

THE PROGRAM: WILLIAM

KEVIN PROVANCE

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"Let's do it again," Jasmine said.

Blowin' through the Jasmine in mind, Lauren thought aimlessly.

"I can't," she replied, still out of breath from their last romp. How women who found each other attractive and enjoyed each other's company in the bedroom could keep this up all night was beyond her. She glanced at the standard wall clock across the room. 6:04 a.m. Had they really been at this for almost three hours now? The multiple orgasms she'd not yet learned to master brought her to her figurative - and literal - knees. She stared back at Jasmine.

"Why the hell not?" Jasmine asked playfully, her sparkling green eye twinkling at Lauren's smile. "You started this!"

Lauren giggled. "You have to understand something, love; three hours of non-stop orgasms...I've never had anything like this happen to me before."

"Yeah, I know," Jasmine said, fanning her hand toward her flushed face. "Me either. There's something about you, Lauren. I like it."

Lauren leaned back on her pillow and admired the perfect physical form that was her body. Big, perky breasts, tiny waist, and legs any red-blooded man would want to sink his teeth into.

"Besides," Lauren added. "I think I should really get out of here before my brother gets back. I don't think he would take kindly to finding his sister in bed with his girlfriend."

Jasmine laughed. "I'm not his girlfriend, I assure you," she insisted. "But I agree. Will finding us together might not go over so well. I'll go."

Lauren and Jasmine exchanged compliments about their mutual performance as Jasmine dressed. Lauren merely slipped into a pair of what appeared to be her brother's boxers and t-shirt. When Jasmine finished dressing and walked down the hall to the apartment door, she noticed some photographs of women gracing the hallway walls. "Who are these people?"

"Um, I'm not sure," Lauren replied, casting her eyes away from Jasmine.

"More of your brother's 'conquests'?" Jasmine asked, flexing the two fingers on each hand as quotation marks. After a pause, Jasmine shook her head. "Figures."

Then, for the first time, Lauren felt terrible.

Or was it guilt?

"Hey, listen, Jasmine; Will's not all that bad a guy," Lauren said in defense, however pitiful.

"Where is he, then?" Jasmine asked, gesturing to the wall of photos. "What's all this?"

Lauren had no immediate response to this. She also found it much harder to lie, much less come up with a good one. "Yeah, I don't know where he is. Maybe a friend needed a ride home?"

Jasmine scoffed. "It's okay, Lauren. I knew what I was getting myself into." Another pang of lousy flooded Lauren's chest. "Listen, I'm gonna go now. It was a real pleasure to meet you, Lauren. If you see your brother, ask him to call me."

"Okay, love. I will," she said. Jasmine tossed her a doubtful look as she reached for the doorknob. "Really, he will. I promise."

I promise.

Two words William Ramsey rarely used in the same sentence.

Twelve hours earlier

Will Ramsey didn't have a very high opinion of women.

They were disposable playthings, not the valued assets his mother constantly tried to drill into his psyche since he was fifteen. That was when William figured out women brought great pleasure and consequently mind-numbing headaches afterward. He'd kept pictures of his greatest conquests on the hallway wall leading to his apartment door from his one-room apartment on East Main Street in Westminster, Maryland.

The same hallway that had seen so many of those conquests take the legendary Walk of Shame.

William attempted to explain this concept to Lawrence, whom he'd met several hours earlier at The Down Under Bar and Grill inside Johannson's Dining House, farther down Main Street. "The Down Under," as the locals called it. One of the finer establishments in downtown Westminster.

Lawrence approached William after seeing him leave The Down Under with a beautiful woman, only to return alone some hours later. William was unaware Lawrence had been watching him for some days during his stints at The Down Under. It wasn't until Lawrence perceived a multi-conquest night on William's part that he finally intervened.

And make no mistake about it, this was an intervention.

William Ramsey was twenty-five and had been blessed with one of those perfectly shaped faces that women gawked over. His thick, dark hair and crystal blue eyes could capture souls without even looking in their general direction. A deep and commanding bass voice would hold attention, so those who heard it would want to hear more, even if they weren't paying attention to what he said.

Simply put, he was physically the guy that most men wanted to be. It meant an endless well of women from which to choose. And we're talking gorgeous women ranging on the intelligence scale from dizzy-blonde to board-room-stern brunette. Admittedly, the intelligence quotient didn't matter to William. He'd classify them as either "dumb as a rock" or "a snobby know-it-all cunt."

Once he reached the promised land between their legs, they'd all take a similar Walk of Shame afterward. That is, freshly fucked and barely dressed. Very few would ever receive that "Sure, I'll call you sometime" assurance William made, usually pre-coitus. Sometimes post.

When Lawrence saw William return to The Down Under for the second time in one evening, he knew it was time to get involved, if for no other reason than to save another unsuspecting woman from undeserved humiliation. Lawrence broke the ice by congratulating him for leaving and returning in one night, minus the catch of the day. Playing to William's ego would be an easy in.

Unlike William, who was easy to approach, Lawrence's other assignments posed more challenges in terms of accessibility. He knew this assignment would be a piece of cake, especially when he asked William for his secret.

William was quick to brag and offer opinions, suggestions, techniques, and actual reviews in one or two cases. He must've spent at least an hour running his mouth, holding himself up proudly. For Lawrence, it distracted William from why he'd returned to The Down Under. More conquests.

Finally, it was time for Lawrence to make the kill.

"But Will," Lawrence argued, pushing his horn-rimmed glasses from the tip of his nose. "Have you ever considered what it must be like for those gals who are hurriedly and probably sloppily dressed while taking this Walk of Shame, as you put it? How do you think it feels to be treated like trash?"

"I don't treat them like trash, man."

"I would respectfully disagree," Lawrence said, leaning against the bar, his hand buried in his chestnut brown hair. "You clearly make some effort to seduce these women, and for what? Just to have sex with them?"

William seemed dumbfounded. "Uh, yeah?"

"So you fill their heads with pretty words and promises of more than just a one-nighter while using their bodies for pleasure? And then you just...kick them out?"

"So?"

"Isn't that what you'd do with trash?" Lawrence asked.

William lifted a shot glass of Grey Goose and tossed it back, wiping the corners of his mouth with his thumb and forefinger. "I don't make any promises."

"Aww, c'mon man," Lawrence huffed with a friendly smile, looking at William across the top of his glasses. "Telling a lady that you'll call at some point and then not following through is comparable to breaking a promise."

William shot Lawrence a stern look. "I never actually used the word 'promise.'"

"Semantics," Lawrence said, dismissing William with a wave of his hand. "It's implied. If a woman gives you her body and you profess to contact her at some later but appropriate point, then she perceives this as a promise."

William turned to face Lawrence and stared back with an empty, unflattering look. "How could you possibly know something like that? Are you a woman parading around in a man suit?"

Lawrence chuckled and shook his head. "I'm not a woman. But you could say I have a rather unique perspective on the human psyche, including women."

"So...what? You're a shrink?" William asked, his tone laced with accusation.

Lawrence's gaze drifted off, his expression thoughtful and distant. "Well, in a sense, I guess you could say that. Let me ask you another question." William raised his eyebrows. "Does not using the words 'I promise' help you sleep better at night?"

William found the question insulting. "Actually, the sex helps me sleep better at night. Thank you for asking. If you're asking me if guilt keeps me awake, I'd have to say no." Lawrence's smile faded slightly, revealing a hint of disappointment. Perhaps William wouldn't be a piece of cake after all. Lawrence let this line of questioning go. Enraging William would serve no purpose, especially since Lawrence was here to help him.

"Okay, brother," Lawrence said, holding his hands up in retreat. "Forget I said anything."

"Done," William said and waved at the bartender. He signaled for two more shots of Grey Goose. "Have a shot with me, my good man." Lawrence knew he wasn't supposed

to be drinking 'on the job' but decided this one time would not hurt, especially if it meant keeping William's confidence. "How old are you, anyway?"

Lawrence paused, knowing he couldn't reveal his actual age. Not only would it violate protocol, but William would never believe it. "I'm twenty-eight. Why do you ask?"

William shrugged his shoulders. "Curious, I suppose. You look old enough to drink, I guess."

Lawrence laughed in his head. *Ah, if you only knew. There was a time in my life, my new friend, when there were no age limits for drinking. Would this give you an accurate clue to my age?*

"Quid pro quo, William," Lawrence began, glancing at the liquor-stained bar. "Let me ask you a question. A question that might entice you to think before replying."

William turned and handed a shot of clear liquid to his new friend. Lawrence accepted as William raised his shot glass. "To new friendships, great conversation, and, of course, women. May God bless me to do them all!" The two men clinked glasses and drank. Lawrence muttered something under his breath that William didn't hear completely.

"There is no God; you just don't know it yet."

William turned to attention. "Beg pardon?"

"Nothing," Lawrence said, grinning. "Just reminding myself about the power of Vodka," He wasn't supposed to lie about anything as far as his assignments – his clients – went. It was another protocol. All conversations must be truthful to complete the mission. The only exception would entail having to circumvent the truth in the work Lawrence and others like him do, which is to protect and defend the greater good of The Program. However, the slip Lawrence just made, if The Superiors caught it, would land him in some fairly hot water that would make hell itself seem like a spa. Lawrence recovered from it and moved on.

"So Larry, what is this mind-bending question for me?" William asked with apparent interest.

Lawrence sat back down on the barstool to face William. He most certainly did not like to be called 'Larry.' The stool whined in age, much like elderly people do when they have to pick up thrown newspapers that didn't quite make it to their door. And perhaps, like most of the elderly, this stool was about to die. "Okay, how would you feel if you were a woman, and it was you taking the Walk of Shame after giving your body to someone like you and being disappointed and possibly heartbroken when that 'implied promised' call never came?"

"Honestly, I don't care," William said flatly, staring at Lawrence with an expression that matched his voice. "Besides, that's a silly question. I'm not a woman; I'll never be a woman, and Jesus Christ in his sidecar, why would I ever want to be a woman?"

Lawrence continued. "So if you had a magic genie who could grant you a wish to be a woman for a day, you wouldn't take it."

William didn't reply right away. Clearly, he was thinking this one through. "Well, I don't know. For a day? Maybe. I'd love to see what the female orgasm is like. Multiple ones, ya know?" he asked, chuckling and elbowing Lawrence into his arm. Lawrence returned the chuckle.

"So, you'd say yes, then?" Lawrence asked. "To be a woman and walk in her shoes for one full day?"

“Sure, why the hell not,” William said, slamming the shot glass onto the bar. “But I’d have to be a full-blown hottie. I wouldn’t want to be a Plain Jane or a Fat Bertha.”

Lawrence nodded. “Yes, of course. Describe for me the gal you’d want to be.”

William’s eyes lit up. “Oh, that’s easy. The classic thirty-six - twenty-four - thirty-six frame, perky C-cup breasts with dime-sized nipples, long blonde hair, and a nice tight ass to complement my perfect frame. I’d say maybe five foot seven with the appropriate weight and body mass index—” William paused, “—but I’d want to keep my eye color.”

“That’s it?” Lawrence asked as if confirming an order.

Thank you. That’ll be one day of your life, please. Please drive through to the first window.

Brimming with sarcasm, William asked the last question. “So, when do I get to be this perfect woman?”

Smiling, Lawrence shrugged his shoulders. “I just wanted to see how far this would go.”

William sat dumbfounded on his barstool.

This Lawrence fellow was a strange little dude, indeed!

“Gotta run, William,” Lawrence said abruptly, leaving the bar. William watched him go, opening his mouth to ask what the hell this was all about. Sensing the incoming question, Lawrence turned around, cutting him off. “But rest assured, we *will* meet again. In fact, it’ll be sooner than you think.”

Lawrence winked and turned away. William watched Lawrence walk out the rear door of The Down Under in curious wonder and without asking what he wanted to ask.

William was on the prowl for his next conquest within minutes of Lawrence’s departure. Before he could approach a small group of professional-looking women three tables away, a striking brunette beauty made herself comfortable on the bar stool to his left. It was her eyes that caught his attention first. They were sparkling green, as if looking directly into an exploding sapphire stone. They mesmerized William. His reaction was the same women so often gave him when they first looked into his eyes. Despite being unprepared, he still managed to introduce himself.

“William Ramsey,” he said, extending his hand, his smooth bass voice washing over the noise of The Down Under.

William’s latest target sized him up with those screaming green eyes. A small, seductive smile crept across her face. “Jasmine Hall,” she replied, accepting his hand, expecting a quick shake. Instead, he surprised her with a soft kiss on her hand. William maintained his projection of gentle but firm confidence while quaking on the inside. Those two pools of green shards that Jasmine used to see the world were causing him to come unglued.

Jasmine, William mused to himself. Sweet days of summer, the Jasmine’s in bloom. Indeed.

Across the street from The Down Under, Lawrence observed William through the bar’s plate-glass window, arms folded and leaning against one of the many sidewalk trees deliberately planted to give Main Street its summer charm. Jasmine would fall for William’s usual tactics to get his way with her in the bedroom. Lawrence knew this. He also knew that when William awoke tomorrow morning, there’d be a few minor changes he might not expect. Forthcoming events in William’s life would offer him new perspectives. Perspectives he might not have considered before tonight.

The Program had begun.

It didn't take William an extraordinary amount of time to woo Jasmine back to his apartment with wine and sweet talk. It took even less time to get her into his bedroom. William would later ponder that her panties hit the floor before the door closed. Clearly, she wanted what he wanted, perhaps more. Jasmine had been more aggressive than William was accustomed to. Not that there was necessarily anything wrong with this.

They spent over two hours engaged with each other. A combination of stimulating foreplay, mind-blowing sex, and finally, slow sensual after play leading to a quick, albeit deep and peaceful sleep.

III

William sees the most beautiful woman he has ever had the pleasure of laying his eyes upon.

A tall, beautiful blonde with long flowing hair dressed in a black business suit, similar to the style beautiful women in real estate wear. It compliments her exquisite and busty figure. She bleeds class and confidence, standing at attention, unaware William is there. It is almost as if she is a living mannequin. William floats around her, observing every detail, from her crystal blue eyes to her long, smooth fingers.

"Quite the striking beauty, wouldn't you agree?" a voice says. William looks around to see Lawrence standing beside him. But not quite standing.

Floating?

The world around them changes from a dull gray to a misty white and back again at a smooth, hypnotic pace.

"Is this a dream?" William asks, not surprised that Lawrence is suddenly in his company.

"More or less," Lawrence replies, folding his arms. "With a little help."

William turns his attention back to the sedentary women before them. "I don't understand."

"Don't worry about it," Lawrence says reassuringly. "In a little while, it won't much matter."

"I still don't understand," William says with an exasperated sigh.

Lawrence gestures to the woman. "This was the woman you described to me earlier this evening, more or less, right?"

"Spot on, actually," William says.

Lawrence laughs. "Indeed! I've found that most men find this image of a woman pleasing. She's everything most young men want. Beautiful from top to bottom. But let's focus on what you don't see, shall we?"

"What do you mean?" William asks.

"What's on the inside," Lawrence replies.

William rolls his eyes, or at least perceives himself as doing so. "Gimme a break, dude. I thought I explained this to you last night. I'm not all that into how smart she is. Sure, sometimes an intelligent gal can offer some stimulating conversation that makes for great foreplay. But in the end, I'm not looking for anything long-term. So what exactly is the point in how smart she is...or isn't?"

“Because, my friend, for one day you will be her,” Lawrence says, motioning again to the seemingly lifeless woman. “You will live the life of an attractive woman. You will deal with the stigma of men judging you for what you look like on the outside, not for what you are on the inside. You’ll be approached and treated the way you’ve treated other women for the last decade, William. Not to put too fine a point on it, you’ll walk a mile in her shoes.”

William bursts out in laughter. “Are you shitting me? Now I know this is a dream. When I wake up, this will all be over. God! I hate these kinds of dreams!”

Lawrence claps a hand on William’s shoulder and smiles. “If it’s really a dream, Will, and you’re aware of it, you should be able to wake yourself up now. Like when you dream of falling and wake up right before you hit the ground?”

William scoffs. “I usually end up landing on my feet in those dreams, dude.”

“Well, whether or not you land on your feet this time remains to be seen,” Lawrence says. “Not to worry, I’ll check in on you in a little while to make sure you’re...adjusting properly.”

William shoots Lawrence a doubtful look. “Fuck you, dude. Dream or not, if I see you again, I’m gonna kick your geeky little ass.”

This time, Lawrence throws his head back in laughter. “Ah, if I had a dime... William. “Now, wake up.”

III

William opened his eyes.

It was still dark outside. The soft sound of Jasmine’s nocturnal breathing blanketed what would have otherwise been complete silence. William glanced over at her still figure, lying on her side facing away from him, her side moving slowly up and down with her breathing.

Still in a haze from the dream, William wiped his hand across his face.

Something was incredibly wrong. William’s hand moved to his face out of habit, expecting the usual roughness, but the face he felt was strangely soft and foreign.

But it was more than that.

William didn’t feel the same. It wasn’t something he could describe. It was as if his entire thought process was being run through a different filter. Feeling slightly more awake and somewhat unnerved, he sat up, careful not to wake Jasmine.

He first noticed the difference in weight he usually carried between his legs. It was gone. Now fully awake, he reached down to rub his crotch, expecting the usual frank and beans, and got less than he expected. He inadvertently stuck the first two fingers of his right hand inside himself. It was a sensation he didn’t at all expect. Not so much the feeling of fingers inside his body, but the strange sensation of pleasure from rubbing his hand across the top.

“Holy shit,” he said softly, expecting the unusually low tone of voice that came with waking. Instead, he heard the soft, raspy voice of a woman. The hand that had just been on his crotch came up to cover his mouth.

Complete panic set in.

William jumped out of the bed, darted across the apartment for the bathroom, and slammed the door shut behind him. Jasmine stirred but didn't awaken. He flipped the vanity light above the sink on, coming face to face with a complete stranger in the mirror. William did not see his usual bedhead self, but rather the face of a woman with tousled hair. The same woman he'd just dreamt about. William stepped back to view the slim and naked figure he now carried. With mouth open, he watched himself in the mirror reach up and gingerly touch the left breast. He rubbed it softly at first, then cupped it. Finally, he stroked the nipple, which was an altogether distinct sensation.

It felt awesome!

William repeated the same procedure with the other breast, finding the sensation equally impressive. This time, looking down, he lowered his hand to the crotch, giving it the same gentle rub he had given so many other women. A tingling sensation shot through his lower abdomen. Masturbating as a woman was much more pleasurable! He continued the rubbing, slowly increasing the speed and pressure until the pulsing sensations between his legs began.

William stopped suddenly, realizing the moisture between his legs.

Oh God, I'm horny, he thought. Was I going to come?

With little thought for the shock of waking to find himself of the female persuasion, he stroked his clitoris until the pulsating became more pronounced. Suddenly, and without warning, those mild pulses became an explosion that sent waves of pleasure from his abdomen to the farthest reaches of his body.

Without realizing he was doing it, the moaning that accompanied William's first female orgasm awoke Jasmine. She called out to William in a soft, questioning voice. He stopped what he was doing, turning his...

(her?)

...head towards the door.

Fuck! How am I going to deal with this?

William opened the bathroom door, flooding the small apartment with four seventy-watt light bulbs. Jasmine was partially leaning up in bed, uncovered from the waist up, looking groggily at the female form standing in the bathroom door. Her eyes widened at the realization that another woman was in the room.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked, pulling the sheet up to cover her exposed breasts.

"I'm, uh, William's sister," he said in his unfamiliar feminine voice. "I, uh, needed a place to crash. My place is, um...my roommate has a guy over? I didn't know Will had company. I was just going to shower up and leave. I'm so sorry."

Jasmine appeared relieved and settled back down while looking around the room. "Where's Will?"

"I don't know," he said. "He wasn't here when I got here."

Jasmine rolled her eyes. "Typical," she murmured. "Why did I think this was going to be any different?"

Really? William thought.

He shrugged his new slim shoulders, standing there eyeing up Jasmine. He was undoubtedly still attracted to her, but somehow it was different. William imagined the pleasure Jasmine could bring him as a woman. Jasmine gazed back, realizing that the look William's "sister" was giving her was one of desire. Hadn't Jasmine told him earlier that

evening that she was bisexual? And wasn't that a huge turn-on, hoping maybe that a menage à trios were someplace in his near future?

Taking the initiative as he more often than not did, William looked down at his smooth, flat tummy and glanced back up towards Jasmine. "You like?"

Jasmine smiled at once. "I do."

William walked over to his side of the bed as Jasmine turned to meet him. He hastily picked up the bedsheet and threw it aside, revealing Jasmine's sexy naked body. Before lying down, he glanced at the apartment door and whispered, "Maybe we should keep this our little secret."

Rubbing her hands down her torso, Jasmine's smile went from unexpected joy to seduction. "I'm Jasmine."

William didn't know what to call himself now. Was Lawrence a girl's name?

No, but Lauren is.

This clearly was his doing. And as badly as he wanted to understand what had happened to him, the thought of sleeping with Jasmine a second time, now as a woman, was too powerful to ignore.

"Lauren," William said, falling onto the bed. The two fell into each other, not even noticing the bathroom light exposing their nudity.

IV

As a male, William often wondered what it must've been like to be with a woman sexually as another woman.

In the past, he watched other women kiss passionately; there'd been a certain sweet sensuality about it. Of course, as a man, he'd never know. Two men kissing didn't hold the same allure. And frankly, he found the concept disgusting. But to be with another woman, as a woman? It was the apotheosis of pleasure and intimacy, all mixed into one big rush.

Oh, how William wished he'd been born a woman, even after spending almost ten years using and degrading them.

He was his ideal woman and suspected Lawrence's "Program" did this intentionally. Lawrence saw to that, the goofy little bastard. This was all part of his grand plan to teach William some cosmic lesson, although he was reasonably sure the unexpected tryst with Jasmine was not part of the plan.

V

When Jasmine left, William spent the next hour contemplating his situation.

The thrill of experiencing various acts of self-pleasure as a woman faded as reality set in. The new and unknown emotions he was experiencing were confusing at best.

First, he concluded that his job as a real estate agent wouldn't be a problem (or rather, in his current form, it might have actually served as an advantage). It was early Saturday morning, and William never worked weekends unless the situation called for it. After all, Lawrence said this experiment would only last one day. Second, there was the problem

of what he would wear during his time as a member of the opposite sex. Boxer shorts and t-shirts wouldn't fly outside of the apartment. Last, what the hell was he expected to do now? Should he spend the next twenty-four hours holed up in the apartment and wait it out? Or should he sally forth into the small town of Westminster and see what exactly would happen? The prospect was intriguing. Most certainly, people would treat him differently. But also, there might be some perks to being out and about as a woman.

The answers to most of his questions came as a knock at the door.

"Lawrence," William said duly when he opened the door. Lawrence smiled back, holding a suitcase in his right hand. "I should've known."

"William, you look damned good," Lawrence said. "If I didn't know you were really a man in there, well, I'd—"

"Save it, douchebag!" William spat. "Change me back."

"Sorry, brother. No can do," Lawrence said flatly. "The Program has started. It has to run its course now."

"What the holy blue fuck are you talking about?"

Lawrence's jaw dropped in sarcastic shock. "Such language for a lady!"

"Don't make me beat your ass black and blue out in this hallway," William hissed. "An autopsy report claiming that a woman pounded your silly ass into the Earth's mantle probably wouldn't bode well for whatever reputation you have with the ladies."

Lawrence laughed so hard he had to clutch his stomach with his free hand. "I like you, William," he finally managed. "I really do. Now, how about I come in, and we can get started?"

Realizing that he had little choice or say in the matter, William moved to the side, allowing Lawrence to pass, and slammed the door shut. "Okay, what the hell is this all about?"

Lawrence tossed the suitcase onto the unkempt bed. He stopped to sniff the air and turned to look at William. "Smells like sex in here."

William planted his hands on his now curvy hips and shot Lawrence a smirk. "Ya think? I'm surprised you recognize the scent."

"These are for you," Lawrence said, ignoring the retort, gesturing towards the suitcase. "One nice set of clothes for the day and one elegant dress for the evening. There are also some accouterments such as makeup, earrings, et cetera."

William walked back into the apartment through the hallway and sat at the desk he typically used for work. "Tell me how the hell I went from being a man to a woman. Really, I'd like to know."

Lawrence sighed. "The truth is, Will, I honestly don't know. There are many aspects of what I do that I don't fully understand. Here's what I *can* tell you: I work for The Program—"

VI

The Program, it turned out, was nothing more than a handful of men and women who acted as supernatural interventionists.

They accepted assignments from an unseen person or persons, or maybe even God himself. No one knew for sure. Lawrence, who admitted to once being at the receiving

end of The Program, was chosen to help 'pay it forward' based on the result of his intervention. What that was all about, Lawrence wouldn't say. Protocol forbade it.

Lawrence explained that sometimes people, for different reasons, needed a little guidance to see everyday situations from a different or new perspective. The Program provided this.

"Think of it kind of like a prayer from someone concerned for you," Lawrence explained. "Someone who thinks you need a little help to be a better person."

The Program provided this opportunity.

VII

William wanted to experiment with several things.

He tried on both sets of clothes Lawrence provided. The first comprised brand-name blue jeans, a white mid-cut summer shirt showing the hint of midriff, a standard pair of white bra and panties, and white tennis shoes.

William tried the panties and immediately didn't like them, opting instead for his trusty boxers, however large they were. His reaction to the bra was far more pronounced. So many times, William wondered why women wore them. The only time he'd given them a second thought was through the art of unclasping them with a single hand to impress his skill. Now, on the other side of the gender equation, he found it an insufferable piece of clothing, especially with his massive breasts. There was nothing natural or comfortable about a restrictive oversized strap with cups squishing his breasts into place. He wasn't having it. No bra, no sir!

After he'd finished dressing, William spent nearly a half hour admiring his feminine appearance in the mirror, always looking at his ample breasts and smooth crotch. More than once, William gave in to the urge to touch, fondle, and orgasm.

The other outfit was a classy black evening dress that was flattering to his feminine figure. Trying on and wearing the dress had been a completely unique experience. One piece of skin-tight garment that stretched below the thighs felt weird to him.

Back in his boxers and t-shirt combination, the experimentation with the makeup was an entirely different matter. After six failed tries, William opted for the "less is more" approach. It had taken him all morning and into the afternoon to finally semi-master the concept of "priming" oneself. If anything, he'd gained an appreciation for how difficult it was for women to "put on their face" - as he had heard it called - every morning. Styling his long, blonde hair wasn't much of a challenge. There was little difference between how he blew dry and styled his hair as a male. Had this been the eighties, William knew he'd have failed miserably. The concept of having to "poof" hair such as this would've taken him hours and probably still would've come out completely wrong.

It was close to three in the afternoon when William finally completed his work of being presentable to the public. Completely and tastefully made up, wearing the black evening dress, it was time to catch happy hour at The Down Under. Hell, Lawrence also included a small black purse with the outfit. There was, of course, no pocket in which to stick his wallet. William took out his driver's license and enough cash to get through the evening to put into the purse. The new sinking feeling in his gut originated from the fact that his

driver's license wouldn't match who he was now. This could present a bit of a problem should carding be required.

William's jaw dropped upon inspection of the actual document. It wasn't the picture of the ever-handsome William, but the stunning image of Lauren, complete with the name and birth date of Lauren Ramsey. Same age, different credentials.

Lawrence missed nothing. Obviously, The Program had its shit together.

Now, this so-called experiment would truly begin. William Ramsey was going to parade into his favorite bar as Lauren Ramsey.

Feeling nervous, William stood before the hallway that led to the apartment door. Thousands of butterflies flapped their wings in his lower abdomen. What was he scared of? What was it that was making him nervous? The fear of being caught as a woman by people he knew? No, he neither looked nor sounded like himself. Yet he didn't move.

The phone rang, causing William to yelp, pulling him back into the real world, such as it was. He picked it up.

"Hello?" the breathy voice of Lauren answered.

"William?" Lawrence asked. "Why are you still there? Have you been there all day?"

"As a matter of fact, geek boy, I have," William said. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to put makeup on? Let me tell you about it! It's a major fucking pain in the ass. It took me all morning and most of the afternoon to make myself into a respectable woman!"

"Indeed, it is a lot of work, William," Lawrence agreed. "But you're a resourceful guy; I figured maybe Jasmine would've helped with that."

"Don't be coy," William spat. "How do you know about Jasmine, anyway? Is she part of your Program, too?"

"No, she isn't. And even if she was, I couldn't tell you. But rest assured, she's completely unaware of what's happening with you. As for what I know? Let's just say that those in the upper echelons of The Program give me updates on what you've been doing."

"So those voyeurs were watching what happened here earlier this morning?" William asked. "Nice. Real nice."

Lawrence laughed. "No, not at all. They respect your privacy. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know what happened with Jasmine after you changed. She wanted you. So, if you decide to meet a nice young man tonight and nature takes its course, nobody will watch the minutia of what follows. Okay?"

William sighed. "I don't think I can bring myself to be attracted to a man, much less sleep with one, as technically, I am one."

"You'd be surprised," Lawrence said. "Go with the experience and see where it takes you. Who knows, maybe I'll stop by later and see how you're doing."

William paused. "You're a piece of work, Larry."

Before Lawrence could object to the misuse of his name, William hung up the phone.

VIII

Walking into the Down Under as a woman - the bar William had frequented so many times over as a man - was a completely new experience in and of itself. Many coveting eyes hit him like a ton of bricks. The sensation was a bit unsettling. The bartender, who

usually took his time attending to William's usual drink order, made no haste this time when Lauren approached the bar.

One vodka martini and five minutes later, William dealt with Lauren's first come-on. A badly dressed middle-aged man who wasn't going to any great lengths to disguise the fact that he was married, judging by the faded band on his left ring finger, sat beside her. Plastered on his face was a typical shit-eating used car salesman's smile.

"What'll be?" the suitor asked. Judging by the radiating smell of alcohol, the dude had already consumed a few too many.

"I'm with someone, thanks," Lauren said dryly, not glancing his way.

The suitor casually glanced around the bar, finally resting his eyes on Lauren. "I don't see anyone."

"You will shortly."

"So until then, what can I get you?"

Clearly, the dude just wouldn't let it go.

"Nothing," Lauren repeated. "Please leave me alone."

The suitor's car salesman-like smile faltered. He stiffened in his seat. "You don't have to be such a cunt, you know."

This time, Lauren turned to look him straight in the eye. "Excuse me? I tried to be polite, jerk off! What part of 'no thanks' didn't you understand?"

"Gimme a break, honey," the suitor said bitterly. "You're not waiting for anyone, all dressed up like a whore with those braless tits poking through your dress. Just thought I'd save you some time, is all."

Lauren gasped. "Fuck off!"

The suitor stood up to walk away. "No problem, bitch," he mumbled, disappearing into the growing crowd.

Lauren rolled her eyes. Simply existing as an attractive woman in any social situation would be a full-time job.

The following hour passed with little drama. There was some casual conversation and eye contact, but nothing as obnoxious as the first loser who attempted to ingratiate himself into Lauren's life.

What happened next, Lauren did not expect. She found herself attracted to a young man sitting alone at the other end of the bar. It wasn't so much a physical attraction as it was some indescribable interest. To William, it made no sense. This was not a feeling he could identify as a male or even in his temporary capacity as a female.

Curiosity got the better of him when he approached this young man as Lauren, using the same ice-breaking techniques as William.

His name was Stephan (pronounced Steph-ahn), and was a few years younger than Lauren. The more Stephan talked, the more William forgot he was a man inside a woman's body. He was being seduced and didn't even realize it.

At least until it was too late.

Lawrence had been right all along. Hormones or environment, or whatever you want to call it, had overtaken William's thinking as a man. He fell into the very trap he'd laid out many times before.

The experience of making love as a woman in Stephan's apartment was the most perfect thing William could recall. The sensuality of having another person on top of her...
(him?)

...inside of her, holding her, made all the sessions of self-pleasuring earlier that day pale by comparison. The euphoria of afterglow was a high never before – and perhaps never again – achieved.

And then it was over.

The remarkable man Stephan had been all night disappeared, leaving an indifferent prick who wanted Lauren to discreetly make herself scarce. To say Lauren...

(William?)

...was heartbroken, would've been putting it mildly. He felt naked and exposed, knowing he was about to take the Walk of Shame.

Lawrence proved his point. He'd been instrumental in stripping William down to his most vulnerable point, giving him a taste of his own medicine.

Lauren said nothing as she dressed. Stephan fell asleep. Lauren left without as much as a backward glance. She should've seen this coming. It was so predictable.

Stephan's apartment was only five blocks from The Down Under. Lauren returned to her car. If Lawrence had known this was coming, the world would be minus one geek when William was through with him, Program or no Program.

Lauren fumbled in her purse for the car keys when someone who'd been waiting made themselves known.

"Hey, cunt!"

The suitor with the greasy used car salesman smile approached drunker than before.

Lauren looked up from her puzzle of a purse, meeting a somewhat violent push, knocking her against his car and the air full out of her. The masculinity of his usual self came back in full force.

"You motherfucker!" Lauren growled in her deep, raspy voice. "I'm gonna knock your balls into your throat for that!"

The suitor whipped out a backhand and firmly planted it across Lauren's face. The taste of blood filled her mouth as the left side of her face pulsed with hot pain. Stunned by the blow's pain, the suitor grabbed Lauren by her hair and forced her into the alley behind The Down Under.

"Tell me to 'fuck off,' you little cock tease?" the suitor hissed. "Now we'll see who does the fucking and who gets fucked!"

It dawned on Lauren reasonably quickly that the suitor meant to sexually assault her. She attempted to pull herself free from the suitor's death grip on her hair by digging her fingernails into the suitor's clenched hands. He met Lauren's action with a massive push – or throw – into the brick wall behind him, sending her into a half-full trashcan off-center, where she hit the brick wall.

"Yeah, that's where you belong, bitch," the suitor jeered. "In the fucking trash!"

Lauren angrily spat blood at the suitor in defiance. The equal and opposite reaction was a retaliatory punch in the mouth. Lauren felt loose teeth rolling around her tongue. She spat them out, attempting to get back to her feet. Body of a woman or not, Lauren meant to seek retribution.

"This is your last chance to walk away, asshole," she spat. "Otherwise, I'll stomp your greasy ass into the next life!"

The suitor cackled a snide laugh that was almost inhuman. He advanced on Lauren with no heed of her warning. Lauren dodged to the right when her nemesis advanced, sending the suitor off balance into a group of trashcans.

“Look where you are now, fuck-face,” Lauren shouted. “You want some more of this?”

The suitor jumped to his feet, sending the three trashcans off in different directions. They crashed down some distance away.

“I want that pussy, bitch!” he demanded. “And I mean to have it!”

“Not in this life, fucker!” Lauren spat.

The suitor charged Lauren and pushed her into the far wall across the alley. It knocked the breath out of her. She fell to the ground, clutching her chest for breath. The suitor came up from behind her and began undoing his belt. “Yeah, this’ll do just fine,” he said, ripping off the lower half of Lauren’s dress. With a forceful yank from one hand, the suitor pulled those to Lauren’s knees, exposing her genitalia.

The Suitor’s Big Prize.

He picked Lauren up by her waist and tossed her against the trunk of her car, where he could have full and unfettered access.

Lauren, in her weakened state, did not know what to do. She struggled to catch her breath and was so weak from the beating she’d just taken; she had no fight.

The suitor unzipped his pants and reached for his erect penis.

Oh, my God, this is really going to happen! Lauren thought, remembering hearing in the past regarding the trauma of rape, the tearing, and the bleeding. This wouldn’t be about sex; it was about power.

The drunk suitor leaned across Lauren’s shaking body and whispered into her ear, “Your ass is mine now, bitch! Enjoy the show!”

Lauren bit her lip, waiting for a substantial force to slam into her tense, unwilling body. She laid her resigned forehead on the car trunk, waiting for this whole thing to end even before it started.

From behind was a scream from another man. The sound of a pipe making a dull yet forceful thud into the head of the suitor and the consequential slump of his limp body falling to the ground filled the air.

“It’s okay,” Lawrence said. “I have you,” He picked Lauren up from the car.

She tried to talk, but Lawrence shushed her. “Don’t worry, William. We’ll talk later. Let’s just get you back to your apartment.”

Lauren nodded and let her head rest back. She heard voices as Lawrence walked, but couldn’t comprehend them, not knowing if they were real or in her head. The blackness that was unconsciousness surrounded Lauren’s field of vision. After a few seconds, she succumbed to the black, completely unconscious, swimming away in its eternal dark pool.

IX

William sees Lauren - bloodied and beaten - floating in the white-gray mist that seems to swirl eternally around them. She is as expressionless and catatonic as she was when he first saw her not twenty-four hours ago in his first dream. Her beautiful black evening dress is ripped apart, her hair is a mop-like mess, and she looks as if O.J. Simpson mistook her for Nicole Brown. Did the suitor really do this to her? Was she really this badly beaten up? William turns around and sees himself floating across from this tattered mess of a woman, looking just as blank and empty. William’s first thoughts are anger. He will

first find this 'suitor' and kick his ass from one side of Carroll County to the other. Then he will find Stephan and maybe slap him around a little bit. Then perhaps start a rumor at The Down Under that Stephan has a tiny dick, thus damaging his reputation.

"That wasn't supposed to happen," Lawrence says.

William stands up and looks about for the kid with the geeky glasses. "What wasn't? William asks. "My getting beaten up by a drunk piece of shit, or Stephan tossing me aside like trash?"

"Interesting that you put it in those terms," Lawrence says with a chuckle. "Seems the last time we held palaver on the subject, your position was somewhat different, to say the least."

Lawrence finally shows himself from behind the floating apparition of William. "The abuse and attempted rape weren't part of The Program. I broke protocol to help you and stop it."

William does not speak at first. Finally, "Thank you, Lawrence." he says. "If there's any way I can repay that, I'd be glad to do so."

Lawrence smiles genuinely. "Thank you, Will. That means a lot. But it won't be necessary. We have contingencies for things of this nature."

"Huh?"

"Forget it, Will," Lawrence finally says. "I couldn't explain, anyway."

"Protocol?"

"Protocol." Lawrence pauses. "Before I send you back, you should know a few things. First, you won't recall what happened, as you would typically remember something. It will be like an intense dream that'll eventually fade. However, assuming you've gained anything from the experience, you'll take that with you.

"Second, chances are you won't see me again. It's time for me to move on to my next assignment, so here in your dream is where we'll part ways. The only exception would be...well...The Program only recruits from within. No outsiders. Ever. If we meet again, I hope it'd be an opportunity you'd not pass up. To pay it forward, if you will."

X

William opened his eyes.

It was still dark outside. The soft sound of Jasmine's nocturnal breathing blanketed what would've otherwise been complete silence. William glanced over at her still figure. Lying on her side, she faced away from him, her body rising and falling with each slow breath.

Still in a haze from the dream, William wiped his hand across his face.

This time, he wasn't shocked into reality by the sensation of having an unfamiliar face. Activity outside the apartment door, with soft footsteps walking about, caught his attention. Something slid underneath William's door. Then, the person outside promptly left.

William carefully slipped out of bed and over to the business card on the floor before the door. He opened the door and peered out into the hall. It was empty. William closed the door, picked up the card, and read the handwritten note, the only writing to appear on either side of the card.

Second chances rarely happen by chance.

Lawrence

William quickly slipped the card into a table drawer in the hallway, stopping to look at all the pictures that hung there. Glancing at Jasmine with appreciable guilt, William quietly removed them and dropped them into the table drawer. The idea of Jasmine seeing them didn't sit well.

William slid quietly back into bed, trying to determine if what he'd just experienced was real or simply the most intense dream of his life.

Or both?

Jasmine stirred as William settled in.

"Do you want me to go, baby?" Jasmine asked in a soft, barely audible voice.

"No," William whispered, cuddling up behind her. She sighed happily as he did so. "I'd like you to stay."

"Really?" she asked with soft surprise.

"Yes," William said, kissing the back of her neck. "Go back to sleep, love. Maybe we can get some breakfast later."

"I don't want to be any trouble," Jasmine whispered. The sound of her voice gave William pleasant goosebumps.

"You're no trouble at all, Jasmine. I promise."

I promise.

Jasmine closed her eyes and smiled.

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