

GEORGETTE KAPLAN

*The Girl*

*Who*

*Can't*

*Be*

*Kissed*



# *Chapter 1*

Headlights burnt up the night, turning the blackness into garish revelations, bluntly ripping apart the flickering yellow haze produced by the streetlamps before they could form any sort of mood. Gracie resented them. The dark far better suited where she had ended up, what she'd become.

She kept to the shadows. The light passed over her without warming her. She could approach the curb, let herself be seen, let herself be bought; the inertia of her life was all against it. So many years spent avoiding this, running toward anything but this—stealing and begging and dealing, being anything but a whore—only to wind up here, on this New York street corner.

It made Gracie's childhood feel like a waste. All that effort to launch herself from nothing into a normal life. All to push through that normalcy and right back into desperation. The brilliance of the hole. You could climb as high as you wanted and still fall to the bottom in only a second.

Even this anguishing, she knew, was a form of avoidance. If there was one thing she'd learned from a life of running, it was that hesitation was a privilege. She couldn't afford it; she couldn't let her body have it.

More headlights buffeted her: Which of those were a freak, a killer, a hurter? Which was only a guy who wanted a little company, even to cheat? Maybe he was nice, a businessman on a trip that took him far from home, and who needed to relieve some stress...by whipping someone.

Gracie gritted her teeth against her indecision. This wasn't getting her anywhere. It wasn't like she could have any man she wanted, and she'd end up with nothing, no money, if she kept trying to judge nice guys and

serial killers by what car they drove. She was at the bottom of the hole. She needed to act like it.

She stepped out until her toes stuck out over the edge of the curb. *I'm not moving from this spot until I have a john. And I'm not leaving his side until I get paid. This night is not ending with more interest, more debt, it's ending with less.*

Light swept over her, kept moving. She forced her thoughts away from being seen—the eyes inside the car—the sight of her as an offering instead of a woman. How much would she charge? Should she try to bargain, or would that ruin the fantasy of a woman who could be bought?

She'd heard the other girls charging next to nothing: twenty for a hand job, fifty for a blow, seventy-five for everything. Not even a hundred. Gracie couldn't imagine charging so little. It was one thing to have to sell herself—then there was selling herself cheaply.

The urge to back away from the street and its conveyor belt of prospective lovers...clients...was nearly irresistible. But she needed the money. She needed a place to stay. Her old apartment, the landlord—it was pointless to remember it now, but she couldn't help herself—her first john, or would-be john, who offered her another few nights under a roof if she slept with him.

She couldn't do it. Redeem all those leering looks of his. Gracie would let another man buy her, but not Philip Case. There was a dignity in having something she wouldn't sell, or at least someone she wouldn't sell to. She needed all the dignity she could get.

And so she stood out there with the whores and the pushers and the needers and told herself she wasn't like them. She simply needed to make ends meet. It was just once, and Gracie promised herself she would only use her hands. Maybe show her body but not let it be touched. And if they wanted pictures, she wouldn't let them have her real name.

*Maybe I could wear a mask. Just be a pair of disembodied tits and bare buttocks, since that's all anyone who looks at those kind of pictures wants to see. I'll never let them have my name. I'm not like the others. They're old, used up. I'm worth more. I can't forget my worth. My value might be hard to see right now, but it's still there. I won't let myself be locked into who I have to be tonight.*

But it was hard to convince herself she had a normal life on the way. Not when any of those windshields could be a man fucking her, when she could be minutes away from nakedness and physicality with someone whose name she didn't know, someone with the face of a stranger.

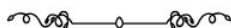
Gracie wondered how far gone a person had to be to have thoughts like that: equivocations, justifications. Did it make her special that she knew the twelfth-grade-reading-level words for those things? Or were all the other women on the sidewalk special too?

A car shrieked to a stop in front of her. Her reflection showed in the mirrored side window, and Gracie wanted to run headlong from that version of her: The heavy makeup, the dress that argued with itself whether it was covering her ass or her breasts, the teetering height of her heels, and the look on her face of a woman who didn't know if she could handle what was coming next. She wanted to run, but she didn't. Gracie walked toward her reflection until there was no doubt it was hers.

"Are you looking for a good time?" she asked. "Because if you make it worth my while, I'll make it worth yours."

The window rolled down with the shrill drone of an old motor. And she saw the hairy fist wrapped around a police badge. Holding the tin shield out to her.

The funny thing was, she relaxed. The peacefulness of a doom achieved.



The cop drove slowly. The passing streetlamps weren't a strobe light; they were knives stabbing in and out of Gracie's eyes. She shut her eyelids, rested her head against the window. The low rumble of the engine at ease could've lulled her to sleep, but she forced her eyes open, watching the thirty-mile-per-hour crawl of the city going past.

Sidewalks, graffiti, people, alleys, storefronts, benches. Nothing she hadn't seen before. Nothing she particularly wanted to see. Sleep called to her, but she didn't want to miss out on whatever freedom she had left. Something was ending—years of staying out of group homes, reform schools, jails, juvie. The jig was up. Whatever came next was on its way. She'd rather pay attention to what came before the end than to what came after.

In the back seat of the unmarked car, Gracie thought of how official it was now. On September 12, she had become a prostitute. She'd been evicted from her apartment at noon. She had twelve dollars in the bank, the change in her pockets, the clothes on her back, and her father's suitcase.

Some essentials—underwear, deodorant, her toothbrush. Other things, she'd taken out of pique. The last roll of toilet paper she'd bought for the building's bathroom, the bar of soap she'd wrapped and unwrapped from her washcloth so no one else used it in the communal shower, a candy dish she'd bought to fill with mints for friends—once she got to know people.

Gracie had spent the afternoon at a pay phone, where she'd waited for lulls in work at the construction yard across the street to call the last batch of employers she'd left applications with. She'd had some good luck that day. She hadn't bought a new package of Charmin, so it was only the one roll she had to pack, and the construction site was union, so she'd only had to put up with the din of a jackhammer once every fifteen minutes or so.

It got to the point that she'd thought of calling her brother, but there was no chance he was doing better than her, and hearing she was in need would have made him more desperate than usual. He was always hard-pressed to pay his own debts; she'd gotten evicted over four months' unpaid rent, but it would've been three months if she hadn't had to help Wayne with his bad bets.

Still, she'd wanted to take everything to him, if only to have someone commiserate with her after she'd ran out of people to call, standing in that phone booth with no job and no chance of being made whole on the wages she was owed from the store that had gone under.

She'd walked for hours, no place to go, no friends to stay with. How could there be when she'd just moved to the city and everyone was so closed off that they seemed *irritated* when she was friendly?

It'd seemed to take an eternity for Gracie to ruminate over what she could do for a little money; she'd lugged her suitcase around like all her effort was accomplishing something.

Finally, it had come time to admit that she had nowhere to take this weight.

She'd gone back to her apartment, simply because she knew how to get some privacy in the building's bathroom while changing into her nicest dress and her highest heels and a coat just to stay a little warm in the black-asphalt chill. She'd stowed the baggage behind the soda machine at the foot of the stairs. It hadn't been restocked in all the time she'd stayed there. The least it could accomplish was saving her money on a bus locker.

Was it just bad luck that the first customer who'd taken an interest in her had flashed a badge and told her to get into the back seat, and that if she

didn't cry he wouldn't put handcuffs on? Or had it been some of the other girls, seeing her fresh and ripe and not liking the competition?

Gracie didn't like to think another woman would do that to her. But then there were the pimps, the gangs and their turf. They had to be behind it, one way or the other, because the cop didn't take her to any police station.

The car jolted to a stop, and Gracie felt sheer panic. Her body being driven against the seat belt was all too much like an arm wrapping around her. She looked around, not recognizing the street, the alley. Where had he taken her? She should've been paying attention; even where the streetlamps worked, this place was hazy, with few people. Those she could see wore dark clothes, hoodies up or hats pulled low, and they touched the light like cats crossed a wet floor.

Her door came open. The cop was there. Thinning white hair ran around his cranium like a rime of salt. He appeared gaunt, hollowed out, his body swimming in a too-big suit. Sloped shoulders seemed halved in a jacket fit for a linebacker. It was like some load-bearing walls had been rotted away inside him, and although the facade still stood, there was no telling which stiff breeze would finish it off.

"Outta the car," he wheezed.

Thoughts burned themselves up in Gracie's head, each hotter than the last. Had he taken her here for a cop's *jus primae noctis*? Was he bringing her before some pimp to be taught a lesson about turf? She wondered if she could run, cry for help. But something about the cop seemed to preclude that. It felt as useless to resist him now as it would be to stub out a cigarette while the building was on fire.

He took her past a doorman, into a lobby far too clean and well-appointed to go with the trash-strewn concrete that disappeared when the door shut behind them.

It wasn't Amsterdam; there weren't girls behind glass windows or neon signs, but the atmosphere, the vibe: It was a whorehouse. The rich red curtains and the plush purple carpets and even the houseplants—with creepers running up the pillars whose hollows they were built into—seemed too verdant, too flowery, for this place to be anything else. The place seemed almost like a greenhouse, with all but a mist running along the ground, and the cigarette haze in the air did a good enough job of substituting.

Gracie's eyes stung. Her skin tingled, knowing it was in a place where it was a market item.

She knew she wasn't meant for this. How had she come here? In which direction did she run to get back to normal? The decision she'd made to go through with this—to play the part of a whore, even before she went all the way—it couldn't be so cataclysmic that there was no going back...

The madam was well-manicured more than pretty, with her wrinkled skin oiled to a sheen and her tired eyes behind chic glasses. She'd taken one dismissive look at Gracie and then become intense. Scouring her closely this time. Badgering her with questions, even asking the cop if he'd ever seen her out on the street before.

Gracie kept saying that this was her first time doing this—eventually they decided she wasn't a good enough liar for them not to believe her. Then the madam had taken a picture of her with her phone.

"Who are you sending that to?" Gracie asked, now not sure she shouldn't be wishing for the police station.

Which would mean having to call Wayne. She would have to make some excuse about how she hadn't *really* been soliciting, but that was simply *embarrassing*. Who *knew* what this was? Were they planning to sell her to some Saudi prince? To make a snuff movie with her? Who knew all the ways they could turn a profit on her suffering?

"A client," the madam answered as though it should be obvious. "Tell me something, girl—do you want to be a hooker, or do you just want money?"

Gracie's mind was frazzled. This seemed like a trap, but how could she be trapped more than she already was? "To make money, of course."

"With a minimum of labor. You don't want to spend a whole night sucking cocks at fifty dollars a blow, do you?"

Gracie blanched. Her face felt like it was having a blowtorch run over it. "No! God, no! Of course not... I only need enough to make rent, please, that's all..."

The madam waved off any further pleading. "This client is a special client. Very rich, very... well-connected. She has specific tastes."

"She?"

The madame chortled. "Yes. A woman, even if she never quite admits it. Is that a problem?"

"I don't know. I've never—"

Her voice grew more acrid the more Gracie protested her innocence: "You've never anything, apparently. But I doubt you'd be any more attracted

to one of the johns you'd find on the street. Why do you think men pay for it? Because they don't like getting it for free?"

"I never really thought about it. The money's the important thing, I guess, but I didn't want someone who was, someone that would..." Gracie's fists balled at her sides. "What does she want to do to me, exactly?"

"That's between you and her." The madam sounded like she was chiding her. "But I can tell you that she's employed my girls before. They don't come back scratched up, slapped around. Some of them say she doesn't do anything with them. No chemistry. She's comfortable enough with solitude that you have to really offer her something to part with it."

It felt like a thick wad of paper had been shoved down Gracie's throat. "Then, if she and I don't have chemistry—I've never had chemistry with another woman..."

"Worried you won't get paid, even after you've *swallowed your pride*?" She made it sound like climbing Everest.

Gracie nodded her head anyway. The madam waved off the cop, who'd been hovering malignantly behind Gracie like a sunburn not yet ready to peel. He grunted and went up a set of stairs, going to whatever his reward was—making Gracie feel unreasonably safer but also like she'd already agreed to something. It was the same feeling as when his car had stopped.

Here she was, but she hadn't wanted to come here, and she didn't know how the place she'd been at had replaced itself with another.

"Well, yes and no, dearie," the woman said. "Our organization doesn't like getting stiffed, not for any reason. But on the other hand, this is the kind of...ah, *grande dame*...who pays only when she wants to. Only, she wouldn't disrespect me like that. At a certain level, respect is a more valuable currency than money. And the more you give, the more you receive."

Gracie felt a bright flare of hope in her chest. "So I might, might make myself available to her and nothing will happen? And I'll still get paid?"

The madam shrugged. "Anything's possible."

"It's at least a good gamble."

"Gambles are for people with something to lose. All you've got to shed is the people you've pissed off by trying to turn a buck in this city without kicking a cut up to folks like me."

"I didn't mean any harm," Gracie moaned.

"Meaning is shit. All that matters is desire and justification. There are men who'd like to hurt women a lot more than they already do. You gave



them an excuse to do so. Went into a junkyard with the dogs' favorite cut of steak tied around your neck."

The madame reached out and touched Gracie's chin like she was polishing one last imperfection off her artwork before putting it up on display. "You want this world? It'll give you what you need. But never forget what you came here for. Give the client what she wants. Leave her satisfied. Take the money and run home. Let this be what happened to one night of your life, not what happened to *you*."

Gracie bit the inside of her cheek. It wasn't like this was the '90s. She'd seen TV shows with lesbians, read books about them. She knew what *she* liked, and she was pretty sure she could do those things to another woman. That was all there was to it, right?

And this woman, this client, if she were paying for it, she would tell Gracie what she wanted. So all Gracie would have to do was follow directions.

But a woman. It would be strange, yes, but better than a man, in some ways. Gracie wouldn't want a man who was old or smelly or anything that would make her not choose him back when she had a choice.

So, a woman. Well, most girls experimented, didn't they? Gracie had... thought about it. She'd looked. This was no different than what she'd already considered, only she would get paid for it. It would be good to be able to say she'd done it, had experienced it. Also, she'd have rent money.

The madam could already see her acquiescence. "I'll let *her* hammer out the fine details with you. She always struck me as the type who likes to hear herself talk. 'Course, if I sounded like that, I'd probably like it too."

"Then she's...pretty?" Gracie asked, not sure if that would be better or worse.

"She looks pretty, let's put it that way. She *looks* pretty."

## Chapter 2

“Room 1010,” the elevator operator said to her after he’d twisted the wheel and the car had come to a shuffling stop. “The door’s unlocked.”

Gracie nodded to him—too scared, no, trepidatious, to be more polite. She shuffled out of the elevator car, thought of what a scared little lamb she must look to the operator, and forced herself into bigger, bolder steps down the hall.

The Empirical was no hotel she’d ever heard of; obviously, it had evaded her search for an apartment when she’d first come to the city. It struck her as the equal of a Hilton or Marriot, except that it was so old-fashioned: the bellboys in little hats, the guests sitting around the lobby and smoking cigars. No HDTVs in the elevators or glowing Dubai lights in the hallway. Everything was so classical that Gracie wouldn’t be surprised if Humphrey Bogart turned a corner...or maybe Seneca.

Except that it was on Wythe Street, in Williamsburg, of all places, and even she knew that a decade ago, that had been low down enough for the cool kids and the rich kids—if there’d ever been a difference—to slum there. She guessed the hipsters were all grown up now; they didn’t want to see gang signs or graffiti unless it was something liberally uplifting like *Black Lives Matter* or *Rest In Power, RBG*.

Wealth. She’d used to think it was hoarded. But the more she saw of New York, the more she thought that it *spread*. It couldn’t take looking at poverty, so it relabeled the have-nots into haves. They were chic, they were authentic...they were gone. To someplace else where they could be poor without the rich having to look at them.

She reached Room 1010. Her hand stretched out for the doorknob. Gracie thought better of it and knocked.

“Enter,” a voice rang out, clarion clear with a brisk accent—boarding school refinement. It didn’t interfere with comprehension like a heavier accent would; it seemed tuned to let Gracie hear the speaker’s origins without her untrained ears losing anything.

Gracie turned the doorknob and went in.

The room was a match for the rest of the Empirical’s architecture. Immaculately clean and orderly in a way that bordered on sterile, except for the furnishings’ sumptuousness. Not garish or even rich, but with vast swathes of rugged floors and uncluttered walls that were pleasingly tasteful.

Comfortable-looking chairs and antique wooden pieces abounded. The lights were off, and there was a fire crackling in the fireplace casting a warm glow that melded and competed with the pink neon light from outside that shone through the windows in a jail-bar pattern.

Sitting by the fire, at one of those tables big enough for a chessboard and no bigger, was a woman.

At first glance, Gracie wondered if she was going to the opera. She wore a tuxedo, or something like one. Tailored black pants, as tightly wrapped around her slender legs as cigarette papers. A white dress shirt under a black dinner jacket. There was a plate on the table, and she was just setting down fork and knife, picking up something she’d set down along the plate and wineglass.

Gracie looked at her shadowed face. There was something off about it, something wrong with the woman’s mouth. But before she could tell what it was, or if it were only a trick of the dim light, the woman had covered herself. Her mask was Kabuki-like, only more surgical, stretching from ear to ear, covering from the tip of her nose to just under her jawline, leaving her upper face bare.

Which was beautiful. The sweep of her nose could’ve been described by a fountain pen’s most eloquent calligraphy, and her eyes were... They seemed too much, too vivid, for the arrow-hole slits they really were, made narrow by a burial of dark eyeliner. Pinpricks of green ice burned at the center of her elegant expression, under eyebrows that were simply exquisite, quirking as they considered Gracie.

And Gracie had to wonder how she looked, her body silhouetted in the light streaming in from outside, surely showing all of her in the little black dress that either held to her body like paint or was rendered invisible

by the light pushing between her thighs and mercilessly showing off her naked figure.

No...it couldn't be that bad. She was letting her imagination run away with her, getting intimidated by the surroundings and the woman and the mask—

"Is that for Covid?" she asked. It just slipped out.

The woman finished adjusting the mask to her face. When she spoke, it didn't seem to muffle her voice at all. "Take your shoes off."

Gracie did, crouching low to undo the satin laces, then straightening. Stepping out of the pumps. She wondered if she should bend down again to pick them up and place them against the wall—no, leave them there; she was supposed to be seductive.

That was the point of this, right? Sex. Money. Although why a woman like that would need to pay... Maybe she liked tying women up, making them eat dog food off her feet. Though Gracie doubted many lesbians would mind that. Maybe she tied women up and made them eat dog food while explaining to them the rich symbolism of a Zack Snyder movie.

Yeah, that would do it.

"Quick to obey," the woman said, praising Gracie but also seeming somewhat amused. "That's a good start."

Irritation flashed through her. It wasn't enough that this woman had paid for her body, she got to be highhanded about it? "Should I take off the rest of my clothes, or are feet all you're interested in?" she snapped.

The woman's eyebrows rose. With the bottom half of her face obscured, the expression seemed explosive—and made Gracie feel like apologizing.

"I should think nudity would make you uncomfortable at this stage. We have things to discuss. You can remain clothed for this. Unless it would make you more comfortable to go nude."

*I could be wearing enough layers for Ohio in winter and those eyes would still feel dangerous.* "What could we possibly have to discuss? You pay me, I lie back and think of England, right?"

"I've been to England. There's not much to think about," the woman said crisply. She stood, so damn *precise* in her posture that Gracie felt like she was about to bow. "Introductions are in order. You are, of course, Gracie Lynch."

"Pleased to meet me," Gracie said laconically, but a second later, the quip didn't feel at all as clever. The woman's eyebrows didn't move an iota.

"My name is...complicated."

The woman leaned against the waist-high table, redolent in how she relaxed herself as much as she wanted to but didn't slump, didn't slouch. Everything was still so precise. She looked like she could've been painted into that pose by a master artist.

"I want two things from you, Gracie. They're somewhat contradictory, which poses a challenge, I know. Which is why I'm prepared to pay you one thousand dollars every day you are able to meet my needs."

Gracie's mouth went dry. One thousand a day? Just for sex? She'd heard that lesbians kept going and going like the Energizer Bunny, but they couldn't do it *that* much. Didn't they have *hobbies*?

"That's a lot of money," Gracie said, thinking she should say *something*.

"It's actually a rather small sum provided I get exactly what I want. When you know exactly what you want, you know what it's worth."

Gracie gulped. She needed a glass of water. Maybe a cough drop. Because she could imagine this woman asking her to do all sorts of things, and she *couldn't* imagine saying no.

"What is it you want?" she forced out.

"First, I want to be friends. I don't wish to order you about, see resentment behind your eyes, have you rip your money out of my hand at the end of each day because I'm your awful boss you can barely tolerate."

"I'm very friendly," Gracie insisted. "I have lots of friends!"

"None who could put you up for the night or spare you a bite to eat?"

"That's only because—because—this city *sucks*!"

The woman's eyes widened slightly, as if Gracie had surprised her. Which Gracie would've thought to be impossible, given they'd only just met.

"That it does," she agreed, eyes narrow again. "But I can tell you're a summer, so to speak. Making friends comes easy to you. It doesn't to me. But perhaps you're better at being a friend than I am at being alone."

"I think if you want to be someone's friend, you're someone's friend. It doesn't have to be hard."

"It is for me."

The woman straightened. She took one long stride toward Gracie. Her leg was sleek and graceful, ending in a six-inch slingback heel, painted porcelain toes poking through the open toe box—the red lacquer reminded Gracie of the lipstick imprint painted dead center on her bone-white mask.

"Because the other need I wish you to service is for pliancy. You will do what I want, when I want it. You will wear what I choose, from makeup to panties, and you will live in the suite next door to this one. You will be on-call twenty-four-seven. When I want you, I'll have you—as I see fit and for as long as it takes to achieve the desired effect."

"Wait, wa—"

"You'll accompany me on business trips around the city when needed. Again, wearing what I want, speaking when spoken to, drawing no attention to yourself—you will be an extension of my persona, not an individual in your own right."

The mask trembled slightly, the woman's jaw working underneath it. Gracie wondered: Was she licking her lips?

"And you'll climax for me. That is very important. When I finger you, when I use a toy on you, when I *fuck* you, you *will* orgasm."

A nervous titter escaped Gracie. She couldn't help it. The woman was just so *serious*. "That's not something I can control."

"It very much is," the woman stressed. "But I'll test for that before giving you the job. The difficulty of the task should be within reason."

Gracie set her lips together. She didn't like having her vagina be treated like an animal capable of doing tricks. "It sounds like what you want is a slave, not a friend."

The woman was unrepentant. "That's the rub: I need both. But slaves don't have options. You do." Reaching into her pocket, she drew out a roll of bills. "One thousand dollars. For your first night. If you don't want the job, take it and go. It should be more than enough to compensate you for your time."

Gracie looked at the roll. She wanted it—but already it seemed like an acquiescence.

And this was simply *insane*. What *was* it, even? A job interview? A seduction? Some kind of kinky sex act all its own?

"Why not just hire a hooker?" Gracie asked, wondering, hoping that her refusal to take the money gave her a degree of power to steer the conversation out of this woman's barrage. (God, she hadn't even gotten her name yet.) "For a thousand dollars a day, you could buy a harem."

"A more experienced hooker, you mean?" The woman heaved a sigh. Like they were discussing what long lines there were at the DMV. "That's the thing about sex workers—it's work to them. I've had escorts who cost

a great deal more than a thousand dollars, in one way or another, and it's always a performance. Fake moans, fake orgasms, everything fake. In my younger days, I actually thought I could convert a beautiful woman, if she caught my eye. That I was good enough to force a good fuck out of them. Now I want the truth."

"And what if I'm straight?" Gracie asked.

The woman's hand snaked out. Two fingers seized Gracie's breast, touching the stiff nipple jutting through her velvet dress, forcing a shrill cry from her lips as pleasure dropped like an anvil straight to her cunt.

"You've been thinking about fucking me since you walked in the door, and it's made you as wet as Dublin at midday," the woman hissed. "You can pretend that's fright you're feeling, if you wish; I know it's excitement."

She let go, and it was like she'd gripped Gracie's clit instead of her nipple. A steely little engorgement throbbed at her core, tingling down into tensed thigh muscles and up into a roiling stomach.

She could've come. If this woman simply reached down and put her hand in Gracie's panties for a second, the fire inside would flash over into an explosion.

"See?" the woman asked, and Gracie could tell she was smiling under her mask. "It's not that hard for you to climax after all."

Gracie took a step back, willing down that racing beat inside her that was demanding that she get more—that was ready to beg, plead, kill if it meant that this bitch would finish the job. "Who the hell are you?" she demanded.

"That depends. When we're in public, when I allow it, I'm Evelyn. And we'll be friends. If I call to you, you can tell me that you need a minute to finish what you're doing. If I tell you to pass the meatballs, you can laugh and make a joke instead of giving them to me. But when I will it, I'm your beloved Mistress. And you'll do anything for your Mistress."

"Jesus."

"Not quite, but you're in the right area code. Now, let's practice. Open your mouth."

"What?"

The money roll was still in Evelyn's other hand. She suddenly stuffed it into Gracie's cleavage. "I need you to be as smart as you look, Gracie. You know you're taking the job. You haven't been listening to me for ten

minutes simply so you can say no. Now's the time to earn it. And that means *obeying your Mistress.*”

Gracie opened her mouth. Wide.

“Very good.” Evelyn took hold of Gracie’s chin and pulled it this way and that, looking inside Gracie’s mouth to examine her teeth. “Satisfactory. I’ll have a dentist appointment booked for you, just to be safe. Close.”

She slid Gracie’s mouth shut, keeping a hand under her jaw. Her hand twisted around, forefinger stroking across Gracie’s chin, then up to drag her lower lip downward.

“The things I could do with that mouth... Tell me you haven’t felt neglected—with lips like those—and I’d wager you haven’t even been gagged once.”

“I like speaking my mind.”

The almost pleasurable tension on Gracie’s lower lip became a brisk slap against her cheek. “You can speak your mind while also showing the proper respect. Try again.”

“I like speaking my mind, *Mistress.*”

“Much better.”

Evelyn lowered her hand. She circled around Gracie, examining her from every angle, running an errant hand through her long, blonde hair. Gracie felt her eyes on every flickering lock as it swayed back into place, then a hand down her arm, tightening on the taut muscle of her bicep.

“You take good care of yourself,” Evelyn observed.

“I can’t afford health care.”

“And is that how you respond to a compliment?”

“Thank you, *Mistress.*”

The woman leaned in until Gracie almost felt the chill of her porcelain mask burning her ear. “Learn faster, my pet. Exactly what I want, remember?”

“Yes, *Mistress.*”

Evelyn let go of Gracie’s arm. “It’s almost a shame. I’ll bet you have stamina. It’d take a lot to make you sweat, and that hair would look so good plastered to a red, sweaty face.” She put a hand to Gracie’s belly. Feeling her abs through the dress. “Oh my. *Those* could be fun. How many sexual encounters have you had?”

“That’s none of your—” Gracie almost bit her tongue. “Seven, *Mistress.*”



Evelyn quirked an eyebrow. "So few. Such a waste. I would think a woman in your condition would appreciate such a pleasant way of burning calories."

"I've been busy...trying to establish myself. I thought a relationship could wait until after—"

"I didn't ask. All heterosexual?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"And did you orgasm?"

Gracie paused. "About half the time, Mistress."

"We'll see if we can do better. Now, I have an inkling of the answer to this already, but I'm getting to like how you look when you're vexed. Piercings?"

"My ears," Gracie said tersely.

"How would you feel about getting your clit pierced?"

"Absolutely not...Mistress."

"Shame. It makes things very interesting. Anal sex?"

"Is that a question or a proposition?"

"A little of both. But if you'd tried it, you wouldn't be asking. Bend over the table."

Gracie didn't know what expression she made, but her whole face suddenly felt like burnt rubber. "You can't seriously—"

"I have an insatiable curiosity, and since you can't tell me how you respond to anal stimulation, I'll simply have to find out. Ass in the air, Gracie. You must've known the moment you wore that dress that someone would have it up around your waist."

A thousand dollars, Gracie thought. That's what this is about. A thousand dollars.

Her panties sopping wet, she lowered herself to the tabletop. Feeling the wad of cash squashed flat between her dress and her bare skin. "Please be gentle with me, Mistress."

She'd been hearing Evelyn rustle around, getting something from somewhere, but now all motion stopped.

"Shit," Evelyn breathed. "Say that again. Exactly like you did before."

Gracie bit her lip. When she spoke now, she heard every word—felt them coming out of her like reverberations of the same beat that was pulsing at her core. "Please be gentle with me, Mistress."

Evelyn snapped her teeth. It echoed in the gaunt confines of her mask. "I am going to send a bottle of brandy to everyone who passed you along to me. You and that fat fucking ass... *Keep your head down.* I don't want to punish you on your first night, but you won't ruin this for me, not when it's so perfect. You, Gracie, you're perfect. I know; I will be gentle. I'll make this wonderful for you. This is only a taste test."

Gracie heard a vinyl glove snap into place. Then the flatulence of a tube of something creamy being squirted out.

"Lift your dress up," Evelyn ordered, her breath still rushing, her voice hot and humid inside her mask. Now it sounded muffled, like Evelyn couldn't bother to project it far past the porcelain.

Gracie got her hands around the hem of her dress and lifted it up. She tried to simply *do it*, but she felt every stitch of fabric trawling up her buttocks, along her hips, pooling at the small of her back and out of her way, letting Evelyn see all of her pantied ass.

Gracie had tried to exert some small measure of control by color coordinating her outfit, though it had all seemed so odious: red heels, red underwear, black dress. But from the way Evelyn sucked in breath, it was appreciated.

"You precious girl." She breathed. "You precious little girl, you're quivering. You're showing so much to me, but I want more."

One hand nestled underneath the waistband of Gracie's lace panties. Gracie felt the material bunch, twist, as Evelyn slowly peeled it down the sweep of her buttocks. She was barely any more naked without the panties than with them, but the way Evelyn undressed her so slowly, like every millimeter was its own delight...

Gracie was bent over, facing the fireplace, feeling its heat on her face, but it felt like her ass was in the fire itself.

"You're dripping, you know that, Gracie? You have a pair of panties like a washcloth. I think I could actually squeeze them out and make quite a little puddle on the floor. And your *cunt*... You can't know how hard it is not to touch that sopping *cunt*, Gracie, *darling*. Are you about to come? You must be so close. Should I get you off?"

Gracie shut her eyes. She was trying not to think about that—trying to pretend that her pussy wasn't twitching, that she didn't even have a snatch that was burning and soaking wet and throbbing, all from this whorish treatment.

She didn't know what she'd do if she actually came from this, if she outright asked Evelyn to make her come like this was what she wanted. It was, but... Evelyn had made her want it. She hadn't walked in here wanting to spread her legs and —

She had to say no—she just had to—but in a way that Evelyn wouldn't mind.

"What I want doesn't matter, Mistress," she gritted out, barely recognizing her own voice; it sounded unnatural with how she was making it so even. Like an echo from another universe where she wasn't feeling this inferno within her. "You wanted to...play with my ass...Mistress...so that's what you should do."

"That's very true, Gracie. A good answer. You really are naturally submissive. No wonder it's only been seven times for you. You've only met men who can give you cock or fingers, not what you *need*. Gracie, my dove, you need to be useful. To be absolutely indispensable to your possessor. Now, let me show you how indispensable you can be to a woman. Open your buttocks. Hold them apart."

Gracie couldn't believe she was doing this. Everything else she'd already done hit her numbly, in a confused swirl of determination to go through with this being undercut by desire. It was a purely physical response, a longing inside her that she told herself was only the sexual animal in her wanting what felt good. If a vibrator made her come, it didn't mean she was attracted to household appliances, did it? She simply liked the vibrations.

Well, maybe her bicuriosity had led her to a thick vein of lesbianism because the taboo she should've felt over being pawed and leered at by a woman had never kicked in, but now that her *asshole*, of all things, was being plied, Gracie finally felt misgivings entering into the equation.

But at the same time, her clit was filled with hot blood; her folds were wet and electric. It thrilled her simply to do what Evelyn said and to know that Evelyn—Mistress—approved of her. She thought of those fingers on her nipple and the way Evelyn had talked about her cunt, like it was a game she knew exactly how to win.

Evelyn touched her there, between the moons of her buttocks. A wet, vinyl touch, tracing the roundness of her anus. Gracie gasped, then mewled dispiritingly. Then giggled.

The funny thing was, Gracie or her body or whatever the difference was—being touched felt wrong to her, but not where she was being touched.

No, it was that the touch was all surgical glove and KY jelly instead of *her*. She wanted Evelyn's bare hand. Or...*something* wanted Evelyn, only Evelyn...

"You're not tensing up," Evelyn observed, her lilting voice rich with amusement. "Have you done this before? You can admit it. I don't have a virgin fetish."

"Then why were you so pleased that this is my first time...sex-working?" It was hard to carry on a conversation, think of the right words, with Evelyn rubbing at her tightly puckered opening like a cat wanting to be let in.

"I told you, I'm tired of sex workers. That's why I want a pet. And let's be honest: Who wants a cat when they can have a kitten?"

Before Gracie could think of a reply, Evelyn obviously decided that it was time she be allowed into Gracie's ass—that she had massaged enough lubricant to gain entry.

And Gracie couldn't say she was wrong. However tight her opening was, it wasn't as tight as it had been. She reluctantly yielded—allowing Evelyn's gloved fingertip to intrude on the pristine emptiness of her hole. Only enough to make Gracie feel that she wasn't inviolate.

"Still not tensing up," Evelyn purred. "You have a well-trained backside, Gracie. Have you had a mistress before? Maybe a master? Or is this from personal study?"

Gracie struggled to keep her breathing even enough to permit speech. As much as Evelyn praised her "training," she felt like she was madly out of control: her heart racing, her lungs heaving, nonexistent voices screaming in her ear about what this made her. *Pet, sex worker*: all nice words for *whore*. And that little fingertip was still fucking her like she was a whore.

"Answer, Gracie. I can always stop."

Gracie couldn't lose this chemistry; she didn't even know if she enjoyed it, but if it went away, she'd always wonder what it *was*, what Evelyn was making her feel, and how she was doing it. Anything this intense, this much herself...she had to understand it.

"I've read some—some books—"

"You don't seem the type to have *A Girl's Guide to Sodomy* on your nightstand." Evelyn wiggled her finger in a small titter of motion that made Gracie croon as much as wince. It was going in deeper—little by little, it was taking up more of her.

“They were stories...where the characters, where they...did this sort of thing...and you’re always supposed to relax when a man, when someone... I mean, that’s just common sense, isn’t it? Something can’t get in when you’re all tensed up. You need to let it in the same way you’d let it out. You need to be...soft.”

Gracie knew then that Evelyn would fuck her, take her ass. She braced herself, tried to force her body to relax, but it was too late. Evelyn was already pushing.

And then Gracie learned that she couldn’t resist, even if she’d wanted to. Her asshole was too massaged, too loosened, too slippery. Evelyn’s finger popped inside, touching the spongy softness within, making Gracie feel it as much as Evelyn did.

“Yessss,” Evelyn breathed. Gracie heard her thighs rub together, she was enjoying herself so. “This is what we do for people in the family,” she muttered—or at least something that sounded like that.

Evelyn kept pushing, getting her finger in to the first knuckle before she stopped and let Gracie get her bearings.

Gracie’s body jerked, trembling with the shock of entry. It didn’t hurt, exactly, but she was feeling so much that it seemed indistinguishable from pain. “It’s too much, it’s too much...”

The finger withdrew a little, almost teasingly.

Gracie whimpered. The one thing worse than feeling this much was the threat of not feeling anything at all.

“I didn’t think we would have to establish a safe word so soon.” Evelyn’s voice was dark: not exactly displeased, but clearly frustrated. “Why do I have a pet that doesn’t want to be played with?”

“I didn’t say I wanted to stop,” Gracie moaned, not sure what her voice was doing. It sounded like she was begging, or maybe asking permission. But she had no idea what she was pleading for or what she wanted to do. “It’s just—it’s a lot.”

“The words you used were ‘too much.’ Too much implies a limit. A limit implies stopping. Or does my new toy like the thought of being broken?”

“I thought I was your pet. Now I’m your toy?”

Evelyn’s finger wormed deeper, silencing Gracie’s protests in a spasm of painful excitement. Her own hands trembled with passion, pulling at the dress she was still holding up and ripping it with an audible tear. She tried to restrain herself, but she was instinctively squirming further onto

the table—taking herself away from that bulbous discomfort in her neat, even opening.

“When I play with you, you’re my toy,” Evelyn informed her. “But even when I’m not playing with you, you’re my pet.”

Evelyn pressed in harder, snaking her tormenting finger down to where Gracie could really feel it. Two full knuckles were inside her ass. Her once-virgin ass. She was feeling those fingers with nerves she’d never discovered until now.

“Should I bark like a dog?” Gracie asked, feeling an urge towards insolence as powerful as her lust. She had to give in, but she *couldn’t* simply give in without snarling a little. Like a cat who wouldn’t let its belly be petted without digging in its claws.

But in spite of that, she and Evelyn both felt her tremble, all of that trembling aimed in one direction—into pushing her ass onto Evelyn’s probing finger, working it further in, sucking it all the way in to the palm of Evelyn’s hand.

“Oh, no. I find your present vocalizations *entirely* acceptable.”

Gracie could only squeal, over and over again, with her hips full of motion not wholly her own. The pain was drifting away, proving to be the only thing that blocked the lascivious feelings now working their way throughout her body.

The more she strained, the more she felt, the more there was to feel. Good things, sensual things...

She thought she’d simply have to endure Evelyn’s attentions, but this was something more. Depraved and perverted, it didn’t matter; it was happening, she was enjoying it.

She didn’t care if it was for money. She wanted these things Evelyn was doing to her. She *needed* this arousal to press on such a little distance onward, to the ultimate peak...

“You’re so close now,” Evelyn purred, her finger settling into a series of strokes that seemed to run along a path of particularly sensitive nerves, flicking fires up inside Gracie’s rectum with each slow roll. “Shall I get you off, or would you rather pretend you’re not a slut?”

“Please get me off, please...” Gracie begged, whimpering, whining, knowing how pathetic she sounded and not caring—even liking it a little; this had to be what Evelyn got off on, if she was soliciting it from Gracie so ardently.

And if Gracie gave her what she wanted, she wouldn't stop.

"That doesn't sound like something a good girl would want," Evelyn tilted cheekily.

Gracie seemed to instinctively know what Evelyn wanted to hear—what would keep that approving glimmer in her chocolate-rich voice. "I'm not a good girl, I'm not."

"What are you?" Evelyn demanded, suddenly hard-edged. Gracie heard a brush of fabric, a whisper of clothing against clothing, and could only imagine Evelyn's other hand rubbing against her own clothed groin putting that steely ardor into Evelyn's voice.

"I'm a slut, Mistress."

"And?" Evelyn prompted, her breath quicker, approving, her whole body approving, her whole body turned on. Gracie could feel it.

"And I'm your pet, Mistress."

"*And?*" Evelyn moaned, so heated that it was like a bonfire, spreading to Gracie, burning her even hotter than she already was.

"And I'm your fucking toy."

Evelyn squealed aloud. Gracie heard her belt buckle, her fly, clothes shuffling down out of the way and then her wet cunt on Gracie's ass—a soulful kiss Gracie felt simmering on the curve of her buttocks, licking her flesh as Evelyn rode the contact up and down,

*She's fucking me*, Gracie thought feverishly. Then: *No, she's fucking herself with me.*

Even as Evelyn fingered her ass, her other hand went to Gracie's neck, the back of it, fingers and thumb locking into place like a collar, tighter, tighter, like she was trying to choke Gracie, only that wasn't it. She wanted to keep Gracie in place, make sure she stayed right where she was so that the pleasure could keep going and going.

Just like Gracie wanted it to. She felt like an instrument played by a virtuoso—the finger inside her, the hand gripping her neck, even the lips of another woman's pussy rubbing against her ass—all of them part of her now, sensations that had taken up the core of her. Gracie was a thing to give and receive pleasure—nothing else, only that mattered. It filled her, and it kept filling her—not simply what was being done to her but what she was being used for.

It pressed at her boundaries from the inside, like a reverse penetration. She would let Evelyn in, but only because her walls had been shoved outward, not because Evelyn was breaking through.

Gracie's eyes rolled up in her head. She was on the cusp of orgasm. When Evelyn spoke, words echoing into the delirium of panting and cursing and moaning, that was all Gracie could hear—her own voice uttering empty breaths—and Evelyn sounding like the voice of God.

"Such a hot little ass... It feels just as good to fuck it as it does to *fuck* it."

Gracie sucked in a breath, deep and hard. It pushed her only an inch too full, lent her the strength to finally give in to the waves that kept pounding and pounding at her, demanding to get loose. She found her voice: "Oh *shit!*"

And then something tight and tangled and immense inside her finally shifted, forcing its way through her, getting *out* of her in pulses that wrenched and surged all the way through Gracie until they were free.

"*UNNHH!*" A tension Gracie had never known she had was finally gone.

Wetness, warm and luscious as pure cream, pooled under her, touching her thighs and lower belly. Gracie shut her eyes. It felt like slipping into a warm bath, only this one didn't stop outside her. It slid into her, heating all of her womanhood before dripping to the floor. She felt unaccountably proud of herself.

"Oh my...oh my..." Evelyn wasn't tribbing Gracie's ass like she had been—she must've joined in on Gracie's climax at some point—but she still held them together, mons to supple skin—Gracie felt the slowing drumbeat of her arousal, ticking down and down and down, assuring her that Evelyn had enjoyed herself as well. "My little overachiever... You squirted...you squirted all over my table."

"Sorry." Gracie breathed, unable to feel apologetic in the slightest. *If you don't want me to come, maybe don't fuck me...geez...and especially don't fuck me like that.*

"Don't apologize. This is wonderful, truly wonderful... I wanted the real thing, and there's no faking *that*, now is there, my pet?"

"No, Mistress." Gracie said hazily.

Something trilled in her, rattling against the sleepy indolence of just how *good* this all felt: some vague notion of dignity or her old self or something. Like a little voice telling her not to drive when she'd drunk enough to be



tipsy. Probably—probably should listen to that voice, even now, when she was virtually drugged by...all of this.

“So my ‘anal sensitivity’ meets with your approval?” Gracie asked.

“Oh, yes. Yes.” Evelyn backed up, and Gracie heard a hurried reversal: fly going up, belt sucked back together, pants raised and straightened. “The job’s yours, my little squirt gun. For as long as you can take it.”

*Take it? I feel like I’m about to pass out on your table, lady...right in my own... whatever this is.* “Great. I want five thousand a day.”

“What?” Evelyn asked blankly, barely even a question, the smoke in her voice suddenly gone.

Gracie forced herself to get up, stand, pull her panties back into position, and flatten her dress down her body. “Well, you keep going on about how perfect I am and how I’m just what you’re looking for, and I even squirted for you... Seems to me that’s worth a little more than the first offer. To do that to me whenever you want.”

“You want five thousand dollars?” Evelyn asked, crossing her arms.

She’d taken the glove off, but the thought of where that finger on her right hand had been still drove Gracie to distraction. It took her a second to look Evelyn in the eye.

“Can you not afford it?” she asked innocently while everything but her voice made the challenge clear.

“Can you supply five thousand dollars a day worth of *that*?” Evelyn volleyed back.

“You’re the one who stopped,” Gracie retorted. “I was just beginning to enjoy myself.”

Evelyn’s eyebrows raised. Like a snake, her hand struck—circling Gracie’s hip and grabbing her ass, pulling her close until they were body to body—Gracie’s asshole aching with its recent deflowering, Evelyn’s sex still pulsing with arousal, the dampness of Gracie’s juices only seeming to grow hotter on her thighs.

“Five thousand, and this hole belongs to me now, so get used to having it wide open.” Evelyn squeezed, her fingers digging into the cleft between Gracie’s buttocks, fingertips not quite touching her opening but definitely felt there. “I don’t leave my toys on the shelf.”

Gracie did not break eye contact. She reached down and petted Evelyn’s thigh. Up and down, fawningly, obsequiously, letting Evelyn know just

how subservient she could be. And that she knew how vulnerable Evelyn was to that.

Evelyn hadn't fucked her because she was in control but because she'd lost it. And while Gracie didn't know exactly what her deal was—she hadn't even seen all of her face—she could tell that, for Evelyn, losing control was worth at least five thousand dollars. The only question was, could Gracie give her that on a daily basis?

She let the words come as naturally as they could, trying to read from Evelyn's half-face if they sounded natural enough. "Yes, Mistress. Thank you for playing with me, Mistress. I love it when you play with me...when my asshole gapes open and I know that it's yours..."

Gracie heard teeth grinding under the mask. "Enough! That's enough for tonight. I have a long day tomorrow and not enough time to properly... educate you."

"It's your dollar, Mistress," Gracie said, trying not to seem too smug. She knew Evelyn would only discipline her for that later.

What she didn't know was how she'd feel about that discipline. The juices that soaked her thighs were trailing down, about to peek out from under the hem of her dress.

"You do have another four thousand for tonight, right?" she needled, her clit stinging erect.

Maybe Evelyn's discipline would be enough to send her running screaming from the room— Gracie wanted to find out.

"You'll get what's coming to you," Evelyn told her. "And one other thing. When you sleep in the bedroom adjoining mine?"

"Yes?"

"You sleep in the nude. I may feel like a midnight snack."

## Chapter 3

Evelyn lay awake, staring at the phone on her nightstand. The dead black screen could come to life in a moment, with anything. A quiet little notification of an email...or the ring of a call waiting to be connected.

Her fist tightened—squeezing deep pressure into her thumb. It reminded her of how Gracie’s asshole had felt, the roiling tightness as she’d climaxed from being sodomized. The thought of it found Evelyn short of breath. Like a kid on Christmas Eve, all she wanted to do was get out of bed, go to Gracie, and play some more. Her new toy.

And what would Kimber think of that?

No. Evelyn had been a good girlfriend once; she could be a good mistress too. Plenty of sleep for her pet, plenty of food, good clothes, a warm bed; she would treat Gracie right. It wouldn’t matter that she came from darkness; Gracie would only see the light.

Her thumb moved practically by itself. She opened up her contacts, went to Kimber’s picture and stared at it. Kimber five years ago. Not much would’ve changed. Kimber took good care of herself. She wouldn’t age too harshly, and she wouldn’t insult her years with some ill-conceived surgery. No, she’d be the same as ever. She just wouldn’t be Evelyn’s.

She stroked the picture with her thumb. Too much pressure. The phone took over, connecting itself to Kimber’s. Evelyn moved her touch to the hang-up button, but she didn’t hit it, even as the phone rang. Kimber would simply call back, wanting to know why Evelyn had rung her. And the pity of Kimber thinking she was some sort of genius was that she’d never believe Evelyn had butt-dialed her.

“Oh my God... Evelyn?”

"Speaking," she said because what else could you say when you'd always known what to say to someone and now you didn't?

"Evelyn...hi. God. This is getting to be a habit with us. First I drunk-dial you—sorry about that again, by the way—and now you... Not that you're drunk, obviously. God. So long. Five years—"

"It hasn't been five years," she corrected. She liked to be accurate about these things.

"Okay, almost five years. I'm sorry I hung up on you last time. If it's any consolation, I vomited right after that, okay?"

"That is...information," Evelyn said. "I'm calling because you implied you were worried about me."

"I didn't say I was worried."

"It was inferred. You said you had no idea how I was or what I was doing... You asked about the mask."

"It's none of my business." Kimber sounded like she had at the end, almost five years ago. Unsure of everything she said. Or maybe just who she said it to.

"I only wanted to let you know that I'm okay. I'm seeing someone, and it's a very exciting relationship. I'm very happy to be with her."

"Okay, that's good."

"It is. Yes."

"Okay," Kimber said with the accent on the second syllable the way she did when she realized she'd said that little word too many times and wanted to rephrase, even though the word was already on the way past her lips. "I was probably out of line asking if you were—last time, I mean. It's just that...you're too good at being alone; you always were. If you're not careful, you could make a career out of it."

Evelyn thought of attempting a reassuring laugh. She didn't think this was a good time to experiment with that. She'd try one on Gracie instead.

"I'm sorry to have rung you so late. But thank you for your concern. And I'd like you to know there are no hard feelings. It all worked out for the best."

"Hey, you're probably busy. Maybe I could write you an email, just to get all the boring 'how's everyone and their cat' stuff out of the way, and then I could call you again, after I've taken a Prozac or something, and—I don't know—if there's something you don't want to talk about, you could text me beforehand, because I'm really not trying to ambush you—"

Evelyn hung up and immediately texted, *Oops, my phone is getting finicky, the battery's almost gone.*

She wondered how right a woman could be about someone, almost five years later, after that much loneliness had had its say.

Well, it was a nonissue. Kimber might know a thing or two: about her, about the Family, about what had happened. But Gracie... There was no way for her to know. That was one of the most wonderful things about her.

She hadn't known Evelyn before. She couldn't tell there was anything wrong.

She didn't even know what was under the mask.



The phone rang. Gracie had been wired enough to stay awake through the night and the next day and drop dead asleep at 10 PM like someone with a normal sleep cycle, but she'd taken that first hit of sleep and become addicted to it. Now her eyes had to be pried open, and even the softest darkness—no neon lights here, no noises invading from where the city was even more chaotic, not even the space heater hurting itself with each second it ran past the warranty—was too much for a will that had been stretched far enough and now needed to spend time being slack.

Few sounds got through the thick walls of an upper-class dwelling, but she recognized the tenor of the city at rest. It disquieted her. One of the few positives of unemployment was that she'd grown used to staying up late, if she wanted, and sleeping in. Enjoying her bed so long it was fully dawn by the time she had breakfast.

It bothered her to be this well-rested at this time of night. She wondered if it was insomnia. A guilty conscience, maybe.

Gracie *had* had sex, not for the first time in her life but for the first time not as part of a relationship or any romance. It was almost anonymous, completely transactional.

No, not completely.

Evelyn might've paid to begin what had happened—the money sat on the nightstand, reassuring and discomforting Gracie in equal measure—but Gracie imagined Evelyn saying they could stop at any point before Gracie's orgasm. Gracie wouldn't have cared about the money *then*.

She knew Evelyn had a taste for making her submit, far beyond the supplication of taking Evelyn's money and accepting Evelyn's touch. Gracie wondered if the woman knew that she could've made Gracie keep going without spending a dime. And when was it that Gracie had started enjoying the sex more than having the integrity of not being up for sale?

*I should've asked for more money, Gracie thought. She would've gone higher. Does it make it better or worse that Evelyn couldn't control herself either?*

The phone started ringing. Déjà vu hit her. Hadn't she dreamed that? Well, it was happening now.

She picked up her ancient flip phone, wondering if five thousand was enough to get her one of those strap-it-to-your-head-and-do-a-VR phones or if the economy was too shit for even five thou to be that much.

It was Wayne. Now, after the dust from her life imploding had settled, here came her idiot brother with a leaf blower.

He didn't know anything. She hadn't been able to reach him when she'd lost her job, hadn't tried too hard either. When did he have any money?

A place to stay? Did he want anything beyond a guilt trip? God, he'd taken care of her for so long, but now—shit—now she still owed him. And she wanted him to be okay, even beyond evening the uneven.

"Wayne, it's the middle of the night," she answered because it was too late to be creative about what in the a.m. it was.

"This can't wait," Wayne told her—like it ever could with him. "I managed to do an election recently—big stuff, all of the celestials are in place, planets aligned—any spell I cast is going to work. If I buy a lotto ticket, I'm winning it. If I pull on a slot machine..."

Gracie rubbed some crust from her eye. Where'd that stuff come from, anyway? "So buy a lotto ticket, Wayne. I've had a long day..."

"Well... hey...you know how it is. The lotto isn't exactly... You know, it's corrupt. It's synthetic, it's corrupt. You cannot divinate something that diseased."

Gracie yawned, not sure he was even using real words. "Okay, so what do you want me to do? Help you find a game of three-card monte?"

"Don't be sarcastic. Do you know how much negative energy you put out when you're sarcastic?"

Gracie yawned again. "You want money, right?"

"I told you—"

"I'm not being sarcastic, Wayne. I'm being blunt." She yawned yet again. "I haven't had enough coffee to be sarcastic."

"Are you wearing that amulet of wakefulness I made you?"

She'd pawned it days ago. Wayne could've probably made real good money as a welder if he didn't just make charms and shit. Things that would sell to the Beverly Hills crowd, maybe, but not anywhere Gracie and Wayne frequented.

"You're avoiding the question," she told her brother, avoiding the question herself.

"All right, yeah, I need some money. You know seventy-seven percent of Americans are in debt? It'd be weirder if I didn't need money; who doesn't need money?"

Gracie felt like telling him that those people tended to spend their money on medical care or cars or house payments, not horse races and tarot readings and tarot races about horse readings—wait, tarot readings about horse races... God, she needed to go back to sleep. She couldn't talk him out of being a magician, and she was not nearly well-rested enough to try.

Wayne kept going. "I need to pay off some debts. Once I do, I can put down some bets. And with the way my mana is headed, we're looking at big payouts. Imagine a pony winning at hundred-to-one odds. Doubling your money isn't even the beginning of that; you'd be rich; I'd be rich..."

"You'd be something... Wayne, look, why are you in debt? What happened to you last time you *divinated*?"

"That was *different*. I was a much less experienced sorcerer then. I hadn't at all realized how important it was how the planets are aligned..."

"Was this when Pluto was still a planet? Was that it? Did that throw you off?"

"Don't *mock* me here." Wayne hissed. "Wouldn't I give you the money if you needed it?"

It didn't matter. He never had money. Or if he did, it was from picking pockets, not from being Harry Potter.

That was the part her brother didn't get. He was all intentions, no facts. He never meant to lose, he never meant to steal—borrowing, he was always borrowing—but at a certain point, you realized you were a bad bet. You cut bait, you didn't double down, or whatever the right term was. But Wayne couldn't let go of being a wizard. If he robbed Fort Knox, he'd put it all on

red or black, whatever color his “spells” indicated, because he’d rather be magic than rich.

What twelve-year-old wouldn’t? But he wasn’t twelve anymore, hadn’t been for over a decade.

Gracie didn’t have it in her to teach him. She knew she didn’t have it in her.

She sighed. “How much money do you need?”



Wayne fucking hated cashless societies. Credit cards, Bitcoin, PayPal, all of it. Bullshit. You could spend three hours picking pockets in Tourist Central and get nothing but a Costco card.

He had good hands; everyone knew it. Great hands, but what was he supposed to grab when there was nothing to steal?

He pumped the pedals and kept his helmeted head down, trying not to look enviously at all the cars on the street or return the murderous glances that ran from driver to cyclist. The bike was the most expensive thing he owned besides his smartphone, and it was a bitch to keep finding places to park where it wouldn’t be stolen while he slept.

But as long as he had it, he wasn’t homeless. He was mobile. Not stuck in the doldrums—which happened to even the white-picket fencers—but in motion, moving with the wind. And when he put down roots, it’d be somewhere worth staying.

It was all about staying ready for fate. Money in your pocket, clean clothes, clean body, shaves and haircuts. He’d tried to drill that into Gracie—ninety percent of the downsides of being poor was looking poor. Store employees gave you nasty looks. Cops looked for an excuse. But if you looked like you belonged, who was to say you didn’t?

*Look.* Look-look-look. That was a recurring thought. Wayne wondered if the universe was trying to tell him something. He’d have to enter it into his codebook once he got to the Empirical. *Look.* He wouldn’t forget. That could be the key.

What was Gracie doing in the Empirical, though? Even if the name wasn’t too familiar, the address she gave was uptown. His people didn’t go uptown except to rob, and Gracie wasn’t a robber. She had a real job, even if it was stocking shelves.



Of course, uptown brought people to it, for this and that, but Gracie wasn't that either. She didn't strip even just for pictures. Not after Dad. So what was she doing there? Wayne tried to recall his horoscope. It would've had a hint at this, he just knew, but it was hard to think past his divination and the incredible luck coming his way.

*Look.* He had to remember that too. That could be an important word.

A red light flashed ahead, and Wayne didn't mind stopping, even if he was in a hurry. It gave him time to roll up his sleeve, take a marker from his pocket, and write down what he had to remember, once he found some space under his elbow. *Look.* That was important. And now he only had to remember to look under his elbow once he got to the hotel.

When he arrived, did he get into an argument with the concierge? No. He got into a discussion. Wayne was clean. He smelled fine. He'd bought his clothes only five years ago. And who cared what time of night it was—he was meeting someone there. He had a right to wait in the lobby.

But the *concierge*—which wasn't even a real job—asked him to show his room key or to rent a room, or tell him what room to ring on the intercom. It was all so mechanical, such a program. This guy was going to be replaced by an algorithm one day soon, and he didn't even know it. No awareness of the natural world, of magic, of energies and orbits and telepathy. No, life was all a rule book to him, and he resented the lowly peasant, Wayne Lynch, who dared to ask him to actually think about the planet and his place in it for one moment.

Wayne didn't like that Gracie came down while he was in the middle of the discussion and drew him aside and apologized to the concierge like *he* was in the right. That was everyone's politics: You stood behind a desk, you wore a costume, and you got to be right all the time. And try explaining that to Gracie.

He wasn't happy she had to see him asserting his right to simply exist; he didn't *want* to force her support, but it would be nice if a little support had been forthcoming. That's what family was about, wasn't it? Family had to be more important than what the concierges of the world thought of you.

"Wayne, just tell me you're good."

He hadn't realized he'd been talking. Sometimes that happened. He thought so hard that he spoke too. Especially when someone affected his composure. He wasn't the only one who got annoyed or angry, he only had a harder time keeping it bottled up. How was that his fault? All this

money, all this technology, and they couldn't make the world a smidge less frustrating?

"I know, Wayne. I get it," Gracie said. "Just calm down."

"I am calm!" he insisted. Strenuously. "What are you doing here, anyway? You know I wondered that the entire way up here? Hey!" He saw someone from the hotel checking out his bike. "Hey! Hey!"

"He's going," Gracie told the man. "It's fine."

"Yeah, it'd better be fine." Wayne scrubbed at his face. "So, how about it? You hiding in the laundry chute or something?"

"I'm doing some modeling for the hotel. They're letting me stay here a few days while we do the shoot."

"You? A model?"

It wasn't that hard to imagine, actually. With her fine blonde hair, almost white, her fair skin, buttered with only a touch of a tan, and blue eyes that dominated her gentle features, Gracie had always reminded him of a young Stella Stevens. She was too pretty for her own good, really. Wayne had to worry what kind of sick thoughts people had about her.

It'd come in handy a few times when they were kids and they needed to get someone alone to roll them. Gracie was the bait and Wayne was the trap. Those had been good times. But now she had to know she could get a lot more than pocket change from men.

"You think it's too hard for me or something?" Gracie asked, and her indignation told him she was for real.

"They pay in advance?"

"Yes, Wayne, they paid me some good money."

"What's good? Five hundred? Six?"

"Good," Gracie reiterated. "How much would it cost you to clear your debts and then just—"

"Just?" he added leadingly.

"Just...fucking spend a night indoors and fill out a resume."

Wayne put his hands up on his head. He looked at his bike. At least that was still there.

"We can do it at the library, I can take you there first thing in the morning. We can even get an Uber."

"You're going to get mad at me," he mumbled. "I'm going to try to explain to you about the secrets of the universe, and you're gonna get mad at me because you want me to shovel fries at Mickey D's..."

"I'm not fighting with you."

"One more corporate cog in the system, Gracie. Do you know how many light bulbs Edison had to invent before he got to the one that lit up?"

"You're not Edison."

"I'm not stupid, you know? I've had some big wins. I'm not greedy. I have a strategy. I only need to get out from under, lay down some money, rack up some paydays... I'm telling you, Gracie, if I started out knowing what I know now, I'd be a billionaire; I would."

"These people you're taking money from are dangerous. You think that because one of them has a good day and decides to give you another month to get whole, it means they're never going to lose patience—"

Wayne jabbed a finger in the air. "What do you think makes them have a good day, huh? Of course they gave me an extension; I cast a spell. You're worrying about me like I'm some jerk—I have lightning bolts at my disposal. This hotel thing, your modeling gig, this is probably me. Do you know how many minerals I have put into blessings for you? You're lucky because I make you lucky. Show some gratitude. Let my system work."

Gracie pushed the heel of her hand into her eye. "What about that social worker? Are you seeing him still?"

"I don't need a social worker."

"I'd give you a million dollars if you'd only go see the social worker once a week. What's his name? Greg? Do you even remember?"

"I'll go see him," Wayne said quickly. "Will that make you feel better? He'll tell me to get an apartment, even though I can't afford an apartment, so then he'll tell me to get a job, even though there aren't any jobs, and then he'll wonder how I'm managing to maintain my robust figure, and he'll call a cop on me—"

"He's not going to call a cop."

"Every asshole in prison has a story that starts 'There isn't going to be a cop there' or 'He won't have a gun...'"

"I'll give you a thousand dollars. You do whatever you want with it, but go see the social worker. Greg."

Wayne cocked his head. "You have a thousand dollars?"

"Yeah, I told you. I'm modeling."

"You'd think if they had a thousand dollars, they could've hired a real model."

“Thanks. As long as you’re here, why don’t you take a shower, a real shower? I’ll put your clothes through the wash. Maybe you can even eat something.”

Wayne looked back into the lobby. The concierge was keeping an eye on him. Wayne gave him the finger. “Your fascist friend there—I should curse him, I should. Just a little hex...”

“Get your bike.”

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# The Girl Who Can't Be Kissed

BY GEORGETTE KAPLAN

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