# Protective Custody

## Response times

The call crackled in over the radio just as I finished my last French fry. Crumpling the cardboard cup flat, I shoved it into the bag wrapped around the gearstick, one of the many little advantages of driving a manual. As the dispatcher gave the code for domestic disturbance and the location, I licked my fingers, and then grabbed the mike. It was off my beaten track, but I might be closer, maybe I would get to do something before I had to struggle through another afternoon of speed trap duty. I looked over at my senior partner, a skinny, but deceptively strong character. The first partner I had that was not going after my pants because he had sworn off women after a failed marriage, and only still around because he didn't act like it was a big deal. He was a nice guy and his boyfriend was too from the times he brought in turkey for thanksgiving in the office.

The report was for 39 Appleseed Drive. Three baker's dozens of seeds. How apples would it take to get that many seeds? Two? Three? Four? I gave up on that imponderable when I turned onto the lane, no point letting a mnemonic outlive its usefulness. A neighbor had reported sounds of a fight inside, and screams of some kind. As I pulled into the driveway and killed the motor, the dispatcher got our attention, with an update that a woman had left the house and driven off. I sighed, and unbuckled my seat belt. Turning to him as I opened the door, I said, "I've got a bad hunch here, get descriptions and put out an APB for her while whatever trail is fresh." before climbing out. He gave a grim smile, and raised an eyebrow. "Even hunches wouldn't have let me boss superiors around like that, but okay. You know the drill, don't take chances, I'll be right behind you, Tori." He lightly reprimanded before waving me to go find out what was tickling my heart.

Every profession has its baggage, little superstitions for those who can't afford solid gods, but wish they could. A quiet hospital in the morning means a hard afternoon, and you pay the reaper for the first patient you kill. Forest fires always break through your part of the barrier if you don't pay for your share of the coffee. Don't wish good luck, or mention the name of the Danish prince. For my suburban office on the outskirts of Boston, it was simple to an outsider. Every good officer has a knack. Most around the town took it as a little in-joke, brought up when one of us beats the odds once, like somehow catching a coffee cup without spilling a drop, or knowing just where to put a road block.

Actually, dig into it, and the actual depth can throw you around the loop if you let it. As far as I can tell, it started just after the end of the last World War, with an officer Bouley. One night on DUI prevention he somehow realized he could simply smell the difference between a responsible drunk, those who you'd want to take their keys away, and the ones who would try and hotwire their own cars to drive home unless you cuffed them. He called it his Knack, and the name stuck. Within a few years, more than half of the force, from the lowly traffic warden all the way up to the station's lieutenant, who when pressed would quietly admit that they knew they had one too, but you could only easily find out the specifics from those who've retired or from who knew the deceased. From the cases I've confirmed, and a majority of those I haven't, it was usually a small sense, never something earth shattering, like being able to stop a bomb with their mind. On the other hand, we haven't had any bombs to deal with, and it always came in handy for us.

I said us, didn't I? I'm no exception, and I don't know what I'm here for any more than you, but it does irritate me that what I suppose is my knack relates so stereotypically to my gender. I am not good with kids most of the time, but if they're heading down the wrong path from some lousy part of life, I feel it right in my chest, like a strange tingle deep down. Usually I can manage something to help turn them to something good. For example, finding a free tutor for a poor struggling student, or finding their true interest beyond smoking behind the high school.

As I approached the door, the tickle grew to baseball sized, and started to have that feeling of a ghosted pain, like when you injure yourself in a dream, and your brain takes a while to figure out it wasn't real. Ring doorbell. No answer. Ring doorbell again. Still nothing. Actually look at the door, mentally evaluate possibility of kicking it open, and if I should. See that it's ajar. Break out in a cold sweat. Fight, one fled from the scene, door not even closed properly, and if I'm right, a hurt or really scared kid inside. I gently push open the thick door, and call out. "Police, this is Officer Lynn, is anyone home?" After a pause of silence, I unholster my tazer and step in. "I'm coming in, make yourself known!" I yell.

Benjamin hopped out of the cruiser and hit the ground running. I stopped entering for him to catch up. "She's being followed on the highway until we evaluate the scene. After you." He said with his usual mocking smile. He definitely saw himself as a modern day Oscar Wilde, a gentleman's gentleman.

As I took the right side of the house, examining each of the spacious, colorful rooms, finding a few pictures, but no signs of a struggle. The few photos of people were of a small family of three, husband a tall man with a slight oriental heritage, wife with a dark tanned face, maybe interracial heritage, holding a girl clearly their child, from the strangely cute smile, to the light brown hair. The picture with them the oldest put the parents at middle aged, the girl in a tomboyish pre-teen area. The lower floor was a large loop of rooms I discovered, when I entered the kitchen, to find Ben with his hands covered in blood, trying to staunch a bad wound in an unconscious Mr. Appleseed's side.

There are times you are in control and others where it's best for everyone and your sanity if you let the job take over. Hand to radio, radio to mouth, mouth to call for all the help and justice and hope. Towels to Ben, trying to slow the bleeding with everything at hand, him pushing on the wound like trying to keep a broken door shut against the night. Look around at the tumbled cutlery and dishes scattered over the counter, the sink still full of bubbles and dirty water, could she have stabbed him and already washed whatever did that before panicking and leaving him to die? Tiled floor, a few droplets of blood leading to a third door, which unlike every other door we had used, was closed. I gently knocked on the door, wondering who had closed it. A yelp that stabbed at me and a small scream that quickly dissolved into other noises answered that.

Slowly opening the door, I saw small bare feet sticking out from behind the washer, trembling and rubbing each other, one toe covered in blood. Stepping in, I closed the door, keeping the girl's sanctuary closed to the strange change. Leaning over the washing machine to look down at her, squeezed into the smallest space she could, repeatedly tapping something heavy at the grout between two tiles. Covered in dust from the neglected gap, coughing fits occasionally punctuated her whimpers. Even though I might be good at helping kids, I still felt uncomfortable talking to them for the first time, everything I could think of wasn't right. Orders would alienate her; questions might put her deeper into shock. She looked up as something on my belt chinked on the metal of the washer, glazed eyes barely seeing, and then looking back down. Well, first things first. "Are you hurt?" I quietly ask, responded with a break in the tapping and a quick shake.

I watch over her, and after a few dozen more chinks into the grout, I get around and look down into the dark gap, and let out a small gasp. In her grip was a kitchen knife, half of the long blade covered in a layer of blood, dripping into a tiny puddle between the tiles. "Um, did you hurt him?" I whisper, trying to get the knife away from her.

"I think so… I pulled it out, he started yelling, and then stopped," she whispered, pulling back into the darkness, letting the knife tip over and fall onto the floor. I carefully slid the knife out of her reach, letting only the tips of my fingernails touch the evidence. Massaging at one of her feet to help calm her, I get onto the floor with her and smile, fidgeting and rubbing dead skin and cruft off the soles of her feet.

"I'm going to stay here and protect you. My partner is out helping your dad until the other good people come to fix him, and then we've got to get out of here, mm? I'm Officer Tori Lynn, and if you need help just ask for me, me being here pretty much makes you in charge of you until everything's better." I advise the poor girl, speaking softly, trying to gently tug her out of her inward spiral.

The paramedics came with their trademark wail, cut off mid note out the front. I finally managed to get her to come out. "Do you want to meet the good people who have come to take care of your dad?" I ask, offering out my hand.

She shook her head, and looked down. After a strange pause, she looked up, and reached out with her left hand. I took it gently then offered my other hand, but she was already pulling herself up out of the gap, standing with a sneeze and a shake of her whole body. As she shook herself off, I slipped the hand span long knife into a baggy. The girl may have made it worthless as evidence, but it had been used in the assault, so into a bag it went.

I took her to the kitchen door, and opened it a crack, peeking out. Ben was standing now, talking to one paramedic while the other evaluated the wound. Body language was vague, but on the optimistic side, so I chanced opening it completely, bringing the girl out with me. "How is he?" I ask, feeling her fingers squeeze mine tight.

"Breathing, so he'll pro'ly stay that way." Ben said, helping set up the stretcher to save time for the paramedics. That done, he turned to me then looked down at whom I found. "Hi there, I guess you've already met Tori, I'm Benjamin, what's your name little girl?" he asked, and gave the flicker of a wince, one of those micro expressions that you only see if you're looking for it. This was him hating himself for talking down to kids, even knowing they would then prefer me empathetically.

She looked at him with a shy sniff, then up at me, giving a more open smile. "Chau." She turned back to Ben, shaking off a few clumps of dirt. "I'm not little, I'm normal sized, you're the big one." She says with the simple logic of her age, and then trailed off, staring at her father on the stretcher. "Can I say goodbye before he's taken away?"

"Well, the doctors made him sleep so he wouldn't be hurting, but he might hear you." I walked over to the stretcher with her and she got up onto her toes, leaning over him. "Sorry I hurt you more… Should have let the doctors take it out, I'll know that next time. I don't want it to happen to happen again, I mean, next time someone gets hurt like that!" she began to shake, so I put my hands on her shoulders.

"He knows what you mean. How about we go and get you changed before your mom gets back?" I suggested, trying to change the subject.

"Okay… If she does come back, she'd be even angrier with me like this." Chau mumbled, batting at the dust clinging to her nearly shoulder-length hair.

"Why do you say that? Where did she go? What did she say before she left?" asked Ben, automatically switching to interrogation mode, but trailing off when he realized he was asking far faster than she was answering.

She sighed, looking down at her bare feet. "Don't know… She just screamed that it was my fault and slapped me, and left without me," she said, pawing at her cheek.

I patted at her shoulder, and glared at Ben. "This isn't the time or the place. Chau, how about you show me your room, I'll brush your hair if you want me to." I offered, picking at the more dust bunnies.

As she led me upstairs, Ben called out halfheartedly, "Okay, I guess I'll make sure everything stays secure…" Chau gave out a small laugh, a good sign. On the other hand, him trying to get the last word was a little sad.

Upstairs was the same as below, quiet décor in the corridor, half a dozen doors, most of them open wide, save for the bathroom, some kind of closet, and what I assume was the parent's room. Chau tugged me past one of the open doors, glance revealed a cluttered office, not unlike the ones I had.

Dragged into her room, I looked at it with an officer's eye. Single size bed, but for someone much taller, by the time she grew it would have worn out, probably second hand. A chest of five drawers with the top one gone, the hole was like a gaping wound, or a dark mouth. The cheapness continued around the room, a battered desk with schoolbooks on an elevation above. At least that was her size. Sitting on a well-used beanbag chair was a small white laptop in the corner plugged to a charger, and an old small television-VCR was in another corner, unplugged, and neglected. A lonely bookshelf sat next to it, with less than half a shelf of reading material. It was a little sad with nearly everything in the room just off-white like the carpet, or wooden and old, blank walls, not even evidence the walls had had anything, not a nail hole for picture, marks from tape, or a disjointed rectangle.

She let go of my hand and went to the drawers, instinctively going to the drawers and pulling each out in turn, putting an article of clothing on the bed, and closing the drawer. The selection of new clothes was nearly the same as her current outfit, with only different hues between them. She mechanically picked out a plain cloth blouse, new one a dull orange, loose fitting black sweatpants, and plain white underwear, just grabbing the top one on each pile, as if she didn't care about more than getting a complete set.

Before I could step out of the room, she was already naked. One hand pulled out of the shirt to reach down and pull at her waist, and the other pulling the collar over her head. In three fluid motions she had all the clothes in her hands, already pushing them into the hamper before I managed to stutter, "U-- I'll be right outside if you need me," and stepped backwards to close the door. When she turned around, she changed my mind about that notion instantly.

I am no medical expert, but scars are easy to identify, especially on those gifted with an actually useful amount of pigment. Close to a dozen fine marks covered her front in thin long lines, in many directions, nearly faded, with only one standing out, the brightest at an angle, only just missing the girl's nipple, down and across, fading as it crossed over the solar plexus, getting brighter as it passed down over her stomach. Apparently oblivious to my shock, she stood on the carpet nonchalantly, leaning a little on one leg. "I think I should wash my hair first." She said matter-of-factly, and slipped around me.

I quickly grabbed her chosen clothes and tried to catch up, trying to think of any of the training that would be applicable to this strange girl and the situation. Someone was clearly hurting her, the same person that had planted the knife? On the other hand, had it been Mr. Stabee doing the hurting, and the missus stabbed him when she found out, and panicked?

Still no signs of life from below, Ben was probably practicing evidence collection or feeding his caffeine monkey. I stepped into the bathroom, even more white and sterile than Chau's room. She had climbed into the tub, and had her head stuck under the running faucet. Putting down the clothes next to the tub, I picked up a brush off the counter, and gently pulled her away from the cold stream. "I think you've got enough of it, too much cold water isn't good for you." I advised, rubbing at her now icy shoulders.

She shook her head, and scooted back to the far end of the tub, standing up to sit on the end, and stretching out her legs. "Y-yes." She stuttered, hiding her hands between her legs, squeezing them to warm them up. "Are you going to brush my hair now?" She asked, turning her head to look at me.

"Okay, if you want me to." I say, sitting down by her, beginning to carefully brush at it, using my free hand to slick the excess water, then to touch at her collarbone, just at the tip of the brightest cut. "This looks painful, how did this happen?" I ask, fingers barely brushing at the mark.

With a small spasm, one hand flew up to push away mine, but I insistently kept my hand there, adding a little pressure, goose bumps growing on her arms and chest. "He hurts me when I won't…" she trailed off. A few silent brushes later, she shook me off and climbed out of the tub, putting on the clothes silently before she was completely dry, and quickly hurried out of the room.

Muttering, I follow her out the door, closing it behind me before trying to find where she went. A click solved that puzzle, one of the doors just shut, and I hurried to it. Opening it, I found the main bedroom, dark in the half-light of drawn curtains. "I don't have time for this…" I mutter as I see her feet sticking out from under the king-size bed of her parents. I really didn't have time for this, I had to get her back to the station for child services to deal with, I may have a knack dealing with them, but it wasn't my job.

Luckily, she climbed out by herself, dragging out a shallow chest, maybe 4 by 6 by 12, made of cheap pine, with a small lock on the front, a tiny brass padlock like some use to lock a diary. She dropped it on the bed and looked up at me. "He hides this inside the bed, the bottom mattress is hollow, there's a hole underneath" she said, shuffling bare feet through the freshly cleaned carpet.

Examining it, I noticed I didn't have to. The latch on the front didn't have a visible way to open it, but the screws holding the hinges were visible. Not sure what to expect, I pulled on gloves and went to work unscrewing the hinges while Chau watched silently. Whatever it was, I was sure my not having my fingerprints on it was a sound choice, if only to prevent possible awkward questions later. One multi-tool later, the hinges gave way.

Inside, several coils of thick rope, pastel green and purple lay. Lifting them up, I found that there was at least four of the ropes, for there were four collars, each with a rope's end tied around it. Confused, I pulled them out, but didn't uncoil them Heart racing, I stare at a bright box cutter, the smallest tip poking out of the protective sheath, and look away briefly, wincing at seeing what probably left those cruel cuts on her. I force myself to finish inventorying the box. A thin and long vibrator, metal smooth with a bullet tip; a much smaller one, hardly bigger than a triple a battery; several spare cells; a pair of baggies, one filled with white pills the size of peas, while the other one was much more full, and contained what looked like some generic painkiller, save for the lack of identifying markings and how each one was a different candy color. A final piece of rope confused me, and I picked it out. The length of the same durable rope had no end, or more accurately, each end had been looped around and tied at about a third of the distance from the other end, making three lengths that met at each end.

As I held it up, surprisingly her face brightened up. "Do you want me to put it on?" She asked eagerly. With a start, I drop it, realizing that she actually wore the piece of rope like an improvised thong. I look at her, then down at the ropes in my gloved hand. What kind of twisted things was she forced to do? In addition, why was she eager to put this thing on? I kept getting questions, maybe this was the time to get at least an answer or two.

Going to the door, I opened it and called down to Ben. "I'm going to snoop around a bit to try and support hunches, tap my radio a few times when someone comes, okay?" I hear a muffled response, and the crackle of a tap on the talk button of his radio.

Entering again, I carefully closed the door, and turned to find Chau again starting to strip in her quick way, and this time I manage to stop her with only her arm pulled out of her shirt. "Now wait a second, you don't have to get naked again, just tell me what happened when you got cut, you don't have to show me if you don't want to." I say, one hand gently pinning her now covered arm.

She shook her head and stepped back. "I asked about it with mom, and she said I shouldn't do this kind of thing with only people I like, and that's why he played the mean game with me again, I don't really like the nice game, but if I try not to, he makes me play the mean game, that's worse…" She gives a spasm, and starts pulling her other arm out of the shirt. "I'll tell you what the mean game is like, if you play the nice game… Because I like you, so it's okay."

My mind raced, should I do what she asked? It was something that could be informative, and she already had gone through worse. Being caught would be bad, but refusing her offer could be just as bad. I gave a sigh and sat down on the bed, pulling her onto my lap and holding her tight, both of her skinny arms trapped under the cloth. "You like me?" I asked, and she tried to wriggle out of my grasp or her shirt, but I held her firm. She went limp, and gave a shy nod. "Okay, but every game has rules, I'll tell you mine, and then you do the same, okay?" Another nod. "If my radio makes noise, we have to stop right away; you get those clothes on as quick as you can, and you close the box, lock it, and hide it away again. Also, rub that little lock with cloth all over before you put it away, or the other people with think it was your box. Next, you can't ever tell you showed me. Next time another person asks you about it, you only tell them, and you tell everything you can remember, but only about before I came to help you, or I would get in a lot of trouble, do you understand?"

She nodded again, and said in a quick stream, "Me showing you will be a secret, but a good secret, those games with him are a bad secret. The difference is telling good secrets hurt good guys, telling bad secrets hurt bad guys, but then the bad guys hurt you unless you have more good guys than bad guys. That's why I didn't tell the bad secrets before," she finally inhaled, and slumped out on the bed on her side, slowly wriggling her shirt up her body before pushing it off over her head.

I took the discarded garment, and turned it right side out, smoothing it out on the bed. Look back at her, wince at the poor girl's damaged body, and look around for something to help it. I got up and with care, looked at each of the tubes on the mother's dresser. Sunscreen; lotions of several kinds; for some reason she kept the shampoo in here, possibly to keep the hubby from using it when his ran out. Ah, here we go, some antibiotic ointment. "First, I want to help those cuts get better." I offer, turning back to the bed with the tube.

She hadn't laid there waiting, by her own initiative she had followed my example with her pants and underwear, and was standing in the middle of the mattress, bouncing up and down a little as she pulled on the thong. She looked down at herself, and then pulled the rope up a bit harder, her small labia separating around the rope. She quivered a little, knees looking unsteady for a few seconds. Then she saw what I had picked up, and frowned at me. "That's not yours! Not allowed to waste her creams, you can't put it back in when you've played with it, I know!" She scolded at me, stepping across the springs in an uneven wobble.

As she reached me, an unlucky step made her teeter backwards, arms wind milling as she failed to right herself. Rather than let her fall, I reached with both hands, catching her behind just before she let her knees go. I gave a gentle squeeze with both hands to her rump, laughing at the near collapse. "Careful, you wouldn't want to bounce off." I grin, giving another slow squeeze. Smooth, with a lot less give to them than, for example, my own. Maybe I should really try to enjoy the game of hers; I'm comfortable with my sexual identity, if not actively seeking fulfillment. To her, I having fun would mean she's normal, and it's a bit late to act like its wrong. "I know how to use this, I won't waste it, it will help heal you from the mean games, that's what you want me to do isn't it?" I smile up at her, and affectionately kiss her bare stomach, resisting a silly urge to plant a raspberry on her.

Chau gave a shy smile back down; her eyes locked on mine, she dug her small fingers through my hair briefly sending tingles down my spine. "Okay… He called it 'razor sharp'... It didn't hurt much when he did it, but starts hurting soon, for a long time." She said, and gave a small spasm in my arms.

I tried to kiss each of her injuries better, across her stomach, slowly working upwards in a slow zigzag. Suddenly, I found my lips touching one of her tiny nipples, and I stopped abruptly, in embarrassment holding the kiss. I felt her inhale, and gave a happy sigh, and a little curious, I tugged back on it. The suction held as I slowly pulled back, letting go with a pop when she gave another spasm, fingernails digging into my scalp. Behind her back, I opened the ointment tube and removed enough to rub in to the worst of the damage. I helped her sit down, let go of her thin hips, and began to massage in the ointment.

"Ooh, that's nice, you're good at the nice game…" she softly complimented, her eyes half closed. Her body responded as I applied the salve, arching up against each cold dollop of the ointment, collapsing back in shakes as she fought the small pains as I rubbed back and forth to help heal her soft, delicious skin.

"Okay then, what next?" I ask as I rub my evidence gloves against her arms, breathing deliberately to fight the lightheadedness. I had already done enough to lose my badge for good, that was sure, but I didn't feel guilty about it, was that a bad sign? I swore to uphold the law. Even though I became an officer to do the right thing, the two things are sometimes contradictory. "In for a penny in for a pound", or "stop digging"? Maybe I should have asked myself this before asking her that.

She twisted to her side, reaching at the box. I leaned my knees on the edge of the bed and reached over her, accidentally making contact between one of my breasts and her as I got to the box. She reached in and pulled out the pair of vibrators, and she stifled a giggle from having my uniform brush her nose. "If I'm good, the small one touches my privates. He puts the big one in my bum if I'm bad. Being good feels nice, but being bad hurts." She whispered, holding both out on her palm, arm trembling. "Have I been good?" she asked, needing my approval in an odd intensity for someone she had just met.

Misery makes strange bedfellows. In this case, it was her misery rather than mine, but it still fit. I took the smaller toy, and playfully shooed at the other one, and she quickly put it back with a relieved smile. She scotched back, and stretched out her legs, kneading her knees with both hands, eyes locked on mine, her eyes wide and dilated in the half-light. Running around the knot at the front of her singular garment, I wondered aloud. "Did he do anything else down here?" I avoided a leading question, but I did want to know the extent of the damage.

She slowly wrapped her hands around my wrist and pushed my hand down. From the ointment, my smooth fingers slid down her lips swollen all puffy, from the pressure of the tightly pulled rope, and my attention to soothing the stinging pain. "Only touches like this," And she scootched back, loosening the rope across her slit; slowly pulled on my wrist until I allowed one of my fingers to sink into her. "And sometimes like this!" She squeaked, her legs squeezing together, making my exploring finger feel even tighter.

I slowly wriggled my hand out of her grasp, breathing heavily. So eager to please she was putting herself at discomfort. I examined the little toy, and twisted the end. Click, quiet high hum. Pulling off one of my gloves, I smiled widely at Chau, and gently put the bare hand over her mouth, I hardly wanted her to squeal louder than she already had, but that ointment would hardly smell or taste any good. I lowered the tip of the vibrator like a piece of chalk, lightly brushing around her clitoral hood in small circles, and then slowly pushed against her, each upward stroke a little firmer and slower, each touch making her more tense, her small hands gripping at my bare hand, her nose in overdrive, starting to hyperventilate.

She struggled to move in time with my strokes, her girly hips were not very adept at the attempted actions, and was more distracting to my goal than helpful. Her shivers began to slow, her small body tensing, and she was fighting my muting force. She managed to push my hand away and took a deep breath. Think fast. I couldn't break free from her grasp in time, and other hand was still covered with the glove and smelled of the ointment. I threw myself onto the writhing girl, kissing her full on the mouth to capture her high moan of climax. As she peaked, I felt her heart racing, her hands on mine, her legs stretching out and wrapping around mine, I felt her climax more truly than I would feel my own, and matched her note with mine for the last second before she petered out. I rolled onto my back, holding her in my arms, letting us both catch our breaths, with the occasional kiss at one another's cheeks or nose, both of us shaking from the intensity of the slowly receding past.

## Evidentiary hearings.

As I lay there on my back, entranced by her eyes, time and her hair ran through my fingers. She rested her arms on my chest, putting some weight on my breast, slowly sitting up in my lap, each exhale causing her to tremble. "That was different…" she said, her voice also affected by the recent climax, beneath the trembling chord of her words she was more relaxed, as if I had helped close a bad past forever. I sure hoped that was the case.

I wished to myself that I had recorded it, so many thoughts to rethink, quite a few statements to analyze. "Different good I hope, you won't have to do anything you don't want to, now that good people are here to protect you." I said, rolling to get her off so I could get up, and stood. Looking in the mirror hung over the dresser, I was surprised that it looked like I had actually had sex in the past fifteen minutes or so. Hair all over the place, face gleaming with a layer of perspiration. "Okay Chau, time to get ready to leave, hide it all away and get dressed, grab what you'd take with you on a sleepover, and meet me downstairs, okay? I need to freshen up so we can keep this secret." She got up and pulled off her thong, the small vibrator bouncing onto the bed. She deftly popped it into her mouth while she figured how to get it all back in neatly. Just as she was about to close the lid, I remembered. "Could you also get one of each of those candies? I'd like to find out what exactly he was giving you."

She nodded, and pulled open each baggie, getting a pastel pink pill, then one of the plain white ones. Holding them out to me in an open palm, she commented, "They don't taste very good, but they make everything feel nice for a while, not allowed to have any unless he gives me one. Would you now?" I shook my head, I definitely drew the line at drugging her up with gods knew what. She shrugged and finished closing up the box. Not addictive then, that was a good sign, I hoped. She stretched out on hands and knees, arching her back, and then slid off the bed with the box.

In my mind, a strange, newly awakened part touched at each part of the mental image. Full of lust for her smooth skin; hungry for her firm flesh, thirsty for her— No, that wasn't right, the rest of me said, burying it under instincts of protection and love. I had done what was needed at the time, I finished my part here, the tickle from my heart was gone, and it was beating softly, already forgetting the affair. Quick brush and splash of cold water and the rest of my body would follow suit.

Chau returned from under the bed, and began to put on the laid out clothes while I brushed at my hair, then carefully pulled off each and every hair from the brush, stuffed the clump into an evidence bag, and the bag down into a sock. Any hairs I shed around the place could be explained by me scouting around for any other occupants. Call me paranoid if you want, but I'd rather be safe than sorry.

I took her by the hand, and closing the master bedroom's door, led her back to her room. "What do you bring to a sleepover?" she asked, looking around the room before walking over to her desk, guessing that one would be any unfinished homework.

"Let's see, your homework and anything you'd take to school, you might not be back here before school and you wouldn't want to be missing something for then, right?" she nodded, and started gathering up several loose papers, a paper notebook, and then got the laptop, just as big. She pulled out her book bag from under the desk, and stuffed the two-inch high stack into it. Looking back at me expectantly, I shrugged. "Toothbrush? Security blanket?" I offered, feeling a little odd, sometimes she acted really dependant, or had she simply never had a sleepover?

She gave a little giggle at my offhand suggestion. "Okay, I'll try and look around, will make sure to get tooth brush paste though." She said, offering out her bag before walking back to the bathroom. I took the bag and examined it as she dashed off to the bathroom. It looked off white, but pinker than anything else in the room, and a small badge sewn on next to the handle on top with her name and school printed on it. Chau Breech, Carpenter Elementary. Curious Surname, but you still saw the occasional random victim of Ellis Island. I thought it sounded nice for her.

I headed down the stairs, sat on the bottom of the stairs, and slid out the laptop from the bag. It was a little budget computer, little more than the light office suite; an e-book reader with textbooks of every grade from first to sixth already on it; a web browser, complete with parental controls. I started there; you can learn what hides in a person if you look at their history, her browsing history would have to do. Ctrl+H popped open the history sidebar, and I skimmed the contents. Mostly it was reference sites, but the occasional comic strip showed up, and the typical browser games were there too, but hardly more than a blip. Overprotective parents or was she just a devoted student with little interest in frivolities? I found that hard to believe, but those abused had a tendency to form obsessions to hide behind, this was better than other obsessions I had seen.

The small keyboard and touchpad were hard to get used to, so that had taken longer than I would have liked. I skipped over the protected documents labeled and digitally signed with the school's name; I had a hunch that would not be where she kept her secrets. From the top of the stairs, Chau asked, "Should I bring the toy box?" I jumped a little guiltily, but turning around, she was still out of sight.

"No, there'll be toys at your new home, and you'll be back here soon." I responded, skimming through her saved writings, mainly essays for revolutionary history and book reports. They were neatly organized, each labeled with a date, sorted into folders labeled with each subject and the teacher's name. Well, except for 'Fysics – Anderson'. I was tempted to fix the typo, but then just opened it. Several more folders each named with gibberish, containing more of the same within. I let myself smile. The folder maze, one of the more complex ways a newbie hid files; one of the simplest to defeat. Console window, navigate to the start of the maze, and start a recursive search down the maze for anything that wasn't a folder. The poor CPU actually turned the secondary fan on at this point, and battered the hard drive for it all. An absurdly long time passed, nearly a quarter of a minute before it returned one file. Yraid.cod lay in the 15th layer, and was nearly half a megabyte. I didn't have time to rename, skim, and re-rename, so I quickly plugged in a USB key with the suite of useful programs, and copied the file over to look at later. Then I decided I might as well read her essays too. She was coming down the stairs, so I quickly killed the windows; the copying had taken longer to command than to happen, thank you USB 2.0.

She looked over my shoulder curiously, leaning against my back. "Whatchu doing? It's nothing special, I can't even play any games on it besides a few that came with it, and they're boring after a day." She leaned over me and showed me the list of games. Hardly more than tech demos they were, I wonder why she hadn't searched for more games, I guess this sad selection put her off the idea. Well, nothing's wrong with a little escapism, so I copied a few games off my thumb drive while it was still plugged in, Old adventure games, and one of the kinder roguelikes, as well as a few puzzle games I enjoyed.

"Try these after you're done with homework, they're old, but they were made for computers weaker than this, I even played a few of these when I was nearly your age." With that, I closed the computer and detached my stick, putting it back into my belt. Being prepared was useful, and it let me use the pockets many others left empty, even if others questioned my eclectic collection of tools.

We walked to the sitting room and I placed the bag on the couch, and made her sit on it, I needed to get a report from Ben, but I didn't want her to go back in there, and odds were the news wouldn't be good. "You have to wait here, Ben and I have to examine the kitchen, and we don't want you to get in the way of something, there are specific rules to follow. When we're done, figure out what to do then, probably go down to the station to find who you'll get to sleep over with until your dad gets better." She gave a resigned sigh, got out one of the papers from the bag, a mechanical pencil, and began to work at the basic algebra problems.

In the kitchen, Ben had been busier than I had. The haphazard scene was now littered in bright yellow evidence markers, little placards each with a number, I assumed corresponding to his notes. "There you are Tor, any news from your snooping?" he asked, with one eyebrow raised as if he didn't quite approve of the warrantless 'search'.

I tapped my upper lip, and then pointed in the direction of the girl to indicate to be quieter. "Nothing a formal search won't turn up if they dig through the mattresses," I emphasized with pressure on those words, I didn't want the biggest piece of evidence to go unfound, "but enough to know that this isn't a safe household for her to be in, at least if he recovers." I scowl, remembering the damage he had done to his unwilling daughter, and then froze my expression to keep internal the memory of caressing fingers against her scarred skin.

He gave a wince, and then shook his head to silently admonish it, and clear the pained expression. "Maybe that's why he got ventilated, Mrs. Breech found out somehow." I scowled at him; this wasn't the time for idle speculation. "Ah, yes. Okay then, let's see." He flipped back his notebook a few pages and read to me. "Timothy Breech, admitted an inch away from DOA, but they got blood transfusions quickly, and kept his heart beating, but he's going to be under for a while if he's lucky, but if not, the newest member of the vegetable garden is going to be Carrotim. Abigail, the wife, she's practically the opposite. Tailed to the local mall, the idiot waited by her car for her to come back, and by the time it was too late, he thought to check the bus stop. She could be anywhere in Boston by now, anywhere in the country by tomorrow." He sighed. "Finder Finch, why'd you have to go burn out when we still need someone like you?"

Finch Bird had been a detective for half a decade when I had joined. His whole family was named after birds, or at least all the ones I had met at his wedding to some bird (lowercase B, it's a pun, not a relation), and it was a little perverse. Most of the males of the Bird clan had majestic titles, like Eagle or Pelican, while the girls were named after the more peaceful members of the animal's class, like Robin, Swan, and, yes, Finch. His name fit though; full names usually were a specific species, and his full name was Spectacled Finch, and he had been a skinny, blond haired man always in need of glasses.

About a year ago, he had let one too many people know he had the knack to find. He could follow the logic of someone who misfiled a report or a warrant, and like magic, recover it; same thing with the dead drop for a drug deal; and in one case, an abandoned car from a hit and run. He insisted it didn't work in tests for the nosy people who insisted on testing him, "Where's my car keys?" or "Where'd I hide your glasses then?"

Then one day, the Lieutenant asked for his help in a way he couldn't bear to pass up. Gang member from the city comes out here to rob a few houses for some reason. He left a single fingerprint behind, so we knew whom he was, just not where he had gone. The Lieutenant convinces Finch to try to find him, and suggests dousing over a map of the state. A few hours later and more and more detailed maps of Boston later, and he had pinpointed the exact address, a known hideout, history of raids a mile long. One anonymous tip later, Boston had the ball in their court. Despite the mixed sports metaphor, they fumbled big time. Sources are unclear on the how, but the summary goes quite simple besides that detail. The hider had somehow gotten advance warning, a leak, a scanner, or some other communication method, and had decided to flee. He didn't know who told about his hideout, so he did the most logical thing according to his very criminal mind.

He left the house after making 13 corpses, and SWAT pulled up just as he had started his car's engine. He may have been crazy, but he wasn't suicidal; he surrendered. The black irony of the whole mess was he never got his day in court over the burglaries. The young man already had multiple life sentences, and so we never even found out where his loot went. Finch mailed his badge and gun in, and that was it, he just vanished. Rumors still abound, from who got a secret farewell message, to the exact reason he left. It may have just been the lousy outcome, but personally I think his knack went out with a bang, and he took the hint to get away before worse happened.

I shrugged, trying to answer the rhetorical question. "Fickle world we live in. If we knew where he was, he could help us find him, and since that's nonsense, let's deal with what we can. She'll turn up." I went to the pantry cupboard, and got a half full box of cheese crackers and a wrapper from the cookie jar, about a dozen cream filled cookies for her to share or keep for a rainy day at her foster home. "Chau'll need these where she's going, best I can do for her for the moment." I explained, and then snuck out a trio of the small cheese flavored squares. "That it here? I couldn't bear to miss speed trapping." I said, the thick sarcasm making Ben wince.

He shook his head. "Still have to wait for the family lawyer to come lock up, get comfy until he comes, can't leave the place unlocked and empty." He looked at his watch. "Just be glad we don't have to do extra to catch up, priorities are here." He smiled. It was already ten minutes past the hour, with taking her to the station and making sure she got the right treatment there, and the paperwork for all of what had happened here, that could shave nearly two hours off sitting in the idling car. Well, almost all of what had happened.

I went back to Chau and sat down, turning the TV on, news channel, and muted. I carefully put the cookies in an outside pocket, and gave a wink at her when she noticed, then put the box inside after pouring another handful out to nibble on and share with her. I checked out the news ticker for any good debates with Ben later. She was already checking her answers, hardly more than a few taps of her eraser against each of the problems, and the final hard problems redone on a separate paper, the same as the first time, she wasn't the quickest, but she was accurate and methodical.

The door clicked open, and I got up, just in case it was Abigail returning, but steps were of a man, and a suit walked through the door. Relaxing slightly, I evaluated him. Middle aged, but still buff, he could pass for thirty, but I guessed that was deceptive from the black but slowly graying hair. "Greetings miss…" He squinted at my badge. "Tom? No, Tori, my apologies. Jeremy Westinggale, I was told I needed to bring down keys to lock up, them leaving in a hurry and all." He shook my hand briefly, it was a little damp; quickly he pulled away, and pulled out his PDA and a pair of keys. "Here's the keys you'll need to lock up." He pulled out the stylus and tapped rapidly on the touch sensitive screen. "Here we go. Hmm, they still only have Grandparents listed as emergency contacts. Her maternal grandmother lives out close to Cape Cod, and both paternal grandparents live down in New Mexico. I'll call them and see if one or both of them could come up to take care of her."

I raised an eyebrow, almost snatching the device out of his hands. "What? Isn't the former closer?"

He grinned grimly. "And more trouble than she's worth. I'd recommend temporary foster care before letting Chau have to be with her without either parent to keep the crazy—the absent minded lady in check." He paused, doing a few more taps. "I'm busy tonight, but my wife and son are home, she knows both of them when they looked after her on some weekends, they wouldn't mind her being there tonight if you need somewhere until then."

I looked over at her, and she was staring at me, shaking her head quickly back and forth, soft hair wrapping about her head; would feel so nice in my fingers, I hoped I would get to brush her hair again... I jumped guiltily as he tapped my shoulder, and I turned back to him. "I, uh, guess I'll keep a note of it. I guess it's time to get going." I gave a tap on my handheld radio, and then helped Chau pack up her bag again. Ben came in with a smile, which clear to everyone, froze when he shook Jeremy's hand.

We all left, Chau walking over to the two cars parks beside each other to examine them as we locked up, and did a once around to check for any other unlocked doors or windows. Luckily, it was all secure, so we went back to the cars. After the back door for Chau, Jeremy offered to let Chau ride in his car, but she was already climbing in. I took shotgun for a change, explaining that I was feeling a little jittery.

On the drive back to the station, Ben tried to make small talk, the usual stuff he tried with kids. What she was learning in school, what she wanted to be when she grew up, etcetera. He didn't get any interesting responses, and after a few neutral answers, she rested her head against the seatbelt and closed her eyes. When he began to ramble off at me, I decided to rest too, relaxing to the dispatcher's calm dispassionate voice, a small part of me keeping vigilant for updates on either of her parents, the rest fading into sleep.

## Psychological Review

Ben poked my neck, and I jumped awake. "I'm up, I'm up." I mumble, rubbing my eyes. Looking around, I located my bag on the seat beside me. I looked past him while grabbing at my bag, unclicking my seatbelt, and shifting and turning out of the car.

Ben touched my backpack, and I looked up at him briefly, and then looked around for Tori. Ben gently shook at my bag, "You want me to carry that for you?" he offered, but I pulled it closer and shook my head. He shrugged, and pointed at her, who was leaning against the car, writing something in her book. "So, been to this police station before?" he asked as he closed the door and locked it.

Of course, school made me come here some time ago. "Yes," I said quietly, and turned away to walk over to be closer to Tori. "Are we going inside?"

Tori touched at my shoulder as she put away the notebook, and gave a pushing suggestion toward the front door. "Uh-huh, for now, have to follow the book, means I'll have to tell people in charge what happened, and you'll probably have to talk to someone too. Don't worry though, I know her well, she helps me when I need her, you'll probably like her." She said, and I focused on her words as we entered the quiet building I only had fuzzy memories of from some long ago school trip.

Tori showed me a quiet corner with a hard plastic chair to sit in; it fit well even though only my toes could touch the ground. After she told me she had to tell about how Dad was hurt to the people in charge and that the therapist would come out soon, I was alone, other than the person at the desk, occasionally answering the phone. It quickly got busier as others tried to talk to me, but they weren't Tori, so I just mumbled answers and hid behind my backpack. After a few people had passed, none the one for me, I opened my bag and reached in, pulling the box of cookies open, just one won't hurt…

I pulled out the cream filled sandwich and looked it over, wondering if it was impolite to pull it apart here. "May I have one too?" I heard, and I nearly jump out of the chair, the planned snack crushed in between my fingers. I look at the crumbs and bits, then up at the speaker, an old boy in a casual tee shirt and jeans; I guess he counted as a man. He had a badge pinned to his shirt saying he was Theodore M. and Therapist. "Woops! Didn't mean to startle you. I'm Theo, and if you're not Chau, someone around here looks a lot like you, and is probably just as confused."

I smiled a little; he did seem to be a nice person. Even if he did force jokes in, they were kind of funny. Don't feel like laughing right now, maybe after I managed to forget enough to laugh he'll still be here. He offered his hand out. I don't like handshakes very much, and my hand was full of cookie crumbs. "Um, if you want…" I poured the shattered cookie into his outstretched hand after he turned and cupped it. As he began to munch the larger pieces, I fished out another, and then closed up my bag. "I think I'm the only one like me here, are you the person everyone wants me to talk to?"

From the corner of my vision, I see him nod. "No promises on me being the only one, but I'm the first one on your agenda, would you like to come in now?" he pointed to the near door, ajar to an office. I twist out of my seat to get my bag onto my back, and quickly get inside.

Happy sigh, soft sunlight in here, rather than harsh tube lights, things you don't notice until they're gone. It was a large office, with a carpet that only managed to cover half the floor. On floorboards rested a desk, one of those leathery chairs on wheels, and eight chests of drawers for files against the wall, mismatched colors and sizes as if they were just pushed in here together rather than planned. The carpet half looked like a little family room, pulled right out of a small house: A long sofa that even had little extra pillow on each side, and a matching reclining chair; a low couch table with a few things on it, a patchwork doll, some sort of plastic doll, a Rubik's cube and some sort of lynchpin wooden puzzle, all piled on a sketchpad.

Theodore followed me in, shut the door, and gestured to the furnished half of the room. "Sit where you like, make yourself comfortable." He offered, dusting his hands of the crumbs with a clapping brush back and forth. I put my bag on the floor, and sat on the edge of the couch farther from the separate seat. He sat down in the recliner, and sat there, leaning forward and watching me, apparently curious and interested in every little movement of mine.

After a minute, he still hadn't said anything, and I looked up at him briefly. Catching my eye, he smiled back at me, and I looked down at the table. Was this some test? I picked up the cube, and turned it over in my hands. Someone had scrambled it up pretty badly, but I was sure I remembered all the important moves needed to solve it. bottom layer, the four edge pieces in the middle layer, then the few movement sets that would switch or rotate the bits on the top, that part was the hardest, and messing up the sequence meant I would have to start all over. "Um, do you want me to fix this, or is this pattern important?" I asked, no point restoring order where it wasn't wanted.

He gave soft bark of laughter, and nodded. "If that's what you want to do, that's fine with me. Why do you want to do that?" he asked, uncapping a fancy pen from his pocket protector and flipping over an old looking spiral flipbook.

I looked at his notebook with a small gulp; it was a test after all. I quickly got the red side done first, making sure the side bits of each mini cube matched up right, thinking about his question during the twists, focusing back on the puzzle to figure the next thing to do. There, first layer done, and one of the middle was already right. "I suppose that's what you're supposed to do, get the pieces in the right place, otherwise it looks all weird. There are other patterns that work, like turning each side around halfway makes a sort of X on each side, but you just left it a mess."

Scrib scrib scrib, what was he writing about me, was it good or bad? "I suppose so. What makes some patterns a mess, and others not? Why not just pull off all the stickers, you'll have nothing to worry about and could twist it freely." He asked, good questions, I hoped my answered would be as good.

One stubborn side ruins the fun of these things, I force it to align, and am done with the second layer. Now just to figure out how to finish it using the few switches and rotations I could remember from that booklet. I had to be sure; messing up now would make me look stupid. "A mess is when you don't care about where all the colors are, I guess. I could put at least one color on every side and it would be a mess, or a pattern, depending on who said so." Slow sequence of carefully planned moves, keeping the overall orientation rigid, puts the thing in chaos briefly, returns closer to completion. "Don't know what you mean about pulling them off... I doubt you'd like it, I don't have long enough fingernails or anything else to take it off, and if I did... why bother twisting it around after?" I offer, holding my breath over whether I had done right in word and sequence.

"Well Chau, I like your reasoning, and I'm guessing now isn't the first time you've used one of these. I wouldn't like a damaged cube, so that's one way to put it. As for bothering to twist it, why bother to twist it at all? They're just colors, you know what it would look like solved from imagination, what's the point of actually seeing it?" I look over at him, focusing on his hands, feeling a bit uncomfortable, and shrug.

"Because things like to be in order? No... Because I want them to be? Because something else wants it to but can't? I don't know; it's just a toy." I shrug, look back at it, and nearly swear. Breaking chain of thought mid-sequence equals broken chain of movements. I struggle to remember, going through the moves in my head, take a guess, and at the end of the sequence, have a jumbled mess. Scowling, I put it back down, not feeling bothered to retry. The other puzzle hadn't had a copy in my hands before, so I picked it up instead, I had seen enough dolls. "This doesn't have colors, and it wants to be pulled apart, it hopes I can't, or if I do, that I can put it together again... or are those my wants, or yours?" I ask, tentatively pushing and pulling on each part, shaking and examining from all angles.

"You sure are insightful, or are you?" another quick laugh, followed by a few words worth of scribbling. "Don't worry about breaking that, it's been pulled apart so many times I could put it together blindfolded. Don't try to bend the wood though; one piece does have a weak point that needs gluing back together whenever it gets unlucky. What makes this puzzle different from the other? Is it better?"

"Maybe, I don't know how it works. It looks nice, but if it's easy, it doesn't really compete with something that has more patterns than just 'open' or 'closed'. Hm... You implied bending wouldn't work, so that leaves shearing, twisting, and..." I paused, trying to remember what other ways I can apply force. "Well, I don't thing compression or expansion would work much." I stopped blindly forcing at it and looked again at the nearly exact cuts; maybe I was assuming wrong about the shape of each piece, from the lack of wiggle room and the weird angles. "It's different... it's wood... but that doesn't matter, unless it involves floating the thing, you could make it out of metal. It has only one way to solve, or it would be easier, other has as many as you could count in a huge tune." Ah, these pieces all slid at once at a wield angle, and the lock collapsed, with the rest of the blocks losing cohesion and clattering to the table. "And it doesn't do that." I said bashfully, leaning all the way down to get the piece that had bounced.

He gave a light applause of praise, it wasn't mocking I think, he really meant it. "Good work. Do you think you would have asked me how to do it if you couldn't solve it?" He asked, his voice a little tense. Had he expected I wouldn't do it? He seemed to be asking intentions what I did, and now, what I might have done if things had turned out different. Would intentions of small things be the same as intentions of large things?

"I don't know. If I had to do it without help, but couldn't, maybe I'd ask for a hint, but you gave one already, so you're pretty much confusing me." I offered honestly, and tried to figure it out how to reassemble the scattered pieces. Normally it should have been easy, after taking the pieces apart one at a time, but this thing had just collapsed in my hand, so I had to figure out how it all went together.

He chuckled a bit, maybe to cover up more writing sounds. No, he didn't know that it was irritating. "It is a confusing question, and a complex state of mind, having to imagine what your past self would do if things were different. The larger the difference and the farther back, the harder it is." I examined the three pieces, trying to make a mental cast of how the rest would look like assembled. I managed to prop up the interlocking pieces by hanging themselves off the cube, and started with the rest, focusing on the pieces that interlocked uniquely, each piece of how the whole inner locked together, with the outer part blocking the only directions remaining. "How about the other toys, what do you think about them?"

I held the finished inner half of the construct, and looked again at the dolls. "Pointless, they're just material, they don't even pretend to be alive, and kind of creepy." I offered, and it was true, I had put away all my books and toys, after reading them, most lost any point to me and with the toys, they were just boring after a while. Sometimes I try to figure out why I didn't notice sooner, was that what he was talking about? If so, it must be a real puzzle if he agreed. I felt tempted to talk about this, maybe he would understand. First, finish putting this together, no point distracting yourself more.

He leaned over and picked up one of the dolls. "They're not alive, and I agree they are a little creepy, but does that make them pointless? Emotions are important, and while those can help you think, these are here to help you feel. They don't have to pretend, but you can for them, right?" He tapped the things feet on the table, but I looked away after I saw what he was doing.

Focus, steady, balance the thing on two of the keys, put the third in position, and let all three snap together. I put it back on the table and sighed with relief, at least that was fixed. "Why? Feeling something tells you what to do, doing something to make you feel a certain way is just silly most of the time. You should be happy because you do something, not do something because it makes you happy."

He nodded, and put the toy down. "I guess we can talk about that later. How about something else, Would you like to talk about your family, your friends, people who don't like?" he asked, leaning forward to push the other doll and cube off the pad, and picked up the wooden puzzle. "Very nice, you do these a lot?"

No, why would I do one after I solved it? Well, maybe he means puzzles. "Well, when I get a new one I do."

He gently rolled it on the table like a freaky shaped die. "Okay then, would you like to open the book? I've drawn a few things in there, forgive my lack of talent." He slid the book down to me, some cheap lineless notebook; it looked like many pages had been removed. He used this and then pulled out pages. Sigh, I didn't even need to open it to see he was throwing another test at me.

Inside, He had drawn crude figures, the awkward poses like cartoon characters stamped flat and pinned down like butterflies, two big ones with a smaller one in colored clothing, having both its hands overlapped by the larger. Several others, each of them the one in the same colored clothing and another all grey, some larger than it, others the same size, and one box had the colored character looking down at a baby.

I looked up at him with a little groan, and resisted the urge to elaborate with a multisyllabic 'boooring'. "Now don't be like that, it's just a few little questions, and after we can get you some lunch from the station cafe. I think today's special is chicken nuggets. I hope you're not a vegetarian." I gave a quick shake, and pulled the hair back, I should have gotten a headband as well before leaving. "Okay, what I want you to do is pretend you're the one with the colorful clothing, and simply tell me who the others are in the picture, and what they're doing." I sighed; at least I didn't have to draw anything myself. Just quickly do this. You can do it.

Leaning forward, I pointed at the first picture, first at the one with the assumed parents. Dropping into a sarcastic 'good little girl' voice, I started. "Mommy, Daddy. Holding me because I'm so special and don't know what I really want." I offered, looking up at him with my eyes open wide.

He was resisting laughter, but let out deep 'heh' before relaxing. "Oh I know, it may seem beneath you, just humor me, sarcasm makes my job a lot harder, okay?"

I let out another groan, and turn back to the picture. The next was a picture of 'me' with a larger person's hand on my arm. "Um, somebody is holding me?" I offer after a pause.

"That's fine. Who could it be, and why are they?" He asked, still writing nonstop from the start of this 'test'.

"I don't know who, could be parent, teacher, or just someone who can't get their way with logic and just using meanness." He nodded quickly, and flipped over the paper. Next picture, focus, the writing sounds aren't important. The next panel had me holding the arm of another person the same size as me."I guess it could be someone blind, I haven't met anyone like that though." Pondering it, I thought a bit longer. "Maybe it's someone who won't listen to me. So many other kids never listen to me and act like I'm speaking gibberish." The next had the one I was supposed to be really close to another person my size, with what I assumed were arms drawn to look as if they were holding each other. I shrug, tracing the outline with my finger. "I don't know. There's no friend I'd hug..." One would hug me, but I didn't like it, or anything else about him. The next one was weird. A larger person and I both held what could only be ice cream cone with an absurdly unstable and bellyache inducing amount of scoops. "Really? That much ice cream would be too much for two people, and just me, I'd probably get sick trying!"

He laughed, and looked over his art. "True, but even I couldn't tell what it was with only one scoop drawn. Just pretend it's a normal size, that detail isn't important. Afterwards, you could try and redraw that if you want to."

"No, don't worry..." I sigh. "I guess someone is taking it because they want it, or they're giving it to me, or vice versa, or sharing it, depending on what's going on." Suddenly I feel an epiphany pop into my head. "That's intentional. The ambiguity is so I have to tell you how I generalize the situation?" I look up, and he's grinning like an idiot, or a madman.

"You got me. It's a useful tool to find out what you're like on the inside. Not really the time to talk about it, meta-psychology is trickier. Don't worry though, there's no wrong answers, I'm not grading you." He pointed with his pen back at the paper. Fine, fine, I get it.

The colorful representation of me was looking down at a baby, crawling on the featureless void. "They're annoying, loud and smelly and stupid. I can barely stand them if the parent is with them." I look at the last image, in which an adult was holding me up in front of them at their eye level. "If I'm not levitating or on a higher step, it's pretty much as before, only all of me held rather than just my arm. Mom, Dad, Babysitter, Teacher, or some other person wants control of me." I sigh, and flip the page over, but it's blank. "So, are these nuggets you mentioned good?" I ask, changing the subject to food, I was getting hungry, something I wouldn't have expected to be after seeing him so hurt. I guess that's what they mean that life goes on.

I snapped the book shut and pulled my backpack up with me. "I like them." he offered with a shrug, and wrote for a few more seconds. At the speed he wrote, either he was good at cursive, or he was doing pointless scribbles. Flipping his notebook closed, he got up and passed by me to the door. "Just follow me and we'll go get lunch." I gave one last look back at the unsolved cube, sighed, and followed him out.

I followed him out and down the quiet hall; a few people littered it, reading a board or sign, writing on a clipboard. The cafe was small, a dozen two-seater tables in a three by four grid, the short side aligned with the server station. I followed his example, grabbing a tray, sliding down and adding a box of chicken nuggets, a little salad, a package of some white dressing, and a bottle of diet soda. He watched me, giving a snarky observation that I was already taking care of my figure. "When you've had to drink this kind for long enough, the normal stuff is the one that tastes bad, I suppose." I responded. I liked the 'bite' to it better. By the checkout, there was a little spinning rack, and after asking, pulled off a bag of cashews. He paid for both with a card embossed with the logo of the station. After thanking the cashier, I picked out the table in the far corner next to the window, and then opened the packaged plastic knife and fork.

He sat down across from me, and did the same. Inside the box were several pieces of breaded chicken, and a pair of ketchup packets. I started to eat the mildly spicy meal. About halfway through, I saw Tori and someone else come down the corridor to us. She waved at me, and they got lunch too, coming over to join us. After pushing the table next to ours against it, Tori sat down next to me, and the man in the suit sat in the other chair. "Hello, Miss Breech," he said, looking at me. "So you're the one who's joined us at such short notice." I blinked at him for a bit.

"Aaand..." I struggled to say something understandable and not rude. "You're the one who joined us at no notice?" I asked. He looked important. On the other hand, the type usually just thought they were, or like I should think so.

He held his hand out across the table. "Chief Lemon, I'm the one who tries to keep this place from falling down around our ears." He said with a plain smile.

"You built this building?" I ask, holding my cutlery harder, I didn't need to shake his hand at the table.

He slapped his offered hand down with a guffaw, making me jump. "That's me; I'm the architect of all the people who work here!" He nearly bellowed. I gave a nervous giggle.

Tori sighed, shaking her head and looked down at her meal. "Play nice you two, and this place is pretty empty, you don't need to yell."

Lemon nodded, eating at his meal with a careless air, not even bothering to cut them, just dipping them, and eating them like big French fries. "So, what's the plan?" Chomp. "I'm assuming there're no other close relatives of yours nearby, what would you suggest?" He looked at me, freezing me in his gaze. "Is there an aunt or uncle we don't know about? Do you know any of your parent's friends that could take care of you? Otherwise, I guess we could pull out the ol' foster parent listing and call up those you think you would like."

I looked away, back to cutting up the chicken and giving each bite a nice thin layer of ketchup. "No other relatives around here. Any friends of them I can think of, I don't like them." After taking a sip of soda, I sighed. "Going to foster parents sounds awkward." I looked up at Tori, and grabbed at her arm. "Could I stay with her instead?" I ask spontaneously.

Both men laughed together, and she looked simply surprised. Theodore managed to stop laughing first. "She's already one!" he said before his laughter took over again.

Tori looked at the two with clear embarrassment, and put her arm around my back, patting at my shoulder. "Oh ignore those idiots. It just means that I've been given permission to take care of kids who need a place to stay."

I nodded, hugging her arm more. "So I can stay with you. Good. How much longer before you go home?" I asked, savoring the remainder of my lunch.

She shook her head a bit."Um, it's not that simple. Sigh, I guess you can stay with me for now if they say so, but I don't get out for another--"

Lemon interrupted. "Oh go on, I'm sure you'd be useless worrying about what she's getting up to in the meantime, You've done the briefing, the paperwork you can take back to your place, enjoy the half-day." He offered with a smile, pushing his chair away to get up. "I'll call you if anything regarding her happens here." He said, and walked off, stopping by the counter to return the tray.

Theo gave an awkward laugh at the chief's quick departure. "Don't look at me to save you, I don't have any objections." He said to Tori, and then turned to me. "Unless you're going to give her a hard time, I can't have you breaking a good officer." He added, looking at my eyes until I looked away.

I paused to take a bite, thinking over responses. "I won't break her, she's nice!" I said eagerly, leaning against her again briefly. She patted at my head lightly, and I had to resist the urge to hug her.

"Good luck Tori, see you tomorrow then." He said as he got up to leave. After he left, Tori gave another sigh, and rubbed at my head again.

She turned up my head and grinned at me. "Maybe you aren't a complete burden after all. I'm free from a boring afternoon thanks to you!" she exclaimed, picking the trays up, barely giving me the chance to capture my last bit of chicken. "Let me get a few things, and then we can escape." I grabbed my bag and followed her back down the corridor. At one of the offices, she went inside, then came back out with a little briefcase, and closed it after she finished forcing in a yellow file folder. "I got everything I need, you?" after I lifted up my backpack, she nodded, and took my hand and headed for the door.

There's something soothing about cars when they're behaving, safe inside a little bubble of almost silence, watching the world fly past like magic. The time and miles sped past, occasionally punctuated by an attempt to read, but it was just a little too uneven, the small shakes of the car as always shaking the words one-way and my eyes another. One final turn, and up a gravel-strewn driveway, I watched the house come into view.

The house looked like an old statue in a new outfit, it was slightly fancy around the windows and front door, and the paint was almost white. Besides the gravel driveway, the yard wasn't the usual overwatered grass; it was mostly moss with the occasional patch of wildflowers. It looked alive, rather than a carpet that just happened to be growing. Farther back, the trees began, and the light forest extended quite a distance, or at least enough that I couldn't see any gaps that told of a clearing on the other side.

"Here's my place, nothing special, kitchen, office, bedroom, and boxes." She said with a smile, climbing out of the car, and locked it after I did the same.

"Boxes? I asked, heading towards the front door. "Every house has boxes..." I said as she got to the front door.

She laughed as she unlocked the door, and swung it open. "Cardboard boxes, sure, but usually they're unpacked after you move. I haven't gotten around to... any but the important ones." The foyer looked normal, coat closet and a few shoes in a corner; it was empty of other things though. I followed her into the kitchen, where she sat at a small table set up in there, and stretched. "Feel free to look around if you want, but there's nothing really interesting in this place, its three sizes too big for me, and I still haven't found much use for most of the space."

I nodded, and wandered around the place. Besides the kitchen, there were two other rooms, one set up as a TV room with chairs and a short table, another with a fancy dining table in the middle. Both of these also had various empty cabinets and shelves crammed in, making them feel a bit weird and cramped. The third was bare of furniture altogether, but had more boxes than the other rooms together, laid out in rows with a walk space between them, and stacked two or three boxes high. I peeked in a few. Old textbooks, one box was full of jigsaw puzzles, and a smaller one had lots of tissue paper wrapped up tight, probably fragile things, judging from the cup shapes of the ones on top.

Upstairs was more of the same, with a cluttered office just like... the one in my other home. I quickly closed that door and moved on. A bedroom with a huge bed and various chests of drawers, this must be where she slept. Another room of boxes. A room half-full of boxes, and another bed, all made up and tucked in, along with its own desk and short chest of drawers, along with a long mirror on the wall, partly hidden behind the cardboard stacks. This would be my room I decided, and put the backpack on the bed. Next to it was a nice bathroom, with a big nearly square tub, twice the size of the one that was in my home. There was a trap door in the ceiling of the corridor I noticed, but I couldn't reach it, and it probably only had more boxes anyway.

The afternoon was relatively peaceful, talking to Tori about this strange house, what family she had, and other random things. I whittled away the hours by helping her find the box of board and card games, and we tried several out, often disrupted by having to reference rule booklets or making sure no vital part was missing.

The house had been left to her from her parents, and at the time she had been living in an apartment. For some reason the lawyers had assumed she wanted it sold, and had gotten it all packed up, neatly sorted into all the boxes to make the distribution of the things easier. She did the math, and long term, it was cheaper to move in and wait for the place to be worth more. The shorter drive to work and no rent more than made up for all the money that would have to go into moving and living in the new place. A few uncrossed wires later, the house was pulled off the market, and she moved another load of boxes in. After unpacking the essentials, she had just left the rest alone, never bothering to waste time unpacking things she'd probably have to box up again.

She had grown up in western Massachusetts, and while she had lived most of the time in the state. The rest of her relatives had slowly dissolved away into other states of the country or existence, and so she just did her job, doing her best to keep up as it was, with no free time to manage a social life outside of work, or even a roommate.

When it was getting near evening, she decided to do some paperwork or something, and so after a simple macaroni and tuna dinner, we went upstairs. When she saw my backpack on the second bed, she gave a small laugh. "I guess you're settled about sleeping arraignments. Anything you need for doing homework?"

I sat on the bed, propping my legs up on one of the closer boxes. "Not really, maybe you could set up my laptop for Wi-Fi, in case I need it, fine otherwise." I offer, pulling out the laptop and getting to the internet setup. I still wasn't clear on all the options, many acronyms it assumed I knew I didn't.

With a nod, she sat down beside me and took over, I watched, trying to remember what she did, and trying to not ask too many questions. After that, she patted my head, hand rubbing down the back of my hair. "Okay then, I'll check on you later, when do you usually go to sleep?"

I shrugged. "When I'm tired, I guess. Sometimes it's hard to force myself to sleep if I'm still thinking about something."

She nodded, and without warning, gave me a hug. "Don't worry, and you can always talk to me, thinking is always easier with another." After rubbing her face in my hair she let me go, and gave me back the computer. "Sometimes distraction can help, but it's not a cure." With that advice, she left me.

I sighed, looking at the screen, now devoid of windows. It might not be a cure, but it was fun. I unfolded a tiny corner of the vast internet, took a deep breath, and dove in. They used to call it surfing, but that just wasn't the right verb. Truly experiencing the richness of the internet wasn't taking the first wave you saw and riding it back to shore to repeat again with only little differences, it was more like swimming, scuba diving into unknown depths, having to use your wits to find coral instead of sand, and dolphins instead of sharks. Learning which places you can trust, even if they had cultures unseen and misunderstood by outsiders. I participated occasionally, helping a lost fellow swimmer, or just pointed out something shiny to those who had done the same. You just had to find the balance of being one of them, and one of yourself.

I tried a few of the games she had given me, and after a few of them, I found one I liked, and settled in to relax in a world of simple shapes and not-so-simple puzzles. Tori poked her head in during this, and asked if I was okay. I nodded, and after failing on one puzzle that refused to show its secrets to me, I stretched out on the bed, careful not to knock the laptop off the bed, sore from sitting in the same position for so long. "I'm off to bed then, don't stay up too late." She said with a smile, closing the door.

# Custodial debate

The wireless internet had been useful. Unblocked and free, I had found interesting things on it, some new things, others renewed or shown in a new way. I lay back, staring up at the ceiling, planning. First, I had to get control. I was still hers, it did feel good belonging to someone who was nice, but it wasn't enough. After that, I could focus on not having to go back.

I logged my little computer off, and wrapped it carefully in the charging cable around it. I upended my backpack on the bed: the cookie box; the spare clothes; the workbooks, and the locked box. It contained the power to making someone mine, rather than being owned, I couldn't let those she worked with from taking it, or I would always be hers.

I took the multi-tool she had left with her uniform and emulated her, slowly getting the box open. Looking through the box's inventory, I considered the items. Most I could come back for if my plan worked. I had no need of them otherwise. The thong had been a gift in a weird way, and they represented something I never had wanted to do, until today. So I pulled that out, got out of my clothing, and pulled up the rope, shuddering at how tight it felt. Pulling on my warm pajamas, I sat on the bed and breathed deeply, relaxing, preparing.

Back to the box. Bag of tablets. The white ones, they were good, one of those made me think of naughty things for days, and it wasn't as bad when I did them, but when I didn't fight it, I always felt worse later. Surely one wouldn't hurt, but I still felt the last one I had been given. Would another make me feel even better? Probably not. I pulled one out, and placed it on the front side of the cookie box, now face up.

The colored ones were not good. They were the opposite, I couldn't think or do anything for a short time, maybe an hour, and I was all limp and only just aware of what happened, the forced naps were not fun, but I could see how one would be useful now that I had them. No, using them was bad! No, using them for bad is bad, and I'm not doing that. One of those, onto the cookie box as well. Stuff everything but the cookies back into my backpack for now, and now the real job begins.

Screwdriver in, pliers out. First pill, slowly squeeze, crunch. Crunch the other. I needed to crush each of the pieces smaller. After about a dozen crushes, I had a coarse white and green powder, barely enough to fill a pea. Pliers in, little knife out. Take a cookie, and carefully cut down the middle. Lick one of the half layers, and push onto the powder. Repeat with the other to get the stray bits. Carefully push back together. Go to bathroom, drip water on, and push together, this time hoping they stay together. Finally, smooth down the visible edge of the cream. All done.

I washed the tool off, just in case, and then went to her room, holding the box of cookies with the wrapped stack of cookies open, my special cookie buried as the second from the top.

The pretty girl I belonged to was in her bed, propped up on pillows, laptop still on. "Hey you, isn't it a little late for snacks?" She said, half closing the computer.

I smiled slyly, and hopped up onto the bed. "Isn't it late for work?" I retaliate, poking at the back of the mostly closed screen, and she jumped to keep me from closing it completely.

"I suppose so. I guess it is time to go to sleep, early night lets you meet the early light." She opened her laptop, and after a few quick taps, pushed it away. I peeked at the screen, bigger than the one I had, and was on a sparse back desktop. Looking through the icons, most I didn't recognize, but I did think the file name matching that of a TV show wasn't a coincidence.

I grinned at her, shaking hair out of my eyes, and touching at the laptop's S key, highlighting the bootleg show file. "Or we could watch that, and have a second dessert..." I tempted, holding the open box under her nose, genuinely accidentally bumping her chest. She pondered for a moment, and then attempted to sneak her hand in. I quickly pulled the box away. "Why should I share before you?" I asked, reaching in myself, pulling one out, and promptly pushing it into my mouth, the circle filling my mouth, forcing me to chew.

She used my weak moment to re-sneak her hand into the box, and pulled out the cookie I had worked on for a while. She playfully spun it like a coin pinned between finger and thumb, causing my mouth to go dry. Dryer, that cookie had done most of that job already. Luckily, she stuck it between her teeth, and took a bite. "Is it because I'm already sharing my house with you?" She started the show, and pulled me to her side, planting a kiss on my head. After her second, the first drug began to kick in, evidenced as she began to lean against me, and then on me.

I struggled to get out from under her, the awkward position making it more than a little difficult. I looked at her half open eye, the other hidden against the quilt. I gave a smile, the happiest I've been in ages. "Don't worry, I'm fine, and so are you..." I whispered, returning the kiss to her nose, causing a faint sound in response, and her eye widening to almost full briefly. Okay, first things first. I carefully moved the laptop to her bedside table, and then pulled back her sheets and quilt, all the way off the end of the bed. Sprawled on her side, her bent arms and legs made her look like a runner, frozen midstep.

I rolled her onto her back, and felt at her heart, beating strong, stronger than mine was. "Okay, I'm sure you'll be fine," I say again, pushing her sleeveless top up, carefully I had to tug each inch, I wouldn't want to damage her or it. I raise each of her arms, unresisting under my much weaker forces, and pull the top off completely. Then come off the loose pants, and I sit back to breathe in awe.

She was just like me. Well, that's not true, she was the color of rough pink gems and ivory, and I was more like unfired clay. Her hair was bright, mine dark, and of course she had those pretty breasts. They were small, I could cover either almost completely with both of my hands, but that was still more than my chest, flat as a board. She had her own scars, thicker and more obvious than mine. They were old, maybe even older than I was. Had someone else hurt her? Was doing this wrong? No! I must not be hers, therefore she had to be mine, and I wouldn't cut or hit someone like me, the pills were just because she wouldn't understand!

I tried to remove the bra from the front, but that wasn't the only kind. I crawled around and pushed her up, finding the clasp, and after bending it just so, it popped open, easy as pie. From behind, it was much easier to push off my limp owner's bra, and I got out from behind her, and stopped at her panties.

Already on all fours, I gave a playful grin at her relaxed face but intently staring eyes, and grabbed the hem with my mouth, biting and tugging. I barely got down a few inches when I heard tearing, and felt her heart pickup into overdrive. Quickly I stopped, and turned back to her. "Don't worry, just your underwear... I'm sorry!" I apologized, and pulled them off by hand the rest of the way. When I stood up over her, I looked down on what I had done. She was trembling slightly, and eyes were all wide, silently pleading with me for something. I lay down on her, kissing at her the way she had when she had stolen me away. "It's okay, I won't hurt you, I promise!" I repeat, feeling her shake of fear mix with mine of excitement.

I pull back, feeling over her breasts, cupping one in both hands, then the other, then letting my hands slide down her. Feeling over the coarse hair on her hips, I press hands close, feeling how warm she was. I rubbed down her legs, then off her. "As something said to someone, I'll be back." I whispered, and climbed off the bed, back to get the rest of what I needed.

The special box out of my bag again, I got the leashes and the toys. Before I returned to the bedroom, I stopped by the bathroom, my excitement making me take extra precaution. After, I noticed an electric razor and grabbed it. It said safety, so that probably meant I could use it without hurting her. Not wanting to make a mess, I then had to hunt down a vacuum cleaner. It took me longer than I would have liked, but I did find a nice handheld one.

Back in the Bedroom, I quivered in the guilty pleasure, she was all mine already, the rest was just icing on the cake. I put one of the roped collars on each of her wrists and ankles, making sure to be able to stick a finger under it when tightened; some wiggle room would prevent her hands and feet from going numb. I don't know how to do knots. I do know where to learn one when I need to. After figuring out how to do a reliable knot around each bed leg, I went to work. Tying her legs down was easy, but with her hands, she was starting to wake up in them, randomly shaking them as I tried to keep it taut and tie it.

I relaxed and admired her again, now that she would be mine when she fully awakened. Only one last chore to do, and that was getting rid of the one thing I wanted to remove, I didn't have any ugly rough hair on me, and neither should my pretty Tori. When I turned the razor and the vacuum on again, she started to jump on the bed, the 'safe' electric razor snagging up, causing unpleasant sounds from both the trimmer and her. I yelped, pulling the stuck tool free. "Just stay still and it won't hurt at all!" I scolded, and as I turned it back on, she jumped again, but a reminder by tugging at a pinch of hair made her finally go still. "Good girl, you know you'd look better without it, but I guess if you insist, I guess I'll compromise..." I carefully trimmed away all but the highest row of hedge, and that I carefully reduced to a small, lopsided pentagon, that I was sure she would understand to be a cute little badge.

I finished vacuuming up the shaved off hair, and put the vacuum and razor down. Slowly feeling fingers over her swelled up lips, I gave little pinches to tease at her. "You got to see me and have fun; it hardly seems fair that I shouldn't get the chance to be in charge, nice people share things, including power." I squeezed gently around her hidden nub, twisting back and forth. "Every time he liked it and I didn't, but with you I liked it, and so did you, I should make you like this too."

Opening my shirt, I pulled it off, draped it over her stomach, and then did the same with my pants. I rubbed at her dampening forehead and neck with them, and she watched me with a half-focused expression. She was in there, she was just taking her time to wake, and I can wait... "Don't worry, I won't do anything before you are all back, empty Tori is no fun to be with." I whispered, stretching out on her, nestling my head under her chin, hugging around her waist, and lightly dozed off listening to her body.

"What-- what did you do to me?" I woke to hear her ask, her body trying to shake loose from her predicament. "Let me go, this isn't funny!" She nearly yelled, making me want to cover my ears, but I simply got up on all fours, looking at her now alert, wide eyes. "Come on Chau, let me go or..." she trailed off, looking up at one of her collared wrists."Else?" She finished weakly.

"Do you want me to say "Or else what?"' I offered, nearly giggling at her. I propped myself up with hands on her breasts, pushing up myself farther. "Yup, you look pretty stuck." light kneading back and forth, but I didn't want to put too much pressure on her, well, at least on there.

She gave a scowl at me, giving another strong jerk on the rope, to no avail. "Or else I could lose my job. Or else you'd have to go to some other foster home. Or else I won't be your friend. This isn't right or nice at all," she offered, shaking and trying to twist away from my hands.

I met her movement, adding different pressures onto her breasts, trying to figure out which she would like. "Too late, I'd just have to tell about what you did last time, I kept that secret like you said. I don't want another foster home! Why wouldn't you be my friend? I'm yours, and after, you'll be mine!" I leaned back, feeling over each of her pale nipples, maybe just gentleness would be better, and I pretended to finger-paint around each breast, slow circles inwards, and a few fingers climbing up each side to the top, a licked pointer finger and thumb lightly rubbing around the slowly hardening tip. "If you're mine, I'm not alone and you're safe with my secret, and since I'm yours, I'm safe from any mean boy and can keep your secret."

Tori slowly relaxed under my touches after I eased up, her face slowly going calmer as she began to accept the gentle touches. "Secrets don't work that way..." she whispered back, her arms and chest muscles going limp."People would figure it out eventually, and then we both would be in more trouble." she curled her head up to look at me. "It's just not normal, girls aren't supposed to be... intimate at your age, and the people who made you do so are in a lot of trouble."

I huffed, and stood up over her, pulling off the silly rope garment. "What do these have to do with us?" I asked loudly, scratching ineffectually with my trim fingernails at my body. "This isn't about him! No one's making me do something, and now that I know about being sexual, and that it can be good, I want to be with someone who makes me feel good, not just does ugly things for his games!" I stomped the mattress, causing the springs to bounce me up, not quite the impact I was hoping.

She sighed, looking upwards at the bed head, a half-meter or so of mattress between them. "You have a point, to the victor go the spoils, if you want to hurt me because you're angry at them, I guess there's nothing I can do now." she sighed. I wanted to scream at her. I didn't want to hurt her; I wanted her, why didn't she see? I dropped to my knees, then my stomach onto her, and pushed her head back down. Giving a puckered kiss to her mouth, I held my breath and her head. After a few seconds, she opened her mouth, and I felt her tongue lick at me. Trying to return it, I licked back at it, the tips just touching. I pulled away, my heart racing. That's what they called a French kiss, I thought to myself while looking back at her, feeling like my head would pop. "You don't want to hurt me? That's nice. Could you get rid of these ropes then? They're pretty uncomfortable." She asked, and I couldn't help but notice how big a blush she had gained.

I looked up at her hand, in a relaxed half-open position, nearly no spare fingernails, and little calluses on her right hand from writing. "I could, but then you'd escape, I want to be sure you're mine before I let you go." I answered after considering. I didn't feel like hers until after she kissed me back in my first home, but that was after she had touched me, I still wasn't sure which one mattered, or if it was both. I returned to kissing her, licking over her covered lips. When she opened her mouth and sucked my tongue in, wrapping hers around mine. I felt like I was pulling her warmth deep within me, all the way down to my private area, and giddily wondered if she was feeling the same way.

I sat up, legs spread to straddle her stomach. Looking over her, I felt at each of the marks on her exposed torso, wondering what memories were burned into the old and small, but plentiful scars. Crawling around over her, I found others on her arms and licked at one carefully, and then another on her other arm. "I think you're pretty, even with all of these." I mumbled bashfully.

I picked up the short thick wand, and after staring at the reflective metal's distorted reflection, I wrapped as much of it as I could in my hands, and breathed on the top. I never liked this toy when it felt cold, and so I fought off its chill while rocking slowly against her, and enjoying the dizzying arousal I felt slowly gathering inside both of us. With a scoot back, I rubbed my hips against hers briefly, wincing as I felt the remaining coarse hair scrape against me. "Maybe I should get rid of the rest, that doesn't feel very nice…"

She shook her bindings and her head. "No, I'll probably get ingrown hairs as it is, please don't!" she pleaded, and so I discarded the idea, sliding farther down. Resting on my stomach, I slowly traced my fingers along the lines where her legs and hips met, and slowly up her slit, and at the top giving just a little more pressure on the small flap of skin, sliding it up. I puffed a breath at the exposed nub, slowly swelling up with her excitement. I wasn’t sure if this meant she enjoyed it and wanted to be mine, or just was the normal reaction to what I was doing. I had to figure out, no point taking just her body if the rest of her wasn’t mine as well. Pressing the slightly warmed bullet against her nub, I teased it all around the same way I had often been ordered to, and gradually, similar results began to show.

Her breathing slowed and became more irregular, and her clenched teeth caused it to sound like little hisses as she arched back, trying to get some slack to retreat away. She continued to protest, but I knew she didn’t really mean what she said because she never managed a whole sentence without her body saying something as well. "This is so… uuu! Wrong! You really shouldn't—" She broke off in a quick inward gasp as I pressed the toy against her, right above her clit to squeeze it between my fingers to test how firm it was. "Fu, shouldn't be doing this." She finished weakly.

"You did it to me, and I liked it! And you're older, so it's okay for me to do more, I don't have to worry about hurting you when I push it in!" I exclaimed, and teased the toy against her opening until it caught on a dry spot less than an inch in, and she bucked up in a yelp of pain! Quickly I pulled it back, and looked up at her, suddenly feeling guilty and bashful. "Um, I guess I spoke too soon. What did I do wrong?"

She screwed up her face, and struggled to shake off the jolt of pain. "Let me up, and I'll show you?" she suggested, but I quickly shook my head, and she gave a sigh and closed her eyes in resignation. "Fine, look in the front of the bottom drawer," she said, turning to look at the bland bedside table with a trio of drawers, the handles carved into them, rather than the usual attached kind. I climbed off the bed and sat on the carpet, and pulled the drawer all the way out.

All I saw was towels, carefully folded and taking up most of the space in the drawer. Looking right down the front, I saw a tube of something, like toothpaste or ointment. Lifting it up to the light, I read the purple tube. "Astroglide?" I asked, and then turned it to read what else the tube said. "Gel. Real pleasure lasts longer. Longer than what?"

Tori shrugged, and chuckled. "I dunno. Fake pleasure, I assume." She squirmed in her restraints again, the wood of the bed creaked a little, but

Apostrophe

Officer Bouley was killed from a lucky punch broke his neck, when he was trying to get a newcomer to the bar to give up his keys after his third round. At the funeral, the next layer of the superstition formed. One of his friends told a story, possibly the only guy who over the long career of the divining nose consistently called a taxi or walked, even when he wasn't in the same place. He told about how the day before he had gone down for good, he had been talking about early retirement. "It's just not in me anymore." he had said. "My nose isn't blocked up, I smell them all, and they all smell the same. That scent makes me sick." That started the new layer, and over the years, the few deaths on duty in my quiet town showed a creepy pattern. If they claimed a knack, sometimes it just faded away, or vanished one day. One officer who had an affinity with dogs suddenly couldn't even have his own geriatric terrier stop barking at him, and after being gone for week, they found him buried in his back garden like a common bone, shirt, pants, and skin shredded by angry teeth, and his once loyal companion gone. They say the knack protects you for some reason, to be in just the right time and right place. Every one of us has only one true goal, the rest of our jobs are just us making time until that moment, and after it's gone, if you don't retire, quit, or transfer to administrative, the hole it leaves behind kills, and even then some go blank, slip into a coma. It's easier not to think about, and it's good to not talk about it with any other than your partners and direct superior, and that habit is a layer that is even harder to fathom origins.

*Dramatis Personae:*

*Tori Lynn: Officer in a Police force in a suburb area close to Boston. Average height and build, blond, prone to internal dialogues. No steady sexual partners. Has a 'knack' for helping disadvantaged minors.*

*Benjamin A\_\_\_: Tori's partner, Bi but avoiding female relations, boyfriend. Has a 'knack', affinity with water. Fond of Tori, like an older brother rather than a ranking superior.*

*Chau Breech: Young Daughter of an interracial couple, oriental father and African-American mother. Shy, borderline autistic aspects.*

*Timothy Breech: Stabbed by unknown assailant, wounds superficial, Chau's removal of knife causes massive blood loss, coma.*

*Abigail Breech: Seen leaving the scene of the crime by car after sounds of fight, followed to mall, took intercity bus and vanished.*

Jeremy Westinggale: Breech Family Lawyer. Wife and old teenager son. Think a happier, slightly more heavyset Ted from Scrubs.

Finch Bird: Location unknown, former officer, Knack of finding lost things.