



Falling Off Script (The Matchmaker Files #2)

Author: *Bonnie Charming*

Category: Romance

Description: Two rival dating coaches. One viral feud. Zero chance of keeping it professional.

When a feminist podcaster publicly roasts a toxic masculinity guru, she doesn't expect him to flirt back—or to spark online theories and a shipping frenzy.

Now she's navigating a viral mess of internet drama, clashing ideologies, and one very inconvenient crush.

Total Pages (Source): 45

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Here he is. The alphahole.

Leaning back in his faux-leather podcast throne, radiating smugness, voice dipped in testosterone and whatever he's marinated his ego in. Adrian Zayne—dating coach, masculinity messiah, and walking cautionary tale.

"I don't chase women," he says, pausing for effect. "I attract them by being unapologetically myself."

Perfect hair, perfect smirk, sitting in front of a skyline like he personally built it. A Marvel reboot jaw, gym-poster arms, and a face that's never caught a bad angle—or a humble thought.

The video is titled Why Modern Women Can't Handle Real Men .

One million views in twenty-four hours. He is probably monetizing every second.

"In today's world," Adrian continues, voice slow and low, "men are shamed for being masculine. For being decisive. For walking away from drama."

He stares directly into the camera. "But here's the truth. Women don't want equality. They want superiority. And when a man doesn't pedestal them, they panic."

The audience of hoodie-wearing man-puppies erupts in digital applause. In the background, a gong sounds. Why is there a gong?

I pause the recording and lean back, arms folded, staring at the frozen frame of

Zayne. The algorithm loves him. Every soundbite sharpened for virality. Every opinion designed to be clipped, stitched, argued with. And the worst part? It works.

He has podcasts. He has books. He has retreats, for God's sake. Today's video is a sales funnel for his new bootcamp, Masculinity A to Z . Conveniently signed off with his initials, because of course it is.

His whole brand is built on reductive certainty. "Women do X, so men must do Y." Like relationships are algebra. What does he teach? Detach, dominate, disappear. And people eat it up.

I'm not new to this. I'm twenty-seven and have already coached more women than he's allegedly dated at thirty-two. Which—judging by his content—is saying something.

I've seen every flavor of red flag the modern dating world has to offer—ghosters, love-bombers, guys who say they're just really focused on their personal growth right now while subtly requesting nudes.

Adrian Zayne has built an empire out of it.

And I—I'm a woman with a mic, a message, and a major in gender studies.

He coaches men. I coach women. He teaches them to detach. I teach them to feel. He calls it power. I call it fear dressed up as confidence.

I say true things. But truth is slow. Truth is quiet. And truth, apparently, doesn't go viral.

I close the clip. Then I hit record.

I've never done video before.

Not because I don't know how—I mean, I can plug in a ring light like the rest of them—but because I've made a very intentional choice to stay off camera.

My podcast is about ideas, not aesthetics.

No thirst traps. No outfit breakdowns. No clips of me holding a mic and staring into the void like I've just solved world problems with a smoky eye and soft focus.

But then... Adrian Zayne.

I've watched that damn video three times, each time with increasing disbelief and a vague urge to throw my laptop out the window.

It had everything: the low voice, the brooding stare, the perfectly styled hair that probably has its own management team.

He delivered one reductive cliché after another with the confidence of someone who'd never been interrupted in a meeting.

So, yeah. I was pissed.

And that's when I made the decision.

Not a teaser. Not a clip. Not a cute little reel with captions and lo-fi beats.

A full video.

Me. On camera. Breaking every rule I've made for myself.

My friend Jessie's already queueing up the cuts. She says it helps her feel productive between rejection emails.

"Hey queens," I say to the camera, mimicking his slow, deliberate tone. "Today we're going to talk about the fascinating species known as the Zeta male. Not to be confused with the Alpha, Beta, Sigma, or whatever Greek letter is trending this week."

I pull up a screenshot of Adrian's latest video thumbnail—him standing with arms crossed, surrounded by adoring women who are clearly paid models.

"What separates our Zeta specimen from the rest of the pack? Alphas chase. Sigmas retreat. Zetas sell retreats about NOT chasing. "

I pull out Zayne's latest book, *The A-Z Strategy: Attraction Isn't Random* , which I found in the self-delusion section of the bookstore. I flip through the pages dramatically.

"Chapter One: How to Turn Your Fear of Intimacy into a Business Model. Chapter Two: Advanced Smirking Techniques. Chapter Three: Why Everything is Women's Fault, Including Global Warming."

The snark is flowing now. If he can monetize toxic masculinity, I can certainly monetize calling it out. Maybe I need my own sound effect. A kazoo, perhaps? Nothing says "I see through your nonsense" like a well-timed kazoo.

"Or a sad trombone," Jessie says from the couch, perched sideways with my laptop balanced on her knees.

She's cutting the reel with the precision of a surgeon and the posture of someone who's just bombed a second-round interview.

“You want me to slow-zoom on his smirk or cut to the blinking montage?”

I look over her shoulder. “Can we do both? Smirk, then blink-blink-blink. Like his brain’s buffering.”

She taps the keys, already anticipating my sarcasm structure. “Love that. Also, I added a flash of red every time he says ‘frame.’ Like he’s triggering the algorithm.”

“You’re a genius.”

Jessie shrugs like it’s no big deal, but her cheeks get pink. “Hey, do you think—just floating the idea—do you think your podcast needs, like, a full-time editor?”

I pause. I really, really want to say yes. But I can’t. Instead, I give her the soft-landing version. “Jess, you know where I am. The podcast basically funds itself if I pretend my time is worth zero and my editing software doesn’t mysteriously renew at full price every December.”

“Oh.” She tries to cover the flash of disappointment with a sip of oat milk that is, let the record show, mine.

I know she’s been applying to jobs all week.

I also know she hasn’t gotten a callback since the one where they asked if she was comfortable “moderating masculine spaces.” Whatever that’s supposed to mean.

I watch her for a second. “I mean... I still have coaching clients. Usually someone’s ex-wife or their cousin who saw that interview where I said ‘stop dating men you wouldn’t hire.’ But that’s all old connections.”

Jessie gives a half-nod, eyes still on the mug.

“I thought the podcast could bring in more,” I add. “But so far it’s just brought me trolls.”

That earns a quiet, understanding snort.

“It’s not exactly a business yet,” I say gently. “Not the kind I can build payroll off of. Yet.”

She presses her lips together. “Right. Totally get it.”

I nudge her foot with mine. “You’ve already been doing more than half the work here. I just wish I could pay you in something other than hummus and bad feelings.”

“Honestly,” she says, setting the mug down, “I’ll take the hummus. For now.”

She doesn’t smile. Just lifts the corner of her mouth—like she’s trying to meet me halfway from wherever disappointment’s left her.

“You want to hit post? ”

She glances at the screen. The freeze-frame of Adrian’s smug little grin. The caption: When a Zeta calls himself an alpha.

Jessie clicks. “Uploaded.”

We watch the views tick up in silence.

Jessie tilts her head. “Do you think Adrian Zayne is his real name?”

I scoff. “No one that smug is born with a last name that cool. It’s definitely rebranded.”

“Yeah,” she says. “He probably used to be, like... Andrew Zuckerstein. You know. Equal parts tech bro and Frankenstein.”

I snort. “Then one day he bought a microphone and black t-shirts in bulk.”

That makes her smile, just a little.

Jessie hits refresh.

“Two hundred views,” she says. “And rising.”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

My name is Andrew Zilchman, and I am so fucking tired of being Adrian Zayne.

The voice. The charm. The polished charisma. I've worn it like a suit for ten years, and it still doesn't fit.

Adrian Zayne gets the followers. Adrian Zayne gets the girls — or at least teaches guys how to pretend they do. He sells confidence in bulk. Certainty by the byte. Charisma on subscription. And if you say it all with enough balls? People believe you.

But lately, I'm not just tired of being Adrian Zayne. I'm tired of Adrian Zayne, period. Of the smugness. The shortcuts. The certainty. And maybe—just maybe—so is everyone else. Maybe the algorithm's finally bored of six-packs and soundbites. Maybe people want something real.

Or maybe I'm just projecting.

My phone buzzes. I don't check it. I know the rhythm by now: first the followers, then the backlash, then the spin.

I close my laptop. The monologue can wait. I've already said everything a man like me is supposed to say. The cold plunge, the boundary speech, the little sermon about discipline over desire. I could do it in my sleep. Sometimes I think I have.

Buzz. Buzz.

It's a message from Tyler, my assistant.

TYLER :

You're trending under #Zetamale hashtag. Currently at 2.7 million views and climbing. Average watch time: 92%. Engagement's through the roof— stitches, duets, reaction takes.

ME:

What platforms?

TYLER :

You're being quoted on feminist TikTok and misquoted on Twitter. Instagram's recycling your old clips with clown emojis. We're entering meme territory. And yes, I checked. Momentum's organic, not bot-driven.

ME:

Where did it start?

TYLER :

There is this blogger, Emily Parrish. Hosts a podcast called Let Me Finish. Started four months ago, about 90k followers as of today. High engagement, mostly women 25–40. Liberal vibes.

ME:

send me a link

Tyler sends it instantly. No caption.

So, Emily Parrish. I hit play.

There she is.

Too hot for a feminist.

Barbie face, Barbie proportions—just with long dark hair instead of the regular blonde.

Tank top situation: strategic. Lighting: suspiciously flattering.

She looks like a skincare subscription ad that wants to cancel you.

Emily leans into the mic .

“What separates our Zeta specimen from the rest of the pack? Alphas chase. Sigmas retreat. Zetas sell retreats about not chasing.”

Oh, we’re doing this.

I keep watching.

“Alphas need the throne. Sigmas need the cave. Zetas need the camera.”

This isn’t just a rant. It’s performance. It’s crafted. Every punchline lands like it’s been A/B tested on her group chat. And I respect the hustle.

I pause the reel on her mid-eye-roll. Zoom in. She's annoyingly photogenic, even when she’s calling me emotionally unemployed.

Tyler pings again.

TYLER:

You've been invited to BuzzBattle. You and her. Live panel. Audience questions. No script. Broadcast in thirty countries. You in?

I stare at the message for a second.

BuzzBattle with the Zeta Slayer. Live, no script?

Challenge accepted, hottie.

ME:

Yep. I'm in. Let's give them a show.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

The studio lights are brighter than I expected. Not warm and flattering like podcast ring lights. Harsh. Surgical. Like I've accidentally stumbled into an operating theater, and my dignity's on the table.

I scan the crowd. Mostly men. Of course. Every other seat is occupied by a dude in a fitted blazer, Zayne disciple energy radiating from their pores. I spot one guy in a flat cap who looks like he microdoses and blames feminism for it.

And then Adrian Zayne strolls in, reeking of a four-figure cologne and main character syndrome.

Every woman glances. Every man clocks him. He doesn't just enter a room—he adjusts the gravity.

Adrian looks at me and smiles.

My stomach flips. Not a crush. Just my nervous system confusing performance aggression with a mating call. Again.

And then it hits me—he's doing it. The Look.

I've seen it in his videos. Heard the script.

“Look at a woman like she's already yours.”

And damn it, it works.

Just for a second.

I feel myself reacting—back straightening, pulse skipping—like my body forgot I hate him.

Then I snap out of it so fast I'm amazed I don't get whiplash. Nope. Not today. Not me.

"Emily," he says, taking the seat next to me with relaxed grace .

"Adrian," I reply. My inner critic is already pacing in heels, whispering, Don't let him get under your skin. It's oiled and slippery down there.

The host leans into the mic like he's unveiling a new iPhone.

"Up next, we've got two powerhouse voices in the modern dating space. First up—he's the bestselling author of *The Zayne Method* , host of a viral podcast, and the man behind the 'Iron Mind' movement—please welcome the one and only Adrian Zayne!"

Adrian gets a loud cheer. Of course he does. These guys have practically memorized his viral videos. They quote him on Reddit. Probably give each other high-fives for using his lines like they're cheat codes for real life.

"And representing the ladies tonight, she's the founder of Let Me Finish podcast, and a voice of reason for women navigating modern love—give it up for women's dating coach and speaker, Ms. Emily Parrish!

I blink. Did he just call me a dating coach?

I lean toward the mic. "Just to clarify—I don't coach women on dating. I help women

figure out what they actually want—then decide if the guy deserves to be part of that picture.”

“I see,” the host says, blinking. Adrian immediately jumps in:

“So... are you single, Ms. Parrish?”

I stare at him, caught between a laugh and a lawsuit.

This isn’t a date. It’s not a panel about my love life. But somehow, the question always circles back, like a drunk at karaoke who keeps requesting the same song .

I turn towards Adrian. “I am—unless this panel ends in a marriage proposal. Otherwise, I’d prefer we stick to the topic.”

A few laughs. One woman near the front claps, loudly. I want to buy her a drink.

Adrian tilts his head, smiling like I just asked him out.

“Well, in that case, I’ll do my best to stay charming. Wouldn’t want to ruin my odds.”

I blink slowly. “Don’t worry. I did the math before I came.”

More laughter. Adrian gives a little mock bow.

The host clears his throat, trying to steer us back to the “discussion” part of this discussion.

“Right. So, let’s dive in—Adrian, tell us what you think is going wrong in modern dating.”

Adrian opens with his Greatest Hits.

“Men are lied to constantly. We’re told to be soft, vulnerable, empathetic—until the woman you’re dating loses interest and sleeps with someone who texts her at 2 a.m.”

Applause. A guy in row four turns beet red.

Adrian Zayne is halfway through his manifesto and already looks like he’s auditioning to be the next Bachelor —if the Bachelor trauma-bonded via lightly coded misogyny. But a few women in the audience still gaze at him with swoony eyes. Honestly, betrayal on every front.

“To put it bluntly,” he says, flashing that godforsaken smirk, “eighty percent of women want twenty percent of men. It’s not about love—it’s about math.”

The crowd loves it. They eat it up like they’re watching a man explain the stock market to someone holding a PhD in economics. Which, coincidentally, isn’t far off from what’s happening .

I glance at the moderator. He gives me the nod—the your turn, sweetie nod. The one they give women right before sending them into war without body armor.

I adjust the mic and smile like I’m about to recite a bedtime story—with knives.

“What Adrian is describing isn’t a dating problem. It’s a branding problem. Men want credit for downloading empathy but never actually install the updates.”

There are some chuckles. Mostly women. Adrian raises an eyebrow like he’s letting me cook.

“We’re not rejecting you because you’re nice. We’re rejecting you because you’re

nice like a job interview—polished, practiced, and trying to lowball us into thirty percent below the market.”

That lands. A few gasps. Adrian paces once, slow and deliberate, like he’s letting the silence marinate. Then he pivots, both palms raised like he’s offering a trade deal with the gods of enlightened masculinity.

“So what’s the fix? Let women run everything until men evolve into golden retrievers with bank accounts?”

“If your only options are alpha predator or golden retriever, maybe sit out the next evolutionary cycle.”

Laughter ripples.

Adrian presses a hand to his chest in mock offense.

“You wound me, Emily. I thought we were building rapport.”

“You don’t build rapport,” I fire back. “You run the playbook, then blame us for noticing it’s scripted.”

Adrian leans in like we’re at a dinner party no one else was invited to .

“So what do women want?”

“We want a partner, not a project. Ideally one who doesn’t quote Reddit like it’s peer-reviewed science.”

He nods, mock-serious. “So . . . not me, then.”

“Wow. You're catching up.”

Adrian leans back, hands up. “I surrender. You’re dangerous.”

“Only to men who fear the phrase we need to talk. ”

I smile like I’m offering dessert and a trap.

Adrian smirks back. “Is that for boyfriends, or do your male colleagues make the list too?”

“If they’ve ever interrupted me to say the same thing I just said—yes.”

Twenty minutes later, the segment ends. The lights dim.

We stand. I feel my knees shake—not from nerves, but from the sheer effort of staying balanced in a room where gravity favors him.

He turns to me. “You were good. Really. Just... you know. A little preachy.”

I smile. “And you were charming. Just... you know. Completely full of shit.”

He gives me a wink. “Admit it. You had fun.”

“Let’s call it a character-building experience.”

He grins. “Drinks after?”

I shake my head, biting back a smile. “I’d rather go out with the guy in row four. At least he blushed—like someone who still has a conscience.”

Adrian shrugs. “He’s probably in your DMs already. Starts with ‘You’re not like other girls’ and ends with a podcast link.”

I laugh despite myself .

He holds out his hand. “No hard feelings?”

I tuck mine behind my back. “Oh, all the hard feelings. But I’ll save them for my girlies group chat.”

He walks off looking entirely too pleased with himself.

I resist the urge to trip him. Barely.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

I should've turned off notifications. Rookie move.

But I'm three hours post-panel, sprawled on the hotel bed still half-buttoned, half-buzzed, phone in hand like it's a crystal ball. And baby, the algorithm is drunk and in love.

First headline I see:

Battle of the Sexperts: Adrian Zayne vs The Zeta Slayer

— BuzzBattle Official

Cute.

Then Reddit gets involved, because of course it does. r/TheRedPill is hosting a livestream replay watch party titled "Is She Into Him or Just Dominating the Frame?"

A guy named CryptoCoachAlpha93 has a spreadsheet. A literal spreadsheet.

He's timestamped every micro gesture from the panel—eye contact, lip curls, eyebrow arches—with the enthusiasm of a forensic linguist decoding the Zodiac letters.

"At 13:07, Adrian crosses his right ankle over his left = Alpha comfort signal."

"13:09, Emily touches her hair = classic preening. High likelihood of subconscious attraction."

“13:11, Adrian mirrors her lean-in = escalation accepted.”

Another comment pops up:

“Emily is either seething with hate or dangerously into him. There is no third option.”

Then someone called BetaBackBreaker chimes in:

“She’s neg-hitting him like a PUA in disguise. It’s textbook reverse game. ”

Reverse game. That's a new one.

A video clip titled When Your Nemesis Roasts You But You’re Kinda Into It has gone viral on TikTok.

Soundtrack: Taylor Swift’s “...Ready for It?”

Visuals: me smirking while Emily Parrish tears into my soul like she’s slicing birthday cake and I’m the frosting.

There are thirst edits.

Thirst. Edits.

One zooms dramatically into her biting her lip after I say “So... not me, then?”
Another slows down my grin at 0.5x speed like I’m auditioning to be the cover model for Toxic & Tempting Monthly .

An Instagram influencer named @FeministButThirsty posts a photo of me and Emily with a comment:

“I hate him. I really, really hate him. Also, would 100% let him ruin my life.”

Pinned. 87k likes.

In the comments, someone replies:

“She looked like she wanted to punch him. Or kiss him. Possibly both.”

And then, the crown jewel of this clown parade:

A betting pool.

Run entirely through a Discord server called “Ship or Shred.”

Yes. People are betting real money on whether Emily and I will have sex before the year ends. Odds are currently 3:1 in favor of a hate-fueled hookup.

Some guy named “FrameLord77” is taking this so seriously he’s doing YouTube breakdowns with freeze-frames and laser pointers .

“Now, here at minute 17, Emily unconsciously mirrors Adrian’s posture. That’s a limbic resonance signal. They’re neurologically syncing.”

I laugh so hard I drop the phone on my face.

Jesus. This is insane.

But it’s also... perfect.

I sit up in bed, still grinning like a man who just realized his worst enemy is now his best marketing funnel.

Because here's the thing: you can't buy this kind of buzz. This is the stuff PR people pray for and then invoice you twenty grand to pretend they created.

This isn't just drama.

It's a narrative.

It's enemies-to-lovers fanfic with a real-time comment section and split-screen sexual tension. It's hate-watching with a side of "but what if?"

And whether they love me or hate me, they're watching. They're clipping. They're sharing.

Even the feminists are boosting engagement—debunking, dissecting, sometimes thirsting in between paragraphs of deconstruction.

Tyler texts me.

TYLER:

Trending on Twitter.

"Zeta x Slayer" is the new ship name.

You're welcome.

ME:

Do we trademark it or lean in?

TYLER:

Lean in .

Hard.

I've bet on you!

I toss the phone onto the bed and stare at the ceiling, brain buzzing louder than the ring light I forgot to pack.

The way I see it, I've got two options: play defense or offense. And you know what I always choose.

I flip to Tyler's thread.

ME:

What if we pitched her something? Real collab. Podcast or series. Battle of the sexes but smart.

TYLER:

Risky.

Also baller.

Also horny-coded.

ME:

Horny-coded is the key.

I'm not even sure this is a real plan. It's more like... momentum. A vibe.

The internet wants a show? Fine. Let's give them one.

Let them ship us, clip us, overanalyze every glance.

Lean in. Smile for the camera. Let it look like a fling.

Emily won't love it. But if I play it right, she'll respond.

And then we're in business.

Because hate is attention.

And attention?

Is the game.

Game I practically invented.

I smirk, fingers already flying over the keyboard.

Let the next round begin.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

After the panel aired, the internet did what the internet does: it lost its mind. Clips went viral—duets, stitches, dramatic readings. Team Adrian. Team Emily. Team 'Please Just Kiss Already.' Apparently, someone had made a thirst edit of us arguing, set to a slowed-down Dua Lipa track. Tragic.

So when I got the invite to a networking mixer hosted by the production company, I knew exactly what it was: orchestrated tension. Optics. PR candy. Put us in a room again and let the cameras hunt for chemistry.

The event is at a rooftop bar in Midtown—the kind of place where everyone pretends they just happened to look amazing.

String lights, ambient music, curated cocktails named things like 'The Soft Launch.

' Too many men in sneakers and blazers. Just enough sheen to feel important.

And then Adrian Zayne strolls in, perfectly timed. Like someone said 'action.'

Adrian is already there when I arrive. Of course he is. Holding court near the bar, laughing at something a woman in a leather jumpsuit says, hand resting lightly on the back of her chair. It's not quite touching. But it's definitely there. Just enough to register.

He sees me. His smile widens.

"Emily," he says, lifting his glass like we're co-conspirators, not ideological enemies. "Still dangerous, I hope."

I smile back, tight and professional. "Only in heels."

He chuckles. Steps closer. "Good. Would've been disappointed if you went soft on me."

I'm not sure if that's a flirt or a jab or both. Probably both.

We make small talk. Someone hands me a drink I didn't ask for. Adrian leans against the high-top like he's posing for a lifestyle blog. His questions are curious, personal, and too smooth.

"How long have you been coaching?" turns into "What made you want to fix people?" turns into "Do you ever let anyone see past the brand?"

At some point, someone with a camera circles by—probably a social media manager with delusions of TMZ. As if on cue, Adrian shifts closer. Not too much. Just enough that when the shutter clicks, his hand casually touches the small of my back.

I stiffen. He smiles like it's nothing. Like we're just two charming professionals sharing a moment of collegial chemistry.

But then it happens again.

Different angle. Different glass in his hand. Same subtle touch. Same flash of his teeth. I swear I see him glance at the photographer before he leans in and murmurs something low enough that it won't be captured—just implied.

That's when the alarms start going off in my head.

He's not flirting. He's documenting.

I sip my drink. Keep my body angled slightly away. Every answer I give is a half-truth wrapped in a smile. Because I know what he's doing.

The cameras might buy it. I don't.

Later that night, I call Jessie .

She answers on the third ring with a groan and a "Do you know what time it is?"

"According to Instagram? Time to ship me with a man I verbally dismantled on national livestream."

A beat of silence.

"Okay," she says. "That's fair. Proceed."

I flop backward on my bed, phone balanced to my ear. "They're making edits, Jessie. Slow zooms. One's set to a sepia filter and an acoustic Beyoncé cover. This is not good for me."

"Emily, it's amazing for you. You doubled your following. Your podcast is trending. People are stitching you, quoting you, even thirsting over you a little. That one girl with the shaved head called you 'the feminist Loki.'"

"That's not the win you think it is," I mutter, but fine—I've saved that video.

"This is literally the best thing that's ever happened to your platform. Controversy drives traffic. He gave you a gift."

“A gift? Jessie. He manipulated the panel. He touched my back mid-photo op—”

“Of course he did.”

“—and angled his whole body toward me like we were in a shampoo commercial. Do you know how many frame-by-frame breakdowns there are of that?”

I nearly slam my phone screen-down on the table.

“Yeah,” she says. “Some of them are... honestly kind of romantic.”

I make a sound that can only be described as a full-body eye-roll. “I was trying to dismantle a system and he was live-producing a shipping montage.”

Jessie grins. “Well, mission accomplished. Because now you’re both trending. Joint virality. That’s rare.”

“I don’t want to be co-packaged with him like we’re some nightmare his-and-hers brand.”

She tilts her head. “But it’s a good brand.”

“I was trying to expose him, not end up starring in a slow-mo thirst edit.”

“You do realize you’re going viral?”

“Oh don’t even. I’m the punchline in his sales funnel.”

“You’re the main character in a narrative you didn’t write. That’s still better than most people.”

I roll onto my side. “Why are you being calm? You’re never calm. Where’s the outrage? The righteous judgment? The extremely specific memes?”

There’s a long pause.

Then she sighs. “I’m too broke for principles tonight.”

I blink at the ceiling. “Jessie...”

“I overdrew my checking account buying a reusable water bottle. I thought sustainability was supposed to pay off.”

I try not to laugh. Fail. “Your bank account died for the planet. Brave.”

We’re quiet for a moment.

Then she clears her throat. “So. On that note... I applied for a job.”

“Okay,” I say, cautious.

“A bunch of jobs. Mostly depressing ones. But there’s one you’re really gonna love.”

That tone. The one she uses when she knows I’m going to hate something.

“Jessie. ”

She pauses. “Just don’t freak out.”

“Jessie—”

“I applied to Zayne Media.”

“WHAT...” I sit bolt upright. “You can’t. You literally can’t. He’s the algorithm’s gift to fragile men. He’s the Big Oil of gender dynamics.”

“He’s also hiring an assistant. And I... need groceries.”

I flail so hard I almost drop the phone. “So what, you’re just going to sell out?”

“If selling out means having dental again, I’ll consider it.”

I bury my face in a pillow. “You can’t work for him.”

“Why not? He’s a CEO with a budget and—God help me—benefits.”

“But it’s him !”

“I’ve applied to seventeen jobs this week, Em. I’m one spreadsheet away from monetizing my panic attacks.”

There’s a long pause. I can hear her breathing. I hate that it sounds like mine.

“You know he won’t hire you,” I mutter.

Jessie goes quiet. “Wow. Thanks.”

“Not because you’re not qualified! Because he’s Adrian Zayne. He doesn’t hire women unless they’re props or set dressing.”

“Maybe he’s trying to diversify.”

I roll my eyes. “Doubtful.”

“Maybe he needs someone to keep him in check.”

“Oh my god,” I say, laughing bitterly. “And you think you’re going to be that person?”

“I don’t see you offering me a job,” she shoots back.

Silence .

“Yeah,” she adds. “Didn’t think so.”

“I’m sorry, is this my fault now?”

“No,” she says. “But it’s hard being broke and principled when the only one paying for it is me.”

My chest aches. “I hope your onboarding packet comes with a coupon for internalized misogyny.”

“I hope yours comes with a therapist. Because girl—”

“I know, I’m spiraling.”

We both fall silent again.

Finally, she says softly, “You’ll be okay, Em.”

“Not if you start quoting him at brunch.”

“Just... don’t hate me if I try to survive.”

I swallow hard. “I don’t. I just hate that this is what survival looks like.”

Another pause. Then she says, “Same.”

I hang up. Crawl into bed. Stare at the ceiling.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I’m still replaying his laugh.

And I hate that too.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Tyler got himself promoted to media manager last week—which meant I had about three days to pretend I wasn’t already drowning without an assistant.

The catch? Whoever I hired would be two feet from my calendar, inbox, and post-workout lighting setup. Too smart, and they’d eventually blackmail me into promoting them, like Tyler did. Too dumb, and I’d wake up canceled on a Monday I was supposed to be enlightened.

So today... I need a unicorn. Someone low-maintenance, high-functioning, and morally flexible. Dumb enough to be loyal to Adrian Zayne, smart enough to handle Andrew Zilchman.

Which is why I’m staging my office like it’s an Airbnb for influencers.

I slide the annotated Art of War into the drawer. Replace it with The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F ck*—strategically dog-eared, spine barely cracked.

I angle the ring light for “accidental glow.” Hide the collagen gummies. Leave the protein powder.

On the shelf: a succulent (plastic), a candle labeled “Focus” (unscented), and one strategically placed chess piece—a black king. For symbolism.

My phone chirps. One minute to interviews.

Let the parade begin.

** *

The first candidate shows up ten minutes early, knocking like she owns the building.

She walks in before I even say “Come in.” Blonde, bouncing, wearing a perfume that smells like a threat. In her arms: a poster board.

“I made this for you,” she says.

I look down. It’s laminated. There are glitter stickers. And a heading in bubble font: “MRS. ZAYNE VISION 2025.”

My face is on it. Multiple times. Some printouts are clearly pulled from Instagram stories that were up for twenty-four hours—three years ago.

“I color-coded your brand pillars,” she says. “See? Masculinity, clarity, legacy. Pink, gold, and chrome.”

I clear my throat. “Are you applying for the assistant role?”

“Absolutely,” she chirps. “I already memorized your schedule. I even track your content drops with my moon cycle. I’m a Pisces, by the way.”

“Noted,” I say, mostly to the part of me that wants to die.

“Oh—and don’t worry about salary. I’ll work for exposure. Just tag me occasionally. Or mention me as your muse.”

I blink.

She takes that as encouragement.

“Or future wife. I’m flexible.”

Interview length: five minutes. And that includes the time it took her to show me her Zeta ankle tattoo. With sparkles.

Candidate number two walks in chewing gum and wearing a muscle tank. He fist-bumps me uninvited.

“Brody,” he says. “Or just ‘Alpha Prime,’ if that’s easier.”

It’s not.

“Tell me about your experience,” I say, already regretting every decision I’ve ever made.

“I’ve studied pickup artistry in the field,” he announces. “Real-world reps. Nightclubs. Co-working spaces. The DMV.”

I stare.

“I mean, obviously that translates to branding. Energy. Tone. Frame control. I’m basically already managing your charisma.”

“So... have you ever managed a schedule for someone else?”

“I don’t believe in calendars,” he says.

“Excuse me?”

“Time is a lie. I follow energy. Like, if the vibe says email, I email. If the vibe says nap, I nap.”

“And how do you coordinate anything with clients?”

“I don’t. I let them miss me.”

Interview length: seven minutes. Five too long.

Candidate number three is in a suit. Buttoned. Polished. Eye contact that says “I’m here to steal your brand.”

“Adrian,” he says, like we’re best friends. “What you’re doing is powerful. But it’s time to scale. Which is why I’d like to pitch you on ZetaCoin.”

I take a moment to respond. He takes that as interest.

“Think about it. You tokenize your masculinity. We build community through scarcity. ZetaCoin becomes the currency of the heartbreak economy.”

“I’m... sorry, is this your interview or an ICO?”

“Both,” he says. “That’s the future. ”

Interview length: ten minutes. I mostly spend them imagining what it would feel like to live off-grid and raise goats.

I slump into my chair between interviews. Stare at the stack of resumes like one might suddenly stop being a threat. Tyler used to vet these people. Now he's a "media manager" on a leave, and I'm auditioning for my own downfall.

I rub my eyes. Mutter into the ether:

"I'll hire the next person who can spell calendar."

The door creaks open.

Next on the list: Jessica Caldwell.

Clean resume, no misspellings. Promising.

Maybe.

She walks in with a tablet—not a vision board, not merch, not a deck titled 'ZetaCoin.' A tablet. Like she came here to work.

Slim black jeans, oversized blazer, glasses. Her hair's pulled back like she's got somewhere to be after this. Her resume is printed on actual white non-scented paper. No glitter.

"Jessie Caldwell," she says, extending a hand. Firm shake. Confident. Not trying too hard. Which, nowadays, is suspicious in itself.

"Adrian Zayne," I say. "You're punctual."

She smiles. "That's generally expected in admin roles."

Huh.

I gesture to the chair across from me. She sits. I glance at her resume. Bachelor's in Communications. Then titles like "Brand Campaign Specialist," "Community Manager," "Experiential Marketing Lead. "

That's... a lot.

"You've worked with creators before," I say.

"A bit," she replies. "Mostly post-production. Editing, scheduling, narrative planning."

Narrative planning? She seems to be leaning towards the "too smart" end of the spectrum.

I blink. "And what brings you here?"

She folds her hands. "I'm looking for a growth opportunity in a fast-paced environment. Ideally something hybrid—strategy and operations. Your brand is obviously evolving, and I'd love to be part of building that next phase."

I stare at her. It's a good answer. A very good answer. Which is, frankly, even more suspicious.

But she's already steering the conversation forward.

Jessie scrolls something on her tablet. "Looks like your content streams don't talk to each other. Is that a feature or a glitch?"

I blink.

Okay.

Rude.

Accurate.

But rude.

I glance at her tablet. She's not even pretending to backpedal. No smile to soften the hit. Just calm, quiet competence in a blazer.

Definitely the too smart kind. The kind that will one day build a system so flawless I can't fire her without breaking it.

She keeps going. "And some of your guest booking seems reactive—tied to trending topics—but not necessarily integrated with your launch funnel. That's something I could help streamline."

My radar pings. Loudly. This woman talks like she just stepped out of a Notion dashboard.

"You've clearly done your homework," I say.

"I watched some episodes," she replies.

"Well, let me walk you through the role a little," I say. "It's mostly just... admin stuff. Emails. Posting clips. Booking things. Nothing too...intellectual."

The word hangs there.

Intellectual?

Damn it. That's the kind of thing that scares off half my audience—and would be too

much for the last five candidates. It slipped out like a bad tell.

Jessie raises an eyebrow. “Noted. I’ll keep font sizes in check.”

She says it lightly. Like a joke. But I clock the subtext: she caught the slip. Logged it. Filed it next to whatever other soft spots I just broadcast.

She scrolls through something on her tablet. “If this is about relevant experience, I did some freelance editing last year. Just a small podcast project, but very fast-paced. High volume, lots of moving parts.”

“What podcast?” I ask, mostly out of habit.

She blinks. “It didn’t have much reach. Very... local.”

“Name?”

She coughs into her sleeve. “MmmphCast.”

“Sorry? ”

She waves it off. “Not important. What mattered was the workflow. The host was unpredictable. Like, emotional support Google Doc levels of intense.”

I lean in. “Unpredictable how?”

She pauses just long enough for my radar to ping.

“Random schedule. File chaos. Regular identity pivots,” she says brightly. “At one point they tried to make a bonus episode out of crying in a Whole Foods parking lot. I gently intervened.”

Okay. So she knows what she signs up for.

Still sus.

But no crypto. No crystals. No one crying about time being a social construct.

Given I need a new assistant by yesterday... I'll probably hire her.

I've made worse decisions. On camera.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

The thing about agreeing to a first date with a man named Trevor was that it was already a gamble.

He had green eyes and decent punctuation. I figured, sure. One cocktail. Worst case, he's boring. Best case, I finally go on a date that doesn't end in another tragic postmortem voice memo to Jessie.

We meet at a bar called Bar. I wish I were kidding. It's one of those hyper-minimalist, influencer-lite places that serves drinks in beakers and plays music that sounds like a panic attack manifesto. Everything is matte black.

Trevor is... fine. Teeth a little too white. Hands a little too moisturized. And just a bit too proud of his Patagonia vest.

He orders us both something mezcal-based without asking. "Trust me," he says, like a man who skimmed one bartending subreddit and never shut up about it.

I nod, mostly because correcting men has never once improved my drink.

"So, what do you do?" he asks.

"I'm a mindset coach," I say. "For women."

"Oh," he says, pausing just long enough to prove he didn't hear the 'mindset' part.

"So, like, you teach them how to flirt better?"

I open my mouth, then close it. He leans back, satisfied, like he's cracked the feminist

code. My cocktail arrives in a test tube.

But then his eyes light up like a raccoon spotting a Ring cam .

“Oh my God,” he whispers, craning his neck. “Is that... Adrian Zayne?”

I freeze mid-sip of my artisanal \$19 ginger-turmeric-mezcal-spritz.

“Excuse me?”

Trevor cranes his neck. “It is him! The dude from the masculinity bootcamp thing. He changed my friend’s life.”

“Oh no,” I mutter.

Trevor’s already waving. “ADRIAN!”

And because God has a perverse sense of humor, Adrian turns.

Of course he does. He’s in a black T-shirt that fits a little too well. And next to him, laughing at something he just said, is Jessie.

My Jessie.

Traitorous, job-hunting, sold-out-to-the-dark-side Jessie.

I blink once. Twice. Then look at my drink like maybe it contains hallucinogens.

Adrian spots me. His expression shifts—like he’s been waiting for this moment and just got the cue.

“Emily,” he says, walking over with the ease of someone who thinks the room belongs to him.

Trevor’s vibrating with excitement. “You know him? That’s insane. You didn’t say you were in that circle.”

“It’s not a circle,” I say flatly. “It’s a fire pit. And someone handed him the matches.”

Adrian reaches our table, Jessie trailing two steps behind him like she’s trying to look casual and not like she just manifested me through sheer guilt .

“Hey man,” Adrian says, shaking Trevor’s hand like they’re cofounders of a protein startup. “You been following my content?”

“Since Zayne Law Part Two, man. That monologue on dopamine discipline? That rewired me.”

“Oh my God,” I say under my breath.

Adrian chuckles. “Glad to hear it.”

Then he turns to me. And the smile softens, just slightly. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Same,” I say. “I usually only run into my nemeses in Instagram ads.”

Jessie clears her throat. “Hey, Emily.”

I turn. “Hi, Jessie. Small world. Or were you just hoping I wouldn’t notice who you’re working for?”

She shifts her tablet behind her back like it's incriminating. "I'm just contracted short-term."

I nod slowly. "Right. Contracted. Like herpes."

Adrian raises an eyebrow. "Should I give you two a minute to unpack that metaphor, or...?"

Trevor laughs like Adrian just invented humor.

"So how do you two know each other?" he asks, totally oblivious to the fact that my soul is attempting to leave my body via eye roll.

"Oh," Adrian says, stepping just close enough to make it feel like he was already in my personal space. "Emily and I did a panel together. Some ideological combustion. And a few viral thirst edits."

I give him a look. "Possibly a restraining order edit too."

Jessie sips her water and stares at the ceiling like she's trying to contact a higher power.

Trevor, for some reason, is loving this.

"You guys should collab again," he says. "Honestly, the tension between you two? Peak content."

"I'm going to need you to never say that sentence again," I say, stabbing my drink with a straw.

Adrian leans in slightly. "I'm glad we ran into each other."

“Wow,” I say. “Did they teach you that line at Zeta Hogwarts?”

Jessie chokes slightly on her water.

Adrian just smiles. “No. That one’s original.”

I shoot Jessie a glance. She’s blushing. Not beet red—but definitely soft pink.

That’s when I know. She likes him. And not in a professional development kind of way.

I feel it in my gut. Not jealousy, exactly. Just... horror.

Trevor’s still starstruck. “Hey Adrian, can I get a selfie?”

Adrian obliges, smiling like the benevolent cult leader he absolutely is. Trevor beams, totally unaware that my date just became a networking event for incels in rebranding.

Adrian turns back to me. “Are you staying long?”

“Not if it turns into a pitch with eye contact,” I reply sweetly.

He chuckles. “Well, don’t let me scare you off.”

“You? Scary?” I say, tilting my head. “You’re barely even distracting.”

Jessie mutters something about the restroom and disappears like the ghost of female dignity.

Adrian watches her go, then looks back at me.

“That’s the nicest insult I’ve gotten all week,” he says.

“It’s Tuesday,” I remind him .

“Exactly. Room to improve.” He winks. “Don’t deny it. I get under your skin just enough.”

“I deny everything. Including your entire philosophy and haircut.”

He just grins. “Okay, Jessie and I should probably leave you to it. We’ve got something to discuss.”

And with that, he turns and strolls back toward the bar.

Trevor sighs. “Man. That guy’s the real deal.”

I stab my drink again. “He’s a real something. ”

And silently, I make a note:

Add “Jessie situation” to the crisis spreadsheet.

Under: High Risk, Medium Tragedy, Maximum Chaos.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

There's a special kind of headache reserved for men who realize they've been compromised by a woman with a podcast and an unemployed best friend.

I sit there, blinking at the door.

Emily. At the bar. With a guy who quoted me like he was trying to win a cosplay contest. Honestly, tragic. She deserves better—if only for comedic contrast.

But then there was Jessie.

Jessie, whom I brought there. Jessie, who sat beside Emily like they were already synced on some private frequency. Sipping a matcha spritz, nodding along to Emily's eye-rolls like they co-authored *Feminist Snark: A Manifesto* .

Wait.

They know each other?

Worse—they like each other.

Jessie would've said something. Right?

Except she didn't.

And now I'm flashing back—her casually mentioning she once edited a “small podcast project.”

Oh my God.

I hired the Zeta Slayer's right hand.

And the worst part? I didn't mean to hire a spy. She was just sharp. Quick. Unflappable. Found a typo in our onboarding packet and pitched a better tagline before I'd finished my coffee.

But now?

She's a plant. A double agent. A sleeper cell in Docs and Slack.

I open my Google Drive and brace for impact.

Yep. There it is.

A document titled "Notes on Male Loneliness."

It's not even subtle. Just pages of half-baked thoughts like:

Maybe men don't fear intimacy. Maybe they fear being disappointing when finally seen.

What if confidence isn't armor? What if it's being willing to stay after the apology?

Delete. Trash. Burn it with fire.

Next up: "Things I Wish My Dad Taught Me."

Absolutely not. That one gets zipped, encrypted, renamed "April Tax Estimates 2023" and buried in a folder I label "Receipts" because no one ever clicks there.

I check Slack. There's a draft message I almost sent to my video editor:

"This one felt too raw. Let's keep the eye contact, lose the rage. I want people to feel held."

I rewrite:

"This one's soft. Recut with edge. Add a static punch after the quote drop."

Cool. Masculinity salvaged.

But still—Jessie's already seen me. Not candle-lit vulnerability me. But enough to know I drink almond milk matcha and once referred to a pitch as "emotionally discordant."

Which means she could go back to Emily and say the one thing that would destroy everything I've worked to build:

"He's... kind of nice."

I can't let that happen.

So I do what any man does when he feels the slippery approach of self-awareness. I overcorrect.

Lights on. Ring light up. Voice low. Shoulders squared.

I hit record.

"Men," I say, pausing for emphasis. "You don't need to feel safe to be strong."

Beat. No blinking. Minimal humanity.

“You need to be strong to be safe.”

I stare down the lens like it owes me child support.

“The world doesn’t wait for your comfort. It waits for your clarity.”

Another beat.

“No fluff. No feelings. Just forward.”

I hit stop. Exhale.

It's garbage, but it's strategic garbage. It's the kind of clip that gets reposted with captions like “He gets it” and “Masculinity redefined.” It's a mask. Clickable and market-tested.

I upload it with the caption:

No apologies. Just protocol.

#IronMind #AlphaInProgress #NoMoreFeelings

Then I sit back and wait for the engagement to flood in like validation laced with dopamine.

But my mind's still stuck on Jessie.

I think about her laughing in the kitchen yesterday.

About how she didn't flinch when I told her most branding is just unresolved dad issues with a logo.

About how she organized my content calendar in under thirty minutes and then casually asked if I believed in moral gray zones "as a brand or as a person." I didn't answer.

Because I don't know.

And because—

Yeah. Never mind.

Her loyalty isn't neutral. It's timestamped.

I should fire her.

But if I do, I'll never know what she already told Emily.

And worse—what she might still tell her.

So I keep her close.

I wipe the matcha order from my Uber Eats history.

I tell the team to stop using words like "restorative" in public memos.

I post another video about grit. Grit is safe. Grit doesn't cry in the car after visiting his mom.

Speaking of which... I glance at my calendar. A red reminder sits there, chirpy and

cheerful and devastating:

“Call Mom.”

Jesus...

I hover. Just hover. Like deleting it would make me an orphan.

I should call her.

But I also just realized my assistant might be forwarding screenshots of my emotional development to a woman who once compared me to a scented trash fire with good lighting.

I sigh.

And then—click .

Delete.

Replace with:

“Finalize Q2 dominance framework.”

There. Very alpha.

And then, like some sick cosmic joke, my phone rings. Mom.

I freeze. Jessie is fifteen feet away, earbuds in, probably editing a thumbnail or writing a 10,000-word Slack message with citations. But she’s here. In range.

I hesitate. Let it ring once.

Twice.

Pick up.

“Hey,” I answer, lowering my voice to the CEO-register. “What’s the update on the... shipment?”

There’s a pause. “Andrew, honey, it’s just me.”

“Yes,” I say tightly, glancing over. Jessie doesn’t look up, but her fingers have gone still on the keyboard. “I’m circling back on that package. Just confirming ETA.”

“Oh,” Mom says, clearly playing along. “Well, I just wanted to say I’m so proud of your... latest drop.”

I mouth kill me and slowly rotate my chair away like I’m ducking enemy fire.

“Right. The drop. Engagement’s solid. Bounce rate’s clean.”

“Bounce rate?” she repeats, openly amused. “Is that your heart or your analytics?”

A cough from Jessie’s direction. Or a laugh. Hard to say.

“Let’s keep it high-level for now,” I say, trying to regain footing. “Just wanted to confirm alignment on Q2’s growth strategy.”

“We’re aligned,” Mom says cheerfully. “And I’ve defrosted the soup you like. We can onboard that tonight. ”

I press the heel of my palm to my forehead. “Love that for us.”

“Tell that nice assistant of yours I said hi,” she adds sweetly, because of course she does.

“Hard pass,” I mutter, and end the call with the finesse of someone hanging up on a live grenade.

Deep breath. Swivel back toward my desk.

Jessie doesn’t look up—but the smirk is back. Subtle. Calculated. The kind that makes you feel like she knows something .

And then, the kicker. Still typing, eyes on her screen:

“Tell your supplier I’m happy to review their Q2 positioning.”

I blink.

She couldn’t have seen the calendar entry.

Could she?

I deleted it.

But not right away.

Shit.

She’s going to tell Emily.

Or worse—she won't.

She'll keep it. Store it. File it in that internal hard drive labeled Adrian Zayne: Actual Human? ? and pull it out during some feminist group chat like it's a magic trick.

I can't have that.

I open my phone and order a coffee. Black. Hot. Double shot. No foam, no milk, no weakness on record.

Then I type a new note in Slack for the team:

“Next content drop: grit, power, discipline. No softness this week. ”

I stare at it a second longer.

Then add:

“No ‘growth’ metaphors either. Feels moist.”

Send.

Jessie looks up, finally. “Moist?”

“It's a dangerous word,” I say simply.

She nods again. “Agreed.”

We don't say anything else.

But I can feel it: she knows.

She knows I called my mom.

She knows I said onboard the soup.

And she's not mocking me. She's cataloguing me.

Which, somehow, is worse.

Because if she's reporting back to Emily, I just gave them both something they can't unsee:

A moment of actual softness.

God help me.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

JESSIE:

Hey. You up?

ME:

It's not a booty call if it comes with NDAs.

Ten seconds later, she's calling me. Which is either brave or stupid, considering she now works for the human equivalent of a gym selfie.

"Hey, bestie," Jessie says brightly, like she's not currently in bed with the algorithm's boyfriend.

I deadpan into the receiver. "Oh, we're leading with bestie ? Not complicit in feminist treason ?"

She groans. "Okay. I deserve that. But before you get my girlboss license revoked—can I just remind you that I am now your direct line to enemy gossip?"

"You want me to treat you like a mole?"

"I prefer 'embedded intelligence asset,'" she says. "Think of me as a whistleblower. With better contour."

I roll onto my side and stare at the ceiling. "Right. Because nothing screams feminist resistance like selling out to Zeta Media for a dental plan."

“Call it strategic infiltration, ” she says. “And FYI, I still don’t have dental. I’m a contractor. Very anti-capitalist in vibe if not in payroll.”

“So. You and Adrian,” I say, sweet as cyanide. “You seemed... comfortable. ”

“Please,” Jessie scoffs. “It’s just a job. He needed someone who can spell ‘narcissism’ without projecting it.”

I snort. “And yet, somehow, you keep using phrases like ‘emotional calibration’ in casual conversation. That one didn’t come from me.”

There’s a long pause. Then, faintly: “Okay, that one might have slipped in during a team sync.”

“A team sync , Jessie. You used the word sync . You’ve been radicalized.”

She makes a strangled noise. “Oh my god, I am not in a cult. I’m in a Slack channel.”

“Which is just a cult with worse fonts.”

“Look,” she says, already sounding defensive, “I wasn’t expecting to like anything about working there. But he was actually... I don’t know. Respectful. At the shoot. Like, with me and the other women. No weird comments. No casual condescension. Nothing.”

I raise an eyebrow at my ceiling fan. “And now we’re giving out medals for basic social decency?”

She sighs. “I’m just saying—it surprised me.”

“Well maybe you’re just starstruck,” I shoot back. “Not your fault. A lot of women

confuse high-def lighting with moral growth.”

“Or,” she says, voice sharpening, “maybe I’m just tired of being broke and watching you fight every man on the internet like it’s your job.”

“It is my job.”

“Yeah,” she says, quieter now. “And it’s exhausting just watching.”

The silence between us hardens like cooling lava .

“You don’t have to agree with me all the time,” I say finally. “But you’re supposed to be my person. Not his.”

“I am your person.” Her voice cracks slightly. “But if you want me to keep being that, I need to make rent.”

Beat. Static. The sound of two women realizing their friendship might be on a slow boil.

“Right,” I say, sitting up. “Of course. You can work wherever you want. I just... didn’t think it would be him. ”

Jessie is quiet. Then: “Neither did I. But he’s not who I expected.”

I nod like she can see it. “Yeah. That’s what scares me.”

There’s nothing left to say, so I wrap it in a tight bow of emotional repression.

“Anyway,” I say brightly. “Good luck with your... brand synergy.”

“I’ll let you know if he starts quoting Brené Brown.”

“Please do. I’ll add it to the war crimes spreadsheet.”

We hang up.

I toss my phone onto the nightstand, then flop back on my pillow, staring at the ceiling like it owes me an explanation.

She’s allowed to like people. I’m allowed to be paranoid.

Those two things can coexist... right?

My ceiling fan spins silently, refusing to answer.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

When I was twenty, the game was about winning.

Get her number. Get her upstairs. Get her to forget you didn't know who you were.

Confidence was a volume knob. You turned it up, said something borderline clever, and hoped she laughed before she noticed the emotional vacancy sign blinking behind your eyes.

It worked. More than it should have.

Now?

Now the game's about being chosen —not just wanted.

It's about showing up with your whole self, minus the armor.

Telling the truth and hoping it's still attractive.

Making room for someone else's fear without disappearing inside your own.

And yeah—

That scares the shit out of me.

But none of that matters right now, because fifty guys just paid three grand each to sit in a Marriott conference room and listen to me tell them how to be a fucking man.

The room smells like three brands of deodorant fighting for dominance. Folded chairs, scuffed mirrors, a giant flip chart with the words "ATTRACTION ISN'T AN ACCIDENT" in all caps. Chairs creak. Someone's bouncing a leg like they're revving a motorcycle.

I don't even call it a session. I call it floor time. Because these guys don't want to feel like they're in a classroom. They want to feel like they're part of something .

A pack.

They didn't come for structure. They came for initiation.

"Alright," I say, standing at the front, arms folded like I'm about to hand out mission orders. "Who's got balls today?"

A few guys laugh. One fake coughs "Not me." The energy is a little twitchy, a little defensive.

And then—

"I'll go."

Matt.

He stands like a guy who bets on himself every day—and still braces for the loss. Mid-twenties. Shorter than most in the room. Compact frame—didn't win the genetic lottery, but hit the gym anyway. He's the kind of guy who meal-preps on Sundays and keeps showing up even when no one's watching.

My favorite kind. Quiet engine. Long game.

Girls don't see it right away. They clock the height, the glasses, the social hesitation—and miss the discipline.

But give him a year, some coaching, and the right shirt?

Different story.

“I'm tired of being the guy who doesn't speak up until it's too late. Tired of pretending I'm okay with being overlooked.”

He glances around like someone might heckle. No one does.

“I don't want tricks. I want to be seen. But I don't know if there's anything worth seeing.”

Dead silence. The kind even dudes in gym shorts respect.

I nod slowly. Arms still folded. Trying not to show that I felt that one in the chest. “That,” I say to the group, “is what showing the fuck up looks like.”

They murmur. A couple nod. One guy claps once, fast .

Pack sees him now.

“There was this girl,” Matt says.

Heads turn. You'd think he just said there's a bomb in the room .

He's fidgety. Hesitant. But he's standing. That's the work.

“Coffee shop in Silver Lake. Saturday morning,” he says. “She was wearing, like...

this tan coat thing. Big scarf. You know that vibe?”

“Autumn librarian?” someone calls out.

The group laughs — not mean, just relating.

Matt shrugs. “Maybe. She ordered a cortado with oat milk.”

I lift my hand. The room quiets like someone hit mute.

“Where were you sitting?”

“Corner. Charging my phone.”

“What was the vibe of the place?”

“Kinda quiet. Mostly laptops and headphones. Indie playlist, but not pretentious.”

“Did she look at you?”

He hesitates. “I think? Maybe once. Hard to say. I was watching through the lid of my coffee like a coward.”

A few chuckles. I don’t join them.

I’ve seen that move. I’ve done that move.

“Okay. Did she have a book? Laptop? Phone?”

“She was just... waiting,” he says. “Like she didn’t need to be doing anything. That’s what got me.”

I nod. Not just to him — to the whole room. I feel them recalibrate.

“Alright,” I say, stepping forward. “Next time, here’s what you do. ”

The chairs creak as they lean in. I could sell this moment for \$900 a seat. But this isn’t content. This is the part I actually love.

“You don’t compliment the coat. Don’t open with a line. You notice something about the space — something you both share. The playlist. The long line. The fact that this place still sells macadamia cookies like it’s 2003.”

They laugh. Good. Still with me.

“Then you make eye contact. Real. Quick. Just enough to give her a decision.”

“She’ll either look away or smile. That’s your moment. You say one sentence. A real one.”

I pause.

““I was gonna get the same thing. Now I have to pretend I wasn’t.””

Someone mutters “that’s good” like it’s sacred text. One guy nods like I just unlocked the Matrix.

“Then you walk away. Pay for your drink. Sit somewhere visible. If she’s interested? She’ll make herself approachable. If she’s not? You didn’t lose anything. But you showed up.”

I look back at Matt.

He's listening harder than most people ever do.

"You weren't afraid of her, man," I say. "You were afraid of being seen by someone who might matter."

I let it hang.

That silence? That's the new edge.

"And that's the game now. That's the only one left worth playing."

** *

Most of the guys are gone, still buzzing about the playlist and how that macadamia cookie line landed. A few fist bumps. One guy asked if eye contact counts if you're wearing sunglasses. It does not.

I'm packing up the notes I didn't look at once when I notice Matt — still standing near the coffee urn like it might pour him courage if he stares hard enough.

"Something still cooking?" I ask without looking up.

"I, uh... yeah. Just..."

I glance over. He's got that look — post-breakthrough vulnerability mixed with decision paralysis.

"Are you still thinking about the scarf girl?"

He shrugs, sheepish.

“You think I should go back there?”

I click the pen in my hand once. Let it punctuate the silence.

“No.”

His face falls a bit. Like he was hoping for permission.

Then I add, “I think you should go back there on purpose. ”

I cross the room. Lower my voice so it’s just between us. Big brother energy. Pack leader to cub. Whatever metaphor makes it easier to say what I actually mean.

“Same café. Same time. Same seat. And you don’t go there to get her attention. You go there to remember who you were when you saw her the first time. The guy who wanted to be seen, not just get a number.”

Matt swallows. “And if she shows up again?”

“Then you try again. No pressure. No performance. Just a human moment. Make a joke about the line. Say something about the playlist. Or hell—ask if she’s the one who keeps buying the last damn macadamia cookie.”

That makes him smile. Not big. But enough.

I clap a hand to his shoulder — not hard. Just solid. Just real.

“And Matt?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re not going back for her. You’re going back for you. That’s the only part that sticks.”

He nods, slowly. It sinks in.

“Still feels like a movie,” he mutters.

I nod, just once.

“Yeah. But this time, you’re the one writing it.”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Rachel Goodwin is the kind of client coaches dream about.

Intelligent. Polished. Clearly rich, but not in the annoying way — in the “my Chanel shoes are silent when I walk” way.

She sits across from me in my home office, which is technically just the second bedroom of my apartment—but I’ve feng shui’d the hell out of it to make it feel less like a guest room and more like a launchpad for self-actualization.

She found me through my podcast a few weeks ago, which still blows my mind. Back when I was recording episodes in my closet and praying my neighbor wouldn’t flush during a take, I never imagined someone like her would be listening.

Her notebook is open, her pen is already uncapped, and she makes direct eye contact when she says:

“I’m not afraid of being alone. I’m just tired of building empires and coming home to silence.”

God, I love her already.

“That’s a good place to start,” I say, and I mean it.

She’s coachable. Thoughtful. Smart enough to challenge me when it makes sense, but respectful enough not to treat this like some TED Talk sparring match. She does her homework, highlights her takeaways, and once — I swear to God — she color-coded her attachment patterns.

By week three, I'm ready to nominate her as my personal case study in How To Actually Do The Work.

Which is why, when she starts telling me about a guy she met at a coffee shop, I let my guard down. Just a little .

"It wasn't even a date," she says, stirring tea like this is some Jane Austen side plot. "He just made a joke about the line being longer than a TSA checkpoint and somehow... I don't know. It landed."

I raise an eyebrow. "Did he ask for your number?"

"No," she says. "But we talked for a few minutes. And then he left."

I smile again and say, "Let's talk about what made that moment land."

Because if this is the start of something, I want her anchored before the tide rolls in.

He was... kind of intense," Rachel says, like she's still processing it. "But not in a serial killer way."

I jot that down in the margin. Intense, not homicidal. Comforting.

"And it felt different," she adds. "I don't usually get that kind of attention. Like, not the curated, LinkedIn-adjacent kind. This was... shy? Earnest?" She pauses. "He didn't give me a pitch. He gave me a pause."

Okay. Now she's romanticizing.

But I don't stop her. I've seen too many women preempt disappointment by talking themselves out of possibility. Let her have the moment.

I ask the usual questions—what did he look like, what did he say, how did you feel—and she answers like she’s recounting a dream. The kind that lingers, even if the details blur.

Then she drops it :

“He never asked for my number. But he showed up at the same coffee shop this morning. Just sat two tables over. Didn’t say anything. Just... smiled.”

My coaching face stays on. Inside, my eyebrows lift.

That’s either a green flag in disguise or a beige one fraying at the edges.

“He said hi?” I ask.

“Just nodded. Then left after ten minutes.”

Alright. Not red flag territory. Yet.

No emotional negging. No backhanded vulnerability. No “I usually don’t do this but...”

Just a guy being... weirdly normal.

Either he’s winging it, or he’s the rarest type: a man who means what he says and says very little.

I make a mental note.

We’ll see where it goes.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Matt texts me while I'm halfway through a protein bar and a podcast about dopamine fasting.

“We talked again. She smiled. I made her laugh.”

And just like that, I'm grinning like a moron in the middle of my kitchen.

He doesn't know it yet, but this is what progress looks like.

Not the laugh — the courage to tell someone about it.

I shoot back:

“Good. Keep the momentum. Stay calm. Stay curious. You're not performing. You're connecting.”

He sends a thumbs up. Proud of him.

Most guys start with goals like “get a girlfriend” or “get laid.”

Matt started with “not disappear when someone sees me.”

And now he's got a maybe. A spark.

A woman who actually brings him out of hiding.

That's rare. And rare is worth protecting.

I don't know her name yet. Haven't asked. Don't want to jinx it.

He's not trying to win.

He's trying to stay in the room.

And if this works—maybe I'll bring them in for a testimonial or something.

Shit like this is why I keep running bootcamps.

It's not for the clicks. It's for the moments no one else gets to see.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Rachel's been glowing lately.

Not in a "new serum" kind of way — more like she got emotionally exfoliated by a man who actually listens.

And I'm happy for her. I am.

Right up until this morning's session.

"So, I went out with the mystery coffee guy," she says casually, tucking her phone into her Hermès tote. "Turns out he's been working on himself. Said he's part of some men's group."

My pen stops mid-sentence. I keep my face neutral — professional, warm, unbothered.

"Men's group?" I ask.

"Yeah. Some kind of coaching thing. Confidence, identity, that sort of stuff."

"He said they meet on weekends and have, like... challenges?"

My mouth says, "That's interesting."

But my brain says, Adrian. Fucking. Zayne.

"It's cute," she goes on. "He even told me one of their assignments was to go back to

a place that scared them. That's why he came back to the coffee shop."

Yup.

That's textbook Adrian: fear exposure plus location memory loop. I've watched the clip. He used a whiteboard.

"I mean, I didn't ask for details," Rachel shrugs. "He just seemed so proud of himself for doing it. I didn't want to ruin it. "

My smile stays locked in place.

But inside, my gut goes cold.

Practiced. Warm. Just enough to look present.

Men's group.

Challenges.

Returning to the place where he saw her to "conquer the fear."

I know exactly what that is.

That's not healing.

That's performance.

That's Adrian Zayne 101 — wrap a tactic in therapeutic language and call it growth.

And if Rachel — Rachel — is caught in that?

No. Absolutely not.

I've spent the last six sessions helping this woman unlearn every internalized rule about being chosen, about being palatable, about playing small. I've watched her step into power she didn't know she had.

And now some reheated pickup artist is going to "learn confidence" by rehearsing vulnerability at her expense?

Hell. No.

Of course it's Zayne. Of course he'd evolve his brand from "neg with eye contact" to "empathic alpha energy." He's smart like that. Dangerous like that. He knows exactly how to stay just progressive enough to not get canceled.

And Rachel?

She's exactly the kind of woman his content is designed to break through.

Self-aware. Strategic. A little tired of carrying everything.

He doesn't want her to feel manipulated .

He wants her to feel seen.

And I bet he's training his guys to do the same.

Well. Not on my watch.

If Adrian wants to play a subtle game, that's fine.

But I play long game.

And I've got Rachel.

Let him think she's a win.

Let him count her as proof his method works.

Because when it falls apart — and it will — I'll be right there to help her name exactly why.

And while I'm at it?

Maybe I'll study his methods.

Take notes.

And show him what it looks like to outcoach a brand built on shortcuts.

I nod like I'm interested. I am interested. Just not in the way Rachel thinks.

“That sounds like a big step for him,” I say gently. “Has he shared more about the group? Like who runs it, what they focus on?”

Rachel shrugs, sipping her tea. “He said it's some kind of men's leadership thing? Weekend intensives, a few small group sessions during the week. Confidence, emotional presence, that kind of stuff.”

Confidence and emotional presence. Adrian's favorite cosplay.

“Did he mention the facilitator's name?” I ask, casual. “Sometimes that gives insight

into what values they emphasize. ”

Please don't say it.

Please say it.

“I think he called him Zen? Zane? Something like that. Adrian Zayne?”

Bingo.

My stomach tightens. But my face doesn't twitch.

“Interesting,” I say. “That name's familiar. I think I've seen some of his content online.”

Rachel looks up at me, curious. “You don't think it's... bad, do you?”

No, I want to say.

I think it's surgical.

I think it's engineered to pass as insight while bypassing real depth.

I think it's a very shiny trap.

But I don't say any of that.

“What matters is how you feel around him,” I say instead. “Not just in the high moments, but in the quiet ones. Trust lives in the quiet.”

Rachel nods, writing something down.

And me?

I'm already writing my own plan.

Because this just got personal.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

I'm halfway through erasing "TRUST = TENSION + PRESENCE" off the whiteboard when Matt clears his throat like he's about to recite wedding vows.

I don't look up. "You good?"

He doesn't answer right away. Rookie tell.

"I think I'm... in trouble."

That gets my attention.

I turn. He's hovering by the empty chairs like they might offer backup. "What kind of trouble? Legal, emotional, or text-message misfire?"

He hesitates. "Emotional."

God. Not that one.

I sigh, cap the marker. "Sit. Talk."

He perches on the edge of the table like a man about to confess to murder—and counting on you to help bury the body.

"It's the girl from the coffee shop," he starts.

I nod like, go on, even though I already know where this is going. The way he's talking? He's caught. Not by her. By the feeling.

“We kissed,” he says.

“Okay. Who initiated it?”

He looks away. “Me.”

“Details. Start from the top. Set the scene like I’m your editor and we’re trying to sell the film rights. ”

“We met for a walk. Coffee again, but to-go. Casual. She mentioned she had a tight schedule, so I suggested we walk around the reservoir.”

“Smart,” I say. “Movement keeps things light. Conversation flows easier side by side.”

He nods. “We talked about weird jobs. Hers was assistant brand manager at a pickle company in college. I told her about my gig handing out flyers dressed as a burrito.”

“A+.” I pause. “And the moment?”

He shrugs. “We stopped at the overlook. I asked if she ever felt like she was living her life in third-person. She said yes.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Jesus, Matt. That’s almost too good. You didn’t read that on a subreddit?”

He shrugs. “No. That one’s mine.”

I lean forward, elbows on knees. “Okay. And then?”

“I touched her arm. Light. Then I said, ‘I’ve been wanting to do something, but I

wasn't sure if it was the right moment.””

“Solid. You gave her space to opt in.”

“She looked at me, and I said, ‘I think I just found it.’ Then I kissed her.”

I let out a low whistle. “You soft-launched a move and closed. You’ve been holding out on me. That was clean.”

“I practiced. In my head. Like... a lot.”

Of course he did. That’s why I like this guy. He doesn’t coast on charisma. He does the work .

“Okay,” I say. “Now the real question. Did you escalate further?”

And that’s when it comes.

“I did not,” he says. “I’m just... not interested in the performance anymore. I don’t want to escalate. I want to feel. ”

That’s bad. I pause. Stare.

“Matt. That’s how they get you.”

His brow furrows. “Who’s ‘they’?”

“Women. Intimacy ninjas. They get you comfortable, let you talk about your childhood, and suddenly you’re planning dog names for your hypothetical future rescue. Before even getting anything real from them.”

He shakes his head. “This isn’t a trap.”

That’s what men always say when they are trapped.

I clear my throat. “So what do you want from me? Permission?”

“No,” he says. “Just... not ridicule.”

I blink. Then nod. Fair.

“I think I want a real relationship,” he adds.

I raise my eyebrows. “Already?”

He shrugs. “I’m not saying marriage. Just... I don’t want to mess this up by playing someone I’m not.”

Now I’m the one quiet for a second.

“Okay,” I say finally. “Let’s say you don’t mess it up. Let’s say she’s real, and kind, and into you for all the right reasons. What then?”

Matt tilts his head. “Then I get to find out what it’s like to show up as myself.”

I nod once. Like I’m signing a permission slip I never got. “That’s the riskiest play in the book.”

He smiles, a little shaky. “Yeah. But you’re the one who said real connection needs risk.”

I grimace. “That does sound like something I’d say.”

He stands, hands stuffed in his jacket pockets, and I watch him walk out like he's carrying something sacred in his ribcage .

I glance back at the board. TRUST = TENSION + PRESENCE.

I pick up the marker. And under it, I add:

+ Dumbass Hope.

Then I turn off the lights.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

I've watched Adrian's videos for forty minutes. Not because I enjoy the torture — but because I'm trying to catch the sleight of hand.

I've got a title slide, a playlist folder, and a passive-aggressive Canva template that says **ZETA MALE DECONSTRUCTED** in Helvetica Bold.

The plan is simple. Dissect his content. One video at a time. Name the tactic. Explain the psychology. Provide actual tools for women who've been on the receiving end of men trying to "mirror vulnerability" like it's a pickup line.

But I can't find it.

The video's from one of his live bootcamps—forty-seven men in a rented coworking space that probably feels much smaller in real life. It's grainy, badly mic'd, and absolutely saturated with the scent of desperate reinvention.

"Gentlemen," Adrian says on the screen, flashing that media-trained smile that somehow splits the difference between smug and saintly, "what do women want?"

He pauses. Lets the question hang.

"Confidence?" someone tosses out, hopeful.

Adrian's smile sharpens. "Wrong," he says. "They want connection. Confidence just gets you through the door. Connection gets you the weekend. Or the wedding. Or the 2 a.m. phone call where she says, 'I can't stop thinking about you.'"

Wow. Did he just recite his own imaginary sext?

The camera catches a wide shot. They're all watching him. Hanging on every word like he's Moses, about to lead them out of the dating desert. And Adrian sees it. Feeds off it.

"But today," he says, "we're not learning how to pick up women."

And this bootcamp costs three grand. Just saying.

"So here's what I actually believe."

Then, that shift in tone. Like he's changing gears from content creator to cult leader.

"It's not about tricks. It's not about domination. It's not even about women."

Blink. Blink.

"It's about men."

Oh god.

"We build our confidence with each other. We sharpen our instincts with each other. You want to be dangerous in the right way? Learn how to show up for your own life. Learn how to look another man in the eye and say, 'I've got you.'"

A few guys shift forward like he just unlocked a new cheat code.

"Because the truth is, you can't connect with a woman until you've got something solid under your own feet. You don't need to be perfect. But you need to be present. You need to be willing."

I'm ready to roll my eyes. But for some reason, I don't.

"We train together. We fall apart together. We rebuild together. That's what this room is for."

He paces slower now, voice softened like he's not performing anymore—just remembering. Or pretending to.

And me—

I'm still on my couch, holding my tea like it's a stress ball, staring at a man who has just made "bros before hoes" sound like a spiritual awakening.

And what's worse?

There's a tear in my eye.

An actual, unsanctioned tear.

I pause the video on his face. His eyes are crinkling. The smile's soft. It's the kind of look you want to believe in. Trust.

And that's what pisses me off the most.

He's getting better at it.

He tells a story about screwing up a date because he was too busy trying to sound smart. About a girl who asked what he was feeling and he panicked and told her his SAT score.

The room laughs. But he doesn't.

“I didn’t know how to tell her the truth,” he says. “Which was: I’m terrified you’ll like me and then realize I’m nothing.”

I pause the video.

Goddammit.

It’s too good.

It’s the kind of vulnerable that doesn’t feel edited. The kind that makes you go, oh. You’ve been in the pit too.

I sit there for a full minute.

I close it.

New tab.

Another video .

This one’s a Q&A from some live retreat. A guy with sleeve tattoos is crying. Adrian doesn’t say much. Just sits with him. Nods.

“Let it be heavy,” he says. “You’ve carried it long enough alone.”

I don’t cry. But something in my chest creaks open a little.

Not for him . For the guy. For all of them.

Which is extremely inconvenient because I’m supposed to be dismantling this garbage fire of a man brand, not catching feelings for his redemption arc.

Still. I'm five videos deep before I realize I haven't touched the takedown script.

By video seven, I start taking notes again.

Except they're not bullet points. They're questions.

Why do we believe someone more when they hurt out loud?

What's the line between honesty and strategy, and does it matter if the result helps people?

Is it manipulation if you mean it, but it still gets you followers?

I hate how he's messing with my clarity.

I hate that his storytelling works.

And I really hate that my next video might be called:

"The Trouble with Truth: Why Adrian Zayne Is Effective (and That's the Problem)."

I close the tab. Then I open it again.

Just to double-check one thing.

It's not for him. It's for the data.

I'm just... being thorough.

Thorough. Not intrigued. Not impressed. Definitely, absolutely, not into him. At all.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

The question comes from the guy in the backward cap—jawline sculpted by Instagram filters and emotional avoidance.

“What’s the best way to ask what she wants without sounding, you know... insecure?”

I blink. “You could try... asking.”

Silence.

I wait for the usual laugh. The knowing chuckle. A snort at the back of the room from the dude who thinks negging is still in vogue.

Nothing.

Just twelve men blinking at me like I’m the problem.

Okay.

Not the response I expected.

Usually by now we’re trading “close the deal” war stories and someone’s bragging about optimizing their Hinge opener with ChatGPT. The guy in the corner’s usually already talked about “closing twice on the same girl” like he’s reporting sales figures. This—whatever this is—is not that.

Either I’ve entered a parallel universe... or these guys got a group discount on

emotional evolution.

Next guy raises his hand—flannel shirt, neck tattoo, speaks like he just found inner peace through Spotify playlists.

“She said she wants to take things slow,” he says. “And I think I might actually be into that?”

I glance over my shoulder at the whiteboard.

Session Topic: Closing with Confidence .

Cool. So we’re officially off-script.

A few heads nod. The man in the Patagonia vest hums softly, like slow-burn vulnerability is something he’d recommend on Yelp.

Then another voice, from the front row. Skinny jeans. Earnest face. Voted Most Likely to Cry During Pixar Films.

“She invited me to meet her friends next week,” he says. “Is that a relationship move? Or am I overthinking it?”

I blink again.

“Gentlemen,” I say slowly, scanning the room. “What is this, a Nicholas Sparks book club?”

A couple nervous laughs. One guy nods solemnly.

“That was a joke,” I add. And that’s when it hits me.

They're not asking how to get laid. They're asking how to matter .

Which would be touching—if it didn't make me feel like I'm hosting a TED Talk sponsored by therapy TikTok.

I sip my coffee and scan the room again.

There's that guy who used to argue every week about the value of "options." He looks contemplative now, like he's trying to remember if his ex actually did ask for emotional support or just a ride to the airport.

The guy who once asked if "eye contact was beta" is biting his pen.

The spreadsheet bro in the back has taken out an actual notepad.

My guys—my proud, formerly chaotic, usually under-showered tribe—aren't angling for threesomes.

They're asking about friends .

Feelings .

Future plans .

This is either adorable or terrifying. I can't tell yet .

I glance again at the board.

This was a crash course in charm, not couple's therapy.

When did they stop trying to be heartbreakers and start manifesting soulmates?

I set the coffee down and pace. Arms crossed. Trying to look casual. Cool. Unbothered.

Spoiler: I'm none of those things.

“Okay,” I say. “So, recap. We’ve got a man who wants to ask questions without seeming needy, a man who’s surprisingly chill with emotional pacing, and someone wondering if meeting the friends is a commitment milestone.”

I make a slow circle around the whiteboard. Gesture vaguely like I’m preparing to draw a diagram. I’m not.

“What next? You're gonna ask me if texting her good morning every day is love-bombing or just attentive?”

No one laughs.

Some nod .

“Oh my god,” I mutter. “You people are serious.”

I turn back to them. “Are you listening to yourselves? This is a bootcamp, not a premarital counseling session.”

They wait.

Flannel guy lifts his shoulders. “You said connection is the endgame.”

Wait, they listened to that part?

“Right, sure,” I say. “But there’s sequencing . You don’t start a movie with the post-

credits scene.”

Skinny jeans guy tilts his head. “But what if that’s what she wants?”

Tattoo guy leans forward. “Yeah. What if she’s already there, emotionally? ”

I stare at them. For a full beat, I have nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

I pivot toward the coffee, like caffeine can fix this.

That throwaway line about connection I added in Week 2 to sound less like a creep and more like a socially acceptable human?

I feel myself spiraling.

I need a reset.

“Be right back,” I say. “Refill.”

I duck into the hallway, head for the bathroom, and lock the door like I’m evading a lie detector test.

The mirror stares back. I stare harder.

“What am I doing,” I mutter. “What the hell am I supposed to say in there—‘Let’s unpack your attachment wounds and draft your wedding vows in Excel’?”

I run my hands over my face. It doesn’t help.

I still schedule my feelings like dentist appointments.

Preferably ones I miss.

This is new terrain.

And I'm wildly underqualified.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Rachel walks into my office like she just got back from a very exclusive, very illegal wellness retreat for your nervous system and your G-spot.

Her blazer's crisp, but her smile is feral. There's a slight limp in her step, which I try very hard not to notice. Her cheekbones are practically winking.

She sits down, smooths her hair, and drops this gem:

"So. I slept with him."

I blink. "Matt?"

She nods. "And Emily. Oh my God. "

There it is. The tone. The "I just got emotionally rearranged by a man who reads exactly one book a year and it's always The Art of War " tone.

"He was—" She exhales like she just climbed something. "—so confident. Not cocky. Not performative. Just in charge. "

I raise a brow. "In what way?"

"In the he picks you up and sets you down where he wants you kind of way."

I nearly drop my pen.

"And not in a creepy Fifty Shades way," she adds quickly. "More like... strategic

competence. Like he was ten moves ahead, but also somehow reading me in real time?”

My left eyebrow is now trying to defect from my face.

“He didn’t ask what I liked,” she continues. “He found out. ”

My mouth opens. Nothing comes out.

“He flipped me,” she says, and I don’t even know what that means, “but gently. And then—this is the part that kills me—afterwards? He just leaned over and smirked like a man who knew exactly what he’d done and would maybe do it again later if I was good.”

I choke slightly on my own oxygen.

“He said—” she lowers her voice—“I’ve been thinking about doing that since the café.”

I actually black out for a second.

Rachel is glowing like a woman who just got a TED Talk delivered into her pelvis. I’m doing mental gymnastics trying to not picture the scene.

“My legs shook, ” she says. “Like cartoon Bambi. I had to sit down in the bathroom after just to recalibrate.”

I nod slowly, like that’s a completely normal response to postcoital alpha dominance. My notes page just says Flipped?

Rachel giggles. “He even did that thing—where he keeps eye contact while he... you

know.”

“Oh, I do not know,” I say too fast.

She grins. “He kissed me after like it wasn’t a reward, it was a promise. And then—get this—he got up and said, ‘I’m getting you water. Don’t move.’”

I snort. “Okay, that’s too much.”

She shrugs. “It worked.”

Of course it did.

He’s one of Adrian’s .

I try to keep my face neutral, but internally?

There’s a fire drill in my brain. Sirens, flashing lights, an intercom voice yelling “THIS IS NOT A DRILL. YOU ARE CURIOUS ABOUT THE ENEMY.”

Because now I’m wondering—what if this is what Adrian’s been teaching? Not lines. Not games. But actual embodied confidence, mixed with just enough Boyfriend Experience to make a woman question all her past standards?

I do not want to know if Adrian Zayne can flip a woman gently.

I do not want to imagine him saying “Don’t move.”

I cross my legs. For no reason. Just... atmosphere control.

Rachel sighs blissfully. “I just didn’t know it could be like that. Like I wasn’t being

handled—I was being claimed. ”

Okay.

Cool.

Super healthy reaction I’m having.

My internal monologue sounds like a Whatsapp group for emotionally compromised podcast hosts:

What if your nemesis has great hands?

Are you allowed to despise someone’s values but still... investigate their technique?

EMILY DO NOT GOOGLE ZAYNE TACTILE METHODS.

I force a smile. “Sounds like he’s done a lot of growth work.”

Rachel nods. “That men’s group thing? Whatever it is? I think it’s working.”

I just nod and swallow.

She tilts her head. “You’ve been really quiet. Are you okay?”

“Of course.” My voice jumps an octave. “Just... collecting data.”

Because that’s what this is. Not jealousy. Not projection.

Research.

Very respectable, platonic, unthirsty research .

Rachel hugs me goodbye. I close the door and whisper to the empty room:

“I am in so much trouble.”

Because now I’m not just thinking about Adrian’s methods.

I’m thinking about application.

And that is a road paved with extremely bad decisions.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

If attention is currency, I'm currently printing money. I lean back in the leather chair that's been strategically placed for maximum jawline and minimum lumbar support. One AirPods in, the other dangling just out of sight. Ring light: flattering. Background: tastefully intellectual. Me: peak smirk.

"Welcome back to Iron Mind Live ," I say into the mic, words gliding out like whiskey over ice. "We've got a hundred and eighty-five live with us today. First-timers, drop a one in the chat. Returning legends, drop a fire emoji."

The emojis roll in.

"Let's dive in. First question—'What's the best way to flirt at the gym without being a creep?' Easy. Don't. Unless she initiates. Otherwise, your barbell is your best wingman."

A string of laughing emojis in the chat. I smirk. Easy mode.

I power through another handful:

"Who should pay on the first date? Whoever initiated. Or, you know, pay anyway if you're trying to signal high intent."

"Is it okay to double-text? Only if the second text is 30% funnier than the first. Math matters."

Then it pops up.

@TReformedBro: What if the first date went well, but she ghosted? How do I re-engage?

I read it aloud, voice smooth. "Good question. Let's break it down."

I tap the keyboard to follow up.

Where'd you meet her?

@TReformedBro replies instantly .

Online. She was a mindset coach. We talked about identity and stuff. Pretty deep, lol.

I blink. Just once.

Lean in slowly, heartbeat steady but focus narrowing. That bar. That line. Identity and stuff.

I type again.

What did you do on the first date?

Another fast reply.

Went out to the Bar. I ordered mezcal for both of us. She didn't love that, haha. Didn't seem like a dealbreaker tho.

Not a dealbreaker, I think, but definitely a disqualifier.

I stare at the username. The girl was a coach. They met at the Bar. Could be a coincidence.

Could also be that dude I saw sleazing on Emily Parrish.

I smile into the camera. Calm. Easy.

"Let's talk ghosting," I say smoothly. "Sometimes it's not about you. Sometimes, it's entirely about you."

The chat pops off with burn emojis.

"If the conversation was solid, the vibe felt good, and then she disappears—ask yourself one question: Did she get kidnapped, or were you just the only one who thought it was going well?"

I keep eye contact with the camera, like I'm speaking directly to Emily's date.

"Because if she ghosted, maybe it wasn't a mystery to solve—it was the message."

I can see him squirming, even if it's only in my head. You couldn't pay me enough to coach that dude back into her inbox.

"My advice? Don't chase ghosts. Elevate instead. "

A few people in the chat type the rocket emojis. I end the stream with a tight smile.

"That's all for today. Remember: You don't rise by chasing. You rise by becoming."
A pause. A wink. "See you legends next week."

I log off.

Silence.

Then I exhale. Long. Through my nose.

Open another tab.

Search: Emily Parrish Let Me Finish .

It loads with annoying clarity. New episode. New thumbnail. She looks good—annoyingly good. Like someone who actually sleeps and drinks water and doesn't spend thirty minutes explaining "social calibration" with a slide deck.

Title: "When He Doesn't Hear You (Because He Thinks He's Winning)"

I wince.

I press play.

Her voice slides through my speakers—warm, certain. Just enough edge to be interesting. Just enough softness to be dangerous.

“We’ve all had that date. The guy who orders for you. The one who monologues. Who thinks presence is the same thing as dominance. And when you ghost? He tries again, not because he values you—but because his ego doesn’t like the silence.”

Well, it looks like she’s still ghosting that douche.

Good girl.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

This was a bad idea.

Not unethical. Not dangerous. But high-risk ridiculous. The kind of plan you'd expect from a woman in a romcom with a concussion. Or unresolved issues from high school. Or both.

I stand in front of the mirror in Jessie's apartment, applying eyeliner with the kind of concentration usually reserved for bomb defusal. Which, to be fair, this kind of is.

"You don't have to do this," Jessie says from the couch, where she's aggressively not watching me. "You're doing a field test. Of a man. Using your own body."

I cap the eyeliner and turn to face her. "He seduces for sport. This is just... sport back."

"You literally teach women how to avoid guys like him."

"Exactly. Which makes this... research."

She raises an eyebrow. "And the wig?"

I hold up the glossy red hair bob. "Controlled variable."

Jessie mutters something about Freud and takes a sip of wine.

The logic is shaky, yes. But here's the thing: I need to know.

It's not just about Adrian. Okay—it's about Adrian. But more than that, it's about my own mind. Because lately, I can't tell if he's my ideological nemesis or just... incredibly inconveniently hot.

And if I'm going to exorcise that confusion, I need data. Intimate data. Unfiltered.

Also, I don't want to give him the satisfaction .

If I show up as me—Emily, the feminist podcast host who made a whole video about his fragile masculinity—he'll think he won. That I cracked. That he “converted” me with pheromones and a well-placed smirk.

No. Absolutely not.

But if I show up as someone else? That would be mine.

I slip into the dress—black, low-backed, the kind of thing I'd usually pair with a blazer and a TED Talk. Tonight, no blazer. Just skin, scent, and strategy.

Lipstick next. Red, obviously. If I'm going full femme fatale, I might as well max out the trope.

I study my reflection. I don't look like me. And that's the point.

Tonight, I'll be Lena. Or Val. Or some woman who laughs at all the right moments and doesn't quote social science mid-flirt.

I don't want to humiliate him. I just want to see.

What's it like, being the kind of woman Adrian Zayne wants?

And would I feel anything at all?

Jessie stands and hands me my coat. “Please don’t die.”

“I’m not even going to kiss him.”

She pauses. “Okay, now I’m worried.”

I wink and leave before she can stop me.

The place is already buzzing when I arrive. Rooftop loft. Influencer gloss. Music pulsing with effortless cool. I tell the bouncer I’m “on the list.” He waves me through without looking.

Inside, I do a slow lap, acting like I’m just taking it all in—not scanning for him.

And there he is.

Leaning against the bar, laughing at something someone said, hand curled casually around a glass of something dark. Of course he looks perfect. Of course he wears black. Of course his smile makes half the room tilt on its axis.

I roll my shoulders back, walk slowly, let the heels click just enough to be heard over the bass.

He doesn’t look up until I’m almost beside him.

Then—eye contact.

Brief flicker. No recognition.

But then again, his smile shifts almost imperceptibly. Just a twitch at the corner. Like a man clocking a déjà vu he can't quite place.

"Evening," he says, voice smooth. Curious.

I smile. "Is this where the emotionally unavailable go to recharge?"

He chuckles. "Depends. Are you here to recharge or to deconstruct?"

Touché.

I sip the drink I haven't yet ordered. "Neither. Just... observing the wildlife."

He looks at me again, head tilted. "You seem familiar."

My pulse spikes. I raise an eyebrow. "We all start to blur together after enough ring lights and podcast reels."

Another smile. This one is slower. More dangerous.

"What's your name?"

"Lena," I say, praying he doesn't recognize the feminist callback.

"Well, Lena," he says, "can I get you a drink, or are you planning to psychoanalyze me from afar all night?"

"I find proximity improves accuracy."

That earns me a nod of approval. "Fair enough."

I know I'm playing a game, but the rules are starting to shift under my feet.

At some point, he leans in—closer than necessary. His breath warm against my cheek. “You always this sharp?” he murmurs.

“Only when I'm undercover.”

He pulls back a fraction, eyes flickering. “Is that what this is?”

I smile, slow and deliberate. “Would it ruin the moment if it were?”

A beat.

“No,” he says softly. “Just makes it more interesting.”

My heart stutters.

For a moment, we just stand there. Sea air curling around us, the bass of the party fading behind glass.

Then, gently, he gestures toward the interior stairwell. “Come inside.”

No flourish. No smirk. Just that calm confidence, like gravity has quietly shifted and I'm already mid-fall.

I follow.

Down a short corridor, past dimly lit rooms. He opens a door, steps aside.

I walk in.

He closes it behind us.

The click of the door feels louder than it should. Or maybe everything does—his footsteps on the wood, the hush of the air between us, the sound of my own pulse trying to set a land-speed record.

He doesn't move right away.

Just watches me.

The kind of watch that makes you forget how eyes even work. Like he's waiting for something. A signal. A slip. A tell.

I'm supposed to be in control. This is my experiment. My mask. My move.

But now I can't remember what I've been trying to prove.

His gaze drops—neck, collarbone, the low dip of the dress. Then back up.

Slow.

Unhurried.

Hungry.

"I have to admit," he says quietly, "you're very convincing."

I swallow. "Convincing?"

He steps forward.

One breath.

Two.

I don't back away.

"You planned all this," he murmurs. "The dress. The voice. The persona."

I say nothing.

Because somehow, it doesn't feel like a trap anymore. It feels like gravity has shifted and I'm floating. Toward something I can't name.

"But next time..." he says, voice brushing my skin like a secret.

He leans in.

Close enough to feel the warmth of his words .

"...just ask."

A beat.

Then, softer—almost smiling:

"Emily."

My breath catches.

And everything—

Goes dark.

I jolt awake. Alone. Blankets tangled. Skin flushed. A strange ache in my chest, like I've just missed a train I didn't know I wanted to catch.

The laptop beside me is still open, screen dimmed. One headphone has fallen out. The video has auto-rolled to another Adrian Zayne monologue.

I stare at the ceiling.

Seriously?

Because of course. Of course it ends right there.

Not even a kiss. Just Next time, ask.

I flop back, shove a pillow over my face, and curse my subconscious for having better game than me.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

I wake up disoriented, which is already a bad sign.

Not the kind of disoriented that comes from tequila or low blood sugar. It's the ambient kind—like someone rearranged the furniture in my brain while I slept. Nothing's technically wrong, but everything feels half a beat off.

I never sleep past seven.

I sit up too fast and immediately regret it. The room tilts, then corrects itself like it's embarrassed for me. I rub my eyes and run a quick systems check.

No hangover. No fever. No emotional damage that I'm aware of.

Still, there's something there. Some static buzz.

I shake it off.

Cold shower. Espresso. Inbox.

Normally that's enough to reset me. Not today. Everything feels slightly out of sync, like I'm watching my own life on a one-second delay.

I reread the same subject line three times. Delete it anyway.

Espresso number two.

Standing desk. Noise-canceling headphones.

I open the video folder. The one I've been avoiding.

I hit play on some raw footage. Watch my own face appear on screen, mid-sentence, mid-hand-gesture. I look like I know what I'm saying.

I don't feel like that guy today.

Pause. Close window. Exit .

This is getting annoying.

I lean back, let my gaze drift up to the ceiling, and that's when it hits me.

Not a memory. Just a flash. A mood.

Rooftop lights. Warm-toned. The expensive kind that makes everyone look photogenic and emotionally available.

Perfume—something bright, then slow-burning.

A laugh, low and curved like a question.

Red lipstick.

I frown.

I didn't go out last night.

Unless I somehow sleepwalked into an influencer event—and honestly, I'd rather be dead.

So... a dream?

Maybe. Probably. I don't usually remember them, but sometimes they leave behind smoke.

Still—why the hell am I thinking—

“Emily Parrish,” I mutter.

And then I freeze.

Where did that come from?

I haven't thought about her in—days. Maybe. Not obsessively.

Just... normally.

I stare up at the ceiling again, like it might have a transcript.

Nothing. Just that same weightless, wrong-side-out feeling.

Like I missed something.

Or something missed me.

I stand. Espresso number three.

Maybe a walk.

Not because I care .

Just because I can't remember the dream doesn't mean it didn't want something from me.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

“So, first of all,” I say, flopping onto the couch like it personally owes me emotional backpay, “I know I skipped a session. And yes, I’m aware avoidance is not a strategy.”

Dr. Lisa gives me the therapist face. The warm, nonjudgmental one that says continue, sinner .

She looks, as always, like she’s just returned from a wellness retreat where the robes are silk and the drama is subtle.

Her silver-streaked hair falls in soft waves past her shoulders, framing a face that has clearly made a pact with time.

High cheekbones, olive skin that glows without highlighter, and eyes the color of espresso behind stylish glasses—sharp, unblinking, and way too good at calling bullshit.

“I’m glad you made it in today,” she says, her voice low and smooth like she practices on NPR narrations. “What feels important to bring into the room?”

That’s classic Lisa. She doesn’t push. She invites. And damn it, I always RSVP eventually.

I sigh. “Okay, so... There’s this man I want to talk about. Let’s call him Adrian. I totally hate him. He’s like if a TED Talk and a cologne ad had a baby, and that baby was raised exclusively on Joe Rogan clips.”

She nods. “And what’s your relationship to him?”

“Public nemesis,” I say. “I did a reaction video to one of his clips—well, technically a takedown, but it was fair—and then we ended up on a panel together. And now the internet is betting on whether we hook up before the end of the year. ”

“I see,” she says gently.

“And also,” I add, “he’s been showing up in my dreams. Uninvited. Repeatedly. Doing things to me that are... not appropriate for a woman who once called him a human equivalent of a gym selfie.”

Lisa pauses. “How long has that been happening?”

“Three dreams in the past week,” I say. I lean forward, voice low and panicked. “He’s winning in my subconscious, Lisa. This is psychological warfare.”

Dr. Lisa adjusts her glasses. She has the kind of calm that makes you want to throw a chair just to get a reaction.

“Tell me more.”

I hesitate. Then blurt, “Like, today he showed up wearing a tank top that said ‘I WIN’.”

“And?”

“...and nothing else!”

Dr. Lisa pauses. “Okay. So these dreams are... sexual in nature?”

“Offensively so,” I say.

She tilts her head. “And how do you feel about that?”

“Betrayed,” I snap. “My brain is supposed to be on my team. And now my own subconscious violates me. I mean, he literally carried me onto a countertop and—”

I cut myself off, waving my hands. “You know what? Doesn’t matter. It was a dream. It’s not real. My brain is just... sorting files.”

Lisa gives me a look that says you named the folder ‘Strategic Initiatives: Mount Him’.

She tries not to smile. I see it. Treasonous dimple. “Emily, it’s normal to have erotic dreams, especially involving figures of tension or unresolved emotion.”

“Yeah, but this isn’t unresolved emotion. This is psychic warfare.”

I lean forward, whispering like the walls have ears. “He’s infiltrating. Like, psychologically. Maybe even spiritually. And I need tools, Lisa. Shields. Rituals. Maybe salt circles? Do those work in REM?”

She folds her hands. “You’re describing classic projection mixed with suppressed arousal.”

“I’m describing a hostile takeover,” I correct. “Do you know what he said in this dream? He said ‘I don’t need consent. I need surrender.’ While tearing up my blouse.”

Silence.

Then she says gently, “And how did you respond in the dream?”

“I said, ‘This is unethical,’” I mutter. “But then I took my panties off. So.”

She nods like this is standard Tuesday material.

I groan. “I can’t even hate-sleep in peace.”

Dr. Lisa scribbles something in her notebook.

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s say hypothetically I want to reprogram my dreams. Like Inception , but feminist. Do we do that with affirmations? Aversion therapy? Do I record a loop of Gloria Steinem quotes and play it overnight?”

Lisa raises an eyebrow. “Why do you think Adrian’s showing up now? ”

“Because I’m being emotionally targeted by his pheromones and algorithm,” I mutter. “Or maybe because my libido is a traitor.”

Lisa leans back, thoughtful. “Maybe the dream isn’t about him. Maybe it’s about what he represents.”

“Oh, great. Now he’s a metaphor.”

“Emily—what if this isn’t sabotage? What if it’s your psyche exploring vulnerability through someone you intellectually distrust?”

I blink.

“Wait. Are you shipping me with my nemesis too?”

She smiles. “I’m just noticing where your imagination is already going.”

I sigh and stare at the ceiling. “I swear to God, if he ever finds out about these dreams, I’ll have to legally change careers.”

Lisa laughs softly. “Your secrets are safe with me.”

“Good,” I say. “Because next session, we’re doing hypnosis. And I want Adrian erased like a bad tattoo.”

“Or,” she says, “you could explore what makes him stick.”

I narrow my eyes. “Are you on his payroll?”

She just smiles again.

I groan. “Fine. I’ll journal. But if I start sleep-texting him, it will be your sin, too.”

The first thing I become aware of is not the sun, or the time, or the desperate need for caffeine.

It’s the fact that I’m... smiling.

Like, post-kiss, post-climax, post-sin smiling .

My eyes snap open.

“No,” I croak to no one. “No, no, no. Not again.”

But it was. Again.

Adrian was there.

With his hands. And that voice. And that stupid, smug smile.

I groan and reach blindly for my phone, still half-asleep and 100% too horny for my own principles. I open the voice recorder app for dream journaling like Dr. Lisa suggested and hit record before I can overthink it.

Tuesday, 8:15am

“Okay. Dream log. He was there again.

Adrian. Just—there. No warning. No shirt. No shame.

He looked at me like he already knew what he was about to do to me.

And he did. God, he did.

I can’t even say half of it out loud.”

I blink. Still half-under covers. My body warm and wet in all the wrong places.

Shouldn’t I go into full detail? Get it out of my system?

Okay. Fine.

I’ll record the rest.

Just... for me.

I should delete this.

I won't.

But I should.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

My mom and I have brunch every other Sunday. Just a ritual. Habit. Slightly weaponized guilt.

I show up. She pretends not to analyze me. We both lie beautifully.

She's already at the café when I arrive—corner table, window light, a single espresso like it's a personality trait. She's scrolling through something on her phone with the kind of expression that says she's already had five thoughts sharper than anything I've come up with all week.

She looks good. She always does. Elegant in a way that feels curated but effortless—like she has a capsule wardrobe of forty-seven identical blazers and the bone structure to make it work. Fit, polished, annoyingly composed. Most people guess her mid-forties. She's fifty-three.

She hasn't dated since my dad died. Fifteen years.

No boyfriends, no swipes, no flirtation at dinner parties.

I used to think it was grief. Then I thought it was standards.

Sometimes I wonder if she's still loyal to him.

To his memory. My dad was the kind of man who made loyalty seem like a moral endpoint—tall, principled, career military. He died like he lived: with posture.

We hug—efficient, like she's clocking my blood pressure through osmosis—and sit.

She raises an eyebrow the moment I reach for sugar. “Rough morning?”

“It’s nothing,” I say, even though it is.

She hums .

It’s not a real hum. It’s a diagnostic.

We’ve been talking for maybe fifteen, twenty minutes—nothing dramatic. Just surface-level updates. Work. Travel. A recipe she half-finished. She stirs her espresso like she’s teasing out some secret. Long, slow swirls. Not looking at me.

I stare at mine. It’s lukewarm by now.

Then, without warning, she says: “You run those coaching groups for men. Any of them... my age?”

I blink. Look up.

“Why, do you want to join?”

I shoot for sarcastic, but it comes out a little too sharp.

She doesn’t laugh. Just lifts one eyebrow. “Not exactly. But I thought I might start dating again.”

I blink.

“Oh.”

Then, trying to recover: “I mean—most of the guys are under forty. Some are older.

But it's not really built for..." I trail off.

"Women?" she offers, deadpan.

"Yeah. Or moms."

She smiles into her espresso. "Good thing I wasn't asking for access. Just information."

I blink harder. "Wait. You haven't dated since Dad."

She shrugs. One elegant shoulder, like she's adjusting a silk scarf instead of dropping an emotional nuke on my Sunday.

"He died. He was not canonized."

That short-circuits me. "You always made it sound like no one could measure up."

"No," she says evenly. "I just didn't feel like managing someone else's emotional architecture while grieving."

Then she adds, offhandedly: "Loyalty made a better story."

I stare at her.

She doesn't backpedal. Doesn't soften. Just takes a sip of her espresso and raises an eyebrow like I'm the one who suddenly got sentimental.

"You told me that story," I say, quieter than I mean to.

"And you clearly inherited the branding instinct," she says. "Well done."

I lean back, arms crossed, trying to keep my expression neutral. She doesn't miss it. She misses nothing.

"So this whole time," I say, "you weren't... mourning, or committed, or whatever. You were just busy?"

"No," she says. "I was grieving. For years. But grief's not a cage. It's a process. And eventually, I finished the part that required silence."

I process that.

Then immediately try to deflect.

"You want me to screen people? Run background checks? I could set up a private intake form—"

She laughs, just once. "Andrew."

I shut up.

"You don't need to manage this," she says. "But if there's someone you genuinely think I should meet, send him my way."

I nod, slowly. She waits.

The thing is, I built a whole system to help men get what they wanted—fast, slick, impressive. But now, when it's about something real—someone real—I've got nothing. Not one guy I'd introduce to my mom.

What does that say about me?

I exhale. “It’s just... weird.”

“Because I’m your mother or because I’m a woman?”

“Because you’re both,” I shoot back. “And because you’ve always said— explicitly—that you had what most people spend their whole lives chasing.”

“I did,” she says. “I also think that’s a terrible reason to stop living.”

I glance down at the table. Run a fingertip along the wood grain like it might distract me from the creeping horror of her being, well, right.

“You know,” she adds, “you coach men. Hundreds of them. You’ve helped strangers build self-worth from scratch. And yet—when it’s me—you act like dating is a nuclear threat.”

Yeah. That’s the part I don’t like admitting. I taught men how to win women. Not keep them. Not connect. Just win. I sold the chase. Polished the pitch. What happened after the conquest? Not my department.

She doesn’t back down.

“This isn’t about replacing your father. It’s about finding something that fits who I am now.”

I go quiet.

She sits back, folding her hands in her lap like a judge who’s already made her ruling.

“This isn’t a crisis,” she says. “I’m not marrying a Pilates instructor. ”

“Yet,” I mutter.

She smiles. “But I am open. And that doesn’t erase anything that came before. It just means I’m alive. And aware. And curious.”

Alive. Aware. Curious. God, she even dates like a therapist.

I finally look her in the eye. “You really think you could find that again? Something like... what you had?”

She tilts her head. “Why would I try to find the same thing twice? The point isn’t replication. It’s connection.”

I have nothing for that.

No retort. No joke. Just the creeping horror that she might actually be right.

She picks up her cup again. “You’re not responsible for how I process intimacy, Andrew.”

I frown. “Don’t say words like that. You’re going to make me drop my croissant.”

“You didn’t order one.”

“Exactly. Intuition.”

She quietly chuckles. Then gives me a look I can’t quite place. Half-maternal, half-clinical. Then gathers her bag.

“We done?” I ask.

“For now.”

I stand. Kiss her cheek. It’s instinct, not obligation.

She pats my arm. “You’re a good man, Andrew.”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t make it weird.”

She smirks. “Too late.”

Then she walks away—confident, composed, and apparently back in the dating pool.

I sit back down and finally drink the espresso.

It’s cold.

But it’s still strong.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Rachel walks in like she's just come from a particularly successful Vogue cover shoot. Her heels click. Her smile is... suspiciously euphoric.

She sits. Smooths her skirt. Tucks a lock of hair behind her ear, still smiling.

I raise an eyebrow. "So. I take it, the coffee guy's still around?"

Her grin turns criminal. "His name is Matt."

Matt. Right. Adrian's latest emotional origami project.

I school my face into something encouraging. "And how's Matt?"

She exhales, dreamy. "Honestly? Kind of amazing. He's... grounded. Decisive. He radiates this quiet confidence, you know?"

I nod slowly. "Quiet, like... emotionally intelligent quiet, or 'says nothing and stares at you over the menu' quiet?"

Rachel doesn't even blink. "He ordered for me. Without asking."

I pause.

"Oh?"

She clasps her hands like she's praying to the Church of Alpha. "He just told the waiter, 'We'll do the salmon and the Syrah.' Like it was the most natural thing in the

world. And I didn't even mind."

I blink. "You like salmon?"

"I hate salmon," she says cheerfully. "But the way he said it? I wanted to like salmon."
"

Okay.

"And he paid," she continues. "Just—no debate. Card already out. Said, 'My treat. You're my guest.'"

I try not to flinch.

Rachel leans in. "And then—get this—he said, 'When I'm with a woman, I lead. Not because she can't. But because I want to.'"

I stare at her. "That's... a line."

"It's a good line."

"It's a suspiciously practiced line."

Rachel waves a hand. "Who cares if it's practiced? So is Broadway. Doesn't mean it doesn't work."

Touché.

She pulls out her phone. "He sends me these little voice notes in the morning. Listen to this one."

I brace myself as she hits play.

Matt's voice comes through, low and slow, like he's narrating a meditation app for men who lift.

"Morning, beautiful. Today's intention: you're worthy of pursuit, not performance. I'll be thinking about you... while I conquer my goals."

I pause. "Is that a pep talk or a Peloton ad?"

Rachel giggles. "It's hot!"

"It's... heavily branded."

She shrugs. "So is everything. At least this one comes with abs."

Okay. Deep breath.

"He also gave me this little speech about how women are the prize, but the right man earns the privilege of pursuit through 'energetic congruence.'"

"Energetic... congruence," I echo.

Rachel beams. "Isn't that beautiful?"

"It's something," I say.

She sighs. "I feel safe with him. But also, like, super turned on. Like I want him to pin me to a wall and respect my boundaries, you know?"

"I do. I... deeply do."

“And he never interrupts me. Not once.”

“That’s good,” I say carefully. “Though... do you ever feel like he’s waiting for his cue instead of actually listening?”

She tilts her head. “He does say ‘that’s valid’ a lot.”

I nod. “Mm. Classic empathy filler. Right up there with ‘I hear you’ and ‘Tell me more.’”

Rachel looks faintly troubled, then shakes it off. “Still. I’m not going to nitpick. He’s putting in effort. And he’s really into me.”

“I can see that.”

“And last night, he said he was reading a book about feminine archetypes. He said I give off ‘Queen energy with a hint of Muse.’”

My face doesn’t move. My soul quietly rolls its eyes.

Rachel bites her lip. “You think I’m being love-bombed.”

“I think you’re being... love-marketed,” I say gently. “Like, he’s saying everything right. The question is—what happens if he runs out of script?”

She’s quiet. Just for a second. Then: “I guess we’ll find out.”

I smile. “And if he ever says the words ‘divine feminine vortex,’ I’m legally obligated to intervene. ”

She laughs. “Deal.”

She leaves a few minutes later, floating out of the office like she's been lit from within by a ring light and serotonin.

I stay seated. Let the quiet settle.

Rachel's falling for a man who's working overtime to be her fantasy.

And maybe, maybe he's not faking.

But I know what happens when the fantasy runs out.

And something tells me this Matt isn't built for endurance.

I close my notebook.

Let's just hope Adrian's course comes with a refund policy.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Matt shows up to the Tuesday session with the energy of a man who just texted “u up?” to his own self-worth and got left on read. Usually, he fist-bumps everyone on his way in. Today, he just nods.

“Matt,” I say, raising a brow. “You look like a man who either got lucky or got humbled.”

He exhales. “Honestly? A little of both.”

The other guys chuckle. I do the coach lean — arms crossed, head tilted, masculine posture set to “philosopher lumberjack.”

“Alright,” I say. “Floor’s yours.”

He hesitates.

Then: “It’s Rachel. I think she’s starting to see through me.”

That gets attention. Two guys straighten. One whispers, “Oh shit.”

I nod, slow. “Tell us.”

Matt scratches the back of his neck like the answer’s hidden there. “At first, she loved it. The confidence, the clarity. I said stuff like, ‘I lead with intention’ and ‘I don’t chase, I attract,’ and she practically melted.”

I nod. Those are solid lines. Some of my best work.

“But now?” he continues. “She’s asking questions. Like, ‘What do you mean by that?’ and ‘Where did you learn this?’ And I... I don’t know what I mean. I just memorized the videos.”

Ah.

“Okay,” I say. “So now we’ve entered the advanced phase. She’s testing you.”

“She asked if I meditate,” he blurts. “So I said yes. Now I have a meditation app I haven’t opened and I panic every time she mentions mindfulness.”

The guys laugh. I don’t. Because this — this is where guys quit. The first time the persona needs maintenance.

“You listen to me,” I say, voice low. “Women will test you. That doesn’t mean you abandon your frame. That means you hold it . You’re not lying. You’re evolving. You’re becoming the version of yourself who does meditate. Eventually.”

Matt frowns. “But what if she’s not testing me? What if she’s... just paying attention?”

That one lands with a thud.

I pause. Adjust my stance.

“She’s paying attention,” I say carefully. “Sure. But don’t mistake interest for interrogation. Women want to feel you’re solid. That you know who you are.”

“But I don’t,” he says quietly. “I know who you told me to be. I just thought if I acted that way long enough, I’d become it.”

There's a silence.

Even the guys in the back stop fidgeting.

"That's the point," I say, slower now. "Repetition becomes instinct. You're laying down new tracks. Neuroplasticity. Alpha reconditioning."

He nods, but it's shaky.

"I mean..." he mutters, "I literally had to Google what a Syrah was before I ordered it for her. And I hate salmon. I almost gagged. But she looked impressed, so I just... kept chewing."

Laughter. Nervous. But real.

"I ordered for her, like you said," he adds. "Took the lead. She smiled. But then she asked what my favorite meal was, and I couldn't remember the last time I had one that wasn't performative."

My jaw tightens. Not visibly. But I feel it.

He leans forward. Eyes sharp now, not just anxious. Searching.

"Adrian... how do you know when it's real?"

The question hits harder than it should.

I glance around. The other guys are quiet. Watching me like I'm supposed to have the answer laminated in my back pocket.

"Real takes time," I say automatically.

Matt doesn't blink.

“And... what if the ‘me’ she’s falling for doesn’t exist?”

I freeze for a fraction of a second. Just long enough to register it.

The guy who used to flinch when a woman looked at him is now out here quoting polarity theory and dismantling his own emotional facade.

He’s doing it. And it’s working. But maybe too well.

And maybe — just maybe — he’s not the only one who’s been faking it so long he doesn’t remember where the mask ends.

I slap his shoulder — lightly, reassuring. Old instinct.

“You’re building the man you want to be,” I say. “And if she’s the right woman? She’ll appreciate the effort.”

He nods, but I see it. The doubt. Not just in her. In himself .

And, fine. Maybe in me.

After the session, I sit alone with my notes. They’re blank, because who am I kidding — I haven’t used them in years.

Matt’s voice echoes in my head.

How do you know when it’s real?

I used to know.

Now? I just sell it.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Rachel walks in wearing the kind of outfit women pick when they're either falling in love or quietly preparing to torch the whole thing. Cream blouse. Clean lines. No accessories. Like she's here for clarity.

I offer tea. She declines. Just sits — posture perfect, eyes slightly too bright.

“I need your opinion,” she says.

My internal warning sirens go off immediately. Clients only ask that when they already know the answer and want someone else to say it first.

“Okay,” I say. “Shoot.”

She exhales. “I like him. I do. But... something's off. Like I'm dating a man cosplaying as my type.”

I tilt my head. “What makes you say that?”

Rachel pauses. “He said I'm the embodiment of his ‘divine polarity catalyst.’”

I blink. “That sounds like either a soulmate or a Pokémon evolution.”

She doesn't laugh.

“He's still kind. Still generous,” she continues. “But now I catch him... hesitating. Like he's running his sentences through spellcheck before he speaks. Or he'll say something about ‘masculine leadership’ and then immediately scan my face like he's

waiting for applause.”

I nod. Slowly. “That’s a big shift. ”

“It’s like — the guy I met at the coffee shop? He was nervous. Honest. Maybe a little awkward. But I liked that. And now...” Her voice trails off.

Now, he’s a man trying not to forget his script.

Rachel looks up. “Do you think I’ve been too critical? Maybe I should be grateful he’s putting in the effort.”

I shake my head. “Effort’s great. But performance isn’t the same as presence.”

She flinches a little. I soften my tone.

“Rachel, you don’t need someone who plays your perfect match. You need someone who can stay when things get messy — unscripted — real.”

She nods, but her voice drops to a whisper. “I don’t think he can.”

I let the silence hold.

Finally, she says, “I think he wanted me to believe in a version of him he hasn’t become yet. And I did. For a minute.”

I want to hug her. Instead, I say the thing I know she’s already thinking:

“If you’re the only one being real in this relationship, it’s not a partnership. It’s a performance review.”

She gives a short laugh, shaky and quiet. Then she stands.

“Thanks,” she says. “I just needed to hear it out loud.”

I nod. She leaves. No hug this time.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Matt shows up early.

That's my first clue.

He's usually a "right on time" kind of guy. "Fashionably insecure," I called it once. But today, he's pacing the lobby ten minutes before we open, clutching a green juice like it might refund his self-worth if he squeezes it hard enough.

I hold up a hand. "You okay, or are you prepping to sell me essential oils?"

He gives a hollow laugh. "We broke up."

I blink. "Rachel?"

He nods. "It was... civilized. Quiet. Mutual-ish."

That last part? That's where I know it wasn't.

"She said she felt like I 'lacked emotional presence.' That I was more honest before I tried to be impressive."

Oof.

"She told me I don't know who I am. And maybe I don't. But I was getting there. I was trying."

"Matt—"

“She said I was ‘performing healing instead of doing it.’”

I stare at him.

That’s not breakup vocabulary. That’s coach-speak.

Coach-speak from a very specific source.

I narrow my eyes. “Did she come up with that on her own?”

Matt shifts. Hesitates. Then: “She said she was talking to someone about it. A friend. Or a... mentor.”

“Uh- huh.”

He scratches the back of his neck. “Emily. The podcast woman. She’s her coach.”

And just like that, I go still.

Like the power’s been cut, but the emergency lights haven’t kicked in yet.

Emily.

Of course it was Emily.

“Let me get this straight,” I say, slow. “Rachel goes to Emily for advice. Emily — the woman who called me a ‘walking red flag in a leather jacket with daddy issues’ on a livestream — tells her you’re fake, and now Rachel’s gone?”

Matt winces. “She didn’t say Emily told her to dump me. Just that... Emily helped her see what she already felt.”

I turn, walk three steps, turn again. Controlled fury in athleisure.

“This is what she does,” I mutter. “She poisons the well with feminist poetry and a head tilt. Undermines any man who doesn’t cry on command and pay for therapy in interpretive dance.”

Matt stays quiet. Smart.

“She couldn’t beat me on stage,” I growl. “So now she’s winning through sabotage. Undermining my clients. Dismantling everything I’ve built!”

I look at him.

“You didn’t lose Rachel, Matt. You were targeted. ”

Matt blinks. “I mean... we also kind of didn’t like the same movies.”

“Focus,” I snap.

He nods quickly. “Right. Emily.”

I exhale. Calm. Collected. Furious at a molecular level.

“She wants a war?” I mutter. “Good. I play dirty.”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

I hit "Go Live."

Lighting: adjusted. Earrings: overthought. Not because I'm nervous—just because the algorithm worships symmetry.

The chat is already rolling before I even open my mouth.

@SelfCareSlay: "Yesss it's EMILY O'CLOCK"

@PixieTherapist: "Let's talk soft power babyyy"

I smile into the camera.

"Hi everyone," I say. "Tonight's topic: soft power. Specifically, what happens when performative masculinity feels real. When you meet someone who says all the right things, does all the right moves, but somewhere deep down—you can feel the disconnect."

The chat explodes with flame emojis and personal anecdotes that read like dating autopsies.

"Because let's be honest," I continue, "we've all been there. You meet a guy. He opens the door, quotes Rumi, remembers your coffee order. And for three weeks, you're convinced he's the missing link between therapy and orgasms."

I sip water and lean closer.

“But then the cracks show. Not huge. Just enough to trip you. Like he says the word ‘feminine essence’ unironically. Or he gets weirdly quiet when you ask what he was like as a kid. And suddenly, it all feels... rehearsed.”

@WitchyRhonda: “YES. IT’S ALWAYS A SCRIPT.”

@MargoWithBoundaries: “This is a TED Talk and a seance.”

I smile, pleased. I’m hitting my stride .

“And that’s the danger of soft power,” I say. “It feels safe. It feels intentional. But if it’s built on mimicry instead of truth, it’s not a relationship. It’s branding.”

Fifteen minutes later, I’m mid Q&A, basking in the glow of a 12k viewer count and a comment section full of praise hands and "YES, QUEEN" energy. I’ve just finished a bit on emotional mimicry—how “healing language” gets co-opted by men who’ve never been within 500 feet of a feeling—when a new video question request pings in.

Username: @GrowthInProgress

New account. Blurred profile pic. Verified.

Hmm. Slightly sus, but the submitted question is pure earnest energy:

“What would you say to someone who followed all the emotional growth advice, tried really hard, but still got judged when they showed their real self?”

I sigh, warmed. “This,” I say into the mic, “is exactly the kind of question we need to normalize.”

I click “Accept.”

The screen glitches once.

Then clears.

@HotGirlData: “Wait. WAIT. Is that—?”

@FeministButThirsty: “ADRIAN ZAYNE???”

Yes, it’s him.

The man whose videos have more views than the CDC’s COVID page.

Smiling like a cat in a mouse costume.

The chat detonates.

@JennieComeGetHim: “NOOOOOOOO”

@TherapizeMeDaddy: “I KNEW ‘growthinprogress’ was sus”

I slam the mod panel.

“You used a burner account.”

“I used a curiosity-forward alias,” he says.

“You ambushed my stream.”

“I joined your community circle. Calmly.”

“You’re trending already.”

He grins. “A man’s gotta eat.”

The chat is chaos.

@ZetaGate: “WE NEED MODS AND AN OIL CLEANSE”

@HotGirlAcademic: “this is now a case study in gendered sabotage”

@ShipOrShred: “...I hate them. Also I need them to kiss.”

I stare him down. “Fine. What’s your actual question?”

He leans back. “It’s more of a case study. About a student of mine. Let’s call him... Trevor.”

My stomach drops. The cocktail. The bar called Bar. The Patagonia vest that deserves jail time.

He wouldn’t.

Oh, he would.

“Trevor,” Adrian continues, “is what we call a ‘late bloomer with brand enthusiasm.’ He subscribed to my newsletter. Watched every video. Once tagged me in a selfie with the caption ‘High-Value Energy.’”

The chat is giggling like a slumber party.

@CringeAndCo: “NO NOT HIGH VALUE ENERGY”

@SpiritualCatfish: “this is why I date women”

“Trevor tried,” Adrian goes on. “He cleaned up. Worked on his posture. Got new cologne. He was proud. He was ready. And then—he matched with a woman he admired.”

Oh no.

“He took her to a minimalist bar. Complimented her boundaries. Quoted dopamine discipline. Offered to ‘contain her feminine energy’ halfway through a \$19 cocktail.”

I stare straight into the lens like it might suck me out of this reality.

“That woman?” Adrian says, his voice dipping into soft smug.

“You...” I gasp.

“You!” he echoes. “Emily. Saint of Emotional Depth. Crusader against My Entire Deal. And there you were—on a date with my disciple.”

The chat riots.

@IsHeReal: “WAIT. SHE DATED A ZETA?”

@NotMeDrinkingTurmeric: “EMILY. EXPLAIN.”

@ShamefullyTeamAdrian: “i’m living and dying simultaneously”

My face is on fire.

Then—

With one smug click, Adrian’s Zoom background shifts.

The bar. That bar. And the selfie of Trevor and Adrian, with me in the background. I'm shot mid-lip bite.

The chat riots harder.

@BuzzBattleOfficial: "HE DID NOT JUST GREENSCREEN HER DATE"

@EmilyILoveYouBut: "that was a lip bite. a submission signal."

@ShipOrShred: "I hate them. I need them to kiss. I need therapy."

Adrian folds his hands like a smug little dating demon at a TED Talk. "You keep calling it manipulation. I call it a predictable outcome."

I blink. Once. Twice. My soul tries to detach and float out the window, but my ring light traps it.

"You stalked my life and turned it into décor."

"I prefer: curated a multimedia learning moment."

"You're insane."

"And yet," he says, gesturing lazily behind him, "so are the vibes."

"Full analysis goes live tomorrow on my channel," Adrian continues. "Working title: When the Slayer Catches Feelings."

I click "End Stream."

The screen blinks.

Adrian smirks like he won.

And then—he's gone.

I black out for three seconds. When I come to, the chat is still rolling.

@SoftPowerGate: "I WASN'T GOING TO WATCH NEXT WEEK BUT NOW I'M HOSTING A VIEWING PARTY"

@DatingDisasterClub: "REPLAY BUTTON IS EXHAUSTED"

@ShipOrShred: "this isn't content it's an ecosystem and I live here now"

I close the laptop.

Close my eyes.

Scream into a pillow.

Trevor. Freaking. Trevor .

Next time I date someone in a Patagonia vest, I'm checking his subscription history first.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

I hadn't opened my dashboard in two days. Not because I was scared.

Okay. Fine. Because I was scared.

But morbid curiosity is stronger than dignity, so here I am, staring at the backend of my career like it just sent me a drunk text.

My stomach makes a noise I'm not emotionally prepared to interpret.

Engagement rate: up 340%.

Average watch time: 10 minutes.

Demographic breakdown: more men than usual. A lot more.

I scroll. The top-performing clip is a 13-second loop of me glaring at Adrian while he smug-monologues like he invented smirking.

It has over a hundred thousand likes.

I close the browser. Reopen it immediately. Then slam the laptop shut like it just called me babe and asked for feet pics.

My phone buzzes.

JESSIE:

Open your analytics yet? Or still pretending it didn't happen?

I call her. No preamble.

“He Zoom-bombed me.”

“You're trending in six countries. ”

“He changed his background to my face, Jessie.”

“To be fair,” she says, “it was a flattering freeze-frame. Excellent cheekbones.”

“I blacked out from shame and came to with a Twitch sponsorship offer.”

“Yeah,” Jessie says, completely unfazed. “BuzzBattle wants to do a reaction segment called ‘Zeta or Nah.’ You decide in real time if a clip is toxic or just cringey.”

I make a noise somewhere between a laugh and a low-level exorcism.

“You realize,” she adds, “he made you viral.”

“He made me a meme.”

“A good meme.”

I flop onto the bed and stare at the ceiling. “Jessie. Be honest. Are you... into him?”

She snorts. “No.”

“That was fast.”

“I mean, he’s hot, sure. And objectively charismatic. And surprisingly well-lit for someone who lives in constant moral shadow.”

I groan. “So yes.”

There’s a pause.

Then, quieter: “Look. I’m not saying he’s good for you. I’m just saying... he’s good for your content.”

I stare at the ceiling like it owes me money.

“You’re saying I should be grateful to the man who hijacked my livestream with photographic evidence of my worst romantic choices?”

“I’m saying the internet already shipped it, built a fan wiki, and is currently arguing about your attachment styles on Reddit.”

I hurl a pillow across the room.

Jessie’s voice turns annoyingly gentle. “You don’t have to like him. Just don’t block what’s working.”

I don’t answer.

Mostly because I’m not sure if I’m still mad at Adrian—

—or at Jessie for not being mad enough.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Matt looks like a man who just lost a duel to his own optimism.

He's slouched on the edge of the studio couch, fingers laced like a prayer he doesn't believe in anymore.

"She's not answering my texts," he says.

I raise an eyebrow. "That could mean a lot of things. Maybe she's busy. Maybe she's reflecting. Maybe her phone is in a river because you said 'I'm holding space for your journey' while she was crying."

He flinches. A little.

"I messed it up," he admits. "And I don't just mean the conversation. I mean... the whole thing. From the start."

Now that's rare. Most guys, even post-breakup, are still looking for a way to win. Still trying to spin the story so they don't come off like the villain—or worse, the loser.

But Matt?

Matt looks like he doesn't care how it looks. Only that it's gone.

"I keep replaying the way she looked at me," he says quietly. "Like I was a script she already knew the ending to."

I feel that one.

Deep in the ribs.

And instinctively, my response kicks in. The usual speech.

“Matt,” I say, leaning back, “you’re young, you’re decent-looking, you’ve done the work. There are hundreds of Rachels out there. Thousands. You can walk into Erewhon tomorrow and accidentally fall in love over raw honey. ”

He doesn’t laugh.

He just looks at me, eyes steady.

“I don’t want another Rachel,” he says. “I want her.”

I freeze.

He means it. Not like a guy clinging to scarcity, but like someone who’s seen the real thing and knows he’s not going to get that twice by accident.

“Look,” he adds, “I know you probably think this is weak. Or codependent. Or whatever word you use when someone actually cares.”

That stings more than I want to admit.

I stand. Walk to the window like that’ll help me outrun the part of myself that does think those things—until recently.

“You love her?” I ask, without looking.

He hesitates. “I think I could. If she let me try again.”

That’s enough.

I turn back around. “Alright.”

Matt blinks. “Alright?”

“You want her back? We’ll get her back. If you agree to document everything and let me turn it into a case study.”

“You really think I can?”

I give him a long look. “I think heartbreak’s inevitable. Might as well make it content.”

His smile wobbles. “That’s bleak.”

I nod. “But on-brand.”

He gives a wary chuckle. “You’re serious?”

“Dead serious,” I say. “Think about it: one guy, one mission, one shot at real love. The raw footage alone is a case study. We build a whole series—coaching, accountability, live check-ins. Call it The Ex Files . ”

Matt blinks again, slower this time. “You want to turn my emotional spiral into a marketing asset.”

I spread my hands. “Matt, your spiral has structure. Stakes. A growth arc. And a chance at a satisfying third act. That’s practically a sales page in human form.”

He stares at me like he's trying to decide whether to be insulted or flattered.

I add, more gently, "And hey—if she says yes, you don't just get the girl. You become the testimonial."

Finally, a real smile. "This is either genius or wildly unethical."

I grin. "Why not both?"

The second Matt leaves, the room deflates.

Not just from his puppy-dog sincerity or the smell of stress sweat he insists is pheromonal—but from the part of me that was pretending this wasn't a terrible idea.

The door clicks shut behind him and I finally let out the breath I didn't know I was holding, which, ironically, is something I mock people for saying.

I rake a hand through my hair and head for the bar cart. Something about coaching other people through their emotional disasters always makes me want whiskey. Coaching a guy like Matt through one? I need a fucking sedative.

The ice cubes clink like they're judging me. I swirl the glass, take a sip, and stare at the whiteboard where "TRUST = TENSION + PRESENCE" still sits half-erased like a ghost of confidence past.

I shouldn't have said yes .

I know that. Helping Matt win Rachel back? That's not coaching. That's a romcom side quest. With feelings. And the worst part is—it actually matters to him. I saw it.

That stupid, hopeful look. Like love's a group project and I just agreed to do the PowerPoint.

Jesus.

I pace, the way I do when my brain starts looking for exits. There's gotta be someone else. Someone we can loop in who still has pull with Rachel.

Not his friends—they think she's out of his league.

Not his exes—wrong type of testimonial.

Not his mom—although honestly, she'd probably land better.

I pause mid-step.

Emily.

Nope. Nope. Next.

I take another sip. Start pacing again.

Emily fucking Parrish.

I try a few more mental gymnastics—somebody from the podcast team? Rachel's co-worker? A well-placed meme campaign? But it's like trying to convince yourself you're not hungry when you can smell bacon.

It always comes back to her.

Of course it does. Because even when she's wrong, she's persuasive.

And even when she's playing dirty, she's clean-cut enough that people cheer.

Rachel trusts her. The audience loves her.

And worst of all—she gets it. The performance of love.

The way sincerity sells. The way stories shape decisions more than facts ever could.

I sit down hard on the edge of the desk and glare at nothing. My drink sweats onto my hand. I should be furious about this. About the fact that I need her now. That the same woman who clipped me into oblivion on her little feminist fireside chat is now the key to my student's redemption arc.

But I'm not furious.

I'm...fine. Annoyed, sure. But that anger I had two days ago? That screen-punching rage? Gone.

I got my licks in. Dropped a few bombs of my own. Watched her flinch when I called her predictable. A few thousand new followers, some well-placed smirks. Call it even.

Now it's not personal.

It's tactical.

Rachel trusts her. That's leverage.

If I spin this right, it won't even look like I'm crawling back. It'll look like I'm offering an olive branch. Facilitating closure. Being the bigger man. Growth-oriented. Mature.

Ugh.

This is worse than crawling. This is rebranding .

But it could work.

And if I line up the optics right—some go-between, a few staged touchpoints—it won't even look like it's about me. It'll look like I'm empowering women to collaborate. Maybe I throw in a comment about mutual respect. A wink to our “shared mission.”

God, I hate how good I am at this.

I down the rest of my drink and set the glass aside.

There's a knock at the edge of my conscience. The part of me that remembers who she is—not just the marketing asset, but the woman who made me actually enjoy losing an argument. The one whose laugh makes people forget their point. The one who looked at me, once, like I wasn't a bit.

She's dangerous.

And annoyingly useful.

I lean back in the chair, arms behind my head, eyes on the ceiling like maybe I'll find a better idea in the drywall.

But there it is again.

Emily. Damn. Parrish.

The name tastes like pride and mouthwash.

The podcast stunt still pisses me off—don't get me wrong. That whole “guess who's a manipulative piece of hot trash” segment? Weaponized charisma at its most smug. But somewhere between the outrage and the editing notes, I found myself impressed.

Guess humiliation is a great audition.

And if I'm being honest—something I avoid unless cornered or on camera—I've been waiting to see what she does next. Waiting for her to pull a punch or double down. To pivot or spiral.

She didn't.

She recalibrated.

She's like me. Just younger. Prettier. And perhaps better at making people cry in under ten minutes.

I grab my phone. Scroll past the unopened texts from Tyler, the bookmarked thirst comments, the saved video of her eyebrow twitching at me like it wanted to unionize.

Then I pause.

I'm not asking Emily for help. That would imply weakness. This is a favor. For Matt. Via a third party. It's not a retreat. It's a delegation .

I scrubbed a hand down my face and let out a sigh that feels like a tax write-off. Then I tap my screen.

“Jessie,” I say when her face appears, framed by curtain bangs and chaos.

She's eating something aggressively crunchy.

"Let me guess," she says, chewing. "Another breakthrough that requires emotional labor you're not equipped to handle?"

"Close," I mutter. "I need Emily."

There's a pause. Then:

"Okay, do you want her forgiveness, her endorsement, or her password to feminism? Because I feel like that's three separate battle plans."

I stand, pacing across the studio. My voice drops into the register I reserve for clients and damage control.

"I need her help with Matt and Rachel. Real help. Like—therapeutic mind games but make it matchmaker."

Jessie blinks. "You mean... like a crossover episode?"

I turn. "A collab."

"Wow," she says slowly. "You really want Rachel and Matt to work."

"It's not just about them. Rachel's the one that got away. If we help them fix it, it's a proof point. For both of us. And the audience already thinks Emily and I have chemistry."

"Sexual tension is not a business model."

"It is if you don't flinch," I shoot back.

Jessie narrows her eyes. “So you want me to pitch the idea to Emily, even though you just ambushed her on her podcast and humiliated her in front of an audience of brunch feminists.”

“I wouldn’t say ambushed—”

“You called in mid-episode and exposed her date for quoting your advice like it was scripture.”

“Okay, fine. Yes. I humiliated her. But the metrics—”

“Don’t,” Jessie says. “Don’t lead with metrics.”

I sit down, suddenly tired. “I can’t talk to her myself. She doesn’t trust me. And frankly, she shouldn’t. So I need to offer her something she can’t get anywhere else.”

“A public apology? A full retraction? A tasteful suicide?” Jessie deadpans.

“A narrative,” I say. “Closure. Triumph. A redemptive arc for her client that makes her look like a coaching goddess. We fix Rachel and Matt—together—and Emily gets to say her methods worked.”

Jessie tilts her head. “You’re not wrong. But she’s going to see through it.”

“Which is why you ask her.”

She arches her brow. “You want me to play go-between?”

“You already are,” I say. “You’re the only person who knows both sides. She trusts you.”

“She used to. Until I started working for the man who weaponizes eye contact.”

I run a hand through my hair. “Tell her it’s for the brand. For the clients. For her audience. Hell, tell her Matt’s hopeless without her. All of those things are true.”

Jessie leans back in her chair. “So you want me to text her like ‘Hey girl, want to emotionally rehabilitate two attractive clients and film the redemption arc?’”

“Make it sound strategic. Use words like ‘synergy’ and ‘pilot concept.’ Mention data. She’s soft for data.”

“You’re soft for her. ”

I don’t flinch. Don’t blink.

Just say, “That memo stays off the record.”

Jessie smirks.

For a second, neither of us speaks. I can hear my own heartbeat and the faint sound of Jessie opening another snack.

Finally, she says, “Okay. I’ll float the idea.”

I nod. “Carefully. Make it sound like it came from you.”

“And if she says no?”

“Then I find another way to fix it,” I say.

“But not as good.”

I don't answer.

Jessie gives me a long look. "You realize, if this works, she's going to be part of your life for more than a week."

"I'm counting on it."

"Yeah," Jessie mutters, pulling up her Messages app. "That's the part that's going to get you in trouble."

I don't argue. Just watch Jessie type.

This is a strategic play—nothing more.

Emily needs the win as much as I do.

So if I can use her without hurting her?

Technically, that is generosity.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Rachel sits on the couch like her bones have been replaced with static. The blazer's gone. So are the earrings. She's wearing a zip-up sweatshirt and existential dread. No makeup, hair in a bun so angry it's practically protesting.

"I regret breaking up with him," she says.

I nod slowly.

"It just keeps coming to me. I watched him blink. He did that thing guys do when they think you're making a mistake but they're too emotionally evolved to say it."

"The 'disappointed Jedi' face?"

"Exactly."

She sighs. Not a dramatic sigh. A real one. The kind that leaves soot behind.

"I don't know if it was the right thing," she mutters. "I keep thinking maybe I just—sabotaged something good."

"No." I sit up straighter. "You walked away from someone performing vulnerability instead of practicing it. There's a difference."

Rachel's lip wobbles. She blinks up at the ceiling like maybe God will offer a second opinion.

"I just..." she trails off. "I'm so tired, Emily. The thought of getting to know someone

new feels like filing my taxes after a house fire.”

That lands in my gut like a rock.

“Then don’t date yet,” I say gently. “Rest. Grieve. Heal. We’re not doing exposure therapy for your attachment style.”

Rachel lets out a weak laugh. “God, I wish I could be one of those girls who breaks up and immediately starts making out with bartenders.”

“You can. Just say it’s part of your healing journey and wear lip gloss.”

She smiles, barely. I hold her gaze.

“You made the right call. You didn’t walk away from something good. You walked away from something scripted.”

Rachel nods, but it’s the kind of nod people give when they’re not ready to believe themselves yet.

“I’ll text you the angry playlist,” I offer.

She reaches for her bag. “Make it acoustic. I want to cry and feel superior.”

The moment she leaves, I flop dramatically into my chair, exhale, and grab my phone. It buzzes mid-reach.

Jessie Caldwell calling.

Thank God.

After emotionally exfoliating Rachel for an hour, I'm desperate for a hit of dopamine. Preferably in meme form. Or a shared fantasy where Adrian Zayn gets lightly concussed by a collapsing ring light.

I answer, already smiling.

"Oh good, my favorite double agent. Please tell me you've uncovered proof that Adrian's jawline is AI-generated and his real face is just a morally confused potato—"

"Emily."

Jessie's voice drops ten shades into full-on professional NPR. "This is a semi-formal call. I'm reaching out on behalf of Zayne Media."

My smile stalls .

"...Excuse me?"

"Adrian wants to float a small content collab," she continues. "Just one episode. Video or audio. Something lightly reactive with both of you in it."

"What, like a reality show where I don't throw a mug at him?"

"More like a limited edition face-off. We're testing a format where your—how do I put this gently—unresolved tension plays well on camera."

I snort. "So now I'm a walking plot twist."

"You've always been one. He just finally noticed."

I roll my eyes. “I assume he didn’t want to call me himself?”

“He thought I’d have a better shot.”

“So he sent my best friend to negotiate like I’m a diplomatic incident.”

“I mean... am I wrong?”

I sigh. “Jessie, come on. We barely made it through one panel without turning it into verbal foreplay for a courtroom drama. You want me to what—set up a camera and flirt-fight him for engagement metrics?”

“I want you to control the story. Use your voice. Reclaim your narrative. You know, all those empowering things you say on-air before emotionally disemboweling tech bros.”

Damn it. She’s using my own lines against me.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I’m asking.”

A pause.

Then I add, “I have some audio drafts from that solo episode I never ran. Brainstorm stuff. Maybe a few segments he could riff off of. Want me to send them to you first?”

“Sure,” Jessie says. “Whatever makes this easier.”

“Cool. I’ll just dig them out and share the folder.”

“And Emily?” she adds, voice softening. “Don’t let him frame this. If you show up, make it yours.”

She hangs up.

I open my Drive and click through the chaos.

Raw_logs looks right. Click. Share.

Sent, I text her. If he says ‘synergy’ with a straight face, I’m throwing something sharp.

I stretch, crack my neck, and reach for the tea.

Then my calendar pings.

Reminder: Send dream logs to Dr. Lisa before Friday.

Right. That’s what I’ll do next.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

There are very few moments in life when I feel genuinely disoriented.

Mildly amused? Regularly.

Profoundly pleased with myself? Hourly.

But this? Sitting at my desk, watching a folder labeled Raw_logs sprout thirteen audio files?

This is new.

Jessie had forwarded it earlier today—said that she hadn’t had time to check it. I expected outtakes. Feminist rambling. Maybe a bonus track where Emily called me a sentient leather jacket or a walking, talking red flag.

So naturally, I clicked.

The first file opened with her voice. Low. Raspy. Not polished for the mic—real.

“Okay. Dream log. He was there again.”

I blinked.

“Adrian. Just—there. No warning. No shirt. No shame.”

My smoothie stalled halfway to my mouth.

I hit pause. Rewound. Played it again...

Oh.

Oh, that was not an outtake.

That was a confession. A series. A library of admissions with my name on them—moaned, muttered, and occasionally growled.

And dear God, they got worse . In the best possible way .

By the fourth clip, I wasn't smirking anymore. She described things with a kind of reluctant clarity that made it very hard to breathe. Very hard to focus. Very hard, period.

And it wasn't just the sex. It was the creativity .

I'd helped guys navigate threesomes, dominance games, even the logistics of shower sex in apartments with no water pressure. But Emily Parrish? She dreamed up scenarios that needed a stunt coordinator. Unhinged. Artful. Borderline illegal in Utah. And somehow, I was both the villain and the reward.

It was diabolical. Erotic. I never would've guessed she had that in her.

And now? Well. Now it's all I can think about.

The door creaks open.

I hit pause automatically.

Tyler pokes his head in like we're roommates. "Yo. Dropping your coffee.

Also—random, but I totally bet on you and the Zeta Slayer in the hookup pool. Two-to-one odds. Should’ve been higher.”

I blink. “Oh, right... a betting pool.”

“There’s a Discord. Full fantasy league. Someone made a trailer.”

He grins. “Just saying—you seal the deal this week, I win eighty bucks. No pressure.”

He leaves.

I sit there.

Thirteen files. Over an hour of listening.

I should feel bad. I should close the folder. Email Jessie. Tell her she messed up. Maybe pretend I never opened them.

But I don’t .

I just scroll down to number 13.

The last one.

The timestamp says eleven minutes.

And in that moment, I am not thinking about PR. Or revenge. Or leverage.

I am thinking about her mouth.

And the fact that next time I see her, I won’t be thinking at all.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

I'm in sweatpants. Hair up, no bra, nearly horizontal. One AirPods in. Spotify's humming something acoustic about personal growth. Basically: I'm defenseless.

I shuffle to the door, expecting a neighbor, a fire drill, maybe someone trying to sell me essential oils and eternal salvation. I open it without looking. Big mistake.

Adrian Zayn is standing there. Dressed in black. Easy posture. Smirk locked and loaded.

He's holding a small brown paper bag like he's brought either enlightenment or blackmail.

"Evening," he says.

I stare.

What the hell.

"That's one way to say hi."

I tighten my grip on the door. "Why are you here?"

He lifts the bag. "I've got you something."

"Oh my God, is that more merch?" I step back. "If it says 'Hold Frame,' I'm calling the cops."

He steps just far enough inside to hand me the bag. “It’s tea.”

I blink. “Tea?”

“Rare blend,” he says smoothly. “No caffeine. Thought it’s appropriate for the night time.”

“I was literally asleep.”

“Exactly.”

I look down at the bag. Then back at him.

“You’re acting weird,” I say.

He smiles. “I’ve been told.”

I shut the door slowly, still staring at him like he might disappear if I blink too hard.

He doesn’t.

He wanders into my kitchen like this is a casual visit and not an ambush on my sanity.

“You want to explain what’s actually going on?” I ask, arms crossed over my very unstrategic tank top.

“I just thought I’d stop by,” he says. “See how you were doing. Share a cup of something warm.”

“Tea?”

He turns toward me, still smiling. “Cambodian blue lotus. Subtle. Smooth. Lucid dreaming effect.”

I narrow my eyes. “Why are you so invested in my sleep?”

He tilts his head. “Call it professional curiosity.”

I laugh once, sharp. “You are not my therapist.”

He takes a single step closer. Not enough to be obvious. Just enough that I feel it in my knees.

“I didn’t say I was,” he murmurs. “But you’ve had very... interesting dreams lately.”

My spine locks.

He’s still watching me. Not scanning—just knowing. Like he can sense the blood rushing to my throat without needing to look.

I keep my voice steady. Almost.

“Have I? ”

He nods. “Go ahead. Tell me how this one ends.”

Then—very gently—he reaches out and brushes a strand of hair away from my cheek. Just a touch, barely there.

But I feel it everywhere.

The silence after that is louder than it has any right to be.

He doesn't move.

Neither do I.

My feet forget how to work.

His eyes stay on mine. Cool. Certain.

I should say something.

Anything.

A joke. A deflection. A verbal grenade.

Instead, I stand there like someone's unplugged my entire personality. Like a woman who's just been invited into her own fantasy.

His hand is already gone, but my skin still buzzes where he touched me. My breath feels shallow.

His eyes are still on me—steady, unreadable, but heavy with something I can't name without blushing.

He doesn't move.

Not forward. Not back.

He doesn't have to.

I'm already unraveling.

"Say it," he says softly.

The words hit like an echo from a dream I haven't admitted to yet.

"Say what?"

He tilts his head. "Whatever it is you're not saying."

I swallow. Hard.

What I'm not saying is :

I dreamed of your mouth.

I dreamed of giving in.

I dreamed of losing it, and liking it.

Instead, I step forward.

Barely.

A shift of weight.

A surrender you could miss if you weren't looking.

But he sees it.

He doesn't pounce. That's not his style.

He waits. Lets me walk the last few inches on my own—like he's giving me all the

control while knowing I have none left.

When I reach him, my hand lifts before I can stop it.

I touch his jaw—just lightly, like I need to make sure he’s real.

He’s warm. Solid. Here.

And when I don’t pull back, he moves. Slowly. Deliberately.

His hand finds my waist—light pressure, just enough to let me feel the outline of choice.

He leans in like he’s asking a question with his mouth, not his words.

And I—

I tilt up.

Answering.

I feel the moment our lips touch like an electric shock beneath my skin. His mouth is warm, confident, unhurried. He kisses me like he has all the time in the world. Like he knows he’s been kissing me in dreams for weeks and wants to make sure I notice the difference.

I do .

I notice everything.

The way he doesn’t grab. The way he holds. The restraint in his fingertips. The

tension wound so tightly in his body it makes me ache.

When he pulls back, just enough to breathe, I don't move.

I'm afraid if I open my mouth, I'll ask him to ruin me.

"Is this the part where you stop me?" he murmurs.

And this time, I do say something.

"Don't stop."

That's it.

That's the thread pulled.

He kisses me again, harder. His hand slides under my tank top, his palm hot against my bare skin. I arch toward him like I'm being pulled, like there's nothing else—no commentary, no control, no public opposition—just this.

Just him.

Just now.

He walks me backward, slow and sure, until my thighs hit the edge of the bed I haven't bothered making.

When he pulls off his hoodie, I forget how breathing works.

When he touches me again, I stop trying to remember.

I reach for him without thinking. He catches me like he knew I would.

More than anything, I'm afraid to wake up.

I don't.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Her hair is a mess.

Not the “sex hair” kind they photoshop on perfume ads. The real kind. Lopsided bun, strands stuck to her cheek, one curl trying to unionize against gravity. It should be funny.

It is, actually.

But also... something else.

She sits on the edge of the bed, mug in hand, legs bare. Barely awake. The kind of quiet you only get when someone forgets to be defensive.

And for some reason, I can’t look at her for too long without something in my chest doing a weird little ache-shift-ache loop.

So naturally, I say the dumbest thing possible.

“Do you always make that little noise when you stretch, or was that a performance exclusive?”

She blinks.

Sips her tea.

Then looks at me with the vague expression of someone deciding between murder and sarcasm.

“Did you seriously just talk to me like a man who owns a podcast mic?”

“Too soon?”

She narrows her eyes. “Too true.”

I smile. But not all the way.

She stays quiet .

And I hate that part of me—the one I trained out of existence years ago—that wants to fill that silence. Wants to understand what she’s thinking.

Which is terrifying.

Because I’ve spent a decade mastering the art of not needing to know that.

I get up. Find my pants. Fasten my belt slowly, like that will somehow make this feel more casual. Like I haven’t watched her fall apart under me and worshipped every second.

“This doesn’t have to be complicated,” I say.

Which is, in fact, the thing people only say right before it becomes complicated.

She doesn’t answer.

She just watches me. Quiet. Still half-dressed. Still barefoot.

And somehow that makes me feel more naked than she is.

I grab my shirt.

“Anyway. I should go.”

Still casual. Still cool.

Totally normal to flee after you’ve just had the most unsettlingly real sex of your adult life with the one woman who’s publicly called you a “charismatic algorithm in pants.”

Totally.

“Are you running from me,” she says finally, “or just from the part where you liked it?”

I turn, half-buttoned, halfway out the door of my own emotional bandwidth.

She’s smiling, but it doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

“I’m not running,” I say. “I’m just... emotionally jogging. ”

That gets a laugh.

A real one. Soft. A little cracked.

She pulls her legs up, hugs her knees, looks at me like she can already see the next three moves.

Which, fair. She probably can.

“Jog carefully,” she says.

“Always.”

And I leave before I say something honest.

Because coming over once was the game.

Staying would have meant I forgot the rules.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

“So,” Dr. Lisa says, clicking her pen like it’s a loaded weapon, “how’s the dream journaling going?”

I wince. Not the correct response, and we both know it.

“I sent you the folder like you asked. Labeled, dated, ethically unhinged.”

“About that,” she says gently, “I think there may have been a mix-up. The files I received sounded more like... rough podcast drafts?”

I blink. “What?”

“Very polished. You narrating ideas. No dreams that I could identify—unless your subconscious involves mid-roll ad breaks.”

Oh no. And yes, it explains everything.

“Wrong folder,” I mumble. “Wrong people. I sent two hours of voice-memo sex dreams to Jessie. And it looks like she shared them with Adrian.”

She pauses. “Adrian. The man from your dreams?”

“Yeah. But now the dreams are real. As of yesterday.”

“Ah.”

That’s it. Ah.

The professional-grade way to say: you catastrophically horny idiot .

“Anyway,” I sigh. “You don’t have them. Let’s move on.”

“If you’re ready.”

I’m not. Not even close.

But she gives me that look—the one that always says you don’t have to say it, but you should .

“He showed up at my apartment,” I say.

Her pen moves.

“With tea,” I add. “Cambodian blue lotus. Said it helps with lucid dreaming.”

“That’s oddly specific.”

“Right?” I laugh. “It was so calculated I wanted to throw the bag at him. But also I wanted to boil it. And drink it. And then maybe climb him like a tree.”

“So what happened?”

I hesitate.

“We skipped the tea. But the rest went as planned.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“Disoriented,” I say. “Like I opened a door I can’t shut without slamming part of

myself in it.”

She waits.

“It wasn’t just sex,” I say. “I mean, it was sex—really, really unfairly good sex—but... it felt like he knew me. Not just my body. My patterns. My tells. Like he wasn’t reacting, he was reading me. And not with some pickup-artist formula, either. With intention.”

“How did he act afterward?”

“Controlled. A little distant. But not like he didn’t care. More like—like he was trying really hard not to.”

I sit back. Let my head fall against the cushion.

“You know what’s worst?” I mutter. “I think he already knew I had feelings. Before I did. He looked at me like it was all confirmed. Like he’d been waiting for me to figure it out.”

“And have you?”

I don’t answer right away.

Because the answer is yes .

Yes, I have feelings.

Yes, I want him.

Yes, it scares the hell out of me.

And yes—I have no idea what he wants now.

“I think I want to know what he’s going to do next,” I say finally.

Dr. Lisa smiles—just barely.

“So you’re not done.”

“No,” I say. “But I really wish I were.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Matt catches me just as I'm entering the studio.

He barrels toward me like he's on a mission. I brace for something chaotic— a question like “Do you think jealousy is hot if it's symmetrical?”

Instead, he just says, “I'm not doing the show.”

I blink. “You mean the pitch I haven't even sent to Jessie yet?”

He scratches the back of his neck. “Yeah. That one.”

I wait. Matt doesn't usually cancel things.

“I don't want it to feel like I'm trying to win her back on camera,” he says. “Like she's some kind of campaign I'm running.”

I nod slowly. “That was kind of the idea, though.”

“Yeah,” he says. “But... if I do it that way, I'm still performing. I'm still trying to be what she wants, instead of just—being who I am.”

Now I really stare at him.

He shifts on his feet. “I dunno. I was gonna text you about it. But then I thought if I said it out loud, maybe I wouldn't change my mind tomorrow.”

A laugh almost escapes me. It's not mocking—more like surprise. Genuine, startled

pride.

“Well,” I say. “If it helps, this is one of the most adult things I’ve ever heard you say.”

He winces. “Don’t make it weird.”

“No, seriously. This is like... growth. Do you feel it? Right in the chest? Sort of like a cramp, but with dignity? ”

Matt glares at me. “It’s still weird.”

I clap him on the shoulder. “Weird is the right direction.”

We stand there for a second. Matt looks out at the parking lot like he’s considering running for it.

“She’s not talking to me yet,” he says quietly. “But I think she’s reading my texts again. Like, they’re getting delivered.”

“Progress.”

“I’m not expecting anything,” he adds quickly. “I just want to be someone she doesn’t have to flinch around anymore. That’s the win.”

I nod. “You sure you don’t want to say all this into a ring light for content?”

He flips me off.

I grin. “I’m proud of you.”

“Ugh. I hate that compliment.”

“Good. Means you earned it.”

Matt exhales. “Anyway. Just wanted to say it straight. I know I kinda got everyone hyped for the idea.”

I shake my head. “It’s fine. To be honest, that was one of my dumber ideas. And I have plenty to choose from.”

He gives me a quick, awkward nod. “Later.”

I watch him go. His posture is still a little too performative, like he’s walking to background music only he can hear—but the volume’s lower now. And for once, I don’t feel the need to fix him.

When I get to the office, the first thing I notice is the silence.

Not the good kind. Not focused, productive silence .

The kind that usually comes right before a PR crisis or a Slack meltdown involving the phrase "accidental nudity."

I slide into my office, power up the screen, and see it.

The folder.

Raw_logs

Still in the shared drive. Still wide open like a goddamn bear trap.

I curse under my breath and click. The files are all there. Same time stamps. Same titles. A solid hour of audio Emily definitely doesn't want me—or anyone else—hearing.

And then I hear the footsteps.

Of course it's Tyler.

He leans against the doorframe like a smug little algorithm with too much access and not enough shame.

“You know,” he says, “I was gonna ping you, but I figured you'd see it eventually.”

I don't look up. “What exactly did you see, Tyler?”

“Let's just say your girl has a vivid imagination. And impressive breath control.”

I exhale slowly. Count to three.

Then look up.

“Delete them.”

He blinks. “Excuse me?”

“Delete the folder. Lock it. Kill it. Burn the server.”

Tyler gives me a look that belongs in a courtroom drama. The kind where someone's about to say “But Your Honor, the footage speaks for itself.”

“You’re serious?”

“Dead. ”

“Come on,” he says, stepping in. “Do you know the kind of reach this could get? Viral potential? I could clip a single sentence and we’d be trending on TikTok in under four hours.”

“She’s not a campaign.”

“She’s an influencer,” he shoots back. “That is, an attention whore.”

I stand.

He doesn’t flinch.

But he doesn’t smirk either.

“Let me guess,” I say. “Still tracking your bet?”

That gets a twitch.

Just a little one, but it’s there.

“Of course I tracked it. I won.”

“You think this is about winning?”

“It’s always about winning. That was your rule, remember?”

My jaw locks. I don’t answer.

He studies me. Slowly. Too slowly.

“Wait,” he says. “You actually fucked her.”

No question mark.

“So it’s true,” Tyler says.

“And you’re already plotting how to use it!” I feel it heat behind my eyes. I breathe. Swallow it. “Of course you are.”

“You trained me to.”

That hangs there. Heavy. Ugly.

And true.

I sit back down, jaw tight.

“Then unlearn it.”

Tyler scoffs, turns toward the door, and mutters just loud enough for me to hear: “You’re making a mistake.”

Then he’s gone .

And I’m alone again.

With the folder.

With the memory.

With the fact that I have, in fact, forgotten the rules.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

I get a bad feeling the second I see Jessie's text.

JESSIE:

Don't check Twitter.

Or do.

But make sure you sit first.

Then come the emojis: tape recorder, fire, coffin. Jessie doesn't do metaphors. If she's cryptic, it's already too late.

I open my phone.

MORGAN (Group Chat – LadyPodz United):

Girl... is this you??

Attached: TikTok link.

Caption: "When the feminist queen dreams of the Zeta King"

I click.

My voice. Crystal clear. Breathy. Private.

“Adrian. Just—there. No warning. No shirt. No shame.”

The audio ends, and the screen smash-cuts to a montage of Adrian smirking, backlit, sipping something probably overpriced, while Twitter text overlays scream:

“She SAID she hated him.”

“The mic didn’t just catch feelings. It caught her climax.”

I slam my phone down. This isn’t happening.

Except it is.

I grab my laptop. Open Twitter.

The hashtags are trending:

#ZetaLeaks

#EnemiesToOvershare

#EmilyMoansGate

People are debating whether it’s real.

@AI4Justice:

“Cadence is off. Probably AI-trained on podcast snippets. Look at the breath curve at 0:09.”

@FeministButThirsty:

“I dream in stereo. Let her live.”

I hate them both.

A screenshot is making the rounds from a Discord betting pool:

“Bet’s settled. Told you they hooked up. Audio doesn’t lie.”

— Tyler Z., 41 minutes ago.

People are having a day with my logs. Someone slowed it down and synced it to Wicked Game. Someone else transcribed it into a fanfic intro and posted it under the title Dream Logs: Zeta Files. The internet turned my shame into plot, my voice into thirst trap soundtrack.

I scroll.

I scroll like someone looking for answers and only finding GIFs.

One of them has captions. A screencap of me mid-sigh, eyes half-lidded, with “same girl same” pasted underneath in sparkly Comic Sans.

I click away.

Open a new tab.

Check my calendar. As if somehow a client meeting at three is going to salvage my reputation.

I minimize everything.

And then I curl up on the floor like the world's most emotionally violated croissant .

The worst part isn't just that the world heard it.

It's what he did.

Adrian. He got the files I clearly sent by mistake. If he had any decency—any at all—he would've heard them, closed the tab, and never spoken of it again. Instead, he handed me to the internet like a sacrificial offering.

He didn't just use me. He used me twice.

First, he used my body.

Then he used my voice, my trust, my name.

He slept with me. Smiled at me. Said all the right things. Then sold me.

I remember how he looked at me that morning. Like maybe—just maybe—he meant it. Like I was more than a meme.

But it wasn't real.

None of it.

He knew exactly what he was doing.

I thought I'd hit rock bottom when I dreamed about him.

Turns out rock bottom is sharing it with him.

And watching him press publish.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

It's not the audio that makes my stomach turn.

It's the caption.

Jessie's already storming down the hall. I follow, barely registering the blur of pings lighting up my notifications.

We find him in the podcast lounge—sprawled across the beanbag throne like some smug, post-ironic Bond villain. Headphones in. Hoodie up. Zero guilt.

Jessie doesn't hesitate.

She smacks the phone out of his hands. It hits the rug with a soft thunk.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

Tyler blinks up, serene. “Good morning to you, too.”

“That was private,” she snaps. “You knew exactly what it was.”

“Yeah,” he says, casually retrieving the phone, “it was just a test. A creative proof of concept.”

“You don't test with someone's private voice memo,” she hisses. “You don't cut up a person's dream like it's foley work.”

He snorts. “Relax. It was in a shared folder. Labeled ‘raw.’ She gave access. You

gave access.”

Jessie’s hands are fists.

“Because we thought you’d use judgment. Sharing that folder was a mistake. Clearly.”

Tyler tilts his head like a curious puppy. “Is that what this is? Or are you just pissed she climbed Adrian before you could?”

Silence .

The kind that feels like gravity breaking.

Jessie doesn’t blink.

I step forward.

“Tyler.”

He turns to me, grin dimming just enough to look calculated. “Come on. Everyone saw this coming. The whole Discord’s been betting on it.”

“You knew I told you not to touch those files.”

“Technically, you told me not to post them.” He shrugs. “I didn’t. Not me.”

“So you’re saying it leaked by accident?”

“I’m saying”—he smirks—“it was Jessie who got us the originals.”

Jessie inhales sharply.

Tyler's smirk widens.

I stare at him. Hard.

"You're done."

That lands.

His smirk doesn't fall off—it fractures. Slightly. Enough.

"What?"

"Pack your shit," I say. "You're out."

"You're firing me? Over a voice memo?"

"No," I say. "Over the fact that you don't see the difference."

He laughs once. Bitter. "Wow. Look at you. Finally picking morals over metrics."

"Maybe," I say.

He opens his mouth—then closes it. His jaw clenches.

Jessie doesn't say anything.

Tyler grabs his backpack from under the chair, mutters something low and venomous, and walks out.

No slam. No fight.

Just gone.

I stand there, hands open, brain buzzing.

Jessie exhales through her nose. “What now?”

I don’t answer.

Because I don’t know.

I walk back to my office. Close the door. Open my laptop. Then close it again.

No content today.

No clever spin.

Just silence.

Page 38

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Hangovers aren't supposed to last a week.

But apparently, shame marinates.

I wake up on my living room floor, clutching a half-eaten Girl Dinner charcuterie board and a hairbrush I had, at some point, used as a mic. There is a single sticky note on my laptop that read:

DO NOT PODCAST DRUNK.

Solid advice.

Not that I needed it. I hadn't opened the podcast mic since. Or checked the analytics. Or answered Dr. Lisa's latest texts—because if there's one thing worse than being exposed, it's being asked how you feel about it.

My inbox is like a haunted house—full of ghosts who suddenly remembered my name once the scandal hit trending.

Love is a scam. Trust is a liability. And the only man who's ever truly seen me is currently monetizing my public humiliation.

I am halfway through a Google search for “How to pivot your brand without dying” when my scheduling app pings.

New appointment booked.

Rachel G. | 1pm Today

I stare at it.

For a second, I thought it was a hallucination. Or a prank. Or a divine intervention scheduled by the Feminist Internet to force me to wear pants again.

But no. It was her.

The one client I hadn't completely let down. Yet .

I almost canceled.

Then didn't. I dug out a semi-clean hoodie, brushed my teeth with the urgency of someone entering a hostage negotiation, and sat at my desk.

Because apparently, even a burnout spiral can be people-pleasing.

Rachel arrives five minutes early, holding a smoothie and looking like a human-shaped reset button. Calm. Fresh-faced. Post-glow-up energy. It's vaguely threatening.

"Wow," I say. "A living woman. Should I offer tea, or just the raw disappointment of my current existence?"

She holds up her smoothie. "Already hydrated. But I'll take the disappointment to go."

We sit. She crosses her legs like a woman with boundaries. I fold mine under me like

a squirrel bracing for nuclear winter.

“So,” I say, trying to sound breezy and not like I’m dying inside, “how are things with Matt?”

She gives me a look that’s impossible to read, then nods slowly.

“He’s... back in the picture.”

My eyebrows do the Macarena.

“Back in the picture like... professionally photoshopped or magically resurrected?”

Rachel smiles softly. “We’ve been talking. A lot. And yeah... I’m thinking of getting back with him.”

I blink. Then take a sip of my cold coffee and make a face like it’s judging me back.

“Bold move. ”

She tilts her head. “I’m aware.”

“You seriously believe he changed?”

“I do. No ultimatums. No makeover montages. He just... did the work.”

“Great. So I’m the only one in this narrative without a satisfying third act.”

She smirks. “You could start yours anytime.”

I deadpan: “Coming soon to absolutely no platforms: Emily Parrish Re-Enters

Society.”

“Sounds like a hit,” she says. “Especially if you narrate it.”

“Oh no,” I say, holding up both hands. “I only podcast from a place of smug emotional superiority. That ship sank with my dignity.”

Rachel leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “You really think people only listened to you because you had it all figured out?”

I shrug. “Well, the lighting didn’t hurt.”

She ignores me. “You think because you fell apart a little—because someone hurt you—you’ve lost the right to help other people make sense of their pain?”

“Other people didn’t moan their nemesis’s name into a voice memo that got leaked to the internet and got three hundred remixes.”

“That you know of.”

I choke on my coffee.

She smiles, more gently now. “Emily, people didn’t follow you because you were perfect. They followed you because you said the things they were too afraid to say.”

I stare down at the cup in my hand. “Yeah, well. I ran out of things to say.”

She shakes her head. “No. You’re just living one of them now.”

I don’t respond.

So she keeps going.

“You don’t have to be the hero of your story. You just have to be honest in the middle of it.”

Something about the way she says that—quiet, unforced, no lecture in her voice—hits harder than any of the therapy memes I’ve been doom-scrolling all week.

“Great,” I mutter. “So I’ll be your cautionary tale. ‘Hi, I’m Emily, and I thought secret hate sex would be fine until the secret leaked.’”

She doesn’t even blink.

“You’re not a cautionary tale. You’re a translator. For messy feelings. For what it means to want something and not be sure why. For what happens when being smart doesn’t keep you safe.”

I look at her, unsure whether to cry or offer her a podcast co-hosting gig.

“You think this disqualifies you,” she says. “But it makes you more valuable. Because now you know what it’s like to lose your voice. And what it costs to get it back.”

I open my mouth.

Nothing comes out.

My eyes blur. Just slightly. The burn behind them is the kind that starts low and doesn’t ask for permission.

“I’m so tired, Rachel.”

“I know.”

“I feel like everything broke. ”

“Good,” she says. “That means you’re in the middle. And the middle is where all the interesting shit happens.”

I sniff, half a laugh. “God, you’re good at this.”

She stands.

“You are better. You just forgot.”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Emily Parrish has uploaded a new episode.

Title: Mistakes Were Moaned .

My stomach flips first—something halfway between guilt and indigestion. Then comes the thought: At least she’s still breathing fire . Part of me is relieved. The other part—smaller, quieter—braces for a monologue with my name in blood-red subtext.

I click.

There she is. No intro. No filter. Just her and a white wall. The lighting isn’t even that flattering.

“I haven’t recorded in a while,” she says. “Partly because I was ashamed. Mostly because I didn’t know what version of myself was still allowed to speak.”

Okay. So this isn’t a hit piece. I adjust the volume.

“It’s a weird kind of grief, when the thing that breaks you is something you technically chose. I chose to trust. To speak. To feel something. And someone turned it into a promo clip.”

Guilt flares again, sharp and hot. I shut it down just as fast. I didn’t leak it. I didn’t even touch the file.

Still. I shift in my chair.

“The worst part wasn’t the Internet remixing me like a pop culture cautionary tale. It was realizing I’d stopped recognizing my own voice.”

I exhale through my nose, hard. She’s doing it again. Making it sound universal, poetic, tragic—and somehow mine .

It’s weird, hearing her voice out loud again. Not in a clip. Not in a remix. Just... her.

And it makes me feel—

Well.

Nothing.

Obviously.

It just reminds me how long it’s been since someone made silence feel like a conversation. That’s all.

“Here’s the thing no one tells you about humiliation—it doesn’t kill you. It gives you clarity.”

I lean back again. Right. This isn’t revenge. It’s clarity. And she’s found it without me. Without even looking for me in it.

Some dark, low voice inside me mutters: Good for her .

“I thought if I lost the perfect narrative, I lost my voice. Turns out my voice never needed perfection. Just honesty. And a mic.”

The screen goes black.

I stay staring at it like it might turn back on and say just kidding .

It doesn't.

I open a new tab. Click on the episode stats. Ten thousand views. Low watch-to-like ratio. The comments?

Consistent engagement. Emotional resonance. Minimal trolling.

Classic slow-burn sleeper. Not a scandal. A moment.

God, she's good.

No theatrics. No venom. Just clarity. Like she's wrestled it all down to truth and let it speak for itself.

I want to text her .

Not to explain. Not even to apologize, which is new for me. Just... to say I saw it. That I heard her. That she's not alone in the fallout.

But I don't.

Because let's be real—if I were her, I'd assume this was all my fault too. And even if I tried to help, it would look like PR damage control wrapped in emotional narcissism with a bow of let's talk off-camera.

Which it wouldn't be. Not entirely. But she'd never believe that. And honestly? I wouldn't blame her.

She rose from the ashes and I was part of the arson.

Still. I'm glad she posted.

Glad she's okay.

Glad she's found something to hold onto that doesn't involve pretending to be okay for someone else's benefit.

I tell myself that's all it is. Relief.

Not nostalgia. Not the part of me that still remembers the way she fell asleep and buried her face in the pillow like she'd made it to safe harbor.

Just relief.

I close the laptop. Stand up.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm driving toward the one person who still believes I'm salvageable.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

I open the door in pajamas that have definitely seen better years, holding a mug that says "Men Are Fine I Guess." Jessie's standing there with Thai food in one hand and a six-pack of kombucha like it's a peace treaty.

"Emotional support noodles?" Jessie asks, smiling.

"You think carbs can undo digital betrayal?"

Jessie pauses. "I mean... yes?"

I let her in. We sit on the floor. I haven't vacuumed. There's a sock on the table and I genuinely don't know how it got there. Jessie doesn't comment. Just starts unpacking the food like we're study partners cramming for the Emotional Recovery Midterm.

We eat in silence for a few minutes. Or rather, I eat. Jessie picks at her tofu pad thai like it personally offended her.

"I had no idea what those files were when I forwarded them," she says.

I nod. I've heard this before. But this time it doesn't make me want to throw a spring roll at her head.

"I know," I say.

She looks at me.

"I've been rewriting the betrayal monologue in my head," I add. "Yours was the

shortest chapter."

Jessie lets out a laugh. Small. Real.

"You forgave me?"

"I didn't say that. I just said I stopped planning a legal-themed podcast episode with your name in it."

Beat .

"I forgave you," I admit. "You didn't run. You didn't try to spin it. You just showed up. With carbs. That counts for something."

Jessie nods. Then says carefully, "Adrian tried to stop it too."

I freeze. Fork halfway to my mouth.

"It was Tyler. Adrian saw it and—he lost it. Fired him on the spot."

I blink.

"Publicly?"

"Yeah. No PR spin. No 'mutual agreement.' Just 'pack up your shit.'"

I put the fork down.

"Well," I say. "Gold star for doing the bare minimum."

It sounds hollow even to me.

Jessie doesn't flinch. She just adds, "He looked wrecked, Emily. Like he hadn't slept since it happened. I didn't say anything. Just... thought you should know."

I make a noise that sounds vaguely like a scoff. "Next he'll discover empathy. Imagine the press release."

She doesn't reply. We let it sit.

I grab the kombucha, twist the cap too hard. "So," I say, gesturing at the bottle. "What flavor is this? Citrus guilt? Mango manipulation?"

"Lavender grief," Jessie says, deadpan.

We both snort. It's almost a laugh.

Jessie scrolls through the comments on my podcast.

"Listen to this one," she says. "'I didn't know other women felt this way. Thank you for making the mess out loud.'"

I roll my eyes, but I'm smiling. Barely. But it counts .

Jessie refreshes the podcast page. A new comment appears. Jessie tilts the laptop toward me.

@TheRealAdrianZayne: "Emily, you're the man."

She squints. "Is that... a peace offering?"

I shrug.

She grins. “That’s Adrian’s highest praise. I don’t think he’s even said that to himself.”

Jessie hands me the last tofu roll. I take it.

We don’t say anything else.

We just eat and let it land. And for the first time in a long time, the apartment feels almost like mine again.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

The knife moves like she's auditioning for a cooking show called Therapists Who Slice Precisely to Avoid Conflict .

“Still using the Santoku,” I say, dropping my keys into the bowl by the door.

She doesn't look up. “Still showing up unannounced?”

“I didn't want to schedule vulnerability.”

My mom snorts—just barely—and turns to rinse the cutting board. “Very brave. Or very stupid.”

“Both,” I say, pulling out a chair.

She doesn't ask what's wrong. She never asks questions she already knows the answer to. Instead, she puts the kettle on. Chamomile. Code for emotional triage.

“Tea?” she asks. “Or something that helps with dissociation?”

“Got anything that pairs with ego death?”

“I have rooibos. And wine I forgot to process emotionally.”

I exhale. “Rooibos. Let's stay grounded.”

She sits across from me, careful and calm. She always gives me room to speak. Sometimes I wish she wouldn't.

“You think I became a coach to help men get relationships?”

“I think you became a coach to manage yours,” she says calmly. “From a safe distance. Preferably with good lighting and a sense of control.”

I huff out a breath. “Are you analyzing me right now?”

“Occupational hazard.”

“You still seeing clients? ”

“Just a few. Referral-only.”

She pauses. “One reminds me of you.”

“Poor thing.”

“She’s sharp. Strategic. A little too quick to diagnose people so she doesn’t have to trust them. You’d probably hate her.”

“Or imprint on her sexually and call it growth.”

She doesn’t blink. “Not your worst pattern.”

I rub my eyes. My skin feels wrong. My brain’s a reboot halfway through an update.

“You remember that whole voice memo thing?”

“The one that leaked on three platforms, got remixed into a lo-fi seduction track, and inspired a dozen TikTok think pieces about emotionally unavailable men? Vaguely.”

I groan. “God. You heard it.”

“It was forwarded to me. Repeatedly.” She looks at me over the rim of her cup. “The themes... they rang familiar.”

“Please stop saying themes.”

I set the mug down, too hard. Tea sloshes over the rim. “You want to know what happened?” I say.

She doesn’t answer. Just waits.

“It was never meant for an audience. Definitely not for me,” I say. “But I saw it before it leaked. That was private. It was her, unfiltered. It was messy and human and... way too real.”

“And you listened to it,” my mom says softly.

“I listened to it.” I nod, slow and reluctant, like it still makes me flinch. “And I didn’t have a playbook. I couldn’t flip it into a response video or a witty clapback or a charming invitation to collaborate. I just... froze.”

“Because it was real.”

I lean forward, elbows on the table. “You don’t get it. I’ve had people confess crushes, obsessions, kinks—on camera, in DMs, live Q&As. This wasn’t like that. It wasn’t flirty or clever or asking for anything. It was honest.”

“So you backed away.”

“No,” I say quickly. Then, slower, “Yes. But not in the way you think.”

She tilts her head, therapist mode fully engaged.

“I didn’t ghost her,” I say. “We... slept together. After I heard it. She didn’t know I’d heard it, but I thought—I’ll give her what she wants. Me.”

“What version of you did you give her?” she asks quietly.

I swallow. “The one she wanted. Or... the one I thought she did.”

Her eyes are too calm. Too knowing.

“I gave her the fantasy,” I say. “Smooth. Confident. Attentive. I made it look like I meant every touch. Every pause. Which I had. But I didn’t say that. I didn’t say anything real. I just... gave her what she’d imagined. And then I left before the silence could turn into truth.”

“You played the role.”

“It was a good role,” I say bitterly. “Oscar-worthy. Until she realized there was no real person behind it.”

She nods slowly. “And when the leak happened?”

“I thought she’d never talk to me again. So I stayed out of it. I didn’t post, didn’t comment, didn’t defend her, didn’t use it for PR—even when people begged me to. Tyler wanted to capitalize on it. I told him to drop it. I fired him later.”

“That was the right call.”

“It didn’t feel like enough. ”

“Because it wasn’t.”

I look at her. She holds my gaze.

“You didn’t hurt her by walking away from the scandal,” she says. “You hurt her by walking away from her. Before the scandal even hit.”

“I was scared,” I admit.

“That she’d want more from you than you knew how to give?”

I exhale. “No. That she’d see what I didn’t have to give.”

She nods once. “And now?”

“Now I think I’m in love with someone who probably doesn’t even like me.”

“Do you want her to?”

I almost laugh. “You’re supposed to ask why, not if.”

“I’m not your therapist,” she says gently. “I’m your mom.”

That word lands harder than expected. I feel it in the back of my throat.

“You always knew how to read a room,” she says. “But reading a person? That takes more than strategy.”

“You’re a really annoying therapist,” I mutter.

She sips. “One of my clients once said, ‘He always knows what I need. But I never

know what he needs. And that's why I can't trust him.'"

I freeze.

She doesn't blink.

"That line stuck with me," she says. "Because it reminded me of you."

I stare at the steam rising off my cup.

She stands and rinses her mug. I don't move .

My hands stay wrapped around the cup like it has answers. It doesn't.

I watch her move around the kitchen—efficient, unbothered, like we haven't just cracked open the softest part of me and left it on the table to steam.

She dries the mug. Folds the towel.

I clear my throat. "Do you ever get clients who mess things up not because they don't care... but because they do?"

She doesn't turn around. "That's most of them."

I shift in my chair. "What do you tell them?"

This time, she does look at me. No analysis. No smug insight. Just a quiet awareness, like she knows I've finally stopped deflecting.

"I tell them that love isn't something you prove by saying the right thing," she says. "It's something you protect by showing up anyway."

I nod. Once. “Okay. Then what the hell do I do now?”

She turns, a towel in her hand.

“If I wanted to fix it,” I say slowly, “with her—I mean... if I even could—”

She raises a hand.

“If the door opens again,” she says, “don’t walk in selling something.”

She places the mug down carefully.

“Just walk in. That’s enough.”

I look at the table, then at the door. Then back at her.

It sounds simple. But for me, showing up has always come with a pitch deck.

“No script?” I ask, half-joking, half-hoping she’ll break her own rule.

“No script,” she says. “Just presence.”

I exhale slowly. I’m unlearning a language I thought was native.

“Right,” I say. “Just... walk in.”

She doesn’t answer. Doesn’t need to. She just reaches for the towel again, like the conversation hasn’t upended me.

And somehow, that makes it easier to stand.

We don't hug. We never do, unless someone is dying or graduating. At the door, she slips a container into my hands.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Dinner. And a subtle metaphor."

I raise an eyebrow.

She taps the red lid. "Means stop running."

I stare at her.

She smiles like a secret.

And for the first time in weeks, I don't have anything clever to say.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

I hadn't planned to come back.

Not after the leak.

Not after the backlash.

But here I am.

Same couch. Same zen-as-hell little bonsai tree on the windowsill. Same therapist who knows too much and says too little.

It has been two weeks since I ghosted our last scheduled session. I blamed "schedule conflicts," which was generous. The real conflict was existential: I didn't know if I could still talk about feelings without auto-translating them into hashtags and public shame.

But I came back anyway. Because the silence was starting to sound like him.

Dr. Lisa didn't comment on my absence. She just gestured to the couch and asked, "Tea?"

I shook my head. "Tea feels a bit... loaded right now."

And just like that, we are back.

Sort of.

Not really.

But enough.

I'd just finished my two-week highlight reel—leak, shame spiral, ego in rehab—and she'd been nodding along like someone trying to assemble IKEA furniture using a horoscope .

But her pen paused mid-word, like it had been waiting for me to stop talking.

I narrow my eyes. “Okay, how long have you been sitting on a comment you swore you wouldn't interrupt with?”

She seems to hesitate. “Emily. Can I ask you a question that's... not clinical?”

“That's already a red flag.”

She folds her hands. “This man you've been describing—the one from the dreams, the tea visit, the one you thought published the audios. His name is Adrian?”

I blinked. “...yes?”

“And he goes by Adrian Zayne. Publicly.”

I give her the side-eye of doom. “Lisa. Why do you look like someone who just solved a murder and realized it was their dog?”

She takes off her glasses.

No. No no no.

“Emily,” she says gently. “That’s my son.”

Silence.

Like the world hiccupped.

I blink once.

“Your son ? You are Adrian’s mother?”

She nods, face surprisingly calm for a woman who just found out her son had a starring role in my unsanctioned audio porn.

“Adrian Zayne is his brand name. But yes.”

“And you’ve been giving me... advice. On how to navigate my feelings. About your son.” I whispered again. “This is unethical. This is Greek tragedy unethical. We’re two monologues away from a Euripides reboot. ”

I drop my face into my hands. “You’re supposed to disclose these things.”

“I didn’t realize it was Andrew. Until people started tagging him on these leaked audios.”

“Oh my God. So what do we do now?”

She shrugs, as zen as her bonsai tree. “I can step down after this session if you want to. But you still need someone neutral to talk to.”

“You’re not neutral! You made him.”

She smiles. “Not alone.”

I squint at her. “Well, you and his father created a man who can gaslight the entire internet.”

She doesn’t flinch. “You also said he made you feel seen.”

I groan. “I say a lot of things. Some of them are jokes. Some are just... despair in a cute outfit.”

Her brows rise. “And which one is this?”

“This?” I give her a dry look. “The latter, obviously.”

I shift on the couch, suddenly too aware of how long I’d been talking. “But seriously,” I add, voice lighter than I felt, “was there a moment—just a flicker—when you thought, ‘Wow, my son really broke this girl’s brain. Go me!’?”

Lisa doesn’t laugh. “No. But I did think, ‘She’s brave.’”

That does make me laugh. A soft, incredulous sound. “I’m not brave,” I say. “I’m horny and poorly supervised.”

Lisa smiles at that, but doesn’t interrupt. She always gives space when I start spiraling into honesty.

“You’re also honest,” she says eventually. “Even when it hurts.”

I exhale. “Yeah, well. It hurts a lot.” I press a finger to my temple. “I always thought if I kept things clever and curated, I’d stay safe. But I wasn’t safe. I was just... branding my loneliness.”

A pause. A longer one.

“And now?” she asks gently.

“Now I can’t unknow what I want.” The words come out quieter than I expected. And a little shakier.

She nods. “And that scares you more than the leak?”

I let out a dry laugh. “At least the leak got me views.”

I look down at my hands. “I keep thinking about how it sounded. That voice memo.”

Dr. Lisa waits.

“I wasn’t performing,” I say slowly. “I wasn’t filtered. I wasn’t even fully awake. And somehow that version of me got broadcast like a TED Talk for horny insomniacs.”

Lisa’s lips twitch. “And how did that feel?”

“Like I got pantsed in public. By myself. In hi-fi stereo.”

She nods again. “But he didn’t use it against you.”

“No.” I swallow. “And that’s the part that wrecks me. He didn’t mock it. Didn’t quote it. Didn’t even meme it. He just... disappeared. Like some noble raccoon returning the trash it stole.”

Dr. Lisa doesn’t laugh at that one either. Just says, “Maybe he was overwhelmed.”

“Oh, definitely. Nothing terrifies a man more than intimacy and good audio quality.”

Now she does smile. And I can tell it’s not just a therapist smile. It’s a mom smile. And I’m not sure which one is more dangerous.

“He may surprise you,” she says. “Eventually. ”

I squint at her. “Are you... hinting? Is this, like, woman-to-woman telepathy or something?”

She gives me that maddeningly serene expression again. “Let’s just say I know how long it usually takes him to have a feeling. And then google it. And then maybe act on it.”

I snort. “So I just sit here and manifest?”

“No. You go live your life. On purpose.”

She pauses, then adds, “He’s like a GPS. Brilliant at telling everyone else where to go, but absolutely hopeless when he’s the one who’s lost.”

I stare at her. “So I fell for an emotionally unavailable Garmin.”

“Give it time,” she says, smiling again.

And this time, I can’t help it—I smile back.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 10:13 am

Jessie is halfway to the door when I say, “So you’ll help me?”

Jessie stops but doesn’t turn around right away. Her hand rests on the doorknob like she’s weighing the exit. Then she turns—slow, suspicious, like I’ve just offered her a free trial with no catch.

“You mean it?” she asks.

“Yes.”

She lets out a sigh, like she's calculating the emotional labor cost of re-engaging with my chaos. Her eyes narrow, not unkind, but definitely wary. Like I’m a slightly dangerous dog she’s fed before.

She raises an eyebrow. “No backup plan? No subtle pitch? No seven-layer logic pyramid about how this helps your brand and singlehandedly repairs your public image with a well-timed tear and a humble flex?”

“No.”

“Not even a vibe deck?”

“Jessie.”

Another pause. She steps back into the room, and tosses her bag onto the couch reclaiming territory. Then she sighs again—less frustrated this time, more resigned to the fact that she is, against all professional judgment, still part of this plot.

“All right,” she says. “I’ll help. But if this turns into another stunt—if there’s even a whiff of brand strategy—I’m out.”

“Deal. ”

“And not just out. I mean full Team Emily. Matching merch, TikTok duets, probably a group chat with your mother. Don’t test me.”

I manage a smile, more reflex than joy. “Understood.”

“You do know this is going to be awful, right? The energy in that room is going to be like: ‘Welcome back, here’s your accountability sandwich, we spit in it a little.’”

“Yeah. I know.”

“And you’re still doing it?”

“Yes.”

Jessie grins. “Honestly? That’s kind of hot. Stupid, but hot.”

She leaves.

I stare at the spot where my laptop sits. Where my voice usually fills the room. Where metrics and scripts and thumbnails run my day.

Not this time.

Whatever happens next—I don’t get to script it.

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I should have known something was off when Jessie offered me coffee with a smile. Not her usual “I found a bug in your self-worth code” smirk. This was... conspiratorial. She even added oat milk without asking. That’s how I knew it was a setup.

“You’re glowing,” she said as we mic’d up.

“I’m sweating,” I replied. “You know this room has the ambient humidity of a hot yoga class, right?”

Jessie didn’t answer. Just patted my shoulder like she was proud of me for something I hadn’t done yet.

Honestly? I should’ve seen it coming. It had been a weird month.

Exactly four weeks ago, the phrase “Raw_logs” meant nothing to me. Now it’s a trigger word that makes my eye twitch. One stray folder. Thirteen misplaced files. And suddenly, the man I’d most recently yelled at via podcast showed up at my apartment with tea.

The fallout came fast. My subscriber count doubled. My sense of privacy halved.

I pivoted. Pivoted so hard my own therapist got whiplash.

New audience. New tone. New Emily.

Red graphics, Gen Z episode titles. “Intentional cringe,” Jessie called it.

The numbers soared. The comments softened. And yet, under the surface: questions. Too many. About Adrian. About the audio. About whether it was all real, or just a very compelling experiment in vulnerability as brand currency .

The plan was simple—or so I was told. A reunion livestream. Light, punchy, scroll-stopping energy. We'd talk about what worked, what flopped, what we'd learned. Maybe toss in some banter from Matt and Rachel if the mood struck. Classic post-season fluff.

Rachel was already perched on her stool like a reformed villain turned wellness coach. She had a headband. A journal. A smile that said "I've forgiven myself and at least three mediocre men."

Matt hovered near the ring light, visibly sweating through his third-layer shirt. He looked like someone trying to dress up their emotional availability with a vest.

Jessie manned the audio with the gleeful chaos of someone who knew exactly what was coming and had no plans to warn me.

We rolled. Cameras on. Audience live.

And for ten beautiful minutes, it went exactly as planned.

"So Rachel," I said, flipping through my cue cards. "Tell us how it feels to be the first person in this group to graduate from emotional chaos to couple's therapy."

She beamed. "Honestly? I think I was just ready to stop being right and start being happy."

Cute. Marketable. Clean.

Matt chimed in: “And I’m just happy to have a second chance at demonstrating I’m not a walking red flag.”

Jessie made a gesture off-camera that implied he was still at least salmon-colored. The chat exploded in laughter.

I relaxed a little. The metrics were good. Engagement was steady. My pulse was only mildly erratic.

I turned to Jessie .

“What’s your hot take on why modern dating’s still a mess?”

She didn’t flinch. “Trying too hard to be impressive instead of just... being a human.”

That’s Jessie for you. Equal parts snark and clairvoyance. The kind of girl who’d psychoanalyze your love life mid-coffee order and then offer you a bite of her croissant.

Before I could steer us back to safer territory, she added—way too casually: “Okay, Emily. What would you tell your past self? Y’know, the one who treated dating like a quarterly KPI review.”

Low blow. Fair.

I laughed. “Maybe... less spreadsheets, more somatic awareness?”

A few chuckles. Rachel gave me a look like she’d heard that one in therapy. Jessie just raised a brow.

“No, seriously,” I said. “I’d probably say—stop trying to optimize for the lowest

possible risk. Eventually, you start confusing loneliness with safety.”

There it was. My truth. Neatly packaged. Totally survivable. Maybe even tweetable.

That’s when Jessie leaned into her mic.

“We’ve got a surprise guest today.”

I blinked. “We what?”

Rachel was suddenly very invested in adjusting her mic level. Matt looked like he was trying not to make eye contact with a bear.

Jessie turned to the camera. “You may know him as the man who hijacked Emily’s podcast not once, but twice. Please welcome... Adrian Zayne.”

I swear my heart stopped. Not in a poetic way. In a medical emergency way.

Adrian walks out like he’s entering a TED Talk—but without the smirk. Hair slightly messy. Wearing a shirt I once said makes him look “accidentally approachable.”

He doesn’t wave. Doesn’t look at the camera. Just meets my eyes.

And for a second, I want to run.

Instead, I sit frozen. Waiting for the punchline.

There isn’t one.

“I wasn’t invited,” he says. “Not officially. But I figured I owed us something.”

Jessie hands him a mic like she's passing off a crown. Or a bomb.

Adrian looks at it, then back at me.

"You once said I always knew what to say," he begins. "But I'm not here because I know what you want. I'm here because—for once—I know what I feel."

I can't breathe.

"I was the guy who had all the answers. Who taught other guys how to stay just far enough away to never get hurt. How to win from a distance. And it worked. Right up until I met the one person who saw through it."

My mouth goes dry.

"You asked me once what I wanted. And I gave some generic answer. But what I wanted—what I want—is to be the kind of man who tells the truth. Especially when it costs him."

He looks down. Then back up. Right at me.

"I didn't choose you then. Because I didn't know how. But I'd like to learn. With you. If you're open to figuring this out with me."

Silence. Not from the audience. From me.

I feel everyone watching. Waiting.

Rachel's eyes sparkle. Even Matt looks like he's holding his breath.

Jessie clears her throat. "Emily?"

I stand.

Walk over to Adrian.

Take Adrian's mic and hold it up like I'm about to say something profound.

Instead, I turn to the camera.

“That's our show, folks. See you next season—if we survive this conversation.”

Then I reach down and hit the end stream button myself.

Jessie slides her headphones off.

“Wow,” she says. “Great timing. That's when the sponsor ad was supposed to go.”

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Jessie stares at us over her tea cup like we've just announced we're taking up competitive ballroom dancing. We're in Adrian's apartment—somehow both minimalist and overflowing with half-finished projects.

“So this is what sexual tension looks like after resolution,” she says. “Weird.”

Adrian doesn't even look up from where he's stealing the last of my cookies. “Give us another week. We'll be insufferable.”

I swat his hand too late. “Those were for thinking. You can't eat a woman's thinking cookie.”

“I thought these were debate cookies,” he says, popping one in his mouth. “You said we were workshopping.”

“Oh god.” Jessie makes a face. “You're not about to pitch me something with the word ‘framework,’ are you?”

“No,” I say. “Okay, maybe. We're starting an innovative matchmaking business.”

Jessie stares. “Define ‘innovative.’ Is this just another dating app with extra buzzwords?”

“We're not reinventing dating,” I say. “We're just... admitting it doesn't work without support. Look at Matt and Rachel.”

Adrian winces. “They were a disaster.”

“And they still like each other,” I say. “They just couldn’t get past the noise on their own.”

“I’m still not sure if they ended up together because of us or despite us,” Adrian mutters .

Jessie throws up her hands. “Are you kidding me? I was your matchmaker! I dragged both your emotionally constipated asses into the same room!”

Adrian and I glance at each other, then at her.

“Exactly,” I say. “Which is why we’d like to rehire you.”

Her brow lifts. “Wait—rehire me?”

Adrian nods. “First official matchmaker on staff. Full-time.”

She squints at us. “Is this a soft launch or a fever dream?”

“We’re serious,” I say. “And there’s a dental plan. We want you on the team.”

She lowers her mug like it might explode. “All right. Talk.”

“So, technically, this started because Adrian made too much money teaching men not to text ‘wyd’ at 2 a.m.”

Adrian shrugs. “I already hacked attraction. Seems like the next step is fixing love. Vertical integration.”

Jessie snorts. “You do realize your dating advice is half the reason I stopped dating?”

I grin. “People don’t need more dating advice. They need results. They need friction.

Someone to walk them through the chaos.”

Adrian points at her. “And that’s where you come in.”

“You screen,” I say. “I coach women. Adrian coaches men. But this isn’t just coaching—it’s matchmaking with context. We pair people who’ve actually dealt with their own mess first.”

Jessie watches me with a kind of cautious optimism. Like she wants to believe in this but has also seen me try to organize my spice rack alphabetically and emotionally spiral somewhere around ‘cumin.’ Still, she doesn’t stop me .

“Is it like... couples’ therapy, but for future couples?” she asks finally.

“Exactly,” I say. “Hopefully more fun, though.”

“You know,” Adrian adds, “I’ve spent money on dumber things.”

Jessie eyes him. “Name three.”

He raises a finger. “Hot tub podcasting.”

Another. “Protein shakes that somehow had no protein”

A third. “And that time I paid a man on Fiverr to yell affirmations at me in a Scottish accent.”

I interrupt. “Wait. That was money well spent.”

Jessie tries to steer the conversation back to business. “So it’s curated, cross-coached, data-driven matchmaking... with built-in content production?”

I nod. “And you’re the first full-time hire. With benefits. And a cool title you can make up as long as it fits on a mug.”

Adrian adds, “You also get to yell at us both when we disagree.”

Jessie considers. “Honestly? That’s the most appealing part.” She lifts her cup. “Fine. I’m in.”

I nod, satisfied. “Then we just need to write it down. Make it official.”

Adrian’s already typing. “Did better. I tweeted it.”

I blink. “You what ?”

He holds up his phone. “Tagged you and everything.”

I snatch it from his hand and read aloud:

@TheRealAdrianZayne: “We’re starting a matchmaking company! Now accepting alpha users.”

Jessie lets out a strangled laugh. “Oh my god, we’re gonna get canceled before we even launch.”

A new notification pops up.

@FeministButThirsty: “Sign me up.”

We all look at each other.

I raise my teacup slowly. “To emotionally competent chaos.”

Adrian clinks his against mine. “And public accountability.”

Jessie grins. “And group health insurance, please.”

We toast.

And just like that, Matchbox is open for business.