



## **“What If Superheroes Did Exist?”**

**003**

*Can I say that I gave Kimberly Williams a good fight? A real fight? Or challenge, I should say.*

*Can I say that?*

*While I took to the air and landed strikes, she continued to put me in submissions. She did, and while I know I can say she looked impressive doing it, I can also feel validated in the fact that I managed to withstand her technical skill, showing my own in-ring prowess, knowing where I was at, at all times.*

*There was more than one occasion where I was able to get Kimberly down, giving myself ‘valuable time’ as the commentators said. I can’t say that I didn’t walk away feeling like if the title had been on the line, then SCW would’ve had a brand new Underground Champion.*

*I meant what I said when I said it. Kimberly was bored. I think that boredom shined bright with her continued use of submissions. She used them and I continued to break free, or withstand the pain she put me through. I don’t know if that calls her statement about being one of the best technical wrestlers into question, or if it adds fuel to the growing fire of my toughness, and desire to become one of the best.*

*It’s something I’m not going to question, nor will I downplay what I feel I accomplished by beating Kimberly.*

*Others can if they want, but I’ve no issue in leaving them speechless.*

**Last Night**

Night fell over the city. The Big Apple truly was the ‘The City That Never Sleeps’, and nine-year-old Enzo Rossi couldn’t seem to rest, either. Finding himself outside the apartment he lived in with his single mother, Angela, the young man held a small flashlight while he read a ‘Spider-Man’ comic. It was New York City, after all. No kid his age would be caught dead reading anything other than ‘Marvel’.

*Unless it was ‘Spawn’, Enzo thought. But his mother deemed him too young to read anything regarding the main superhero from ‘Image Comics’.*

Thumbing through the pages, nestled on the stoop, Enzo was pulled into the fight between ‘Spider-Man’ and ‘Venom’ when a gust of wind crept through the night, rattling the metal stoop. The young boy braced himself, unknowingly loosening his grip on the comic, which lifted up and skirted from its original location in front of Enzo, only to flutter and flap as gravity pulled it down to the alley below.

“Shit,” he whispered.

Crawling back into his bedroom, Enzo stepped foot into the living room where his mother was passed out on the couch. Angela was a working nurse, and barely saw her son. She still loved him, however. Sleep just got the better of her. In that light, Enzo was envious.

His feet touched the stoop before Enzo made his way down the metal maze that was the fire escape, his brown eyes were not watching his rapid steps. They were focused on the comic as the pages flapped against the pavement.

*Stay right where you are!*

On the last rung, Enzo jumped, landing solid on his feet, but they didn’t remain still for too long. Not until he reached his book, at least.

Dropping to one knee, his jeans grew damp from the wet pavement of the alley. Enzo flipped through the comic, to ensure it hadn’t suffered any damage. Just a few wet spots, but nothing major. None of the colors bled.

A green colored van drove by, but the young boy didn’t see it. His focus was elsewhere, wanting to see how the epic battle panned out. It held his attention even as the van door opened. The engaging artwork blocked out the sound of footsteps as they approached in a pair of heavy black boots.

“Hey, kid. What ’cha got there?” the voice echoed in Enzo’s head, taking him from the final page, just as the fight between ‘Spider-Man’ and ‘Venom’ came to an end. “Oh shit,” the young man looked up to see an older gentleman towering over him. He was in his mid-twenties,

dressed in a black hoodie, as well black jeans. Scruff clung to his already worn face. “I love ‘Spider-Man’. I don’t think I’ve read this one, yet.”

“I love him, too. Can I have it back?” Enzo asked, trying to not sound afraid. The young man wished he had stayed home.

*You could’ve bought another copy, dummy.*

“Oh, yeah. Sure.” Enzo reached for the comic, but it was drawn back. “What’s your name, kid?”

“Why do you want to know my name?”

“Well, I’m sure you’ve heard the rule about not talking to strangers. I know my parents always said that to me.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard it.” Enzo replied. “What’s your name?”

“Touche, kid. My name’s Dante,” he said, placing a hand over his heart and taking a bow.

*He must think he’s important.*

“I’m Dante. Now, it’s your turn.”

“I’m...” Enzo’s voice trailed off. He shook his head. “I don’t think I should tell you my name.”

“Well,” Dante shrugged before tossing the comic book into the green van Enzo finally noticed. “I’ll find out your name one way or another.” Such a statement sent a chill down the young boy’s spine. “Get in the van.” Dante’s expression changed. There was nothing friendly about him. He seemed cold. Like a viper waiting to strike its prey.

“Get in the van.”

Enzo wanted to cry out, but his throat felt dry.

“Get in the van,” Dante repeated as his hands clenched into fists. “I’m not going to say it again. It’s just you and me out here. Your best bet would be to do what I say. Now...”

Unable to call for help, the boy climbed to his feet and began to run backwards before turning forward, his eyes on the fire escape. He heard a voice that seemed to come from inside the van, barking orders at Dante.

*Come on! Come on! Run! Run! Run...*

The ball of Enzo's left foot touched the first step of the fire escape, only for his body to be pulled away with such violent force, the boy nearly flipped mid-air. He was brought face to face with Dante before feeling something hard and heavy connect with the back of his skull. The night became darker and then there was nothing.

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The boy was thrown in the back and twenty-six-year-old, Dante Miller sat in the back of the van as the driver, and crew leader, Mitchell Zane sped off into the night.

"Make the call," Zane said from the front seat.

"Yeah," Dante said. Placing his burner phone to his ear after using the speed dial, he listened as it rang on the other end. Someone answered a few moments later. "Hey. It's me. We picked up a surprise delivery. Tell the big man. A few days? I hope we're getting more guys. A few days for that, too? Yeah, yeah. I got it. No..." he sighed. "No problem. Yes...yes, understood."

The call ended and Dante glanced over at the kid. He was crying underneath the brown hood that had been placed over his head. Dante wanted to comfort the child but knew that was against the rules. It'd be seen as a sign of weakness, and weakness resulted in loss of life for those who showed it.

Looking away, Dante told himself to ignore the kid's cries.

*Ignore it. Don't listen to it. You're getting paid for this. Don't worry about what happens next.*

The very thought of 'what happens next' made his skin crawl and his stomach turn. Closing his eyes, Dante repeated the words to himself until it started to sink in, even if it was momentary.

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### **The Next Day**

It seemed like it never rained the night before, as sports agent Ronnie Beecher, stepped outside his apartment on the Upper East Side. The sun beamed, pelting his fellow New Yorkers in scorching heat. The weather wasn't going to slow him down, however. Ronnie had an important meeting he needed to attend with a potential client.

*There's nothing potential about it, he thought. This has to happen. It has to work.*

The would-be client was a professional wrestler. Not exactly the sort of clientele Ronnie wanted to pursue, but he knew that desperate times called for desperate measures.

Ronnie Beecher had been a hugely successful, and widely sought, agent in his field. But the attention and popularity got to his head. That's what his former employer had said, at least. It went to his head and his career hit a downward spiral thanks in part to nights spent on all different variations of debauchery.

He wanted a redemption story, which is what caused Ronnie to rest his watchful eye on this certain professional wrestler. Like Ronnie, he seemed to be in search of his own redemption. Ronnie knew everyone loved a redemption arc, based on past experiences.

He hoped he was able to find one with Scott Reed.

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Scott Reed wasn't the greatest pro wrestler to ever lace up a pair of boots. He wasn't the worst, either. He just didn't know if that mattered in the grand scheme of things.

Besides, he had bigger fish to fry.

Giving his two sons, Daniel and Victor, kisses on their foreheads, Scott said his goodbyes before leaving the residence belonging to his former in-laws, Matt and Gloria. Former because their daughter, Scott's ex, had taken her own life about a month prior.

Scott was already down-on-his-luck but losing her from this world didn't help. His responsibilities doubled, as he needed to find a bigger place. He needed to make more money. He needed to cross his T's and dot all his I's. Even when it felt Scott had done so, it still wasn't enough.

*It's a wonderful life, said nobody ever.*

Climbing into his car, Scott caught wind of his face. There were remnants of bruising around both eyes, and a busted lip. The bruise around one eye came from a fight he'd gotten into outside a strip club he'd found himself at a few weeks ago, with the angry, not to mention drunk, boyfriend of a stripper Scott had taken a liking to. The other came from an incident during a trip with the wrestling company paying his bills all the way to Japan. In the country that Godzilla always seemed to destroy, Scott got involved in something he didn't need to, but felt there was no other way.

Said incident was something he didn't care to mention.

If anyone asked, he fought a door and lost by taking the knob to the face. More than once, to be exact.

Scott was on his way back into the city so he could meet with a potential agent by the name of Ronnie Beecher. He figured Ronnie was hoping to make money off him, not to mention to further his own success. Scott couldn't fault him if that was indeed his mentality, as Scott had his own intentions as well.

*But first, he thought. I need to know he's a good man.*

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"You're looking a little worse for wear," Ronnie said after exchanging a handshake with Scott Reed. They took a seat at a table in the back of a café, 'Elliot's Espresso'.

Scott scoffed and shook his head, "Occupational hazard, I guess. Despite my appearance, I do appreciate you taking this meeting."

The agent shrugged. "Not a problem. I'm always on the prowl for new clients."

"I believe I've read that you don't have any current clients," Scott stated. "Is that true?"

Ronnie seemed taken aback by that at first but managed to recover. "I've not had the best track record in the last few years. I can own up to my mistakes. I won't lie," he sighed. "I got into some bad shit. Got myself into a hole, and all I'm trying to do is to climb out of that hole. I want to make things right."

"I can respect that," said Scott. He felt that the agent was indeed a good person. "I've made my own mistakes. It's cost me a lot in my life, not to mention my career. I just need to get things on track."

"Well, if this meeting goes well, then maybe we can both benefit from this. You know?" Ronnie asked, giving off a grin at the same time.

"That's what I'm hoping for," Scott replied.

"So, seriously," the agent began, curiosity beginning to dance around in his eyes, "what happened to your face? Was that from your last match?"

Scott's last match, or fight depending on who you ask, was against the female version, and pro wrestling equivalent, of the Dollar General rip-off of Deadpool. Her gimmick was to be bat-shit crazy with hints of gravity sprinkled in, which she was. She just wasn't nearly as funny.

Pro wrestling had changed in recent years, as a lot of intergender matches were taking place, as in men competing one-on-one against women. Scott didn't like it, because he wasn't a fan of hurting a female, but he knew he had to be like the industry itself. Willing to adapt.

"Yeah, I guess so." Scott lied. "It's okay, though. I managed to win, either way."

"There's a silver lining, but I have to be honest. You look like hammered dog shit, man."

"I'm sure I'll never look normal."

"What do you mean?"

"With my lifestyle," Scott shrugged, "I take a lot of hard hits. I get into messy situations sometimes. I know a lot of people think wrestling is fake, but I don't pull any punches or take shortcuts when it comes to the physicality aspect of what I do, and neither do my opponents."

As he finished his sentence, Scott thought about his last night in Japan.

The conversation continued, filling the void between them with laughter and war stories from their separate careers.

"So Scott," Ronnie asked after what felt like a two-hour conversation finally coming to a close. "What do you say? Do you think we can work together?"

Scott observed the agent sticking out his right hand.

"That depends," he said as they locked eyes.

"On what?" asked the agent.

"Do you know a good lawyer? You know...of the honest sort..."

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### **An Hour Later**

Ronnie told Scott he'd look into the lawyer thing, and Scott was good with that. They parted ways, with the agent stating how he hoped they'd be talking soon.

Scott drove in silence through the city. His mind filled with thoughts. First, he thought of the stripper Raven. Her real name was Lindsay, and he wondered if she ended up okay, after he'd been knocked out by her boyfriend, Joe. Second, Scott thought about what had taken place in Japan, curious if anything good came out of the incident. And three, Scott thought about the one thing that had been agonizing him since his return to New York.

*Would I do it all over again? Could I? More importantly, should I?*

The questions lingered as Scott pulled into the parking lot outside the gym he'd frequented since he was a prepubescent. It was known as 'Box Like Beckett'. The owner, and Scott's former trainer, was renowned boxer, Sam Beckett. They were introduced by Scott's old houseparent over the group home he'd grown up in, Mr. Bobby.

Sam didn't box anymore, but he continued training others. What he learned from the old boxer helped Scott develop some confidence in himself, especially when it came to finally standing up to the bully he encountered in the group home.

Chris Hodges.

Hodges had always gotten the better of Scott, but after a few months under Sam's wing, Hodges never bothered him again. Or anyone else, for that matter.

But those skills had seemed to dissipate the further Scott had gotten into his training to become a pro wrestler. After what had gone down with Joe, he couldn't help but think he needed a refresher.

The gym was just like one would see in the movies. There was a section specifically for weight training. Benches. Rows of dumbbells of different weights. Pulley machines. There was a ring in the center of the gym. It had been replaced numerous times since Scott first joined. There was a row of punching bags a few feet behind the ring.

Scott went inside and found Sam sitting in his office. He was grizzled. Tiny scars littered his face, especially around the forehead and eyes. One or two on his left cheek. A long one on his right. Scott always told him to grow a beard.

"Then no one would be able to tell us apart," Sam would say.

"Hey old man," Scott said as he stood in the doorway. "Working hard, or hardly working?"

"Jesus H. Christ, kid. Did that shit-head Hodges find you and pay you back for the beating you gave him all those years ago? You look awful."

"Definitely wasn't him," Scott replied before taking a seat across from Sam. "I'm still wrestling."

"Oh, boy. You know that's..."

Scott interjected. "But I came by to see if you could help me sharpen up my fighting skills. You know? So this," he pointed to what everyone else seemed to point out. The condition



his face was in. Scott was indeed handsome, but not even his beard could hide the varying shades of purple and blue, “doesn’t happen again. You get what I’m saying?”

“I get what you’re saying,” Sam said. “And you look like a good tune-up. I don’t mean getting your ass kicked again, either.” The former boxing champion, who had been reading the newspaper, stood up from his desk. He had a bit of a limp and a hunchback. It was an occupational hazard, he’d always say, which reminded Scott that he used the line earlier.

The only difference was that Sam was telling the truth.

“Well, I don’t you’ve got it in you to kick my ass, old man.” Scott grinned.

Sam flipped him off as he limped by. “I can do more than just kick your ass. Don’t forget who taught you everything you know. And everything you seem to have forgotten. You and that fake wrestling shit.”

“It’s not as fake as you think.”

The old man waved off Scott’s remark. “It ain’t as real as I think either, kid.”

Scott followed Sam to the weights, then by the ring, before they finally reached their destination, which was the row of punching bags.

“So, we’re going to start with fundamentals.”

“I don’t need all that...”

Sam shook his head. “Look, if I’m going to train you then we’re starting from the bottom. Is that going to be a problem? If it is then take your pasty ass out of my gym and we’ll call it a day.”

“Starting from the bottom?” Scott asked. “I can handle that.”

“You can probably handle it a lot better than you handled yourself against whoever made you look like you do.”

Scott told himself that he could use the whole doorknob excuse. Deep down he knew, however, that Sam could smell bullshit from a mile away. There would be no point.

Going through the motions of a jab, uppercut, haymaker, overhead punch in no particular order, Scott became reacquainted with his fighting stance and the various strikes rather quickly. Sam always applauded muscle memory, saying boxing, or any kind of fighting, was like riding a bicycle once you figured out the basics.

“So,” Sam asked as Scott landed another uppercut into the bag. “Is there going to be a rematch?”

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*I know such a thought can be seen as laughable to some.*

*Me? Scott Reed? The grappling artist formerly known as Beard? Leaving people speechless? No way, right?*

*Selena Frost. Hasn't given me a second thought, I'm sure.*

*The One. Kiersten Scott. She seems to have moved on from our little back and forth, focusing on Selena, and wanting to compare ass sizes with Kandis.*

*I get it. Kandis got cheated a few months ago. The way that went down was the catalyst for my return to the ring. Kiersten? She can't handle getting beaten, especially after spewing one of her nonsensical diatribes for a good fifteen minutes, when it only needed to be five. Once again, I get it. She has to throw in as many curse words as possible.*

*I've never faced Kandis, but I know she has done nothing but improve and get better since her time in EMERGE. I was down there, as nothing more than a body to fill up the roster. I didn't care for it, but Kandis did. She continued to elevate herself, and that has translated to the SCW roster. She was deemed a tag team specialist, but what did she end up doing?*

*She outlasted thirty-nine other competitors, as cliché as that may sound to the wrestling insiders, to win Taking Hold of the Flame last year. With the crowd behind her, and the determination she's presented, there's no denying that she's a favorite for a repeat.*

*The One? She comes and goes in terms of success. I was at the beginning of it when she was deemed as the 'Next Big Thing'. But despite her minimal success, has Kiersten really lived up to that moniker? She's called herself The One, but she's stuck between One and number Two, in my opinion. She talks a big game and yet she doesn't back it up more often than not.*

*Like Selena, it's as if I'm not even on their radar. I defended Kandis. I've brought the fight to Kiersten, and yet, I'm an afterthought, if even that.*

*Does it bother me? A little bit, yeah. But that's just more reason for me to stay motivated. I have a goal, and what a way to truly leave them speechless than by outlasting them in Taking Hold of the Flame.*

*I mean, what if I come in and win the whole damn thing?*

*Laughable? Maybe.*

*But...what if?*

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### **Two Hours Later**

His body was already getting sore from the training. Sam didn't take it easy on Scott, and despite the activation of his muscle memory, his body felt the punishment it'd taken.

Pulling into the driveway of Matt and Gloria's illustrious two-story house on the outskirts of the city, Scott looked at his reflection, telling himself to brace for the impact of bogus concern.

*Get ready for the interrogation.*

Gloria had seen his face earlier in the day and when she began to fling questions at him, Scott said he didn't have time to discuss it due to his meeting. She told him they'd talk about it later. While replying that he was looking forward to it, that couldn't have been any further from the truth.

Walking up the front stairs, Daniel and Victor met Scott halfway, hugging him. They'd always had a strong bond, but with the loss of their mother, it'd only gotten stronger. Scott was thankful for that, as he felt he'd never truly developed one with his parents, as they died when he was really young.

The circumstances of their deaths, he never knew.

"Hey guys!" Scott exclaimed, scooping his kids up in his arms. "Have you had fun with Grandma and Grandpa?"

"Yeah!" shouted Daniel. His voice was extremely high pitched compared to Victor's.

"That's good to hear," Scott replied before turning his attention to his other child. "And what about you, big man? Did you have fun?"

Victor gave a slight grin, as he was far more bashful than his twin.

"Is that a yes?" Scott asked. "Come on. Is that a yes?" he pressed his forehead against Victor's. "That's a yes, isn't it?"

"Yes," the child groaned and rolled his eyes. "I always have fun."

*That makes one of us.*

“And that’s what it’s all about, boys.” The front door opened, and Gloria stepped out. Her freshly dyed hair, blonde to cover the incoming gray, shimmered in the sun. “Morning, Gloria.”

“How’d the meeting go?”

“It went as well as I could have hoped. Were the boys good?”

She smiled as she looked at Daniel and Victor. Scott knew Gloria loved them with all the love she could give, just as he knew she never felt such a thing for him. Scott was certain she blamed him for the loss of her daughter, even if she wouldn’t come out and say so.

“They did fine. As always. Right, guys?” Her smile returned which conjured laughter from the children, whom he set down. As soon as their feet touched the wooden planks of the porch, they ran over and hugged their grandmother. “Can you guys go inside? Go wake up Grandpa for me, please.” Stepping out of their way, we watched as the boys took off into the house. Their chuckling filled the silence between Gloria and Scott, until she closed the door. It was nothing but muffled noise. “So, do you want to tell me what happened to your face?”

Lying, as Scott did to Ronnie, he said, “Yeah. I took a little too many shots to the face. It comes with the job, though. The swelling has already gone down. The bruising will do the same soon enough.”

Crossing her arms, Gloria scoffed. “And do you really want your children to see you beat up all the time?”

“They know what I do, Gloria. They’ve watched wrestling in the past. I just tell them it looks like I got hurt when I really didn’t.”

“But you actually did, Scott.”

“I did, yes. But,” he shrugged. “I’m obviously fine. Besides, it pays the bills. It’s all I know how to do.”

Despite shaking her head, I could still see her disappointment. “Scott, I know we’re the only real family you have...” Scott wanted to thank her for dragging that card up, “but I know you can do a lot more than what you’re doing. I remember hearing stories of how intelligent you are. Was that true or was my daughter lying to me?”

He’d always done well in school but was also never really interested in doing anything else. Pro wrestling was hard work, but it wasn’t like winning the Nobel Prize. Not even remotely close. “I’m not really sure.” Scott said, “Maybe she believed in me more than I do, or did, in myself.”

Tears began to ski down Gloria's face. She was a retired detective. Based on what Scott knew of his former mother-in-law, she'd seen it all. Rapes. Murders. The list seemed endless, and no matter how much make-up Gloria used, it wouldn't hide how worn she'd become.

"I'm sorry," he stated. "I shouldn't have said that."

*Way to cover up, dick.*

Wiping the tears away, Gloria shook her head. "No, I'm sorry. I just...I just care about my grandbabies. That's all."

"I know you do," Scott replied, not really knowing what to say or do. He never knew real comfort, having dead parents and all.

*Maybe that's why Chris Hodges was such an asshole, he thought. His former bully had lost his mother and father, too. Chris knew how they died. They were killed. Gloria probably investigated it now that I think about it.*

"It's just that," she exhaled sharply, "I saw something on the news this morning. Another child has gone missing in the city."

"Another?" he asked, suddenly interested in what the former detective had to say. "What do you mean another?"

"Do you not watch the news?"

*Can't say that I do.*

"From time to time," he fibbed. "When I get the chance."

"Kids have been going missing for the last few months. A real rise in kidnappings. Old friends of mine in the department believe there's a sex trafficking ring hidden somewhere in the city," Gloria shuddered. "I just can't imagine...what if..."

Scott interjected, knowing exactly where she was headed. "Don't think like that. That's not happening. Ever. My boys will be safe as long as I'm alive."

"You don't know that. I've seen some shit, Scott. I have seen some shit," Gloria fired back, putting extra emphasis at the end of her statement.

"Yeah, yeah. I know. I remember all about it."

"Can you do me two favors, please?"

Nodding, he said, "I'll see what I can do."

"They're more like promises," Gloria added, sternly.

"I don't like making promises..."

She shook her head. "Don't give me that. You can make these promises to me, Scott. They're not just for me. They're for you, and more importantly, they're for those boys."

*Damn it!*

"Okay, what do you want?"

"One, I want you to promise me that you'll not let anyone else watch Daniel and Victor. Just us."

*That shouldn't be a problem. I don't trust anyone else in the city. Not even at work.*

"I'm with you on that one. What's the second?"

"That you'll let them stay with us the next few days without any fuss or bullshit."

"I want the boys with me, Gloria. I'm their father."

"I know. I know you are," she said. "I just need to know they're safe. That's all."

"And they'll be safe with me."

"Please, Scott. You promised..."

"I did not promise that second bit, just to be clear."

"Do this for all of us, Scott. It'll keep me sane, and it'll keep me from calling you every five minutes. Not to mention the fact that I'd try to stay at your place."

*Nope, not happening.*

"Okay, Gloria. Fine by me," he said rapidly. "They can stay here. Not you coming to my place. But I'd like to spend time with them every day they're here. Deal?"

"It's a promise."

"Okay, I get it. Now," he brushed past her. "I'd like to hang with my kids."

"You know I'll never stand between you and those boys."

“I mean,” Scott raised his eyebrows, “you kinda are.”

Patting his back, Gloria said, “Well, I won’t do it again after this. Deal?”

“As long as that’s a promise, too.”

“Yeah, sure. You got it.”

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### **Later That Night**

Scott arrived at the strip club, *‘Sexy and Sassy’* around 8PM. The bouncer chortled as he approached.

“You again?”

“Me again,” Scott said. He heard his spirit deflate as the words escaped him.

“Well, Raven is here. Don’t let Joe find you talking to her. He’ll fuck you up,” the bouncer grinned. “Again, mind you.”

“Yeah, I remember,” Scott pointed at his face. “You can’t forget a thing like that, especially when you’re reminded on a daily basis.”

*More like every five seconds, my guy.*

“Well, have fun. Just remember to stay away from Raven. That’s hazardous for your health.”

“Her name’s Lindsay. Did you know that?”

“Man, my name’s Cliff. Don’t nobody inside care what these bitches’ real names are. Get out my face with that nonsense.”

Shaking his head, Scott entered the club and went straight to the bar, where he ordered a Pepsi, just as he’d done during his last visit.

*Last visit? It’s not like you’re going to see a shrink. Think of something else to call it. How about...I don’t know...your last experience? Maybe?*

His thoughts ceased momentarily when he saw her. Lindsay. She made her way out onto the stage. The rest of the patrons began to shout madly, tossing money at her while whistling in her direction. It became the Wild, Wild West.

He was able to tune out the noise however, staring at Lindsay. Not at her body, but at her face. Into her eyes.

She seemed far more lost than she did the night they met.

*She probably needs saving, but don't tell yourself that you can do the saving.*

Her routine ended, and she collected the cash, while Scott finished off his soda and made his move.

*Piss off brain.*

*Dumb bitch ass brain.*

He found himself just a few inches from her when Scott asked, "Can I have a dance?"

She froze in position for a few moments before Lindsay turned and faced him. A look of shock made its presence felt.

"I can't talk to you," she said.

"I'd like to talk to you," he said.

"Did you hear what I said? Literally said I couldn't."

"I'll pay you," Scott added, pulling out a wad of cash. "I just want some of your time. Just to talk. Nothing else."

"I don't want your money."

"You can have it, either way."

Lindsay looked at him, a sense of defeat in her eyes before she shook her head. "Fine. Let's go."

She took him by the hand and led Scott into the VIP room. It was the same one they shared when they had their first conversation. One he hadn't forgotten.

*It wasn't that long ago, homie.*

*Fuck offff...*

Once inside, Lindsay sat on one side of the leather seat, while Scott sat opposite her. "So, what do you want to talk about?"



“How are you?” he asked.

“I was okay, until I saw you.”

“Yeah, I’m not much to look at.”

Trying to hide her smile, Lindsay fired back. “It’s not that and you know it.”

“Then, what is it?”

“Look at your face, dude!” she cried. “I’m obviously bad for your well-being.”

“Yeah, you’re with a real winner, I must say.” Scott pointed at the bruising on his face, just as he’d done with the bouncer. Just in a less sarcastic manner, as he was trying to find humor in the situation, hoping to get Lindsay to smile, laugh, or both.

“Don’t remind me,” she said. “Just look. I like you and though we just met, I care about you. I don’t want anything bad to happen to you, especially because of me.”

“I can handle myself,” Scott proclaimed.

“Yeah, your face says it all.”

“I appreciate that,” he said.

“Look, keep your money. Just make sure you’re gone before 10. Can you do that for me?”

Scott sighed before standing up. He placed the money beside Lindsay before saying, “That’s for you. And for you, I’ll be gone. No harm, no foul.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Shaking his head, Scott replied, “It was fun while it lasted, right?”

“Don’t say that.”

“You take care of yourself, alright?”

Lindsay glanced down, no longer making eye contact. “You do the same,” she said, clearly unable to mask the sadness in her words.

“I’ll definitely do my best.”

*She probably needs saving, but don’t tell yourself that you can do the saving.*

*Whatever you're thinking...don't do it.*

*Get it out of your head.*

*Stop it. Get some help.*

*Oh, good Lord...*

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## **10 PM**

His name was Joe Allen, and in his mind, he was nothing less than a real badass.

Joe was the type of guy that nobody wanted to mess with, and if you tried to test that theory, you ended up regretting it, full stop.

On the way to pick up her girlfriend Lindsay, Joe couldn't help but laugh as he remembered some pipsqueak trying to defend her a few weeks prior. Joe had to knock some sense into her, and while he knew she was doing what she had to do to make money for them both, he also knew he didn't have to like it. Well, he had to pretend he didn't like it.

But some little shit stepped in, trying to talk all big and bad, only for Joe to show him how small and puny he was. Joe knocked him on his ass, before punting him in the head to seal his fate. Had Joe gotten his ass kicked, it still wouldn't have turned out well for Lindsay. That's all there was to it.

It was just like his father said.

"You gotta put everyone, especially women, in their fucking places. No questions asked."

It was the motto Joe grew up with. He kept such a thing alive, well after his old man kicked the bucket.

It was why all the bouncers knew not to cross him at 'Sexy and Sassy'. It was why Lindsay didn't backtalk him when he picked her up this time. It was why she didn't say a word unless he addressed her. It was why she gave him some of the money she earned that night.

He dropped her off at her place, before heading over to the convenience store near his house. Grabbing some beer and jawing with the cashier, he didn't notice the guy that slipped into the store not long after he did. He paid for his beer and gave the cashier his number, telling her, "Oh, you could get it. You know you want it."

Joe didn't notice the same guy get into another vehicle and pull out behind him, following him.

Pulling into his driveway, letting his truck roll into the shadows behind his place, Joe popped the top to one of the beers, taking a big swig. Sliding the gear into park, and killing the engine, the man who was nothing less than a real badass, climbed out of his vehicle. He went to take another swig, only to stop as he heard the building sound of heavy footsteps.

Turning to his left, a figure emerged from the shadows and Joe blinked, only to feel a fist meet his chin, bone against bone. He dropped his beer before getting hit with another fist to the side of the face, then a shot to his gut. Joe hunched over, telling himself to keep it together.

Standing straight up didn't last very long, as the figure connected with a kick to the balls. Joe clutched himself and dropped to his knees.

The figure said, "Oh, you could get it!"

Another punch, and another, and another. Joe tasted blood inside his mouth. A tooth came loose. Bone on bone. Flesh ripped apart.

"You know..." The punching continued. Lefts. Rights. "...you want it!"

Joe fell to the side as everything rang in his head, the pain slithering like a snake up and down his body. He looked up, wondering if he could get a good look at his attacker, despite the blurriness in his vision. Blinking a few times, it seemed the figure was giving him a moment or two. In those moments, everything cleared up, but Joe didn't know who stalked him.

The figure wore a black mask. Everything was black from his shirt to his pants and boots.

"What..." Joe spit out blood. "What the fuck do you want?"

The figure smirked. "Isn't it obvious?"

More punches connected in rapid succession.

Each harder than the one before it.

The figure cried out, a beast venting frustration, before landing another strike. Joe felt another tooth crack, the fragments piercing his tongue, mixing in with the blood as it was sprinkled on top for good measure.

And then, Joe watched as the figure lifted up his boot and then he saw the bottom as it rushed towards him before everything matched the figure's mask.

All black.

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## **Midnight**

The soreness hadn't gotten any better by the time Scott Reed returned home. The effects from his training, not to mention a few other things, lingered, sending shockwaves throughout his entire body each time he moved.

He grabbed a shower, washing any residue from the day, and letting it slip away into the drain.

Climbing out of the shower and shuffling towards the bathroom sink, he caught his reflection as he'd done earlier. His face still looked the same, which surprised him based on how the rest of his evening had turned out.

Looking at his semi-mangled face, Scott couldn't help but think of Lindsay, and how he hoped the best for her.

*Maybe things will change.*

Sliding into some briefs and gray sweats, Scott made his way into his living room and plopped down on the futon. It reminded him of his time in the group home. Scott had his own bed, but there was a futon in the living room area of the home, which was where he normally fell asleep. He made a promise to himself when he aged out that he'd get one for himself.

As he did with Gloria, Scott kept his promise.

Thinking of Gloria at that moment, he leaned forward and grabbed the TV remote from the coffee table a few inches from him. Turning the TV on, Scott searched until he found a news channel, and he waited.

"Old friends of mine in the department believe there's a sex trafficking ring hidden somewhere in the city," Gloria had said.

Like it did with her, such a thought made Scott tremble.

Nothing else was said on the news, so he began a search on his phone. He searched sex trafficking news. Kidnappings, or whatever else he could think of.

And then, he saw it.

A child's face. Enzo Rossi, a nine-year-old child, was missing. His mother Angela, a nurse, told police Enzo was home with her when she fell asleep on the couch. When she woke up, the child was gone. A flashlight with Enzo's name on it had been found in the alley beside the apartment complex the family lived in.

More thoughts crept into his brain as Scott tossed his phone to the side.

*Whatever you're thinking...don't do it.*

*Get it out of your head.*

Except Scott couldn't do so, no matter how loud the thoughts screamed at him. Reaching over, Scott took his phone back into his hand, and he looked at the picture of Enzo.

His grip tightened around the phone. Scott was never one to get really angry, but at the moment, he was something much worse.

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## **Elsewhere**

Enzo Rossi sat in the darkness of some room. The only light he'd seen was earlier when the sun seemed to shine through a mostly boarded up window.

Not knowing where he was, scared him. Not knowing if he'd ever see his mother again, made it worse.

Despite the fact that he was kept fed by those who'd taken him, the child knew they didn't have good intentions.

Not for him, or anyone else they'd probably kidnapped.

"Don't think about that," Enzo whispered to himself before lying down on the mattress which rested on the floor. With what little light he'd had, the child had been able to memorize where some things were.

He wished he had memorized how to fight, based on what he'd seen in all those comics he spent all his time reading.

*Don't be stupid, Enzo thought. None of it's real. Where you're at, those guys...it's all real. None of 'them' are real...*

Closing his eyes, Enzo worked hard to replace those thoughts, wondering if he'd comfort in one in particular.

*What if superheroes 'DID' exist?*