

***LA LA LAND***

***CHRONICLES OF VAJRA***  
***BOOK ONE***

***T E WHITAKER***

**PREVIEW**

## Paved with Pink

Call me Brät—unless you’re an exotic dancer with a stage name such as Harmony or Destiny or Skye, or a woman I’m chatting with online, in which case you can call me Vajra. That’s *my* stage name, my online handle, and the name my penis goes by. A typical online conversation:

HOTHONEY69: *what does your name mean?*

VAVAVAJRA: *Do you do Tantra?*

HOTHONEY69: *no, but I know what it is. why?*

VAVAVAJRA: *Just checking in advance. Tantra people get upset about it.*

HOTHONEY69: *by your name?*

VAVAVAJRA: *Amazingly enough, yes.*

HOTHONEY69: *weird. cmon tell me. i have an excellent sense of humor.*

VAVAVAJRA: *It’s a mashup of vavavoom and the Tantric term for “warrior cock.” :-)*

HOTHONEY69: *ok*

HOTHONEY69: *:-)*

VAVAVAJRA: *VaVaVoom + Vajra = VaVaVajra. It’s supposed to be funny.*

HOTHONEY69: *it is. but not lol. do YOU do tantra?*

And I’m in. According to the Shauson-Banks Index, I’m the world’s fifth-ranked online dater. If you write well and gather some decent photos of yourself, online dating profiles are your all-in-one matchmaker, wingman, and social status confirmation. Alive today, Shakespeare would mow a mighty cum swath through Stratford-upon-Avon.

Like Shakespeare, I’m a writer, to be precise a writer-director of the filmic arts, and I was on my way to Hollywood, where fame, coin of the realm, and roses by many names awaited.

After driving two days from Iowa, I made Las Vegas and spent a night at a notorious strip club burning through money and fruitless approaches. I slept until noon the next day, walked

across a surface-of-the-sun-hot parking lot, fired up my black SUV with the off-road package I'd never taken off road, and drove across the Mojave listening to *Chinatown*.

I listen to films while I drive. It's an excellent exercise to separate oneself from the film's visual language. Film is my religion, and I'm the proud owner of a holier-than-thou, pretentious demeanor regarding cinema. This I know about myself. I have just enough self-awareness to be dangerous.

By late afternoon I sat on the floor of a refurbished, unfurnished apartment a block off Fairfax behind Television City. A health food restaurant and dry cleaners did business at street level, and a welcome number of attractive starlet-sorts cruised the lobby, hallways, and elevator. This was home for the next six months. I had a few thousand dollars remaining for furniture and food, and confirmed registration to an upcoming seminar conducted by the world's foremost screenwriting coach. Tomorrow I'd have my vehicle inspected for the "personal taxi" gig I'd slog through until I sold a few scripts, before meeting with my agent.

But tonight I had a date with a woman I'd met via *Zamba*, a hot-or-not instant dating app.

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My date's father answered the door, resigned and suspicious.

"Hi," I said. "I'm here to pick up Julia. I'm Brät." It's good to use one's real name with fathers, because it's a good bet he won't go for Vajra the Warrior Cock.

"Like bratwurst?"

"I was conceived in Germany."

He opened the door wider and shouted upstairs. "Julia!"

I stepped back.

"Come on in," he said.

I would have preferred to wait outside, but there wasn't much choice at this point.

"Thanks," I said, and entered the foyer. A staircase ascended to my left, a hallway straight ahead to a brightly lit kitchen.

“Hiiii!” Julia called, sticking her head over the stair railing. “I’ll be down in a minute. I put my dress on backwards.” She giggled, high-pitched and horrific. I smiled and followed her father to the living room.

A big brown recliner faced a television, on which an enthusiastic audience sampled the juice of their lives from a magical juicer. In went cucumbers, oranges, apples, and ginger, out came miracle juice with twelve times the healthful benefit. I sat on a sofa.

“What’s your business?” he asked.

“Movies, I guess. I wri—”

“We’re in construction,” he said, cutting me off. “Family business. Julia handles the office on site. Gotta have a presence. She can handle herself.”

A little boy, maybe three years old, dashed through the living room, vanishing down the hallway. His feet pounded up the stairs. Julia’s father studied me.

“You meet online?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Thought as much,” he said. “You’re better dressed than the others. Don’t know what she’s told you.”

“We haven’t really spoken much.”

“So nothing at all,” he said. “Let me give you some advice. Run. She’s not for you. I love my daughter, but I’m a realistic man. You’re young, not thinking straight, what with all these phone apps and dating sites. I’ve seen them. It’s a candy store. Pardon my French, but you’re thinking with your dick. No other explanation for you being here.”

“I—”

“Hellooooo,” Julia said, entering the room, nothing like the twenty photos she’d posted on *Zamba*. She’d colored her long, black hair a deep burgundy, cut it short, and shoehorned herself into a purple sequined tube dress that had fit thirty pounds ago. Her heels were blue suede. It hadn’t come together as she’d envisioned it. Her photos were so misleading it seemed intentional.

I froze my expression, stood, and shook her hand. “Great to meet you.”

She flashed her father a scolding glance and we left.

\* \* \*

We landed in a discount hotel chain bar, somewhere in the Valley. Not what I imagined for my first night in L.A. A group of five women wearing lanyards took turns at the karaoke mic. The floor-to-ceiling windows looked past a dark parking lot of rental cars and sad trees to bustling Ventura Boulevard. On stage, a thin, severe woman wearing a navy blue suit belted “Crazy.” Patsy Cline, not Seal.

“I hate karaoke,” Julia said. “I thought it was another night.”

“Bummer. I love it.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Not at all. I’ve won money singing.”

She pointed at my energy drink. “But you’re not drinking.”

“I don’t need to. I was born without inhibitions.”

She arched an eyebrow. “That may come in handy.”

Had I found her attractive, Vajra might have given her comment a standing O, but instead he sat unmoved, disappointed with the show, wondering if he could get a ticket refund. My penis sulks when his world isn’t paved with pink.

“Your dad said you’re in construction,” I said. “It’s a family business?”

“Steve is my stepfather. He says a lot of things.”

“So you’re not?”

“I am. But it’s not who I am.”

“Who are you?”

She cringed as the first notes of “Brown Eyed Girl” drifted through the bar. “I hate this song,” she said.

“You have brown eyes.”

“Eye color doesn’t define you.”

“Do I need to repeat my question?” I asked.

“I’m more interested in who *you* are,” she said, and dug into her purse. She unfolded a sheet of paper and read from it. “How long have you lived where you currently live?”

I grinned. Was she kidding? “Less than a day.”

“Come on. I’m serious. How long?”

“I told you I just moved here.”

She crinkled her forehead, retrieving a forgotten memory. “Oh yeah. Then I assume you’re renting? Or are you a homeowner?”

“Are you taking my credit information?”

“I’m trying to get to know you.”

“Then let’s do it like every other person on earth. Have a conversation. Let things emerge.”

“I’m not comfortable with that.”

“Not comfortable with a conversation? That’s what people do.”

“I don’t have that kind of time,” she said. “I want to learn things. I need knowledge.”

I sat back. “I’m not participating.”

She pursed her lips. “You understand what’s at stake, don’t you?”

“Apparently not.”

“You’re a boy. I’m a girl. Do the math.”

I’d had enough. “You do it.”

She laughed. “Wow. That was rude.”

A heavy woman with a too-short flower print skirt began whisper-singing “Little Red Corvette.”

“No ruder than you pulling out a credit app on a first date.”

“I don’t go out much,” she said, and her eyes welled. She sniffed and hid her face in her hands, before collapsing onto the table, head buried in her folded arms.

The waitress stopped at our table. “Is everything all right?”

I flashed her a weary expression. “I’m not sure. Julia?”

The purple sequins shuddered.

“I think so,” I said. “I guess we’ll see.”

When the waitress left, Julia raised her head, a mess of wet cheeks and smeared mascara. “My last boyfriend was weird. I guess I’m—I need to know things about you before I can talk about it.”

“Like what?”

“Just *things*.” She swiped at her eyes. “I mean, like, I don’t know. Like have you ever had sex with an animal?”

Full stop. What?

“No,” I said, carefully, drawing it out. “Why?”

“Never mind.”

“You can’t say ‘never mind’ to that.” Of course she could.

“Of course I can,” she said.

“Not if you want to get to know each other at all. Not if you want to talk about your ex.”

“We—” She stopped herself. “He tied me up once.”

“Okay. I’ve done that.”

She smiled, indulgent. “Look, you seem nice. But kind of conservative.”

“Conservative? Me?” I laughed, maybe too much. “That’s a new one.”

“I just don’t want to shock you.”

“You won’t,” I said.

“Sure,” she said, doubtful. “He has a big black dog. Pretty. Shiny coat. His name’s Duke. I think he’s a Lab.”

I nodded.

“Anyway, he wanted to see if Duke—I can’t believe I’m telling you this—he wanted, Jesus, he stuffed me with food to see what Duke would do.”

“Stuffed you with food.”

“Uh-huh.”

“What kind?”

“I don’t know. Carrots, maybe? Stuff from the refrigerator.”

“Dogs are carnivores.”

“I couldn’t see. I was blindfolded.”

“Okay.”

She sat back. “You’re grossed out.”

“That’s not it.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve never heard anything like this.”

“Where are you from?”

“The Midwest.”

“You’re not in Kansas anymore,” she said.

“Ha ha. Not Kansas. Iowa.”

“Same thing.”

“Not really,” I said.

“To people here it’s the same thing.”

“Fine. So what happened? Did he bite you?”

“Duke? No. He just licked. Um, I don’t know. Licked me until—”

“Until what? He’d eaten everything?”

She shook her head. “Until I—you know.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t. What?”

“Until I came.”

“You *came*? From *a dog*?”

She frowned. “Afraid of being compared?”

I laughed. “You’re fucking with me.”

“No I’m not,” she said, laughing with me. “I’m totally serious.”

“So—”

“It was weird.”

“Which part? The dog or cumming?”

“Both, I suppose.” She considered. “I probably wouldn’t do it again.”

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“No no no,” she shrieked, grabbing my arm. “Go straight.”

“But that’s your—”

“I don’t want to go home yet. Just—just don’t turn. I know a place.”

“I’m completely lost.”

“It’s fine,” she said, her hand now holding my forearm in a way I might have deemed affectionate. “You don’t have to get it. Just do something for me, okay?”

“All right.”

She let go of my arm and relaxed in her seat. “Take a right up here.”

We pulled into the parking lot of a little league baseball complex. Though past midnight, I counted nine other cars, a few with steamed windows—a local make-out spot. Tarzana's Inspiration Point. I parked away from the other cars.

"Thank you," she said. "Come on."

We left the car. A knowing moon watched her lead me along an unlit cement path between dormant baseball fields. Chain link fences stripped of their windbreaker tarps, worn grass infields, smeared chalk lines between missing rubber bases and absent home plates. She held my hand, heels clicking on concrete, sequins flashing colorlessly in the moonlight.

Baseball is my sport, my father's sport, the sport of his father. I'd played since childhood, had earned a college scholarship, and though I hadn't picked up a bat or ball since college, its rhythms and traditions flowed through me, ancestral and mythical. Prowling between the little league fields felt like trespassing on Indian burial grounds.

"You've been here before?" I asked.

She studied me, fathomlessly wise. "How many women have you slept with?"

Touché. Questions best not answered.

"Here," she said, choosing field nine, giving us a clear view of the parking lot and surrounding fields, and vice versa. We stepped into the open air dugout. She sat on the bench, her dress scratching against the aluminum. I remained standing, listening, scanning—for what I'm not sure, maybe the baseball gods' fury or the rolled eyes and disappointment of my exes. A soft breeze eased through the chain link. She reached for my zipper as if able to sense movement through the jeans, tracing my joint through the heavy material, helping it grow, a feline playing with her food. A shiver swept over me. She looked up, lips parted, eyes glistening. The night hung in expectation, an urban jungle waiting for the leopard to—

"I'm not going to do everything," she said. "If you want me to suck it, you have to participate."

I know. I know I know I know. The credit app. The dog. Her stepfather's warning. At least three red flags. But rationalization is an exceptional tool—an intellectual's beer goggles—and really, was there a decision to make?

I unsnapped, unzipped.

“Thank you, kind sir.” She tugged down my jeans and my hi-tech, perspiration-wicking boxer briefs. She grinned, eyes flaring. “Nice.”

She took me in her mouth.

Some men enjoy the virgin fantasy. They want inexperience. That’s not me. I appreciate experience or, maybe more to the point, I appreciate excellence. Enthusiasm. Single-minded focus and leisurely intent. A woman who knows there *is* such a thing as a bad blowjob and it’s more common than not. A woman who sucks my cock like it’s the universe’s center, who understands but doesn’t struggle with power dynamics, who keeps her teeth out of the equation and allows me to lie back and fantasize she’s someone else—this is a woman to treasure and worship and put on a pedestal.

Julia hovered above the fumbling masses with slow-flapping pearlescent wings, an all-powerful goddess.

“Oh my god,” I groaned, cradling her head in my hands. “Huhh huhh huhh—” And like that, I came. She stroked me through it, squeezing my balls, fingernails over my t’aint.

I opened my eyes and could see she could see I understood she owned me.

“Mooooooooorrre,” she cried, hungry, wanting, a spoiled child.

“I—”

“Put it *in* me.”

“But I don’t—”

She hiked her purple sequined tube dress and laid back, knees up, blue pumps serving as the gates to the unknown, daring me not to fuck her. She understood the transcendent power of quid pro quo obligation and a man’s deep drive to spread his seed trounced such piddling forces as rational thought and self-respect.

“I don’t have a condom,” I said.

“I’m on the pill. Fuck me.”

I hesitated, and she reached for my traitorous, stiffening cock, cupping my balls, pulling me to her.

“Fuck me, daddy,” she purred in her weird child’s voice. “Pleeeeeeeaaasse?”

My stomach turned and I nearly vomited. But, you know, I didn’t. And that doesn’t say a lot of good things about me. She guided me inside, wrapped her legs around me like a horny shaved

sequined koala, and pulled me in, dictating the speed, leaving nothing to me, whispering again and again.

“Oh daddy, oh daddy, you fuck me so good with your big dick.”

Unlike Act One, this went on forever. Somewhere in the timeless middle, I understood she'd sucked me off to assure I would last when it mattered to her. Sweat poured off me, soaking her hair. We fell off the bench onto the dirt. All manner of filth spilled from her mouth to my ear, disgusting and wrong and holy shit politically incorrect.

I'd never been so hard.

She called me Daddy and Duke and Lover, whispered harsh references to bestiality, incest, something about a chicken and corn, maybe I'd heard that one wrong, who the fuck knows, on it went, she soaked my balls at least five times, coming hard, screaming, her legs coiling around me, heels digging into the backs of my arms, fingernails tearing across my back, constricting my ability to breathe, squeezing my dick inside her, begging me to fill her in that odd little voice, my breath coming hard, ragged, if it didn't end soon I would pass—

I saw stars. She gripped me, convulsing, as I poured inside her. Colors and goddamn *stars*.

She nudged me off and I rolled to the side onto the dirt. My sweat dripped onto the dugout floor. Chills swept along my body with the breeze. Julia buried her fingers between her legs.

“Just one more,” she sighed. “You can watch if you want.”

# The Great Equalizer

The bored dude with the khakis, polo shirt, and eternal three-day stubble inspected my vehicle while I completed the necessary paperwork and online licensing exam. He took his time filling out my license, yawned while I downloaded the necessary phone app, and affixed the required URide window sticker on the bottom right corner of my windshield.

“Take it off when you’re not working,” he said. “The taxi dicks’ll key your car.” He stared into the middle distance. “And chicks’ll think you’re a douche.”

“Thanks. Good tips.”

“Yeah.” He handed me a business card. “These are the pickup rules for LAX. Keep them in your car. Hotels are usually cool about us. The hip ones, boutique-sorts, especially. Downtowns not so much. Just ignore the cabs. They’ll try to intimidate you.”

“Okay.”

“You in the business?” he asked. “Actor? Producer?”

“Writer-director.”

“Ah, a hyphenate. Well, maybe you’ll get stories from it. Don’t give passengers your script. Even if they ask. The powers-that-be find out you did that, you’re done.” His expression shifted to self-reflective. “It’s a means to an end. You’re not a driver. You’re a writer. You don’t want to be a stereotype, unless you’re a masochist. So separate the two. Riders ask what you do, which they will all the time, just say you’re paying your way through college. Everyone involved’ll feel better about it. Most importantly you.”

“Thanks. Are you an actor?”

He smiled. “I’m paying my way through college.”

We shook hands and just like that I could “be my own boss and earn money on my time” and “turn my ride into rubles.”

“Brät, the script wasn’t ready for prime time.”

I sat across from my agent—Stu Goldberg of Goldberg & Associates—in his luxurious office. His dark, monstrous, polished wood desk dominated the room. He sat behind the desk in a matching throne with blood red seating surfaces. I sat in one of two smaller chairs. A personal injury attorney, Stu’s love for film had inspired him to open an entertainment division at his firm. Bookcases lined the walls, filled with screenplays, legal documents, and thick leather legal tomes. Behind him a vast window framed Century City’s glass towers and the 405 freeway. He wore a black suit and a black open-neck dress shirt. His salt-and-pepper mane flowed to a matching trimmed beard—adult radio rock star circa 1987 meets angel-investing hipster. This was our first face-to-face meeting.

“What do you mean?”

He steepled his fingers. “I told you I had Mark polish it.”

Mark sat across the room sipping green tea at a “breakout” table and chairs. He wore a graphic t-shirt and jeans and struck me as a true blue dick.

“Yeah, I remember.” I’d agreed to this arrangement from a distance. Mark would polish my first screenplay, *Assassination*—my “kids track normal people for sport and ‘assassinate’ them with paint guns but they choose the wrong target: a real life assassin who turns the tables on them” thriller—in exchange for an extra five percent of the sale. Goldberg & Associates would keep twenty percent total. I knew nothing of Hollywood and assumed Stu saw the same genius in me I fantasized I possessed, and viewed Mark’s polish as a barely necessary launch step.

“We do this for our clients all the time,” Stu had told me.

“It’s changed a lot, obviously,” Mark said. He gazed out the window, sipped his tea.

“In what way?” I asked.

“So you need to understand it’s much different than the original script you sent us,” Stu said.

“Then explain to—”

“And it would be unfair to Mark,” he continued, ignoring me, “not to mention misrepresenting the authorship to potential buyers, if you received sole credit for the work.”

“But that was our agreement. It was supposed to be a polish. Mark chose to do what he did. Which I haven’t seen, by the way.”

“I think we’re beyond that,” Stu said.

“Beyond what?” I said, getting pissed.

“The question of authorship. I’m uncomfortable misrepresenting the work. It’s co-written, your name first of course—”

“Oh of course,” I snapped.

“—and a fifty-fifty split of the sale.”

“First off,” I said, “this is bullshit.”

“I feel exactly the same,” Mark said from behind his precious tea cup.

“Do you? I don’t see how that’s fucking possible.”

“Brät—” Stu began.

“I have to run the new agreement past my sister.” My sister Georgia is a mergers and acquisitions attorney.

“There’s no time,” Stu said. “It goes to market tomorrow.”

This was news. “Tomorrow?”

He grinned.

I had decided to write screenplays because I figured scripts were easier to write and more lucrative than novels, ergo a faster path to tooling around in an Aston Martin like 007. I’d start with scripts, move into directing, and spend my golden years in Bel Air penning acclaimed espionage novels while receiving twice-daily blowjobs from worshipful starlets wowed by my maverick genre-unto-its-own literary blend of action, humor, and sex. Unfortunately, I’d told this to Stu during an unguarded moment.

“Fifty percent of what this baby is going to sell for will put you in a twelve-cylinder Vantage,” Stu said. “Maybe a DB9.”

“Where are they?” I asked. “The script and the agreement?”

He slid a manila envelope across the desk. I opened it. The new contract waited on top. I pulled out my phone, took photos of all six pages, and messaged them to my sister with the note, “I’m getting screwed, but read it and tell me how hard.”

“Like I said, there’s no time for that,” Stu said.

I ignored him and read the script’s cover page. They’d changed the title to *Uberman*.

“Add a ‘story by’ credit for me on the cover page.”

“You’ve got to be kid—” Mark began.

Stu silenced Mark with a glare and texted something. A muffled curse from the receptionist carried through the closed door.

“Done,” Stu said.

My phone buzzed. I read my sister’s detailed response to my message. They’d tried to fuck me on the back end—potential sequels and such.

“I’m forwarding you something,” I said to Stu.

His phone beeped. He read and said, “No.”

“Then the script goes out with the current agreement,” I said. “My sister says you need me to capitulate to alter an agreement already in place.”

He glared with open annoyance. I steeled myself against trembling nerves threatening to set my teeth chattering, grateful I hadn’t divulged my sister’s profession until now.

“We won’t represent you again,” Stu said, a last ditch threat.

“You took the words right out of my mouth.”

Stu glared at me and forwarded the text to his receptionist.

“This is so unfair,” Mark muttered.

Stu set his phone on the desk. “Shut up, Mark.”

\* \* \*

The Queens Street Café sits at the corner of Beverly Boulevard and Queens Street. It offers indoor and al fresco seating, good drinks, excellent food, and the occasional star sighting. My small, inside table featured a good view of Beverly and a prized electrical outlet within cord’s length. A big, honey-laced cup of masala chai crouched on the left side of my laptop, and a pumpkin muffin on the right.

My L.A. plan: Write in the morning, take meetings (if any) in the afternoon, drive for URide at night, revise as necessary. Like most good plans, it had structure with space for improvisation.

I’d received an email from Stu a few minutes earlier. They’d messengered *Uberman* to potential buyers late last night and I could expect word maybe today, certainly by tomorrow. I’d read the script for the first time last night and, of course, hated every revised word. *Assassination*

had provided the premise and structure for Mark's histrionic Nietzschean bullshit, ludicrous character names, and subpar dialogue:

ZARA

(staring at the bridge)

This isn't my end. I shall overcome it.

I peered over my laptop screen at a girl across the room. Dark hair, ghost pale skin, exquisite features, slender, about my age. She wore torn jeans, black suede knee-high boots, and a tight black sweatshirt emblazoned with *You'll Know*. She read a leather-bound book, her lips moving a little, and didn't raise her eyes when the waitress refilled her coffee cup. Her immersion in the book struck me as armor against dashing writers, no matter how charming.

A loud rumbling approached, and she looked up. When the windows vibrated I thought *earthquake*. But except for the girl, around the café eyes remained on screens, conversations continued. Soon the source revealed itself—a big Harley. Bright blue, gleaming chrome, an older style, not museum quality like some in Los Angeles. The rider parked the bike on Queens Street, back tire against the curb, and shut it down with a gunshot blast. He took off his half helmet, set it on the seat with total confidence no one would dare steal it, and walked toward the café.

As he entered, I recognized him—the inspector from URide. Torn blue jeans and a heavy canvas jacket were a different stylistic universe from the khakis and polo shirt he'd worn at URide. I gave him an up nod, he narrowed his eyes, didn't recognize me, and continued to the counter.

The girl watched him, met my eyes, blinked, and returned to her book.

I hit the key combination for dialogue in my fancy screenplay program and wrote the most obnoxious opening line I could think of to say to the girl with the book. I'd work backward, editing and editing until I crafted something natural, organic, and clever.

Boots approached.

"Writer-director," the URide guy said. He made a half-assed motion toward the open chair at my table and sat across from me.

"Nice bike," I said.

“Thanks.”

“I assume that’s not a URide vehicle class.”

“You are correct,” he said, pleasant, much different than during the inspection.

“Euclid!” the barista called.

He grabbed his drink at the counter and returned.

“Euclid?”

“My parents are mathematicians.”

“I was conceived in Germany,” I said.

“Therefore, Brät.”

“You remembered that?”

“It’s unusual,” he said. “And I’m good with names. Plus, you’re wearing the same clothes.”

“Different black t-shirt, maybe the same jeans. I’m not sure.”

He dumped two packs of raw sugar into his espresso.

“That’s a cute cup,” I said.

“Isn’t it? Double espresso. Gives me a jolt. I’d go for a quad shot, but then they’d give me a cappuccino cup which’d be too big for my dainty fingers.”

I laughed.

“What are you working on?” Euclid asked.

“Third draft. And I’m waiting to hear from my agent about a script making the rounds right now.”

“Congratulations,” he said, studying me. “But you don’t sound as pumped as most writers do when they’re on the brink of fame and riches.”

“My agent had his assistant revise my script.”

“His assistant? Why?”

“Apparently it wasn’t good enough.”

“Huh. Who’s your agent?”

“Goldberg and Associates.”

“Never heard of them.”

“It’s a boutique agency.”

He sipped his espresso while the girl with the book packed her stuff and left the café. Euclid followed my eyes and checked her out as she passed by the window.

“I see you haven’t mastered it, yet,” he said.

“Mastered what?”

“Ignoring the famous.”

“She’s famous?”

“Oh, yes.” He finished his espresso and set down the cup with a tiny plink. “Troika, the thinking man’s porn star.”

Outside, a couple *oohed* and *aahed* over Euclid’s motorcycle. “She liked your bike.”

“Motorcycles are the great equalizer,” he said, admiring his bike. “Ride one and you’re the rebel, the bad boy, which in turn removes you from socioeconomic classification. You don’t have to be rich if you’re dangerous. Women’ll come to you.”

“I might steal that line from you.”

“You can have it,” he said, his tone genuine. “I’d be honored.”

“Thanks. What do you do when you’re not inspecting cars for URide?”

“I’m a producer,” he said.

I sat up.

“At ease, soldier. I’ve done a few shorts that made it into festivals. Nothing you’ve seen.”

“Still—”

“I’m the Babe Ruth of story ideas, but I can’t write and actors drive me nuts.” With one finger he pushed the espresso cup a few inches toward the table’s edge. “It’s been tough breaking in.”

Outside, a sky blue Ferrari with cream white leather seats rolled to a stop in the handicap spot. The passenger, an ethereal Asian girl whose youth and beauty made her relationship to the older man driving the car easy to characterize, kissed the man, hopped from the car, and dashed into the restaurant next door. The Ferrari charged into traffic.

“I’m going to take off,” Euclid said. “You got a bike?”

“No.”

“You should get one. We’ll go riding. Can you email me your script? The original?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks,” he said, jotting his email address on a napkin. “I’d like to read it.”

He left, fired up the bike, and roared off in the same direction as the Ferrari. I messaged Stu.

ME: *Any word?*

A few seconds later—

STU: *No.*

## Varying Shades of Condescension

A fifty-something man with a shaved head and dyed goatee in so-so shape and a centerfold-type blonde woman in her twenties rode with me on my apartment complex's elevator. He watched the ascending numbers and she actively avoided my gaze. On my floor a man and woman yelled at each other behind a closed door, and another man exited the apartment next to mine—black suit, white sport shirt, hair plugs, sweat beading on his forehead. I glanced into the apartment as the door closed, as one will, was greeted by long tawny legs rising to blinding white shorts, and I conducted a brief thought experiment to determine the detectability of a small hole drilled through our bathrooms' shared wet wall.

I unlocked my apartment door as a smash and an accompanying scream echoed through the hallway from the elevator's direction. The shouting spiked when the woman about to carom into my life flung open a door I couldn't see to escape a crazed Hungarian boyfriend chasing her with a nine-inch carbon steel chef's knife. Feet slapped the hallway floor, coming fast. She rounded the corner, slipped, slid, and crashed into the wall.

Back on her feet, something shiny and red in her hand, she saw me, her focus shrinking to a point between my eyes like a jet fighter's weapons guidance system locking onto its target, and sprinted toward me. I stood with my hand on the door handle, the door ajar, not hearing anything, barely registering the wild-haired Hungarian scrambling around the corner like a knife-wielding, grizzled Tasmanian devil.

I calculated our comparative masses against her relative velocity and applied back-of-a-napkin witchcraft physics along the lines of her Linear Momentum ( $m$ ) plus her Emotional State ( $e$ ) divided by her Angular Velocity ( $w$ ):

$$m + e^2 / w^2 = KE_{\text{linear}}$$

To which I ballparked, translated, and added my confusion and stable mass properties into a moment of Inertia ( $I$ ) to get:

$$KE_{\text{linear}} + \frac{1}{2}I = WTF^2$$

She crashed into me at full song, rebounded, struck the back of her head against the reinforced steel door, and fell into my apartment, bouncing off the wall onto the floor and scrambling away like a green-eyed, heavy-breasted, smoking hot sand crab into the open concept kitchen with the gas range and marble countertops.

Stunned, I turned back to the hallway. The Hungarian and his knife were closing fast. I made the obvious decision, took a lateral step into my apartment, and closed the door behind me.

The Hungarian pounded on the door. “Syyyyyydneeeey!”

A knife stabbing a reinforced steel door is unidentifiable unless you know what it is.

She sat on the floor, arms straight behind her, knees up and spread more than necessary. Her breasts rose and fell like civilizations. In one hand she gripped a pair of Concubine Red fuck me pumps to coordinate with her little black dress/body beanie. She wore an expression miles from gratitude, feet from disdain, inches from entitlement.

“Where do you keep your cigarettes?” she asked.

“I don’t smoke.”

“I suppose you’re a vegan, too?”

“We’re omnivores.”

“Thank Odin,” she said, standing and watching the door where metal digging into metal continued without pause. “Vegetarianism is fine for moral reasons. But try to sell me the health angle and I’ll know you’re a vegan mafia-owned bitch.”

“Did a carrot kill your dog?”

She laughed, a musical, liberated laugh. Holy fuck was she beautiful.

“Sydney!” the Hungarian shouted, agonized, furious, pleading.

She pointed to herself. “Sydney.”

“I put that together myself.”

“Good boy.”

“I’m Brät.”

“Like bratwurst?”

“I was conceived in Germany.”

“How many times have you explained that?”

She smiled and approached. Was she going to kiss me? I clearly deserved it. But instead she shouted at the Hungarian through the door.

“Zoltan!” *Jab jab jab*. Protrusions began to appear on the door. He’d sliced through the outer layer. “Zoltan!” she shouted again.

“You have kill me!” he groaned, but stopped digging into the door. “You are witch!”

“Zoltan!” she demanded through the door. “Down! *A térdeden! A térdeden!*”

He slid to the floor. Guttled cries came through the door, a man in pain.

“You’re a weak man. A stupid, weak man.”

“I am still man,” he shouted, and pounded the door once. “I will kill boy who hides behind door!”

She winked at me. Nothing to worry about. She would handle it.

“He is strong man, Z. Alpha male. He is not afraid of you.” I frowned. “He makes me feel safe.”

Now Zoltan sobbed.

“Go away,” she said. “Take your knife.”

“But—”

“Not today. It is over. I can no longer remain silent.”

Whimpers of an animal in pain struck the door. Horrible, twisted emotion.

“Y-y-you *can’t*,” he cried.

She sighed, heavy, theatrical. “What do you have with you?”

The knife clattered to the floor. He fumbled with something. The corner of a hundred-dollar bill peeked under the door.

She spit at the floor.

“You disgust me, Zoltan,” she said, her voice harsh. “You are a weak man.”

Another hundred-dollar bill came through. And a third.

She scoffed. “You cannot buy my cooperation, *disznó*.” Her expression transformed to academic and she mouthed *pig* in explanation.

Open anguish came from the other side. “*Nem, nem vagyok.*”

Seven more hundred-dollar bills slipped beneath the door. A thousand dollars.

She bobbed on her toes. “You are *disznó*, Zoltan. A sniveling, dirty little *disznó*. But I will say nothing. Not today. Because your children do not deserve this.”

The sobbing eased.

“Now go,” she said. “Stay in your place until I come for you. *If* I come for you.”

He asked something I couldn’t make out, his voice docile, grateful.

“Yes,” she said. “You may eat from your bowl.”

He retrieved the chef’s knife and shuffled off.

She collected the money, lifted her dress, and slipped the bills into her panties. “Buy me dinner.”

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