



## **The Right People**

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**Published:** 2008

**Type(s):** Short Fiction, Science Fiction, Sexuality

**Source:** <http://futurismic.com>

**About Rakunas:**

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So, it's Wednesday after school, delivery time, and we're doing the usual: I'm checking invoices on my cell, and G.R.'s violating the safety parameters of our merchandise.

"Gene," he says, gripping the pickup's wheel with one sweaty hand and his cell in the other, "check this out." G.R. thumbs the keypad until his torso makes an unnatural beep, and then he sprouts breasts.

No. One breast. Right in the middle. A grin spreads on G.R.'s ruddy face like mildew on a locker room floor as he unbuttons his shirt, revealing a pink, rubbery udder.

I shake my head. "G.R., you know the rules."

His smile wilts. "But—"

"No playing with the product in public." I thumb in an override code, and the Pleasure Chest (we boosted this review model from my parents' samples before leaving the house) sags to its default flatness. "You gotta be discreet."

"I can do that," he says, fingering his cell. The Pleasure Chest blooms into a forest of mammary appendages.

"Remind me again why we don't deal drugs instead," I say, cross-referencing tonight's deliveries with our clients' public profiles.

"You always say it's not profitable enough."

"No kidding," I say. "Paying for product, registering with the school district, nothing but hassle. I swear, we're living in an insane world. Someone at school gets caught with a gram of coke, he gets counseling and a second chance. But if he gets caught with a butt plug, he's a pervert for the rest of his life."

"Uh-huh," he says, and the udders start swaying in time to the stereo.

I snag the cell out of G.R.'s hand, thumb the Pleasure Chest off and toss the phone into the back of the cab. G.R. flails behind his seat for the cell. "Aw, man, and I was gonna figure out tentacles next."

"I'm sure the manufacturers would appreciate that. Now, gimme that thing."

G.R. grumbles, but he peels off the fleshy prosthetic and plops it in my lap. "Your parents getting any more of these?"

"Probably," I say, filling out the last of tonight's orders. "They're lecturing at Kinsey this week."

"What're they talking about?"

"The usual: overcoming shame, quantifying satisfaction, genitals and electroshock," I say. "I don't care, so long as they get new review samples for us to resell. Our clientele's starting to get jaded."

"I hope they get some more of those flocking dildoes," says G.R., smiling. "I got new routines to try."

"Right," I say, remembering customer complaints about disembodied penises doing kick lines. I beam tonight's delivery list to G.R. "Drop me off at Joe's."

"You got a lead?"

"Uh-huh." I scroll through the school foaf, avoiding his stare.

"Who? Is it Missy Dupree? I saw you guys talking after lunch. She seems like a total superfreak."

"Missy Dupree is a young lady of impeccable virtue and perfect Morals scores," I say, remembering to refill her order. "Even if she were a customer, I wouldn't tell."

"Neither would I!" he says. "You can trust me."

"I do," I say. "It's the customers who don't."

"Bullshit," he says. "People love me."

"Really?" I say, pulling up G.R.'s foaf profile. "Then let's look at Gulliver Reginald McCabe—"

"That's Goat Rapist McCabe," he says, bristling.

"—and your single link from Eugene Ro." I hold my cell up to G.R.'s face, and he ducks away from the thin green line connecting us. "You want to hear your latest reviews? I could start with Vinh Lam's complaint from last week."

G.R. rubs his nose. "Can't believe I wasted my poetry on her."

"Just because the words rhyme doesn't make it poetry," I say.

"It was, whaddayacallit, pastoral."

"It was about goats in heat."

"Tomato, toemahto," he says.

As the truck bounces up to Joltin' Joe's Stimuporium, my display lights up with a map of multi-colored dots, our classmates' cells all active and telling the world *I'm here, I'm here*. I filter out all but the green, the school's best and brightest, and find one of tonight's to-dos: Kalpen Singh, captain of the baseball team, so-so scores but good connections, right in the middle of Joe's. I'll have to meet him in person to size him

up, but if his public admiration for Cold War politicians is any indication, I might finally unload the Margaret Thatcher RealGirl that's been hogging inventory space.

The pickup wheezes to a halt, and I pull up the store calendar. Vince Chin, soccer star and Academic Decathlete, is having an ASB election rally here tonight. Excellent. The more uptight and upright the crowd, the more customers just waiting to be born. "Give me a few hours," I say, tossing him the Pleasure Chest. "Misbehave yourself."

"Tentacles, ahoy!" says G.R., and the truck lurches off into the night.

The mall air smells sweet, like cinnamon buns and opportunity. My phone is discoverable and loaded with encrypted business cards (G2 MARKETING: WE DEAL IN HUMAN FULFILLMENT). I have a room full of people who have a desperate to get their covert rocks off. I enter the warm light of Joe's, ready to do business.

But something's off. Over the roasting coffee and toasted scones, there's a whiff of motor oil, pomade and pot. And instead of the fresh-faced crowd I expected, the people here have social profiles that contain words like "concerned" and "troubled" and "strongly recommend anti-psychotics."

Shit. The room is full of Bad Kids.

I take another look at Kalpen Singh's green dot and find it's now attached to a stolen property complaint. Sure enough, Madeline Donohue, wanted on explosives charges, fiddles with a cell covered in baseball decals. She knocks it on a table, and the green dot winks out. I switch profile filters and get a screen of angry red. There is no one in this place I want to see, let alone sell to.

Resigning myself to a night of lost sales and possible police intervention, I get in line for caffeine. My cell beeps, probably with a coupon from the store. The subject line, however, doesn't seem like something from Joltin' Joes's marketing department:

THIS SCHOOL NEEDS AN ENEMA.

AND I'VE GOT THE RECTAL TIP

I open the message, then recoil as Ammerly Prescott appears on the screen.

It's an action shot from last season's CIF lacrosse championship against Our Lady of Perpetual Humiliation. Ammerly subbed in for a star player, and she spent her field time steamshovelling opposing players into the air. The picture's composition is excellent: Ammerly's mouth

is wide open in a Valkyrie scream, her opponent is a tangle of spittle and pigtails, and there, in the background, is the ref holding up a card as red as the bloodstains on Ammerly's jersey.

Below the picture:

PRESCOTT FOR ASB PRESIDENT

My hands shake as I call up G.R. and pop him the campaign flyer. "Is she serious?" he says. "And what's this about enemas?"

"What, you want me to get her to deliver one to you?" A few people glare, and I dash behind a pyramid of coffee canisters.

"Okay, calm down," he says. "You want me to pick you up?"

The front doors crash open, and in strides Ammerly Prescott, flanked by Benny and Frank McTavish. Her jet-black hair looks like the wreckage of a demolished skyscraper, and her blouse is unbuttoned just above scandalous. She sneers, her teeth bright white behind bruise-painted lips. I remember that smile from junior high; she would flash it right before she gut-punched me and took my lunch card. If we could sit down and talk, what would I try to sell her? Maybe that Italian job with the out-board motor...

Ammerly climbs onto a coffee table, her combat boots scuffing the finish. She raises her arms and flips off the cafe with both hands. "Fuck you, and everything you stand for!" she cries.

Oh, yeah. *Definitely* the Italian job.

"Gene?" says G.R. "What's going on?"

I snap out of my sales reverie. "I'll call if things get dangerously weird," I mumble, then kill the call.

Ammerly holds up her hands, and the crowd stills. "You're Bad Kids," she says, her voice loud and clear. "You've been rated and tagged since preschool. You walk into a place like this, and the staff downloads your profile and finds out you've got negative reviews and bad scores, and before you can even order, you're asked to leave because you bring down the... *ambiance*."

The crowd nods to itself, and Ammerly's face lights with rage as she slashes the air. "And yet you know, you *know* that the people with the shiny happy reputations are getting away with murder without any punishment. Their stories beat ours because they have more weight. Are we gonna stand for that?"

"No!" roars the crowd.

"Are we gonna be ignored?"

"No!"

"Are we gonna stay at the bottom?"

"No!"

"And you know how we're gonna change that?" Ammerly yells, leaning toward the people. "We're gonna beat 'em at their own game by taking over the Associated Student Body!"

The crowd cheers, raising their tattooed fists, and Ammerly smiles. "Every year, the ASB gets to certify the foaf, but they're just rubber-stamping policy from the Principal's Office. If I'm elected ASB president, my first act will be to change the way we rate people by *de*-certifying Reagan's social network!"

The crowd chants her name, and she stills them with upraised hands. "You know who the biggest block of voters is in our school? It's everyone in the middle, the people who just go to class and don't join anything. They're just as trapped by their reputations as us. We're gonna have to convince them that a vote with us is a vote for something better."

The crowd nods, and I grip my cell and hold down the 5 button. In three milliseconds, G.R. will get a text that says *GET ME THE FUCK OUT OF HERE RIGHT NOW*.

Ammerly straightens up, ready to close her pitch. "You guys are the voice of this campaign. I want all of you to reach out to everyone around you. If you discover someone who's in the middle, someone whose scores or rep are too low to have any weight, talk with them. Come Monday, we're gonna win this one, and then no one, not even the Principal, will get in our way."

The crowd applauds, and Ammerly climbs down from the table.

My cell beeps, and I leap out of my skin. The display is angry with system messages: *43 CONNECTION REQUESTS. VIEW ALL?* I look up at the coffeehouse, and my stomach sinks into my shoes.

People are staring at my corner. They're holding their cells and pointing in my direction.

*Reach out to everyone...*

I'm still discoverable.

Crap.

The connection requests keep pouring in. I stab at the power button, but it'll take a good five seconds for my cell to cycle down. Crouching as



low as I can, I crabwalk backwards. There's got to be a way out of here, even if it means following a coffee can through a window.

Then there's a rattle of boot chains, and two McTavish-shaped shadows loom overhead. My hand flails behind me until it touches the cool metal of the fire exit's panic bar. Frank, the older and uglier one, peers over the coffee cans and gives me a smile that makes my kidneys ache.

Then there's a wheezing engine from the other side of the door. I slam the panic bar and leap into the pickup's open cab as G.R. guns it out of the mall.

"Dude, what was *that*?" says G.R.

As I fire up my cell, I tell him about the meeting and Ammerly's speech. Then I pull up her profile. She's opened her grades and schedule for public consumption, and, as I scan them, my heart pounds harder and harder.

"Check it out," I breathe, "she's been taking Poli Sci and Public Speaking and rocking both of them. Plus she's been in Junior Statesmen and..."

"What?"

"...she's been in *Toastmasters* since CIF." I lower my cell and swallow hard. "This is incredible. Ammerly Prescott's been learning how to become a politician."

"Wild," says G.R. "Too bad ASB can't do anything."

"Yeah," I say, Ammerly's speech thudding in my brain, "except certify the social network. Oh, no..."

"What?"

"If Ammerly wins, she de-certifies the foaf. That means that any of our customers' bad behavior could come to light, so they wouldn't have any reason to shop with us anymore."

"Why not?"

"Cause our entire business is built on *shame*, and if everyone knows you're a perv, there's no point in being ashamed. Oh, hell. We've got to stop her. We've got to find some way to undo her appeal. We—"

I look at G.R. as he absently fondles himself.

"We've got to run another candidate," I say.

"What?"

"Yeah," I say, warming up to the idea. "We've got to run a candidate who's going to distract Ammerly's voters and let Vince Chin march into office."

"Who?"

I turn to G.R. and smile. "Isn't it obvious? You, my little Goat Rapist."

G.R.'s face scrunches up in thought. There's a protest fighting for life somewhere in his head. I have to act fast.

"G.R.," I say, "I know what you're thinking, and you're right: I am totally, absolutely, completely using you. I'm taking advantage of your low scores, your reputation, and your questionable moral character." I put a hand on his shoulder. "But, before you turn down this terrifying, ball-shrinking idea, consider this: everyone in school might hate your guts and curse your name and say all sorts of vile things about you, most of which will probably be true. But, if you run, I promise you that the one thing they won't be able to do is *ignore* you."

We drive past Irvine's strip malls and hyperplanned subdivisions, G.R.'s face still scrunched up. Eventually, we're back at my house, and G.R. kills the motor. We sit in silence, listening to the engine ping.

"I have no chance of winning, do I?" he finally says.

I shake my head. "None whatsoever."

He nods, then pulls out his cell and thumbs the keypad. His shirt bulges, buttons pop, and the Statue of Liberty bursts out of his chest.

"Cool," says G.R.

Lady Liberty turns to me and *winks*.

#

The next morning G.R. and I pass through the crowded metal detectors into the squat, bombproof buildings of Ronald Reagan High School. The students have cell headsets jammed into their ears, and the teachers have union-mandated drug inhalers jammed into their noses. And everywhere we go, people stare at us. Or, rather, at G.R.

I had a hell of a time talking him into using soap this morning, and we came to blows over his wearing a clean shirt and tie. I managed to buy him off with a set of ben-wa bocce balls. I don't blame people for being amazed: never in his life has G.R. looked more presentable, if not normal.

Getting G.R. onto the ballot was simple: I just bribed half my network to sign a petition. It's going to cost me a few months of freebies, but I can

always write them off as marketing expenses. The real tricky part, however, will be getting people to take him seriously. Our first appointment should take care of that.

"Talking with the press is easy," I say. "You just need to say whatever comes to mind. I've got to smooth our clientele's ruffled feathers."

"Are they cool?"

"They've definitely gotten more civic-minded," I say, scrolling over a screen full of *WTF???* texts. "Now we need you to start eating into Amerly's voters."

"How? I'm not as good a speaker as her."

"No, but you're more degenerate. Are you wearing the Pleasure Chest?"

G.R. nods and smiles. "I figured out how to make it talk last night."

"Good," I say. "Use that. Just so long as you stay on your worst behavior for the interviewer."

"Who is it?"

There is a burst of angry Vietnamese from the end of the hallway, and Vinh Lam gesticulates and screams into her cell as she stalks toward us. She stabs her call to death, snaps off a few quick shots with the phone-cam, then holds the cell up to my face. "So, Gene, I wanna know, and I wanna know because the right people are asking me to ask you: why are you committing reputational suicide?"

Attila the Hun's campaign manager couldn't have asked for a better opener. "I'm not the story here, Vinh," I say, patting G.R. on the shoulder. "My friend here is. G.R.?"

G.R. is frozen, completely locked up. I nudge him, and he blurts out, "I want to run for ASB President!"

Vinh isn't having any of it. "Your friend has scores that redefine the word 'negative.' G.R.'s a nobody, Gene, and nobodies don't get press time."

"I want to run for ASB President," G.R. repeats, sounding like he means it.

I give her a smile so sugary it could cause diabetes. "But candidates do get press time, Vinh, which is why you should aim that phone-cam at him. My friend wants to redeem himself, and his ideas are unique and powerful."

Vinh rolls her eyes. "So, do you plan on cleaning up after him after he piddles on the carpet?"

"I have full faith in my candidate's toilet training," I say.

"I want to run for ASB President!" G.R. adds.

Vinh huffs in snippy disgust. She turns the cell to G.R. "So, G.R., the few people who work up the energy to despise you say you're a freak of nature who should be put down like a rabid mule. Care to comment?"

G.R. clears his throat. He fixes his tie. He breaks out in a brilliant smile, the one he uses before doing something epically mind-scarring. I pat my candidate on the back and walk away as fast I can without raising Vinh's suspicions.

As I round the hall, out of the corner of my eye I see G.R., his pants around his ankles, and the face of Enrico Caruso rising out of the memgel that caresses G.R.'s crotch. The tenor clears his throat and belts out the opening chorus of *Rigoletto*, only to be drowned out by Vinh's shriek of terror.

We have this election in the *bag*.

#

The rest of the morning is a blur. My cell chirps with one message after another: clients terrified of G.R.'s link to me getting back to them, editors of the school's seventeen underground newspapers demanding an interview, and one damned blogger after another begging for sound bites.

I forward the editors on to G.R., then the bloggers on to the editors, leaving me to stroke our clients' fevered egos. Most of them are lower on the totem pole, so I fend them off with texts. Only a few at the top, the kids with the perfect scores and spotless profiles, demand facetime. I set up appointments with them for between periods, but one demands a secure meeting *now*.

The gong ends third period (history of American PR, one of my favorite classes), and I hustle out to the east wing. The school band wraps up a C-scale as I round the corner. Twenty feet away, a securicam is planted above the band room door, swinging right to left, watching everyone that enters or exits. Under the cam's blind spot is my client.

The band fires up the "Liberty Bell March," and I dash up to Vince Chin, his massive jaw grinding away at sunflower seeds. "The fuck're you doing, Ro?" he yells in my ear, shells flying from his lips. "You trying to out us both?"

"Look—" I say, and the band stops playing. The conductor upbraids the tuba section for being off-key. The band starts again.

"—I have G.R. under control."

"The fuck you do! Did you read his bullshit in the school paper? He's talking about creating a tantric drill team for halftime shows and pep rallies! He's—!"

"He's distracting people away from Ammerly Prescott."

"She's got nothing," Vince says, waving his hand.

"She's been eating into your support from the middle, and she's offering more than better dances and bigger homecoming floats. Ammerly's your main problem, not G.R. and his singing genitals."

"But—" says Vince. The band finishes, and the conductor screams about rushing the tempo. They rip into some more Sousa.

"—his numbers are up."

"What?" I yell.

Vince shows me his cell. On the display is a pie graph poll of the student body. G.R. has a tiny slice, nothing compared to Vince or Ammerly, but it's been growing all morning. I scroll through the internals to get a feel for the demographics, then snort. "The people who like him are in Ammerly's camp, Vince. G.R.'s taking her votes on the bottom, and those people hate your guts. Look for yourself."

"I know how to read a fucking poll."

"Apparently, you don't," I say, pointing at the screen. "Otherwise you'd see that all G.R.'s doing is making Ammerly's job tougher. There aren't enough Bad Kids in school to beat your base, and G.R.'s just making her scramble."

"All the same, I think—"

"I only care what you think if you're unhappy with your product," I yell, losing my customer-is-always-right smile and getting in his face. Vince teeters on the edge of the blind spot.

"Now," I say, my nose millimeters from his, "you keep your chin out of my business and put it into the race where it belongs. If you spend less time worrying about G.R. and more time lying to everyone in the middle about how you'll move 'em up the food chain, you're a shoo-in. Don't call me again unless you want your order refilled."

I wait until the securicam turns, then dash up the hallway.

#

By day's end, most people have come to their senses, and G.R.'s poll numbers have descended. Soon, it'll be back to business as usual: Vince will waltz into victory, Ammerly will go back to beating people, G.R. will remain a pervert, and I'll be making bank. Everyone wins.

After the gong rings, I escape into the recycled hallway air. My thumbs ache from all the texts I've had to send, so I stand there, shaking my hands loose.

"Jerking off a little too hard, Gene?" a familiar female voice says behind me.

My spleen leaps into my throat. I spin around as Ammerly Prescott materializes from a drinking fountain alcove. She licks water off her lipstick-bruised mouth and steps toward me.

"Where's Frank and Benny, Ammerly?" I ask, trying to stay cool and failing. "Out shaking down frosh for PINs? Breaking walls with their foreheads?" My hands dive into my pockets, and I thumb the emergency code to G.R., hoping he'll arrive in time to identify my remains.

"Their parole officer dropped by for a little talk," she says, taking another casual step forward.

"That's great," I say. "Look, I'd love to stay and chat, but I've got to meet with my candidate, so I'll see you later, okay?" I step back, only to bump into the wall.

Ammerly smiles. "I wonder if you can help me figure something out," she says. "You were always so smart in junior high, pointing out the weak ads during homeroom TV, so this shouldn't be too tough." Ammerly pulls out her cell and thumbs up a screen. She turns the display toward me, and it takes everything not to panic as *WE DEAL IN HUMAN FULFILLMENT* glares at me like a Congressional subpoena.

"Well, that looks like a business card," I say, twisting back into the hallway.

Ammerly slams a nearby locker door. "This is *your* card, Gene. I got it from Kalpen Singh's cell. The chat history was very illuminating. You ever read Thatcher slashfic?"

"I'm sure my parents made me read some," I say.

"Is that where you get your supply? That would make sense, though I still can't believe someone as clean as you would be out selling My Little Bukkake."

"I wouldn't know anything about that."

Ammerly pummels another locker.

"Though I do hear it's very popular," I say, as we tango down the hallway.

"See, ever since I saw this card, I've been trying to figure out why you'd risk blowing your reputation by having your perv friend blab his way all over campus," says Ammerly. "You've got some angle, Gene, and you're going to tell me. Otherwise—" She beats another locker into submission, and it bleeds gym clothes and potato chips. "—that will be you."

"Oh, now, come on, Ammerly," I say. "Why would you want to do that? It wouldn't help your poll numbers if you dirtied your boots with my face."

Ammerly stops, and her brows furrow. "Poll numbers?" Her eyes flicker, like she's running internals in her head, and she says, "Are you trying to derail my campaign, Gene?"

A fresh layer of flop sweat dampens my neck. "Why would I do something as undemocratic as that?"

"Cause it'd keep you in place, you dildo-pusher," she says, stalking toward me.

"Ah," I manage.

"'Ah' is not the appropriate answer, Gene," she says. "'You're right, Ammerly' or 'I love the status quo, Ammerly' or 'Please don't destroy me, Ammerly,' that's what I expect to hear." Her face is purple as we scoot down the hall. "You just keep fucking with me. What did I ever do to you?"

I back into another wall, and now Ammerly's face is microns from mine. She smells a lot nicer than I thought she would, like grapefruit and plumeria. Her skin is smooth; aggression must be good for fighting acne. Ammerly's eyes narrow to thin slits, and I wonder if I could get in a lucky swing before she crushes me beneath her steel-toed designer boots.

"Now," she says, "I have put up with too much for you to get in my way, so either make G.R. drop out of the race, or I'll expose you to the entire school, starting with the Principal's Office." She looms above me like a Laguna mudslide, giving me the lunch card smirk.

And then I remember that we're not in junior high anymore, that I have a reputation and network that can crush hers. From somewhere

deep inside me, a growl climbs up into my throat. Ammerly's smirk fades as I straighten up and look down on her. "The Communist Party," I say, "will get into Orange County politics before anyone believes you," I say. I take a step forward, and we reverse our way up the hall. "They will run Mao Tse-Tung's waxed corpse on a platform of flag desecration, nun-raping and taxes for the unborn and *win* before you have that kind of pull."

Ammerly shakes her head with a nervous laugh. "Oh, I don't think—"

"I don't care what you think," I say, hovering above her like an avenging god. "You're just a Bad Girl, and nothing you do will change that. You can fix the system, you can climb your way to the top, but you will be a Bad Girl, always and forever. And you know what? No one wants to be around you except other Bad Girls."

Ammerly's mouth twitches, and she bares her canines. Then, to my shock, her bottom lip quivers. She swallows hard before backing way, not taking her now-damp eyes off me until she turns at the end of the hall, bowling over G.R. He rights himself, and we both watch her vanish around the corner.

"I think my grandmother was right," says G.R. "All that jerking off has screwed up my eyes, 'cause there's no way I just saw Ammerly Prescott crying."

"There is no link between masturbation and ocular damage," I say, "even for someone with your amount of frequent flyer miles."

We climb out of the basement, past people waiting for sports practice or club meetings. I tell G.R. about the business card, but keep Kalpen's name out of it. There's a chance he could become a client, though I'd have to charge his ass double.

G.R. shrugs. "So what if Ammerly knows? It's not like anyone's going to believe her."

"Yeah, that's what I thought, but she was so cocky..."

"When isn't she?"

"Point," I say. "But this felt different, like she actually had some weight..." I thumb up Ammerly's profile. "Oh, God, no..."

"What?"

The display is awash in multi-colored lines showing the people who've reached out to connect with Ammerly. Most of the links are green. "Do you recognize any of those names?"



G.R. scans the display. "No."

"Neither do I," I say, pulling up profiles. "And you know why? They're all in the middle, and they all like Ammerly enough to link to her in public. She may have lost poll numbers this morning, but she never lost links. She's gotten weight from people who aren't Bad Kids, and that means..."

G.R.'s eyes bulge. "...she can go public and people will believe her!"

The strength drains out of my legs, and I sink to the floor. "We're doomed." I let out a little snort. "Well, *I'm* doomed, anyway. Either Ammerly wins and the business goes poof, or she tells everyone about us. And no matter what happens, she'll give me a heaping plateful of grievous bodily harm."

"Dude, what is it with you and her?"

"Remember sixth grade?"

"Of course!" G.R. says. "That's when your parents came to school and gave that talk about masturbating. I thought I knew it all, but, whew, when your dad came on stage and did that demonstration—"

"It's also when Ammerly moved here from Ohio, dumbass," I say, giving him a glare. "She sat in front of me in homeroom and asked for a link. I was getting enough shit for being the son of Irvine's favorite sexologists, and the last thing I needed was to be connected to this freaky new girl. I told her to leave me alone, and she responded by pounding the crap out of me. Things just got worse the next year when she grew four inches and two cup sizes."

"Now, why would you notice a thing like that?"

"Ever been hit in the throat with a woman's breasts?"

G.R. breaks into a wistful smile. "Not yet."

"Well, try it with a pair that's encased in a Kevlar bra," I say, rubbing my Adam's apple. "I still get hoarse when it's cold."

"So," says G.R. "Where does this all leave us?"

The air leaks out of my lungs. "I have no idea. For the first time in my life, G.R., I cannot think of a way to get out of this jam, short of suicide."

"Dude, you're not—"

"Of course not! That'd screw up my reputation even more."

"I think you worry too much about that," he says. "All this reputation stuff is bullshit anyway."

"So, you don't think student government has a role in everyday life?"

"Nah, just more bullshit."

"What do you think of Homecoming, Prom, Winter Carnival, and Brand Awareness Day?"

"Also bullshit."

"Clubs? Teams? Organizations?"

"Bullshit, bullshit, aaand bullshit."

"And if you were elected ASB president, do you think your attitudes would change?"

"Hell, no," he says. "I'd say it even louder."

A chuckle burbles up from my chest. It grows until I'm laughing so hard I fight for my breath. I put my arm around my friend's shoulder. "G.R., you are a genius."

"No I'm not. Are you okay?"

I haul myself up and offer him a hand. "We've been thinking about this the wrong way. Your running shouldn't be a distraction; it should be for real."

He pops to his feet. "What?"

"Yes," I say, nodding. "You're gonna win."

"Dude, you're starting to scare me."

"Good," I say. "That means we're on the right track. Come on! We're gonna find you a crowd." I take off down the hallway, and G.R. struggles to keep up.

"Wait. Wait!" he says, grabbing at my booksling. "What are you talking about?"

I whirl around. "Do you know what separates you from Ammerly and Vince? He wants to maintain the system, she wants to alter it, but neither wants to admit it's all crap. Your honesty is political gold."

"Gene," says G.R., stopping in his tracks, exasperated. "I appreciate the whole I-Believe-In-You bit, but even I know I can't win."

"Oh, yes, you can." I thumb through the school foaf and pull up a map of dots. "There's an important group of people at the Meaty Meat Burger across the street. If we hurry, we can get there before they're done. Come on!"

"Yeah, but--"

"G.R.," I say, grabbing him by the shirtfront, "do you want to spend the rest of your time here wondering about the wonderful stuff you could've brought to this school? Or do you want to come with me to Meaty Meat Burger and actually do something about it?"

G.R. swallows, his face trembling. With fumbling hands, he pulls out his cell and thumbs a single button. An odd crackling sound comes from his pants, and then we are bombarded with the Berlin Philharmonic playing "Flight of the Valkyries."

"I love the smell of gravy fries after school!" he says, and we charge out of the building.

#

A sizable crowd mills about the beef-scented wonderland that is Meaty Meat Burgers when we burst through the door. The buzz of conversation dies as people stop stuffing their faces with Triple-Toppers to whip out their cells as they chirp and beep and vibrate their owners into action. Our own cells are set to active discovery, blasting out a signal that says, *Yes, we are who we are and we are right here*. All eyes are now on us.

"I dunno about this, Gene," whispers G.R. "Crowds make me nervous, even when they're just ignoring me."

"That won't happen while I'm here," I whisper back. "I sent out link invites to some of these people. If they misbehave, they get nothing."

"Isn't that bribery?"

"No, it's politics. Now," I point to the audience, "just relax, look 'em in the eye and say everything we went over. Imagine the entire crowd is made of naked, aroused goats."

G.R. straightens up.

"Thattaboy," I say, then fade back to an empty bench and leave my candidate in the middle of the restaurant. G.R. looks down at his shoes, takes a deep breath, then launches into a stump speech. His voice is warm and carries to the back of the restaurant, thanks to G.R. turning the Pleasure Chest into a portable psy-ops system. It's now modulating his voice into frequencies that are pleasing to the human ear. We'll have to figure out how to market it later.

I'm so wrapped up watching the crowd clapping and cheering that I don't notice my cell vibrating until it's numbed my leg. I grin at the display; it took even less time to get this call than I thought. G.R. continues to work the crowd as I hop out to the parking lot.

"Is this for real, Gene?" snaps Vinh Lam. "I just got texted from a two degree foaf that your pet freak is giving a speech and using complete sentences. What kind of drugs did you give him?"

"The only thing that intoxicates my candidate is interacting with voters," I say. My cell buzzes again, this time with a text from an underground editor requesting a comment. "If you want to keep smearing my candidate in the pages of the *Communicator*, that's your call. But G.R.'s got something to say, and people are responding to it with positive links."

"I've seen it, and I still don't believe it," says Vinh. "No one like G.R. can get uprated so fast. No way."

"Vinh, I think your bias against my candidate is starting to show. Now, in the time we've talked, I've gotten two—" My cell buzzes again. "—sorry, three messages from underground editors, all of them wanting to know about G.R. Either you put on your objectivity hat and score an exclusive interview at O'Leary's Olde Thyme Sushi in about fifteen minutes, or I dole out this story to the undergrounds and leave you in the dust."

"No!" blurts Vinh before sighing. "All right, I'll be there. Just...no singing this time, okay?"

"You have nothing to fear, Vinh. You might like what he has to say."

"Not unless I can follow up with a stun gun." She hangs up.

The crowd is on its feet, clapping and chanting "G.R.! G.R.!" I catch G.R.'s eye, and he extricates himself from his new admirers.

"That was incredible!" says G.R., flushed and smiling. "No one threw stuff at me! They liked me!"

"No, they loved you," I say, showing him his profile. He stops and stares at my cell's display.

"This can't be right," he says, his voice drifting. "People are linking to me, and they're saying nice things." G.R. looks up at me, his eyes damp.

I throw an arm around his shoulders. "Now, don't go sobby on me yet. There's no crying in politics unless you lose or get caught in a sex scandal, and you are not about to lose."

G.R. gulps. "What about the sex?"

"That can come later."

I thumb through the foaf, pulling up profiles and sending out more link invites. "By the time we work through this place, you'll have

numbers that'll make your opponents wet with envy. Let's go meet the people."

The crowd inside Crazy Curry is thick and humming. People are up against the windows, pointing and waving. This time, G.R. climbs right up onto a bench and launches into his speech. Everyone boos and laughs at the right places, and G.R. wraps things up by leading them in a call-and-response ("What do we hate?" "BULLSHIT!" "Who do we want?" "G.R.!"). I thumb in acceptance codes for my link invite bribes, and we barrel out of there under a hail of cheers and flying samosas.

At Wings 'n' Gizzards and the Pho Palace, it's more of the same: people run up to meet G.R., holding out their cells, and his network grows. My link invitees have whipped the crowds into a frenzy: people bang on the tabletops and chant "Bullshit, bullshit!" G.R. slays both audiences, and the people at the Pho Palace carry him on their skinny shoulders over to O'Leary's.

I tail behind, thumbing in acceptances and casting around for more places to hit. Word about G.R.'s electrifying speeches has traveled through the middle kids faster than Estonian herpes. He's now polling at 20%.

O'Leary's is overflowing as we approach. People are packed in so tight that G.R.'s bearers have to pass him hand-over-hand into the restaurant. A goggle-eyed Vinh stands on the periphery of the crowd, her mouth hanging open in amazement before she fights her way inside. Everyone quiets down long enough for G.R. to order a round of wasabi shakes for the house, and a rousing cheer drowns him out.

My cell buzzes; *VINCE CHIN* lights up the caller ID. "Calling to make another order?"

"You dick," Vince snarls. "It wasn't enough to put your goat fucker on display. You had to go and make him a star."

"Hey, he's only telling the people the truth. If you can't come up with a better message, that's your problem."

"No, it's yours. I'm cutting you off."

"Cutting me off?" I laugh. "What makes you think I need your business? You have any idea what a loss leader you are?"

"I mean that I'm cutting you off of my network."

"Fine by me. I got plenty of other people who'll be happy to take your place."

Vince chuckles, a cruel sound that sets my teeth on edge. "Not anymore."

"I'm sorry?"

"One of us has more weight, Gene, and it isn't you."

Sweat breaks out on my neck. "What do you mean?"

Vince's chuckle becomes an evil cackle. "You should see how fast your links go. I wouldn't want you to miss it!" He laughs and laughs as I kill the call and thumb up my profile. What I see hits harder than any gut punch from Ammerly.

The green lines that connect me with the school's best and brightest are vanishing, and with them go our entire customer base. I had over five hundred links this morning; now I've got forty, and they're all from people I bribed to listen to G.R. this afternoon.

My cell buzzes, pulling me out of my stupor. Vince again. "Calling me back to gloat?"

"Oh, come on, Gene," he soothes. "It's not right to gloat, even if you are better than someone else."

I wince, but hold my tongue.

Vince clears his throat. "I hated to do that, Gene, I really did. But behave, or I'll kill this call right now and leave you with the peons."

I swallow my pride along with my liver. "What do you want?"

"If you get G.R. to pull out right now, I'll link back to you. I'll write testimonials about what a great guy you are, tell everyone to bring you back into the fold. We'll act like this never happened."

O'Leary's explodes in a cheer that would make most riot squads nervous. Catcalls and applause shake the windows, and the people inside stomp their feet and yell, "G.R.! G.R.!" The crowd rushes out like an avalanche, the candidate surfing along the top, a look of bliss on his face.

"Well?" says Vince. "What's it gonna be, Gene?"

The crowd sets G.R. on the ground. He waves at them and runs up to me, all smiles. "Holy crap, that felt great!"

"Could you hold, please?" I say, silencing the call before Vince can protest. "I hope you're not talking about that thing in your pants."

"Nah," he shakes his head, "I shut it off after Meaty Meat."

"What?"

He shrugs. "It started overheating in the middle of the chanting, so I turned it off."

"That was all you?"

He nods.

I thumb my cell. "I decided. You can go fuck yourself."

"WHAT?" Vince yells.

"Yeah," I say, eyeing G.R., "I stand by my candidate."

"What was that?" asks G.R. as I kill the call.

"Voter outreach," I say as my cell bleeps, and one of the forty unlinks and creates a little more black space.

"Okay," I say, pocketing the phone. "In about an hour, most of the sports teams are going to get out of practice, and they'll head over to Grove Corners. You and your mob stake out territory at Joltin' Joe's, crowd out the regulars, you'll have this thing locked up. Just go and be the you you were just now."

"Won't you be there?"

Before I can answer, Vinh butts between us and shoves her cell in G.R.'s face. "G.R., I wanna know, and I wanna know because the right people wanna know, what's your next move? What're you gonna do? And why haven't you been this interesting before?"

G.R.'s eyes flicker to me for a moment. I nod, and he turns on the charm. Their voices fade as I walk for home, just like any other regular kid.

Tomorrow will be a busy day.

#

I spend all night watching my network shrink to a single link between me and G.R. and thinking of ways to make the business work, but nothing adds up. When I finally doze off, I have nightmares: horrible visions of Vince Chin rolling me into a giant burrito, then dunking me into an ocean of miso soup to fend off attacks from a merciless, razor-toothed shark with pouting, purple lips. By the time I wake up, I'm too exhausted to realize my alarm has gone off an hour early.

G.R. won't be here to pick me up for another ninety minutes, and there's no way I'm going to get back to sleep, so I resign myself to starting the day at this ungodly hour. A hot shower eases my brain into gear, and I run through the day's plan: do nothing. It's such a novel concept that I'm having a hard time accepting it.

G.R.'s speech at Joltin' Joe's had just the effect I'd hoped for: hundreds of kids in the middle crowded out the regulars like so much kudzu in a rose garden. Footage of the speech tore across the foaf, making G.R. an instant social media darling. He even has a new campaign anthem, courtesy of a local garage band: "Bullshit Makes the Baby Jesus Cry" is holding at number four on the local P2Ps. His poll numbers are a remarkable forty-two percent, and nothing will stop him now, not even if he lived up to his name on stage. Hell, at this point, that might get him even more votes.

A quick bit of dressing and gathering stuff, and I'm out the door. No point in waiting until G.R. wakes up, so I speed-dial his cell, only to get kicked right to voicemail.

I hole up in the local Joe's, making call after call to no avail. From my vantage point, I should see G.R.'s truck coming by, but there's nothing but a stream of SUVs and mini-wagons. Slamming down my eighth soda, I run out the door to catch a waiting OCTA bus. School starts in half an hour.

A nerve-wracking twenty-seven minutes later, I escape from the bus and stumble toward Reagan's main gate. After clearing the metal detectors, I fly down the hallway, following G.R.'s green dot to the science wing. The candidate and a small part of his mob mill around a drinking fountain. He's shaking hands and slapping backs. The buzz is deafening, like a plague of locusts. I didn't realize until now just how much I hate voters.

"G.R.!" I call out, shoving G.R.'s admirers aside. After fighting to get within arm's length of the candidate, I grab him by the shoulder.

G.R. turns and shoots me a smile. "Hi, Gene! What's up?"

"Conference," I say. "Now." Hauling G.R. out of his mob is like dislodging a mammoth from a tar pit, but I manage to drag his ass into the nearest bathroom.

"All right!" I call to the guys crowding the urinals. "All of you, out! Private political conference!"

There is silence. A few heads turn. I drop my booksling and yell, "Did you not hear me? I need to talk to my candidate, and none of you are invited!"

The guys glance at each other, then at G.R., who gives them a quick nod. The room empties, and I lock the door behind the last of them. "Where were you?" I say. "I tried calling, but your cell was off."



"I was up all night talking with people about the election," he says, yawning. "Got a lot of great ideas about what to do next."

"Hey, voter outreach, great," I say, washing the bus off my hands. "Make sure to keep me in the loop, okay?"

G.R.'s eyebrows furrow. "I thought you said I was fine on my own."

"You are," I say. "Just keep in mind why you're running."

He shrugs. "Well, I've got a handle on everything..."

"Wait," I laugh. "Since when have you ever run anything like this?"

G.R. winces, his expression darkening. "Well, since when have *you*?"

"Hey, I run our business, remember that?" I say, my voice rising a little too much.

"Yeah, I remember," says G.R., his voice rising with mine. "You got to make all the connections and talk with everyone while I did the shit work."

I start, like I've been slapped in the face. In fact, I think I have. "You mean you'd rather have to do the marketing, the research, the books—"

"I mean I'd rather do something that doesn't involve me always being your bitch!" he yells.

"Well, I've always thought of you more like a flunky..."

G.R. points a shaking finger at me. "Hey, don't call me that. My Analytical scores are higher than yours. Why do you think I'm the one who figures out how to hack your parents' samples, huh?"

"Because I've been busy getting us customers, you unrepentant perv, just like I've been busy running your campaign."

"Yeah, fat lot of good you've done," snorts G.R.

"I'm sorry?"

"You see that crowd out there?" says G.R., pointing at the hallway. "You know who did that? Me, that's who."

"You? Ha!" I say. "You wouldn't have jack if I hadn't put in a down payment for your mob. Don't go talking to me about who's doing more."

"God, Gene, why are you being such a dick?" yells G.R.

Taking deep breaths, I count to ten. Around four, I give up and explode. "One of our clients is trying to blackmail me, and—"

"So?" says G.R. "That's your problem, not mine. I'm at forty-two percent. Even if I tie with Vince or Ammerly, there'll be a runoff and plenty of time to get more votes."

"Are you high?" I say. "Are you buying your own press?"

"I have had enough of this crap," seethes G.R. "Ever since kindergarten, you've been pushing me around. Not any more! You're fired."

"What?" I laugh. "You wanna fire me? Fuck you, I quit!" I shove G.R. out of the way, blasting the door open and bowling over the eavesdroppers who've gathered around.

Voters. Fuck 'em.

#

3rd period, and my cell bleeps with a message, but I don't bother to read it. It's probably just Vince goading me or Ammerly threatening me or G.R. begging me, please, please help him out. To hell with all of them. I work my ass off and all I get is—

In her instructional bunker, the teacher jumps as her own cell chimes. She glances at the display, then looks at me, her face a mask of terrified pity. "Gene Ro, please report to the Principal's Office."

The same message is on my cell, right under the official timestamp. I can feel everyone's eyes on my back as I grab my booksling and walk out the door. The air suddenly feels cold.

The air inside the Office, much to my surprise, is warm and smells like English muffins. Pleasant music rains on us from a ceiling grill. The secretary, a grandmotherly old woman with a cardigan draped over her shoulders, looks up from her massive mechanical keyboard. "Why, hello, Eugene!" she says in a voice reserved for serving milk and cookies. "The Principal will be with you both shortly. Please take a seat."

She motions to a row of steel chairs seated across from what looks like a battleship's blast door. G.R. sits in one, trying hard not to look terrified. He glances at me, opens his mouth, then looks off into space.

"Excuse me," I say to the secretary. "Why does the Principal want to see us?"

"Oh!" says the secretary, looking over a stack of papers and giving us a sad frown. "I believe it has something to do with the sex toy ring you're both running."

Time stands still as the full weight of what she's said hits me like a wrecking ball to the testicles. I sink into a chair and look at a pale G.R. "What?" I squeak.

"Oh, yes," she says. "The Principal received an anonymous tip last night that you two have been running a business selling sex toys to the student body." Anonymous tip, my ass. This has Vince Chin's semen-stained fingers all over it.

"But, that's not illegal, right?" I say. "I mean, we have drug dealers in all the bathrooms!"

"Oh, yes," says the secretary. "But they all registered with the Principal's Office. I'm afraid you didn't. This is a place of learning, after all."

A phone buzzes on the secretary's desk, and she answers with a cheery, "Yes, sir?" Inhuman wailing comes from both the phone and behind the blast door; she smiles and nods and places the phone back in its cradle. "The Principal will see you now," she says, pressing a button. Cable restraints zip out of the chairs and wrap themselves around us. The chairs jerk forward on a conveyor belt toward the blast door. As we approach, I see a giant smiley face gouged into its surface, right below the legend *THE PRINCIPAL IS YOUR PAL!* The blast door opens with a missile silo hiss. Before we can cry out, we slide into the Principal's Office.

It's dark inside, crime scene dark. The room smells like a horrid mix of rancid fried chicken and ointment. A tiny pool of light spills out onto a desk clogged with paperwork and fast food wrappers. As we roll closer, I see a thick pair of arms, flabby and covered with eczema, resting on the desk pad. They are not arms that I want anywhere near me, not even if I had a bullwhip and a biohazard suit.

"Well?" bellows a voice from behind the arms. "Don't be bashful. Get up here!"

The chairs straighten themselves out like morgue slabs, then tilt forward. We zip to the front of the desk, and something leans into the lamp-light: a face with five chins, a spit curl of white, Brylcreamed hair, a nose like a misbegotten squash. It is a face covered in boils and acne scars, a face pale from years of sunlight deprivation, a face sallow with decades of poor diet. It is a face right out of a horror movie, and it only looks worse when it tries to smile.

"Well, now," says the Principal. "A little bird tells me you've been naughty boys." The blast door clicks shut behind us.

"Yes, selling dildoes and vibramats and orgazmotrons on school property, using school network resources to do your dirty business, all without permission." The Principal tsks, shaking his head. "We can't have that. So, it looks like a session with the cattle prod, followed by a parent-teacher interrogation and a summary execution."

"Uh," I say. G.R. faints dead away.

The Principal pauses, like he's consulting a moldy mental thesaurus. "No, wait! Not execution," he says, "Expulsion."

I manage to swing my slab into G.R.'s, knocking him awake.

"Yes," the Principal nods, "more paperwork and not as satisfying, but rules are rules. But don't worry about the cattle prod, boys. Only a formality. It's very small. Doesn't leave marks anymore. Here."

The Principal opens a desk drawer and pulls out a device the size of a flashlight. There is a firm click, and sparks crackle across the desk. The Principal smiles again, the light and shadow dancing across his chins and scars, like the poster of a Swedish black metal band come to horrible life.

The Principal deactivates the prod and tosses it on the desk, shaking his head. "Now, I can understand what you're going through, boys. It's a difficult time of life, when your hormones collide with your need for laddish tomfoolery. These days, you kids are all 'doing it.' That's what you call it, right? 'Doing it'? 'Gettin' the spanky-tank'? 'Twisting the pudding'? Eh? Eh?" He waggles his eyebrows, a sight more obscene than any porno I've ever sold. G.R. gags, though that might be due to his slab's rocking.

"Indeed," says the Principal, rising from his desk and walking toward us. "I remember that time myself, the body anxiety, the backseat fumbling." He inhales, immune to the evil smells in the room. "The best days of my life, boys, when you knew your Prom date was the only girl you needed, and then..." He rests a hand on my slab, and his beady eyes burn into mine. His mouth twitches, like the start of a sneer, but his eyelids flutter for the briefest of moments before he turns away, and I recognize something.

The look in the Principal's eyes is one that I've seen many times in my career. It's more than the desperate look of a fetishist who needs to get off, more than the hormonal drive of a juiced-up chess player. It's the look of a human being who simply wants fulfillment, and it is my moral

obligation, my sacred duty, to help that person and only charge him a three hundred percent markup.

The chair cushions fart in protest as Principal crashes down on them. "You'll see, boys, that there comes a time in a man's life when his body fails, when everything goes in a haze of heart stents and impotence, and no amount of science will keep your true love satisfied. And I won't have you giving that kind of false, illegal hope to this student body."

The Principal picks up the cattle prod and a form-lead clipboard. "Now, before we start," he says, lumbering toward us, "you both need to sign these releases in the event of your incapacitation, sterility or death." He starts the cattle prod again, sparks leaping between the leads. "If you don't sign 'em, state law says I can up the voltage, so I'd make with the John Hancocks if I were you. Then we'll get your parents here, and—"

*—your parents. What're they talking about?*

*Genitals and electroshock—*

I clear my throat, and the Principal jerks upright and locks his addled eyes on me. I fight back my rising gorge and give the Principal my finest sales smile. "Sir, what would you say if I told you the solution you're looking for is at hand?"

He smiles, the folds of fat shifting under his eyes like an avalanche. "You're not the first person in that chair to try bargaining his way out."

"But I'm the first one with parents presenting a paper at the Kinsley Institute that has some bearing on your affliction. If you'll just look them up... "

The Principal's eyes narrow, like he's going to zap us anyway, but he pulls out an ancient cell, barely web-enabled, and thumbs up a search window. As the Kinsey's site crawls onto the screen, I hope I've got my parents' lecture schedule right. If it's S&M day, we are beyond screwed.

The Principal walks back to his desk, his eyes growing wider in the display light until a single tear slides down his fat cheek. He puts down the cell, looks at us both with a quivering smile, and the hand holding the cattle prod disappears below the desktop. There is a click, and a bright spray of sparks, and then, sitting before us is a new man.

"Holy Good Gravy," he says, looking like an ecstatic ape, "that puts a turn in your crank." His free hand smashes down on a button, and the restraints that hold G.R. and I zip away, letting us tumble to the ground.

We help each other up, and the Principal, now the picture of deranged bonhomie, says, "So, Eugene! What's a fine, upstanding young man like yourself doing here?"

"Just helping my friend here get elected to ASB, sir," I say, patting G.R. on the back.

The Principal regards G.R. for a moment. "Say," he says, "aren't you the goat fucker?"

G.R. grins. "I have been known to enjoy their company from time to time."

The Principal nods. "Me, too. My weekly visits to the FFA's corrals are the only thing in this godforsaken place that keeps me from putting a bullet into my head."

G.R. nods until he realizes what he's heard. He turns to me with eyes as big as dinner plates, then stares down at his shoes.

The Principal leans back and says, "Well, there's obviously been some kind of mistake. There's no way you'd do the degrading things you've been accused of. Sorry for bringing you in. Get back to class, keep off the goofballs and eat lots of fiber. Key to happiness, boys: fiber."

G.R. spins to go, but I stop him and lean toward the Principal. "Ah, sir? I was wondering if you could do something about the expulsion forms?"

"Expulsions? In my school?" roars the Principal, picking up the forms, clipboard and all, and feeding them into a paper shredder sitting on his desktop. Everything vanishes with a satisfying grinding of gears.

"There!" he says, waving the cattle prod like a fiery baton. "Our business is concluded! Go! Go and enjoy your youth while you've still got your prostates!"

G.R. and I look at each other, then bolt for the now-opened blast door as the Principal shocks himself again and again.

Outside, the recycled air has never smelled sweeter. The secretary starts, surprised to see us upright and alive.

We're both quiet for a few seconds. I look over G.R.'s shoulder as he shuffles his feet. We both start apologizing at once.

"Look, what I said this morning--"

"--that was wrong, dude, and--"

"--got carried away, what with the mob--"

“–all you, man, it was all you–”

“Right.”

“Cool.”

G.R. nods. “I did mean what I said about you being a dick to me, though.”

I shrug. “And I meant the bit about you being an unrepentant perv.”

“You are what you is,” he says, holding out his hand. I take it with a firm shake.

I glance at the clock on my cell. “Well, school’s out in a bit. You ready for some more meet ‘n’ greet?”

G.R. strikes a heroic pose. “I think everything is bullshit,” he intones.

“Excellent,” I say. “You’re ready. Now we’ll just–”

My cell buzzes, and a giant alert icon fills the display. I thumb up the message, and it knocks the wind out of me.

“What?” asks G.R.

“Pull up the school paper,” I say in a daze. “Strange bedfellows, fuck *me*.”

#

At the lunch shelter, a healthy-sized crowd mills around Vince Chin and Ammerly Prescott. They’re standing together on top of a bench, each using their cells as microphones. We hover at the edge, keeping an eye out for McTavishes.

“...which is why we’re throwing our support together against G.R. McCabe!” calls out Vince, his voice coming out of a thousand cell speakers. “That way, Ammerly and I can have a runoff after we’ve left G.R. where he belongs: in the gutter, where no one will miss him.” The crowd answers with a hearty cheer.

“Is he serious?” yells G.R. over the din.

I thumb through a slew of chat rooms and undergrounds. “It’s legit,” I shout back. “They must’ve cut a deal while we were in the Principal’s Office.”

Vince holds up his hands, and the crowd stills. “I know a lot of you are thinking about how weird this must look, but it’s a natural partnership. Ammerly and I have a lot in common: I like to help old ladies, and she likes to steal their purses.” The crowd laughs, and I zoom my phonecam on Ammerly to get a closer look. She laughs, but, even without the

closeup, I can see her heart isn't in it. Her smirk is gone, and the fire in her eyes is dead.

Vince settles down the crowd again and says, "But we agree on one thing: reputation matters. Our opponent, however, doesn't think so. G.R. McCabe is nothing more than an attention-grabbing clown, and he doesn't deserve anyone's vote."

G .R. bristles. "What is the deal with this cockmonger?"

I look at the smug grin plastered on Vince Chin's face and the shame that burns on Ammerly's cheeks. I think about the single green line between me and G.R., about all the lines I had yesterday. Vince catches my eye and gives me the tiniest of nods.

"Vince Chin is one of our clients," I yell in G.R.'s ear.

"WHAT?"

I nod. "He's an auto-voyeuristic plushy. Gets off filming himself humping stuffed toys."

"Wait, wait," says G.R., shaking his head. "Why are you telling me this? I could actually do something with it now."

"If I'm not going to be a golden boy anymore, I might as well make the best of it," I say, thumbing up a link and waving my cell at G.R.'s.

He accepts, and his cell starts downloading a video. "Oh my diapered baby Jesus," he says when it plays.

It is a film of Vince Chin, grunting like a wild boar in heat, as he humps away at a pink stuffed elephant, all captured thanks to the back-door uplink in one of his auto-voyeur nannycams. The video switches vantage points to the trunk's point-of-view, and G.R. puts the cell down. "That's just wrong. Even *I* grew out of playing with stuffed toys."

"How fast can you send that link to your mob?" I ask.

"I don't know if I can do that to them."

"They're tough people. Let fly, baby."

He thumbs his cell, and the link sails out over the ether.

"Good," I say. "Now watch."

Vince is so absorbed in his harangue that he doesn't see the ripples in the crowd. People start as their cells ring, then bow their heads to look at the message. They elbow each other, sharing cells and stifling giggles. Within thirty seconds, the entire crowd is laughing and pointing at the



stage. Even Ammerly has gotten the message, and she stares at Vince with naked rage.

Vince finally realizes he's lost the crowd, and he turns to face Ammerly.

"I think you need to get up there," I say to G.R.

"Shouldn't I save my mojo for later?"

"I don't think there's going to be a later," I say. "Just summon your mob and get up there before--"

Ammerly cold-cocks Vince across his massive jaw. He tumbles to the ground like a sack of potatoes and lays prostrate as she gives him a good kick to the stomach.

"--before she belts him," I finish, shoving our way through the bodies. "Listen, G.R.: this is the moment of campaign truth. You need to get up there and take hold of the situation. You need to expose Ammerly for the sell-out she is, and you need to draw attention away from your sordid past. You need to do this now, and you need to do this well. I have nothing but confidence in your ability to kick ass." I put my hands on his shoulders and smile. "Now, go and win, you beautiful freak."

G.R. nods and pushes his way through. People move out of his way, some patting him on the back.

Ammerly shushes the crowd. "Reputation counts," she says into her cell, murder in her eyes. "But it only counts when it's coupled with honesty. And you, Vincent Chin, are a lying sack of crap." She gives Vince another kick for emphasis. "I don't give a damn about your sick habits, but if you don't have the balls to be honest about it, you don't deserve to share a ballot with me."

"And what do you know about being honest, Ammerly?" calls out G.R. as he takes the stage.

Ammerly smirks. "Last I heard, you were getting hauled into the Principal's Office for being a dildo jockey." The crowd hoots and whistles.

"Nah," says G.R. into his own cell. "He just wanted tips on how to woo the ladies. It's all about the ruminant erotica." A small cheer comes from the back of the crowd; the first of G.R.'s mob has arrived.

"Pretty big talk for a--"

"--and could you stop calling me a freak for once?" says G.R. "I don't go around telling everyone that you're a wannabe revolutionary sell-out, do I?" The crowd laughs as G.R. waves.

"Yes," he says to the crowd, "I'm a freak, I'm a pervert, I look funny at girls and touch myself in inappropriate ways. I am what I am, Ammerly." He fixes her with a stare. "What are you?"

Ammerly's smirk fumbles, then recovers as she says, "Is Gene out there feeding you this?"

G.R. shakes his head. "I'm nobody's puppet, Ammerly. I've never cut any deals with my opponents, never promised anything I can't deliver. I may not have taken this whole thing seriously yesterday morning, but I do now. I do every time someone tells me how they're sick of being mocked or bullied or just plain ignored." His mob cheers, and I clap along with them.

G.R. looks out over the faces of the assembled student body, then turns back to Ammerly. "You know, the funny thing is I probably would've voted for you. I mean, who better than me would want to be accepted? You think you've been shunned? Please!" The front row laughs, and G.R. winks.

"None," says Ammerly, looking more and more deflated, "none of what you say changes the fact that you link to Gene Ro, someone who just got busted for running a sex toy ring to the school's high and mighty. He's spent his entire life pretending to be someone he's not. Are you going to deny that?"

The chatter increases. I recognize more than a few former customers looking nervous.

G.R. fixes Ammerly with a stare and says, "Gene's my friend, but I don't care what he does. And if you meant what you said about changing the way we link to people, you wouldn't either."

The mob explodes, and Ammerly stands there flinching like a shark that's just had its teeth pulled. "But you're his business partner!" she cries. "You've been helping him forever!" A hush falls over the crowd, and they lean in to hear G.R.'s defense.

G.R. smiles, that twinkle of evil hiding behind his angelic face. "Ammerly, you've seen my scores. You know my reputation. Do you really think I'd be selling sex toys when I could just stay home and use 'em?"

The roar is so deafening it rattles windows. As G.R. holds his arms aloft in triumph, the entire crowd surges forward, reaching out to carry him off the bench. He surfs on their outstretched hands as the crowd starts chanting his name.

Ammerly looks at the people; some of the Bad Kids shake their heads and walk away. She swallows, fixes her jaw and steps down, doing her best to maintain her composure. Ammerly waits until she's pushed her way to the periphery before dabbing at her eyes.

For the first time in my life, I feel bad for her. It doesn't last long, though, because several dozen hands hoist me aloft. The crowd carries me hand-over-hand to its middle, where G.R. gives me a casual shrug.

"Thought we should have a post-mortem on that speech," he says.

"Dude, if you're using phrases like 'post-mortem,' my work is definitely done," I say.

"Thanks." His smile fades, and he leans over. "So, what now?"

I thumb up G.R.'s poll numbers. "Word spreads fast. Everyone knows Vince is a plushy, Ammerly's a sell-out, and you can't be owned. You're at 84%."

"No shit?"

"None whatsoever. You're gonna have one hell of a mandate."

G.R. hoots. "Sweet! And then what?"

I shake my head. "You don't need a campaign manager for that; you need a chief of staff."

"Well, that's you, right?"

"No. Ammerly."

"WHAT?"

I nod. "Look, she knows about cracking skulls and whipping people into line. Plus, you'd be keeping your biggest political opponent nearby." I tap one of my bearers on the head. As they move me away, G.R. leans back and grins up at the sky.

The crowd has grown so large that it takes me at least two minutes to return to solid ground. I slip around a corner for some quiet and find myself at the band room. Even though it's lunchtime, the sounds of tooting horns leak through its walls. I'm about to leave for an even quieter spot when someone taps my shoulder and I turn into Benny McTavish's fist. My head spins as Frank follows up with a rabbit punch to my gut.

The air whooshes out of my lungs as I double over. As I fight my way upright, I realize that we're all under the securicam's dead spot. "Hi, guys," I say. "Here to talk shop?"

Frank wallops me again, right in the solar plexus. This time, I don't bother getting back up. The ground is sticky with decades of sun-baked soda and emptied spit valves. I put a cheek on the warm asphalt. It's the most wonderful thing in the world, because it doesn't want to hit me.

A familiar pair of heavy, black boots fills my vision, though now I can see that they're not steel-toed, but more of a silvery Kevlar weave. "Hi, Ammerly," I say to the boots.

"Hello, Gene," says a voice from above.

"So, how much did Vince offer you to sell out?"

One of the boots kicks me in the midsection. I grunt and curl up into a ball.

Ammerly squats down, forearms on thighs. She reaches out and caresses my face. "It kills me to see you like this," she purrs.

"I'll bet," I say, laughing despite the pain. "C'mon, Ammerly, you can tell me. Aren't we old friends? Haven't you been beating me up since we were kids?"

She stands, nudges me onto my back and straddles my torso. For a brief moment, I glance away from her face and realize that I can see her underwear. To my shock and wonder, she's wearing purple bloomers.

Ammerly looks at me and says, "Respect."

"What?" I blink. "From him?"

She nods. "He said if I helped him squeeze out G.R., then we could have a real debate. I mean," she laughs, "I know he was completely full of shit, but for a brief moment, I felt like he respected me as a candidate."

"I think 'feared' is the right word."

"Probably," she says, sitting down on my stomach and giving me a light slap. I try to roll away, but my arms are pinned beneath McTavish feet. "But it was enough to give him a chance. That's certainly more than you ever offered me."

I cough and wince at the extra weight on my abdominals. Ammerly feels very warm, and her perfume is fuzzing my concentration. "I told G.R. to make you his chief of staff," I blurt.

Ammerly grabs my chin, squeezing my cheeks. "Now you're just taunting me, Gene. First you fuck up my campaign, and now you're offering me a job? Whatever you're trying to sell, it's not going to keep me from kicking your ass."

"Inna pass for mons," I try to say, then shake my face free of her grip. "In the past four months, you've met with members of every student group and talked about the link system. You've written and posted over thirty proposals for overhauling student government, eleven of which the current ASB picked up and called their own."

"How do you know all this?" she asks, leaning close.

"It's called oppo, genius," I say. "You're a player, Ammerly, and if you had any ovaries, you'd take the gig and run with it with everything you've got."

She puts her face in mine. "And what makes you think I'm not going to beat him on Monday?"

"Oh, come on," I laugh, intoxicated by her perfume. "His numbers are so high that you could spend the next forty-eight hours sharing video of him living up to his nickname, and he'd still win. So, you can either just beat the shit out me or stop being a Bad Girl. Your choice."

Ammerly cracks a tiny smile. "I thought you said I'd always be a Bad Girl."

I fix her with the best stare I can muster. "You are. And that makes you perfect for the job."

Ammerly narrows her eyes as her cell buzzes in her skirt pocket. "Speak of the freak," she says, holding up the display for me: it's G.R.

The cell buzzes a few more times before Ammerly finally takes the call. "Yeah?" Her face is so close to mine that I can hear the other end, loud and clear.

"Listen, Ammerly," says G.R., the mob buzzing in the background, "I've been trying to figure out how to ask you something in a way that'll simultaneously stroke your ego and not bruise your pride, but I respect you too much to try either. Would you be my chief of staff? You'd get to keep on causing trouble."

Ammerly gives me a look and says to the cell, "How much trouble are we talking about?"

"A lot," says G.R., getting worked up. "I want to have the Homecoming floats depict scenes from great American horror movies. I'm thinking chainsaws, zombies, fake blood."

Ammerly cups her hand over the phone. "Is he always like this?"

"You learn to get used to it," I say.

"Have you?" she asks.

"Not really, no."

Ammerly sits upright, keeping a hand on my chest for balance as G.R. prattles away. I look up at the sky, trying to think about nuns and puppies and not about how arousing this is.

"Okay, okay," Ammerly says, "I'll take the job. Just save the ideas for later, okay?"

G.R.'s reply is out of earshot, but, from the bemused smile on Ammerly's face, I'm sure it's a positive response.

"All right," says Ammerly. "But I reserve the right to kick your ass if you become suckful. Deal?"

She nods to his reply. "All right, then," she says. "Just be ready to work. And, G.R.? Thanks." She kills the call.

"Hope you can deal with him," I say.

"I've got a tazer," she says. "Will that help?"

"Can't hurt," I say. "So, are we gonna stay like this all day? Shouldn't you buy me dinner before you mount me?"

She nods to the McTavishes, and they step off my wrists. Ammerly leans in and says, "You can be a real asshole, Gene. You know that?" She gives me a peck on the cheek, then stands up and strides away.

After the feeling returns to my hands and torso, I haul myself up. My wrists are raw, and it hurts to breathe, but I can't help but feel hopeful. I survived another encounter with Ammerly and didn't die. This is going to be a good year.

I look at the McTavishes and say, "So, guys. Everything's cool?"

Benny and Frank look at each other and then at me. "No," says Benny. "Not yet."

I take a step back and cover my torso. "Uh, really?"

"You made our friend cry," says Frank, grabbing my arms and pulling them apart.

"And you're taking her away from us," says Benny, punching me in the stomach.

I stink to the ground. "Can't say I'm surprised," I whisper, and they proceed to beat the stuffing out of me.

#

Fortunately, the McTavishes get carried away and move from underneath the blind spot. All I remember before passing out is

the *whit, whit* of tranquilizer darts. Next thing I know, I'm in the Nurse's Office with an aching body and the business cards of twenty personal injury attorneys.

G.R. takes me home, and my parents teleconference in with an angry lecture about how it's wrong to commodify sexual expression. Eventually, the painkillers and ice packs take over, and for the first time since first grade, I don't have to think about business.

By Monday afternoon, I work up the strength to move into the living room for some sunlight and reading. I try scrolling through back issues of *The Economist*, but the election results eat at me. Finally, I crack and pull up the school paper.

The front page shows a line of voters snaking around the gym and out to the lunch shelter. Turnout is at a record high. There are close-up shots of homemade NO BULLSHIT buttons and of a beaming G.R. There's also a picture of Vince Chin, but it's tough to tell from the way he's blocking the lens with his palm. Ammerly is nowhere to be seen, which is funny, 'cause I could swear I can smell her perfume, that grapefruit and plumeria—

"Hi."

I look up, and Ammerly Prescott is in the doorway of the living room. I try to flee, but my body's too beaten to comply. I can only lie there like a trapped marmoset and watch her walk in. Not strut. Walk.

Ammerly's hair, while still ratted and hair-sprayed, is now in a loose ponytail. Her skirt is an inch longer, and her boots are an inch shorter. The mascara under her eyes is toned down a few degrees, and Ammerly's lipstick is now a deep, pinot red. When she smiles, it scares me even more because her face is warm and pleasant.

"Uh," I manage.

G.R. pops out and waves. "Hey, sorry to barge in on you, but we were in the neighborhood, and Ammerly wanted to come and apologize for the shitectomy-by-kicking you got."

"Christ," I say, catching my breath. "Haven't you taught him to knock?"

Ammerly cocks an eyebrow. "Haven't you?"

"Touché." I look up at G.R. "So, you happy with that tally?"

"Ninety-nine percent!" he crows. "I think that calls for some celebratory hacking. Your folks got anything new?"

"There's a package from Tonga in the hall," I say. "The one marked 'Flammable'."

G.R. bounds out of the room.

We look at each for a few uncomfortable seconds. Ammerly's mouth twitches as she approaches the couch, and I say, "I like the new look. Hardcore, yet accessible."

"Thanks," Ammerly says, sitting on the edge of the sofa. "I did it for you."

"Really?"

She laughs. "You wish, Gene." She punches my arm, then winces and pulls away. "Sorry. Reflex."

"No, that's okay," I say, trying not to show the pain and failing. "That was presumptuous of me. I'm sorry."

Ammerly smiles. "Well. Maybe I changed my lipstick for you."

"Ah."

"So," says Ammerly, "I'm sorry for what Benny and Frank did. They were acting on their own, and I gave them the business after the tranqs wore off."

"They were sticking up for their friend." I shrug. "In a warped, disturbing way, it's kinda sweet."

"It was still inexcusable," she says. "There's a time and place for violence, and that wasn't it."

"You're going to be fun when people come asking for club funding."

We look at each other, and Ammerly pats me on the leg. "So, uh, I also came here to ask if you'd like a job. Unless you want to keep on with the dildoes."

I laugh. "No, I am done with retail. What's the gig?"

"Working for me. Special Policy Assistant."

"What would I do?"

"Help me figure out how to execute G.R.'s ideas, come up with new ones, and be ready with the tazer."

I nod to myself. "Will I have to put out?"

Ammerly fixes me with a raised eyebrow. She leans in close and says in a smoky voice, "Maybe."

"Uh."



She's on top of me before I can breathe. Ammerly's tongue chokes me, and it feels like she's sucking the air out of my lungs. I can't remember ever feeling so scared and alive.

"Hey, guys!" comes a muffled voice.

Ammerly and I break from our kiss and look up: a six-foot wooden tiki figure stands under the archway. Its mouth gapes, and an obscene tongue lolls behind giant, jagged teeth. The truly scary part, though, is the four-foot erection that rises from the tiki's stubby body. It looks like something that could swallow you whole or hump you to death or both.

The tiki bobbles from side to side, and the voice says, "Foolish mortals! Bring to me your finest virgins, and tremble!" Then, with a *poof*, the tip of the phallus bursts into flame, and liquid fuel sprays out from a nozzle deep in the tiki's mouth. A jet of fire explodes into the living room, nearly incinerating a table lamp. Ammerly yelps and leaps into my arms. It feels good, even though she's crushing my lap.

The tiki bobbles again, and G.R. pops out from behind. "Dude, I didn't even have to hack this!" he says. "You should see the other settings it's got! Could we use this at my inauguration? Please?"

"Got that tazer ready?" Ammerly whispers in my ear before nibbling on it.

"Right next to the fire extinguisher," I say. G.R. grins and gives me a thumbs up. I can only smile and give him one back.

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