

Creeps

Chapter Four

All things considered, Stacey took the news fairly well. Kira's presence in the waiting room kept her from screaming at him, which gave him room to clarify that it had, in spite of everything, worked out surprisingly well. A second round of not screaming followed, its volume suppressed by further exploration of the benefits of what had transpired, followed by what was more loud muttering than not screaming. With the wind out of Stacey's piratical sails, she finally let him bask in what she acknowledged was actually rather good news.

"So... you got her down to her underwear for you, and...?"

"And... what?" Martin arched his brow.

"Come on, give a girl a teaser."

"Oh! Really? You seriously wanna know what she looked like?"

Stacey sneered. "Why 'really?' I'm not sure if you heard why I arranged to have you hypnotize her, but yeah, I'm curious."

"Oh. Yeah, that makes sense. I dunno, I just figured, you know, you'd seen her in her underwear before. In my head, I guess it feels like you see hot girls in their underwear all the time."

"Sure, totally. We're having a panty party at DAT house this weekend, actually. I'm not sure if I'll go, though. Growing up with Kira, sitting around in our bras and panties all the time, you just sort of got sick of it after a while, you know? What am I saying, of course you know. You have siblings, right? What kind of underwear do they wear when you guys get together?"

"All right, all right, geez, point taken. She was wearing a gray sports bra, and these sheer blue panties with kittens on them."

The leer that crept onto Stacey's face as she channeled his simplistic description was a sight he had long missed. Her eyes slid closed. Did she notice her—

"Quit staring at my nipples."

Yeah, she noticed. He tried not to.

"So I talked to Kira about goals, like I said. Now that we're finally getting things moving, maybe we should talk more specifically about your goals for all this."

Her eyes slipped grudgingly open. "How do you mean."

"I mean, what's your endgame? Yes, I know you want her willing to sleep with you."

"Not willing. Wanting. And to *fuck* me," she clarified.

"Crass. But yeah, don't worry, you're not going to wind up with a sister always bugging you for some quality naptime. But is that it? Just fuck you?"

“What do you mean, ‘just fuck me?’ Why is that not a sufficient goal?”

Martin shot her an incredulous look. “Seriously? We spent months watching hypnosis porn together, and you don’t have any specific things you want from her aside from sex?”

“Like what? Don’t complicate things, Mesmer. I don’t need her to bark like a trained seal or pace back and forth like a zombie.”

“No, I mean...” He shook his head. Had she really not thought this through any more intently than this? He’d spent a whole year imagining what might happen when Stacey finished her conditioning, and had spent the months since then imagining their next coupling. “So for starters, do you want to do it more than once?”

“What? Of course I do. You thought I wanted her to want to have sex with me exactly one time and then never again?”

“OK. So then, do you want her, say, in a state of constant craving, fixated? Do you want her to switch on and off between her normal self and her I-want-to-fuck-Stacey self with some kind of trigger, like you snap your fingers and suddenly she’s crawling under the table and pouncing on your box? Do you want her submissive, more take charge, or simply left natural?”

“Left natural is probably bad, homophobe that she is,” Stacey muttered. “OK, so I see where you’re going. I didn’t realize you had this down to a science. No offense, but it felt like you were winging it last year, taking what you could when you could. Didn’t know I could request a custom job.”

“I tell you what. Why don’t we get on with the main attraction, and while you’re under, I’ll see what’s lurking down there. Get straight answers, unvarnished. Gay straight answers, I mean.”

“I... Yeah. I don’t know. No offense, but that’s kind of personal, isn’t it? Asking someone their innermost fantasies?”

Martin held out his hands as if to ask if she were serious. “What on earth could you possibly be holding closer to that incredible chest of yours than what you’ve already told me? Short of necrophilia, I think you’re pretty safe.” Still, he took her reticence as a good sign. There had still been no way of knowing whether his trances were legitimate or a façade on her part. That she was nervous could mean she’d been letting him in. Though it could also mean she’d been so caught off guard by his request that she’d forgotten she was faking. Alas, he was a hypnotist and not a diviner.

“Yeah, I guess it couldn’t hurt. Give us something new to talk about, at least. After last spring, it feels weird to keep coming here and not walking out with new mantras and freaky urges.”

“Well today we’re only going after existing freaky urges. Now lie down and let’s get going.”

“All right. Let me set up the cam.”

Martin sighed. "Is that really necessary?"

Stacey folded her arms imperiously. "Do you have something to hide?"

"No! But I do find it more than a little insulting that someone who recently chewed me out for not having time to come in and do these sessions manages to find time to rewatch them."

His line had been crafted to elicit a response, something to show him whether or not she really was re-watching them. Before, she'd used their mere existence to keep him in line. Presently, however, he learned nothing.

"Why don't you let me worry about how I spend my time."

"Sure, but... Look, I don't care. Record if you want. But you know as well as anyone that I honored my part of our bargain last year start to finish. If all of the sudden you think I'm out to pull a fast one on you somehow, I guess it's just sort of hurtful. But whatever."

"Honored your part of the bargain? Like when you trained me to let you grope me, pinch me, dress me up like a hooker, talk about me like I was a sex toy without me batting an eyelash? Like that?"

"You said, make you want to fuck me. If there had been a way to go from lesbian to cock worshiper, I'd have done that. It was a process. But you know, forget I said anything. Set it up, and let's get on with it."

Martin sighed and produced his notebook. In case she happened to be especially eagle-eyed, everything on it was the boring, half-hearted programming he'd been doing with her up to that point. It wasn't difficult to maintain his sullen glare; her recording *was* rather insulting. Still, it was a bluff start to finish. If he couldn't get rid of the damned camera this way, he'd find another. He'd considered that—

"Fine. But watch yourself. I don't want to have to blow your nuts off." His face brightened – not an act, either. She interceded however. "And don't make some douchey guy joke about blowing your nuts or whatever."

"Wouldn't dream of it. Shall we?"

Stacey gave a long last look at her camera case, then tucked it back into her purse. "All right. Let's talk about my custom job."

Had Martin Manning been an athlete rather than a hypnotist, he would have spiked the ball in the end zone or performed a gaudy celebratory dance. As a hypnotist, he celebrated his victory in the more traditional way of permitting to grow out his wooly eyebrows another half centimeter. That camera had been one of the core stumbling blocks to his dream of a Stacey who wanted to go on fucking him in perpetuity. Now, it was out of the picture – no pun intended.

Then it was time to get to work. His inductions with Stacey had continued to favor the long form rather than his old shortcut methods. The rationale was that the more time devoted to it, the more her resistance would slip, worn down by boredom and

its cousin tedium. She'd been put into a trance too many times by now to have her brain not want to do what it had become accustomed to doing, to give up control and bring forth the subconscious. So long as he didn't do anything to put her back up. The last thing he needed was for Stacey to establish a fresh reservoir of resistance. That was why he'd forewarned her of his agenda, and it was why he meant to keep precisely to it. Absolutely no deviations.

Once she was under, he began with the usual stuff first. If it was a sham, she ought to expect it, and not push back.

"I trust Martin Manning. I look forward to having sex with Kira and Martin Manning. I know I will enjoy my threesome with Kira and Martin Manning. If Martin Manning asks for my help with Kira and it doesn't cost me anything, I will consider it. I won't mind sharing Kira with Martin Manning when we have our threesome. I trust Martin Manning."

It was almost as enjoyable to hear her say it as it was to sit back and imagine it happening. He gave her a good while of that. The monotony of the repetition was on par with the monotone in her voice as she said it. One of these weeks, he'd need to arrange some kind of test to see if she were indeed entranced or not, but for now, it seemed to hurt nothing to treat his sessions like they were mantra hour. Nowhere near as good as having her do it to herself a hundred times a day, but at worst it did no harm.

His eyes flickered to the door to the waiting area, where Kira had told him she'd be working on the readings for this week's lecture. She'd complimented his new curtains then, cheeks flushing slightly. Her mind became legible, and in large print, in that moment. He read there a lengthy paragraph of relief that at least Stacey wouldn't be able to look in any more, with a brief aside of mortification at the specter of what might have happened if Stacey had done so during her little strip tease.

Kira couldn't know that the curtains were actually there to prevent her from seeing rather than being seen. He'd found some sound-dampening stuff to put up around the door as well, applied similar to weather stripping. His persuasive speech to reassure her that the extra privacy was to protect her rather than give him a secure space in which to get her clothes off again was written and rehearsed. A panhandler Martin had encountered near the office had accepted \$20 to accompany him into the office to help him test the soundproofing, with a \$50 bonus offered if he could accurately repeat what Martin was saying on the other side of the door. It had taken a low shout before the man earned his bonus.

Once she saw his upgrade, even Stacey had gone out of her way to compliment the effort. There shouldn't be much of any chance now of someone's ears perking up when their sister spoke their name in the next room. One less thing. Two less things, if one counted the cessation of recordings.

For Martin, it enabled the ensuing discussion to transpire with minimal anxiety. At last, he gave Stacey permission to stop, and got to the task he'd promised to discuss with her.

"Stacey?"

"Mm."

"I want to talk to you about Kira. About what you want to be able to do with her once I'm done with her."

"Mmm."

Martin licked his lips in spite of himself. It was the first time that third, deliciously lingering *m* had graced his ears in months. Kira was too free with hers by half. Stacey's were always, always a treat.

"Did you ever make wish lists? For Christmas, birthdays, if you win the lotto, et cetera?"

"Mm."

"Did you get everything you wanted?"

"No. Asked for a puppy every year. Never got one."

"That's too bad." Then he halted. "Wait, what about Raider?"

"Kira's stupid humpy slobbery mutt doesn't count."

"All right." He could empathize. His little sister's cat had been his equivalent. Damned thing only had eyes for its owner, and only had claws for Martin. "So yeah, you got *some* of your wish list, though, right?"

"Mm."

"Good. Now that's how we're going to talk about Kira. We'll talk about what you want, and some of it I'll be able to get, and some I might not, and that's OK. Right now, we're just making a wish list. That's all. So everything is on the table. Whatever you want, you can ask for, because you know it can't all happen. OK?"

"Mm. Yeah. OK."

"So let me start with some direct questions, and then we'll see if you're up for a brainstorm. Question one: do you want to be able to repeatedly have sex with her, or do you just want to be able to do it once?"

It was Stacey's turn to lick her lips. "Repeatedly. Want to fuck her ten times a day. Forever."

A tall order, especially from someone who seemed to have slipped out of half of her programming in a few short hypno-free months. Someday they'd have to have a talk about what, if any on-going involvement he was meant to have, but not today. That was a hyperbolic version of the answer he'd expected, though. So far, no surprises.

"Great. Now I know you're going to want to be with her once before we have our threesome. As you know, I've agreed to that request."

"Mhm. God, yes. Can't wait."

“Yes. Right. So my question is, do you want me to be on-hand, or nearby, when that happens, so in case something goes wrong—”

“No. I want her all to myself. Just her and me. All mine.”

“All right.” He thought he’d talk to her about it later, but for now, he made a mental note to attempt to explicitly groom Kira to want to fuck Stacey, as opposed to suggesting that Kira want to do what he told her to do, which might include fucking Stacey. A fine line, but given her resistance to the incestuous act, it might not be wise to presume she would fuck Stacey on command her first time out.

“Would you prefer Kira embrace bisexuality broadly, or indulge in it only in the case of yourself?”

A pause, a shrug. “Don’t care. Whatever’s best.”

“What kind of lover would you like Kira to be? Give me some adjectives.”

A smile so lascivious it was almost off-putting – almost – blossomed on those plump pink lips. “Eager. Desperate. Groveling.” She considered a moment, then added only a single word. “Penitent.”

“Uh... penitent? What does that mean?”

“Regretful. Apologetic.”

Martin rolled his eyes. “No, I know what the word means,” *you pedantic bitch*, “but what is a penitent lover? Penitent for what?”

Fidget.

In that space between question and answer, during his knee-jerk reaction to a twitch of Stacey’s fingers, Martin sucked in a breath, choking down a squeal of delight.

That her fingers gave that spastic little jolt should have been insignificant. She’d done it a thousand times. Early on, it could be triggered by something as minor as when he addressed the girl by her first name. By the time the two were winding down in May, it had come as a result of only his most aggressive techniques, breaking down the lesbian’s resistance and warming her up for his cock. It was a useful warning sign, and Martin had encouraged it. Sometimes it was the heads up he needed to back off of something before it woke her up early.

Here, clearly he was coming close to her thin red line warding him off from her history with Kira. Familiar territory, if frustrating. Yet in terms of how anxious this one small fidget made him, it was no more frightful than a fire drill. Routine.

That wasn’t what had made him gasp.

It was that she didn’t know she did that.

Stacey Reeves was actually, truly, fully, in a trance. It was real. A minor gesture he hadn’t even noticed the first couple dozen times he’d seen it. No way she could fake that sign. She had her recordings – or she had once; that was terabytes of video, so he doubted she’d kept it all – but she’d admitted to him that she only used them to copy his

induction. She wouldn't be watching them for signs she was faking when she obviously knew she hadn't been.

Stacey Reeves was in a bona fide trance.

He was so thrown off by it that he had to ask her to repeat her answer, and only after she had did he even remember his question. "She knows." That was all she had to say on the subject. Apparently Stacey's subconscious didn't think he needed to know why Kira owed that apology. It sounded like it had something to do with the lurking ugliness of what Stacey called Kira's homophobia and what Kira called Stacey being a freak. Come to think of it, it might be exactly that.

For now, though, he'd learned what he wanted to know. It may well be that Stacey had only let herself be fully entranced because she'd been excited for this discussion topic, and that she had bought into his bullshit argument that her subconscious might hold useful information. Next week, she might go back to faking. (If she'd even been faking, but as far as Martin was concerned, if there was a chance, then it had to be treated as a certainty.)

At last, confirmation that he was getting through to her. Martin glanced at the clock; still lots of time to go, but none to waste. As much as he'd been looking forward to hearing Stacey fantasize at length to him about Kira, there were now bigger fish. Much as he might prefer to dive in after them, however, transitions mattered. Too sudden a shift could rattle her.

So yes, he would deviate. A little. Only a little, though. As much as she'd let him. But no more.

"What would you like our threesome to be like?"

"Quick," she answered. Quickly.

His lips twisted irritably. "Right, but like, what will we *do*?"

Fidget. "Sex. I'll have sex with you, then Kira. Me first. Feels dirty other way."

Hardly the explicit tale he had been hoping for, but a testament to why these sessions had been necessary to begin with. Yes, even if it was some assembly-line bada bing bada boom like she suggested, it would be incredible on his end. There was no such thing as boring sex with women this hot, especially with the knowledge in the back of his mind that he'd made it happen with his art. Still, it was disappointing how little imagination was being exhibited on the subject.

"You sound like you're not looking forward to it."

"Don't have to. Gonna happen either way."

Martin appreciated that she had embraced her obligation, but he wasn't looking to settle for obligation. "But no excitement for my being there?"

Fidget. "Cost of doing business."

It sounded like that was how she'd been rationalizing the necessity to herself. "Did you not enjoy our last time together?" He knew for a fact she had at the time, though memory had a way of putting itself in a twist over time.

"Yes. I mean..." *Fidget*. "No."

"No? Why not?"

Fidget. The frequency wasn't alarming yet, but this was the most aggressive questioning he'd done thus far. Not surprising that she didn't like that he was veering off track from what he'd told her to expect. "Asked if I didn't enjoy it. Said no. I didn't not enjoy it."

He worked it through in his head for a moment, but shook it off. "Oh. Well... that's good. Then why are you so disinterested in doing it again?"

Fidget. "No."

Martin fidgeted himself that time. "What? No what?"

"No. Can't tell."

Can't? Had he found the two most secretive sisters in all of creation or what? Still, a brainwashed lesbian espousing lukewarm interest in men seemed rational on the surface, to the extent that it wasn't all insane. No sense pounding on doors she didn't want opened when he didn't even know if there was anything on the other side. For the time being, he moved on. "That's OK, Stacey. I won't try to make you say or do anything you don't want to."

She let out a small sigh. "Mm."

"I want to make sure everything works out the way you want it, though. To do that, I need to understand your likes and your dislikes. All right?"

"Mmm." Stacey was expecting him to return to the subject of Kira. She was about to be disappointed.

"Do you ever miss any of the things we did last spring?"

Fidget. Fidget. "Can't tell."

What the hell was this secrecy? "Do you still watch any of that porn?"

"Mmm."

That was something, at least. "Do you still use the dildo I made for you?"

Fidget fidget. Before she answered, he was already throwing up his hands. "Let me guess, you can't tell me."

"Mm."

Time and again, that was her answer. Her agitation didn't seem to be amping up. It was like she was answering the same question, hardly more annoyed to fend him off the tenth time than the first.

"Did you like dressing up and undressing for me?"

"Did you like when I touched you?"

"Did you like being horny all the time?"

“Did you like when I told you how much I love that hot little body of yours?”

That last earned him another thin smile before it crashed into the same barricade. The clock on the wall told him time was running down. Tempting as it was to push until he found some crack to provide a glimpse of what was on the other side, his discipline came back to him. Nothing good came of groping about in the dark.

Well, no. Poor choice of phrasing, that, yet the intended point was nevertheless valid. Martin needed time to reflect and plan. The timeline today may be short, but their overall time was ample. After a few calming breaths, he submitted to the necessity of another transition.

“Stacey, remind me of the point of these sessions.”

“To get mentally ready for our threesome. To sell the lie to Kira that I’m your patient.”

“Right. Let’s focus on that first one. How do you think we’re doing?”

The sorority girl’s slender shoulders shrugged. “Meh.”

“You don’t want it to be as fun as possible?”

“Mm. Yeah.” But an unspoken *I mean, I guess* was there.

Martin disregarded the apathy. “You know, there’s a tool we have that might help.”

“Mm?”

“Do you remember the mantras?”

Fidget fidget. Fidget fidget fidget. One hand floated up and was wrung out like it had been stung by something. He heard a *crack* as her wrist flicked and twisted spastically. *Fidget fidget fidget.* “Mm.”

Martin jerked back. Her eyelashes had fluttered like she was about to wake up, fingers wringing themselves like they were out to get each other. Why had *that* question set her off? He really knew so much less about this woman than he needed to. For the third? time that session (Fifth? Tenth?), he abandoned his plan and improvised. Fuck everything. This whole hour was one giant slalom of deviations. May as well ride it out at this point.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to ask you to do them.”

Fidget. Not stillness, but much calmer. “Mm.”

“Since we agree we’re not going to do them for now,” Martin casually slipped in the plural as a qualifier, but hurried to the point quickly, “why don’t you tell me why not? Then I’ll tell you why not.”

She frowned, shook her head. A rope of black hair drooped off the couch cushion and down towards the floor. “Nm. You first.”

Hmm. His hope had been to let her voice her reasoning and either agree or move on like he’d never offered to reciprocate, depending on what Stacey said. He hadn’t expected to need an actual reason. His mind raced in search of palatable bullshit.

“Because you told me you don’t want to, and I respect your wishes,” he said finally.

That brought her smile back, and she sighed herself deeper into the sofa, a portrait of a mollified woman. “Mm. You’re too nice.”

Notably, Martin Manning was not too nice; she’d simply made him too good of an offer, and that generosity predisposed him to acquiescence. “What about you, Stacey? Why aren’t we doing the mantras?”

“Work too well,” she murmured. “Can’t tell you more.”

For the remainder of the session, Martin drilled her on repetitions of that very claim. *Martin Manning’s mantras work well.* Alliterative. He stressed his name there in case Stacey began – or had continued – using mantras of her own again.

Meanwhile, it was Stacey’s words that echoed around in his head, over and over. By the time she returned the following week, there was a plan again, and this time, there were no deviations.

An arguably wise but tautologically quotable man once said, “When hanging a stinging insect, move very slowly.” Martin had been stung. Fortunately, Kira was not the sort to die after delivering a single sting. For the next little while, he avoided anything even remotely suspicious. There was no telling whether Kira possessed her sister’s cunning, feigning submission so as to discover what he was about. The girl may seem more innocent, but it was a big risk. The simple fact that she had snapped out of a trance half-naked once could mean a future spontaneous awakening at the slightest provocation.

Without knowing what else to do, Martin filled time by doing his ostensible job. More or less. The girl had goals, so if he couldn’t have her slobbering on his knob, he may as well build her trust in him and his craft.

Her weight loss was a real pursuit now, hitting the gym and watching her carbs. Dean’s list? He helped her find study groups for every one of her classes, and personally tutored her after those sessions when Stacey wasn’t waiting. The bit about calling her folks he ignored, counting it as a victimless crime. Considering the people had brought a Stacey Reeves into the world, perhaps they weren’t the best influences for young women anyway.

As for Emma the roommate, he was less straightforward in helping her with her issues, though he did put an end to the conflict. It was a simple matter of promoting direct confrontation of every grievance no matter how slight; learning to stand her ground where she felt she was in the right; and cultivating a mindset of allowing interactions to speak for themselves. e.g. When she told him about Emma’s habit of leaving dirty laundry on the floor overnight, he prodded her to throw away one article every time it happened. A few weeks later, a deeply tranced Kira giggled to herself over Emma’s tantrum at discovering on her laundry day that almost all of her underwear had grown legs. She accused Kira, but the reliable court of public opinion favored the hot popular girl as always, and soon the whole dorm was alive with the rumor Martin concocted for his patient that Emma had given up so many pairs of panties as trophies to guys she’d fucked that she had none left.

The week after that, Emma threw in the towel and demanded a roommate transfer from Penderdast’s hall director. Despite a handful of offers from Kira’s friends, she accepted her therapist’s advice and enjoyed having the room to herself. Then she thanked him for all his help.

In his unmerited defense, Emma’s persecution wasn’t malicious. It was only that when one’s overarching goal was, well, evil, its pursuit tended to inflict collateral damage. He no more meant to cause Emma pain than he did Stacey or Kira. The goal, however, was not happily ever after. It was to fuck the Reeves girls. Other considerations were secondary.

All things considered, Kira wasn't making things hard on him. Yes, she'd hinted that their strange encounter had been in some small way a turn-on. She had also, however, made it very clear that whatever hot-for-teacher kinks she harbored did not outshine her embarrassment and discomfort at being spied on without her consent. So he didn't ogle her, didn't come near her, didn't permit any more hugging after sessions, and absolutely didn't use the word "pleasure," ever.

What he did do was bid her to continue down the path she'd begun. Amidst all the self-help, she spent half or more of each session reaffirming a few ideas he considered jumping off points. Nothing far-fetched or controversial. It was almost so banal she might have acknowledged it while fully alert. Trust, enjoyment of coming to his office, and an abiding belief in the success of his work on her.

It was a lot like religion. If one didn't subscribe to it, it didn't do anything. A believer, however, could be fed all manner of ideas that flew in the face of reason and logic. Martin even intended to extend the metaphor to fucking his parishioners.

The process wasn't sexy, at least not beyond his hypno fetish. It wasn't in the same league as his achievements back in the spring, but even so, it was progress, however incremental. Kira repeatedly reassured him that his efforts were working and appreciated. Every time he woke her up, she awakened with verbally expressed shock at how good she felt. At least until she grew self-conscious about her effusiveness, at which point she simply blushed a little and made up some questions about classwork.

By the time Emma was out of the picture, it was time for fall break, roughly a quarter of the school year over. It was right after fall break he'd begun with Stacey the year before, so comparisons were inevitable. Overall, he felt pretty good about things. Regaining ground with Stacey, reasoning his way into some of the blind spots she attempted to impose upon him. Kira was easily hypnotized, bought into the program, and was increasingly willing to act on his suggestions. At his direction, she had evicted her roommate, aced her midterms, and was down twelve pounds from when they'd started. All things considered, it was excellent progress.

Kira went home for break. Stacey did not, though she did use it as a reprieve from hypnosis sessions since there was no need to chauffeur her sister. Martin's parents visited, both incredibly impressed at his entrepreneurial spirit. Less so at his sweltering attic abode, but his father slapped him too hard on the back and aptly reminded him that Bill Gates had started out in a garage. They came and went the same day, parting with the highest hopes they'd had for their son's future in years on account of not realizing his client roster could be counted on their collected right thumbs, and neither patient paid for his time. After a long weekend spent touching up lectures and finalizing his midterm reports for his students, classes and therapy sessions resumed. Kira was on boyfriend number four by then, having ditched #3 right before break and picked up a new one the night she returned to Lakeview.

The Tuesday following fall break delivered two meetings of great consequence.

It was his day to meet with both Reeves girls, ergo his favorite day of the week. Stacey's session came first. More work on stressing the efficacy of his mantras, some work on his new project, and then sitting back and titillating himself listening to her increasingly graphic depictions of what she wanted to do with Kira.

"Mmm. Love her tits. Always been a boob girl. Want to watch her crawl back and forth. See them swinging underneath her. Lie down and have her crawl over my face. Feel them slap my cheeks as she passes. Do pushups and drop them in and out of my mouth."

Her thighs rubbed together beneath her skirt. Martin let himself walk to the end of the sofa, helped himself to a better view for a moment, then retook his seat. She hadn't raised the issue of recording since he'd guilted her out of it, which had meant copious time spent admiring her sweet little body from every angle.

"What else would you like me to let you do to her?" he prompted.

"Mmm. Dress her up in sluttiest little outfits. Bought so many for her last year once I saw you were doing it. Maid. Remember my maid? Would barely hold them in. Watch her jiggle around in it cleaning my room. Your office, too. Skirt so short. Grope her ass while she works. 'I'm so sorry, Stacey. Please suck my titties, Stacey.' Mmmm."

So far, Stacey hadn't *quite* breached the line into open masturbation during their sessions, and that day was no exception. It wasn't far off, though. It had been easy over the past couple months to let his fantasies favor Kira. It would require a professional hotness assessor to distinguish them objectively. From Martin's perspective, he'd already had Stacey and Kira was new, so it was natural to favor the younger Reeves more prominently in his fantasies. Except then, Stacey had become his live action erotica narrator, and while he couldn't be sure, he thought he might be nudging her back towards some of her older habits. Or maybe she was just dressing a little hotter for fun. She could have a new girlfriend to look nice for, for all he knew. It certainly wasn't anything he could take verifiable credit for, but he was glad for it nevertheless.

Kira's apologies, often coupled with pleas for mercy (where "mercy" was usually code for being used like a sex doll) were a common theme in Stacey's narratives, but she'd never elaborated on the why.

"We are going to have such a good time," she murmured during her swagger out of his office. Martin was having a good time merely watching her go, skirt swishing side to side with every swaying step.

Kira came in next.

"How was your break, Professor Manning?"

"Pretty good. My folks visited, which was nice. Haven't seen them in a while. How about yours?"

“It was so fun! Weirdly, I thought I’d appreciate a break from studying more than I did, but honestly, with your help, everything has felt so *easy*. But yeah, I got to see all my friends from back home, which was awesome, and my friend Elena is preggers and gonna get married in December, also awesome, and my cousin Chelsea who got married summer before last is expecting too, which is crazy awesome. I was one of her bridesmaids! Wanna see? I think I looked really cute.”

“Actually I’ve already seen,” he said by reflex.

They both reacted with some apprehension to his admission. Thankfully he covered quickly, and equally thankfully the truth was adequate as explanation. “Sorry. It’s just – I’m assuming it’s the same ones your sister showed me once last year? I vaguely recall her showing me some bridesmaids photos, and though I obviously didn’t know you then, you looked so much like her I guess I assumed you were sisters even without the introduction. Hopefully that’s not a breach of confidentiality. I just didn’t want you thinking I was... you know, creeping on my patient or something.”

She chuckled, but looked relieved. “So Stacey’s the creep? No surprise there. But yeah, anyway, there’s your update then. Chelsea is four months along, and just now told the extended family. I found out even before my mom and dad. I’m so happy for her. She’s gonna be a great mom.”

“That’s great. Congratulations? I’m never sure what the right words are for someone telling me someone else’s good news. But pretend I said the right words?”

“I’ll tell her my hypnotherapist sends his best.” She grinned. “Say, speaking of, not to be greedy or anything, but... can we?” Without waiting for confirmation, Kira assumed the position, sliding the throw pillow behind her head and wriggling down onto her back.

“Greedy?” Martin asked while pivoting to turn on the white noise.

“I mean... I dunno. Just... OK, don’t feel weird or anything, but I really missed this. No joke, but I actually sorta had a hard time sleeping in my own bed. Then I finally had to close my eyes and pretend I was on your couch. Is that weird?”

“Oh, who’s to say what’s weird. Now go ahead and close your eyes, Kira, and we’ll get to it.”

She clapped her hands giddily, then rested them on her belly. “Mm. Let’s.”

On they went. Her eagerness to begin persuaded him to employ the abbreviated induction to maximize time. Minutes later, Kira, in a skirt as tight as Stacey’s had been billowy, was breathing slowly on his sofa, awaiting his manipulation. Someday, he’d fuck those mouth-watering tits while her sister sucked on them. For now, though, he picked up where he left off. She seemed to be in a good mood today; maybe he’d try to nudge her a little farther.

First, however, came the basics. Trust, enjoyment, and efficacy. Rinse and repeat. “Kira, repeat after me. Hypnosis works well for me.”

“Hypnosis works well for me.”

“Now say that ten more times.”

Martin opened his phone, scrolling further and further down through Kira’s instagram until he found where she’d posted a subset of those wedding pictures of her cousin’s. Her and Stacey in matching, incredible bridesmaid dresses. The bride, Chelsea, had tits even bigger than Kira’s. It was objectively too much cleavage for tasteful presentation, which was just the right amount for him.

“Repeat after me. I like coming here.”

“I... I like coming here.”

He nodded. “Ten more times.”

He zoomed in on that cleavage, despite the presence of a not inconsiderable amount of it visible in the V-neck of her tight autumn sweater on the couch before him.

He didn’t look up, leaving behind the wedding photos for a few pics he’d favorited from their summer travels. “Repeat after me. My therapist is helping me lose weight and keep it off.”

“My therapist is helping me lose weight and keep it off.”

“Ten more times.”

A shot of Kira and Stacey standing on a pier, the former in a green one-piece with glistening cleavage spilling out of the top, the latter leaning over a railing in a blue bikini she’d worn to his office a couple months before that photo had been taken. She held a fishing rod in hand. It had over 12,000 likes. What did it do to one’s psyche to know *that* many people wanted their approval of her swimwear on record? No wonder these girls had such issues.

“Repeat after me. My therapist can work wonders on my body.”

“My therapist can work wonders on my body.”

Whoops. That had been accidental. *On my body* had come of a combination of her repetition about her weight loss, and his leering at her bikini pics. Ah well. She’d said it unhesitatingly, so may as well have her internalize it. “Ten more times.”

As he was thumbing rapidly past boring pictures of indoor activities with her parents, Martin began to notice a slight tremor to Kira’s voice. He grimaced, half-tempted to cut her short. She wasn’t make that wrinkly face of hers, but the voice seemed to be conveying it all its own.

“Repeat after me. Our time together is relaxing and enjoyable.”

“Mm. Our time together is relaxing, and enjoyable.”

Slight pause aside, she seemed to be back to normal. “Ten more times.”

There was a good one. The picture had obviously been taken by one of their parents, Kira holding a hand up to block her face from the shot but leaving her paper-thin tank top and boxer shorts in frame. She was twisted just enough to display a little sideboob. Very nice.

When she finished he was fixated on a grainy but nevertheless mouth-watering pic of Kira in a sequined bikini, standing in waist-deep water, hair up in a messy ponytail, freshly tanning body shining in the sun. So much so, he didn't notice the extent to which her breathing had accelerated. Her hands, folded on her tummy, were tracing delicate patterns on the scant two inches of skin exposed where her sweater had ridden up.

"Coming here is a high priority. Repeat it."

"Coming here... is a high priority." She giggled, but he'd learned to shrug off her implied that's-what-she-said-isms by now.

"Ten more times, Kira."

She nodded, droning on as directed. He had switched over to Stacey's page. Long ago he'd realized both of their parents followed both of their feeds, a fact which may be the impetus behind so many pictures putting out cloyingly happy family vibes that obviously didn't exist between the two. An innocuous shot at the breakfast table of their rented cabin featured an impressively good look down the neck of Stacey's pajama top, one of those that made a man stare in search of whether there were nipple pixels present or not. Martin had long since determined that there were not.

He glanced to his notes to check for the next line. "Repeat after me. If I follow my therapist's instructions, nothing can stop me from doing what I want."

"Mmm. If I follow my therapist's instructions, nothing can stand in my way."

"Ten more times, please." Kira's writhing, one hand dipping deeper and deeper into the waistline of her skirt, was lost on him as he inspected an image that wasn't explicitly sexy, but captured an expression on Stacey's face that was blank in a way fetchingly similar to her tranced self.

"Repeat: I trust Martin Manning."

"I trust Martin Manning," she declared emphatically.

"Twenty times on that one." Doubly important, after all.

Martin was feeling good about the improvements in his mental discipline after last spring's spooge-in-the-hair incident with Stacey. He was hard as a rock, dismissively brainwashing this vixen while he pored over images of her and her sister in various poses and states of partial dress. Neither of them noticed that she actually miscounted and repeated it twenty-two times, nor that both hands were finally where Kira wanted them, up her sweater and down her skirt.

"Repeat after me. Coming here feels natural, rewarding, and good."

"Mmm. Coming here f-feels natural..." Her jaw quavered. "Feels rewarding..." There was a sharp intake of breath that finally induced him to look up as she let out in a throaty groan, "feels *gooooood*..."

It was not readily apparent that Kira came as she completed the utterance. Not to him, anyway. There was such a sharp transition from the tiny pic on his phone of a

cheerfully smiling Kira mounting her jet ski and the sight of the real Kira masturbating unabashedly on his sofa that he hardly realized what he was seeing before it was over.

“Kira...?!” He rose to his feet, gaping.

“T-ten more times?” she whimpered. “Please?”

“Yeah. Um, ten. Ten more,” Martin stammered, stumbling to his feet only with the help of both hands braced against his desktop. What was happening?

“Coming here feels *natural*,” Kira gushed, her broad hips thrusting into the air, grinding in circles against her fingers. “Feels *rewarding*. Feels so freaking *gooood*.”

Bit by bit, the hand groping her own tits raised up her sweater. Three halting, moaning repetitions in, she’d lifted it completely over a maroon colored bra. Silk, he thought, though it was hard not to focus on her fondling instead. There was no focus to it. She forced the hand into a bra cup, tweaked a nipple, and heaved her tit toward her mouth. There was no effort to lick it, nor to do more than lower her chin in its direction for a moment, but by then Kira was giving herself a frankly painful-looking squeeze before moving to the other.

Her right hand looked much more sure of itself. Martin came around to where he had a better view, and sure enough, the girl was positively going to town on her pussy. The clit received the lion’s share of her attention, but then he saw it dive way deep into her panties, clearly fingering deep inside of herself. That was where it stayed, then. Plunging what looked to be two, maybe three fingers as far inside her volcanic pussy as they would go.

“Coming here feels rewarding. Coming here feels good,” Kira panted. Was she even counting? She’d added “coming here” to each subsection of the line now. Not that he objected.

Phone still in hand, Martin had the presence of mind to sneak a few pictures. No sense worrying about her waking up to find him standing over her recording what looked to be a steady stream of orgasms, each blending into the next. With or without the recording, this was a 10/10 on the relationship-destroying shock scale. So who cared?

Then, between one heaving, gasping breath and the next, her whole body slumped down on itself, and lie still, marionette with its strings severed.

He jammed his phone back in his pocket. “Kira?” he ventured.

“Mm.”

“How do you feel?”

“Rewarded,” she said with a happy sigh. “Good. Needed that. Missed it.”

“Missed it? What do you mean?”

“Missed coming here. Fall break was *hard*.” She flashed a pouty face, and he promised himself then and there never to make her wait to come ever again.

“Have you... have you come in my office before?”

She shook her head. “No. Wanted to. But no.”

“So why did you today?”

“Finally decided to listen. You helped with the weight, and the roommate, and the grades. I trust you. So I listened to you.”

“Listened to me? What? I...”

He looked down at his notes. In light of what he had just seen, it was as if he'd never read them before. Martin barely stopped himself from bursting into gales of laughter. He had thought a few of the lines might come across as suggestive, but still within the realm of plausible deniability if she retained something and called him out. What he'd forgotten to take into account was that he was dealing with the world's most devout believer in the “that's what she said” gag. She'd come to truly believe that hypnosis worked, and to trust his guidance. After that, a lazy overuse of an ambiguous phrase had done the rest.

“Kira, when you wake up, are you going to notice that you came in here?”

Wrinkle. “Yeah. Panties are soggy. Scratched my boob.”

Well fuck. Subconscious Kira might have been too horny to care about having an audience, but this was the same subconscious who had jolted itself awake and been mortified to be seen in her underwear only last month. What the hell was he supposed to do? Confiscate her dampened underwear? He imagined Kira going home tonight, wondering if she really hadn't worn panties to her hypnotherapy session, and then finding the scratch when she changed into her PJs. Her natural assumption would be even worse than the truth, which was itself really really bad. He'd be screwed.

Unless...

Unless...!

Nope. Nothing was coming.

“Kira, I want you to repeat it for me some more, OK? But no more touching yourself. Just words. ‘Coming here feels natural, rewarding, and good.’ Keep saying that until I tell you to stop, OK?”

“Mmm. OK. But please can I touch myself? Feels so good... Mmm. Please?”

“No. Words only. Follow my instructions.”

Giggle. “And nothing can stop me from doing what I want.”

“Only words.”

Once she made it through a few reps without succumbing to what was to Martin a very familiar temptation, he slipped from his office to the waiting room as quietly as possible. Stacey was on her phone, but glanced up. “Hey, K-.” She did a double take. “Uh... yo. Is... Where's Kira?”

“We have a situation, and I could use some help.”

“Situation? Again? Did you have this many idiot situations when you were working on me?”

“No!” he said a bit too forcefully. “That is, no. Almost never. Now shh, and listen.”

Martin brought her up to speed, silencing her several more times as her incredulity and libido vied for access to her voice. “And I think that’s the basics. So now I have an eighteen-year-old girl in my office with her own cum in her panties and a mildly lacerated tit, and the moment she wakes up she’s probably going to freak the hell out. Thoughts?”

“Thoughts? How the hell am I supposed to know what to do? You’re the master hypnotist, Mesmer! How could you possibly pay so little attention that you didn’t notice her start frigging herself ten feet away from you?!”

“Do you know how boring it is listening to someone repeat the same words over and over and over again? I was on my phone!”

“Your phone! What the hell am I pay—” She stopped. “OK, so I’m not paying you, quite. Either way, I don’t know. Did this ever happen with me?”

He shook his head. “No. By the time I got you to touching yourself, you’d been priming yourself for it for weeks. My impression is that it felt to you like you’d been doing it and wanting it for a long time.”

“So... is she ‘primed’ at all? Like, have you been doing anything that she might internalize as building to this? Whispers in her ear, pats on the butt, complimenting her tits? Any of that shit you do to me? Used to do, I mean.”

“No. I mean, she was repeating the stuff that caused today’s incident, but I didn’t mean it like *that*. It certainly never did this in any other session.”

“But... what was it you said earlier? You said she was eager for it, right? Eager how? How could you tell?”

“She said she’d had a hard time sleeping over break. Imagined herself on my couch. That she felt greedy rushing into it.”

“OK. OK, so...” Stacey tapped her lip. “So yeah, it sounds like she’s been really digging your hypno mojo. Maybe an absence makes the heart grow fonder situation, and today it fondled all over your couch.”

“That seems pretty obvious in hindsight and all, but what do I do with it?” He pointed to the wall clock behind the vacant receptionist desk. “Goddammit, Stacey, I should already be waking her up!”

“Stop yelling at me!” she snapped.

“I’m sorry!” he snapped.

Stacey held up a finger, then stalked over to the door to his office. It was cracked open before he could insist she stay the hell out of there. To his immense relief, nothing had changed. “Coming here feels natural, rewarding, and good. Coming here feels natural...” No touching.

On impulse, Martin placed his hands on Stacey’s hips and pulled her away. Then pulled harder when he found her rooted in place, staring. At last she let him dislodge her

from her observation. He gave her a pat on the butt for her troubles. God damn, but her ass was tight.

She forced away a dry smile as quickly as she could. Which wasn't very quick at all. "I told you, Mesmer, you're not supposed to touch me like that any more. Not until..." Stacey jerked a thumb toward the office door.

"Noted. So were you just going to watch as things blow up in our faces?"

"Do you want my help, or do you just want to whine and despair?"

"Help. Definitely help."

"OK," she said, leaning toward him and pulling his forehead until it met hers. The girl smelled good, he had to give it to her. "Here's what we do."

Kira Reeves shuffled back to her sister's car, fighting down a small sense of panic. How could that have happened? Had it really? No, it had. No point in denying it. Professor Manning's office didn't have a bathroom, so she'd had to make Stacey wait while she ran across the street to use the bathroom at the gas station. She hadn't peed herself. How screwed up was she that she'd actually been hoping that's what that wetness down there had been? Which meant that her hazy recollection of that session had been real.

Which meant she had *masturbated* in Professor Manning's office. Right there on the same couch her sister used for her sessions. The freak would lose her mind if she ever learned Kira was doing something like that in there.

What was it about that place that got her so... excited? Sure, part of her had enjoyed that crazy weigh-in incident, being exposed, vulnerable, sexy, in front of her therapist/teacher. She didn't have a crush on him or anything, but Kira knew the fetish well. She had been a ringleader of that fad of flirting with that hot substitute Mr. Kelley. Settling into the back of Stacey's car – no way she was going to ride up front where they'd have to talk and bleh – the lingering dampness in her underwear poked at her all over again. Thinking of Mr. Kelley wouldn't help. That guy had been way too sexy to be some lame-ass sub. Kira blushed at the memory of perching herself on the teacher's desk, chatting him up, daring him to try to look up her mini skirt. She had never intended to do anything with him, even if he was the kind of creep who would let her, but the fantasy had been there. Could some of that be transferring to Professor Manning?

No, there was no question. Some of it was. There was something about Professor Manning that told her that he could work wonders with her body. She'd thought it was innocent, though, played with those feelings with those big hugs and bright smiles and excessive compliments. She was a flirt. So what? Flirting didn't mean you were going to *do* anything. Stacey had always acted like her little sister was some big hoe or something, but really, Kira liked male attention, and the power she felt being able to play around with a guy like that.

Only today, she'd friggid herself into what she dimly remembered as a mind-blowing orgasm on his couch. Her games with Mr. Kelley had never made it past a tour of the house at her grad party. Kira had briefly shut the two of them in her bedroom together. She'd sat on the edge of her bed, leaning back on her palms, smiling up at him as he tugged at his collar and weighed whether or not he should make a break for the door.

Thank god Professor Manning hadn't been in the office when it happened.

Kira slammed the door behind her. "You know, it's really uncool of you to barge into Professor Manning's office while I'm in the middle of a session."

“I knocked,” Stacey protested from the driver’s seat, turning her music down a little.

“Still! We could have been in the middle of something huge, for all you knew. A break-through. Or I could have been in the middle of something, like, embarrassing. Like crying or whatever.” Good cover. “What was so important it couldn’t wait until I walked out, anyway?” She’d been so flummoxed by waking up and finding her pussy thrumming with pleasure, Kira had completely missed what the two were talking about.

“Look, I said I was sorry. What more do you want? You were right, OK? Feel better? I should have waited. But it was your usual quitting time and I have places to be, but I promise, it won’t happen again. Martin would probably have my hide if it did. You’d think you two were in there planning a bank heist the way he bites my head off if I dare to mention your name. Confidentiality is well and good, but that guy is such a hard core dick about it.”

“You... you talk about me? With him?” It was reassuring to hear Stacey’s complaint about how seriously confidentiality was treated in the clinic. Still, Kira didn’t like the idea of her sister talking about her to anyone, much less Professor Manning. She really liked him as a therapist and as a teacher. But if he found out about Stacey and her freako desires, she would never be able to show her face in his office again. She might have to change schools, and Dad could just throw himself a pity party that his daughters weren’t both following in his footsteps at Lakeview. Better a dad who was mad at her than ever having to face *that*.

“We don’t talk *about* you. But like it or not, you’re part of my life, so your name has come up. Occasionally. Infrequently. Briefly.” Stacey made sure Kira was watching in the rear view mirror when she dramatically rolled her eyes. “Relax. Believe it or not, I have other things going on in my life than my dippy sister.”

Kira was relieved to hear it, but scowled anyway. “I’m gonna make the dean’s list, you know.”

“Oh wow. How many semesters running does that make now?”

“God, you’re such a bitch sometimes, Stacey. You could just be happy for me.”

“OK. Great work, Kira. I’m really proud of you for your one good semester.”

Stacey glanced back in the rear view mirror. “Feel better?”

Kira did not feel better. The tedium of this routine antagonization by her sister had let her mind wander back to the bizarre nature of her session. How had she let it get out of control like that? She’d barely begun to admit to herself that these sessions felt *good* in a way that was not mere relaxation. That having a man control her body, even if it was only the food she put in it and the exercise it fueled, turned her on. On the one hand, it felt weird, letting go, deciding to listen to those whispers in her brain that could only be her therapist’s voice, instead of her own desires. Following her gut and doing things her own way had left her with a sloppy cunt of a roommate, at least two classes

that felt like she was a year behind two weeks in, and, well, an expanding gut. Professor Manning had fixed her weight, helped her drive out that horrible Emma, and put her on track for the best grades of her life. All that, and it was only halfway through her first semester.

Except now Kira had begun enjoying coming in for his help so much that she had begun enjoying *coming* for his help.

Neither of them had noticed, thank god. Ironically, she supposed she owed Stacey. If her sister hadn't dragged him out into the waiting room to handle her drama when she did, Kira might have started touching herself while he watched. It was so...

No, not hot.

Well, it was, but it was other things way more so. She would simply have to control herself better. It was just that controlling herself was kind of the opposite of why she went to him in the first place. She went there to let *him* control her.

There had to be a solution. Maybe she could fool around with her boyfriend right before sessions, get it out of her system. Lord knew Jude wouldn't mind. Coming back to Lakeview horny out of her mind from a week of fantasizing about her next hypnotherapy session she'd picked the best-looking most available boy out of those at the Penderdast food court and brought him back to her room. They'd made out for a while, tepidly, and she'd woken up to three fresh texts from him. Jude hadn't even gotten past second base and he was already whipped. Maybe she'd have to find a new guy. It was hard staying with someone who didn't respect themselves. But who?

Whatever. Kira shuddered off the consideration. Boys didn't matter. What mattered was all the progress she was making. That was what college was all about, right? Professor Manning would help her become her best self. So long as she followed his advice, nothing could stop her from getting what she wanted.

Apparently not even basic social conventions like don't get yourself off in your therapist's office. She giggled at that. She would do her best not to let it happen again, but... if it did? The thought bothered her less than she might have thought it would. Coming there just felt... natural, somehow. No doubt he wouldn't see it that way, though. But he was also probably the best person to help her get her mind right anyway.

"What's so funny back there?" Stacey asked.

"Trust me, you would not understand."

"Try me."

"I don't want to talk about it, least of all with *you*. So there." Kira snorted, and made sure the light from her phone would be obvious so Stacey would know she'd been shut out.

That past summer had been the longest of her life. Stacey had sworn up and down that she was over it, that it had been a one-time thing, a drunken fancy no more serious than the time Kira had streaked one of Stacey's house parties her freshman year.

Maybe it was even true. Kira didn't care if it was or not. Some things, once heard, one couldn't unhear.

Professor Manning had worked wonders with her. Even so, it was hard to imagine anyone had the words that would make things right between her and Stacey again. That ship had sailed, been blasted to smithereens by torpedoes, and sunk to the bottom of the ocean where every last person on board was eaten by giant squids.

Poor Professor Manning. He'd done so much for her other goals, but when it came to Stacey, Kira feared that she had set him up for an impossible task.

Something itched inside her sweater, but when she scratched it, there was a faint blossom of pain. After making sure Stacey wasn't watching, she peeked down her neckline, shining her phone onto her boobs. Sure enough, there was a thin, straight scratch, right where her fingernail would glide if she were positively mauling her own tits.

How long until her next session? she wondered, then sent a text to Jude. *What're you doing Thursday afternoon?*

As another testament to his pathetic infatuation with her, he was already typing a response while she wrote her follow-up. *How would you like to go down on me in the back of your car? I know a good spot.* If Jude wouldn't, surely someone would. A good come before her session ought to keep her in line next time. It had to, or she'd lose all the respect she'd tried to recover from her previous embarrassing behavior around him. Poor guy. Why did she keep making things so hard for Professor Manning?

That's what she said. Kira stifled the giggle just in time.

I think we're good, Stacey texted him a short while later. She was pissed I "made you leave the office," but turned bright red when I pushed back. She knows what she did, but looks like you got her to think you weren't there to see it.

It was several hours before Martin read the text. Some of that gap was the necessary period of masturbation called for after Kira's display. It was the hardest he'd come since he'd nudded in Stacey in the spring. Another cause was that Martin had gone across the way to the very same gas station where Kira had recently inspected her dampened panties. Martin arrived just in time to catch the guy throwing out the past best-by sandwiches at the dumpster out back.

Damn. Egg salad today. Oh, well. He had some tums in the mini-fridge.

The final cause for the delay, as foreshadowed so long ago that one may require a brief use of their ctrl+f function to refresh oneself, was the second of the two meetings of great consequence. (Phrasing preserved for ease of reference.) Martin was in the midst of lowering his pants for a second go, the mayonnaise and mustard still pungent on his breath, when a knock came at his office door from the direction of the waiting room.

"One moment!" he stammered, cinching his pants back up with a belt that was going to need fresh notches if his diet maintained its trajectory.

Once satisfied that he was composed, he opened the door, mind racing for what excuse he might offer to Kira, the obvious source of that knock. Having not yet read Stacey's update, he assumed the girl must be murderous over his latest attempt at deception.

It was not Kira. Nor Stacey, nor Naomi, nor any other woman he knew. She was of a similar age with them, and very pretty. Someone familiar, but... Nope. He came up blank. "Hi there," he said awkwardly.

The girl's chin tilted down, eyes on the floor. She spoke so softly he could hardly hear her. "I'm sorry. Are you open? The door was unlocked, but there was no receptionist, so I..."

"Oh! Um, yes. I mean, no, but... Well, we're looking for a receptionist. But meanwhile here I am! So... yeah." He looked her over. Who was she? He tried picturing her as a blonde, but it jogged nothing. "What can I do for you?"

"I, um, wondered if you were taking any new patients? I'm on my parents' insurance, but they live in another state so I might be out of network, but I can pay you out of pocket. If you do that."

Martin arched a brow. Was someone really looking for his help? Why? He couldn't have a less credible reputation if he'd jammed quotation marks in his business title. The Manning "Mental Wellness" Clinic! Hypnotize at your own risk!

"Um, so, are you?"

"Oh. Um... yes? I mean yes! Yes I... am." Was he? What did he know about mental wellness? Maybe he really should add those quotation marks.

Yet in spite of his doubts, the girl smiled, relieved. “That’s great. I know how hard it is to get in to see specialists without a referral, so... Thanks. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” He extended a hand, which the girl shook. Or at least wiggled softly. Good enough. “Martin Manning, at your service. And you are...?”

“Sharon Nelson.”

Nope, still not ringing a bell. He shrugged off the sense of familiarity. She must just have one of those—

“But people call me Sherri.”