

WINNINGS

By pwatson1974

Julie sighs, pushing an errant strand of chocolate brown hair away from her face, staring around the empty store from behind the counter. She sighs again. It wasn't supposed to be like this. She wasn't supposed to be the one who stayed in her hometown while everyone else went out into the world and made something of themselves. But life hadn't worked out like that. She'd married young, too young, and regretted it. Divorced but without anything to show for the marriage. And now, at the ripe old age of 28, here she was stuck in a boring dead-end job in a boring dead-end store, in a boring dead-end town full of boring dead-end people. Just once could something even remotely exciting happen. She snorts. Right, like anything exciting ever happened around... The merry chime jangles above the door. She forces herself to smile, turning to the door. The man standing there is annoyingly familiar, but she can't place him, which meant he isn't from around here, which makes him the most interesting person she's seen this month. Tall, arms tanned under a white t-shirt, some definition but not a muscle-bod. Faded jeans, belt with a small buckle. Black hair, sparkling blue eyes, a face that's a fraction too thin to truly be called handsome but still not bad. Probably her age, give or take a year. Long, confident strides, looking around casually, but making his way over to the counter.

Julie makes sure her smile was in place. "Can I help you, sir?" she asked in her most pleasant voice.

"You might be able to, at that..." he glances down at her badge, "Julie." His eyes look up at her face, a quizzical expression crossing his features, "Julie...Julie Covington? I thought you'd have left this place years ago." He sees the uncertainty crossing her face under the professional smile, "Sorry, sorry, you probably don't remember me. Gary Fairbrass. We had some classes together."

She tries to wrack her memory, "Gary Fairbrass... oh my god, you're geeky Gary?"

He winces, "I was, yeah."

"Oh, wow, sorry, but, wow, I wouldn't think you were, I mean, I didn't recognise you."

He gives a small, thin smile, "Yeah. Lasers for the glasses, growing up for the acne and personal trainer for the rest. You still look good."

She snorts, "I look like a loser."

"You don't." he protests.

"Oh, please, Gary. You've made it big. You've got a personal trainer, for God's sake. What do I got?"

"Well, you've got a date for tonight if you want one."

"I do?" she stops, "Are you asking me out on a date?"

Gary takes a keen interest in the counter top, "Yeah, I am." He looks up, those eyes pulling her in, "Missed a lot of chances when we were in high school."

"Alright. You're on. Best offer I've had in a long time. Pick me up at my momma's at 8."

"See you then." He buys a roll of sweets, probably just to buy something and walks away.

The rest of the day drags more than usual, quite a feat in and of itself. But a 'friends' date with Geeky Gary Fairbrass is the most exciting thing to happen to her in months, and isn't that a cheery thought. She eats a little, showers, and then searches through her wardrobe for something appropriate, although given the choice of venue isn't the best, she settles for a nice silk blouse and skirt, something smart, adding a pair of dangly earrings set with green stones that caught the light nicely and matches the slim necklace she added, the little cat's face hanging on her collarbone. Hair washed, dried, brushed and tonsured into ringlets, she's ready. And all before she hears the firm knock on the door, too. She stays upstairs, hearing her mother getting the door.

"JUUUULIE!!! Your date's here!" her mother shrieks up the stairs. She checks her appearance in the mirror one last time, smoothing the skirt down. She walked slowly down the stairs, butterflies in her stomach for no good reason. Gary's scrubbed up nicely too, the jeans replaced by a dark shirt, open at the collar and black trousers that fit him perfectly. The butterflies increase as she notes the discrete designer labels, her shabby store-bought clothes feeling itchy and faded in comparison. He smiles up at her, his eyes lighting up. She swallows, licking her lips, reminding herself this isn't a real date, just school friends talking. Until that nasty part of her reminds her that she and Geeky Gary had never been close to 'friend's, and were barely nodding acquaintances. Actually, it adds, she'd laughed at him, let Brad and the others humiliate him and basically considered him one step up from dog vomit when she'd considered him at all. Best hope he doesn't bear a grudge. She licks her lips, standing there, feeling like a teenager again, no, worse, teenage Julie never suffered from existential crises on a date.

Gary looks similarly unsure for a long, long few seconds before he produces a bouquet of flowers from behind his back, holding them out awkwardly. Her mother breaks the awkward silence with a cough. "Oh, will you two young people just go? Before I die of old age waiting for you to do something? And, young man, if you take advantage of my daughter like her no-good ex-husband did, I'll beat that fancy suit right off your hide."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mom!!"

"Are you still here?"

"No, ma'am." He takes Julie's hand, leading her out.

"I am so sorry. She..." she stops dead, staring at the car pulled up to the curb, the Mercedes looking so out of place in this neighbourhood, catching curtains twitching as her neighbours duck out of sight. "that's your car?!"

"One of them."

"One of them?! How many have you got?"

He looks away, sheepishly, "A few."

"If you expect to get even a kiss goodnight, you're going to show me what this baby can do." She walks around the gleaming silver car, running a hand along its sleek curves, "Well?" she asks, arching her eyebrow.

Gary presses a button on the key ring, the Merc beeping acknowledgement as Julie slides into the leather seat. The engine purrs into life, and the car glides away.

The dinner isn't fancy, well, it really couldn't be given the town can barely manage a Dennis to its name, never mind somewhere that didn't feature lots of pictures on the menu. Fortunately, the conversation saved it. Gary apparently owns, owns!!!, a company called S.A.T., Sufficiently Advanced Technologies, which he claims was a joke but Julie missed the punch line completely. He'd struck it big in IT and his company was going gangbusters, netting him a small, ok, not so small, fortune. In turn, Julie told her uninteresting life story. The marriage straight out of high school to Brad; the three years they'd struggled before realising that if they kept it up, one of them would kill the other; the divorce, quick and clinical as can be; and her dull, depressing, boring life that stretched on forever, never changing. But then it turns back to how a "multi-multi-gajillionaire" spends his time and money.

"...you do not."

"Straight up."

"God, could you be any more of a stereotypical geek boy done good? Job in IT, magic as a hobby, far too many fancy toys for his own good..."

"You seemed to like the one I brought with me."

"Ok, so maybe you've got someone on staff with a good taste in cars."

"Yes, I do. His name's Gary."

Julie snorts. "You just like it because it's a rocket ship under the hood."

He shrugs, reaching for the wine, "That is a possibility."

"You just need a trophy wife now."

Gary almost spits the wine across the table, swallowing hard, almost choking, "Don't make me laugh when I'm drinking." He gasps and splutters, "But, yes, the position of trophy wife is vacant at the moment. Would you like to apply?"

Julie pauses, "Dental included?" Gary stares at her until Julie can't keep from laughing. "Oh, God, the look on your face."

"I'll take that as a no, then."

"Never say never. What are you doing back here anyway? I mean, I can't imagine anything about this place that would make me come back if I escaped."

"Business. We're thinking of building a test facility and the land around here is cheap. So I've been surveying the likely sites, but mostly meeting the bigwigs and seeing what they can do to persuade me to use the patch of scrub in their district for it."

"And you're seriously thinking about here? You aren't going to find all that many PhDs to populate something like that. And it's not like we've got a lot of town to support them if you did."

He shrugs, "It's a consideration. But that's business, which is boring and I've been doing that too much the last few days. Besides, there are more interesting things to talk about?"

"Like what?"

"Well, you've been spending a lot of time probing my life..."

"Because my life would put you to sleep. You've had the heartbreak sob story, which was the only vaguely interesting bit. Since then, it's just been Groundhog Day. Over and over and over."

"I don't believe that." He offers the wine bottle and Julie nods, another glass pouring.

"You haven't lived it. I mean, this? This is the most exciting thing to happen to me in months. Not that this isn't nice, don't get me wrong, but, you know, a meal out isn't that exciting."

"Oh, I see."

Julie pulls back, "No, no, you don't see. This is nice, really nice. But...oh, fuck it, I can't explain it. Look, this date, just going out for a meal with someone from my high school? That is easily the highlight of my year."

"Really? Then we'd better make it worth it, hadn't we?"

"Uh-oh, I know that look. I've seen it in the mirror enough times. What are you planning?"

"Wait and see."

"Seriously?"

He shrugs and sips his wine.

After the meal, “We’re going the wrong way.”

“No, we’re not.”

“Hello? I live here, remember, we’re going the wrong way to get to my house.”

“We’re not going to your house yet.”

“We’re not? When did we agree that? Where are we going?”

“The interstate.”

“Why are we going there?”

“Because it’s a nice straight bit of road without anyone else on it.”

“What’s that got to do with any...”

“Well, I recall someone saying something about a kiss...”

Julie snorts, stifling the laugh. “So, you’re going to show me what the Enterprise can do?”

“No.”

“No? Then what...”

“I’m going to let you show me what she can do.”

“What?!”

“Unless you think you’re not up to...”

“Oh, no, you made the offer. No take backs.”

Gary pulls the car over to the side of the road. Julie reaches for the door handle. “You don’t need to do that.”

“How do you expect me to drive from over here?”

He smiles. “Switch drivers.”

“Switching driver controls.” A computerised, female voice responds as the steering column folds into the dashboard.

Julie gapes at it as another column unfolds in front of her, feeling pedals sliding out of the floor under her feet. “How...”

“We might have made some modifications to this one.” He replies, enjoying her astonished reaction, “One of the perks of owning a tech company.”

“Are you sure it’ll work?” he gives her his best ‘look’, “Right, right, of course you’re sure. Well, then, I hope the accelerator’s been as pumped up.” She pushes her foot to the floor, the car leaping forward, tyre smoke burning behind them.

The needle climbs, the speed limit making a whooshing sound as it vanishes into the distance, until, a manic grin on her face, she slams on the brakes, spinning the car around to cross over and taking off back towards the town. She pulls over before they reach the town’s edges, beating the time out coming back, headlights stabbing into the dark, insects chirping around them. “Ok, I admit it, you have really cool toys. Although the engine could be louder. You aren’t really going fast if there isn’t an earthquake in the seat.”

“Thank you.” Gary replies, looking more than little pale, his hand locked white-knuckle tight on the armrest. “I’ll bear that in mind. Switch drivers.” The controls switch sides again, Julie still marvelling at the fact as he drives, much more slowly, back into the lights of the town

“Fancy a nightcap? Earl’s is still open.”

“Sure.”

The Mercedes pulls into the lot of Earl’s, the neon sign blinking blue across the car’s metallic paint. “Well, I guess they still have both kinds of music here then.” Gary mutters, looking around the pickups filling the lot.

“Yup. Country annnd western. So, Elwood, wanna go inside and buy a girl a drink?”

“Sure, why not?”

Julie gets out of the car. A few seconds later, Gary follows her, a sharp black suit, hat and black glasses over his face. “How did you...?”

“Amateur magician, remember?” he smiles at her, ducks down and comes up in denim and faded shirt, “Quick changes a speciality. Well, not exactly, but you know what I mean.”

She applauds quietly. “Pretty good. But I got a thirst that needs satisfying. Come on.”

A few, or more, shots later, “How did you do that with the clothes?”

“A magician never...”

“Yeah, yeah. Fine, don’t tell me.” She replies petulantly, reaching for the bottle, “What else can you do?”

“Here? Mind reading, card tricks. If I had a glamorous assistant and my stuff...”

“Get that look out of your face, I am not going to be your glamorous asshishtant.”

“Then card tricks.”

“Show me.”

“I’d need a pack of...”

“You’ve got one on you. You’re just waiting for the chance to show off an’ pull it out from behind my ear or shomethin’.”

“You’re taking the fun out of this, Julie.” He pulls a pack from somewhere. “Now, I’ll just shuffle these up, then you say what card position you want and I’ll tell you what card’s there.”

“Bet you can’t do that.”

“How much?”

Julie feels around in her purse, “Ten bucks?”

“Ok.”

“Not for you. You’re rish. You gotta pay up...at leasht a hundred.”

“Ok.”

“An’ you can’t use those cards. They’re marked. I’m not an idiot. I’ll get some from Earl.”

“If you’re going to make things harder, we’re going to have to raise the stakes.”

“Sure, sure, twenty for me, five hundred for you.”

“Ok.”

Julie smiles like she’s won something and weaves to the bar, getting a pack of cards, still in the cellophane, from Earl after much hand-waving and pointing and shaking of heads. She drops the pack on the table. Gary reaches for them. “Uh-uh. If you shuffle ‘em, you’ll just use some magishian thing to put them in order. I’ll do it.”

“That’ll mean another raise of the stakes.”

“Ok. Hundred for me, an’, an’ ten thou for you.”

"Ten thousand?"

"Yeah, ya chicken. No confidenshe?"

"You're on."

She rips the wrapper off, pulling the cards out. "Includin' the jokers."

"Another raise?"

"Sure. Five for me an' fifty for you." She turns around.

"What are you doing?"

"Well, I can't have you lookin' can I? You'll Rain Man me."

"Another raise then."

"Ok, one for me, hundred for you."

Julie shuffles the cards, although all Gary can see are her shoulders moving under the blouse. She turns back, thumping the cards onto the table. "There. Work your magic, Mishter 'Jillionnaire."

"Sure. Which card do you want me to find?"

Julie pauses, "No, no, one card's too, too easy. Make it four, no, five, no, ten..."

"Why don't I just tell you what order the entire deck's in?" he replies sarcastically.

"That's a good idea. Go for it."

"Stakes'll go up again."

"Yeah, sure, I'll..." she pauses, "No, I wanna, but you'll raishe the shtakes too mush, an' I can't afford it..."

"Ok. How about we play for something other than money?"

"Like what? Oh, I know, you can bet the Enterprishe."

"And what are you betting, Julie?"

She pauses, looking down, "I dunno. I don't got anythin' to bet. I mean, what would you want that I got that you couldn't just get outta petty cash?"

"Oh, I can think of something."

"You can? What?"

“You.”

“Me what?”

“Just you. For a week.”

“Me? You want me?” her eyes widen, “For what?”

“Trophy wife? Glamorous assistant?”

“Doesh it have dental?” she laughs. “An’ when I win, do I get you for a week, too?”

“Instead of the car.”

Julie pouts, “Fine. You, instead of the car.”

“Deal. First one’s the seven of hearts.” Julie turns over the seven.

Fifty-three cards later, “Two of spades.” Julie stares down at the pile.

“Well, crap. Double or nothing?”

Gary laughs, “Go ahead.”

Fifty-four cards later, Julie’s still staring at the treacherous cards on the table. “Double or nothing!”

“You sure? You know you’re not supposed to bet more than you can...”

“Don’t you tell me what I can or can’t do, Mr Geeky Gary Gajillionnaire Shmarty-Pantsh. You can’t do it three times in a row.” She starts shuffling.

“Ok, Julie, ok, but this is the last one.”

“Sure, sure. You can’t do it again.”

Fifty-four cards later, “How did you do that?” she asks, staring between the cards and Gary.

“A magician...”

“Oh, shut up.” She throws back the last of the bottle, folding her arms petulantly.

"I think it's time I got you home." He helps her up, letting her lean against him on the walk to the car.

He helps her into the passenger seat, although Julie shoos him away when he offers to help with her seatbelt, sliding into his seat and setting off for Julie's house. "You were kidding about that bet, right?" she asks.

He shrugs, "If I'd lost, would you have been kidding about wanting the car?"

"No." she replies quietly.

"Exactly."

The rest of the drive passes slowly, Julie hunched over, casting furtive glances out the window until they pull up outside her home. Gary helps her out of the car, but she tries hard to avoid leaning on him. "I'll see you tomorrow, Julie."

She blinks, "Tomorrow?"

He smiles, it's a nice smile, reassuring, "When I come to pick up my winnings."

"Your...winnings?" she gulps, "Me?" she squeaks.

Gary takes a step back, giving her some more space, "We can sort it out tomorrow."

"Right. Tomorrow."

Tomorrow, Julie yawns, blinking blearily awake, rubbing her eyes, head pounding. She stumbles into the shower, thankful not to have to go to work today. The pounding hot water gradually eases her headache, but brings back memories that sends a shiver through her body. She makes it downstairs, to find her mother waiting in the kitchen, hands around a mug of coffee strong enough to be used as paint-stripper. "So?"

Julie swallows, "I had fun, Mom. But..." she trails off.

"But?"

"I think I might have done something really stupid."

"Oh, Lord preserve us, you haven't got married again, have you?"

"No! But..."

"Oh, that's a relief." she lets out a long sigh, "So, what did you do?"

"Well, I..." she stops a knock coming from the front door.

"Who could that be, I wonder?" she looks over at Julie, "Aren't you going to answer it?" Julie nods, shrinking into herself as she walks towards the doorway, opening it to find Gary, once more smart casual, smiling.

"Hi, Julie. Can I come in?"

"I guess." she steps aside.

"Well, you brought her back, in one piece, and she didn't have dustmarks on her back, so I guess you get out of a beating."

"Yes, Mrs Covington."

"However, something happened last night, and you're going to tell me what. Clear?"

Gary blinks, "Yea, ma'am."

"Good. Coffee? There's a pot brewed. Come into the kitchen and we can talk about whatever it was. Both of you." she leads them in, settling across the table. "So, Julie says she did something 'really stupid'. What?"

Gary glances across, "Well, we made a bet."

"A bet." her eyes narrow, "How much for?"

"Well, a month."

"A month? A month of what? A month's rent?!"

"No, no, uhm, we ended up betting, uhm, well, Julie bet she'd be mine for a month."

Mrs Covington blinks slowly, "Yours. For a month. And what did you bet?"

"Uhm, that I'd be hers for a month."

"Well, at least you were fair about it. She lost, I take it?"

"Uhm, yes, ma'am."

"Well, when you said something stupid I must admit I didn't think you meant this stupid. So, you're here to collect your reward, I take it?"

"That, uhm, that was what I was..."

"Well, never let it be said a Covington welched on her obligations." Gary's eyes go wide, "Julie, you'd best go explain to Pete that you won't be coming in for a while." she takes a drink of her coffee.

"Mom!"

"What? You made a bet. You lost. Now you got to pay up. That's the way of it. Maybe next time you won't bet so foolishly. However, young man, if you do anything, and I mean anything, to hurt her during that month? I swear to God, I will take up my dear Matthew's shotgun, ram it right up your ass and blow your goddamn brains out through your nose. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good." she shakes her head, "A bet. Lord preserve us. Well? You have calls to make, young lady. Scoot." Julie scampers away. Gary turns to follow. "Oh, no, you don't get away that easily, Gary Fairbrass. Sit." he sits. "So, it went according to plan, then?" she asks mildly.

"Yes, ma'am. Just like you said."

"Good. I hope you can get the fire back into her eyes like you think you can. It hurts to see her so dead inside so young. Damn that Bradley Chesney and all his kin."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll do my best by her." he looks off to one side, avoiding Mrs Covington's steely gaze, "My mother sends you her best wishes. Oh, and this." he presses a button on his shirt before reaching into his pocket, hand vanishing inside the perfect blackness without a bulge, a very faint humming emerging and pulling out a full bottle of bourbon.

"I always did like your mother." Mrs Covington smiles, taking the bottle, slipping it out of sight, smacking her lips, "But don't think that shotgun line was just for Julie's benefit."

"No, ma'am."

"Good that you understand that. Esther would never let me hear the end of it otherwise."

Half an hour later, Julie stands nervously in the lounge, a battered suitcase crammed with clothes and a few small personal possessions hanging from one hand. How did this happen? How did she get into this situation? Letting her mouth run away with her, letting common sense take a back seat to the thrill-seeking, irresponsible part of her. Again. You'd think she'd learn. She'd been a bit surprised at how easy it had been to persuade Pete to let her have some time off. No pay, obviously, but even so, she was due in tomorrow. Still, that's one less thing to worry about. Of course, it does leave one very significant thing to worry about.

"All packed?" she nods, "Good. You take good care of her, now, or you'll have me to answer to."

"Understood, ma'am. You ok, Julie?"

She smiles weakly, "If I said no, would it make much difference?" she swallows nervously, "You won the bet, Gary, although God only knows how. That means I'm yours. I'll get used to it."

The hurt look passes across his face quickly, "Well, let's get your suitcase put away."

Gary reaches into his shirt pocket, fiddling with something, pulling out a ring of metal just about the width of the pocket. He puts his hands on the ring and pulls gently, a clicking noise accompanying its widening as the metal ring stretches out until he's holding a thin ring three feet across which he puts on the floor.

"And that is?"

"Something we've been working on. Makes it easier to transport things. There isn't a lot of luggage space in the car, after all."

"And how..."

"I'll show you." he presses a button on his shirt and the interior of the ring goes perfectly black, smoother than a millpond, a faint hum emerging. "Can I?" he takes the case as Julie stares at the blackness.

"What is that?"

"Angela calls it something untranslatable from physics to English. We just call it a hole."

"A hole?"

"Yeah. Ok, some of the guys call it a portable hole, but that's just too geeky for marketing. So hole it is."

"Is it safe?"

"Oh, yes, perfectly. We've held parties in them, even once they've been sealed up. And no one was hurt except by alcohol poisoning. Also no rips in the space-time continuum have been reported." He tosses the case into the ring, smiling to himself as Julie and Mrs Covington stare at it, mouths agape, as it sinks slowly into the blackness.

"It's gone!"

"Yes. Once the hole's sealed up, it becomes inaccessible. Then you just pull the ring smaller and bingo, easily transportable. Julie?"

She pulls back with a start, "Yes? What?"

"Your turn."

"My turn? My turn to...oh, no, you do not want me to get in that thing."

"It's perfectly safe. We've had people stay there for a week or so without..."

"A week?! What happens if it breaks?"

“Well, then we'll have to get its backup unit active and pull everything out as a matter of precaution. Back at the facility there's another copy attuned to the same hole space. And a third in storage at a secure facility as backup of backup. If the first one goes down, the second automatically activates and we get everything out of there. The backup requires manual activation. We've tested that. Nothing's gone wrong so far.”

“So far?!”

“So far. But we've subjected the field to some pretty extreme things. I don't think anything that doesn't include the world megaton will shift things. And if we get something like that, we have much bigger problems.”

“You're sure it's safe?”

“Absolutely. I've been inside when it's been tested. I didn't notice anything happening, no matter what we did to the field. Julie, it's safe. I wouldn't get you to do anything that wasn't. And not just because your mother's standing behind me and knows where her shotgun is.”

“He has a point there.”

Julie looks at her treacherous mother and sighs. “Ok. Fine. I guess. What do I do?”

“You can just step in, but it takes a bit of balancing, especially when it's on the floor. Jumping in like it's a pool works better.”

“Right. Sure. No problem. You're sure it's safe?”

“You'll be safer in there than if you were driving. Especially on the Interstate.” he winks at her. Julie giggles nervously, pinches her nose, and jumps. She vanishes into the blackness, leaving not even a ripple to mark her entrance. Gary turns as he hears the gasp behind him.

“She's perfectly fine, Mrs C. I promise.” he walks up to the edge of the hole and reaches in. A little fishing around later, he pulls up a hand, then an arm, then Julie's head breaches the blackness, her eyes wide.

“Oh, wow. That was...”

“See you in a bit, Julie.” he lets go and she slides swiftly back into the blackness. “You see. Perfectly alright. She'll be fine, Mrs C.”

“I suppose so. But...” Gary presses his shirt button, the blackness vanishing with a suddenness that makes Mrs Covington gasp.

“Really. She's fine. It's quite peaceful in there, really.” He pushes something on the ring, the metal pulling in on itself until it's back to the pocket-sized version. He picks the empty ring up, sliding it into his shirt pocket.

“She'd better be.” she replies, sounding a little unsure as she watches the ring that contains, somehow, her daughter shrunk and put away.

"Mrs C, you trusted me enough to put this whole crazy plan together. Trust me. I will do absolutely nothing to hurt Julie in any way. And that applies no matter how strange things might get."

"'Might' get?!"

He smiles reassuringly, "Trust me, Mrs C. It'll be fine."

She lets out a long sigh, "I hope so. Now get out of here before I decide that shotgun needs some use."

"Yes, Mrs C." he walks quickly to the car, speeding off into the daylight.

Julie floats in the darkness. It's peaceful, the darkness warm and soothing around her. She drifts, alone with her thoughts, feeling them flitting through her mind without really bothering to grasp at them. It's felt like this ever since the hole closed, just drifting. She feels the hole open like a tugging through her, the hole gaining direction again. She feels more than sees the hand reaching down, clasping it, letting herself be pulled out into the brilliant sunshine, a sea breeze washing over her. She shades her eyes as Gary pulls out her suitcase. "Wow, you must have driven like hell on wheels to get here in a few hours."

He smiles, packing up the hole, "Try three days."

"Three...days? I was in there for three whole days? That's, that's impossible. It felt like...it was....three days?"

"Yup. Three days in transit. That doesn't count as part of the four weeks, right?"

"Huh? What did you say?"

"Just checking the transit doesn't count as part of the bet. I mean..."

"What? Of course they count! You put me in there! Time started ticking the instant we left."

"Now, Julie, that's hardly fair..."

"Fair? Fair?! Was getting me jacked up and suckering me into a bet like that fair? Was raising the stakes every time I tried to make sure you weren't cheating fair? Was insisting on taking your 'winnings' like I'm some piece of damn jewellery fair?! This is as 'fair' as you're gonna get."

"Well, for one, I didn't get you jacked up. You did that to yourself. For two, no one forced you to accept the raised stakes; you could have just walked away. And, for three, you did make the bet, with the stakes being what they were. I'm claiming what you put up, Julie, nothing more. But, fine, 3 down, 25 to go. Let's go inside." he turns towards the car, "Mode: Compact."

“What does that...” she stops as the car shifts and crumples and squashes together, metal and glass sliding over each other like a better-animated Transformer until the whole vehicle sits on the ground, a metallic silver trolley-case. “That...you just...that's impossible.”

He smiles, pulling out the handle and wheeling the car down the smooth path. “That's the line of business we're in.” Julie finally notices the building behind her, a long curve of tinted glass, fountain in the centre, 'SAT' in slanted red and gold letters above the entranceway.

She stares for a few seconds before Gary waves her on, “Come on. No point wasting any more time.”

The double doors whisper open as he approaches and leads them into the entry hall, a middle-aged woman sitting behind the reception desk, dark brown hair done up into a bun, peering through slim glasses. SAT is emblazoned on the wall behind her, “Good morning, Mr Fairbrass.”

“Good morning, Amina. This is Julie. She'll be working here for a few weeks. Could you sort out a temporary security pass for her? Access to my suite, but not the labs.”

“Yes, Mr Fairbrass.”

“Oh, tell Angela I'd like to speak with her about her project as soon as possible.” He pushes the case over, “And have this delivered to the lab. Performance is good, but the switch over and compression could do with shaving some time off. Thank you.” He walks briskly across the tiled expanse, pulling out a keycard, swiping it firmly across the panel beside one of the many doors, holding it open for Julie.

“This is, wow. I didn't think it would be this...this big.”

“Yeah, it's been a good few years. But the labs take up a lot of space, so we're smaller than we look. But what business wants to look small when the clients come around?”

“I guess.” They stop at another panel and the elevator door opens at the swipe of his card. “No teleporter?” she jokes as the doors hiss close.

“Not yet. Keeping contaminants out over the transmission is proving a problem.” He ushers her in, the doors closing behind them, “No one wants to guest star in a remake of the Fly.”

“You're really working on that?”

“Yup. But for now the holes are much more reliable, although not quite as fast.”

The doors open onto another corridor. “I remember. So what's up here?”

“Executive floor.”

“So, this is where your office is?”

“Amongst others.” He flashes the card at another reader and lets her through the door.

Julie stops in the doorway, staring, "This is your office?"

"No, this is my living room. My office is through that door."

"Living room? You live here?"

"It's more convenient. Lots of the mad scientists do, otherwise they'd sleep in their labs. Some of them do that anyway."

"Right. Of course." She looks around the room, pale cream carpet, stylishly furnished, sloping glass front with a spectacular view over the ocean, TV the size of a Buick. "Man, you live it well up here."

"Can't complain."

"Yeah, I couldn't either. Where's my room?"

"Your room?" he notices Julie tensing, and decides not to push it any further, "Through those doors there." He nods towards a pair of double dark wood doors, "There's a bathroom attached and a door to my room. You can figure out which is which."

"Right." She hefts up her case. "I'll be right back."

"Ok. I'll be through in the office if I'm not here." He nods at another door.

"Sure." She walks into the room, closing the door before allowing herself to take it in. It's like the photos you see from the brochures of those swanky hotels that cost a month's salary for a week's holiday. For one thing it's almost as huge as the living room, the bed pressed and looking very soft and comfy. A set of wardrobes are set into the wall, the doors gliding along at the slightest push, more space than she'd need to hold her entire life never mind just one suitcase. "What am I doing here? How the hell do I fit in with a place like this? Good little Julie. Maybe I'll get a doggie treat or patted on the head if I do well. What does Gary want me here for?" some suggestions spring unbidden to her mind and she shivers, hugging herself, "And what can I do about it?" She spends some time unpacking her suitcase, barely filling up any space in the huge closets, finding the bathroom, and checking the other door locks, which it does. The bathroom is also fit for a small family, the fittings gleaming like it's just been used for a commercial. She steps into the shower, washing herself down, letting the hot water roll over her skin, relaxing her a little.

"Time to face the music." She pulls on her surprisingly clean clothes and braces herself, stepping into the living room. And finds it empty. "Well, that wasted a whole lot of guts." She walks around the room, running her fingers over the furniture, eyes drawn to the sloping windows and the view out over the ocean, nothing spoiling from this height. She stops at the door. She takes a deep breath, and pushes it open.

The office is actually less impressive than the other rooms, smaller, starker. The wall opposite her has a painting, American west landscape, obviously expensive, but no other adornments on the faintly metallic grey wall. Gary's standing beside a black leather executive chair behind a wide black desk, one hand resting on it, leaning slightly in. Standing on the other side of the desk was a woman, coal black hair, exotic features blending Asian and Peruvian. She's shorter than Julie, with dark skin that looks darker next to the white lab coat hiding the rest of her outfit. They both look over at the door. Gary smiles.

"Angela, this is Julie. Julie, this is Angela, our Head of Blue Skies Research." Angela clears her throat, "And Deputy Head of Perversity."

"'Deputy Head of Perversity'?" Julie asks, as Angela turns towards her, looking younger than Julie expected, probably the same age as her, if not younger.

"Despite trying hard." She replies, lips twitching into a smile, "You should never try to outrank your boss. Should you, Boss?"

"No, no, I meant the perversity bit. You have that as an actual job title?!"

"We let people make up their own job title, within reason. Angela just has a warped sense of humour."

"This is true. However, Ellie will be getting bored, so I'd better go see to her. Nice to meet you. I'm sure we'll see each other soon." She walks out, leaving a small black box on the desk. "And, yes, Boss, it does what you asked for. Ellie and I had fun testing it, but v1 will always be my baby."

The door closes behind her. "So, are all your employees as weird as that?"

Gary shakes his head, "No. They're unique all right."

"They?"

"Angela and Ellie, her wife."

"Wife? You mean she's..."

"Trying to classify Angela is usually an exercise in frustration. For many reasons."

"Riiiiight. How does someone that young get to be head of whatever? And especially deputy head of perversion?"

"By having more letters to her name than an alphabet. Seriously, you think I'm smart? Angela's in another league entirely. If she ever makes what she's done here public, she'll be as famous as Einstein, if not more so."

"And you're not going to tell me about the other part?"

Gary turns a little redder, "No."

"So, what's in the box?"

"A present."

"For who?"

Gary pushes the box across the table, "You."

"Me?" she squeaks, "What is? How did? When did you get that?"

"I called in for it on the drive back. Three days, remember?"

"Yeah, but..."

"And Angela was already working on it, anyway."

"Working on it? What is it?!"

"Open the box. A good magician..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." She opens the box, revealing a black ribbon, pale transparent beads set along its length. Julie lifts it up, letting it drape over her hand. "It's beautiful." Her hand glides along the material, "It's so smooth. What is it?"

"Silk. Do you want to put it on?"

Julie blinks, "Put it on?" she looks down at the silk ribbon and starts to wrap it around her neck, fiddling under her hair. "Damn it, I can't..." she turns around, "can you?" she feels his hands on the back of her shoulders, fixing the ribbon around her. She gives a tiny purr, so long since anyone's touched her at all, but pulls away, a shiver running through her body, pins and needles spreading over her skin.

"You look good in it."

Julie blushes, "Hah. This thing must cost more'n I make in a year. Anybody'd look good in it."

"I don't think it would match my eyes."

Julie mostly stifles the laugh, "You know what I meant."

"Well, if you don't want it..."

Julie pulls away, putting her hands up to her neck, "No take backs!"

"Fine. You can keep it, I suppose. At least while you're here."

"Awww, you're such a sweet owner." she stops, hands over her mouth, realising what she's just said, "I-I didn't mean..."

"It's fine. At least I'm sweet."

"It doesn't mean..."

"I know, Julie, it's ok."

"I should go." she starts for the door.

"Julie..."

"I'm sorry. I should go." the door closes behind her.

He sighs and reaches into the box, pulling out a small tablet. 'Subject profile captured.' He smiles and saves it under 'Julie'.

The next day dawns, bright and early, although Julie does her best to pretend it doesn't, pushing herself deeper into the pillows. Eventually, Julie pulls herself, reluctantly, out of the sinfully soft bed, slouching to the shower. "*Why did I say that?*" she berates herself, still dwelling on the day before, "*It'll give him completely the wrong idea! Well done, Julie, you've fucked it up again. As if the bet wasn't bad enough, now he'll really be expecting you to do all sorts of other things. Just like Brad.*" She sighs as she turns off the shower, and stops staring into the mirror as she turns. "What is that?" she wipes the mirror clear, staring over her shoulder at the black mark on one buttock. She feels down, finding her skin still smooth, "Oh, he didn't." she examines the mark, a small black circle with tiny writing printed inside it, "How did he...? Well, that's just great. Way to go, Julie." She finishes up, pulling on something comfortable, tying the silk ribbon around her neck, before heading to the living room to confront Gary.

Unfortunately, fortunately, she can't really decide which, the room is empty. She debates with herself fleeing back to the relative safety of her room, or staying here until he gets back from wherever he's gone, even of pushing into his bedroom to confront him, ignoring all the implications that might have, but eventually pushes the door to his office open. Gary looks up from his desk, bits of it glowing, words hovering in the air above it like pale white ghosts.

Julie bites her lips under his gaze. "We need to talk."

"Give me just a second." He sweeps his hand out, the words following the gesture, vanishing at the edge of the desk. "So, what do we need to talk about?"

"You know what. You know what you did. You had no right to treat me like that!"

He holds up a hand, "Julie, slow down. What have I done?"

"You know damn well what you did! I certainly didn't get 'property of Gary Fairbrass' tattooed on my damn ass!"

He looks confused, "Tattooed what where now?"

“Don’t give me that! Who else would do it?”

“Julie, I promise, I did not get any part of you tattooed.”

“Riiight, I bet the tattoo fairy just did it!”

“I’ll get Angela up here., See if she can fix that glitch.”

“Glitch? Angela? What are you...”

Gary touches the deck, a small piece glowing. He holds up his hand, “Angela? Could you come up to my office soon as your free, please? We need your input on the Mark III. There seems to be an...interesting glitch with it.”

“Sure, boss. Let me just get dressed and Ellie and I’ll be right up to deal with it.”

“The Mark III? Glitch? What are you talking about? And what does it have to do with...”

“Julie, one question at a time, huh?”

She scowls at him, “So?”

“Ok. The present from yesterday? The one you’re looking beautiful in now?”

“Don’t try to butter me up. What about it?”

“Well, it’s not just something beautiful to wear. It’s possibly one of the most sophisticated, impossible machines on Earth.”

“It is? And you let me have it? What does it do? And what does it have...”

“Well, I was going to talk to you about this later today, once I’d got some things settled. But, ok, the silk’s crystals are connected to a similar array in this.” he pulls out a small tablet, sliding it across the desk. “Don’t press anything on the screen just yet, it could be a shock.”

“Ok, ok,” she picks up the tablet, “actually, screw y...” and presses her finger onto one of the apps on the screen.

Gary sighs, looking at the, admittedly beautiful and exquisitely crafted, white marble statue holding the tablet, a finger defiantly pressed on the screen. “I did warn you.” He gets up out of his chair, walking towards the statue. And the door opens.

There’s a low whistle, “Well, Boss, that is quite a glitch.”

“That’s not the glitch.”

“Well, obviously, I built it waaay better than that. So, what is this mysterious glitch?”

“Julie said she’d got a tattoo on her...”

“On her ass?”

“Yes.” he replies suspiciously, “How did you...”

“Let's take a look.” she walks over to Julie's marble form, pulling her jeans down to reveal the black etched tattoo on her marble skin, “Oh, that. That's not a glitch, it's a feature.”

“A...feature?”

“Well, sure. You won't be giving this to someone who isn't pretty into the kink, so why not play with that?”

“You didn't tell me.”

“You don't like surprises?”

“Not this one.”

“Ok, ok, I can get a clean copy in there.” she looks over at Julie, “Well, I can once I get it out of her hands. I don't suppose you have a hammer and chisel handy?” Julie's stone heart skips several beats at that.

“Angela!”

“Oh, you know she'll be all right no matter what. Fine, fine, I won't damage your new executive toy.” She pulls another slightly larger tablet from her lab coat, “Now, let's see. Just need to sync up the crystals. And then just make a few adjustments and...” she presses down firmly and Julie vanishes. Her clothes drift to the floor, the tablet falling onto a soft cushion that certainly wasn't there earlier. “There.” she picks up the tablet, “Give me an hour or two and I'll have it all fixed.” she pauses, “Yes, really, an hour or two. Sorry, someone thinks I'm stalling for fun.”

“Are you?”

“No fair asking a direct question.”

“Angela...”

“Fine, fine, give me a couple of minutes with this thing.” she starts pressing on the screen.

A couple of minutes later, she hands the tablet back to Gary, “All yours. The default is no cutie mark, Once she's restored, that'll be gone, but you can add it when you feel like, or change the design, whatever, from the tattoo app here.”

Gary hits 'restore' almost as soon as the tablet's in his hands, and Julie stands where the cushion was on the floor, sans tattoo and every stitch of clothing. Her shriek pierces the air, and her hands fly to cover herself. For a moment she stands there, then flees out of the room.

“Smooth, boss.” she pauses, “Oh, Ellie wants to talk to you.” she presses on her tablet and a willowy blonde appears by her side, her lab coat vanishing, the blonde as naked as Julie.

“Angela!” she squeals, snatching the tablet out of her hand, pressing onto it.

Angela has time to mouth “Uh-oh” and wink before she crumples to the ground. The blonde digs through her wife's pile of clothes, pulling on a silk robe with a purr.

“That's better. Someone has very strange ideas of appropriate workplace behaviour.” she picks up a small earbud from the pile. “Yes, sweetie, I know you've got a busy day ahead of you, but you did just make me flash your boss. He'll forgive you. Won't you?” she turns towards Gary, “Now, as for you, she didn't know, did she?”

“Know what?”

“Anything. About all of this. About what the MkIII could do. About what you had planned. Did she?”

He tries to meet her eyes and looks sheepishly away.

“Honestly, no wonder you and Angela get on so well. Angela's taking a duvet day, by the way. Yes, you are. No, I don't care about the work, you can stand to take one day off from it. Well, if you're going to be like that...” she reaches for the tablet and presses an app, “aaaah, that's better.” she pulls out the ear bud, popping it back into the tablet, “Now, I am going to go talk to her, Julie, right, and when I'm done talking, you are going to go apologise to her.” she takes up Julie's tablet, scoops up the pile of Julie's clothes and walks out of the office.

Ellie knocks on the door to Julie's room, “Fuck off!” coming from inside.

“I've brought your clothes back.”

“Leave 'em outside...thank you, I guess.”

“You're welcome. I don't think we've formally met. I'm Ellie, Angela's wife.” the door opens just a crack, a puffy eye staring out.

“She isn't, she isn't around, is she?”

Ellie unconsciously runs her hand down the sides of her robe, “No, Angela's not around at the moment. Can we talk? I really think you need to talk.”

The door opens a fraction more, “Ok, I guess we can talk.” Ellie smiles warmly, as Julie lets her inside. She hands over the pile of clothes. Julie takes them and jumps back. “Get that away from me!”

Ellie looks down at the tablets in her hand. “Ok, sweetie, it's ok. I'm putting them down on the top, ok? No one's going to accidentally turn themselves into a statue.”

"That wasn't my fault! He...I was mad and...he told me..." she collapses onto the bed, her face buried in her hands, body shuddering with sobs. Ellie sits down beside her, putting a comforting arm around Julie's shoulders.

"It's alright, Julie, it's alright."

"Alright?! I was a statue!"

"And I was Angela's lab coat. Your point is?"

"My point? My point is...you were what?!"

"Angela's lab coat. She only wears one when I'm it."

"She only...that's insane!"

"Maybe a little bit. But I let her. I mean, holding your lover all day, keeping close to her, who wouldn't want the chance to do that?" Again, Ellie strokes her hand along her robe.

Julie blinks, "You make being her coat sound romantic?"

"Isn't it?"

"You're just a coat!!"

"And you were just a statue. But you weren't just a statue, were you? Statues can't hear what's going on around them. Statues don't get frightened."

"She said, your wife, she said she was going to break my fingers off!"

"She did. Of course, she thought you knew it was safe. She's a tease, not nasty."

"Safe?!"

"Completely. You'd have been totally fine if she'd done that."

"I wouldn't have a finger! How is that totally fine?"

"Wouldn't you? When I first changed Angela into a statue, I knocked her over and broke her head off. You think you're scared, imagine that when you're a college student who doesn't have a clue what's going on."

"I don't have a clue what's going on now." Julie whimpers.

Ellie hugs her, "No, and Gary's an idiot for putting you in this position. A nice, kind, smart, well-meaning idiot but still an idiot. So, what do you want to know about?"

"What?"

“Well, you're here for a month, right?” Julie nods, “And you don't want to spend that month scared out of your mind, do you?” her head shakes, “So, what do you want to know about?”

“What do I want to know about? How is this even possible?! I was a statue?! I was a cushion! How is that possible?!”

“You would start with the difficult ones. I can't explain it. Angela's tried to explain it to me half-a-dozen times and she might as well have said it's powered by rainbows and unicorns. I just have to accept it is possible and that I'm not going to understand how it works. Kind of like the Internet. I mean, do you really understand how that sucker works?”

“I guess...”

“Same thing here. It works. It doesn't matter exactly how.”

“So you can use those...” she jabs her finger to point at the tablets, “to change people?”

“Ah, now this one I can answer. Yes and no.”

“What?”

“The tablets have to sync to a crystal that's been set up correctly. It's like connecting them to a wi-fi signal. Only one at a time. One of those is connected to the crystals in your collar, one's currently connected to Angela, but it's also set to hook up to mine.”

“Yours?” Julie pulls back a little.

“Mine. Angela and I share the tablet. Although I let her change me most of the time. Sometimes, though, she likes, or needs, to be changed.”

“You like it?”

“Ohhhhhh, yes. Being just clay for her to shape, being made into anything she desires...” she blinks, and coughs, “Yes, I like it. But I know what's coming. You didn't.”

“Whoa, hold on, you think I would...like that? If I knew it was coming?”

Ellie shrugs, “You might. If you trust the person on the other end, it's wonderful, freeing, giving yourself over, letting them do literally anything with you...”

“If.”

“Fair point. Do you trust me?”

Julie's eyes widen, backing away, “Y-y-yes, but...”

“Oh, I didn't mean I'd be doing anything to you. I meant you'd be doing things to me.”

“T-t-to you? M-me? But I don't...”

"Don't worry. The interface is so simple a child of six could use it. Do you have a child of six with you?"

Julie snorts, "No."

"Guess you'll just have to do then." she rises from the bed, taking up the smaller tablet. Julie pales.

"You s-said that was...was linked to me. What are..."

"It is." she fiddles with the screen, "And now it isn't. I've linked it to me." she hands the tablet over. Julie takes it with a tremble in her hand. "Now, don't press anything yet." Julie practically drops the tablet onto the bed, "Close enough. Now, the really important thing to remember is the restore app. Press that and everything reverts back to normal. Doesn't matter what you've done to me, how badly broken I am, I'll be fine."

"You're sure?"

"Well, since I'm giving you control of me? Yes, I'm sure. All the other apps are just presets, fun things to play. Well, almost all. Press the Communicator one. It's ok. It won't bite." Julie reaches out, pressing the app. "Ok. You should be seeing what I say." Ellie explains as her words scroll across the screen. Julie nods, "Good. That will still work, even when I can't actually talk. Ok?" Julie nods. "Good. Don't touch the Mindless or Change apps just yet."

"W-why not?"

"Well, Change is what made all the presets, so all the options possible, but there are a lot of options and we don't want to go that deep just yet."

Julie shakes her head, "And Mindless? That sounds like..."

"Like it turns your mind off?" Ellie smiles to her, "Exactly right. You become a normal, unremarkable object."

Julie shivers, "And that's a good thing how?"

"Well, it's very peaceful, and it can be fun. Angela loves turning me off and on at the flick of a switch."

"R-right."

"And I used it on her before we got in."

"You did? What is she?" Ellie smiles and strokes her robe, "She isn't? She is? Can I...?" she reaches tentatively out, putting her hand on the robe, "It feels, it's just like a normal robe."

"That's because it is a normal robe. It's Angela as well, but right now, nothing distinguishes it from a normal robe."

“And you like that, don't you?”

Ellie blushes, “Mmmmm. So, want to pick something and change me? See how it feels?”

“I...I...”

“Try that one.” she points to an app marked LWB.

“W-what will it do?”

“Press it and find out.” Ellie purrs, “I am in your power. Do with me as you...” Julie presses the button. The robe drifts to the bedding, a small wooden cube falling on top of it.

...wish? Well, I guess you did.

“Ellie? Are you all right?”

I'm fine. Better than fine. Say hello to the first thing I ever turned Angela into. The little wooden box she'd been testing her ideas on.

Julie tentatively reaches over, lifting up the box, Ellie, turning it over. “But...”

But?

“You're just a wooden box. How are you...”

Who knows? Who cares? There's an earpiece in the side of the tablet. You can hear me better that way.

“Ok.” Julie fumbles with the tablet before finding the earpiece, pushing it into her ear. “Now what?”

“What are you asking me for?” Ellie replies, her voice coming across breathy, seductive, and on the edge of laughing, “I'm just a little wooden box. You can do whatever you like with me.”

“I...I...I can't.” she jabs her finger into the screen and Ellie finds herself sitting nude on the robe. “I'm sorry, I...you...I...I can't.”

Ellie hugs her. “It's ok, Julie. It's ok. It's ok.” she repeats as Julie shudders against her shoulder. “You feeling ok to see other people?”

“Other people?”

“Well, mostly Gary and Angela.”

“I...I guess. You won't leave me alone, will you?”

“I won't leave you alone. Will you be ok if I set this back?”

"Back? Back to...me? I..."

"Ok, ok. I'm going to put a passcode on it. Not that I don't trust you, but I would like only Angela to be playing with me later."

"Ok."

Ellie slips her robe back on, pushing the larger tablet into the pockets and slipping the earbud into her ear, pressing an app on the screen. "Welcome back, lover. I'll tell you later."

They walk back into the office. Gary pushes himself up from the chair, "Julie, I'm so sorry. I didn't think that would, I never meant for, I'm sorry."

"You said not to press it. I should have listened to you. I..."

"Do you want to go home?"

"Do I want to..."

"Go home. I'm cancelling the bet. No obligations. I can get you home in a couple of days if..."

"I'm staying."

"Julie, you don't..."

"I'm staying." she sets her chin defiantly at him, "A Covington does not welch an' I ain't gonna be the first. Besides, Momma was serious about that shotgun and if I go home like this, she'll think you're worse than Brad an' she was darn near ready to whup him till he bled."

"Ok. I'll take the collar and make sure..."

"No take backs!"

"Julie?"

"No take backs." she replies more quietly. "If I can't deal with it, you'll get it back, but you don't get to say it's over for me. No one gets to do that again."

"You're sure...?"

"No take backs. You're stuck with me all month, Gary. Get used to it."

"And I think that means I can go and enjoy the rest of Angela's duvet day?"

"Can...can you come by tomorrow? Please?"

Ellie squeezes Julie's hand. "I'll be round tomorrow. Angela will just need to get a new lab coat for a bit."

She scoops up Angela's clothes, pulling out the tablet and walks out in a pale t-shirt and skirt instead of a robe.

The next day, Julie and Ellie talk, the tablets an unspoken presence on the counter top.

The day after, Ellie persuades Julie to play a little with her, but Julie's finger's tremble as she holds the tablet. She persuades Gary and Julie to have a dinner party to properly welcome Julie. It's not as awkward as it could have been.

The day after that, her hand doesn't tremble, but her eyes keep flicking to the smaller tablet.

The day after that, Julie asks what the Vanish option does, and wipes Ellie out of existence for half an hour. And is only a little nervous when she brings the blonde back.

The day after that, Ellie has to say no to Julie suggesting she uses the tablet to merge Ellie with her. "That's just for Angela." Ellie explains gently.

The day after that, Ellie finds Julie wearing her collar. She hands the smaller tablet over. "Ok. Your turn." she says, managing to keep most of the tremor out of her voice.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. No. Doesn't matter. You got to get back on the horse, right?"

"Well..."

"No, I'm ready. I am. Just, you know, don't turn me off? Please?"

And so Julie spends a good part of the day as a little wooden box, or a bronze statuette a few inches high, or a diaphanous cloth wrapped around Ellie's shoulders, or merged into the bed as Ellie lies on top of her, or, for only five minutes, absolutely nothing at all. Each time Ellie brings her back, she somehow manages to discretely not mention quite how flushed and breathless Julie is, or the ecstatic sounds coming over the earpiece when Julie forgets it's there.

The next day, they talk through the day, about their lives, Angela, Gary, the weeks Angela's spent getting the device ready, the time Angela had hidden herself with the tablet which leads into how to set timers and time limits on the transformations and a mischievous gleam in Julie's eye.

The day after, Ellie isn't as surprised as Julie hoped she would be to find a note on the bed explaining that Julie's hidden herself away with the tablet. It still takes a good hour and a half before she finally finds Julie, merged into the topmost pillow. And half an hour longer to persuade her to come out.

The day after that, Gary sits in his office, staring at the holographic screens floating in front of him, juggling figures in his head. Only just halfway through, and he's already screwed things up beyond repair. Julie barely speaks to him, staying in her room even when Ellie's not there. They don't talk over dinner, if they're even in the room. Mrs C is going to kill him so dead. What did he think he could do for Julie, really? Stupid, arrogant...a tablet rests on the desk. He looks up. Julie's standing there, the collar around her neck, a faded t-shirt and jeans around her. "Julie?"

"We're going out."

"What? We're..."

"Going out. I've been stuck inside for a fortnight. And I think you can spring for a night out."

"You're going like that?"

"What's wrong with this?"

"Nothing, nothing. It's just..."

"Mr Megabucks thinks I look too common for him?"

"No! I just..."

"Don't sweat it, my owner, I wasn't planning on going out like this. And you're not planning on going out like that." she makes shooing motions, "Go on, go get dressed properly."

"For what?"

"I don't know, you're taking me out, remember?"

"Right, right."

Later, not much later, Julie stands besides the Mercedes a red ladder dress clinging tightly to her body, barely covering her enough for local obscenity laws. Gary, after pulling his tongue back in and unbulging his eyes, opens the door for her. "Wow."

"Damn right 'wow'. We'd better be going somewhere worthy of this dress."

"I sure hope so." he murmurs as he watches Julie slide into the passenger seat, the tiny dress riding up.

The drive to the city doesn't take long, any close calls certainly not being due to the driver being at all...distracted, much to his passenger's satisfaction. They stop outside the restaurant, the valet moving towards the car. "Hang on, this is a bit much for somewhere like this." She fiddles in her handbag, pulling out the tablet, making some changes to something and the dress expands, changing to a halter dress with a thigh-length slit, keeping the fiery colouration. "Don't worry, I'll change back when we go dancing after." she pats his cheek affectionately as she slinks out of the car.

"Dancing?" he pales.

"Dancing. Unless you don't want to see me in that dress again?" she pauses as he comes around the car, "Or maybe out of it." and saunters towards the restaurant leaving Gary's flabber well and truly gasted.

The maître de shows them to their table, at the back, hardly a salubrious location. Julie draws eyes as she walks past, husbands and boyfriends having to stammer out excuses quickly. She suppresses a shudder. She was so intent on teasing Gary, she forgot they would be in public and how little the near-skintight dress leaves to the imagination. She sits down, her face starting to turn the same colour as her dress.

"You doing ok, Julie? You're looking a bit...peaky."

"Everyone's staring." she replies quietly.

"Well, yeah, of course they are. They probably think you're a movie star or a model or something."

"Me?"

"Well, they're sure not going to be looking at me, are they?"

Julie colours further, only saved when the waitress arrives with the menu and wine list.

"See anything you like?"

"How should I know? Everything's in foreign and I can't even get the English bits to make no sense."

"And the wine?"

"Gary, what do I know about wine? If they had beer, I'd be fine, or bourbon as you're buying, but wine?"

"Want me to handle things?"

"And have me be the pretty trophy on your arm? Yeah, sure, why not? That's what you won, after all."

"That wasn't what we bet for."

"It wasn't?"

"Well, I didn't bet to win a pretty trophy, I bet to win Julie Covington."

"Oh, please. Now you're just trying to snow me."

"I'm not."

“Ok, then why? We only knew each other in high school and we...we didn't run in the same circles. I'm surprised you even remember me.”

“You kind of imprint yourself on a guy's mind.”

“Hah! You mean all those wild stories about me did. Yeah, I heard them, too. Weren't all true, but well, who're people gonna believe, me or the wild child rebel in their head?” she pauses, looking hard across the table, “Disappointed you ain't getting what you thought?”

“Not in the slightest.”

The waitress returns for their order and Julie lets Gary take care of things, her eyes widening only slightly as he orders French champagne. She looks around, speaking quietly.

“You got any other toys beyond this...” she gestures at the collar, “...lying around? Maybe some 'trick blades 'for sawing your lovely lady in half?”

Gary colours deeply, “No. There's no market. Can't really afford to divert people for the boss'...indulgences yet.”

“And the market for this is what exactly?”

“That's Angela's baby. She fiddles with it when she needs to let her mind wander. Not a product.”

“This is what she does when her mind wanders?”

Gary smiles, “Exactly. You can see why I let her have the leeway she does, right?”

“Yeah, I can. But still, you have holes in space...”

“Heh. Just because we can bend the laws of physics in one place, doesn't mean we can do it in all places.”

“It doesn't? What a crock.”

“Ha. Yeah, I guess. Oh, there's a way, I'm sure, but until it filters into Angela's mind, or I make enough to commission my own staff...”

“...you're just stuck with card tricks and this. Poor baby.”

“Speaking of...” he reaches for his jacket pocket.

“No. In fact, hell no. You ain't suckering me again. No card tricks.”

“Sure? Ok, I guess I don't really need card tricks, do I?”

“You...don't?”

"I do own you, Julie. I could just, say, tell you to get out of that dress and you'd..."

Julie feels her breath catch. "You wouldn't."

"Wouldn't I?"

"No, you wouldn't. Of course, if you did, that would be a shame."

"A shame?"

"Yeah, wasting really expensive booze by pouring it all over you like that. Terrible waste." she smiles, cocking an eyebrow, "Besides, you wanted Julie Covington. No one ever said that meant I'd do what I was told." she sips from the flute, "Usually, they said just the opposite."

"I see. I suppose I'll have to be very careful what I say around you then."

Julie smiles over the glass, "You'd better believe it, mister."

"So, what would happen if I ordered you not to take that dress off?"

The waitress returns before Julie can reply, except for a knowing smile across the table.

Some courses later, "So..."

"So?"

"You didn't answer my question."

"I didn't, did I?"

"So?"

"Why don't you try it out and we can both see what happens?"

Gary laughs, "God, it's good to see that fire back in your eyes, Julie."

"Heh. That sounds just like something my momma'd say." Gary shifts nervously in his seat.

"Really? Guess I must have..."

Her eyes narrow, "In fact, that's almost word for word what she's been saying to her friends when she thinks I can't hear her. Ever since Brad. Friends like your mother."

Gary starts sweating a little too much for the air-conditioned restaurant, taking a long sip of his champagne.

"So, Gary, why exactly did you come back home? I mean, you could have sent flunkies to do the legwork. What kind of bigshot does that himself? And especially in a car as fancy as you did?"

"Julie, I swear..."

"Gary, I may not be some kind of genius, but do not treat me like I'm stupid! You knew where I'd be, didn't you? You knew I wasn't with anyone. You knew what kind of boring ass hell I've been stuck in. You knew, you sonuva..., you knew all that. You planned all this! You and my own goddamn mother planned this!"

"Julie, please..." he reaches over to her.

She bats his hand aside, her eyes glistening, "No! Just, just take me back. Please."

"Julie..."

"Gary, please, I don't want to talk right now. I just want to get back."

Gary pays the bill, and tips the valet generously as he brings the car up. They drive off in a silence so deep and sullen you could hear a pin drop, if any dared to interrupt. "Julie..."

Julie says nothing, reaching into her purse.

"Julie., I..." she taps on the tablet's screen, angrily stabs at the save button and vanishes, the tablet falling onto the warm leather seat cover. He sighs, "Well, looks like you still got that Casanova charm down pat, Gary."

Meanwhile, Julie feels the road running under her tyres, the air whistling over her sleek metallic skin, feeling the engine thundering in her heart and she tries to lose herself in the thrill of it all, feeling her wheels turning, gripping the road. *At least a car can't cry*, she thinks.

Gary parks the Mercedes back at the complex, reaching over to pick up the tablet and Julie's purse. He looks around for her dress but can't find it. Sighing, he presses the communicator app, placing the ear bud into place. "Julie, we're here."

Sullen, brooding silence echoes through the earbud.

"You planning on staying there all night?"

More silence.

"Ok .I'll leave you alone. How long did you set the timer on?"

Finally a response, "Crap!"

"It's ok, I'll just hit restore and..."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I am not appearing buck naked in front of you! Especially not after tonight."

"Naked? What about your dress?"

"The dress was me. Ellie showed me how it worked. I was wearing my skin."

"That dress was...your skin?"

"Right. So if you restore me..."

"Got it. I'll, uh, I'll go get Ellie."

Several long minutes later, Gary returns, Ellie tugging her robe tighter, scowling a little, "...a chaperone?!" Gary starts to reply, "That was a rhetorical question." she stops at the car, tablet in her hand. "Ok, Gary's told me what happened. So, how do you want to play this?" She waits for the answer, "You could have just let Gary..." she stops as a stream of no leaps to the earbud, "well, if you don't want to be let out...that's better. Apology accepted. Ok, let's get this done so I can get back to bed." she scans her fingers over the screen, pressing save and Julie reappears beside the car in her crimson ladder dress. Julie grabs the tablet and her purse, shoes clicking on the floor as she hurries inside as fast as the dress will allow.

"If she'd just let me explain..."

"I'll talk to her." she looks at the rapidly retreating figure, hunched shoulders, fists balled, "Tomorrow. Try not to get Julie to kill you until then. I'm going back to bed. Angela will be getting bored."

Tomorrow becomes today, Angela's boredom eases, and Julie refuses to come out of her room. Ellie looks at the wooden obstacle and sighs, "Why do I have to be the grown-up?" she knocks on the door, "Julie? I know you're in there. Can I come in?"

The door cracks open. "I guess."

Ellie slips inside and the door closes.

"So, what happened?"

"He lied to me! He planned it all with my mother! Deciding what I needed!!"

"You don't need to shout. I'm right here, not in New York."

"Did you know?!"

"That Gary was planning on bringing you back here? Of course. He's been talking about it for weeks, worrying over what to do, how you'd react to the fun around here, how you'd react to him..."

“Weeks?! And you knew?!”

“I knew he was going out and hoping you'd come back with him. What high-school geek made millionaire doesn't want to impress his old girlfriends?”

“I wasn't his...”

“Yeah, I know that now.”

“I trusted him! And he...”

“Went out of his way to help someone who wouldn't give him the time of day in high-school?”

Julie's mouth hangs open so Ellie continues into the silence.

“Or did you mean to say trusted you with something that could stand the world on its head and make it dance, a secret, might I remind you, that right now precisely 5 people know about? Or maybe you meant gave you every chance to get out once he realised how scared you were? Or maybe hasn't done anything at all with the fact that he 'owns' you and could make your life hell? Were those the sort of things you were going to say?”

Julie closes her mouth, “No. And you're right, he's not bad, but he still lied to me, tried to make my decisions for me. And no one gets to do that anymore. Not him, not my mother, no one.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“Make him stew for a few days. Then we'll see.”

“Ok. Have fun. Try not to get stuck in any more cars. I might leave you there this time.”

“Promises, promises. I'll be careful.”

The door closes. Ellie walks over to Gary's office. “Is she...”

“She's fine. Pissed, but fine. Give her some space.”

“I didn't mean to...”

“I know that, you know that and she knows that. She'll get things straight in her head.”

“I hope so. God, what a mess. I'm making things worse.”

“Really? Doesn't look that way to me.”

“She hates me.”

“You're not her favourite person at the moment, true. She'll be fine. Besides, you wanted some fire back in her. You've definitely got that. Just don't get burned.”

Julie doesn't come out of her room for two more days, trying to understand the tablet. Ellie checks up on her occasionally, often getting dragged in to 'help' Julie test something out.

On the third day, she emerges, walking to Gary's office, “Julie? Are you?”

“You're forgiven. Not forgotten, but forgiven. Anything else you're hiding from me?”

“No, no...”

“So no store of previous girls you've used this on?”

“What? No!”

“Shame. We'll have to start one”

“What?”

“Nothing. So, where are we going tonight? Not quite so fancy.”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, we're going out to celebrate me forgiving your lying ass. Somewhere with loud music, dancing and booze.”

The night goes well. Julie's ladder dress draws all the attention to them anyone could possibly want, which is considerably more than Gary is strictly comfortable with. Still, the dancing isn't a disaster, the booze is copious and cheap, and no one traps themselves as a sports car.

The pattern repeats itself over the next four days, with Gary taking Julie out at her instigation. Each time, less and less of Julie's dress accompanies them, making Gary more nervous, careful, and meaning the nights don't end with anything more than a chaste kiss and stumbling “good night”.

The fifth day, “What do I have to do?! If I wear any less, I'll get busted for obscene behaviour! And just a kiss?”

Ellie looks up, “Have you ever heard of the phrase 'mixed signals'? Gary is terrified of screwing things up and hurting you. He's going to be careful, especially after your first date went so well.”

“But I don't want him to be careful!”

“You told him that? Because if you don't...”

“So what, I should turn up in his office wearing just a smile and carrying some lube?”

“That'd probably work.”

“Well, thanks for the helpful advice.”

“You're welcome. Ok, seriously, what do you want from him?”

“I...I...I want him to play with his winnings a bit more.”

“His winnings? Kind of an odd term for someone so independent-minded to use about herself.”

“Don't you try analysing me, too. I got enough of that at home.”

Ellie hides her smile in her book, “So what exactly would 'playing with his winnings' mean?”

“I...I...I can't say it. Not even to you. It's just too embarrassing.”

Ellie laughs, “Really? After all the things I've told you about me and Angela? What you want is just too embarrassing to talk about?”

Julie blushes deeply, “Yes.” she whispers.

“Wow, must be good. And you think I'm going to let you get away with saying something like that and just clamming up? I may be the token grown-up around here, but I'm only human.” she pauses for a second, “Well, some of the time.”

“Ok, ok. But only because you insisted. I want to be his toy. I want him to use me like I'm not really a person, just a toy. No say in the matter, no thought to what I want, just fucked and forgotten. Happy now?”

Ellie blinks, “I think it's time we show you the adult section.”

“The what?!”

“Give me that tablet and I'll show you.” she scrolls over to last application and scrolls over again, a new array of options appearing. “Here.”

Julie scans over the titles and looks up, “These are...I didn't think...”

“So, still think just being a toy is shocking? I mean, my Angela has turned me into a disembodied cock and fucked someone else with me...”

“Really? Heh. And here I thought I was being originally kinky.” she looks back to the screen, “So, if I press this...” she vanishes, a jiggly globe falling onto the bed.

"Yeah, pretty much." Ellie smiles as she walks to the bed, lifting up the disembodied breast. She gives Julie a squeeze, watching the single nipple harden. "You like this, don't you? Which is good as you forgot to set a timer. So, I guess you're just a boob now. All mine to play with, unless I decide to turn you back, sometime in the future." she flicks the nipple and drops Julie back to the bed. "See you after lunch, Tits."

Julie lies on the bed, unmoving, right next to the tablet to restore her but unable to move, for what seems like hours, although a breast, even a sentient one, doesn't have a lot of ways of measuring the time. Ellie picks her up. Julie feels her soft body squeezed. She feels Ellie's lips on her skin, feeling them enclose her nipple, sucking and licking around her. She feels another hand, smaller than Ellie's, take hold of her, pinching, squeezing, feeling another pair of lips give way to nipping teeth.

She feels Ellie stop sucking, feeling her body rubbed over smooth skin, her nipple rubbed around another nipple, feeling it harden under her touch. She feels the other hand pulling her back, rubbing against a small pair of breasts, then feels herself pressed between them, four breasts enclosing her, rubbing against her. She wants to scream, or gasp, or collapse, but her jiggly body can't do any of those things. And suddenly she can, panting, body covered in a sheen of sweat, feeling two warm bodies on either side of her, feeling soft lips nuzzling her. She cries out, her body quivering in ecstasy. She opens her eyes, staring into Ellie's smiling face, glancing down as a dark hand pinches her chest.

"So," Ellie purrs, "how did my toy like its first threesome?"

Julie just pants. "Oh...oh wow. That was...that was...you were..."

"Yes, we were." Angela replies.

"Ooooooh. How-how long was I...?"

"A little breast toy?" Ellie smirks, "About four hours. I wanted to have lunch first."

"Four...four hours? Oh, wow, just a breast toy, for four hours, oh, wow, you could have..."

"See, I told you the toy wouldn't mind if we didn't restore it right away." Angela says from behind her, "Does our new little toy want to be just a toy again? Used by your oh so sweet mistresses? And maybe, if you're very good, turned back before tomorrow morning?"

Julie's breath catches. Does she want that? It does sound good, to be just a toy again, having to worry about nothing but giving and receiving pleasure, having two beautiful women doing whatever they like with her.

"F-f-for an hour" she stammers out, "Your toy. Just, just for an hour."

"This time." Angela smiles, breathing on her ear. Ellie presses save on the tablet and Julie vanishes, a warm, double ended fleshy dildo appearing between them. "Mmmmm, very nice, love." Angela purrs as she strokes along the glans, sliding one end between her legs.

That night, Gary pushes the door to his room open, fumbling for the light switch, wondering what he's done to annoy Julie enough that they didn't go out today. He tosses his pass onto the counter and stops, staring at the bed. Or, to be more precise, the lovedoll lying naked on the bed. He walks towards it warily. Something about the face looks familiar... "Julie?" the doll does not reply. "Ok. I'm dreaming. I must be. Damn, need to cut down on the cheese." He looks over the doll, a sheet of paper taped over her chest. He pulls it away, exposing the plastic tits.

'Gary My Owner,

If you're reading this, then you've found my surprise for you. You've been so nice, so patient with me, but, really, it's time you got to play with ~~me~~ your winnings. And you won't do that while you're worried about hurting me somehow, I know.

So, this is my attempt to make things so obvious even you'll get the message. Tonight, I am your ~~Julie toy fucktoy doll toy~~. Play with me, use me, fuck me like a good toy.

If you think this note's a trick, ~~and frankly I wouldn't put it past Angela either,~~ the earbud's on the counter top.

Please use me soon, Owner.

Love,

Julie Your ~~doll toy winnings toy~~

He looks up from the note and walks in a daze to the counter, pushing the bud into his ear. "Julie?"

"Hello, Owner."

"Owner? Julie, are you..."

"I'm fine. Better than fine. And you're my owner. You won me, remember?"

"That was..."

"That was just a bit of fun, my Owner? I know. So's this."

"And you're sure you want this?"

"Do you think I'd be a blow-up doll lying in your bed if I wasn't sure?"

"Probably not, but, Julie..."

"Beeeeeeep. I'm sorry, Owner, but Julie isn't here anymore. There's just your Toy here, and your Toy wants its owner to fuck it like a good little fuckdoll. Please, Owner? Fuck your little toy. It's a good toy, isn't it? It deserves to be fucked, doesn't it? Please, Owner, put the earbud away and play with your toy."

“Julie?”

“Gary, my dear owner, which part of 'fuck me like I'm a fucking fucktoy' are you not getting? I am me, I am in full control of my faculties and I want you to fuck me! So fucking fuck me!”

Gary puts the earbud down, turning to the bed, and the doll Julie's turned herself into. The room soon echoes to the sounds of springs bouncing, rubber squeaking and the grunts of hard effort.

Later, after the doll's been used as thoroughly as it, no, she, could possibly want, he hopes, Gary limps to the counter, pressing the earbud into place. “Julie?”

“Oh, wow, that was...wow.”

“It was. So, what now?”

“Now?”

“Getting you back to normal.”

“Oh, that.” she replies as if it's entirely unimportant, “I'll turn back in the morning. Until then, well, I'm a toy, your toy. If you're done playing, you should...” her voice turns gradually more husky, “...put me away like a good toy. And yes, I'm sure.”

Gary pulls out the earpiece and flips the inflation stem open. Julie's passionate cries are still audible as she feels her body empty. He carries the deflated doll into the bathroom, washing it gently before he folds it, her, up and places her on Julie's bed, locking the door behind him.

The next morning, Julie wakes up the instant her body restores, wrenched back from the warm bliss of being a doll, thrashing on the bed. It takes her some time to come back down, and even longer to want to move from the bed. Unfortunately, a rather insistent knocking on the door drags her across the room.

Ellie takes in the flush still on Julie's face, the light sheen, the slightly dazed expression, “So, it was good then?”

Julie blinks, “It was wonderful. You could have told me it would feel that good.”

“I could have, sure. I just didn't.”

“Bitch.” Julie murmurs.

“Is that any way to talk to your mistress, Toy?” Ellie asks, cocking an eyebrow, trying to keep her voice stern.

A shiver passes through Julie's body, her fingers drifting lower, “No, my Mistress. Your Toy should be...punished.” She looks down in a vain attempt to hide her smile, eyes bright.

Ellie picks up the tablet. “Now, what should we do with my naughty toy?”

Julie waits, anticipation building, biting her lip until Ellie presses save and she vanishes. Ellie picks up the piece of chocolate off the floor. “Perfect.” And pops Julie into her mouth, “I hope you don’t ruin my figure.” She mutes the earbud to quieten Julie’s squeals as she chews the chocolate up and swallows her down. “Now to deal with the other half of this. I swear sometimes I’m the only normal one around here.”

Ellie walks into the office. Gary immediately looks up from the floating screens, “Have you seen Julie today?”

Ellie glances away, “I’ve seen her.”

“How much does she hate me?”

“On a scale of 1 to 10?” she waits just enough for his mind to fill in at least ‘11’, “About a 2. Gary, she’s fine with what you two did. Hell, she’s more than fine with it.”

“But...”

“But? No, no buts, Gary. Did you enjoy what you did last night? Because Julie certainly did. She was still glowing when I saw her.”

“She was? But I...”

“But you what? Treated her like a sex object? Used her? That’s what she wanted. You didn’t force her to do anything.”

“How do you know that?”

“Who do you think stuck that note on her? Who carried her into your room? I know what she wanted because I helped her arrange it.”

“If I hadn’t given her the Mark III, she...”

“She’d what? Miss out on what was apparently some of the best sex of her life? Be psychologically scarred by the whole thing? Gary, listen to me very carefully, Julie enjoyed herself. Whatever horrible, disgusting, perverted things you two got up to, Julie loved them. So will you quit beating yourself up for once? Because if Julie catches you agonising about how you took advantage of her, she’ll see that as you trying to make her decisions for her and then she really will hate you.”

Back in her room, Ellie pulls out the tablet and presses restore. Julie exists again, her body shuddering. “You...you..you ate me!” she pants.

"I did."

"That was...that was wow, I was eaten!"

"You were delicious, if you were curious."

Julie shivers again, "Delicious. Fuck, how is that thought not terrifying? You fucking ate me! I was...I was...I...you digested....I was part of you!"

"And now you're not. I told you. Whatever we do, it's all perfectly safe."

"Yes, Mistress."

Ellie smiles, sliding the tablet across the bed. "So?"

"So what?"

"So, are we spending the afternoon as Mistress Ellie and her terribly naughty Toy? Or are we just Ellie and Julie?"

"After being...after you...after all that? I think I'm ready to just be Julie for a bit."

And so for the afternoon, they talk, and share stories, and get increasingly kinky ideas, and when Angela returns to the room, the evening can be summed up in two words: Chocolate bodypaint.

The next day, Angela insists Ellie spend the day with her, leaving Julie alone with the tablet and an active imagination. That night Gary finds a torso-sized ball of flesh on his bed, every spare inch taken up by a breast, a note beside it begging its owner to play with the little boobberry. Its Owner obliges.

The next evening, Julie knocks on Ellie's door, the tablet in her hand, butterflies in her stomach. The door opens, Angela smiling behind it. "Hello, Toy."

"Julie." She corrects, "I'm Julie, not your toy."

"For now." she steps back, motioning her inside. The door clicks shut behind her. "Welcome to my parlour. What can your mistress do for you?"

"Is Ellie around?" Angela smiles, "And human?"

"Oh, you're no fun to tease anymore. I'll go get her." she walks into the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

A few minutes later, Ellie comes out, pulling on a robe. "What can I do for you?"

"I found something really cool with the tablet and I wanted to show you. It, it wasn't something you mentioned, so I thought it might be, you know, new."

Ellie smiles indulgently, "Go on." she says, ignoring the laughter in her ear from her robe.

"Ok, well, it's probably easier to show you. But..." Julie fiddles with the pad and presses save.

"What..."

"Shush in the peanut gallery. Watch and be amazed, as the Great Julini cuts herself in half." Julie sits down, pushes her hands onto the chair arms and raises her torso off her hips.

"I'm sure Gary will love that trick." Ellie claps, hearing a gasp of shock. "But it sounds like Angela might want to talk to you." She smiles and presses restore, Angela appearing beside her, utterly nude.

"Hey!"

Ellie shrugs, "You did it to me, lover, and in front of your boss, no less."

Angela ignores that, moving towards Julie, "How did you do that?!"

"D-do what?" Julie stammers.

"How did you get the field to maintain itself across two objects like that? The matrix shouldn't allow for that."

Julie looks down at her legs, crossing them nervously. "It shouldn't? I just..."

"The resonant frequencies of the crystals shouldn't hold their entanglement for..."

"Angela, honey, dial the genius thing back a few notches. Down to my level so we'll all understand what the hell you're talking about."

Angela blinks, "Ok. So the reason the grid works is that there's one of a pair of quantum entangled crystals in the tablet and one in the grid. And what goes into one crystal affects the other, so commands from the tablet crystal can change the physical nature of the object connected to the other crystal. But they're only capable of holding one state, so you couldn't turn into two separate things. Why do you think you can't take the dress off when it's you? Because it's part of you."

"Hang on, hang on, you can be broken into pieces when you're something else, right? How is this different?"

"That's external to the crystals. As far as the quantum state is concerned, you're the same. Splitting someone up like this? That shouldn't be possible."

Julie looks down at her legs, "Is it dangerous?"

"It shouldn't be. You're still under the effects of the quantum entanglement so if the worst comes to the worst, restore would get you back together. I don't understand how you came apart in the first place. How did you do it?"

Julie nervously presses restore, her body fusing together. "I just went into Change and..."

"Show me."

Julie looks away, Angela's intensity scaring her a little and opens up the application, walking through the same steps she'd found earlier. After several runs through, separating Julie into any number of pieces, Angela finally laughs.

"Oh, so that's what it's doing. I'd never have thought..."

"Never have thought what?"

"It's the Mark III. I put in a feature to save multiple defaults into the crystal and..."

"Multiple defaults? Default what?"

"Default forms. What the system restores you to when you press restore. Anyway, you can save particularly interesting forms as defaults with the Mark III, so that when you change back, you don't always have to come back to one form."

"You're saying restore might not restore me to me?!"

"That would be one option, obviously, but not necessarily, if you've saved another form. You could choose to either restore to you, or say, restore to a statue. Or something fun."

"And that has what to do with Julie falling apart?"

"The system's using the alternative default spaces to store the synchronisation frequencies of the crystals and..."

"Angela, love, mad scientist time later. In English."

"It's using the buffer I put in for extra defaults to hold the multiple parts within one synchronisation state. So you can be in as many pieces as there are defaults before the system locks up."

"And how many is that?"

"Twenty. At the moment. Oh, this has possibilities. If each piece holds the entanglement state, you could..."

"Annnnd we've lost her. Angela will be busy pondering applications and spin-offs for a while." she turns to Julie, "So, what shall we do with you in the meantime?"

Julie hands over the tablet, "Whatever my Mistress desires."

Julie spends the next day with Angela, using the tablet to flesh out Angela's theories on how the system is working, Angela making notes and sketching out the design for the Mark IV. And that is how Gary finds four things lying on the bed: Julie's disembodied breasts sitting neatly side by side, a note under one, and her detached pussy nestled between them.

After another day of testing, honestly, just testing, alllll day, Gary finds Julie lying back on his bed in a loose robe, the tablet beside her. "Julie?"

She smiles up at him, "Hello, my Owner."

"Why are you...you? Rather than..."

"...a toy, my Owner? Your Toy realises it's been horribly selfish. It's not allowed its owner to play with it as he desires, only as it desires. Horrible, selfish Toy." She holds up the tablet, "Toy's Owner can play with his Toy however he wishes. Please don't punish your Toy too badly for its selfishness."

"Are you..."

"Yes, I'm sure." He hesitates, "Gary, take the damn tablet before I brain you with it. You have my permission. I am your Toy. Don't mess with the timer, but otherwise, do with me as you will, my Owner."

Gary takes the tablet, his fingers sliding over the screen. Julie licks her lips, anticipating what he'll do to her. "Ready?"

"Oh, yes, my Owner."

"Good." He presses his finger onto the tablet. Julie's breath catches. And nothing happens.

"Huh?" she looks up, confused, "Gary? What?"

"I can play with my Toy however I like, right?"

"Yes, but..."

"Good. I want to play with Julie."

"But..."

"Don't worry. I'll play with you as a Toy later. But first, I want to play with Julie."

"But, I don't, you could make me anything you like. Why?"

"Because I want my Toy to understand something. It's not just a toy to me."

“Promise?”

“Yes, Julie, I promise.”

She smiles and pulls him onto the bed, “Then I guess you’d better get playing.”

“I guess I had.” He replies, pulling on the belt of her robe, easing it off her.

The next day, the last day, Gary wakes up early and presses a few places on the tablet, taking the newly minted bottle of shower gel into the bathroom with him. Julie wakes to find him lathering her over his body, feeling the warm water pounding on her, and then the restore pulls her back, pressed against him. The shower takes a lot longer than it should. But when it’s over Gary takes a duvet day, his schedule cleared.

The morning they spend talking, old friends, new lovers, trying to understand what they are to each other. Lunch is a small affair, a JLT (Julie, Lettuce and Tomato) sandwich, and the conversation continues. At some point in the afternoon, Gary restores her and then changes her before she can say anything, practising his card tricks while the cards moan in his ear. The next time he restores her, Julie pushes him back to the bed, leaping on him. Much of the afternoon passes in bed, sometimes with Julie, sometimes with Toy, all times extremely enjoyable.

“I don’t suppose I can keep this?” she runs her finger over the collar.

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, didn’t think so. If people found out about it…”

“Pretty much.”

Julie reaches behind her neck, “I suppose I’d better…”

“It’s ok. You don’t have to leave right now, do you?”

“No, but, I’d better get it off. Or I might try to run off with it.”

“There is a way you could keep it.”

Julie stops, “There is?”

“Oh, I see. Only interested in me for my toys?”

She swats at him, “Don’t be silly. I am one of your toys. So, this way I can keep this?”

“You could stay here.”

“Stay? Ha! Gary, you guys are literally breaking the laws of the fucking universe here. I work in a mom and pop general store. What could I do here? What job would any sane businessman give me?”

“Who said I was sane?”

“Heh. Ok, point taken, but still, what would I do here?”

Gary pauses to think about it, “Executive toy?”

Julie’s face darkens, scowling at him as if her glare would reduce him to ashes. She keeps the scowl up for several too long seconds until Gary looks away.

“Julie, I’m sor...”

She smiles, her eyes sparkling mischievously, the dark mood gone completely, “I don’t know, my dear Owner, does it include dental?”

Disclaimer: Ellie and Angela, and several of the transformations, are the creations of DungMonster for his story, “the Grid”. They are used without permission, but only because I couldn't get hold of DM via the e-mail I had for him. I hope he doesn't mind.