

Simon The Sex Trafficker

by Jennifer Donnell

Simon was smack dab in the middle of the work week and his girlfriend was calling with some crisis about her phone. He knew this. because she'd texted him as much and was now following up with a phone call. Brrruuuuppp, Brrruuuuppp, went the frantic ringtone of his cell phone, as though a robot was being dangled above a hungry crocodile and calling out for help. He scratched at the light brown stubble on his face, which was itching as it made the crossover to an actual beard, turning more strawberry blonde. Note to self, he thought, shave tonight and avoid the sun. He moved his steering wheel to the right as he navigated a turn on 2nd Avenue. It wasn't hard to guess he was fighting the mid week depression he often felt strike. "Strike" made it sound as if it were quick, then gone, like lightning, but his was slow and methodical. He used to think it was mild, had described it to his doctor as such- an almost forgettable type of blues. He'd since upped his respect of it, as it told him there was always something or someone needing him to be 'all he could be'. The problem is that 'all he could be' usually felt like more than he was.

"If your phone isn't working, how can you text me?" is what he'd written back to her at the last stop light, but her subsequent phone call meant she failed to see the humor of his remark. He just needed another coffee, then he'd answer. If he had any sacred rituals during his 8 to 6, it was driving on his lunch break for a re-fill. He felt bad, knew it wasn't her as much as it was him. Drowning in the grind of his workday stress it was easy for him to become a shut in. He tried Prozac for two months, once, but it hadn't worked.

It wasn't that she wasn't a good girlfriend, as she was. Especially compared to his last few. Miranda, but he called her "Manda". It was an accidental nickname he blurted out once during a late night make-out which had now become a staple. She presented well at

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work functions and family gatherings, though he usually avoided those. She was tall and attractive, curvy enough to get his blood boiling, without making it look like she was all curves and no brain. And she was smart. Smart enough to call him out on his bullshit, which he admitted to having a lot of. Her intellect seemed reserved for standing up to him, however, and not phone repairs. He also loved her, a lot, but his ability to love anyone faded in the moments when he had to work hard enough to love anything, including himself.

He turned into the coffeeshop parking lot. Parking could have been bad here, in the small and cramped space, but they never seemed very busy. He'd recently switched from a chain coffeehouse to a mom and pop business. He liked their dark brew and how they didn't ask for his name to write on his cup. They were both more friendly and less invasive at the same time.

"Cold brew with half and half?" a woman he always imagined should be called Mary-Jo, answered. She was young, or not young, but his age- mid 40's, with ash blonde hair sporting a white patch she seemed unapologetic about.

He nodded and looked out the window while his waited. It was then that his eyes saw it. Truth be told, it wasn't the first time. He stared at it most days- maybe for escape, maybe because he wasn't meant for relationships, maybe because he took after his father, maybe for no reason at all.

Outside, just a few car lengths from where he stood, was a spa with neon lights. Spa was what the writing said out front, but it was one of the many massage parlors in route to his office.

Something about the darkly tinted windows and the signage had tempted him to enter on more than one occasion. Once, he did go inside to satiate his curiosity, and a young Asian women with her

hair in a bun had told him everyone was booked. While he was there he saw another man walk in, maybe five years his senior. He was ushered back by a woman with bare legs and a white coat, as if she was role playing a professional masseuse. He'd caught sight of the man's ring finger and its plain gold band, indicating he was married. He looked for something, in the man's appearance- guilt or an uncomfortable strut to his walk, but none showed.

Mary-Jo handed him his drink, having added more ice. The coldness of his cup jolted him back into the room, out of the low lighting and the women in short skirts, bare legged. He thought of calling back his girlfriend as he walked back toward his car, then made an abrupt and impromptu sharp left. He felt the long bar of the door handle in his hands and glimpsed his own bare ring finger. He caught the image of a woman waiting in the dark lighting, hoped this time they wouldn't be too busy.

He felt free.

