

Mark Buckalew
10 Pegasus Way
Sewell, NJ 08080
609-471-5949
markbuckalew@hotmail.com

Abigail

It was *fucking cold*. No other way to put it. Rock salt crunched beneath my shoes as I paced around outside a trendy nightclub called Xelle. I tucked my hands under my armpits and rubbed them against my ribs to keep warm. She said she'd meet me out front in five minutes. It'd been ten. The techno beat from the dance floor was muffled by the walls, and made a deep, pulsing rumble at street level. I heard the door open and turned my head to see if she was stepping out onto the sidewalk, but there were only strangers—an Italian guy who looked like a wannabe Mafioso leaving with a sagging cougar dressed like a slut half her age. She'd said her name was Abigail, but I started to wonder if even that much was true. She'd made it too easy for me; her friends weren't butting in and trying to pull her away from me, and ditching the club for my place was her idea—and she wasn't even drinking much. Maybe she just led me on. I walked up to the curb and looked up and down the street for a taxi, still hugging myself for warmth.

“Hey, Ryan” Abigail said. She was behind me. And I didn't even hear the door open.

I turned around, trying not to look like I was surprised to see her there, and I said, “Hey.” Abigail was a petite woman with delicate features that belied her mischievous

smile. She withdrew a cigarette from her purse and lifted it to her lips, then held out her slender hand at the tip of it, flicking her thumb up and down, signaling me for a light. I pulled my hands out of my armpits and patted down my pockets until I found the lighter I always carried, but rarely used—I didn't smoke, I only kept it as an icebreaker for female smokers in need of fire.

I took the cigarette from her mouth and put it to mine. I drew in just enough breath as I touched the flame to the end of it, and then I offered it back to her. Abigail leaned in and puckered her lips around the filter. I turned my head and blew out the smoke, seamlessly mingled with the steam of my breath, before hailing a cab that almost passed us by.

With my hand on the small of her back, I walked Abigail past the brake light red-tinged cloud of exhaust lingering by the bumper, and opened the door for her. She got in and scooted across the seat to make room for me, the cigarette still between her lips. There was a *No Smoking* sign on the back of the driver's seat. The cab reeked of cigarettes and weed anyway. The driver looked at me with glassy eyes in the rear view mirror and asked me where we were going.

“West Tenth Street,” I said. And we were underway.

“You live in the West Village?” Abigail asked.

“Yeah.”

“I *knew* it!” She said it as if she'd correctly guessed the final *Jeopardy* question.

I laughed a little at that. “What gave it away?”

“I don't know. It just kind of suits you, I guess. When you said you were a writer, I pictured you in a cramped little apartment with like coffee-stained manuscripts piled up

all over the place and stuff. You seem like the artistic type.” She opened the window just a crack and started long, slow pull from her cigarette. Her azure eyes were locked on mine.

“Actually, I just do a column for *The Village Voice* once a week. It’s about nightlife and social events and things like that. That’s actually why I was at the club tonight—I have to review that place.”

“And what are you going to say about it?” She asked as she turned her head and blew a plume of smoke out the window crack.

“Oh I don’t know. Shitty service, terrible music... but it wasn’t *all* bad,” I said, peering into her eyes. I think it was all the black that made them stand out—the black cocktail dress she had on, and the black leather jacket she wore over it, but mostly her black hair. It was pinned back and up a little, but she let enough thick, dark strands hang forward next to her bright eyes to make them shine through the contrast.

“What do you do at the... um, you said it was an ad agency, right?”

“Yeah. And I just do boring shit, really. Your job sounds cool, though.”

No woman ever said that to me before. Usually, they ask me what I do, and I tell them I’m a writer; and then I ask what they do, and I get their entire life story. The cardinal rule for a man trying to seduce a woman: shut up and get her to talk about herself. Then, just sit back and listen. Or pretend to listen. But Abigail wasn’t making me go through those motions. She wasn’t making me work hard at all—it was almost as if she were thinking like a guy. I glanced at Abigail’s neck just to reassure myself she didn’t have an Adam’s apple. She didn’t. Still, there was something different about her. I always thought women liked playing hard-to-get.

Abigail finished her cigarette and flicked it out the window, scattering embers like fireflies in the night. She closed the window and leaned against my shoulder.

It wasn't a long ride from the club to my building on West Tenth. We passed a lot of other taxicabs, a few couples and groups huddled strolling along the sidewalk, and the occasional homeless man pissing on a street corner. With daytime traffic, it would have been faster to walk home. I paid the driver and helped Abigail out of the cab. She wrapped her slender hands around my arm, and I led the way inside.

I live in an old low-rise walk-up. When we reached the staircase, Abigail stopped suddenly and crouched down on the floor.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing. I just hate walking up stairs in these damn shoes. I always afraid I’m going to fall over and tumble down the steps and break my back. Then, when people ask me why I’m in a wheelchair, I won’t even have a good answer for them—I’ll have to say to them, ‘Shoes ruined my life... but they *were* really pretty shoes.’”

I looked down at her high-heeled, open-toe platforms, as black and shiny as her hair. “Well, they are really pretty shoes,” I said, “... but I have a better solution.” I reached down and scooped her up off the floor. She let out a surprised shriek that quickly turned into a laugh. I looked in her eyes, giving her a confident smile. “I mean, what kind of guy would I be if I made you walk around barefoot on this dirty old, turn-of-the-century floor?”

“Umm... an inconsiderate one?”

“You’re damn right.”

Both her hands met behind my neck, she pulled herself closer to my face, and kissed me. Her lips were soft and supple, and when the brief kiss was over, I wanted more.

I carried Abigail up the stairs, down the hall, and into my apartment. The place wasn’t as big a mess as it usually is—I’d cleaned it up before I went to the club, hoping I might bring home a lady. I kicked the door shut behind me, maneuvered around the coffee table, and set Abigail down on the couch. I told her I’d be right back and then started toward the bathroom when she asked, “Is it alright if I smoke in here?”

I opened the drawer in the end table by the couch, took out an ashtray I’d stolen from a diner on some drunken night a few years back and placed it on the table along with my lighter. I don’t let *men* smoke in my apartment, but I’d let a woman roast a pile of tires on the floor if I thought she’d put out. Abigail thanked me as she lit up another cigarette, and I resumed course toward the bathroom.

As I stood in front of the toilet with my dick in my hands, it occurred to me that the walls were thin and Abigail could probably hear me from the next room. Then I remembered something ex-girlfriend, Christie, told me once: whenever she was in earshot of a guy taking a leak, she listened to his piss hitting the water and tried to gauge the size of his penis by the sound. Christie was always more of a looker than a thinker, but maybe other women did it too, so I put a lot of energy into this piss. I forced it out so hard I almost gave myself a hernia. It was probably enough to make Abigail think that there was a dinosaur in the bathroom with me. Maybe I overdid it a little.

* * *

I returned to find Abigail standing by the couch, staring at me. “So, Ryan, care to tell me what you’re doing with *this*?” she asked, holding up my little green glass bowl in one hand.

“Where did you find that?” Though it was nice to know that she wasn’t eavesdropping on me in the bathroom like some twisted pervert, I hated to think that she was snooping through my apartment. Plus I forgot where I left the damn thing after the last time I smoked, so I figured I should at least find out where it was before she stormed out on me.

“I leaned back on the couch and felt something poking my ass. Then I found *this* between the cushions.” She brandished it before my face. “Do you smoke pot? Are you a *pothead*?”

I debated whether I should say that it was medicinal or that it must have fallen out of a friend’s pocket.

Then the look in her eyes went from accusing to playful with the simple raise of an eyebrow. “I’m just fucking with you, Ryan, you pothead.”

“Well, the term ‘pothead’ gets thrown around a lot these days...” I started to answer, but before I could finish, Abigail sat on the couch and rummaged through her purse. Then she pulled out a tiny plastic baggie of pot. She started picking apart a bud with her fingers and packing the little leafy chunks into the bowl. She didn’t ask for my permission. She didn’t need to—it wasn’t like she was lighting up another cigarette. I sat next to her.

“I kind of figured you liked to get high,” she said, “because you weren’t drinking much at the bar. *And* you brought home the one girl who also wasn’t drinking much at the bar. Everybody needs a vice.”

Abigail held the bowl to her lips and sucked the lighter’s flame onto the bushy buds stuffed in the other end. They glowed a warm orange on her face that got brighter as she pulled the smoke harder into her lungs. Then she laid the bowl down on the table, a wisp of smoke still rising up from the embers and curling out into the air. She put her hand on my shoulder and pushed me against the back cushion, and then she straddled my lap, her knees hugging my hips. Abigail leaned in close and blew a silvery jet of smoke out between her puckered lips and into my mouth. I put my hands on her hips and, in one deep, powerful breath, I drew it all in. I leaned back and shot a column of shared smoke at the ceiling. I took a breath, and then I noticed I was jabbing Abigail in the thigh with a raging hard-on. I sat up straight. She pressed her lips to mine; her mouth pulsed open and closed against mine.

I slid my fingers across her cheek to brush away a few rogue black strands, and brought my hand to rest on the back of her neck. She unfastened my belt, unzipped my pants and yanked them halfway down to my knees. Then she suddenly stopped and reached for her purse. She fished around for a second before pulling out a condom and tearing the wrapper open with her teeth. She started to unroll it onto my hard-on, but something changed when she got it about halfway down to the base. Abigail’s shoulders sunk and her fingers trembled. Her sly and seductive face turned into something sweet but scared.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, hoping she’d say *‘nothing,’* and we could move on.

“Everything,” she said. It wasn’t the voice of the temptress who came home with me, but a mousy shadow of it. She stood up and backed away, pulling the straps of her dress back onto her shoulders. “I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I can’t do this. I really shouldn’t have come here. I’m really sorry.” She scooped up her shoes and purse, and held them close to her chest as she nervously shuffled to the door. “It’s not that you’re a bad guy, but *this* isn’t me, *this* isn’t what I’m really like... I’m sorry I lead you on, but I have to go.” Blackened teardrops began to roll down her cheeks, leaving trails of mascara under her watery eyes. She covered her face with one hand and open and opened the door with the other, dropping one of her shoes to the floor in the process.

“What? Why? What’s wrong?”

She picked up her shoe and walked out into the hallway.

The last time I’d seen a woman cry was when I broke up with Christie—I had gotten bored with seeing her and only her, so I told her it was over; she’d cried and stormed out of the apartment, but nothing about that bothered me until I saw Abigail do the same thing. I took the condom off my now-flaccid penis and tossed it aside, then pulled my pants back up, and made it to the door before it could close behind her. “Abigail, wait!”

“Just forget it!” she said, choking on the words, without looking back as she neared the stairs. She sniffed. “Just jerk off and go to bed or something... I’m *not* fucking anyone tonight!” She started down the first flight.

“That’s not what this is about! I mean it *was*, but it’s not anymore,” I said. “Yeah, I brought you here to fuck, but now you don’t want to and I don’t even care about that... just don’t leave. Please.”

Abigail paused one step from the landing and looked sidelong at me. The mascara trails had smeared from her touch and the tears that followed, and a gossamer strand of snot hung tenuously from her nose. Her pale skin looked sickly under the yellowed light of the hallway lamps. “Why?” she asked, and then wiped away the snot with her wrist. “Why should I stay?”

I wasn’t sure why I wanted her to stay, but I thought about it. “Because I think I like you,” I blurted out after a moment. “And you’re obviously upset, and I don’t want you to be.” Abigail turned to face me, poised to climb the next step. “Come back upstairs. We can talk about it. Or we can just drink coffee—I’ll make coffee.” She came up the stairs slowly, and when she reached the top, I put my hand on her shoulder and brought her under my arm. “I’ll hold on to this,” I said, taking the bunched up leather jacket from her. She let the shoes dangle from her fingers as I walked her back into my apartment.

As I placed a new filter in the coffee machine, I listened to the water running in my bathroom and to Abigail splashing it onto her face. I had just finished pouring in the grounds when she slinked into the kitchen.

“I got mascara all over one of your towels,” she said.

“That’s okay.”

Abigail sat down at the table. I turned the coffee maker on, and then went to the table and sat down across from her. She was wearing her jacket now, but she didn’t look

like she was about to leave. Her makeup was gone, but she still looked pretty; her face was both beautiful and sad at once—like some kind of gothic muse.

“I was engaged, you know,” she said.

“I *don't* know. You left out that little bit of information, actually.”

“I broke it off yesterday... fucking asshole was cheating on me. The *whole fucking time* he was cheating on me. Do you have any idea how humiliating it is to trust someone so completely and then find out you mean nothing to them?” Her voice cracked, and she sniffled, but she held back her tears.

“No... I'm sorry.”

“My friends said I needed a revenge fuck—they said, ‘just go out and find a guy and fuck him like crazy and then leave.’ It sounded like a good idea at the time.”

“And that's why you came here with me.”

“Yeah... and you're a lot nicer than I figured you'd be, but I'm just not ready...”

“That's okay, don't worry about it. Besides...” I began as I reached out and brought my hand to rest atop hers on the table, “...you can seduce me anytime.”

A smile crept across Abigail's face and she let out a mousy laugh. We were both a little startled when we heard the first percolations coming through the grounds. The warm, familiar smell of coffee filled the room. Abigail stood up, took her jacket off and hung it on the back of her chair. Then she stood up and walked to the countertop by the coffee maker. She turned around and leaned back against the edge of the counter. “So,” she said, “Where do you keep the mugs?”