

Rick McGuffin, Private Investigator

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Special thanks to Cyndi Irresistible for plot assistance

1.

"A private investigator?" the checkout girl asked. "You mean like in the old movies?"

"Yeah," I sighed, leaving with my bourbon. "Only not like in the old movies."

I get this a fair amount. People seem to think that because Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade are fictional characters, then PIs themselves must be fantasy, too. I'm starting to think they're right. There are an alarming number of people who treat me like I don't exist. And yet, there's my name on the door: Rick McGuffin, Private Investigations.

I'll spare you the life story, but a few years on both sides of the law led me to a place where I can find out things that other people can't. An old friend here, a few hunches there, some slicing skills, a nanocom, the willingness to actually do research – it can pay off, or at least pay the bills. I can think of worse careers. Just not too many.

As you probably know, New York is weird. Greenwich Village proves it all on its own, but there are so many little pockets of peculiar in this town that it would be tough to say who's in the lead on any given day. And somewhere near the turn of the 21st century, it got even weirder. Mother Nature is a whore, but Big Science is her pimp; together they created everything I never wanted to see outside my second-floor office above St. Mark's Place. Honestly, I miss the piercings and tattoos – they were quaint next to the weird shit walking the streets now.

After the whole ecosystem-domino-effect-thing, nobody was surprised when we saw the first mutations – or "traits," if you want to be polite to the aberrations. Yet instead of being shunned, those who developed traits were celebrated as celebrities. Well, at least, the ones who got cool shit were. Green skin, extra vocal cords, the occasional extra finger or toe...basically, stuff that was uselessly unique yet also gave them their 15 seconds of fame. And when Mother Nature couldn't crank out new biological fashion trends fast enough, Big Science took over the mass production. Recreational gene-splicing quickly made "defaults" antique; those not lucky enough to have tiny wings or iridescent pupils could easily roll their own freakshow. And now, everybody's special. Ain't that America.

The genetically mutated and the genetically modified came to be "gems," with only "natural" or "synths" denoting how they got to the other side of human. I had my own term for them: "Traitors." For one, it was funnier. And B, their rise to prominence is as good a reason to drink as any of my others.

2.

As a PI, I spend too much time in my office for it to be profitable. Actually, "office" is giving it too much credit. I work in a 10-foot-square box with a cracked window that lets the pollution seep in. It's rent-controlled so it hasn't been upgraded in several decades, unless you count the duct tape.

Normally I wouldn't take a VIM call that interrupted a lunch from Curry Burger, but the incoming tag said it was from Gwen. She hadn't called in seven months, so I made the exception, because Gwen is exceptional. I pushed the "food" aside, wiped my mouth, and touched the Answer icon.

"Hi, Gwen." I tried to sound normal. I have no idea if I pulled it off.

"Hi, Rick." The screen didn't do her justice; it couldn't capture her sparkling blue eyes or golden hair the way my memory did. But it was all over her gorgeous face: This was awkward. I had hoped this was the call that would make everything go back to the way it was. It obviously wasn't.

I realized an uncomfortable silence was no way to win her back. "What's up?"

"Rick...Cynthia's missing."

Cynthia and Gwen were always close, long before they came to New York with the standard dreams of fame and fortune. Opposites attract; Gwen tended to be demure and shy, while Cynthia was challenging and overt. Cynthia was sharp, too; she'd even helped me run interference on a few cases. I'd flirted with both girls, but only fell in love with one.

"Missing? C'mon," I blurted out. "She's busy. She's probably just focused on the premiere."

"Rick." Gwen went from merely uncomfortable to legitimately insulted – and frightened. I immediately regretted my tone.

"It's been three days now. No VIMs, no messages, and she didn't show up last night. She hasn't been home and nobody's seen her at the theater, either. Something's happened."

The city was always dangerous, especially for an attractive young thing like Cynthia. I was now concerned, but tried not to show it. "When was the last time you talked to her?"

"Monday night. When I didn't hear from her in-between, I figured she was just crashing at the theater, exhausted from rehearsals. You know. But she's never missed our Thursday dinner."

"All right," I said, trying to sound reassuring. "Look – don't panic. I've got a few things I can check. I'll call you as soon as I find anything."

"Rick..." She looked like she was going to say something, then stopped herself. "Thank you," she said, and looked away.

"No problem," I said, after my own uncomfortable pause. "Thank you" wasn't what I was really hoping to hear, but it would have to do.

3.

I double-checked everything Gwen told me; unfortunately, it was all true. A friend at the security company confirmed that Cynthia's last biometric entry was Monday morning when she locked the door. Well, at least Cynthia's biometric handprint locked the door. Anything's possible. This is New York.

I switched tactics and started slicing. A routine image recognition hack – checking Cynthia’s photo against a real-time security camera database – paid off quicker than I could have hoped. Problem was, it didn’t make any sense. Like a lot of other theater people, Cynthia lived in Hell’s Kitchen, but I spotted her on multiple cams way the hell down near the Franklin Street subway station – a good three miles away. That wasn’t Cynthia’s part of town.

What’s worse, I knew whose part of town it was. Whatever your damage might be, you could be sure there was a trendy underground hotspot somewhere in the city for your claim to genetic shame – and most of them were scattered in the blocks below Canal Street. Home to many celebrities over the years, lower Manhattan had always attracted the affluent and the arrogant – and traitors, having enough money to play God with themselves, fit right in. Tribeca was lousy with them. And that’s where images of Cynthia kept popping up, on three different days since she’d gone missing.

You know that feeling of dread you get in the pit of your stomach when you know something’s going to go bad? This is the first time it actually kicked in for me on this case. It wouldn’t be the last.

4.

Just to be thorough – and to avoid visiting Tribeca until I absolutely had to – I visited their apartment building to triple-check in person, then reluctantly hopped the 2 train from Times Square down to Franklin. I almost didn’t hear the maglev signals at the subway platform because I was fascinated by a young girl – couldn’t have been more than 16 – sporting a blonde pony tail. I mean, literally, the tail of a pony, flowing out over the back of her jeans. Little girls with rich daddies used to ask for a horse; now, they just wanted the hooves.

The light was already fading when I emerged at Franklin Street. The cluster of camera sightings were focused around the same three-block area, so I took up residence in a java joint on the corner of Varick and quietly made my coffee Irish. I kept one eye on the street and one on my nanocom, watching for any new matches from the security cameras.

I wound up using both. I got a beep that reported two image matches roughly a block and a half away and heading in my direction. Several seconds later, she walked right by the coffee shop window – and if I wasn’t looking for Cynthia, I might not have recognized her. Rubber leggings weren’t what I expected, and the metallic silver jacket didn’t exactly make it look like she was hiding, but I got enough of a look at her face and her trademark auburn hair to know it was really her. She didn’t spot me, so I tapped my nanocom on the corner of the table to pay and quickly slipped out the front door.

I knew I had a positive ID, but if the wardrobe didn’t throw me, the body language sure was confusing – and distracting. She moved with an exaggerated swagger I’d only seen her use on stage, like she wanted people to notice her. I didn’t mind the view, but I had to look fast – wherever she was headed, she was headed there in a hurry.

Turns out the chase didn’t last long. Just a block away, she knocked on the side door of a building; she muttered something and they let her in. By the time I reached the door, it was sealed up tight again, but I did notice the small security panel mounted next to the door – a high-end audio/video/biometric deal. Whoever Cynthia was there to see, they weren’t very inviting.

Twilight had set in, so I headed across the street to a small bar for surveillance and spirits. Bourbon in hand, I took a seat by the window, set my nanocom’s mic to parabolic and aimed it at the door across the street.

The building was an old decommissioned firehouse, something of a local landmark; Cynthia had entered through what had been the side staff entrance, and I doubted that the main garage doors had been opened for a good decade.

After about 10 minutes, a pedestrian with half his hair carefully shaved to look extremely random knocked on the door through my earpiece.

"I think you've made a mistake," said a voice through the speaker.

"To err is human," said the pedestrian.

I heard a soft beep and a click as the door opened. Hilarious Haircut ducked inside. Click, two beeps. Five minutes later, the same exchange and entry was repeated for Blonde With More Money Than Taste.

Sounded easy enough.

5.

It was properly dark now, which only made me feel more daring. The bourbon hadn't hurt my confidence, either. I approached the door.

The speaker clicked. "I think you've made a mistake," said the voice.

"To err is human," I said.

The lock clicked and the door pushed open easily. I slipped inside.

"Welcome," said an impossibly large man in an impossibly large black t-shirt. His muscles had muscles. "You're among friends."

It was almost as dark inside as it was outside. The firehouse had been converted to a nightclub – and by the looks of it, the conversion had been hasty. I gingerly took a few steps on a nearby ramp that led to the landing above, hoping to get a better sense of the place, if not a glimpse of Cynthia.

A series of seemingly haphazard ramps – accent on the hazard – led up three, maybe four stories, offering a clear view of the sea of people on the ground floor, none of whom seemed willing to get too far from the bar near the door. I scanned the crowd for a silver jacket but didn't see it. Pink hair here, cat eyes there...frankly, not as many traits as I'd expected to see. But hey, at least I was among friends, right?

As I climbed another ramp, it became clear that the upper floors were designed as semi-private meeting areas. Small groups of people gathered around sofas and tables, chatting, smiling. Form-fitting synthetics seemed to be the dress code; I became aware that I was one of the few not wearing at least one item made of latex or lycra. That, and everybody seemed eerily happy. That just made me more suspicious. This was New York, after all.

I spotted a flash of silver and auburn when I hit the third floor; Cynthia was holding court around a coffee table with no coffee on it. Instead, it supported some sort of high-tech hookah pipe, a bouquet of hoses stemming from a vase-shaped base. She spotted me and smiled. "Riiick," she purred, drawing out the vowel

sound with a fake tone of surprise. "Fancy meeting you here." She was performing, and her costume for this show was more elaborate than I thought. A red latex halter corset contrasted with the shiny black leggings.

"Long time no see, Cynthia," I replied, trying not to sound as uncomfortable as I felt. "Do you come here often, or for days at a time?"

She pressed her lips together in a humorless smile and turned to her audience. "Would you excuse us?" They smiled back and, wordlessly, rose to leave. I caught a glimpse of some epic cleavage from one of the blondes and a generous sweetheart bottom on one of the brunettes as they sashayed by.

"What's with the disappearing act? Gwen's been going crazy," I said.

"Well, she must have been utterly out of her mind if she decided to call you," she snapped back. We'd sparred before – she was smart, and I loved a challenge – but instead of the usual playful and sarcastic, her tone was now egotistical and mean. I wondered if this was an act. Then I wondered if she'd been acting up until now. "Can't a girl go on a little adventure without having her surrogate mother sic her ex-boyfriend on her?"

"Is that where we are? Adventureland?"

She paused a moment. "Yes," she replied smugly. "I'm impressed you found your way in. Do you even know where you are?"

Her arrogance brought out my sarcasm. "I'm surrounded by traitors in a club that appears to have been constructed without any regard to health and safety ordinances."

"The term you're looking for is 'gem,'" she said, with the correcting tone of an elementary schoolteacher. "And if you don't behave yourself, I'll have the one of my partners throw you out."

"How many partners do you have? I've always wondered."

She looked stung for a moment – score one for Rick – but it passed quickly. She waved for an overmuscled waiter and nodded for him to bring drinks. "We built Aufblas for people a bit more...enlightened than yourself."

"You built what?"

She pointed to a glowing sign near the bar. "The Aufblas Bar. It's German. And it's where you are, stupid."

"Oh, it's German. That's a relief. For a minute I thought your tongue had swollen up."

Something flickered across Cynthia's eyes; she blinked slowly and recovered. "You really have no idea, do you?"

The bulging waiter appeared with a pair of drinks – some clear liquid in a martini glass, and some brown in a tumbler – and Cynthia motioned for me to sit. I cautiously accepted the seat and the bourbon. "Here's what I do know. You're hiding in plain sight as part-owner of a gem bar, and I can't figure out why." She didn't react, so I decided to stand down. "Is everything okay?" Still no reaction. "Is this about Gwen?"

She rolled her eyes over her martini. "Rick, everything is not about Gwen. For everyone's sake, let it go."

"Well, what's this all about?"

Cynthia paused for a moment, then sighed heavily. "I'm just tired of not living life on my terms," she said. "I still live in someone else's apartment. I perform in someone else's show. My choices have all been compromises – and I came to realize that all I was really choosing was who would set my limits. I didn't like that. So I finally decided to choose something else. On my terms."

"You ran away."

"I took some time for myself," she corrected, "for something important."

The awkward pause told me everything I needed to know. I added another, then asked, "Are you a traitor?"

She laughed in exasperation. "Are you a bigot?"

"No! But I don't think there's any shame in being normal."

"Look, I don't know why you've always felt threatened," she said crossly. "People got all concerned about natural gems, but it was just the same cosmic joke with a twist – same planet, same problems. They still didn't get to choose anything. But synths...they get the best of both worlds. All the choice and total control."

"So you're saying you had work done?" I shrugged, retreating to my bourbon. "Okay, you've got a new life. No reason to hide from your old one."

"Don't pretend you approve," she barked. "You think this is all a fad, a fashion trend."

On cue, a girl with rainbow eyebrows walked past our table. "Cyn. Come on."

"It's more, Rick, for some of us," she said, lowering her tone. "We can become our wildest dreams. Why not be what you've always wanted to be?"

"I am what I want to be," I said defensively.

"Really?" she said sarcastically. "Spying on unfaithful spouses? Living alone? Pining after the one that got away?"

That hurt enough to make me pause. "I'll do my best not to mistake that for a compliment."

"I didn't mean...I'm sorry," she said earnestly. "I'm trying to say...it doesn't have to be that way. You're a good guy, Rick. You can make a change, too."

"I don't think a trait is going to make me feel better."

"Depends on the trait," she said with a smile. Things were lightening up, but I felt better conferring with the contents of my glass.

"Cynthia," I mused aloud, shaking my head with a smirk. "Accent on the synth."

"Speaking of which," she said, "I don't think you know which rabbit hole you've tumbled down yet. Aufblas serves a specific clientele. So, mister detective – detect."

Her eyes darted to a point behind me, and she gestured for my eyes to follow.

At the bar, a raven-haired woman in an elastic green minidress chatted with a blonde man in a black latex tank top who looked like he lived in the gym. His left hand rested on her exaggerated hip, and she didn't mind that he was practically having a conversation with her oversized rack. A very shapely brunette approached the couple, welcomed by each with a kiss, as her skin took on a purple hue.

I turned back to Cynthia. "Muscleheads and whores?"

She sighed. "A demonstration, then." She leaned forward to select a hose from the vase on the table; as she pulled it, it extended several feet from its base. Cynthia paused, almost solemnly. "All of our choices shape us," she said. "Some more literally than others."

She put the hose between her lips, closed her eyes, and breathed deeply. Her silver jacket adjusted itself as her lungs expanded...and they didn't seem to stop. I watched as the shoulder straps on her corset shifted and her cleavage deepened. She'd grown two cup sizes before releasing the hose from her lips. They now formed a blissful smile, and she reluctantly opened her eyes.

In a sultry voice that made it clear she'd just had a very pleasant personal experience, she whispered, "Are you sure...that a trait...can't make you happy?"

6.

I wasn't sure what to say. A friend I'd known for years suddenly sucked on a straw just turned herself on by blowing herself up like a balloon. Well, two balloons. I had to admit – witnessing the moment and seeing the results affected my breathing, too. I tried to play it off. "That looked...fulfilling."

"Oh, I'm far from full," she replied, folding her arms behind her head to bring her breasts up to full prominence. She was flirting with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. I spotted what looked like a tiny valve near her armpit; I decided not to ask. "But as you can see, my trait brings pleasure to myself as well as others. Now I have choice and control."

I felt distracted and stupid. "So..." I couldn't believe I was going to say this out loud. "You're inflatable." This explained her swagger on the street. With freshly exaggerated curves, she was probably still getting accustomed to walking with rounder hips and thighs.

"It's one of the newest traits, just cleared a few months ago," she said, smiling at her own cleavage. "I started saving up for the splice as soon as I heard it was in development."

"And this isn't a fad."

"No," she said, taking a distractingly deep breath. "It's something I've always wanted – long before it was possible, even," she said, a hint of shyness creeping in. "But it was just something I felt, a fantasy I couldn't explain. It's still kind of a naughty thrill to be able to talk about it, let alone live it. The sense of pressure...gives me a sense of power."

Well, there was nothing for me to say to that. Back to the bourbon, which seemed to be kicking in.

"It certainly won't hurt my theatrical career," she added, gesturing at her curves. "They don't hide girls who look like this in the chorus."

"I guess not."

"After the splice, I had a little money left over, so I invested here. I like to think of it as the ultimate growth market." She smiled, and raised her drink in a mock toast. "At Aufblas, our bouncers actually bounce."

"So you're all a bunch of loonies."

"Times have changed, Rick," she said, letting the insult go. I guess she could tell the booze was starting to talk for me. "Actually, the whole world has changed around you. I'd hate to see it leave you behind."

"Look, I may be surprised now, but I am...happy for you," I sighed.

"You can be happy for you, too," she said, sliding a fingertip down the side of her breast. "We both know what you like."

It took all I had to ignore that and continue. "But Gwen doesn't deserve this silent treatment. You guys are like sisters. Why leave her out?"

"I told you," she said, sliding around the sofa toward me. "I'm finally truly free to make my own choices, and I don't want anything – or anyone – getting in the way." She leaned forward, playing her pair of queens even closer to my vest as I tried to blink the bourbon away. "This is a fresh start for me, and I know exactly what I want this time." She put her hand on my hand, then put my hand on her thigh. I didn't want to enjoy it as much as I did, but the booze had removed a lot of my better judgment.

"I know we've both wondered what might have happened between us, Rick. And we both know we're a good team. This can be a fresh start for you, too. Besides...I've already admitted I have control issues." I felt something stroke my crotch. "Looks like you're having a few yourself."

Cynthia had definitely made things harder than I'd expected tonight.

"You know, the straws aren't the only way to fill up," she whispered. "I can show you the others, but not out here. How do I arrange a...private investigation?"

My head was swimming; Cynthia had been replaced by a hazy pair of red lips floating over two round hills. "Cyn," I slurred, "I don't feel so good."

"Well, it's about time," she said in an echo chamber. "It should have kicked in ten minutes ago."

Everything went dark.

7.

"Welcome back."

I slowly regained consciousness. My head felt like a battleground. Opening my eyes seemed like a bad idea just yet, but I was pretty sure that I was sitting, and that I was hearing Cyn's voice.

"Did we enjoy our little nap?" The voice came closer. "You certainly can hold your liquor, Rick. Probably someone else's too."

I wanted to shoot back with something witty but the only thing that came out of my mouth was a cough and a moan.

"I'll take that to mean 'Where am I,'" Cynthia said, "and that's a fair question. You've been upgraded to one of our elite private rooms here at the club. Consider yourself a special guest."

"I've never been so sorry to be on the guest list," I croaked, still squinting. "Do you always drug your VIPs?"

"Actually, most of them prefer to self-medicate," she said nonchalantly. Through cloudy eyes and dim light I could see she was still wearing the black latex outfit, and the extra curves that filled it. "But I am sorry about that. It seemed the best way to get the job done."

When I went to rub my eyes, I found I couldn't move my arms. My wrists had been bound behind me; I guessed from the feel that they were magnetic cuffs. "Cyn, look...I said I was fine with whatever changes you've chosen. You want to get gemmed, fine – you don't need to hold me hostage."

"That's such an unpleasant word," she replied. "Think of yourself as a guest so valued that I've employed deluxe measures to ensure your security."

"And since when did I become so special?"

"You always were," she purred. My eyes had fully focused now. Cynthia was straddling a backwards chair about five feet in front of me, arms folded on its back. With her legs spread wide, it was clear she was still in a suggestive mood, and the way her shiny legs caught the dim light, it appeared that she'd added some air to herself while I was knocked out. Her hips and bottom flared with an extra voluptuousness as she leaned forward into the chair's back.

"Cyn," I said, "I hate to ruin your mysterious master plan with logic, but if Gwen asked me to find you, don't you think she'll notice when I disappear too?"

"I doubt it. For one, you haven't exactly been on the best of terms."

"And for two," said another voice, "I've noticed."

From the dark side of the room, Gwen appeared. I tried not to reveal just how surprised I was to see her stride out from the shadows. She wore a high-necked, hot-pink minidress with a cyan leather waist cincher decorated with silver buckles. It was as if Barbie decided to go to a ren faire in the 1980s.

I was at a loss for words as my mind tried to process everything, so Gwen continued. "Thank you so much for finding Cynthia," she said with a faux sweetness. "She said that after a little acting coaching, I could get you to do anything I asked."

"Gwen," I said, stupidly. I could only articulate a single word: "Why?"

"Cynthia was telling the truth, you know," she said, strutting over to where Cyn sat and running her finger down her friend's back, which caused them both to smile. "You always have been special. While the rest of the world looks for ways to improve themselves and their lives, you...well, you never have." Cynthia rose from her chair and walked into the dark of the room. Gwen locked her eyes to mine. "So set in your ways. So locked into your narrow view of the world. You've always wanted things your way or not at all." She broke the stare and glanced at the floor. "It's one of the reasons, you know."

Cynthia returned with something in her hands, and Gwen met her gaze. "I needed someone more...flexible."

They both smiled again, and I felt even more foolish. When the hell did this happen? And why was I never invited?

Cynthia held up a silver canister, a few inches long and about an inch thick. After Gwen gave a quick nod of permission, Cynthia moved behind Gwen, wrapped her arms around her midsection, and softly but firmly fitted the end of the cylinder through the buckles of Gwen's waist cincher. Gwen gasped slightly after its soft click, and I heard the canister emit a hollow hiss.

With Cynthia's arms keeping the canister connected, Gwen's hands traveled up her ribcage to where her chest had started to visibly expand. Eyes closed, Gwen caressed her swelling breasts, straining against the spandex as they inflated into taut spheres. Her hips and ass followed, flaring below the waist cincher into soft but generous arcs. After about 20 seconds, Gwen's hourglass now measured at least 90 minutes.

Cynthia disengaged the cylinder with a click and a yank, causing Gwen to gasp again. "I told you the straws weren't the only way," she said matter-of-factly.

This all went against everything I'd known, everything I'd ever believed. Cynthia, I could understand – she was always a wild child, and I figured it was only a matter of time before she went traitor. But Gwen...standing before me, feeling herself up. She slowly – torturously – explored her pneumatic curves in front of me, smoothing her hands down her luciously rounded ass and up to her extraordinarily inflated chest. Her waist remained pinched, but her bust looked ready to bust.

"It's amazing," Gwen finally said, a bit dreamily. "The navel...is intense."

I felt completely disoriented. My reality had been replaced with a bizarre substitute. Gwen had never so much as hinted that she wanted to be a gem; had she really been harboring this desire all along? Or had Cynthia gotten to her and made her think she wanted it? It was a little too convenient. I couldn't stop turning it over in my head, even though it was moot. The woman in front of me was now an exaggerated parody of the one I used to know – or thought I knew – and she seemed transfixed by her own inflated body.

I hated to admit it, but so was I. Seeing the girl of my dreams and her flirty best friend pump themselves up into sexy cartoon versions of themselves before my eyes ranks up there as downright inhumane. We'd all been friends long enough that they knew my preferences for curves; this was clearly intentional torture. So while my hands were literally and figuratively tied, other parts of my body were free to react on instinct.

Cynthia was clearly getting her own satisfaction from Gwen's pre-orgasmic state, but she snapped her attention back to me. "Anyway. I finally realized – well, we both did – that your stubbornness was actually a benefit," she said. "With all your biases, you would never try anything new, never change, and certainly never upgrade yourself. And that was valuable in its own way."

I saw where she was going and I got there first. "Genbanks."

I'd heard stories about what happened in the genetic underground – terrible, inhumane stories. Traits can't be created without uncorrupted control data, and they can't be tested without live subjects. The stories about kidnappings of potential donors. Experiments once they were tapped. Cages for all involved. The genbanks said they were all urban legends, but when people disappear and never return, you have to give them some credence. And this is the fate Cynthia and Gwen had planned for me.

"There are parties looking for clean samples," Cynthia said with a nod. "Parties with enough money to recoup the cost of my upgrades, my investment in this place, and then some. So you're gold, Rick. You're not only a pure specimen, you're the only truly unmodified person I know. You don't even have a tattoo." She looked me up and down. "While you were out, I checked."

"I'm glad I meet your lofty standards, fraulein," I snarled.

"Oh, don't you dare," Cynthia replied with disgust, her swollen hips swaying with every angry step toward me. "The guy who snap-judges people based on their genetics plays the hundred-year-old Hitler card? Spare me. What color is your girlfriend's hair again?"

"I'm not his girlfriend," said Gwen suddenly. Wherever her inflation had taken her, she was now returning to reality – whichever one I was suddenly in. But despite her villainous bravado speech before, she had trouble making eye contact with me now.

"They're not my standards anyway," said Cynthia, turning with a squeak to give me the impressive rear view. "Our contact was very specific. We don't get paid unless we deliver what we promised."

"So draw some blood already," I said angrily. "Get it over with." I could accept losing – I was used to it – but I was getting tired of fruitlessly tugging at the magnetic cuffs keeping me in place, and I just wanted this strangely erotic nightmare to be over already.

"Not good enough," Gwen said, getting back into what I started to suspect was a character. "A few of your hairs were enough for pre-screening, but they insisted on payment in full, as it were."

"The whole manchilada," said Cynthia with a self-satisfied smirk. "And they wanted a live specimen. I think they've got very special plans for you, Rick."

Gwen leaned toward me, overtly presenting her pressurized cleavage. "Besides," she said, cupping her taut breasts and giving them a squeeze. "You can understand why we'd want to stay away from needles."

8.

I heard three deliberately timed knocks on the door, and Cynthia disappeared into the shadows. When she opened the door, I briefly saw the hulking silhouettes of two of the club's bodyguards. A few moments later they stepped into the light. "Time to go," said Cynthia.

One of the bouncers – a foot taller than me and roughly twice my width – waved a metal wand over my cuffs and they noiselessly separated from each other. As I stood, the cuffs alone felt fairly heavy, and I didn't have time to rub my sore arms before Mr. Massive yanked them behind my back again, reactivating the magnetic field. My wrists slammed together again with a clank. A quick shove from his pal Mr. Imposing let

me know that the bouncers' bulges weren't entirely for show; they might have added inflatable traits to fit in at the club, but they also had a few muscle upgrades lurking underneath.

Cynthia led the way out of the room and down a long, dim corridor; I guessed were in a basement below the firehouse. The two thugs shoved me into the hallway behind her, then took up either position behind me – like prison guards escorting a doomed man. I didn't see Gwen but I assumed she was following after I heard the door close and lock behind us.

The lighting was dungeon-worthy, but it was enough for me to see Cynthia's red hair cascade over her shoulders and the racy curves of her undulating hips. I really hated that I really liked what I was seeing. So round, so firm, so fully packed – I supposed it was easy to get a figure that would drive men wild when you could simply squeeze a bulb to get it. It was bad enough that I'd never seriously pursued Cynthia because of my devotion to Gwen; now that I'd blown both chances, it was as if Cyn was almost literally rubbing it in my face.

She paused at a door in the hallway. "I don't want the club seeing him," she said to the bouncers. "Take him to the alley exit and I'll meet you in a moment. Gwen, stay with them." Cynthia ducked inside the room as we marched past. Imposing prodded me to hang a right at the upcoming intersection.

Now, I don't know if anybody's up there – Jesus, Buddha, Hendrix, Yoda, whatever. After all the weird, sad crap I've seen down here in the material world, I tend to think that nobody's driving the bus. But every so often, I catch an unbelievably lucky break, and one day I hope I find out if there's someone I should be thanking. Because at that precise moment, I knew I owed somebody a nice gift basket.

As we turned the corner, I felt my cuffs demagnetize. Massive and Imposing were hired because they were, well, massive and imposing, but they probably couldn't spell the name of an IQ test, let alone pass one. So it didn't occur to Massive that keeping the maglock wand clipped to the front of his belt would put it close enough to my cuffs to set me free. It was silent when the field disengaged, but I felt it, and struggled to keep my arms in position to keep up appearances. I saw another hallway up ahead, and I hoped that adrenaline would get me through what I felt was my only chance.

I took a deep breath and, with an audible grunt of effort, spun to my left as fast as I could, swinging my heavy, cuffed right wrist up straight into the side of Massive's face. I heard something crack and he recoiled. Before Imposing had a chance to react, I used my momentum to spin all the way around for another swing, this time with both wrists together, and plowed the cuffs into Imposing's temple. He went down like a sack of genetically modified potatoes, bouncing slightly as he hit the ground. Massive was still clutching the left side of his face when I delivered an uppercut on my third rotation. He staggered back and toppled over – slamming into a shrieking Gwen, who quickly crumpled under his weight, pinned beneath a few hundred pounds of unconscious thug.

I didn't know much about the inflation trait, but I knew this much about normal balloons: You can add air, you can subtract air, and if it's not pumped to the max, you can displace the air inside. When Massive landed on Gwen's hips and legs, the air shifted, creeping up her torso with an ominous hiss. Gwen's chest rapidly filled her bubblegum pink dress as it strained to contain them. "Oh fuck," she cried, watching her breasts overinflate like the enormous balloons they had become. "Oh fuck, I'm gonna pop!"

I didn't want to see that happen to the girl I'd once loved...so I turned and ran. This was my only opportunity to save myself from a very real future of scientific slavery, so I yanked the maglock from Massive's belt and bolted around the corner. Somewhere down one of these hallways was an exit.

9.

I quickly got lost in a maze of dark corridors. As I passed door after dimly-lit door, I tried not to think about what I'd just done, or what kind of deviance lay inside the private suites I was passing. But as desperately as I needed to run, I needed to get these heavy cuffs off first. The adrenaline from the fight was wearing off and arms were now screaming in pain just from the dead metal weight hanging from my wrists. I finally spotted a room with its door ajar and ducked inside.

I had trouble processing the sight that lay before me. The center of the room was dominated by some sort of examination table, with a more traditional bed to the right; both featured bondage straps. There was some sort of rubber sack/cocoon/deflated ball thing nearby; I didn't want to know any more about it. Three gas cylinders holding who knows what lined one wall; a rolling cart with various pumps, squeeze bulbs, and small silver canisters sat next to them. A hazmat suit, a gas mask, and various clichéd Halloween costumes ranging from schoolgirl to policeman to nun hung on a rack in the corner; most looked to be made of stretchable fabric. I think I even saw an inflatable horse outfit. There must have been several dozen hoses and tubes of various sizes all around the room – slinking out of the ceiling, snaking out of wall outlets, never more than a few inches away from just about any object in the room. Everything was polished, curved, and smooth; it looked like a science lab pretending to be a bordello. The smell of latex was strong and heady; I wondered if they were pumping it in through the vents. I'd found the weirdest, kinkiest, most deluxe suite for inflation perverts.

I sat on the edge of the bed (an air mattress, of course) and fiddled with the settings on the maglock. After keying in a standard override code, the cuffs sprang open and clanked to the floor. I winced and rubbed my tortured wrists.

"Put those back on," barked Cynthia. I hadn't seen or heard her come in; I probably should have shut the door behind me, but I was in a bit of a rush. That didn't change the fact that she was now leveling a pistol at me.

"Cynthia, this is stupid."

"Not as stupid as you thinking I wouldn't see your little adventure in the hallways." She closed the door with her free hand, never lowering her weapon. "Cameras," she said, gesturing to a dome in the corner of the ceiling. "And I bet that's how you tracked me down in the first place, wasn't it? Good old irony."

"Cyn, you can't do this!"

"Already done," she said, sauntering slowly toward me with those hips, her outstretched arm pressing her bulbous right breast into her bulging left. "The nice men from the genbank are waiting for their package. All that's left to is to deliver what they ordered and collect my credits. So let's go."

"What about Gwen?"

"She doesn't care about you, Rick. Get up."

"I mean, is she okay?"

"So now you care, after you heroically ran away from your true love because you thought she was going to explode?" she snarled. "She's resting. And she'll see that was nothing – she's going to be able to get much bigger than that." Goddammit – another cruel mental image. I wished she'd just shoot me.

"There has to be some way we can work this out."

"No," she said flatly. "It works out by you getting those cuffs back on and marching outside, and me not messing up the nice walls of this room with your brains."

I knew she was bluffing. She said it herself: If the genbank was promised a live sample, I was worthless as a corpse. But I didn't really see many options at the moment, so I gingerly put a cuff back on my left wrist. When I grimaced, it wasn't an act.

"It must be killing you," she said with a cruel smile. "Seeing the new her, the new me – seeing us together, even – and knowing that you will never have either of us, never be able to enjoy any of the things we can do now."

A wave of the maglock secured the cuff to my wrist, and it was at that moment that I realized...I was going to owe Yoda another gift basket.

I picked up the other cuff, slammed it on Cynthia's right arm, and bashed her hand with the maglock, simultaneously locking the cuff and making her drop the pistol. With another quick wave of the wand, the two cuffs clanked together as a pair, but an angry shove from Cynthia threw me off balance, and together we tumbled onto the bed, chained at the wrists.

Cynthia tried to pull her arm out of the cuff, but she was more likely to pull her arm out of its socket. Realizing it was fruitless, she simply went for my throat with her free hand, forcing my windpipe closed. I gagged for a few seconds, then with a burst of adrenaline, rolled her onto her back. I pinned her thigh to the bed with my knee and pulled her claws away from my throat with a gasp.

Her hips flared out suddenly as her derriere pressed against the bed; as with Gwen, the rest of the displaced air shot up her torso and into her already augmented chest. Her breasts surged, creating inches of new cleavage barely contained by the corset. She gasped at the sudden change but kept blindly flailing with her free arm, desperate to do any damage she could, until I pinned her wrist next to her ear.

We were still cuffed together – I'd fumbled the maglock when we hit the bed – but at least now I had some physical leverage. I realized I needed to incapacitate her before she turned the tables again.

And then I remembered Cynthia's reaction to the straws, and Gwen's to the canisters.

I grabbed for one of the closest hoses surrounding the bed, which turned out to be connected to a breathing mask. When I forced it down over Cynthia's face, I heard a click from the other side of the room as the respirator activated. She savaged me with brutal left hooks the moment I released her arm, so I threw my elbow down on her forearm and managed to keep the mask clamped over her nose and mouth.

When the hissing began, I didn't see Cynthia start to inflate – I felt it. With my whole body covering hers, I instantly felt her hips begin to grow beneath me, while her chest slowly pressed harder against mine. She struggled at first and her eyes shot open, but then she screwed them shut as I heard her moan behind the mask. The red rubber cups of the corset's top stretched to accommodate her ballooning breasts; her

hardened nipples poked at me through the latex. I struggled to stay on top of her as her ass continued to swell, forcing her pelvis up into mine.

I had hoped that by blowing Cynthia up, I might be able to shut her down. Sure enough, as the air flowed in, her resistance leaked out. Her writhing beneath me now had a different, deliberate tempo to it, and her latex tights pinged and creaked as they tried to keep up with her rapidly swelling form.

I lunged for another nearby hose – it had some sort of connector on it, like the one on the cylinder Cynthia used on Gwen. I grabbed it and stuffed in between us, looking for her navel under the boning of the corset, and finally hit the mark with a soft click. Cyn gasped, and I felt her abdomen bulge slightly, then recede beneath the heavy corset stays – and all the other swelling areas got a boost. I spotted the valve near her armpit, and with a lucky lunge snagged another hose to match it. Another soft connection click and Cyn's breathing became heavy pants of pleasure. I felt her inflate faster beneath me.

I didn't dare remove the mask, but I knew I couldn't stay cuffed to her for much longer. I spotted the missing maglock on the left side of the bed, so I moved our connected arms as one, grabbed the rod upside down, and disengaged the cuffs with a one-handed wave of the wand. Cynthia wasn't trying to beat me senseless anymore, so with another quick tap of the controls, I completely unlocked the cuffs from both of us. She didn't notice; she was delirious with pleasure and still moaning as she swelled. With her arms free, she grabbed at my hips, pulling me closer, as if trying to force me to enter her. When that went nowhere, she focused on herself, cupping the sides her enormous breasts, pressing in to feel them inflating against her hands.

Experimentally I removed my hand from the mask; Cynthia didn't even notice. At this point her pleasure centers were clearly running at full tilt. I slid off her body and stared at what Cynthia had become. She was more voluptuous than any woman I'd ever fantasized about, let alone seen – spherical breasts bulging straight out from her ribcage, ready to burst free of the crimson cups at any moment. Her still-slim corseted waist gave way to pneumatic, rounded hips and tapered thighs, backed by an enormous ass that pushed her pelvis skyward. She was someone's ultimate fantasy, waiting to be explored – or exploded, by the look of it. Whoever it was, I hoped they had big hands and a lot of stamina.

Her staff would find her soon enough, but I didn't want to be here when they did – and I still needed to get out before the genbank goons threw me in a cage. I took one last, long, lascivious look at Cynthia 2.0 – still inflating obscenely before my eyes – before heading for the door.

Over the hissing, I swore I heard Cynthia call out a single muffled word from behind her mask: "More..."

10.

After all that trouble, I managed to waltz out of Aufblas through the main door with little more than the bruises from Cynthia's jabs. Apparently she'd kept the whole affair on the down-low, and Gwen was nowhere to be seen, so nobody even attempted to stop me. The first light of dawn lit my way to the subway, and I headed back to my place, thoroughly exhausted.

New York wasn't safe for me anymore; Cynthia could have shown up at my doorstep with the scumbags from the genbank at any moment. I hated to leave the city but I was a marked man, so I had to leave, at least for now. I knew from investigating identity theft that it was fairly easy to acquire a new name, and I knew a maglev ticket could have me in Los Angeles in an hour. I didn't have many possessions worth

keeping, so it didn't take me long to pack. Just some slicing gear, my nanocom and some data archives, some papers and photos, my meager life's savings, and some bad memories that I'd probably relive forever.

I spent a lot of the weeks that followed asking myself the same questions over and over. How had Cynthia convinced her to turn traitor? Was she truly acting of her own free will? Had I driven her away by being too inflexible? When did she and Gwen become a couple? Ultimately, which was the real Gwen – the girl who laughed at all my jokes while we were dating, or the one who set me up for my own kidnapping?

And the heartbroken ex-boyfriend, leaving Gwen on the floor when she was helpless and terrified that she was going to explode...was that the real me?

The answer to all of those questions is always the same: Bourbon.

I told you at the beginning. It's not like the movies. There are no happy endings.

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