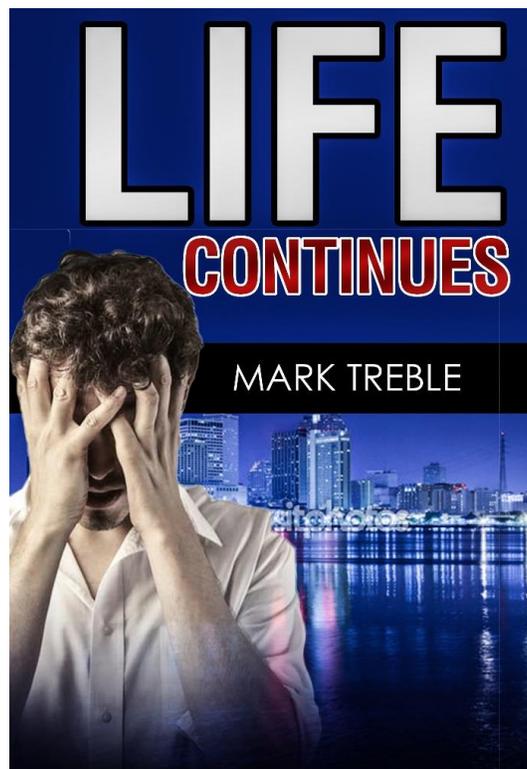


Life Continues

By Mark Treble

Book 2 of the *Life Stories* Series



SAMPLE

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Prologue

I rubbed my jaw once more, wondering when I'd get used to my new dental implants. They felt strange and foreign, but I figured that would probably change. Alex had been kidnapped. While trying to locate him, I had been found hours away from death after crossing the wrong violent paranoid prick. He was a member of the big local crime syndicate and bore a major grudge. The last of my injuries needing attention was the dental work. I'd lost three teeth - we don't want to count the broken ribs - and those were the minor issues.

My stepson's disappearance had led to a much wider and more sinister criminal web involving young men across the country. Oakland, St Louis, Omaha, and a bunch of other cities were affected. One of the young men we rescued had been taken from Oakland. His girlfriend was goddaughter to a New Orleans dentist. And Dr. Collins had insisted on doing the work for free.

I miss Dana so much. She meant everything to me, but now she's gone. And I have to face life without her. I have to face some really unpleasant parts of life without her. Damn her, why did she have to go and die?

She wouldn't want me to stop living, to stop growing, to stop looking for love. Life continues, as she always said. And, there's Alexander. I love him like a son. He pisses me off and frustrates the hell out of me from time to time. But I still love him. And I owe it to him - and to Dana - to be his father. That means hurting him from time to time. When I do, it breaks my heart. But it's my responsibility to get his life on track, to help him grow up and be safe, no matter how much it hurts him or me.

Dana's son, my stepson, was coming around before his mother's sudden death. Since then, he's become a yo-yo. On good days, he calls me Ethan and doesn't look for ways to inflict pain. On the bad days, he calls me Douchebag, has a meltdown, and focuses his energy equally on getting sex, smoking pot, and fucking with me. There are more bad days than good ones. I know he misses his mother and feels lost without her. Well, I feel the same way. But I'm supposed to be the adult here.

God, I miss her so much.

Alex had been through hell. Yeah, it was his own fault, but that only made it more painful for him. Alex had been kidnapped. At least, that's what we thought had

happened. And Alex's disappearance seemed to be part of a pattern of similar crimes in New Orleans over the past year. His was the tenth in a series of unexplained disappearances involving young men aged seventeen to nineteen.

He disappeared in broad daylight from the front yard of our next door neighbor. And his T-shirt and cutoffs were found abandoned next to the curb. He'd been cutting Luke Dupree's lawn; then he vanished. Yeah, that Luke Dupree, the artist. The famously out gay artist. Since Alex was obviously without clothes, the police had their first suspect.

Except that Alex had grown up living next door to "Uncle Luke." He and Dana had been like brother and sister, and Alex was no less his nephew for lack of a blood relationship. I couldn't imagine Luke's involvement and, in a few hours, neither could the police. That still left us without a motive or a suspect.

Nobody knew where to start looking, but I did. I had confidential informants in most of the criminal elements of New Orleans. That said quite a bit given the city's third-world-level crime statistics. I hunted through the muck and mire of metropolitan mayhem, and things were a bit unpleasant for a while. I was run over, beaten up, and eventually left for dead.

Then Alex showed up alive. He and his girlfriend, Monica, had taken off for a rave party upstate. They got lost, ran out of gas, and had no cellphone signal. They were separated, and Monica was eventually found alive, albeit quite a bit worse for wear. Alex was finally located, but was so sick I'd have been planning his funeral had I not been in a coma.

His Uncle Luke actually found him, got him medical care and brought him back to the city. Alex had dysentery, West Nile Virus and a bunch of other really creepy things wrong with him. We recuperated in the same hospital and went home the same day. Alex had missed first semester at a community college where he intended to get a two-year degree in computer crap. So, he stayed at home, never wore pants, had sex with his girlfriend, and got in a lot of trouble.

He had come around again. We were still living with a fragile truce, but I could handle that. And so could Alex. At least I thought he could. He called me Ethan and actually hugged me a couple of times. We went to ball games together and to concerts where my press credentials got him back stage access. We were coming closer to the easy and friendly relationship we'd had before his mother's death.

I just hoped he hadn't screwed up too badly this time.

Chapter One

I was reading a short letter from Brenda, FBI Special Agent from Milwaukee. She raised the subject of a brewery tour. A Miller brewery tour. In Milwaukee. I smiled briefly. She and I had connected when we found the kidnapped young men. Mutual exhaustion and disgust with what we found left us both with nerves near the breaking point. Brenda had a fix for that. I'm amazed my dick wasn't still sore.

The call was unexpected, but I'm not sure why. I'd been getting these calls occasionally since Dana's death. Alex was nineteen, but I was only thirty-one. I'm a step-father who is more like an older brother.

"Ethan McQuade." I put down my bottled water and picked up pen and paper, just like a real journalist.

"This is Officer Thibedeaux of the New Orleans Police Department. Is Alex Johansen your son?" Oh, shit. Not again. At least this one's voice was a pleasing alto and not the growling bass of the last guy.

"Are you sure you have the last name right?" I mean, Alex's last name was DeLauder. Perhaps this was all a mistake. Yeah, right.

"Well, his make-it-yourself driver's license says his name is Alex Johansen. Of course, his prints match those of Alex DeLauder." Officer Thibedeaux was quite professional. And thorough. And I wondered briefly if she was taken.

"What's he done this time?" Might as well cut to the chase.

"Sir, is he your son?" Persistence, I like that in a woman. Just not in a woman who is also a police officer.

I acknowledged that he was my son, having already learned that it was just too time-consuming to describe the real relationship. While continuing to listen, I located my keys and checkbook, and looked for that frequent customer card the bail bondsman had given me.

Drunk and disorderly. Again. Thank God, no car crash, broken bones, public lewdness or property damage involved. I could hope that things were getting better.

“Sir, he’s already been arraigned. Bail is going to be \$1,000. Do you need the name of a bail bondsman?” Persistent, but professional. She’s probably a sixty-two year-old, four-hundred-pound, lesbian. If not, maybe she’d be willing to go out with a guy who only communicates by crying and breaking things. Who the fuck am I kidding? If she’s got her shit together enough to hold down a job, she won’t want anything to do with me.

“Officer Thibedeaux, I’m on my way to central to post bond. Do I talk to you?” I was hoping the answer would be yes, just in case she was only a sixty-one year old three-hundred-pound lesbian.

“Actually, I’m planning to be there to meet you. This is Alexander’s fourth arrest in less than a year. I want to discuss some options for you.” I have options? That don’t involve posting bond or standing trial for murder? Best news I’ve had in a long time.

God I miss her. Dana would know what to do about this. Except she’s dead, so she has it easy. Now, I have to deal with it. Now I feel guilty for being angry with her. I miss her so much.

An attractive woman in business attire was waiting for me. I’d seen her before, but couldn’t place where. She was perhaps five feet seven, gorgeous auburn hair, and as the song says, she was broad where a broad should be broad. She had a dazzling smile. If this was Officer Thibedeaux, then I could forget about an overweight woman in her sixties. And, if she was a lesbian, who am I to be prejudiced?

“Carly Thibedeaux, NOPD.” She offered her hand. *Should I shake it? Hold it? Kiss it? Lick it? Ethan, get your mind back in gear.*

“Ethan McQuade, just NO.” We shook hands.

“Mr. McQuade, let’s go into the conference room. Do you want coffee?” I wanted her, but coffee would have to do.

“Please call me Ethan.” I’m sure I had no chance, but you can’t win if you don’t play the game.

“And I’m Carly.” She was remarkably pretty, and really had her shit together. I knew I had zero chance at bagging this one. Oh, well.

Once the coffee orders had been filled, we sat in government-issued chairs at a government-issued table drinking government-issued bath water. “First, I’d like you to

listen to something.” Carly turned on a small recorder, and my bad day turned into a nightmare.

“You’re Lex?” Woman’s voice, probably Carly.

“Yeah. I’m Lex. You got the money?” Unmistakably Alex.

“Yeah, I have the money right here. \$200, no?” Yep, that was Carly.

“OK. So, what do you want to do?” Alex again.

This went on for about three minutes. Carly told Alex that for her \$200 she wanted him to get naked, give her oral sex, and then have intercourse with her. Alex agreed to all of that.

“You’re under arrest for soliciting prostitution. Put your hands behind your back and turn around.” That was Carly – Officer Thibedeaux. She turned off the recorder.

I hit the table with both fists, then stood up and kicked the chair across the room. Next I punched the wall. Not my smartest move, since the wall was made of cinderblock and my hand was not. This day was getting worse and worse.

“So, I take it you didn’t know about Alex’s entrepreneurial efforts.” Carly wasn’t smiling, thank God. She was, however, going to the sink and wetting a paper towel. I reached for it and thanked her; she ignored me and cleaned the blood off the wall.

“I get loads of shit if I leave blood on the wall in an interrogation room.” She eventually cracked a smile, and so did I.

“Now, stop bleeding on the floor and we’ll talk some more.” She motioned toward the sink, and I washed off the blood, used some paper towels to stop the bleeding, and knew I might have one or more broken bones. Fucking marvelous.

“It gets worse.” That was Carly again. I wasn’t at all sure how it could get worse. She clicked a link on her computer and I saw the ad. It got significantly worse.

Ladies Only Male Escort *** Make your fantasies cum true *** Lex the Nine Inch Tex *** Outcalls Only.

Then there were the pictures. Alex, completely nude and erect (the nine inches was a lie), smiling at the camera. Alex's tongue buried in a girl's vagina. Alex's penis penetrating a girl's vagina. I think I knew who the girl was.

"I can never un-see that, Carly." I was drowning and hoping for a life preserver. And she threw one.

"Ethan, this is an opportunity. As of now, Alex is only charged with drunk and disorderly. The DA retained the right to add other charges as the investigation proceeds. I've told him we can try to work with you and Alex to get his life back on track. That's the carrot. The stick is the charge of soliciting prostitution. What do you think?" Carly's hands were resting on her hips, as though waiting for an unruly child to calm down.

Well, she'd had to clean this unruly child's blood off the wall. "Can I see him?" I was hoping to talk to him. Oh, and maybe slit his throat. That's maybe, I hadn't made up my mind yet. Then I thought of Dana.

It didn't matter what Alex did, she loved him more than life itself. I had to try and help him, not just for his sake, but also for Dana's. And for me.

Speaking of Dana, should I feel guilty about trying to get with Carly? That's a resounding *NO*. We had talked about one of us dying, never imagining that it might actually happen. She told me that I deserved love in my life, and if she were gone, she wanted me to look for it. I told her the same thing, and I meant it. Lots of regrets, but no guilt. It's what Dana would want.

"What are you planning to do?" That was a reasonable question. I wish I had a reasonable answer.

"I'm going to chew his ass for this nonsense, pay his bail, take him home, and either ground him until the Second Coming or cut his throat. I'm not sure which right now." The answer might not be reasonable, but it was honest.

Carly laughed. "In your present mood I can't let you see him. If you attack him, I'll arrest you. If you attack me, I'll bruise your balls so bad you won't even think about sex for three years. I suggest you let him stew overnight. I've taken the liberty of typing out a note from you. If you don't like it, you can change it."

I liked it.

Chapter Two

Alex,

You fucked up big time this round. The police and district attorney will consider holding off charging you with soliciting prostitution, but only if you agree to the following.

1. You're released into my custody. Obey my orders or you're charged and go back to jail until trial. I will not post your bail for the prostitution charge.

2. Officer Thibedeaux and I will create a sixty-day program of hard work and harder learning. Your input is welcome, your veto is not. You will follow the program. The first infraction will result in your website's pictures going to your grandparents. The second infraction sends the pictures to Monica's parents. The third infraction puts your ass back in jail.

3. I will be back in the morning to see what you want to do. If you want to be released from jail, I'll post your bond then. And your ass is mine for two months.

Don't fuck up again,

Ethan.

I didn't want a single change. The idea of leaving Alex overnight in jail turned my stomach. I had nearly died a few months ago trying to find him, and if necessary, I'd put myself in mortal danger again for Dana's son. My step-son. Making him stay overnight in a jail cell was cruel. But, maybe it was needed to get his attention so we could start putting his life back together again.

"Ah, Carly, how did you get all that information about grandparents and Monica? I mean, if you used a rubber hose I'd like to borrow it. I can't get shit out of the boy most days."

Carly smiled. "He volunteered all of it. He begged me not to arrest him. I asked why, and he told me his mother had died and he lived with a douchebag stepfather. He said he wanted to live with his grandparents, but douchebag wouldn't hear of it. He was afraid Monica's parents would find out and the lust of his life would be lost." Carly laughed.

“That was his phrase, ‘lust of my life.’ He added that the sex was fabulous, but she was not very smart. I asked him if she had ever been arrested for prostitution. She hadn’t. So, who’s the not very smart one?” It was my turn to laugh.

“What do we do with him?” I mean the idea of a sixty-day program to put his life back on track was fine in the abstract, but what exactly do we do for those sixty days? Feed him bread and water and have him dig ditches? I was kind of out of ideas.

“I noticed his address on the driver’s license. You live near Luke Dupree, don’t you?” What a graphic artist had to do with Alex’s program was not yet clear. Probably would never be clear.

“Yeah, he lives next door. He did all of Dana’s designs for menus, flyers, anything requiring art. He is really talented.” I paused.

“Um, you’re not planning to date him, are you?” If she didn’t already know, I was going to have to drop the dime. I once got angry at Dana for all the time she spent with Luke. One day, he called me and asked me to come over to his house and head into the back yard, no other explanation. I walked in and blew up.

Luke was completely nude sunning himself beside the pool, mint julep in hand. Dana was topless, enjoying the sun and sipping on a mint julep. They both laughed and Luke spoke first.

“Chill out, man, I’m a three-dollar bill.” It took me a minute before it hit. Queer as a three-dollar bill. Oh. Never mind.

Carly continued. “No, not Luke. He doesn’t play for the right team; we’d be competing for the same guys all the time.” She paused. “I’ve kind of got a crush on his roommate.”

I knew Lazarus Unpronounceable from somewhere in the Indian Ocean, but then remembered he had left the country. Probably for the best. I knew Marcus, Luke’s new roommate. Marcus and Alex were actually good buddies. Alex was eighteen, but had the emotions of a fifteen year old. Marcus was in his thirties and could only aspire to Alex’s level of maturity. Yeah, Marcus was also gay, but we had established with more certainty than I wanted that Alex was straight.

“How do you know Marcus?” Again, take it slow, maybe she doesn’t know.

“Not Marcus; Mike.” Ah, that must be the invisible white guy. About my age, seems smart, almost never see him.

“I met Mike when he was working with me on some training for our officers. Interviewing and interrogation. I invited him back to my place for lunch one day and made an obvious pass at him. He said he was at the beginning stage of a relationship and didn’t feel right stepping out. That just made me want him more.” OK, so it’s invisible Mike, but I still didn’t understand.

“Mike turned Marcus’s life around. Marcus has hundreds of failed inventions to his name. He finally ran completely out of money and was evicted from his apartment. He moved in with Luke and Mike, and they paid him to do odd jobs and keep the place up.

“Marcus had another hare-brained invention idea, and Mike shut it down. He interviewed Marcus about his experience, and then helped him launch an internet service for inventors. Since he’s screwed up everything he’s ever invented, Mike figured Marcus could use that experience to find the flaws in other people’s inventions.” I nodded my head.

“Not long afterward Marcus got a call from a much larger internet-based firm that helped people with their inventions. They gave him \$50,000 for his website and hired him on at \$150 per invention to critique them. He still plays “houseboy,” but I think it’s the ‘black servant in the white household’ joke that appeals to him.” Hmmm. I could see where the joke would appeal to Marcus.

“Anyway, if Mike can turn Marcus around, he can turn Alex around.” I hoped that her crush on the guy wasn’t affecting her judgment. Then I figured, so what if it was? I didn’t have any better ideas. Working with a smart guy might let some of it rub off on Alex. Actually, he wasn’t lacking for brains, just judgment.

“OK.” This was me. “I’m going to take my letter back to Alex if I’m allowed. Can I buy you a drink?” Again, you can’t win if you don’t play the game, no matter how lousy you think your chances are.

“Sure. Come with me. Don’t speak, just hand him the note. Then you can take me out for a drink. Black with sugar, no cream, please. I’m still on duty.” She smiled coyly at me. I think it meant that I had no chance of getting in her pants tonight, but you never know.

At the holding cell, Alex was his usual charming self. “What took you so long, douchebag?” That was directed at me.

I handed him the note, turned on my heel and left. I could still hear his “Fuck you asshole douchebag!” three rooms away. It will do him some good to spend the night behind bars. At least I hope it will. My heart was breaking, but we had to do something to get through to him.

Dammit, Dana, why did you have to die? I needed her right now.

The café was just two blocks away. Mid-fall is pleasant in New Orleans. Sometimes you need a coat, but tonight wasn't one of those nights. I held the door for her so I could ogle her ass. I know I'm a writer, but I'm not sure what the superlative is for “ogle.”

She was single, no kids, straight, and a professional police officer for eight years. I was single, with one stepson, straight, and a professional columnist of eight years.

If she were just an overweight geriatric lesbian, I might have a chance. She was none of the three, but I was going to try anyway.

We shook hands as we parted. I got into my baby-shit brown Malibu and drove home. I don't know what Carly did; maybe save a crown prince, or shoot a murderer, or rescue a cat. Didn't matter. I had something to look forward to: making Alex's life as fucking miserable as he had made mine. In pursuit of helping him get his shit together. As much as it pained me, I was out of other options.

Chapter Three

On the way home, Alex was absolutely silent. I tried talking with him a couple of times and got nothing but sullen looks.

Just before we got to the house, he struck.

“You fucking asshole! You left me in jail all night. I could have been raped or murdered because of you. Douchebag. I’m leaving.” There, we could now have a productive discussion.

“Where are you going?” Seemed like an appropriate question.

“What the fuck do you care? And what fucking business is it of yours anyway?” Maybe a little work was needed on the lad’s conversational skills.

“Well, if you’re planning to leave the city ...”

“I’m leaving the whole fucking state, douchebag. I’m going to Wisconsin. Grandpa and Grandma love me, you know, not like here.” Alex had won the argument.

I dialed a number for an empty desk at the paper. I spoke over the voicemail greeting from someone who had left a year ago. The charade was for Alex’s benefit.

“Officer Thibedeaux, this is Ethan McQuade. I thought you’d like to know that Alex is leaving today to go to Wisconsin ... I wasn’t aware of that ... Yeah, intention to flee the jurisdiction. OK, his bail is revoked. I’m headed back to central.” I made a U-Turn.

“Sorry buddy, your bail is revoked, and you’re headed back to jail. I’ll call your grandparents and tell them to expect you after the trial.”

I think that sound from Alex is called a primal scream. Amazing vocal range, astounding lung capacity. And the drumbeat of his fists on the dashboard made such an appealing accompaniment. They matched my racing heart, knowing that this had to work no matter how much it hurt either or both of us.

“I’ll try to line up a lawyer for you. I can’t afford a whole lot, but I think Luke knows a few lawyers. And Marcus probably has a cousin.” While talking, I was dialing.

“Will, it’s Ethan.” Will covered the crime beat for the paper. “Alex will have to stand trial for drunk and disorderly, and maybe for a minor felony. Bail was just revoked for intent to flee the jurisdiction. I’ll try and find a lawyer tomorrow.”

I listened to his sympathies for a few seconds and answered his first question. “This is arrest number four in the past year.” I waited. “He’s on probation before judgment for the others.” I waited again. “Probably three of the four.”

I listened again. “Jesus, a whole year in jail just for violating probation? I’ll let him know. So, how many weeks should Alex expect to stay in lockup before the trial?” As I listened I held up two fingers in Alex’s direction. Then three. Then four and five. “Hold on a minute, Will.”

“Looks like six to seven weeks until trial. Just a minute.” I returned to the phone.

“Soliciting prostitution. No, not gay, straight. He put up a website, and there’s a recording of him asking a woman for money to have sex with her.”

I stole a glance at Alex. He was pale and shaking a little. Time to drive the knife home.

“So, it’s a year on the drunk and disorderly charge plus the probation violations at a year each. And, another year or so for the prostitution charge. He might get out in three years for good behavior. I’m sorry, but ‘good behavior’ and ‘Alex’ do not go in the same sentence. Thanks.”

I hung up. “Six or seven weeks until trial, maybe three or more years, but if you fuck up in prison it’s more. I’ll call Penelope and tell her to expect you in about four years.” I know I sounded dispassionate. My heart was breaking, and I wanted to cry.

In a remarkably soft voice, Alex asked if we could go home. I pulled into the jail parking lot and made another fake call to “Officer Thibedeaux” at the unanswered phone.

“She says you can go home and don’t have to come back to jail, at least for now. She recommended you read the note again. And, she’ll try to come see you later today before meeting with the DA about whether to hold or file the prostitution charges.”

I tried to soften my tone. “What’s it going to be, Alex? Jail or home?”

Alex hadn't cried since Dana's funeral. If he didn't get home and into his bedroom in short order, he was going to embarrass himself. My stepson was shaking and couldn't say a word.

I answered for him. "OK, home it is." I tried to say it as gently as I could, hoping to convey how much it hurt me to do this to him. I'm pretty sure he didn't notice.

The house was unnaturally quiet. Alex walked to his bedroom and shut the door. The sound of his bedsprings bending was accompanied by a serious groan. No crying in that room for sure.

I called Officer Thibedeaux – Carly – and asked her to try and drop by and see Alex later today. I confessed to the ruse; she thought it was great. She'd be by before the end of her shift.

I had a contract to write a book about the nationwide kidnapping escapades. I got a little bit of work done on that before Carly showed up. I offered her something to drink; she said she wanted to check on Alex. When I called, he came out of his room and asked her what she wanted. Carly laughed. A chuckle would have had better results I think.

"It's my home, and I can wear fucking clothes if I want to or not wear clothes if I want to. What are you laughing at?" In typical Alex fashion he had emerged from his room in his underwear, almost certainly in order to shock Carly. He picked the wrong target for his immaturity.

"Alex, it isn't something I haven't seen before – remember the hotel room? And let's not forget the website. Anyway, if you intend to leave the state, your bail will be revoked and you will go to jail. So, go ahead and leave the state. You'll show up back here in a couple of weeks, just not voluntarily.

"I'm going to see Mike about a program for you. This is day one, fifty-nine to go. If you choose to throw away your life, go for it. You won't be the first, you won't be the last. Without assholes throwing away their lives, I wouldn't have a job. So, do what you gotta do."

I asked her if she wanted to stay for a drink or for a meal. For the night was the real objective, but I thought that might be moving too quickly. Wait until after the meal to pop that question.

"I really want to see Mike." Single-focused can be good. If the focus is on me.

We bade her goodbye.

I made dinner, a full-size meatloaf. I ate a slice, Alex ate the rest. I had a store-bought apple pie for desert. Once again, I ate a slice and Alex ate the rest. Did I eat that much at nineteen?

That night, I called Cheryl again. She had introduced me to sexting, but I had no idea how badly Auto-correct could screw it up. The first time we did it, she got a text saying *I want to kick your puppy*. Her puppy needed a whole lot of kicking right about now.

Chapter Four

“Put on some clothes, and then you can go.” Alex and I were a couple of guys; New Orleans was warm, and we rarely got dressed in the house. He had been spending his time at home in the nude until my friend with benefits, Cheryl, stepped in. She’s a chief trauma nurse at St. Swithin’s.

Cheryl told him about the bruised, burnt, cut, and worse penises and the badly damaged testicles she saw every day in the ER. They all belonged to guys who stayed naked at home just because they could. After that, Alex wore his jockeys around the house. At least it was a step in the right direction.

“Fuck you, douchebag.” It warmed my heart to see that he was completely back to normal after his ordeal. That’s a lie. It cut me like a chainsaw. “I go over to Uncle Luke’s all the time to use the pool or hang out with Marcus and maybe drink some beer. Why do I have to put on clothes?”

“It’s a business meeting is why. Mike is going to help you turn your life around. He’s a professional business consultant and is treating this as a business meeting. You need to do the same.” My words were having no effect. Sure, you can lead a horticulture but you can’t make her appreciate it.

Alex just sneered at me and walked out the back door. He went through the gate that separated the two patios. I counted. “Forty-three, forty-four, forty-five, forty-...”

“Motherfucking conspiracy!” That was Alex. “The camel-pubic-hair-eating bastard told me to go back and return when I was properly dressed for a business meeting.”

I waited a heartbeat. “Well?”

“Well, what? It’s a conspiracy. Even *Marcus* told me to put on my clothes for a business meeting. I pointed out that he was in his usual boxers. He pointed out that he wasn’t going to a business meeting.”

I bit down hard on the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

“What are you grinning at, douchebag?” Alex was in fine form. I declined to respond.

“Then that prick Marcus makes a joke out of it. Says it’s after Labor Day so I can’t wear tighty whiteys.” Alex stomped over to the refrigerator and took out a beer.

“Put down the beer so I won’t be charged with giving alcohol to a minor when the police come by to arrest you on the prostitution charge. Which,” I looked at my watch, “should be in about six minutes.”

Alex threw the beer on the floor. He screamed “Fuck you, fuck Marcus, fuck Mike, fuck everybody!” before dramatically dragging himself across the kitchen to his bedroom. “I’m putting on some fucking clothes. Happy?”

Well, no, I wasn’t exactly happy, but I hadn’t been happy in a long time.

Alex emerged in a wrinkled white shirt and Dockers that were half an inch too short for him. Not good, but good enough. He refused to speak while he made his way in theatrical strides to the back door.

Shortly thereafter I heard a single “Screw you!” in Alex’s voice coming from next door. Things must be going swimmingly. Almost an hour later, Marcus walked through the back door in his trademark red boxers covered with homosexual-themed appliques. I wanted to ask him if he made them himself. Then I changed my mind.

Marcus was carrying three beers, gave one to me, and sat at the dining room table with the other two.

I raised my eyebrows. Marcus pointed at the third beer and said “Alex.” Neither of us said another word for three minutes.

“Holy shit that man’s crazy!” That was Alex. Why his dialog had to include so many exclamation points I did not know.

“First, he wouldn’t let me into the meeting without getting dressed. Then I asked Marcus for a beer, and he and Mike said no. In unison. Something about a business meeting. Marcus, gimme the beer. You owe me, man.”

“I don’t owe you shit, bro. I brought you a beer because I’m your friend, and because you obviously need one. I’m never gonna bring you a beer because I owe you.” Marcus was immature, silly, a clown, and actually quite smart.

Alex took the beer. “Mike says I’m a hound dog and a cunt slut. He says I’m a man whore who’ll fuck anything that moves, and probably half of everything else. He accused me of being a sex addict and being hopelessly depraved. He showed me a sample business card.” Alex handed it over.

Have Dick, Will Travel

Below the text was a drawing of an erect penis with testicles.

“No good, man. The dick’s far too big.” Marcus excused himself to hit the toilet before peeing on the floor.

“Anyway, Mike said it’s a good thing.” That sure got my attention. “He asked me to describe a sexual fantasy involving myself and two women. About two minutes into it I was glad I had put on some clothes. You know.” I did indeed know.

“Then he asked me to describe a sexual fantasy involving me, a cunt and a vibrator. I kinda got off on that one, I mean, Monica knows a lot about vibrators, and ... Maybe I should stop now.” Yeah, maybe he should.

“Next Mike asked me to describe a formula for a schlock romance story that would appeal to women eighteen to twenty-two and include a bunch of sex. That actually was pretty easy.

“I read some of Monica’s \$1.99 romance crap on her e-book reader while I was recovering. It was that or ingredients on soup cans. I read the crap and knew the formula.

“Handsome man meets gorgeous woman. At least one of them is fabulously rich (probably the guy) and at least one of them has some sort of deep dark secret. They are immediately drawn to one another and know instantly that they are in love for the rest of their lives. They spend the next half of the book fawning and swooning and talking about all this relationship shit, with an occasional kiss and maybe a rare trip to second base.

“At around the 50% point they can’t take it anymore, and the fun begins. ‘He kissed her (insert adverb) on her (insert body part). She was (insert adjective) but quickly became (insert another adjective). She kissed him back with a (drop down menu including desperation, passion, lust, pick one) she never knew she had. As he blanked her blank, she passionately/wildly/animalistically blanked his blank with her blank. Before long they

were blanking and blanking and the blanking was nonstop. Then, after eight pages of blanking, the clothes start to come off.

“The first sex scene involves gymnastics worthy of an Olympic athlete and duration worthy of a politician’s speech. She is somewhere between 36C and 38DD, solve that with a random number generator. His dick is somewhere between eight and eleven inches, another random number generator solution. The orgasms are counted in the hundreds. The guy can ejaculate every fifty-seven seconds all night. The sex lasts at least nineteen hours and is nonstop. You know, stuff that’s based on reality.”

Alex was grinning. Sure it was about sex, but he was actually focused on something other than making my life a living nightmare. Please let this have possibilities.

“Anyway, this goes on with giggles and moans and kisses and swooning until about the 70% point, where something awful happens, like taking third place in a cupcake baking competition on reality TV, and they are separated forever. They take turns being fucking miserable. Finally, at the 90% point something else happens, like the winner’s frosting all melts, and the deep dark secret is revealed. This usually has something to do with a life-shattering event at least as horrible as not being able to tie your shoes when you start kindergarten.

“The two lovers are immediately reunited, and half of the remainder of the book focuses on 38DD and eleven inches and impossible sex, the other half on gooey romance shit, and it’s done. I figure about five days to get the first version of the schlock-writing program down, and I’m in business.”

I asked the obvious question. “What’s the business?” Alex looked at me like I was terminally dense. You know, the normal way he looks at me.

“I can churn out this shit by the bucketful. Girls go online and give me their names, the names of the other major characters, a location, a sketch of what the plot might be and a perv-o-meter score for the amount of sex. No porn, no kiddie sex, no sex with animals. Which reminds me, where can I study up on vampires?”

“Anyway, I charge them actual money and help them self-publish in an e-book store. There’s money to be made from book covers, e-book conversions, author websites, social media management for the inevitable best seller, and other useless shit they’ll talk themselves into paying for.

“Now my customer just *knows* she has a sure-fire best seller that will make her rich. And she has a book that’s all about her.” Alex paused for almost a full minute. “I wonder if I can find somebody to mass-produce dildos with names of books on them.”

In an hour, Mike had turned Alex from a sex-addicted hound dog into a sex-addicted hound dog with a real possible business idea.

“Ah, how do you come up with the money to start this?” I was hoping my dwindling cash from the book advance wasn’t the answer. But, if it was, maybe I could sell a kidney or something.

“Mike is putting up \$500 of his own to get me started. And he said he’d bring over a bunch of books about marketing, and business models, and internet commerce and stuff for me to read.

“Then, I have to write a business plan. Something tells me that’s not going to be as easy as it looks.”

My God, it’s just an hour and Alex had matured at least a whole year. I wonder if Mike used drugs on his clients. I wondered where I could get some.

“Anyway, after I have the business plan written he’s taking me down to a bank in town that handles some rich dude’s investments. The dude puts a few thousand into promising new businesses every couple of months. Mike seems to think I have a good shot at funding.”

This was entirely too much. *He’s going to study from books, he’s going to write a business plan, he’s going to build a computer program, he’s going to a bank – please, please, please let him wear clothes – and he hasn’t called me douchebag in thirty minutes.*

Yeah, I know this is all a dream, but if it’s a wet one this is going to be a record-breaking cum shot.

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