

The 10-54 on Hemlock Street

Officer Graham Tanney, Jr. glared over his shoulder into the pizza parlor as he hopped into the driver's seat of his squad car. It still felt a little foreign being over here, like the time his ex-girlfriend had been so drunk she'd passed out on his side of the bed. Those few feet were like a different world. But until his partner Barry was fit to get back behind the wheel, this was where he'd have to station himself.

Not that Barry was ever gonna make it back behind the wheel. But if he started thinking that way, pretty soon he'd start talking that way, and he couldn't do that to the poor guy.

Speaking of, he gave Barry a jingle to pass along the bad news. It picked up on the first ring, very unlike the old warhorse. Graham knew he had to be lonely as fuck, rotting away in his apartment all day, week after week. That's why you didn't play hero. A medal on your jacket and a handshake from a politician was poor recompense for risking being fucked up for life.

"Yo, you get lost or something?" Barry demanded. He wasn't actually pissed or anything, Graham knew. It was just how he was. Though only ten years his senior, the guy had acted like a cranky grandpa even before all this.

"Sorry, man, they fucked up the order, gonna be another fifteen goddamn minutes."

"I told ya to go to the one on the west side. Longer drive, but they never fuck up your order." Barry had indeed said that pretty much every time they'd ordered pizza together. This was the first time he'd been proven right, but the first time was enough that he'd never shut up about it.

Graham wasn't about to call him on it. Three months of the sort of bargain PT the department's HMO covered and little else for companionship had left his partner unfit not only for duty, but for polite company. Still, Graham was going to get him through this, even if the only thing beyond the finish line was a desk job.

Better that than see Barry deteriorate to the point where he gave up and...

No, Graham was going to get him through it and that was that.

"Yeah, yeah. Look, I'm on my way. I just—"

Suddenly, his radio cut in, squawking out of the unit in the dash and on his shoulder at the same time. "Station to Car 6. You read me, Car 6?"

"Hang on, they're calling us. Me. Whatever," said Graham into the phone. He grasped the radio on his shoulder and responded. "Car 6."

"Tanney, we got a 10-54. What's your 20?"

"Corner of Ninth and Wilshire," he said. As soon as he released the talk button, he addressed his phone. "What's a 10-54?"

“Oooh, is that Janice? Ask her what she’s doing after, fuck the fuckin’ breadsticks.” His partner’s flirtations with the dispatcher had always amused him more than it had his wife. Though he was pretty sure Janice had enjoyed the attention. Barry wasn’t a bad-looking guy. Or hadn’t been, anyway. Maybe he still was. Graham didn’t know how to tally such a thing, and didn’t much care.

“Car 6, proceed to 1292 Hemlock and report in once you do your check.”

“Roger, station,” he said, then quickly shifted back to the phone. “Keep it in your pants, OK? Now what the hell is a 10-54?”

“We need to send you back to the academy?”

“I’m gonna send this pizza right up your ass, you don’t answer my fucking question,” said Graham with a little grin.

“All right, all right, don’t get your little panties in a wad, eh?” said Barry. “10-54 is a possible dead body.”

Graham felt himself tensing up. “Oh.” Fuck, but he hated his job sometimes. Lots of times.

“Now make it snappy and bring me my goddamn pizza, all right? I don’t get dinner soon you’re gonna be checking on two corpses tonight.”

Hemlock Street wasn't in a bad part of town, but 1292 was on a bad block from the looks of it. The houses were smaller here, most of them densely surrounded in scraggly conifer trees as if trying to go unnoticed. With most of the street lights broken, they weren't doing an altogether bad job. The house in question was a standout in this fashion, concealed only by some neatly maintained shrubs and a single maple. Graham parked on the street and did a quick lap around the house, but no lights anywhere. Nice little vegetable garden, though – peppers, tomatoes, some broccoli, carrots, the works. Not the sort of place you expected to see this sort of gloomy business take place, but hey, people died anywhere and everywhere. Looked good and picked over, too. Maybe the neighbors were playing rabbit with the master of the house away.

Seeing no lights on and no one waiting, he conferred with dispatch that they'd gotten the usual heads up from the postman who worked this route. Evidently three months of backed up mail was their limit. Go figure, shit like this being referred by a government employee and not the poor bastard's friends or family. Was that gonna be him someday? If he couldn't take the sight of his partner any more, how long before this would be him?

Sure enough, the mail slot in the front door was overflowing. Fiddling with the latch, Graham suspected the mail had piled up week after week until it was now obstructing the opening. He picked up a random letter and found it was addressed to Seth Sobel, which was indeed the name Janice had given him. He gave it a few hard pounds and wasn't surprised not to get a reply. This door was locked, but procedure dictated he look for a non-invasive means of entry first. One of his buddies had transferred up to Easthaven, and he knew they had a locksmith they contracted with for this kind of thing. Not their department, though. Nope, he was going to have to kick the—

Huh. The back door was, in fact, unlocked.

Graham readied his flashlight and opened the door. To his relief, there was no trace of that tell-tale odor he'd heard about from the old timers who'd had to deal with dead bodies before. In fact, he thought he smelled something... edible. He couldn't place it, but it smelled more like food than foulness.

The rear door opened into the kitchen, and a mere glance confirmed the place was spotless. Not uninhabited, quite, but a place for everything and everything in its place. The light switches didn't work; looked like the electric bill was going unheeded in that pile inside the mail slot. He called out for Mr. Sobel again, but again, no response. The logical thing to do here was to open the fridge and see how the food was doing, but the warrant specified permission to search for a person, not spoiled milk, and he didn't expect to find anyone in there. Stealing his nerves, Graham shut the door behind him and began to explore the house with flashlight in hand, bracing himself for the worst.

It was tidily kept throughout, enough so that Graham almost wondered if a cleaning service had been through recently – a musing that at least took some of the edge off of his fears of what he might find. It wasn't dusty in the least, and the only unkempt thing in the place was the giant pile of mail inside the front door. The living room held nothing of interest, and the same with the dining room. The bathroom, where he was fully braced to find someone floating in the tub with slit wrists, held nothing more intriguing than a quartet of toothbrushes. Seemed like a lot for a single occupancy home, but with all of them being bone dry, there was nothing else worth considering.

Bedroom. Surely if there were a dead body in this house, it would be in here. He sniffed at the cracks in the frame before opening it, but still picked up nothing. Indeed, it was a neatly maintained room with a king size bed and plenty of scuffs on the wall behind the frame. Beyond that, bupkis. The walk-in closet was the same, rows and rows of hanging men's clothes, empty suitcases, a half-naked woman, a pile of folded blankets and pillows–

Graham was pretty embarrassed by how loud he screamed, to say nothing of the pitch. The woman, standing in the corner of the closet and smiling pleasantly in his direction, didn't bat an eyelash at his presence, nor at his outburst. Nor, somehow, at the fact that she was standing there before a strange man in her home, her spectacular body clad in nothing but a translucent yellow bra and matching panties.

"Miss?" he said, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Sir?" she answered.

He shined the flashlight around the closet, making sure they were alone, and even spun to check the room behind him in case this was some kind of whackjob distraction.

"Are you alone in the house, ma'am?"

"No," she said simply, smile never faltering.

"Your husband? Boyfriend?"

She shook her head. "I don't have a husband or boyfriend."

He looked her over, trying not to be too inappropriate about where he let the flashlight beam linger. Fuck, she was hot. Early to mid twenties and with a dynamite body, and somehow it still barely lived up to that perfectly sculpted face. Her hair like something off a magazine cover, gleaming in the flashlight with its rolling, golden honey blonde waves. "Mind telling me who else is here, then?"

"Just you."

Graham paused, genuinely unable to tell if she was trying to be difficult or funny. "Do you know where the man who lives here is?"

"There is no man who lives here." Her voice was fragile yet soothing, like a high wind through the branches of a tree.

The policeman shook his head. "I'm talking about Seth Sobel. He owns this place. Does... does he let you live here?"

She considered a moment. “He didn’t take me with him when he moved away. So, I guess he lets me live here?” The woman shrugged.

The more he asked, the more confused he became. Graham took a breath and decided that at least he wasn’t in danger, so aside from the pizza cooling in the car, there was no cause for rush. As for the pizza, Barry cared more about the company than about the temperature of his dinner. Not that he’d ever admit it. Besides, the guy owned a microwave, at least – about the only sort of cooking he was good for.

“What’s your name, ma’am?”

“Emerald.”

“I’m sorry, did you say... Emerald?”

She nodded. Difficult or funny, he still couldn’t say. Was it a stage name? Lord knew the bitch could make a killing as a stripper if she had even a guess as how to move her body. Hell, she could probably stand by the pole and spin in place and come home with a g-string full of benjamins. “All right, Ms. Emerald, I’m Officer Graham Tanney. I need to ask you a few questions, so how about you get dressed and we can talk in the living room.”

“Dressed?” she asked, looking down at herself in wonder.

“Yeah, dressed, unless you want to conduct the interview in your underwear.”

Graham didn’t realize she was following him down the hallway until he went to sit on the sofa. Turning, he saw her only a foot or two behind him, her bare feet silent on the carpeted floor. “Miss, you really do need to get dressed,” he insisted. Had she been about to sit down next to him? Like that?

“What would you like me to wear?” she asked in that damnably sexy voice of hers.

“I don’t care what you wear, but you gotta wear something.”

She giggled at his suggestion. “I don’t have any other clothes.”

“You don’t? Why not?”

“The others took them when they moved away. They said I wouldn’t need them any more, since I’m no longer useful.”

“Useful?” he asked. His subconscious allowed the flashlight to drift down from her face to her chest for a long moment, and he tried not to think of the countless uses one might have for a woman such as this. He corrected it, but slow enough to feel bad about it.

The woman, Emerald, only nodded, as if glad he seemed to understand despite the fact that he was the furthest thing from understanding this madness.

“It looked like there were plenty of clothes in that closet – surely something would fit you.” He could hardly believe he was fighting this hard to cover that body up.

This time she shook her head, looking as horrified as if he’d suggested she roll around in a swarm of angry hornets. “I could never!”

“Why not?”

“Those clothes belong to Master!”

Graham blinked. “Did you say...?”

“Those clothes belong to Master. Master gave us very precise instructions on which of his things we were allowed to touch, and in what manner. His clothes I am allowed to touch only if I am doing his laundry, or if Master is wearing them and has indicated he would like to be touched.” She smiled, as if this was a fond memory.

To many, this would have only been one more answer in a growing succession of answers that left one more baffled than prior to receiving them. However, Graham was one of the cops who actually kept up on current events in law enforcement, and this was all beginning to strike him as eerily familiar.

“Miss... have you been... formatted?”

The woman stared blankly ahead, which only served to confirm it for Graham.

Formatting. It was the latest in human trafficking, the cyber era’s answer to the problem of women with embedded, thought-activated communication devices. As they had grown more and more common, the scumbags had had to up their game. Thankfully the formatting process was still pricy enough not to be common, but uncommon enough that nobody had yet gathered the resources to deal with it. To Graham, it had been the sort of wild criminal undertaking like you heard about in Boston or the other big cities. He’d never dreamed that his sleepy little suburb would ever see that kind of action.

To the extent that anyone not involved in the doing of it understood it, formatting was the equivalent of rewriting someone’s brain. It got its name from the same act on a computer hard drive, wiping it clean to get rid of everything on it so you could entirely personalize it. It was crude tech – from what he’d read, you couldn’t create a whole personality or anything, but instead you could merely imprint some basic urges, instincts and knowledge in the poor victim.

Looking up at her, Graham could instantly tell his guess was right. In seconds, his training kicked in and started formulating a story. Pretty girl, taken in by traffickers, gets formatted and stashed here. It wasn’t set up like a whorehouse or anything, and the decor had a subtle male vibe, so, coupled with references to a “master,” this girl had probably been a kept toy and not put to work. Four toothbrushes – she hadn’t been the only one. The empty half of the closet must have been where the girls had kept their clothes, right up until they and Sobel (if that was his real name, which was incredibly unlikely) up and left. She’d no doubt have been forbidden contact with the outside world, hence not answering the door or getting the mail, but she’d kept up with her household chores. Quite possibly her raiding the garden, too, sneaking out at night when the neighbors wouldn’t see her. Son of a bitch must have had the women he wasn’t using stay in the closet like household appliances, and what was left of her brain was probably was too damaged to even care.

In only a few seconds, Graham felt like he only had one question left, and it was the one he asked. “Why did you get left behind?”

“I told you, I’m useless. Defective.” For the first time, her smile wavered. Rather than explain herself, however, she turned around. There, on her backside, was an ass every bit as spectacular as its colleagues in the front, but that wasn’t actually what drew his attention. There, running from the small of her back up most of the way to her neck, was a thick red scar right along the spinal column.

His first thought was that perhaps this had been part of the formatting process, but nothing he’d read had suggested anything so extensive. In fact, he was pretty sure that was all in the head, nothing to do with the spine. Besides, if there had been three other toothbrushes, assuming one for Sobel himself, that meant there’d be two other girls lurking in that closet. So not that.

“What happened here?”

“I fell,” she said simply.

“Fell? What, on a broadsword?”

“No, down the back steps. I tripped and fell and hurt my spine. Master had to take me outside, to a place called the hospital. They had to cut me open to repair it. But now I’m scarred. Broken. Useless.”

“When was this?”

“I don’t know.”

“Weeks? Months?”

“I don’t know. I know the words, but I don’t understand time except to keep to my schedule.”

Graham pressed a little harder until he was convinced the girl well and truly didn’t have a clue, that part of her brain hadn’t survived the formatting process. No clue how old she was, how long since she’d been taken, when Sobel had abandoned her. Nothing. Same with her hometown, her family, her background... not a jot. When he asked about her birth name, she could only say that her master had named her Emerald because of her green eyes.

While it hadn’t been the focus of his readings, he remembered that part of what made the whole thing so nefarious was the impossibility of recovery. Conventional human trafficking left the victim fucked up for life oftentimes, but there was no chance of recovery here. When they recovered a victim, they could only do their best to identify her and return her for her family to deal with, or if they couldn’t, tuck them away in a nuthouse somewhere. Graham could only imagine what became of those women, in the absence of either associations or oversight.

“Is Master coming back soon?” she asked. She didn’t need to say more. The hope, the loneliness, the longing, the shame.

In the midst of his questioning, his radio buzzed again. "Station to Car 6. Any update on that 10-54?"

Graham looked long at Emerald, who was still waiting hungrily for an answer. He pressed the talk button. "Forgot to check in, Station. House was empty. No sign of anybody being there in months. I'll run the report in tomorrow morning."

“Took you long enough,” said Barry as he made his way in. The door was unlocked, rather atypical of policemen in general and his partner in particular, but it was easier for the guy than hobbling over to answer it when company arrived. Besides, not like the house’s occupant wasn’t still capable of defending himself. That son of a bitch from the Pump & Go might have gotten lucky, but good luck pulling that when he was situated and alert.

Graham grunted an acknowledgement as he fumbled to get his shoes off with his hands occupied by the pizza. Barry was death on shoes in the house. Not like the poor guy could put on laced shoes unassisted any more anyway. And not like he had somewhere to go that would require shoes.

“So, how was the smell?” asked Barry as Graham handed him a freshly nuked plate of pizza.

“Whaddaya mean? Smells fine to me,” he answered.

“Not the pizza, moron, the 10-54!” said Barry with a roll of his eyes.

“Oh. I mean, it was fine. Nothing big. It was nothing,” stumbled Graham. Lying did not come easy to him, he was quickly remembering.

“Fuck, here I’m stuck eating reheated pizza, and you don’t even have the courtesy to have a decent story for me? What, they paying you overtime to depress me or something?”

“Nothing to tell, man. Empty house.”

“Oh, guy up and moves without telling anybody? I had one of those, once. Most boring 10-54 you could get. But I guess it’s better than the exciting kind. Totally empty, huh?”

Graham settled in, stuffing his face to prevent the need to talk, but Barry waited for an answer while he did the same. “Not *empty* empty. Was a full house, just nobody there,” he mumbled.

“Oh yeah?” Barry’s eyes narrowed. “That’s a new one. Occupant up and leaves, but doesn’t take his stuff with him? Usually you gotta be good and rich to furnish multiple houses. And Hemlock ain’t exactly in a luxury neighborhood.”

“How’d you know... you listening in again?”

Barry frowned at having outed himself. “Yeah, sometimes. Not like I got something better to do. Five hundred channels and not one of ‘em worth watching most of the time.”

“We really gotta introduce you to Netflix, buddy. Catch up with the times.”

“What I wanna wait two weeks for a movie for?”

Graham laughed. “Yeesh, we *really* gotta catch you up.”

“I’m only fucking with ya, moron. I know about the whole Netflix and chill thing. If you wanna suck my dick, you gotta do better than old pizza next time.” Barry sighed. “Been a while since I got me a proper blowjob.”

An awkward silence filled the space between them. There was nothing more to be said than he had already. What were the magic words to make a guy feel better after Cynthia ran out on him because of the injury? The department had run that cunt ex-wife of his out of town tout de suite. Probably still owed the city close to three grand in fines and citations. Still, it hadn't done much to make Barry feel any better.

"Fucking bitch," he said finally.

"Hell of a fucking cook, though," said Barry. Then the moment had passed, and the subject closed.

So they sat and talked shop, Graham filling him on the latest station gossip. Not surprisingly, there wasn't much since his last visit two days ago. Barry didn't ever seem to mind when he repeated himself, though, or if he got off track.

Somewhere in the middle of reminiscing about the time they'd had to tackle this naked crackhead, Barry shit himself.

Graham tried to help, but he didn't know what help was, and Barry told him to go fuck himself for trying as he staggered down the hall with his walker, fighting to keep his sweatpants up with the extra load. It was getting better, he yelled from the bathroom. Not nearly as often as when he'd first gotten discharged from the hospital. Still, it was probably best for Graham to make his way home.

He put the leftover pizza in the mostly empty fridge. Still had a little mustard left, and something in a Chinese food container that was undoubtedly the source of that awful stink. Graham took a gander, and threw it down the disposal before his partner could make himself sick on it. No sense offering to run to the grocery store for him again. Barry said he could handle it, and anybody who'd spent twenty minutes with the guy knew he'd rather starve than let a man take his dignity. Not wanting to cross that line, he headed out to the car before Barry made it out of the john, thankful as ever that he didn't have half the guts his partner had. It wasn't raining, but he hustled to the car anyway.

After all, there was the girl huddled behind the driver's seat to attend to.

Graham didn't get any sleep that night.

First, he dove into those materials on formatting the department had circulated. Not much there of any use, but it made it nice and clear on the medical end that this wasn't a treatable condition. The girl was a vegetable, albeit a lively one, as much as if part of her brain had been cut away.

That eased his conscience about things quite a little bit.

"Thank you for letting me dance for you, Officer," Emerald said, swaying her hips side to side hypnotically, playing with her breasts in that filmy bra he'd found her in. Evidently she'd been wearing it every day for months now, laundering it regularly by hand.

"Hey, uh, thanks for dancing," he replied awkwardly. Not that she seemed to notice any awkwardness.

"I'm keeping my front to you so I don't disgust you with my flaws, Officer." Her voice oozed apology. "I wish I could be of more use, Officer."

"You don't have to call me that every time you say something, you know. In fact, it's kind of putting me off a bit." She'd at least seemed clear that her master was gone and it looked like he'd been explicit in his intention not to come back for her. Telling her he was the new boss now had been the only way to get her to come with him. She'd taken to calling him master while he was driving to Barry's, and he'd insisted on a downgrade to merely "officer." Meant the same thing to her, though.

Which made it ten times as hot as it already was.

"Of course." He could see the mental list of his likes and dislikes being updated behind her eyes. She never stopped smiling though, whether she was programmed for it or if it was because she was sincerely happy to have someone to serve again. The dance had been her idea.

"Come on, why don't you have a seat. We should talk." He patted the sofa next to him. Instantly, she ceased dancing and glided over like she'd rehearsed the maneuver, mastering the art of looking as sexy as fucking possible while sitting down on a couch.

"What would you like to talk about?"

"You, for one."

"Me?" She patted her chest. "What would you like to know about me? Anything and everything I know is in service of you."

"In service of... Hey, let's start by having you act like a person. Just say how you feel, don't be all slavey. Think you can do that?"

She nodded, and her voice lost much of the rigidity instantly. "Sure, Officer. I guess I've just been really depressed ever since I ruined my life and Master abandoned me like I was rotten garbage. It's been really lonely. I wanted to kill myself, but Master said we were valuable property and therefore to make sure not to damage ourselves. I know I'm not valuable any more, but--"

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph, girl, never fucking mind that. Go back to talking the way you did before. Any more of that and you won’t be the only one with suicidal thoughts.”

“As you desire, Officer.” There it was again. “You mentioned that you had questions? What would you like to know about me? I’ll tell you anything, no matter how lurid or depraved.”

Graham couldn’t keep a grin off his face. As if that body weren’t enough, the girl was offering up live phone sex shit. “I don’t know, I’ve never... done this kind of thing before. What do you like, what are you interested in, that kind of stuff.”

Emerald nodded, looking relieved to have questions to which she knew the answers. “I like you,” she said rather directly. “I like serving you, pleasing you, obeying you, and satisfying you. I’m interested in learning how I can be a better fuck toy for you.”

Graham waited, but nothing further came. “That’s it?”

The girl considered for a moment. “You’re right. I’m sorry, Officer. I was so stupid. I’m also interested in learning how I can be a better servant for you. I want to learn what you like to eat, how you like your house kept, what chores I can perform for you... I’m not *only* here for sexual gratification – though naturally I am here for that as well.”

“I... wow. That’s not what I meant, but... wow.” Graham stoked his chin, her prior melancholia already forgotten in this wave of servility. “So, you’d do, like, anything I asked you to?”

“Of course!” she said, giggling. “What else would you keep me around for?”

“Are there things you especially enjoy doing? Surely you have some kind of preferences.”

“Well sure. I enjoy it most when you tell me exactly what you want, so I know I’m doing the right thing. That’s my favorite, when I can see I’m being the perfect obedient sex slave.”

“So if I said I wanted a blowjob, you’d...?”

She was at his feet in an instant. “Sloppy or sensual?” she asked as she helped him off with his pants. It was a purely curious tone, like she’d asked whether he liked red wine or white.

“Uh, which one do you like better?”

“Whichever one you prefer. I can make a sensual blowjob last for hours, if you like. Or I’m able to make you come like a rocket if I pounce on it like a greedy little slut. Unless you’d rather simply have me open my mouth so you can fuck my face like a pussy?”

“Fuck me,” he groaned.

He'd meant it as a mere interjection, but suddenly Emerald was standing again, lowering her panties and gliding down into his lap. Maybe she was trying to be funny again – “again,” if she ever had been – or maybe there was nothing left in her brain to distinguish between the literal and the figurative. Either way, there was nothing in him that had the will to dissuade her as her pussy sucked him in like it was hungry for cock.

Then it started... squeezing.

“Holy shit, are you doing that on purpose, or is that part of the formatting?!”

“I'm doing that, Officer... do you not enjoy it?”

“No, it's fucking incredible. I just didn't know a pussy could do that!”

She laughed in delight, though the laugh never quite touched her eyes as she twined her arms behind his neck and started to move her hips. Her pussy kept at it, though, like there was a third hand wearing her as a glove, giving the warmest wettest handjob he'd ever been given. He started in on her bra as much for something to do to distract himself as to actually get at her tits. No matter. The way she was doing him, he came like a virgin, gasping and stiffening with his fingers digging into her back.

There he felt that scar, and he recoiled quickly as he realized what he was touching.

“Was that too fast? I'm so sorry! I'm still learning your body, your desires.” Her big green eyes welled up like she might cry at whatever disappointment she'd imagined she'd become.

Suddenly, he understood the inspiration for her name.

“You did fine – you did fucking amazing. I'm sorry I...” He wrinkled his nose, embarrassed.

“Oh no! You don't apologize to me! If the experience wasn't perfect, it's for me to improve. You've done nothing wrong. You could never do anything wrong to me. I'll do better next time.”

His hands found their way back to her skin, but again, the smooth texture of the scar grazed his fingertips and he quickly shifted them. She used his unspoken discomfort to further her apology. “I haven't been able to move my hips right since the surgery. I understand if you want to dispose of me. Please don't. Please?”

“Dispose...?” He shook himself. “Don't talk crazy. Now come on, how about you get that pretty little mouth down there and get me hard again so we can give you another try. Do it right this time.”

It was strange, ordering her around like this, but heady. Almost as arousing as that dynamite pussy. The next time she climbed aboard, he made sure to take his time to enjoy it. And to keep his hands to the hips.

Emerald bent over backwards to integrate herself into the household. Graham soon got used to coming in from work to a home-cooked meal in his spotless abode, receiving a heavenly massage while he ate, followed by a vigorous and unabashed exploration of any and all sexual acts, positions and kinks he could dream up.

That *she* dreamed up, really. His imagination paled compared to hers, to say nothing of her exuberant enthusiasm to prove the post-injury extent of her flexibility and agility. It was true her accident had impaired her somewhat, as she never failed to apologize for. Still, no other woman he'd been with possessed her willingness to experiment and illimitable desire to please him.

If it was criminal, keeping this girl as his sex slave, she made it hard to remember why he'd ever tried to catch and punish crime.

It was strange, off-putting really, the way what was left of her mind worked. She was illiterate, for instance, and any math that couldn't be reasoned out on her fingers was beyond her. She seemed to enjoy trying, but it depressed him too much watching her flounder, so he put a stop to it. Still, at the same time she had a cunning when it came to understanding his psychology that any detective would envy. She used it to profile him, filing away his reaction to her every word and deed and using it to refine everything that followed. In consecutive nights, she arrived at the realization that he entertained fantasies of fucking a perp; that he was staunchly against having his handcuffs used against him; that he was middling about using them on her; that watching her masturbate with his baton was a decided *fuck yes*. He learned along with her, about those and a thousand other things.

He wondered, once in a while when his mind wandered too fast to stop himself, what this girl would know if she'd never been taken. The missing persons records had been useless; if she was in there, he couldn't find her. From her accent, she probably wasn't from around here – assuming she was even from the U.S. at all. For all he knew, she could've been picked up in Prague and programmed to speak English. Then he'd remind himself he wasn't about to return her even if he found her folks. Too cruel. And then he'd have to think about something else before he could question too deeply if that was the real reason he wasn't looking.

As for Graham, he was learning that if he let Emerald dance for him for too long, she'd be broken the next day, in too much pain to even try to entertain him without it showing so clearly it wrecked the mood. After one such dance, she was resting her head on his lap while he watched TV, smiling to herself as he casually fondled her tits. He might have preferred her ass in this capacity,

“So we tried role-playing me being your prisoner...” she said during a commercial break.

“Oh, got something to follow up with that, do you? What's it tonight, upgrading convict to escaped fugitive?”

“Would you like me to be a fellow policeman? I was thinking, you could procure a uniform for me, if you want it to be authentic, or perhaps you could order me a fetishized costume if you’d rather simply have me look slutty. Then perhaps I could be your partner, and—”

“I don’t have a partner.” He suddenly realized he was pinching her nipple pretty hard and made himself let go.

“Right. Sorry, Officer. That was stupid of me. Would you like a blowjob to apologize?”

“No. Just roll over and... stop talking.”

Without another word, she complied. As the show resumed, he retrieved the blanket from the back of the couch and put it over her back and carefully went back to his fondling.

“Been a while since you came around,” Barry said.

“What can I say, I thought you could use a break from my ugly mug,” said Graham, settling in, beer in hand. He’d offered one to Barry, having forgotten his meds prohibited any drinking.

“Yeah, that’s you all right. Mr. Thoughtful.” Barry winced suddenly at some phantom pain whose cause was in no way apparent. “So what’s your break’s name?”

Graham stiffened. “Uh, what?”

“You forget I got a 290 on the detective’s exam? You disappear for two weeks, and when you turn up, you got a collared shirt, new haircut, and you’re wearing enough cologne to mask a French whorehouse. So what’s her name?”

How could he have been so sloppy? “It’s, um, Emma,” said Graham. Like that, her name was changed. Again. He’d never much liked “Emerald” anyway – too much a reminder of what she really was now.

“Emma, huh? Cute name. Got potential. So what’s her story?”

Graham had not planned on mentioning this to him. Nor to anyone, for that matter. He didn’t know what he was going to do with her, but telling the people in his life about her was not an option. Most of his friends were cops, for crying out loud. You couldn’t tell a cop that you stole yourself a hot young sex slave. His department was an honest sort. They’d have Graham in cuffs and disavow him in a hot minute if they found out what he’d done. What he was still doing.

Hell, if he found out one of them had done what he’d done, he’d be first in line to arrest them, too.

Jesus. What *was* he doing?

“Yo, earth to Planet Tanney, do you read me...?” Barry was waving a hand to get his attention.

“Yeah, sorry. She’s... well, it’s pretty new. Complicated.”

“Complicated nothing,” retorted Barry dismissively. “She got parts, you got parts. She got urges, you got urges. What’s so fuckin’ complicated?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just, she... well, she’s got a history.” Not that she knew what that history was prior to this year. He’d confirmed she didn’t remember ever seeing snow, so it pinned down her disappearance to the last six months or so.

“Wait. You didn’t fall for a perp, did ya?” Barry crossed his arms.

“No, no, she’s clean,” Graham reassured him. Though, sensing he’d need to explain more than that, he improvised, “More of a known associates kind of thing. But she’s clean, and the associates are long gone.”

“Sounds like trouble.”

“She is that.”

“Didn’t think you were the sort to go courting trouble.”

Graham sighed, taking a long pull from his bottle. Then that made him feel guilty, too. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s time I let her go.”

“Fuck, but you give up easy. You and Cynthia been spending time together or something? Things aren’t perfect so you run for the hills?”

“What? No, man. Don’t lump me in with that bitch. I’m only saying—”

“You like being with this girl?”

“Sure I do. Most of the time.”

“Being with this girl means being with this girl, Graham. You either like it or you don’t.”

“I... I think I do.”

“And she’s ready to be with a cop?” He didn’t need to elaborate. It was a unique job, and it took a toll. Some days, that toll got pretty big.

Graham glanced at his ex-partner’s leg brace. Real big.

“She can handle it for sure. She’s not the problem.”

“Then you better figure yourself out then, eh boy-oh?” Barry laughed, but his expression soured quickly. “Goddamn, what I wouldn’t give for a fucking beer.”

“I don’t understand! I did everything you asked, didn’t I? I’ll try harder! Just please, please give me another chance!” Emma whined, tears welling up in those big eyes of hers.

Graham wasn’t risking looking up to see them though, focusing on the clothes he was stuffing into his suitcase. “It’s nothing you did wrong. I can’t be with someone like you. That’s all.”

“But why?” she asked for the tenth time since he’d broken the news. “I’ll be better, I promise! I didn’t ask to be like this! I wanted to be perfect for you! You think I want to be broken? To be useless? I was Master’s favorite, and one bad step and I’m off to the trash heap. Again.” She slumped down to the floor, weeping disconsolately.

She had every reason to be miserable, but it didn’t change things. Graham kept right on repeating that same lie. “You’re going to be fine, Emma. They’ll send you to some doctors, smart doctors, who’ll see if they can’t fix you. Not just your back, but your brain, too. They’ll have you good as new before you know it.”

“You can’t fix what I am!” she howled. “You think I don’t hear you listening to those videos about formatted girls? I know what they say! That it’s hopeless. Irreparable. Pointless to try. Lobotomized.”

“Yeah, well, that doesn’t make what I’ve been doing any fucking better, OK? We’re all doing the best we can for ourselves.”

“You’re doing the best you can for *you*. I don’t *do* anything. I’m an object. I get *done to*. And now you’re throwing me away.”

He glared at her. “Hey, I didn’t make you like this.”

“I didn’t either!” She threw herself at his feet, blubbering incoherently for him to change his mind.

But when he told her to move aside and let him pack, she still obeyed.

The doorbell rang a second time. Whoever it was, they were persistent. The Jehovah's Witnesses and UPS guy only rang it the one time, then deposited their pamphlets or parcels and moved on. Two rings was different. Two rings was new.

"Whatever it is, leave it on the doorstep and I'll get it later!" Barry yelled. He unmuted the TV, but it wasn't ten seconds before it rang a third time.

"Son of a..." It took some effort to get his brace on and stand up. The bell rang twice more while he waited. Whoever this was, they were sure eager to get a taste of the rough side of his tongue. With teeth gritted in pain, he hobbled his way to the front door and threw it open.

"All right, now what the... fuck..."

That was as far as he made it. Standing there on his doorstep was an immensely attractive woman. She was dressed simply in shorts and a t-shirt that were both way too big for her, but they couldn't hide the body beneath it. It was jarring, sitting alone with such ugly thoughts, to suddenly be faced with such beauty.

"Barry Fitzpatrick?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's me," he said guardedly. "Whaddya want?"

"I have something for you."

He looked her over. "You're a little old to be peddling girl scout cookies, ain't ya?"

"I don't know."

Before he could make anything of her response, she withdrew a letter that had been tucked in the waistline of her shorts and thrust it into his hands. He saw his name written on the envelope and was pretty sure he recognized the handwriting.

"What's this?" He looked at the letter front and back.

"A letter. For you."

"Yeah, I can see that. Why's Graham sending you to deliver his mail? You a working girl?"

She cocked her head to the side. "Working girl?"

"Yeah. You know, a hooker? Not even my birthday."

"I'm Emma. That's all."

He paused. "Oh. Yeah, he mentioned you. Didn't say you were..." He looked her over again, but returned his attention to the letter.

"Say I was what?"

"A looker," he said tersely. As the girl broke out in grins, he redirected his attention to the letter, and opened it.

Barry,

I fucked up, and I gotta run. Probably for good. The girl there is Emma. I told you she was my girlfriend, but that's not really it. She's formatted. Remember that

10-54 a few weeks ago? Guy up and left her behind. She's damaged, got scars. He couldn't see past it. I thought I could, but I can't. The girl's busted, and now so am I.

So like I said, I'm leaving. The girl can't be fixed, and I hate to think of her as some toy for a bunch of shrinks at the nuthouse, but maybe that's the best we can do. I dunno. You're a better cop now than I ever was. Go figure. I didn't run with you after that son of a bitch at the Pump & Go, and now here I am running away from you on account of some other asshole. I know I let you down. I let myself down. But not any more. I'm done. I didn't know what to do with her, but I know you will. You're the real thing, Barry.

I'm sorry. I'll try to do better, wherever I wind up. I couldn't do much worse.

Your partner,

Graham Tanney

He read it twice before looking up. The girl, who'd been so all-fired impatient to get him to answer the door, was now standing there perfectly still, watching him read. "Guess you'd better come in," he said.

"I can get that for you," she offered quickly, taking hold of the door. Trying to get himself out of the door frame without letting it slam in her face was harder than it looked, so, after a moment, he conceded and let her. She followed closely behind him, not quite hovering, but he was unsteady enough these days that he understood her not trusting his balance.

"You look like you're hurting," she observed.

"I've been worse. You should see the other guy." He slumped into his chair with a heavy groan. "Sorry. I'm doing PT, but it's not going very well."

"PT?"

He'd read the same stuff Graham had about formatting, and he understood the poor girl's cluelessness. "Physical therapy. I got some exercises I'm supposed to do a bunch of times per day, but they don't tell you what to do when you hurt too bad to try them."

She nodded. "I had exercises to do, after I hurt myself. They hurt a lot. But Master said I had to, so I did."

"Graham?"

She shook her head. "No. Master. Before Graham. He made me like this." She pointed to her head. "Then one day I fell and hurt myself, and... that was that."

"Ah. So then this guy abandoned you, eh?"

"Yes. I'm broken. Useless. I'll never be what I once was."

"Tell me about it."

She cocked her head to the side. "Is that what happened to you? You fell, and Graham abandoned you?"

“Graham, my wife, my whole damn life abandoned me,” he said, allowing himself one long sigh before he pulled himself together. “And I didn’t fall.”

“May I ask what happened, then?”

He gestured for her to sit, and she did. “I was a cop. Graham was my partner. One night we get a call, robbery in progress at this gas station on Elm. So we run out there, right? As we’re getting there, guy’s running out the front door, gun in his hand. We’re still readying firearms when the asshole takes off, plows this big ugly SUV right into us.”

Emma listened, rapt. Nobody had ever taken the time to tell her a story before. “Our car’s totaled, and he’s limping east on Elm but I can see one of his wheels is about to fall right the fuck off, right? Now normally, safety’s the priority. Chasing bad guys comes second. Only I look through the glass in the door of the Pump & Go and I see this cashier, just this tiny Asian woman. She’s lying there, and I can tell she’s not getting up.”

“So you and Graham chased the bad guy.”

“Yeah. Well, no. Graham says he’s gotta check the scene. Now me, I’m already radioing for an EMT, and he knows as well as I do the ambulance station’s only a few blocks over on Willow, and he sees the same thing I do through that window. We’re both climbing out the passenger window, the car’s wrecked that bad, and I’m yelling for him to come after me. That SUV ain’t gonna make it to the end of the block, and we can get him. But he says he’s gotta look after this dead woman, and he goes inside. So I’m on my own.

“Sure enough, his tire hadn’t even fallen off when he rams into a parked car. I know how it is. You get that adrenaline going and you can’t drive for shit. We got training for that, but this guy’s just got instinct. He hops out on foot, and then it’s just a race. I remember Graham joking about how the tubby son of a bitch should’ve done more cardio. And I remember thinking I should’ve done less.”

“Cardio? I’m not sure I understand.”

“Oh, just being funny. Or trying to. See, the guy forgot his gun in his car when it wrecked, but still, I’m not about to open fire on a guy dressed in black running down a sidewalk at night. So I run after him, catch him a block or so later and tackle his ass to the ground. He didn’t have a gun, but the asshole had himself a little switchblade and... well, he went to town on me before I could get him subdued. Lucky for me the ambulance saw somebody flagging them down to save my sorry ass before they even made it to the Pump & Go. I might’ve bled out.”

Emma grimaced. “What about Graham? Did he save the woman?”

“No. Like I’d told him, she was dead before we got there. Probably dead before she hit the ground – shot her right in the face.”

“But you caught the man. That’s so brave. And so terrible.”

“Yeah, it’s something, all right.” He looked her over, remembering who he was talking to. “But hey, you probably got a story just like it and you don’t even remember it, so don’t go using up all your pity on my sorry ass.”

She smiled, if faintly. “If it was anything like that, I’m glad I don’t remember it.”

Barry nodded, slowly returning her smile. “So now what do I do with you?”

“Whatever you want,” she answered.

“Well what do *you* want? And be honest with me. None of this servile bullshit. I’m immune to flattery, even from a pretty little thing like you.”

Emma slouched forward, considering. “I don’t know. Any time someone’s asked me what I wanted before, they didn’t want to hear the real answer, so I just told them the most pleasing answer I could think of. I’ve never really had to think about what I want.”

“Well... think about it.”

So she thought about it. And thought some more. Barry was beginning to wonder if she was going to respond when finally, in her small voice, she said, “I want to be perfect again.”

Emma was surprised to hear a laughter from her newest master, and looked up quizzically. She had expected a response of either disinterest or disdain. Not laughter. “You and me both, girly. From where I’m sitting, you look pretty damn perfect. What’s the matter with you?”

Emma quickly stood, removing Graham’s donated t-shirt as she answered. “You see these scars? I fell down some stairs. They had to cut me open. Part of my spine has a piece of metal attached to it now.” There was no shame on her face, however, until her back was to him.

Seeing this young woman take off her shirt, there was a moment where Barry was more man than person, but only a moment. “That? That’s what’s got you so glum? That’s nothing.” At that, Barry lifted his own shirt, revealing the several scars criss-crossing his abdomen. As her eyes widened, he forced himself to his feet and showed her the back, where he knew it was a good deal worse. “You can barely see the scars from where they operated on my guts – couple micro incisions, then they do everything with these fancy tools. Sure doesn’t make anything work any better though, I’ll tell you that.”

She looked intrigued. “You have even more scars than I do. On the outside, anyway. From what Graham told me about being formatted, my brain is every bit as damaged as your guts.”

“Oh, so now you want my pity, do ya?”

Emma turned to face him, folding her arms beneath her breasts. It felt strange, this small show of defiance, but he didn’t seem to mind. “My master left me because of it. He cast me aside, abandoned me.”

“Yeah, well so did my wife.”

“My second master left me as well.”

“And he left me too, sweet cheeks. That buys ya nothing.”

“My spine’s range of motion was reduced by almost ninety percent.”

“I shit my pants whenever I sneeze.”

“I have no feeling between my shoulder blades and the crack of my bottom.”

“Oh come on, I *wish* I had no feeling!”

“This injury ruined my life!” she cried. It wasn’t a shout, quite; she could only shout when she was in the midst of being fucked, per Master’s orders. But she spoke as loudly as she could let herself.

“Hey, you came to the right place, then. I lost my job, my wife, my partner, and now I gotta figure out what the hell to do with the sex slave some asshole left on my doorstep. I swear, I oughta...” His eyes squeezed shut for a long moment. “Son of a fuckin’ bitch!”

Emma studied him. “Did you shit your pants?”

“Look who’s suddenly Miss Perceptive. Fuck. I gotta go clean this up. I’ll be back in a while.”

She hurried to help him to his feet, and when his balance shifted, threw herself under one of his heavy arms to support him. “Can I help you?”

“Help me? Sweetie, this isn’t exactly gonna be a romp in the hay, understand? Don’t think you were trained for this sort of thing.”

“I don’t care. I want to help you, if you’ll let me.”

It was his turn to study her, but her eyes were a mirror. Or maybe just so like his own he couldn’t tell them apart from his reflection.

“All right. Suit yourself.”

Emma was never turned over to the station. Wasn't right, Barry reasoned, treating the poor girl like a piece of evidence to be filed away and forgotten. To the outside world, Emma was his nurse and physical therapist. In time, she became his girlfriend, and in more time, Emma happily regained a surname when they were married before a justice of the peace.

There were adjustments to be made, of course. She took charge of his recovery, making sure he did all of his prescribed exercises in addition to copious spent time in the human gymnasium that was her body. He took charge of her education, eventually enrolling her in GED classes once she'd re-learned how to read and write. Both of them regained strength every week. Emma announced that she intended to have her IUD removed so they could start a family; Barry acquiesced, and took up his old chief's offer to come back on as a detective to provide for them.

Their scars never went away, but they faded as week by week, they grew stronger together. Soon, it became common for their neighbors to see Barry and Emma walking hand in hand around the neighborhood. If they weren't fast, anyone looking would only assume it was because they looked too contented with one another's presence to ever want to rush.