



## Home Movie

I was holding a thirteen-inch penis in my hand when it all started.

The digitized bell rang to tell me a customer had entered the store. I set the giant rubber cock on the shelf, then glanced over my shoulder to see Kathy and Kevin Wertham walking in. They were a middle-aged couple who were among our best regulars – nice people, maybe a little white trashy, but always friendly.

"Hi guys," I called out. "Just let me finish unpacking this stuff and I'll be right with you." I reached down to scoop another armful of sex toys out of the cardboard box sitting on the floor.

"Hi Marie," Kevin said as they both walked over to the aisle I was in. I glanced up just in time to catch him checking me out while I was bent over. It always amazed me that, despite all the nudity plastered everywhere in the store, guys could still get excited over a little cleavage.

It didn't really bother me, though. As a reasonably attractive nineteen year-old woman working in a smut shop, you can't get bent out of shape every time a guy lets his eyes wander. To be honest, I enjoyed it in a playful, exhibitionist sort of way, just as long as they guys weren't too scuzzy about their leering.

"You need to have a talk with that guy who works here at night," Kathy said, stepping between her husband and me. "That video he recommended to us was seriously fucked up."

"Who, Steve?" I asked, feeling my stomach drop.

"Yeah, *Steve*," Kathy replied, drawing out his name and smiling with only half her mouth, a kind of *can-you-believe-that-guy* smile. "Something ain't right with that boy."

Steve was one of the night-shift clerks – a thirty-three year old burnout who was obsessed with unintelligible Scandinavian death metal, ultra gory movies, and heavy bondage/fetish porn. He took the job here after getting fired from his last gig at a 7-11 because it was the only other thing he could get where his entire shift would begin and end between sunset and sunrise. No one had ever seen him in the sunlight; it was entirely possible that he was a vampire – and not the like sexy, angsty kind that thirteen year-old girls have posters of. I mean like *Nosferatu*.

I could only imagine what kind of twisted midget-amputee-scat video he had subjected these kindly God-fearing folks to.

"Which one did he give you?"

"This one," Kevin said and handed me the box, which read *Cherry Popper & the Philosopher's Bone*.

"That's it?" I said, a little confused. "This is one of our most popular videos. You really thought it was that bad?"

*Cherry Popper* was the latest release starring Jenny Jonestown, one of the biggest stars in the business, who was slowly moving away from porn and trying to break into the mainstream. Her memoirs were on the bestseller list and she was even coming out with her own fashion and apparel line for a national department store chain.

As a result, most of her films tended to be pretty tame fare out of deference to the straight world's delicate sensibilities. Her new movie didn't seem like it would be the type of thing that would have creeped them out so much.

"It was pretty twisted," Kevin poked his head out from behind Karen and chimed in.

I shrugged. "Sorry you didn't like it. Maybe I can help you guys find something a little bit more to your tastes."

One of the things I love about my job is helping people find products that will bring them together as a couple. I'm sure it sounds hokey, like I'm grasping at straws to justify working a job that most people would consider distasteful or even degrading. But the way I see it, monogamy is fucking hard, going to bed with the same person every night is tedious, and if there's a video or toy or outfit or whatever that can help you keep your love life fresh and exciting, then I think that's a perfectly healthy thing.

So after a few minutes, I'd helped the Werthams pick out another video and sent them happily on their way, then I went about checking the old one back in. I popped open the case to make sure the right disc was there, but to my surprise, there was a DVD-R inside instead of a normal factory-printed DVD.

My curiosity piqued, I loaded it into the store's player that we used to show off new releases. The image that appeared on the wall-mounted TV set was a fuzzy, pixelated shot of a young woman standing in a bedroom. She looked to be about my age, beautiful in a generic, sorority-girl sort of way, with long blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail and dressed in a City College t-shirt and khaki shorts.

The camera shook erratically as the woman dropped to her knees and began tugging at the cameraman's zipper, letting his pale, uncircumcised cock flop free. She proceeded to give him a fairly uninspired and pedestrian blowjob, keeping her eyes rolled up to look into the camera lens while the soundtrack was filled with loud grunting and moaning from the cameraman.

*Holy shit, I thought, cracking up. This is someone's home movie.*

I wondered what Kevin and Karen's problem had been; sure, it wasn't all that arousing, but I certainly wouldn't go so far as to call it *twisted*.

Then I wondered if Steve had known that it was the wrong disc when he rented it to them. It seemed like the type of thing he'd find funny, and it's fairly common for customers return a DVD without realizing that they forget to put the discs back in the case – or that they put the wrong disc in. Once I saw a guy had inadvertently stuck his kid's copy of *Toy Story* in the case for *Girls Fucking Goats 7*. I could only imagine what kind of harsh badness went down the next time his wife decided to buy herself a couple hours of quiet by plopping the kid in front of his favorite movie.

Meanwhile, the couple on screen had moved over to the bed and set the camera on the nightstand. Both of them were naked now with the man on top, thrusting angrily into her. I could see that he was in great shape with a toned, muscular body, but his head was just out of the top of the frame.

Suddenly, he moved his hands over to her neck and wrapped his fingers tightly around her throat. Because of the angle, her facial expression wasn't visible, but you could clearly see her starting to struggle under his weight, whipping her head side to

side frantically. He kept his grip locked firmly in place while he continued to pound away. His grunting grew louder and louder until finally he climaxed, his body jerking violently as he let out an inhuman roar. He finally loosened his hand from around her neck, satisfied that she had stopped struggling long ago, her motionless body lying limp beneath him.

The video cut off, and the TV screen went blue.

—  
I watched as Steve's pasty, oily face turned blue in the glow of the screen as he finished watching the video.

"Jesus, that is seriously fucked up," he said.

"Please tell me you didn't know what was on that disc when you gave it to Kevin and Karen," I pleaded.

He shook his head. "I swear I didn't." I let out a sigh of relief so loud that I was actually a little embarrassed when I heard it. Steve didn't react to me, instead keeping his eyes locked in astonishment on the blue screen while adding, "Do you think it's real?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did he really kill her, or do you think it's just a hoax?"

"Looked pretty real to me," I replied.

"Yeah, but do you really think someone would accidentally put something like that in a rental box?"

"Maybe," I said. "Or he could have put it in on purpose. I mean, anyone who'd murder a girl during sex and film it could conceivably be fucked-up enough to get off on the idea of other people watching it, yeah?"

"I guess," Steve conceded.

"Either way, we have to take it to the police," I continued. "I mean, hoax or not, they should be the ones to figure it out, not us."

Steve agreed, and we called the police to let them know what we found. They sent a couple officers over that night to collect the video, and then the next day, a detective came by with a warrant to see our records of who had rented the film. He left his card in case another video like that turned up or we found out any other information that might be helpful. That was the last I heard about it until a week later.

I was at the store, flipping through the newspaper during an extended lull, when I got to the obituaries section and saw a picture of the woman from the video. It was a cap-and-gown senior yearbook photo, so she looked a little younger and a lot more heavily made-up, but it was unmistakably her. As soon as I saw it, I felt a chill come over me, like my blood went cold inside my veins. Her image seemed to leap off the page hypnotically, my gaze locked in on it like tunnel-vision, like there was nothing else in the world at that moment but me and that photo.

Finally, I realized that I had forgotten even to breathe and snapped out of my trance. I started to read the obituary, which said her name was Sarah Lincoln and she was nineteen years old – my age. It didn't explain how she died, but it did give the details about a service that evening.

I wasn't sure why, but as soon as I put the paper down, I called Steve. I just

needed to talk to someone, and he seemed like the person most likely to understand, as unexpected – and creepy – as that was.

"Are you going to go?" he asked after I finished explaining.

"I don't know, maybe," I said noncommittally, even though I had already made up my mind that I would.

"Why?"

"I can't really explain it. I just haven't been able to stop thinking about that video ever since I saw it. I even have dreams about it. Maybe if I go to the service and find out what happened to her, it'll give me some kind of closure."

"Yeah, sure, makes perfect sense," he mumbled. After a brief pause, he added, "*Psy-cho*," stringing out the word in a high-pitched, sing-song type of voice.

I groaned and spat, "I don't even know why I thought I could talk to you."

He chuckled. "Look, I get it. Believe me, recovering meth freak here, I know a thing or two about obsession. It just seems like going to that wake could just as easily make things worse for you, not better.."

After a little cajoling, he agreed to come in a couple hours early so I could make it over to the service. After we hung up, I dug the detective's business card out of my purse and called him to check if they had uncovered anything about the video.

"Normally we don't give out that kind of information," he said under heavy nasal breathing, like he was concentrating on pushing the air out of his nose with as much force as possible. "But since I could see how you'd be concerned, since it was one of your customers who shot that video and all, I suppose there's no harm in telling you that the whole turned out to be a fake."

"What?" I asked incredulously. "But the obituary in today's paper – it's the same girl. How can it be a fake?"

"Look, we tracked down the people who shot the video from your list of customers, and they admitted it was a fake. I don't know anything about any obituary, but it's obviously not the same girl. Now if you don't mind, I have a lot of work to do."

The phone line went dead.

I was incensed, but decided I would try to find out so more about Sarah Lincoln before going any further. *Maybe it is a different girl*, I told myself in my rational mind, even though deep in my heart I didn't believe it.

I pulled out my laptop and hopped online to Google her name. The top hit was an article from two days ago in the local paper that said she was found locked in the truck of an abandoned car parked in a vacant lot in the industrial sector. Her body had apparently been sitting there for at least three days; she was discovered by the tow truck driver who was sent to remove the car after it was reported abandoned.

The article said the cause of death was strangulation. The body also showed signs of sexual assault. Her parents, who identified her, said that she had been reported missing to the police when she didn't come home after classes one day. There were no clues to her killer's identity, and the car she was found in had been reported stolen weeks before.

When I finished reading the article, I felt nauseous. I started clicking on some more of the Google links, and soon the sickness gave way to a profound sense of

frustration and anger. Not only was she my age, she had graduated the same year as me from our rival high school across town. Her MySpace page had a picture of her wearing a t-shirt of *Neutral Milk Hotel*, my favorite band. My best friend Danielle was even listed as one of her friends; they both went to City College, and must've had a class together.

I sat there, staring at her picture on the screen, and raised my hand up to rub my own neck. I realized I was literally trembling with rage.

—

I sat in the back row at the service and tried to stay inconspicuous as I sized up every man I saw, trying to figure out which of them might be a match for the killer. Unfortunately, most of them could be ruled out quickly. Her male relatives were all either too old or too young. Her older brother was the right age but too lanky. Her boyfriend was too heavysset. There were only a handful of young men among her friends, and I quickly ticked them all off – too short, too dark, too ugly.

I walked out of the church feeling just as frustrated as when I entered. Stopping at the bottom of the stairs to have a smoke, I heard a set of footsteps descending behind me, followed by a voice.

"Excuse me, but could I possibly bum one of those?" I turned to see the boyfriend standing behind me, looking distraught and weary in his rumpled, ill-fitting suit. "I quit about a year ago, but I could really use one tonight."

"Of course," I said, tapping one more out of the soft pack.

"Ah, you're a life saver," he said appreciatively as he lit his cigarette and took a deep, desperate drag. "I'm Jason, by the way."

"Marie," I said and shook his hand.

"So how did you know Sarah?" he asked in light, just-making-conversation tone of voice.

"I had a couple classes with her at City College," I lied convincingly, having rehearsed my cover on the bus ride over. "We weren't really close, but she always helped me out in class, so I felt like I should come."

He smiled warmly, "That sounds like Sarah all right. She was always helping people, sometimes compulsively so."

The small talk trailed off quickly, and we spent the next couple minutes finishing our cigarettes in silence. After crushing my butt out under the heel of my Mary Janes, I started heading down the street.

"Hey!" I heard him call out from behind me. I turned to face him again. "Don't take this the wrong way, but if you're not busy I would really appreciate it if you'd let me buy you a cup of coffee. I'm not trying to pick up on you or anything, I just really don't think I can stand being home alone right now."

My heart nearly melted. I could see why a do-gooder type like Sarah would have fallen for him, even if he wasn't exactly heartthrob material. He pulled off that helpless schlub thing perfectly.

"Sure," I said with a demure tilt of my head. "I'm not exactly in the mood for being alone right now either."

We set off together down a random street, not quite sure where we were

heading, trusting in the law that if you just start walking in a given direction in any urban area, you'll eventually hit a Starbucks.

Four blocks later, I was handing him another smoke while we settled into our green table under an equally-green patio umbrella. I sipped my triple-shot nonfat no-whip mocha while he rambled sentimentally about Sarah, recounting the story of how they met, retracing the trajectory their relationship had taken, and choking up as he talked about the plans they had mapped out for their future together. He had been saving up for an engagement ring, and they were going to get married as soon as she graduated, student loans be damned. Then they'd have taken a couple years to get established in their respective careers and save up a little before settling down and having kids.

He gave a self-deprecatory laugh and looked away, trying to hide the tears welling in his eyes. "I know that all probably sounds sappy and trite."

"It's sweet," I said, my head tilted sympathetically to one side.

"The way you do that with your head, tilt it like a cat – Sarah used to do the same thing," he said with a longing crooked smile. "You remind me of her, in some ways."

The next thing I knew, I was on my feet and leaning across the table, my lips locked on his.

—  
"So what, you're like, dating her boyfriend now?" Steve asked when I finished telling him about coffee. I stopped by the store on my way home to fill him in and was rapidly coming to regret that decision.

"It wasn't a date," I said with a dismissive wave of my hand. "I was just spending time with him to see if I could get any information out of it."

"Did you?"

I held out my hand and rocked it back and forth like a see-saw. "Ehh, a little." I told him what we had talked about over coffee. Steve scoffed at a lot of it, especially when I got to the bit about their plans for the future. "Jesus, I think I'm getting a cavity just listening to this," he groaned, clutching one side of his jaw.

I grinned, "Yeah, I know. This guy is like the most painfully sincere person I've ever met. At first it's sweet, but after a while you're like, *Come on already, give me something real.*"

"You realize he's trying to fuck you," Steve replied. "I mean, not to be crass or anything, I'm just saying."

I looked down. "He's a sensitive guy who's in a really fucked-up situation. He just needs a friend to help him through it."

Steve's jaw dropped. "Oh my God. You *already* fucked him."

"Eww," I scoffed, trying my best to feign indignation. "You're so... *vulgar*. I don't even know why I talk to you."

He didn't respond, but instead just arched one eyebrow inquisitively, like the Rock. I was sure he had practiced the move in front of a mirror hundreds of times.

"Okay yeah, I fucked him. Don't judge me."

Steve nodded his head sagely and turned his attention back to the tickle-fetish

video he had on. "Did you guys do anything creepy, like did you make him call you Sarah?"

I frowned and replied in a sheepish voice, "I'm wearing a pair of her panties." I hooked a finger under my jeans and pulled up the waistband of the black lace thong I had on so that it peeked out over the top of my slacks.

"So much for closure," he gloated.

"Yeah, whatever," I said dismissively. "So, since you already think I'm a crazy person, can you do me a favor before I go?"

"What?"

"I want you to print me off that report that we ran for the police, the one that showed who rented *Cherry Popper*."

Steve mumbled something under his breath that was loud enough for me to hear but I chose to ignore anyways. When he realized the futility of arguing, he relented and fired up the printer.

I sat up that night cross-checking the list of customers with Sarah's friends from MySpace on the off chance that there might be a match, but had no such luck. Then I had the idea to check friends of friends and decided to start with Jason.

"*Jason Truman has 2,958 friends*," I read off the screen. "Figures that he'd be a serial-friender."

I figured I'd have better luck if I started with the people who had actually left him messages recently, and to my surprise, it didn't take long at all to find someone who was on my list.

*Robert Washington.*

I clicked over to his profile. He and Jason were both listed as alumni from the same high school as Sarah, although they graduated a couple years earlier. Judging from the messages they sent back and forth them, they used to be really good friends but now only got together for the occasional boozy bullshit-and-reminisce session.

I clicked to see the pictures on his profile. There were shots of him rock-climbing, mountain biking, hiking, and more than a few shirtless vanity shots from the beach. He definitely was a physical match for the killer, not to mention vain enough to be the kind of guy who makes personal sex tapes.

He also had a lot of embedded YouTube videos – all pointless, self-indulgent crap. Like clips of him doing tricks on his bike (poorly), clips of him playing the drums (poorly), and clips of him showing off martial arts moves (surprisingly well). Looking at the smooth, chiseled definition of his muscular torso, his rippling arms, and his thick, powerful hands, I pictured the body on top of Sarah in the video. In my mind, there was no doubt that it was the same man.

—

I stood in Jason's living room, naked from the waist down, wearing only my bra. I had stood up to stretch my legs and had wandered over to his bookcase to snoop a little while he laid sprawled out on his couch, naked among scattered Thai take-out boxes, watching a DVR'd episode of Jon Stewart.

He had the usual stuff you'd find on a pseudo-intellectual twenty-something guy's bookcase – Noam Chomsky, *Capital*, Burroughs, Bukowski, a bunch of Criterion



Collection DVDs, a couple comics, and a few books on Buddhism. The only thing that really piqued my interest was a stone sculpture modeled on the *Venus of Willendorf*, a heavy, two-foot tall hunk of rock depicting a nude fat woman with no feet, balanced precariously on the top shelf.

"Tell me about this," I called across the room.

Jason shifted himself into something approximating an upright position to see what I was talking about. "Oh that," he said dismissively. "That's just something that Sarah made in art class. Nothing special."

I drifted away from the bookcase and made my way back to the couch, draping myself across his lap. I lifted his cock from where it had laid limp against his thigh, still sticky from our earlier fuck. He moaned lightly as I rubbed it back to life, his consciousness drifting lazily between sleep, the TV, and his dick.

Keeping one hand on him, I reach out for the remote with the other, wanting Jason's full attention to myself. I tap on a button that I think is the power button, and the screen flashes off momentarily, but then flashes back on.

"What the fuck?" I grumbled and try a different button. This time the TV stayed off, but the audio kept coming through the speaker. "Fucking hell," I moaned louder and mashed angrily at random buttons.

Jason grabbed the remote away from me and calmly tapped a few buttons; everything turned off finally, but the moment was already dead.

I sank back into the couch. After a brief awkward silence, I casually asked, "Do you know someone named Robert Washington?"

"Yeah," he replied, a little surprised. "He's a buddy of mine from high school. Why?"

"He's one of the customers at the store I work at," I said, trying to keep the lie as simple and plausible as possible. "I chat with him every once in a while. I happened to mention going to Sarah's wake, and he said he knew her."

"Really?" Jason asked, obviously surprised. "I had no idea they even knew each other. I mean, Rob and I don't really see each other much anymore, so I can't think of how they had the chance to meet."

I shrugged, indicating that I wanted to let the subject drop, and then dropped my face into his lap to drive the point home.

Unfortunately, Jason wasn't that easily distracted. "Are you into him?" he demanded.

I looked up at him questioningly, playing dumb. "Who?"

"Rob. Is that why you're asking about him?"

"No," I replied. "I just thought that it was an interesting coincidence worth mentioning. That's all."

"Ah," he said, having no intention of letting the matter drop. "You know, I deliberately made sure not to be around them at the same time. You see, Rob's always had a reputation – player, ladies' man, whatever you want to call it. He could always have any girl he wanted. And I mean, come on, you've seen him. It's not that I didn't trust Sarah, it's just... a guy like me with a younger girlfriend who – if we're being honest – should be out of his league, I can't really help but worry sometimes."

"I don't want to fuck Rob," I insisted, lifting myself up to straddle him. "And I'm sure you didn't have anything to worry about from Sarah. She was a smart girl; she obviously knew a good thing when she saw it."

Jason slowly leaned in to kiss me, and I met his lips with mine, then felt him maneuver me onto his fully revived erection.

A couple minutes later, I could tell he was nearly there, while I was nowhere close. Then an idea popped into my head, one that I couldn't ignore, no matter how irrational or ugly I told myself it was. The more I tried to banish it from my mind, the stronger it grew, and until finally, I couldn't hold out any longer.

I reached out to grab one of his hands, lifting it gingerly off of my hip, then leaned forward to raise it up to my neck. He jerked his hand away abruptly, as if my neck had been searing-hot to the touch, and continued pumping away just as he had been.

He came and quickly fell asleep, leaving me to dress myself by the glow of the TV set while he snored away on the couch. I fished around inside his pants pockets until I found his cell phone, then quietly left his apartment.

Once I got outside, I flipped through Jason's contacts make sure Robert's number was programmed in. Then I flagged down a cab and had it take me to Robert's address, which I got off the printout from work.

The cab dropped me off, and I grabbed a table on the patio of the coffeehouse across the street where I could clearly see the front entrance. Then I sent Robert a text message from Jason's phone asking to him at a bar called O'Malley's just a few blocks from Jason's place, saying he had met a couple hot college girls and needed someone to take care of the friend.

A couple minutes after I sent the text, the phone rang. It was Robert. Thinking quickly, I ran inside and stood next to the coffeehouse's speakers before answering the call.

"Hello," I said in my best imitation drunken slurring.

"Hello, who is this?" Robert said with a chuckle.

"This is Jenny, who's this?"

"This is Rob. Is Jason there?"

"No," I replied. "He's in the bathroom. With my friend. But he told me all about you. Are you going to come join us?"

More chuckling. "I don't know, should I?"

"Yeah, I really want you to *come*," I responded, emphasizing the last word with the embarrassing obviousness that only a drunk sorority girl can pull off.

I hung up the phone, and five minutes later he emerged from the front door of his building. I waited for him to get into his car and disappear from view. Then, feeling a triumphant rush of adrenaline, I ran across the street and pressed a random button on the intercom.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's Sarah, your neighbor from upstairs. Listen, I forgot my keys inside, can you buzz me back in?"

The intercom buzzed, and I opened the door.

The list from work said Robert was apartment 418. I ran up to the fourth floor and tried the door; it was unlocked.

*These tough guys always think they're invincible, too cool to lock a fucking door,* I thought to myself.

I made my way carefully through his darkened apartment to the bedroom, feeling along the wall for the light switch as I entered.

When the light finally came on, I immediately froze. It was exactly the same as the room from the video, and there was a mini-DV camcorder sitting on the nightstand.

—

"I need your help," I told Steve when he arrived at work a few days later, which was the next time our shifts happened to be back-to-back again.

"With what?"

"Setting a trap."

He looked at me blankly. I explained about Robert and my trick to get into his apartment, and how he was definitely the killer.

"Why don't you just go to the police?" Steve asked.

"Because the police think the video is a fake. They didn't know Sarah. They don't care about finding out who killed her."

"You didn't know her, either," he snapped. Then, taking a deep breath, he put a hand on my shoulder and tried to make his voice as sympathetic as a heartless misanthrope like him could manage. "All I'm saying is that I think you're starting to lose perspective here. You're not a detective. Say this guy really is a killer, you could be putting yourself in real danger. This isn't a game."

"Don't be a condescending ass," I spat back. "I know the risks I'm taking."

"Well, then why?" he asked, straining to show some actual sincerity under all that practiced cynicism.

I opened my mouth to explain, but no words came out. "Forget it."

He let out a resigned sigh. "What's the plan?"

The plan went like this:

I had been observing Rob the past couple days to work out his routine. Every day after work he'd hit the gym, *Imperial Health Club*, just down the street from his building. I never saw him try to pick up women there openly, but he'd definitely let his eyes wander a lot, and every once in a while he'd strike up a conversation with one. After watching him a couple times, I'd gotten a pretty good feel for his type, and figured I could fit the mold well enough with a little work.

So the plan was to show up at his gym, find my way over to a treadmill in his line of sight, and wait to catch him eyeballing me. When I did, I'd come over and talk with him, get him ask me out for a couple drinks, and eventually convince him to take him home.

In the meantime, Steve would wait outside his building until he could catch one of the neighbors leaving and enter while the front door is open. Then, he'd sneak into Rob's apartment, which would of course be unlocked, and hide in the closet with his Flip video camera.

When Rob and I got back, I'd try to recreate the conditions of the murder as

closely as possible, trying to bait him into doing it again. I read somewhere that one of the reasons serial killers keep using the same m.o every time is the need to relive the experience, recapture that same rush from killing, like a drug addict chasing that first-time high. It stood to reason that anyone twisted enough to film himself killing a girl and want other people to watch it would be wired fairly closely to a serial killer.

When I saw the camcorder, I'd playfully suggest that Rob should film us. And when we got to the bed, I'd coyly ask if he'd ever tried choking a girl before, since I heard it makes the orgasm so more intense.

As soon as things went far enough to incriminate Rob, Steve would appear and rescue me.

I could tell Steve was less than thrilled with my plan, but he agreed to go along with it on the basis that if he refused and something horrible happened to me, he'd feel guilty. Having agreed to help me, now when something horrible happens to me, at least he'll feel absolved.

We met up at the cafe across from Rob's building. I walked up carrying my pink nylon gym bag to find him already waiting at a table.

When he saw me, his jaw dropped.

"Rob goes for blondes," I explained as I sat down and pulled my freshly-bleached hair back into a ponytail, just like Sarah's was in the video.

"This is getting way too fucking creepy, even for me," Steve fretted. "I mean, we're at the point now where I'd be *relieved* to find out that this is just some elaborate kinky sex thing for you, like you want to pretend to be her and get off on getting fucked and choked on film. Hopefully that's the worst that'll happen, you end up developing a very specific and very peculiar new fetish, while I get stuck trying to explain to a large beefy slab of nude man why I am hiding out in his closet."

I let his comments slide. "Did you bring it?"

He reached into his jeans pocket and produced his Flip.

"Cool. And what about the other thing?"

Reluctantly, he flashed open his coat just enough for me to see the butt of a snub-nosed revolver sticking out of his inside pocket.

"Rock and roll," I said as I got up and headed for the gym.

After changing, I found Rob just where I expected, riding a bike directly across from the women on the treadmills, giving him a front-row view.

It didn't take long for me to catch him eyeballing me, especially in the form-fitting lycra boy shorts and sports bra I had put on. I met his gaze, and soon made my way over to the bike next to him.

Thirty minutes later, we left the gym together and headed out for drinks. Two hours after that, the two of us stumbled drunkenly up the stairs towards his apartment, our hands ripping at each other's clothes like hungry beasts picking apart a carcass.

Once in the bedroom, I noticed that the camcorder had been turned around to face the other way on top of the nightstand – Steve's code to let me know he had been in place.

I picked up the camera and turned it over in my hands, giggling playfully as I figured out how to turn it on.

"Smile," I said when the red "Record" light flashed on and trained the camera on Rob. He smiled and reached out to cover the lens with his hands, but I pulled it free of his grasp and kept filming him. He took a couple steps closer to me and swiped the camera out of my hands, then turned it back on me.

"We'll see how you like it, now," he said.

"I don't mind," I said with a seductive grin and bit on my lower lip. Then I slowly began to peel off my clothes, swaying my hips gently as I stripped for him.

Soon, I was naked and dropped to my knees in front of him, tugging down the zipper of his pants, my eyes fixed on the camera lens, my blonde hair still tied back in a tail.

"Stop," Rob said unsteadily, the color suddenly drained from his face.

"Is something wrong?"

"I don't know, it's strange ..... I just need a minute, okay?" he stammered awkwardly and then abruptly ran into the bathroom.

*I got the bastard*, I thought to myself triumphantly and decided I'd take the opportunity to double-check that Steve was ready, just to be on the safe safe. Rising to my feet, I carefully padded across the room and cracked the closet door open.

When I saw what was inside, it was all I could do to keep from screaming.

Steve lay crumpled in a heap on the closet floor, blood dripping from the large bullet hole in his temple, his gun gripped loosely in his hand, which hung lifelessly at his side.

My head was spinning, and I felt the panic course through my veins, rendering me completely paralyzed. I felt confused, arguing with myself that this couldn't have happened, trying to convince myself that this was somehow a trick or a dream. But most of all I just felt afraid and finally realized that I would be next if I didn't act soon.

I crouched down and pried the gun out of Steve's fingers, then leapt back up and pointed it at the closed bathroom door. As soon as Rob remerged, he saw me with the gun and the dead body sitting on the closet floor, and his face contorted into something grotesque, something monstrous.

He lunged at me with outstretched arms, but before he could reach me, I marshaled enough courage to squeeze the trigger, unloading the gun into him at point blank range.

—

It took several hours to explain to the police what happened – or at least the most-plausible, least-incriminating version of what happened that I could think up on the spot. Eventually, though, I was able to convince them that Rob had killed Steve and that I had acted out of self-defense.

Jason came to pick me up from the police station and took me to his place. I didn't want to be alone.

That night, we made love in his bed – as opposed to the couch – for the first time. He still had a framed photo of Sarah on his nightstand – it was the same one that had run with the obituary, the senior picture. I tried not to stare at it, but a couple times he caught me and followed my gaze to see where I was looking.

It was around the time that I started realizing this might not be the healthiest

relationship for me to be in.

I barely slept at all that night, still too wired from adrenaline and nerves, and was up before dawn and pacing the living room restlessly while Jason slept in.

Bravely, I decided to take another shot at turning on the TV. I managed to get the blank blue screen on at least, but instead of turning the satellite box on, I somehow managed to switch on the DVD player instead. I let out a string of curses under my breath and peered through bleary eyes at the tiny print on the remote, but then my head jerked up when I realized what was playing on the screen.

It was the video of Sarah and Rob.

I stood up, my eyes transfixed on the screen as if I were hypnotized while it played out just as I had remembered. Sarah on her knees, then the two of them on the bed, and finally him circling his hands around her neck.

But this time, when he finally let go of her neck, the video didn't stop. It kept playing,

On screen, Sarah suddenly lurched forward into an upright position, inhaled deeply, and then burst into laughter.

Rob soon followed suit, chuckling as he picked the camera up from the nightstand.

"You were right," Sarah said off the image on the screen blurred, presumably due to Rob flipping the camera around. "It made it so much more intense."

The image disappeared, and the screen returned to blue.

"He accidentally left the video in the case of a movie I loaned him," a voice said from behind me, and spun around to see Jason standing at the entrance to the room. "That's how I got the idea for making it look like he killed her. Unfortunately, when the police came knocking, he still had another copy of the original, unedited version, so he was able to clear himself. Luckily, the police never found anything that cast any real suspicion on me, anyways. All my elaborate planning, and I should have just had more faith in humanity's innate laziness.

"But, Steve..." I stammered.

"When I saw the text to Rob on my phone, I naturally became curious. So I started following you around and soon figured out what you were up to. The problem was, if you investigated Rob and cleared him, you'd naturally start looking for other suspects. So I had to give come up with a way to convince you he was guilty.

"I approached your friend and convinced him to let me come up to Rob's with him, saying I could be extra backup in case anything went wrong."

I made a desperate break for the door, but he was on top of me before I could reach it, tackling me and slamming me into the bookcase at the far end of the room.

As I felt his fingers tightening around my neck, crushing my windpipe with his thumbs, I looked up to see Sarah's Venus sculpture teetering precariously on the edge of the shelf. I renewed my struggle, not intending to get free, but instead only needing to throw my weight into the bookcase for a couple good, solid hits, enough to send the giant hunk of stone toppling down onto Jason's head.

He slumped over limply, blood gushing out of the crack in his skull. I wriggled out from under him while gasping for air, feeling the burn in my neck as I greedily filled

my lungs.

And suddenly, paradoxically, I somehow found myself with the sensation of being completely empty.