

The Introduction

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Mpulse Studio

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Plot

This serves as the introduction to a memoir of accounts from an artist who, following sexual trauma, discovers her voice in women's advocacy. Through her journey, she learns to harness the power of her art to establish a platform dedicated to supporting Caribbean women who fight for their lives to heal from domestic violence.

Trigger Warning

This story contains adult language and depicts a scenario of sexual harassment in a work environment.

Introduction

Mr. Barron sat at the dark mahogany table with his skinny legs opened wide, extended outward, making them appear even longer. His navy slacks exposed the toe of his oxblood tassel loafers. They hazardously jutted out in the walkway between tables. One forearm rested on the table, and the other folded over the back of the chair. We had just finished dinner at a sushi restaurant in a high-end hotel. His business partner excused himself shortly after he paid the bill. The restaurant was busy that night. Knives and forks clinked against the porcelain flatware; the sound echoed throughout the restaurant. The silverware symphony magnified the volume of the space. That, coupled with the chatter from wall-to-wall tables, as well as patrons hovering around the bar like vultures, made it easy to blend in and get lost among the crowd.

Mr. Barron and I still had wine left. We met to discuss some final pieces of a contract for some art that his company commissioned me to paint, which so far was the biggest opportunity that had come my way since I opened my art gallery and studio. Several months ago, his interior designer approached me to create the artwork for a new property that he was having built. It was a large office space, and I was about to make enough money to cover my expenses for the next six months, so I figured that some post-dinner small talk would be harmless.

He had given me a hard time leading up to our meeting. He had been difficult to work with. He tested my integrity with each meeting. He tested my patience. He forced me to have faith, unconditional faith, that the world really is a good place because he made it so ugly. Finally, though, my work seemed to be falling into place. His interior designer would send me an agreement in the morning to sign and solidify the arrangements we discussed. I had been working with their firm for the past three months, submitting creative concepts and building a rapport with the executive team for art procurement. I had been paid promptly and fairly for the work I'd submitted thus far. Based on these facts, I had no reason to doubt my success in the project. However, my intuition understood a different story.

“Are you excited about this contract?” Mr. Barron shifted his posture. He removed his arm from the back of the chair and leaned forward, resting both forearms on the table. He smirked and looked me dead in the eye.

“I’m excited. This is an amazing opportunity.” I anxiously pulled my hair over my left shoulder and began braiding and unbraiding the strands at the end. I took a sip of my wine and nodded, wishing they had brought the contracts with them to the dinner. This process had been arduous, and I was ready for the business deal to be finalized so I could get to work in my studio. I had to set aside any other prospects while I worked on this project. It became all-consuming. I forgot that I was a business owner and an artist at the same time. I spent days in my studio, perfecting each piece, updating the most minute details per Mr. Barron’s suggestions. He made the process difficult; he made me feel that the project could slip through my fingers at any moment and be given to someone else. I tiptoed on eggshells for him and worried that if I looked at him the wrong way, he’d explode into a fury of rage.

“I’m glad you’ll be working with us.” Mr. Barron ran the fingers of one hand through his graying hair. As he smiled, the loose skin from his aging face folded around his neck.

“I am too.” I smiled nervously. The shift in his posture gave me pause. He leaned in and squared his shoulders toward me.



several months prior...

It was a Wednesday evening amidst a hectic week. I had been struggling to finalize a sale, and my pipeline had dwindled down to a few prospects. I didn’t really have time to take a break from my studio, but I figured that a networking event might help me clear my mind. I opened my studio gallery without

much of a safety net, and financial stress had been creeping up on me. The Architecture and Interior Design Association was hosting an annual awards reception, and I had received a courtesy invitation.

I owned studio space in the Dallas Design District, and I knew that my invitation was somewhat of a sales tactic, hoping I would be able to offer business to the interior design firms that shopped around the area. Little did they know, I was the one who needed their business. I'd been scratching my head for weeks, trying to figure out how I was going to pay all of my bills, and I didn't want to ask my parents for money again.

With my awards reception invitation in hand, I stepped out of my Uber and onto the carpeted entrance of Sutherland's, a dark, mahogany-filled Texas steakhouse. As I stepped into a quadrant of the revolving door, I realized I had forgotten my business cards. I rummaged through my bag for a second, but the only cards I came across were old and dog-eared and smelled like the Jean Paul Gaultier perfume that I kept in a side pocket.

The cocktail lounge was dimly lit. I ambled around the heavy, wood and leather furniture, assessing the ambiance. These events were typically attended by wealthy, attractive, well-dressed people, and this one didn't disappoint. In addition to the architects and designers were the developers, realtors, furniture designers, and artists like myself. It was the kind of audience that anyone in my situation would aspire to network with.

As I crept through the crowd, I saw a few familiar faces from my Design District neighborhood, but my goal was to find either a bar or an hors d'oeuvre table. I was accustomed to attending events alone. I lost my partner-in-crime in a break-up, and I'd been too busy to branch out and build new friendships. I experimented with dating apps, to no avail, and in the end, I felt better alone. Introverted by nature, I've never really felt compelled to be surrounded by large groups of people. Shy and introverted, having a drink in hand or picking at cocktail food has always given me something to occupy my attention while I muster up the courage to make small talk.

I moseyed around, slowly and awkwardly, trying to appear nonchalant but hoping to be welcomed into an interesting conversation. I gazed toward an attractive man with dark skin, dressed in a well-fitted suit.

I crossed my fingers that he'd make eye contact. He didn't notice me.

I finally spotted the bar, but at that moment, I was approached by an attractive woman in a floral-printed shift dress. I recognized her from the countless magazine covers she'd graced. It was Karen Vice. According to Hotel Design Magazine, Karen Vice of Vogel and Vice held the highest-paid interior design position in the Dallas metroplex for the past five years. Her firm worked almost exclusively for JTD Properties, a commercial development company that built massive office spaces all over the southwest, predominantly in Texas' urban areas.

Dressed in head-to-toe Prada, Karen possessed all the characteristics of the quintessential interior designer. The buttery leather strap of her heather gray Birkin bag rested perfectly on her lithe wrist. Always well-groomed and fashionable, never a hair out of place, she intimidated me. Karen gained wealth and respect in her industry through her hotel design work. I'd been reading about her career and studying her aesthetic for years, hoping that my art would eventually catch her eye. I fantasized about reaching her level of success. My design studio was still in its infancy, and I was far from her peer. Not only that, I've never been the kind of woman who always looks pageant-perfect. Working in a studio all day, I keep my fingernails filed short, my hair most often twisted into a top knot, and sawdust, metal shavings, and charcoal smeared along the thighs of my jeans. Prim perfection wasn't anything I'd figured out how to attain.

"Mona Lamar?" She smiled at me with vacant eyes and extended her hand.

"Hi." I smiled, cocked my head to the side and reached out to graciously shake her manicured, elegant hand, shocked that she knew my name.

"Mona, hi, I'm Karen Vice. I'm with JTD."

"Hi!" I grinned. I couldn't hide my excitement.

"Mona, I understand that you have a design studio."

Still smiling, I nodded skeptically. I didn't understand why she was talking to me.

"Okay." She continued. "So, JTD is breaking ground on a boutique property just around the corner from here. It's a 20,000 square-foot corporate space... chic, modern, abstract, you get the idea, right?" She turned her lips up to smile, but her eyes and cheeks remained motionless and insincere.

"I do. I'm very familiar with a lot of the work that you all do."

"Okay that's great." Karen spoke direct and succinctly. "Mr. Barron is the owner of the building and has been instrumental in bringing the design process together... he's an art aficionado and he's been playing a key role in the procurement of art throughout the property... he concerns himself with the financial aspect of the procurement, as well. He is interested in using your work in this project."

"Wait, what?" I was still trying to comprehend the conversation.

"I'm going to let him know that you're on board. Follow me, and I'll introduce you," she said, nodding toward the bar. She turned her back to me and began marching forward. I followed with haste to keep up but felt naive as I raced behind her. My gut told me to stop, that nothing good could come from this. Yet I followed, uncomfortable and confused.

How would she have known who I was or that I was interested in working on a project for a commercial space? I'd been waiting for this kind of work since I opened my studio, but I hadn't been vocal about it. I didn't even know how to get my foot in the door of a company like JTD, but before I knew it, I was being led across the room to meet Mr. Barron, the owner of the company that hired JTD Properties to design their new space.

It was a crowded room and we weaved in and out of groups of fellow designers and artists. Karen cleared the path so I could catch up behind her. As I trailed in her footsteps, questions kept popping into my mind. How did he know about me?

I reached for Karen and placed my hand on her shoulder... "Wait, Ms. Vice... Mr. Barron wants to talk about procuring my art? How does he know about my art?"



Jack Barron rested his forearm on the heavily glazed mahogany bar top and leaned in toward his glass of Cabernet. The espresso color of his wool sport-coat blended into the dark wood and black lacquered decor of the steakhouse. Ordinarily, he wouldn't attend a networking event, but he committed to being hands-on with the design process, and he knew that Karen Vice would be there. His executive assistant convinced him that it would be beneficial to network as well. She convinced him to make an appearance, emphasizing that it would be a smart PR move to meet some vendors face-to-face and that he had been too distant and unavailable since his divorce.

"Wow." Jack Barron pressed his shoulders back and started rolling up the sleeves of his sport-coat. "Who the hell is that?" Jack nodded his head toward a petite woman with long, black wavy hair. Her fair, delicate features resembled the face of a porcelain doll. She wore skinny, high-waisted jeans and a gray button-down, denim work shirt. Her brown suede boots rose just over her knee, and she carried a Louis Vuitton messenger bag. She walked in alone.

The bartender looked over at her and gave Mr. Barron an approving wink. "I'm not sure, sir, but I can find out for you." The bartender set aside the wine glass he was polishing and motioned for the restaurant manager to meet him at the bar. Jack Barron was a regular at Sutherland's Steakhouse. He was known for spending hundreds of dollars on wine, just for himself, and then tipping fifty percent after he was so drunk that he could barely walk to his downtown penthouse, only two short blocks away. The staff humored him and catered to his absurd requests. They nicknamed him "Mr. Money Bags."

The manager approached Mr. Barron. "What can I do for you, sir?" He extended his hand to shake. Mr. Barron shook his hand, leaned in, and placed his other hand on the manager's back. He spoke quietly into his ear.

The dark, masculine decor of Sutherland's catered to the good ole boys who regularly inhabited seats at the horseshoe-shaped bar. Once patronized exclusively by owners and executives in the petroleum

industry, every bar stool had an engraved name plaque honoring the longtime loyalty of wealthy white men.

After a few minutes of visiting with guests, the manager returned to Mr. Barron. “Sir, that’s Mona Lamar. She’s an artist. She owns a design studio. I think she’s kind of ‘new’ in this whole scene.” He gave Mr. Barron a brotherly pat on the shoulder.

Without hesitation, Mr. Barron texted his interior designer, Karen Vice. He knew she was at the reception, but he didn’t want to leave his post at the bar to look for her.

(text to Karen Vice) Meet me at bar.

Karen approached promptly. “Mr. Barron, what can I do for you?” She adjusted her dry voice to a feminine, bubbly one as she attempted to feign interest in his request.

He nodded toward the woman with black hair. “Her name is Mona Lamar. She’s an artist and I wanna talk to ‘er about workin on some large canvases for the boutique project.”

His Texas drawl was so exaggerated that it often came across as an act. Karen dealt with him because she had to. She learned how to play his game early on. He wasn’t the first egomaniacal man she had dealt with. She stood up to a man of a similar moral code once and learned the hard way that it’s best to simply smile and nod. She learned how to shelve her emotions. Years of working with chauvinistic men had hardened her. She was typically in charge of choosing the art for the properties she worked on, but Mr. Barron’s ego was large, and she knew she had to acquiesce... he was not a man to question.



“Mr. Barron, this is Mona. She’s thrilled to work with us.” Without so much as a nod and a smile, she turned, her shoulder pushing me against the bar, and sauntered off. She had thrown me to the wolves. My gut was doing somersaults. I wanted to do this kind of work, and if this was part of the process, then I’d go along with it, but the situation didn’t feel right.

“Hi Mr. Barron.” I extended my hand to shake his. His gaze was fixed on the bartender as he offered me a flimsy handshake. “You’re familiar with my artwork?”

“What do ya wanna drink? Getch’ u whatever ya want.” He stood tall and peacock-like with his narrow chest puffed out in an arrogant pose.

“I... okay...” I turned to the bartender. “May I please have a glass of your brut rosé?”

“Look, Mona, here’s the deal.” Mr. Barron gestured for me to look him in the eye. My stomach twisted into a knot. My grandma taught me to listen to my gut feelings—the feelings in my core that guided me,

my intuition. She taught me that I had been gifted with heightened intuition, which gave me a unique advantage when I paid attention to it. She also warned me that my insecurities could disrupt the conversation between my intuition and my judgment. Mr. Barron frightened me. My core told me to politely smile and walk away, but all I saw was a powerful man casting a shadow on me, and I became paralyzed in his darkness. The bartender placed a flute of pink rising bubbles in front of me. I reached for it without turning my gaze from Mr. Barron. I took a nervous sip then unconsciously pulled my hair over my left shoulder and began to braid and unbraided it.

“I own some of the biggest buildings here in this city.” The slow, nasal resonance from his Texas twang seemed to magnify his smugness. “I just bought a new property around the corner.” He stepped in closer to me. “I need an artist to develop pieces of art for it. How does that sound to ya?”

He puffed his chest and made himself even taller. Next to my five-foot-tall frame, I had to cock my head back to see his face, and still, all I could see was the leathery skin that folded down from the pointed, bird-like features around his neck. Standing in his shadow, I leaned back, trying to create more space between us.

“I... um...” I cocked my head to the side, confused. “So you’ve seen my artwork?”

“I know yer an artist. I trust ya. Bring me some samples of yer work tomorrow. I’ve already set up a meetin’.”

He did? I was confused, but at the same time, a meeting was a step in a more professional direction.

“Give me yer card and I’ll contact ya tomorra’ with the details.”

I reached into my bag and started fishing around before I remembered that I’d left them at my studio. I sighed. “I’m sorry sir, I actually don’t have any cards on me.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket, pressed his thumb against the power button to unlock it then handed it to me. “Put’ yer number in here. I’ll call ya tomorrow.” He turned forty-five degrees and gave the bar an equal amount of his attention.

I dutifully entered my number and smiled politely as I handed the phone back to him.

“Look Mona. This is what ya have to understand.” He smirked. “I’m kind of a big deal. Google me. I’m serious.” I continued looking up toward him and nodded. “I’m a busy man. I own property all over the Country. I’m not around to hold anyone’s hands. I check in when I need to and trust that the work is bein’ done.” I kept nodding. I moved my fingers to the collar of my shirt and began to adjust the neckline. I couldn’t stop fidgeting. I could feel beads of sweat forming along the waistline of my jeans.

I never understood people who could praise themselves so shamelessly. I was raised to be humble and thankful for my talents. I kept nodding and sipped my wine as fast as I could without actually chugging it. As soon as I set an empty glass on the bar, I extended my hand to shake his once more before I left. I figured I would never hear from him again, and I just wanted to chalk the experience up as uncomfortable and go back to my studio and bury myself in my designs.

“Let me buy you another glass of... whatever that is that you’re drinkin’.”

"I'm sorry, sir, but I have to go. I still have work to do this evening. Thank you for the glass of wine, and I look forward to hearing from you tomorrow," I said out of courtesy. I didn't want to hear from him. I didn't like the idea that he had my cell phone number. Anxiety rose, and my heart beat rapidly. As I turned to leave, Mr. Barron grabbed my arm.

“Ms. Lamar, if you wanna make it as an artist, you gotta learn that it’s a relationship game. Trust me, there are plenty of artists out there to do business with.”

I swallowed the last bit of saliva in my mouth and adjusted the shoulder strap on my bag. Turning away from him, I began weaving through the crowded bar toward the revolving door. Outside, I found a bench to sit on while I caught my breath. Confused about what just happened, I pulled out my phone and Googled: Jack Barron.

His headshot came up immediately, showcasing his narrow structure framed by sun-spotted, leathered skin that creased around his eyes and folded where his pointed chin met the collar of his Oxford shirt. Beneath his picture were the words: CEO, BARRON ESTATES. I grew up seeing Barron Estates signs all over the city. He made his point. I didn’t have to Google him any further.

True to his word, Jack Barron called me the next day. Against my judgment, I agreed to meet with him. I donned my most conservative suit, portfolio in hand, and braced myself as I entered a stark white meeting room. I sat with him, Karen, and a man whose function with the project was unclear to me. I observed everyone’s body language. Mr. Barron sat with one arm on the table, leaning back, legs spread wide. Karen sat with her shoulders back and forearms placed delicately in front of her, one hand over the other. The other man fidgeted with his iPad, and I sat with my shoulders back, nervously crossing and uncrossing my legs.

We discussed the project timeline and expectations. I was given my budget, which seemed too good to be true. We covered the bases of the project, and Mr. Barron requested that Karen be my point person. I silenced my anxiety through deep breaths, trying to trick my intuition by imagining my art hanging on the walls.

As I walked out of the meeting, Karen cornered me.

“Mona,” Karen held her chin high and spoke in a dry tone. “I don’t know what you did to him or how you got this job. It’s irrelevant as far as I’m concerned. Just remember that you don’t say ‘No’ to Jack Barron... no one does.” She tapped her nude-colored patent leather Louboutin pump on the marble tile floor then turned back toward her office.



...back to the night at the sushi restaurant

Mr. Barron turned his lips into a downward smile and nodded. He opened his mouth and then closed it and paused for a second and just nodded. “I may be too old for ya but I don’t care.”

My hand trembled as I lifted my glass and took a sip of wine.

“Look,” Mr. Barron cleared his throat. “You cain’t tell me that after workin’ with me for the past three months, that you don’t think that I’m not gonna get what I want.”

He paused and took a sip of wine. The more he drank, the thicker the twang in his voice became. I nervously circled the tip of my finger around the rim of my glass. “So I’m just gonna be honest,” he continued.

Dammit... I had gotten so far, and this man was about to take it all away from me. He had been a pain to deal with since my first excruciating introduction to him. He possessed a frightening arrogance, inserting himself into parts of the project that he knew nothing about and demanding changes that were inefficient and unnecessary. I walked on eggshells around him. He was a loose cannon, and even more disconcerting than his overt ego, he inserted sexual innuendos into his everyday language. I could never tell if it was solely directed at me or if he made everyone suffer from his perversities.

My skin felt flush, and I could feel my shoulders curl forward. It was never about the quality of my work; it wasn’t even about me as a person. I was prey. If I didn’t play his game, he was going to take my work away from me. Karen Vice could have cared less about me. She was just doing as she was told so that this kind of thing wouldn’t happen to her. He was about to take my livelihood away from me. He was about to take away the work that I’d put my heart and soul into—painstaking work that I obsessed over for months. Worse than that, if I didn’t keep playing his game, I was going to be broke. I had buried myself in the project so deeply that I stopped seeking out other opportunities. My gut was screaming, "I tried to tell you!" I gulped my wine. I couldn’t stop braiding and unbraiding my hair.

“You’ve heard me talk about the separation I’m going through with my wife. I apologize for that. I really do. It isn’t appropriate for me to speak ill of her while we’re doin’ business.”

My heart raced.

“You have to understand.” He shook his head. “She’s a crazy bitch. She used to be pretty, but she’s had a few kiddos, and she just doesn’t do it for me anymore. She married me for my money and I’m over it. I won’t give ‘er anymore. It’s over.”

I nodded and pursed my lips.

“So Mona,” the estate owner tapped his index and middle finger against the dark, heavily lacquered, mahogany table. “Here’s the thing.” He took another sip of wine. “I think yer adorable and I can give you things. I cain’t give you kids, but I can take you on trips and buy you whatever handbags you want. I know women like bags.” He tapped his tasseled loafer against the ground. “Just tell me what you want. Go online and pick out a bag and email the link to me. You’ll have it tomorrow mornin’.” He took another sip of wine, lifted the decanter from the table, tilted it forward and replenished his glass, then took another sip. His lips were stained dark red.

I followed suit and took another sip of mine. I couldn’t look him in the eye, though. I looked past him and focused on a woman who sat at the table behind us. Engulfed by humiliation, all I could do was nod.

“Look,” he continued. “You don’t have to tell me right now, but just know that yer mine now and you need to understand that I have money. Google me if you don’t believe me. Did you ever Google me?” He cleared his throat. “So I’m the kinda guy who wants to know that other men think the chick I’m with is hot as fuck. I’m just gonna call you chick. That’s okay, right? Women think that kinda thing is cute... Chick.” He winked. I winced.

“Anyway, I have this thing where I like to see my chick with another man. I dated a chick once and she made me watch her fuck three guys in one night. I didn’t plan it and at first I was upset. I didn’t know what to think. I got mad and left her to act like a fuckin’ whore.

But she came home to me, not those guys. I realized that I had what they wanted. I had the chick who could satisfy a room full of men, all at once, and I realized that watching her made my dick hard.

I let ‘er do it again, and again. I need a chick that will let me watch ‘er fuck other men. I realized that it turns me on. That’s what I want. That’s what I need. That’s just who I am.” He sighed and took another sip of wine. “Then I married my wife. She’s a fuckin’ prude. She’s never done anything like this for me. It’s a fuckin’ disappointment and I’m over it.” He slammed his glass of wine on the table and crossed his arms across his chest.

Through deep breaths, I tried to hide the fact that I was shaking. I took another sip of wine to calm my nerves.

“So I wanna take care of you. I want you to do this job for us. I want you to be successful. I just need to watch you suck someone’s dick tonight. Just pick someone.” He uncrossed his arms and motioned around the room. I kept my gaze fixed on the woman sitting just behind him.

“We can go up to my hotel room.” He took a sip of wine and leaned closer. “I need this.”

“Ahem.” I cleared my throat. Wide-eyed, I scanned the restaurant. I couldn’t blink. Saliva evaporated from my mouth. Time froze. “Um...” I took a sip of water. “Can you please excuse me while I run to the ladies' room?”

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward him. I cringed as his spit landed in my ear and against my cheek. He whispered, “when you get back, I want you to give me yer panties. Just slide ‘em into my pocket and feel how hard my cock is getting.”

Gazing just over his shoulder, expressionless, I nodded and raised myself from my seat. I forced my shoulders back and stood as tall as I could make my small frame appear. Placing one foot in front of the other, I made my way to the ladies' room. Halfway there, I started convulsing. My eyes welled with tears as I opened the ladies' room door. I launched toward the sink and grabbed a handful of paper towels to hide my face.

Survival mode set in. I didn’t let myself sob. I shivered, then slapped myself across the face. I took a deep breath, then calmly and neatly folded a paper towel, gently pressing it underneath my eyes. I blotted the mascara that ran down my cheeks, took another deep breath, and shoved my fears deep into my soul. I ran my hands along my torso, smoothing out a wrinkle in my sweater dress. I looked in the mirror, checked once again for misplaced makeup, smoothed out my hair, took another deep breath, then headed back to the table to politely thank him for meeting with me and excuse myself for the night.

When I returned to the table, a short man, even older than Mr. Barron, stood next to him. His hair was bright white, and he had a thick mustache. I approached with hesitation, watching as Mr. Barron patted him on the shoulder.

“Mona!” He smiled. “I found someone for ya.” Mr. Barron poured more wine into his glass. “I’m not gonna lie. I went to the men’s room when you were gone. When I saw this man, when I saw his dick, well... it’s fucking huge.” He nodded and winked.

Paralysis locked my body; my boots glued to the cherrywood floor, I couldn’t move. I scanned the busy, crowded restaurant from the clinking plates to the wall-to-wall chatter, but it was silent. I couldn’t hear anything. I kept scanning the room, taking in everyone else’s interactions. The hotel was hosting a networking event. Young professionals, men and women my age, my social status, interacted with one another: greeting, shaking hands, sipping cocktails, laughing.

I looked around and saw attractive women on dates with men. Were they in love? What were they celebrating? Were any of them prostitutes? Did anyone know what was happening just a few feet away from them? Did anyone know that I was being propositioned? Did anyone know that I had risen out of my body and floated above, looking down upon myself, frowning upon myself, humiliated, crying for myself, wondering why I was being punished, wondering what I did wrong, what I did to deserve this?

The man with white hair stepped toward me. He spoke with a disgusting smirk on his face. “I understand that you’re about to be doing something to me.” Then he winked.

I felt like I was on an amusement park ride, the one where you sit in a cup and spin around and around. I couldn’t stop spinning. The dark wood room spun around me. My mouth dry, I uttered, “I’m sorry, sir. You... you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Dizzy, I turned and walked apace to the lobby of the hotel. As I walked, I felt like I had levitated and was being hurled forward through the air. I could barely feel my body.

I moved fast. Without stopping to slow down I grabbed my phone from a side pocket in my messenger bag and requested an Uber.

By the time I made it to the valet stand, Mr. Barron had caught up with me.

I backed up against the valet attendant. I wanted a witness to know how scared I was. I’m certain the attendant could feel my heart pounding. He placed a protective hand on my shoulder.

Mr. Barron had lost his temper. His dry, wrinkled face morphed from pale, covered in sunspots, to bright red. He stepped toward me, casting his heavy shadow over me, blocking the light that shined from the awning of the hotel. He raised a fist and shook it furiously. “You don’t embarrass me like this!” He looked right, then left. He and I were alone outside the hotel, with only a valet attendant and two bellhops. He took a deep, shaky breath, and in a gravelly voice, he whispered, “Yer gonna regret this.”

Not three minutes into a ten-minute Uber ride home, Mr. Barron’s text messages started coming in. It wasn’t until 4:00 AM that they finally ended.

Cock is really good

Cumm is really good

Be my artist or be my whore

I’m not a whore

Don’t ever say that to me again

U know what I meant

U know I love u

I'm a control freak

My way or find someone else

At this point I know what I

want in my life

Come quick

Good guy here

Come now

Hello

Bye

I'm almost home

In uber

Come back

If u want cumm

Do u want cumm

Tell me now

I will pay

Tell him to bring you back - I will pay

Hello

Right now

Mona

K

Really Mona

I'm out with u

But good luck

Ur artwork is always appreciated

U need to return

Ought now

Right

I will pay

I am no longer interested but hae a great life

Sorry about your luck just very bring

Boring

Pretty sure u r done

Very sure

Everything can't b your way

That's what I wanted

I'm our

Talk next week

Sad

You're making me out to be a prostitute

Ok then never talk to me again

Told u that when it started

You offered to pay me

No I didn't offer to pay - here comes female drama

I'm done

U b done too

You texted me "I will pay"

Can u suck my cock

I'm out

I have had boring my entire life

Good bye

I have to work

No come back

NOW

YOUR TITS

R FABULOUS

I WILL PAY FOR IT ONA

DO WHAT YOU WANT

U DONT SUCK

I'm out

It's ok

1000% sure u will regret this

We are 100% done - no need to ever call again

My fucking bitch

U know exctly what I needed

Good nite

Asleep

U suck

But u don't

Work it out

I'm out

Fuck u

These words make me want to take my own life

Good for u

Don't ever discuss with me again

I'm totally out

Forever

Pls don't email me again

I am so totally full

Come and suck my cock

Now

Here is the think - look at u then me - who wins? Not u

No idea

U come and take it

At 4:03 AM, I poured the last quarter of wine from the bottle into my glass and drank furiously until my mind buzzed from ear to ear. I drank until all I could hear was white noise. Finally numb, blanketed by darkness.



I awoke to a low growl, followed by a whoosh of warm air from the heater in my drafty uptown apartment. Pulling my duvet over my shoulders, I squinted and rubbed my eyes. Turning to the side, as

my eyes fell into focus, they landed on an empty bottle of Sauvignon Blanc next to my Smith and Wesson revolver, and a stream of haunting events began to resurface.

Burying my face in my pillow, I screamed, tears welling up as I clenched my fists and started punching the soft fabric.

I pounded the pillow until my heart raced, then threw it across the room and sat on my bed, wailing in devastation. I cried to dizzying heights until I collapsed, exhausted and depleted.

There are times in our lives when we're forced to confront painful situations, work through them, and move on. Then, there are times when we're forced to face situations that alter the entire trajectory of everything we thought we were and everything we thought we wanted.

My experience with Mr. Barron was undeniably the latter.

