

Creeps

Chapter Five

“All right, I gotta ask. What the hell do you need with four pillows?”

“It’s none of your business, Naomi. Ring me up and I’ll be out of your hair.”

With theatrical flare, the busty blonde Target cashier craned her neck as if to check for additional customers, of which there were clearly none. It was half past eleven at night, early enough that the stragglers hadn’t yet made their way to the registers for closing, but late enough that the store was nearly empty. His luck had not been with him; his ex-girlfriend hadn’t often worked closing when they had been together. Having noticed Naomi standing bored at a register as he was slinking in, Martin had noted the presence of the self-checkout lanes and planned to use them to avoid an awkward encounter. Those kiosks had been disabled – some might say conspicuously – since his arrival. Like much of this strange, strange day, things were not happening as he had anticipated.

“Relax, Marty. I’m only making conversation with a customer. Just saying, that’s a lot of pillows for one guy.”

“It’s the number I needed. Do we really have to do this?”

“So let’s see. One for you, of course. Oh my gosh, are you still playing your little hypno-games with the Wilde child? You *are!* I guess one for her poor abused knees, then, right? Or yours, more likely. Then there’s you, though.” She hefted the fourth pillow and addressed it. “You, I don’t understand at all.”

“I’m doing some decorating. Does it matter?”

“Oh? For your fancy new office?” Her grin was smugness itself. “Yeah, I drive past it on my way to work. Nice sign. Very classy. Must’ve set you back twenty, maybe thirty bucks.”

The sign in question was a clump of letters on the marquis sign by the street. They had misspelled Manning, leaving out what he believed to be the second N, but was in actuality the first. It had, in point of fact, cost him nothing, having stolen the letters from the abandoned strip mall down the road and played contract lawyer with his landlord to force him to install them.

“If I could afford a fancy custom sign, I wouldn’t be coming to Target at midnight for 30% off pillows, would I.”

She laughed at that. “So really, are you and Princess Pretty pussy still getting your freak on? Or did she dump your ass and now you’re shopping for fresh chumps – sorry, chumpettes – around town?”

“Stacey and I were never ‘together.’ It was an experiment, nothing more. Do you really want to rehash things right now, in the middle of Target?”

“This is the front entrance of Target, actually. And its only exit. And you’ve been shopping at the south side store since we broke up, so when else would I get to do it?”

“How would you know that I—” He caught himself too late. “*If I shop south side?*”

“I pick up extra hours over there sometimes. I’ve seen you.”

“So, what, you’re monitoring my comings and goings now? You don’t think that’s a bit much?”

“I’m sorry, it sounds like the guy who somehow managed to find a way to cheat on me with a girl I explicitly offered to threesome with him is accusing *me* of being too controlling.”

“You didn’t want a threesome, Naomi; you wanted me to let you kick her around and abuse her.”

“Yeah, with the three of us.” She flashed a look that screamed *duh*.

“If you want me to apologize again, I will, but only if you promise me I can take my pillows and go afterwards.”

She dragged her fingernails across his chest; he didn’t recoil fast enough to hide his acceptance of her touch. “Don’t be like that, Marty. We broke up, what, five months ago. I’ve moved on, found someone new, having the best sex of my life, and if you even got a taste of Wilde child, sounds like you don’t have cause to be bitter either. I was only teasing you a little. Now seriously, how’s your new business thing going? The Maning Mental Healthy Clinic or whatever?”

“Slow start, but it’s picking up steam. Just signed up a new patient today, actually. Thought it’d be nice for patients to have individualized pillows. You know, for sanitization.” (Or was it sanitation? Were they the same thing?)

“So you have... four patients?”

“Four pillows, plus the ones I already bought.” Which was two, which he had bought in January after Naomi had complained his existing bed pillows were musty. They were still on his bed, though during the move one had acquired a muddy stain he hadn’t quite been able to remove.

“Yeah? Well all right! Atta boy.” She clapped him on the arm. Another customer was approaching now, prompting her to at long last begin scanning the pillows. “Not sure these are gonna fit in a bag, but—”

“That’s fine. The pillowcases could probably use them, though.”

“You got it, sir.”

The rest of the transaction went more or less normally, aside from her pretending to memorize his card number. “I’m kidding! We used to date, so I’m teasing him a little,” she assured the woman behind him, who chortled at the sport. “I already have all your credit cards saved on my phone, anyway.”

The woman positively howled at that, all the harder when she saw his face growing as red as Naomi’s shirt. Naomi handed his card back. “Now are you gonna keep

being a little b-word and hide from me, or are you gonna get over it and start shopping north side like a big boy?”

“Good night, Naomi.”

Whatever she was muttering to that customer as Martin hotfooted it towards the exit set off the loudest peals of laughter yet. “Give the Wilde child my best!” she called after him.

So, yeah. Pillows. Mission accomplished.

“Heya, Kira. Come on in.” Martin gave a nod to the boy waiting alone in his lobby.

“It’ll be about an hour, like I said, Alex. You don’t have to wait in here for me if you’re bored. The mall’s only like two minutes down the road.”

The boy in the waiting room rubbed his jaw for a moment. “Nah, I think I’m cool here. Have fun. Or, no, I mean—”

The door swung shut, and Kira wasn’t shy about eye-rolling his word choice. Then she noticed the pillow waiting on the end of the couch. “Oh hey, this is new.”

“Yeah, I thought it might be a good idea to do more than febreze between patients. So this is the official Kira pillow now.”

“Aw, thanks! Oh geez, though that reminds me – you know you still have not billed me? Free is a good price to me and all, but I feel bad.”

“No, you’re actually good. Since you and Stacey are both on your parents’ insurance, I just signed you up.”

“I don’t have to sign anything?”

“Nope, all part of that paperwork you filled out your first day.”

Kira didn’t remember filling out any paperwork her first day at the Manning Mental Wellness Clinic, which was because she hadn’t. But between financial aid, registering for classes and her now-defunct roommate agreement, she’d filled out enough in a brief period some months ago to presume there had been more. “Cool cool.”

“So, how are you doing?”

“Good, good. Um, good, yeah, pretty good.” She fidgeted in her seat, smoothing out her dress over her thighs. Martin could empathize. After his first time masturbating during one of his hypnosis sessions with Stacey, he’d been pretty nervous for the next one himself.

“Sounds... good.” They shared a tepid laugh.

“So... we doing this?”

Kira was most of the way to her supine position before Martin stopped her. “Actually, if it’s all right, I wanted to talk to you before we start.”

“Oh. Oh god. Yeah. Um, yeah. Look, if this is about last time...”

She froze, and Martin did as well. Her masturbation the other day was nothing he meant to broach as a subject. His mind raced for a pivot, to give her the space to avoid confronting it. He already anticipated having a harder time getting her to do it again; if she knew he knew, it might well become impossible.

“Hmm? No, no, last time was... Oh, do you mean because Stacey barged in?”

“Oh. Um...”

His heart thanked him for coming up with a plausible deflection from a discussion of her uncontrollable masturbatory needs during his trances. “Because I promise you, I made my displeasure very clear to her. That will not be happening again.

I don't want to have to do anything so draconian as locking her out while we're in here, but if you'd feel more comfortable that way, I can."

"Uh, yeah. Sure. I mean no! No, that's OK. She said you were pissed. I don't think she'll do it again. But if you want. That's all I meant. From last time. Um, yeah." Her face scrunched up. He entertained an amusing thought of playing poker with this girl, and how easy it would be to squeeze a month's rent out of her. Then he remembered he was working hard to keep her from paying him.

"I'll touch base with her again when you two come in next week to make sure, but for my part, I'd rather keep the door unlocked. Don't want anybody feeling cornered or anything, right?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Doctor— I mean Professor Manning."

He chuckled. "Not a doctor yet. Anyway, there was actually something else I wanted to discuss. Though it is about Stacey."

"Oh."

"So, I feel like we've made decent progress on most of your goals these past couple months. But so far, I haven't been able to get you to say word one about your relationship with Stacey, even though that's the first goal you mentioned to me." He didn't bother adding how the slightest hint he was pressing in that direction had ejected her from her trance in a second. "Not from you, not from your subconscious. So I thought we should discuss it before we went on with any hypnosis. I wanted to know... well, anything, really."

"Why can't you just use whatever she's already told you about it?"

Martin shook his head. "She's said even less about you than you have about her."

"Seriously? She never talked about... anything?"

"You know I can't tell you what I talk about with my other patients. This is an unusual circumstance, treating both of you, but even if she'd opened up, it's important to me to hear it from you."

"I... OK, yeah. Um... Do we have to talk about that? Like, we have other stuff we could work on, right?"

"We don't *have* to do anything. It's your time. I'm here to help you the best I can. But I will say, it struck me how emphatic you were on day one about wanting to patch things up with your sister, yet you haven't mentioned it since."

Her nose wrinkled like it did during their sessions at the prospect. "And you can't... I dunno, put me under and tell me to forget about it?"

"Forget about what? Your sister?"

"No, just... my feelings, or whatever. Just go, 'Kira, forget all the bad stuff between you and Stacey' and snap your fingers. That's how you do it, right?"

He returned her smile. "Basically. But seriously, trying to forget your problems isn't the same as resolving them. It's up to you, though."

After several months of routine hypnosis, Martin had nearly forgotten the *therapist* part of hypnotherapist. (For exploration of whether or not he ought to concern himself with the *rapist* part of hypnotherapist, google “dubcon.”) It finally occurred to him during his brainstorm of how to make use of that incredible display she’d unknowingly put on for him that he could simply ask her things, like a normal shrink.

“OK. So, like, what do you need to know?”

“Why don’t you start by telling me what’s wrong with your relationship with your sister, from your perspective.”

It was in response to that request that Martin learned about the still less obvious *not* part of hypnotherapist, because as he helped talk Kira down from a panic attack triggered by her attempt to form words about whatever had happened with her sister, he discovered that she still would *not* be disclosing that backstory so easily. Before he quite knew what was happening, he was sitting beside a sobbing Kira, her arms squeezing him like she might blow away if she let go. He rubbed her back consolingly, letting her cry it out. As for Martin himself, he was simply glad she was breathing normally again.

“I don’t think I’m ready to talk about it,” Kira murmured into his sweater.

“I’d say so. Though I’d also say, I’m a lot more concerned about it now than I was before.” Not a lie.

“We’re... she’s...” Her chest began seizing again, and he shushed her back to silence before a second attack began.

“It’s all right, Kira. It’s going to be all right.”

More crying, more sniffing, more clinging ensued. It would have been endearing if it hadn’t been so frustrating.

“I’ve been hugging you for a really long time,” she observed after a fairly long time.

“Stop when you’re ready, but not before. It’s OK.”

“You’re sure it’s not awkward?”

“It’s fine, Kira.”

She snuffle-laughed. “I guess once you’ve seen me strip down to my underwear, a little hugging is no biggie, huh.” The laugh cut off. “Yeah, now it’s awkward.”

Martin nodded. “Yeah, a bit.”

Kira detached herself, and after retrieving a box of tissues for her, he took his own seat at his swivel chair. The last use those tissues had seen was sponging up the mess from his reaction to watching this girl jilling herself on his sofa. She dabbed at her cheeks, then took a moment to clean up the mascara that had made rather a mess of her face. Martin waited patiently.

“I’m sorry about all that. It’s only, you asked me about Stacey, and whenever I start to—”

“Maybe it’s best you don’t set yourself into another panic attack trying to talk about it?”

Kira nodded. “No, I know. But I wanted to say that it’s hard. Like, I don’t want to get into it, but we didn’t just grow apart or something. Some really fucked up – oh god, I used the f-word in front of my teacher!”

“It’s fine. Go on.”

After an apologetic grimace, she continued. “Some really messed up stuff happened. Like, next level. But Stacey just went on with her life like nothing ever happened. I can’t do that. Every time I see her, I relive it all over again. And it makes me feel...” She shuddered. “I don’t even know the word for it. Scared. Sick. A bunch of things. But when I let any of that show in front of her, I get a Stace on my case like there’s no reason to be freaking out. Gaslighting, Dr. Rivers called it.”

“You talked to Dr. Rivers about this stuff?”

“Oh heck no! Oh wow. No. No no no. I’ve never talked to *anyone* about it. I never want to. Ever.”

“I saw that. It sounds like whatever happened, it was really hard on you. So with that in mind, actually, I’d like to try something.”

Her chin quivered in anticipation of whatever she feared he might be about to suggest. “I know you want to help, Professor Manning, but I *really* don’t want to talk about it. Not even with you.”

“No, I understand. But I also think that what you’re carrying is awfully cumbersome. So for now, as a first step, remembering that you can stop taking steps at any time – *any time*,” he stressed, “I want to put you into a trance, and let you practice talking about it when no one is in the room. Just giving you the power to form the words. Then, maybe someday if you feel like sharing them, you’ll be that much closer to being able.”

Kira frowned. “How will I know you left the room?”

“For one, you can have your eyes open. For two, if I don’t, all I expect to happen from pushing you to open up is that you’d snap out of the trance, and lose a bunch of respect for me.”

“No, you know I wouldn’t. You’ve worked wonders for me, Professor Manning.”

“And I’d like to keep doing so. So what do you say? Worth a shot?”

Instead of agreeing, however, she pursued fresh objections. “You record our sessions, you said.”

“That’s right. So here, why don’t you hold onto my phone – that’s what I use, nothing fancy – and that way you know I can’t. How’s that?”

After a long, anxious pause, Kira nodded. “OK. I guess we can try. But if I start screaming, you’ll come back, right?”

“Of course I will. Just don’t make it awkward again once the hugging starts.”

Kira giggled, but then her expression faded to something softer. “You’re like the nicest guy I’ve ever met, Professor Manning. I just wanted you to know that.”

He smiled warmly. Fuck, he couldn’t wait to put his dick in her. He’d been such an idiot to agree to grant Stacey dibs once her time came. “Wait until you get to know me.”

And so he powered down his phone, handed it to Kira, and guided her into a trance. She was already on edge, so he used a more thorough induction, suppressing her anxieties gradually until she was ready to let go of her conscious awareness of them altogether.

“Kira?”

“Mm.”

“How do you feel?”

Wrinkle. “OK. Not as calm as usual. Nervous.”

“It’s going to be all right, Kira. Do you remember what we talked about?”

“Mm. You’re supposed to leave. Not supposed to hear this.”

“That’s right. Do you remember what I asked you to do once I leave?”

Wrinkle. Wrinkle wrinkle. “Yes. Talk about the Stacey stuff.”

“That’s right. Do you think you’re ready for that?”

Wrinkle. “Not sure. Scared.”

Martin nodded. “I’ll bet. Would you rather do something else?”

Kira nodded even harder. “Yes. Oh gosh yes.”

“Well OK then. We’re done talking about your sister today. Forget all about her.”

“Mmm. Good. Bye, Stacey. Mmm.”

Like that, her body relaxed, the threat gone. “Do you mind if I take my phone back?”

“Nmm.” Her arm lazily flopped down to hang off the side of the sofa, but it missed her purse. Martin helped himself, switching it back on right away.

He ought to feel bad. No, he did feel bad. A little. But after two months of watching her dance circles around her grand mystery, he was bored of it. Or if not bored, far more interested in other things. This smoking hot college freshman had been masturbating in front of him only days ago. And not halfheartedly. She’d gotten into it, at least as much as he’d been.

He set his notebook on his lap. “All right. Now how about we do our exercises? To help you relax and enjoy yourself.”

“Mm. OK.”

“All right then. Now repeat after me. I like coming here.”

“Mmm. I like coming here.”

Martin sat back in his chair, switching on his camera and toggling video mode. He put Kira through the paces, the same utterances as the week before. Bit by bit, it

seemed to be having its effect. She was wearing a dress more appropriate for September than October, thin and tight and, if not short, short enough. Cleavage in abundance, and ample thigh on display. Thighs she began to rub together as she continued.

“Coming here feels natural, rewarding, and goood.”

Still, she wasn't taking it as far as last time. Not yet, at least. By the time she'd finished her ten repetitions of each line, she was visibly aroused. Her nipples poked out into the pale blue fabric of her dress, and she licked her lips more than anyone should. Her hips rocked side to side, slowly raising the hem of her dress with each undulation. By the time she was done, a scant yellow triangle of her panties peeked out the bottom.

Luckily, he felt like he had a decent theory why it wasn't going quite so far as it had the previous time. She'd taken comfort in believing, however falsely, that he hadn't seen, so he had to be careful with the next steps.

“How do you feel now, Kira?”

“Mmmm. Good.”

“That's good. I'm glad to hear it. As good as last session?”

Wrinkle. “Nah. But still good.”

“Why? Would you like to tell me what was different last time?”

Wrinkle. She shook her head. “No. Super embarrassing. So lucky you didn't see.”

“I'm not sure I follow. You said you felt good, so how could that be embarrassing?”

Kira giggled, but her little face scrunched up even as she did. “Too embarrassing.”

“Did something happen when I left the office?” Martin knew full well what had happened, and that he'd had front row seats. Still, he had to work her up to it.

She nodded. “Yeah. Love coming here.” Another giggle.

“Would you like it if that happened again?”

She shook her head. “Not in front of you. Would be so embarrassing.”

“Embarrassing, right. If I left the office for a while, like last time, how about then?”

“Maaaaybe. Dunno.” *Wrinkle.* “Dirrrty.”

“Well I tell you what. In a moment, I'm going to leave you alone in my office. While I'm gone, I want you to keep repeating all those things to yourself. Let's practice first, yeah?”

“Mmm.” Her thin smile was sly. It was the smile of a girl who couldn't wait until he left so she could go to town on herself.

It didn't take long to get her stringing the whole thing together. “Hypnosis works well for me. I like coming here. My therapist is helping me lose weight and keep it off. My therapist can work wonders on my body.” He left *on my body* in place, since she'd accepted it before. She still did. “Our time together is relaxing and enjoyable. Coming here is a high priority. If I follow my therapist's instructions, nothing can stop me from

doing what I want. I trust Professor Manning. Coming here feels natural, rewarding, and good.”

“Good girl, Kira.” She beamed. The girl was a treasure. “Now I’m going to leave. You keep saying those words, and remember, you have the office to yourself. I won’t return for a long time. Understand?”

“Mmmm. Yes. Hypnosis works well for me. I like c-coming here. My therapist is helping me lose weight and keep it off. He can work wonders... Mmmm... on my body.”

Martin propped up his phone, adjusting the aim on his camera until the couch was centered perfectly, like he’d practiced. Then, as quietly as he could, he locked the door to the waiting room – just in case. Precautions seen to, Martin retreated to the back of his office and tugged the cord that lowered the ladder to the attic. A fresh application of WD-40 let it slide down in near perfect silence.

“Nothing can stop me from doing... whatever... I want,” her voice trailed after him.

He returned with right under ten minutes to go, creeping down the ladder and returning to his chair. Kira was still chanting, and as he came around the sofa, he saw she was still doing the rest, too. Her dress was flipped well over her panties – or rather, where her panties had been, as that lacey yellow fabric had been tugged down to mid-thigh. The dress wasn’t tailored to allow her to expose her chest, so she’d come at it from underneath, squeezed up and over the left cup of her bra. Like the last time, she was splitting her attention between her boobs and her pussy. He made a mental note of her apparent preference for having those magnificent tits of hers played with. Some grand day, he would make use of this knowledge.

After stowing his phone, he took a seat and watched.

“I love coming here,” she panted. “Mmmm, love coming here. Nothing can stop me from doing whatever Professor Manning and I want. Coming here feels natural, feels so good, feels so rewarding, coming here, love coming here...”

The mantra was a mess, but the effect was pure poetry. How many times had she come since he’d left? Surely, from the way she was carrying on, she must have. Before he had to figure out a means of intervening, however, she gasped, groaned, spasmed, and fell still. The words still trickled from her lips in a whisper, the exact rote words again now. Kira’s body fell still, her dress a disheveled mess around the middle of her chest, her stretched out yellow panties resting at mid-thigh, her hair splayed out like any freshly fucked woman’s should be.

Oh, screw it. He snapped a few more shots. He might wind up needing them.

“Kira?” he said softly.

“Mmmm. Professor Manning.”

“Pretty soon, I’m going to start waking you up.”

Wrinkle. “Aww. Bleh. Time together relaxing. Enjoyable.”

“I think so too. Before I do though, I want to ask you what happened in here while I was out of my office. You don’t have to answer, but I promise you that you can trust me to be OK with it.”

“Nuh, uh. Embarrassing. Already made you uncomfortable before. Be mad.”

“I won’t be. You’re my favorite patient, and my favorite student. I won’t be mad.”

“But I was so baaaad.” Kira giggled.

Fair enough. Martin had hoped to make a little more progress, but really, making a habit of letting her get herself off in his office, at his direction, was progress by itself.

“Pretty soon you’re going to wake up. So if you want to make sure I don’t know you did anything bad, make sure you’ve covered up any signs, OK?”

Wrinkle. Then she gasped. Was she going to snap out of it? He had a plan for that. Yet she merely hiked up her panties and smoothed down her dress, tugging things roughly back into place. Her hair was still mussed, her makeup was still a mess (albeit mostly from crying earlier). A thin sheen of perspiration shone on her forehead and the exposed portion of her chest. He took a couple more pictures. It was too hot not to.

He brought her out of the trance, taking a couple extra minutes to emphasize the distorted recollection with which he meant to leave her. He was then treated to the sight of her bulging eyes as she sat up in a puddle. “Eep!”

“Something wrong?”

“No! No, I... Shit. Shoot, I mean! No. No, everything’s fine.”

“If you say so.” Let her think he was oblivious. “So. That was half an hour of you talking through your situation with Stacey to yourself. How do you feel?”

“I...” She frowned, puzzled. Would it really work? What a double victory that would be! Someday, he’d have to batter down her resistance to Stacey, and if he could do it by tricking her into thinking she’d worked it out, better yet. Indeed, she replied, “I feel... good? Like, weirdly good. Are you sure we...?”

“I was out of the room, but those were in the instructions I gave you. Do you remember anything?”

After a moment of contemplation, she shook her head. “I mean, just impressions. Feeling relaxed, peaceful. Like usual.” She squirmed, adjusting herself to keep the damp spot concealed. How many times had she come? “Yeah.”

“So... it sounds like it worked then, right? You talked out your issues, and came out the other side feeling better for it. I call that a win.”

“I... Yeah, I don’t know. I still don’t feel like I want to talk about it. I don’t think. Like, I’m not panicking. Not about that anyway. Or about anything else!” Kira grimaced. “But maybe that’s better. I mean, I guess it is. Right?”

“I guess so.” Martin looked pointedly to the clock. “Think about it, and we’ll talk more next time. I’m not kicking you out, but I hate to keep your friend waiting.”

“Oh.” She scrunched her face at the door. “Him. Yeah. That’s a good point. Damn, I was hoping we could talk about that article before discussion section tomorrow.”

“You know how to reach me.”

Kira rose, flipping the pillow onto what must be the damp spot with a laughable attempt at nonchalance. No grace at all. Then she came over and gave him a long hug. “Thanks again for being amazing, Professor Manning. I don’t know how I’d be managing without you.”

“My pleasure, Kira.”

Mission accomplished.

“Come on in, Sharon. Or no, Sherri, you said, right?” The greeting had felt more natural in his rehearsals than it did to the woman’s face. How had he let himself get talked into this? No, that was a simple answer. He’d told her he was fully booked, and she’d offered two hundred dollars per session. Dozens of times since she’d booked this appointment earlier in the week, Martin had considered canceling. But each time he remembered how sorely he needed that money. It was a king’s ransom, yet even so Sherri had looked relieved the price tag wasn’t higher.

Given who she was, Martin went into this meeting figuring there may well not be another, and let her poor negotiating skills stand.

To his question, she replied in her tiny voice, “Either’s fine.”

“Well what do most people call you?”

“Sherri.”

“Sherri, then. Welcome.” He invited her into the office, and she squirmed as wide around him as a person could. Sherri took a seat on the couch, folding her hands in her lap and studying the carpet between them. My, but she was beautiful. Annoyingly so, considering that unlike the other women he’d had in his office, there was no expectation of ever getting to fuck this one. She’d cut her hair shorter since last year, to her jaw line on the right and shorter still on the left, and dyed it a lighter red, almost orange. Probably why he hadn’t recognized her from Stacey’s photos at first. She was a little thing, barely taller than Kira, and even more slender than Stacey. Her DAT sweater was a smaller version than the one he’d seen Stacey wear last year during the phase when she was emphasizing her unwillingness to be leered at, but the shape of the navy blue leggings flowing out of it were a reminder not to discount the body under that face.

“So you can call me Martin, or Mr. Manning if that’s more comfortable for you.”

The girl nodded. She said nothing.

“I suppose I can open with a bit about what I do here, and then you can talk to me about what brought you in. Sound good?”

Sherri nodded again. Martin went through a spiel not unlike what he’d done with Kira, a generic explanation of the benefits and process of therapy. “So that’s me. Now what about you? What can you tell me about you?”

Sherri’s hands fidgeted in her lap, reminding him all too much of her ex-girlfriend. “My name’s Sherri. Not really sure what you consider important, so here goes. I’m a senior studying communication at Lakeview with a minor in computer science, I’m a member of Delta Alpha Theta, I was raised Lutheran but now I’m a non-denominational Christian though not especially devout, I’m allergic to bee stings, and I’m here because I’m tired of feeling sad all the time.”

Martin worked his jaw soundlessly for a moment. “That... is... a lot of information. Still, sounds like maybe we ought to begin with that last one. You say you feel sad. Tell me more.”

“I broke up with my girlfriend back in May, right at the end of last semester.” Her eyes took on a far-off look. “I was in love with her. But I found out she’d been hiding a lot of things from me. Big things. I confronted her, and... she shrugged it off like I was nothing to her. My heart broke into ten million pieces, and ever since then I’ve felt... horrible.” Sherri said all that like she was presenting a report, explaining the malfunction of her toilet to a plumber. “And I’m tired of feeling that way. So I thought I should finally get help.”

“I... see. Can I ask, ah, why me? Out of all the shrinks in the book?”

For the first time, her eyes fixed on his and stayed there. “Because you’re the reason we broke up.”

Martin let out a sigh. He’d been afraid of that, but the longer he had denied her the opportunity to express that fact, the worse it had felt. “Aha. Now look, I—”

“You don’t have to make excuses. I respect your professionalism. Stacey came to you for help... I suppose the two of you would call it that, at least. Anyway, she asked, and you helped her. I’m simply asking you to do the same for me. I’m not trying to guilt you into anything. I’ll pay you. I want the same kind of help you gave her.”

His eyes narrowed. “What exactly did Stacey tell you I did for her?”

“Oh, call it what you like. Gay conversion therapy, opening her up to men, making her jagoff family happy with their wayward daughter. Whatever. The semantics don’t matter to me.”

Martin was relieved by her misapprehension. “And that’s what you want? To be straight? Because—”

“No.” Her voice, while small, cut him off like a knife. “My comfort with the male body is fine where it’s at. What I want, if you can do it, is to make me stop caring about her the way you made her stop caring about me.”

“Whoa now, hold on one minute, I didn’t—”

Again, she sliced right through his rebuttal. “You don’t need to be defensive. I don’t mean to accuse you of anything, and no doubt that’s not how you would characterize matters. Like I said, we don’t need to debate semantics.”

“Semantics? You’re saying that I brainwashed her straight or something!”

There was fire in her voice, though she spoke so softly his ears had to strain to hear her. “I get it. Stacey is gorgeous. No doubt the prospect of putting her on the market appealed to you. Earned some bro points or whatever. Call it what you want. I really, truly, don’t care. I’m just tired of being miserable, and missing her all the time, and wanting to be with her all the time, even though she doesn’t feel any of that in return. It’s a hole in my heart that I can’t fill, and I’m asking you to make it stop.”

“Good grief. You make it sound like you’re here for assisted suicide or something,” Martin grumbled.

“I’m not suicidal. I had some dark days, but I never tried anything. And if I was, I wouldn’t put that on you. As I said, I bear you no ill will. I doubt if you even knew I existed when you were working with her. Stacey was always a bit of a closed book.”

“No joke. But... look. Maybe this was a bad idea, your coming here. I admit, I did recognize your name after you dropped it the other day, but I thought, maybe you were here for something unrelated.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You thought it was a coincidence that the former lover of the woman you spent all last year hypnotizing out of lesbianism showed up in your office asking for your help.”

“This isn’t going to work, Sherri. I’m sorry you were hurt. I really am. But the best thing for it is to find somebody new. You’re a pretty girl, and I’m sure you’ll find—”

“Are you seeing anyone?”

“Uh, no, actually, but... Look, I didn’t mean *me*, Sherri, but that’s sweet of you to—”

“I wasn’t asking you out, Mr. Manning. As you may know, or perhaps you don’t, I was there when your own girlfriend stormed into our sorority house screeching accusations at Stacey, mostly along the lines that she was some sort of homewrecker. That’s how I found out, actually. She managed to keep it from me for months. I’d wondered if, maybe, there was someone else. Holes in her alibis when she’d slip out for hours at a time, the way she started dressing around campus, how closely she guarded her phone around me. But I told myself, no way, her libido couldn’t be that out of control if she was getting action on the side. Somehow, I failed to consider the possibility that she was pursuing hypnotherapy as an escape from her dreary lesbian life. With me.”

Martin didn’t know what to say to that, but she obviated the need. “I’m sorry, I went off-topic. Forgive me. I was asking about your relationship status. That girl, Naomi I believe Stacey said her name was, was very pretty. And she seemed very passionate on the subject of your having... employed unorthodox techniques with a patient, let’s call it. So when you broke up, did you run right out, find someone else, and magically feel better? You’ve admitted you’re single now. Is that because your rebound was so incredible you forgot all about her?”

“I see your point, Sherri.”

“Good. Of course I tried seeing other women. They only made me feel worse.” Her eyes stared through the floor, into some darkness visible only to her. “I feel guilty every time I touch someone, because I know my heart isn’t in it, because my stupid heart is trapped in that moment when I found out what I thought was the love of my life was actually someone who was working day and night to be free of me.”

Martin's cheeks puffed out as he let out a heavy breath. "You know, you really might want to consider someone more experienced for all that. I could ask around, make a referral or something..."

The fire in her eyes when she looked back up at him was enough to make him shrink back in his chair. "All right. So now, I'm saying you owe me. You say you recognized me, which means Stacey must have given you some idea who I was to her. You went through with what you were doing, even knowing she had someone who cared about her, someone who *thought* she cared back. That's despicable."

This was really getting away from him fast. He'd been daunted by the thought of figuring out how referrals worked, much less actually grappling with the collateral damage of his actions.

"I never...! I don't know what you think happened last year, but whatever happened between you and her was between you and her. I didn't put any ideas in her head that weren't there already. Not where you're concerned. If she did you dirty, that's not on me."

That raptor gaze slipped back to the floor, collapsed on itself. "Oh."

He raised his chin defiantly. "Yeah."

"Oh."

Martin let that sink in. It wasn't his fault Stacey was a shitty girlfriend! He wasn't about to sit here and let this woman accuse him of wrecking her life. Who did she think she was?!

"I guess that's that, then. Sorry to have embarrassed myself. I'll be on my way. Do you want to refund the \$180 for the rest of the hour in cash now, or send me a check? Either is agreeable to me."

Four pillows in – one for each patient plus a spare, just in case – Martin did not have anywhere near that kind of money.

"Well hold on now. I didn't say I couldn't help you," he countered quickly. "I simply wanted to clear the air."

Sherry had never made it to more than half-standing, but settled right back down. She was so light, she barely made an indentation on the couch cushions. "Consider it cleared."

"All right then. So, um, say again, so I understand: what exactly is your goal in coming here?"

"When Stacey told me we were done, there was a coldness in her eyes like nothing I've ever..." Her lips pursed. "Like she was telling a bum to fuck off when they asked for change. I was ready for a normal fight. Make some accusations, demand concessions, maybe some makeup sex after if she was nice about it. But she brushed me aside like a wad of lint. She's in my sorority, too – maybe you knew that – so I still see her pretty much every day. She doesn't talk to me, won't look at me, and certainly won't

acknowledge that there's anything uncomfortable on her side of things. To her, it's as over and as done as the tide pod challenge, and left about the same taste in her mouth."

"That sounds bad."

"So you asked me what I want? To feel like that. To feel... nothing. Eternal sunshine, a spotless mind. That's what I want." She looked up again, but only her eyes. Everything else still pointed right to the dingy gray carpet. "Can you do that?"

Too many thoughts flooded Martin Manning's mind in that moment to give a decisive answer. How would Stacey react if – when – she found out about this? Treating her ex-girlfriend, the ex-girlfriend she nearly bit his head off over every time he mentioned her name... it was playing with fire.

Did she have a right to an opinion, though? Sherri was right. Stacey sucked as a person, and she probably sucked more as a girlfriend. There was no way she'd come to his show last year, asking what she had, expecting it not to disrupt or destroy that relationship. Still, they had a business relationship of sorts, and pissing her off would not do his goals any favors.

Could he hide it? Not with any reliability. The kind of heartache Sherri was expressing was not something he could rely on to maintain secrecy. It was volatile, and could well blast into an inferno before he could freeze it like she asked.

Could he win that confrontation though, when it came? Perhaps he could persuade Stacey to support such an enterprise. His old patient probably didn't bear this girl ill will – heaven knows she had no right to – so maybe she would agree it was a kindness. If she didn't, perhaps he could persuade her of it under a trance.

Would that interfere with his more pressing agenda, though? Was Sherri's peace of mind worth so small a risk to his goals?

He let out a sigh, and the acrid flavor of past best-by gas station sandwich flooded his nostrils.

"I'd like to try."

He was rewarded with a thin smile on tight lips. "Thank you, Mr. Manning. Though, I feel like I need to ask. Are you still seeing Stacey?"

"Seeing Stacey? She and I were never...! I mean, why would you even think we..."

Her eyes narrowed. "As a patient." He could almost swear her teeth were grinding, but this petite creature before him couldn't have the jaws for it.

"Oh. I'm afraid patient confidentiality strictures prevent me from disclosing my client roster."

"So yes."

"Or no. I really can't comment. But neither can I talk to her about your coming here."

Sherri folded her arms across her DAT logo. "How could you talk to her about my coming here unless you were still talking to her?"

“I meant, you know. If I were. Which I may or may not be.” Smooth.

“Well, whatever. I suppose that was all I wanted anyway, your word that my being here won’t reach her. My scheduling is flexible, so please do make sure our appointments are far enough apart that we don’t risk coinciding. Since you say you can’t officially comment, I’ll make sure to always give you a few times, and you can tell me what works, if that’s agreeable. And once you hire a receptionist, please make sure they understand the arrangement.”

“That sounds fine.” Receptionist? Maybe if he landed ten more real patients – which he certainly hoped he wouldn’t. A woman as hot as Sherri deserved her place in DAT house, sure, but there was no sex waiting down the end of that road. Not so long ago, being allowed to hypnotize a woman like this, even for entirely platonic ends, would have been the thrill of his hypnotic career. Now he had Stacey, and he had Kira. Sherri was an actual job, the farthest thing from his motivation for opening this business.

“So when can we start? I don’t actually know the first thing about hypnosis. To be honest, I was skeptical of it right up until the moment it turned my girlfriend straight.”

“That’s step one, in fact. Overcoming skepticism. Today, I’ll try a simple induction to see if we can get anywhere. My suspicion is no, but that’s all right. It can take weeks, even months to achieve a true trance. But we’ll get there.”

Sherri frowned. “I’ll cooperate with your methods, of course, but... for two hundred dollars an hour, I hope it doesn’t take months to get started.”

“Me too. But it’s hard for some people, giving up control.”

“Giving up control? Like, letting you...?”

He shook his head. “Giving up *conscious* control. Your subconscious is a horse of a different color. It has wants and urges and even needs of its own, all of which might be invisible to the conscious mind. And it’s not used to being accessed, which means you can shape it. Then once it’s closer to the shape you want, you can empower it to assert itself.”

“That sounds like witchcraft.”

“I suppose they didn’t teach this stuff in Lutheran school.” He smiled. “Like I said, it’s hard for some people. But we’ll see. Maybe you can surprise yourself. Skepticism can be a tough hurdle to jump, but what you have going for you is a sincere desire for results.”

“OK. Do I need to lie down or something? Close my eyes? Just tell me what to do. I want to start as soon as possible.”

Once upon a time, he might have taken a girl like this asking him to hypnotize her, and that soft, biddable “tell me what to do” and put it in his spank bank in perpetuity.

“Both are optional. My experience has been that the more comfortable a patient is, the easier things go. You’re the one who ultimately has to decide what’s comfortable or not, though.”

“Then I’ll stay sitting. It would feel strange, lying down on a stranger’s couch.”

“Sounds good. Let’s give it a try then, shall we? Remember, the worst case scenario here is that nothing happens and things stay the same. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“Things remaining the same is exactly what I’m afraid of,” Sherri retorted softly, closing her eyes. “But let’s try.”

By the end of their appointment, Sherri had come no closer to a trance than Stacey had in their first try. She looked weary. She looked frustrated. But beneath that, she looked determined. “I don’t feel like we came close.”

“Honestly, I don’t think we did. But we’ve found some things that don’t work, and we’ve demystified the process a bit. Those are good steps. Next session, we’ll take some more. We’ll get there, Sherri.”

“How long did it take before you could put Stacey in a trance?”

“Months,” he said somberly, trying to do the math in his head. \$200 a week times 4.3 weeks per month, minus the kevlar vest he’d need when Stacey found out... “It’s different for everyone, though.”

Sherri looked down at her lap for a long moment. “All right. If that’s what it takes. Can I pay in advance for next time?”

“Uh, yeah. That’d be fine.”

Mission accomplished.

“All right. I’m going to leave the office again, Kira. And you’re—”

“I like coming here. Hypnosis works well on me. Professor Manning can work wonders on my body. Coming here is a high priority. I...”

He slipped into the lobby as quickly and quietly as he could.

Stacey glanced up from her phone, surprised to see him so soon into her sister’s session. “Seriously? You cannot possibly have screwed things up again already. You’ve only had her in there for what, fifteen minutes?”

Martin sat in the chair across from her. “No, everything’s fine.”

“Oh. Then... shouldn’t you be in there?”

“No. Kira’s repeating what I told her to repeat. Your solution last week had an unintended consequence, though, one that I’m exploring. Exploiting, more like. It’s good stuff.”

“OK... Did you come out here to gloat then, or what?”

“No. I actually came out here to make you an offer.”

“Offer? What offer? We’re on the same team, Mesmer. If you have something for me, let’s get on with it. If you can’t do something yourself and I can help, ask, and if it’s not too much of a pain maybe I’ll throw you a bone.”

Martin smiled. That last bit had been a paraphrase of one of the sentiments he’d been drilling into that gorgeous little head of hers. “I think you’ll find this offer to your liking, actually. How would you like access to a video of little Kira in there masturbating on our couch?”

“You...” She hesitated, licking her lips. For all her self-possession, Martin could see all too clearly that he’d intrigued her. “You got her to do it again?”

“I’ve got her in there doing it right now. And I can do it again, any time I want, so long as I’m not in the room. Your good idea, actually. Her embarrassment over ‘nearly getting caught’ last week is keeping her from giving me another live show, but so long as I’m out of the room, poor girl can’t help herself.”

“That’s... good to hear,” Stacey replied guardedly. “So you were making me an offer?”

“Stacey, I’m going to level with you. I don’t think you and I are making as much progress together as I’d like. I don’t know why you’re so afraid to commit again, denying all the tools we had that worked so well for us back in the spring. But the way things are going, I’m not sure we’ll ever get back there.”

“We’re *not* getting back there. Was I unclear? Just because something was hot once doesn’t mean you want to keep doing it over and over again. Give it up already! You’ve got a good thing going here. Don’t screw things up by being greedy!”

He scoffed openly, a good deal more daring than he would normally dare to be thanks to that video. “I’m sorry, that sounded suspiciously like a lecture on not being

greedy from the woman who wants me to make her little sister grovel for her pussy on her hands and knees in a slutty Red Riding Hood costume.”

“Right, because a magnanimous individual like yourself would never pursue something so base.”

“Look, I’m not trying to get you to go back to how things were. But I want us to have fun. That’s it! Simply to have as much fun as we had that amazing evening in May. And don’t you dare try to run me down pretending you didn’t like it every bit as much as I did, because I was there.”

“Why the hell do you care how much *I* enjoy myself?! I’ll fake a smile when I ride your stupid dick, OK! Just for you!”

Martin gave her a look, gesturing emphatically to keep her voice down. The sound-proofing only went so far. “I said I was going to make you an offer, so here it is.”

The hypnotist fished out his Lakeview-issued iPad – only five years old! – and unlocked it. Waiting for them on its screen was a shot of Kira in her previous session, blue dress up, yellow panties down, hand in her pussy, tit flopping out of her bra cup. He held it out to Stacey, basking in the sight of her twisting her head like a dog trying to make sense of what she was seeing. One whose tail was wagging out of control.

“I couldn’t decide which was the best shot, so you can swipe through my favorites. There’s a few of them there.”

For the first time in a long time, Stacey – a fully conscious Stacey – did as he told her. With each swipe, she peered at the screen from every angle, studying each pixel of Kira’s compromised position. There were only four, but she went back to each at least once.

“You said you had video.”

“I do. And that’s the offer.”

She swiped back and forth frantically, then backed out to see if the video file was saved where she could see it. “Well? Where is it?”

“It’s a trade, Stacey. I want something in exchange.”

“Well what? Come on, Martin. Don’t be like this. You have no idea how long I... Just... Please, OK? I said it! Please. Seriously, *please!*”

He had not dared to hope his bait would work so well. Failing to savor it a moment before responding would be a waste of a golden opportunity. How long since he’d heard her whining *please* at him in that pitiable tone? At last, concerned that his erection would rupture his zipper, he answered her. “In exchange, all I want is for us to watch it together. Once Kira’s session is done, you and I will go sit on that couch, the one she’s probably pleasuring herself on as we speak, and watch it together. Wolfing down hypno porn, side by side, like we used to. Except now, Kira is the porn.”

The hesitation had been precisely long enough for her to recover the slightest shred of dignity. “Did you ever tape me?”

“What? No! No, of course not.” Seeing the disbelief in her eyes, he elaborated, “I was scared shitless of you. Your sister’s a sweetheart, though.”

The glare lingered, then faded. “And if I say no? You going to lord it over me?”

“No. No, I won’t lord it over you. We just won’t watch it. I’d rather watch it with you, personally, but if you don’t want to concede this tiny bit, then fine. We can forget it.”

Stacey gazed down at the tablet again. “You are such a motherfucker. You *owe* me this, Mesmer.”

“I’m producing what I owe you, as we speak. This is about you producing what you are gonna owe me.”

But her eyes were riveted on the screen. Martin craned his neck. He couldn’t be sure, but it looked like she’d settled on the shot where Kira’s hands were caressing the tops of her inner thighs.

“Fine,” she snapped at last. “But I’m *not* masturbating.”

“Not while I watch. Ten to one you can’t stop yourself from sprinting up the stairs to the veep suite once you get back to DAT house.”

She flashed a lopsided grin. “Not while you watch.”

“Deal.” His hand stretched out to shake on it, but she was already lost in the images again.

“You’re sure she won’t catch you?”

“I’ve been putting her under for months. She never opens her eyes.”

“And if she does? A girl comes hard enough, she’s apt to open her peepers.”

“Don’t you worry about me. I’m mitigating my risks like a champ. Do you want the footage or don’t you?”

Defiance shone in her eyes. “Fine,” she muttered nevertheless.

Was she really that horny for Kira? He supposed it made sense. Even if he hadn’t been a part of this crazy plan of hers, Kira would be head and shoulders above the next hottest student in any of his classes. If he saw her in passing, he would remember her. Still. Martin had good reason for taking this risk, however slight. Stacey... Well, the girl was a study in the heart wanting what it wanted.

The two settled in to wait. He let Stacey hold onto the tablet; he had little doubt that she sent herself a copy of the images while he typed up emails on his phone. Why not. He never would have gotten to see it himself if not for her. Besides, if the girl could hide their activities from her own lover for months on end, she could be trusted with a few photos of her sister.

“Hey. Do you think we could, you know, crack the door a little?” She held up her hands. “Not to peek! Just... I want to hear it. If you don’t think it’s too risky.”

Martin regarded her for a long moment, then gave a little shrug. With no more prompting than that, Stacey skittered across the room and plunked herself down right

around the corner from the door, her legs curled up to her chest. As Martin made his way to the door, her eyes looked to the ceiling as they slid closed.

“... relaxing and enjoyable. Coming... Mmmm... Coming here... high priority. So rewarding. Follow therapist’s instructions, nothing can stop me, doing *whatever* I want. Oh gawd. I trust Professor Manning. Coming... coming...! Coming! Coming here feels natural. Feels rewarding! Feels so frigging good, coming here. Oh god. Hypnosis... works well for me...”

Using his foot to keep the door propped that half inch, he crouched down beside her and gave her a tap on the knee. Peevishly, she opened her eyes to look at him. “*No masturbating,*” he mouthed. “*You promised.*”

Stacey giggled, a giggle very much like the girl masturbating in the next room, then clapped a firm hand over her mouth and elbowed him. As they continued listening to the panting, moaning and chanting from the office, her eyes once more closed, but his stayed fixed on her.

He knew that look. Stacey may not be masturbating in fact, but she was most certainly in spirit.

Martin could not wait to fuck that spirit.

A short time later, Kira’s eyes widened in what could only be the predicted embarrassment to wake up to find herself aroused, damp, her clothes disheveled. He played along, as if her having done anything but process her Stacey issues was unfathomable to him. After a quick hug she swapped places with her sister. Stacey forewarned her that they might be ending late. Lots to process this week, she explained. Kira volunteered to simply jog back to campus, since she’d been intending to hit the rec center anyway, and bid the two a good afternoon.

“Now show me that video before I beat it out of you, Mesmer.”

Nestled side by side on his couch, Stacey insisted on sitting on the spot darkened by Kira’s cum. Stacey’s new pillow sat atop her lap. Not ten minutes in, as on-screen Kira began teasing at her thighs, Martin quietly retrieved a blanket for her and said not a word as her shoulder gently jostled his. When the video finished, he permitted her the dignity of keeping her hands under the covers as he uploaded that day’s recording from his phone to his cloud storage so they could watch it on the bigger screen of his tablet.

“I like you, so I’m going to throw in this second one for free,” Martin said, bringing up the file. It loaded on a screen of Kira lying on the sofa, mouth open mid-utterance, knees bent so that today’s shorts bared her legs in their entirety. “The next one – if you want it – is gonna cost you.”

“Do I even want to ask what kind of dickhole you’re going to be about it?”

“Don’t sweat it. For now, you and I have porn to watch.” And he pressed play, and Kira played with herself on the screen, and Stacey played with herself on the couch, and

Martin played with himself all weekend long. With fresh visuals, too. Things were well on their way to that threesome, and quite possibly many more to come.

Mission accomplished.

Martin felt pretty proud of himself for all he had managed to achieve that week. He had bolstered his business, moved Stacey one step closer to a return to lusting after him, and kept Kira on her quick march to join her. He'd even stared down his ex-girlfriend. By some metrics, the pride was well-deserved. To be fair, by other metrics, Martin was a fraud and a sex criminal, so, as in his American education, it may be wise to disregard metrics.

His pride, however, might not have been so overweening had he recognized the full significance of his missteps. Missteps which would – or in the spirit of abstaining from spoilers, might – destroy everything he had accomplished, and more.

Still a nice job on getting hot girls to masturbate around him. No impending doom could take that away.