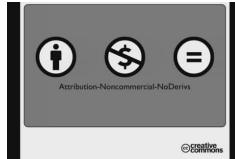


DAY 1

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The estate agent was beginning to look a little flustered as he struggled with the lock but Ben's eyes weren't on him. As the fat, balding man cursed under his breath, Ben Fowler's attention was all focused on the shapely woman attempting to unlock the door of the next flat while juggling four overloaded bags of shopping.

He could feel his penis stirring to life at the jiggle of her buttocks as she shifted her weight and managed to lodge her key in the lock. His gaze stripped away her black skirt revealing the flesh underneath and a shortness of breath hit him as he scanned upwards, peeling the black T-shirt away to reveal the slope of her breast with just a hint of nipple visible beneath the cascade of red hair that hung over her face like a curtain.

'You, my friend, are a godsend.'

Ben started. The image of her flesh banished in an instant as he shot a glance back at the estate agent.

The man smiled toothily at him, obviously unaware of how his flop sweat glistened beneath the fluorescents that lined the stretch of brown-brick flats. He was still jiggling the key in the lock and seemed to be trying to cover his difficulty with what he no doubt thought was slick and charming small talk. Ben wasn't impressed but kept silent. It wouldn't do to get off on the wrong foot. Not when he was trying to start over again; start over and leave the past behind.

'The last tenants left us in a pretty big lurch,' the agent continued, 'gambling debts apparently. Legged it pretty damn sprightly.' Ben snorted before he could stop himself but the agent seemed to take it as agreement. 'That's what I thought. Left owing about four months...'

The agent's voice drained away as Ben turned his gaze back to the lady. She'd managed to open her door but had paused on the threshold. Ben gaped when he saw her smiling at him and the air seemed to press in too close, thickening until it felt like he was gulping mouthfuls of sticky soup. The angular features were there. Just like what he used to look for. The hair colour was right. The eye colour too. And the figure...The figure was perfect.

As he watched he could see those luscious lips ripping open in a rictus-scream, the eyes widening with realisation and his mind jumped to the jar of pills that Slavia had given him.

Where were they? In the car still? Stuffed in the duffel bag with the other things? The other things that he still wasn't certain why he'd retrieved from their

hidey-hole. It was stupid of him to leave them there. Even if he was currently having doubts about their effectiveness. Who cared what his brother's girlfriend had said, surely they wouldn't have released him without proper medication. *Surely not...*

...Maybe he should have brought the whole bag with him... Shit, no, that wasn't right. He was starting over. He couldn't afford to get caught again. He'd been lucky last time. If the boyfriend had been ten minutes later...

Ben was uncomfortably aware of the full-blown erection that was tenting the front of his trousers. The smile had dropped from the lady's face and she was now peering oddly at him. He attempted to mould his features into a smile but had no idea whether he succeeded or not; whether his muscles were obeying him. *Maybe he should go and say hello? No that would just make it worse... He should really stop staring.* Ben tried but he couldn't take his eyes away. Thankfully, before even the faintest glimmer of red walls could appear in the background, the lady disappeared behind her slamming door and the air thinned again. Ben gulped it down as he peered across the weed-choked gardens that pathetically bordered the front car-parks.

'Used to be prime rental property here but then the murder happened and suddenly no-one wanted to stay anymore.' The agent was still focused on the lock and apparently blissfully unaware of the moment that had transpired between Ben and the lady. A fact Ben was immensely grateful for. He had to be much more

careful. Dr Slavia had told him how difficult it was going to be. *He'd said you have to want it to work. And he did want it to work... Didn't he?*

...But that was part of the problem wasn't it? The fact he had to want it to work. Exactly what did that mean? Maybe Mandy had been right. Maybe the pills were nothing but placebos... No that was ridiculous; they never would have released him... Surely not...

...Of course not...

'Only the really desperate folks stay here now...' The estate agent looked up sharply from the lock. 'Not that I'm saying you're desperate or anything like that. Don't take it the wrong way or anything.'

Ben dismissed his comment with a shake of the head that was more directed at the rapidly spreading stains that were dyeing the man's voluminous and immaculately pressed white shirt yellow.

'Are you having some trouble there?' Ben coughed and muttered when he saw that the agent was expecting some sort of verbal response. His voice came out all cracked and croaky though as just briefly, flitting across the mental equivalent of his peripheral vision came a glimmer of red. It was only a hint. The briefest suggestion of a hue but it was enough to start Ben's heart pounding. *He needed his pills...*

'Nah, there's just a bit of a knack to it you know.' The agent paused and looked up at the rapidly darkening sky as he mopped up some of his brow-sweat with his sleeve. 'Don't worry,' he continued, renewing his struggle, 'nothing to worry about. It just sticks a little... Ah there we go.'

The agent sounded ridiculously triumphant as the tumblers clicked and the door swung open.

'After you good sir.'

Ben took a last, lingering look at the closed door of the flat next door, focusing on the tarnished number seven screwed to its front, and then allowed the agent to usher him over the threshold.

The erection was still hot against his thigh.

'As you can see, quite a bit of work has been done to fix the place up. The landlords sunk a fair wad of cash into it, getting it back up to scratch after the last tenant legged it,' the agent called from the living room as Ben stood surveying the kitchen. *Yeah right,* Ben thought as he ran his finger over the bumpy laminate of the bench, his mind transforming its cool surface into the warm flesh of her body beneath his touch. He tried hard not to think of the flash of red and when he realised his touch had become a caress, he removed his hand and shook his head to clear the image. *Looks more like a weekend's work from a couple of mates.*

He wished that the estate agent would just fuck off so he could take his pills. Although he'd only seen the lounge and kitchen so far, it was enough for him to know that a professional had not set foot in the flat. The revolting, lime-green walls were patchy and lumpy from shoddy plasterwork and the joins in the cornices were almost shapeless blobs, giving the impression they had melted. The paint must have been on sale because

everything was lime-green: the walls, the trimmings, the doors, the light-switches. The only thing breaking it up was the off-white ceiling that sported a rather large water-stain across its middle.

Even the carpet – a deep, burgundy colour that clashed horribly with the walls – was thin and cheap-looking and, judging by the way it was lifting in the corners, poorly tacked down too.

‘Ah, admiring the kitchen I see.’ The agent poked his head around the door. ‘That oven’s brand new, so are the bench-tops.’ Although poorly fitted, the bench-tops did look new but judging by the grime encrusted on its front pane of glass, the oven had been in place for a good many years.

Why the fuck was the agent still giving him the spiel? Ben had already signed the lease back at the man’s dingy office. If anything the man’s continued rabbiting was just going to lead him to say fuck off, I don’t want it anymore. Ben rubbed at his temples as he watched the agent’s mouth flap. *He’s probably just a lonely old guy. Doesn’t get much of a chance to talk to anyone. Wife’s probably dead, kids moved away, probably going home to an empty house...*

No matter how much he tried to justify the man’s behaviour, Ben still wished he’d just leave him in peace. He needed time to relax. To take his pills; stop the thoughts before they could coalesce; before the glimmer of red could solidify and spread. *Because the lady next door was not her.* He forced the thought forward strongly, just as Slavia had taught him to. *It’s not her.*

‘So are you happy or what? Such a bargain too.’ The agent was now resting on the bench, balanced on the crook of one arm in a manner that suggested he was settling in for the long haul. ‘The only place you’ll find in Brunswick for under two hundred a week.’

Ben bit back his irritation and forced a smile as he thought about just abruptly punching the man. Feeling the gristle of his nose crunch beneath his fist. It was only the absurd image of the man crumbling then rebounding immediately like a bop bag, still chattering away, that stopped him. With some people it was just futile trying to stop them once they were in the swing.

‘Anyway,’ the agent made an exaggerated show of checking his chunky, plastic watch and hope bloomed in Ben’s chest. ‘I should be letting you settle in.’ He held out the keys for a moment but then gently placed them on the bench when Ben made no effort to take them.

‘I’m just so glad to finally rent this place out you know. The landlords are a nice old couple. Good people. Sort of got suckered into buying this place by another firm. Lot of bastards out there you know. Didn’t tell them the history. They had no idea how hard it would be to rent.’ The agent paused and leaned forward conspiratorially. ‘Also as a quiet aside, there was a bit of a bet back at the office. You my friend have just won me two hundred bucks. The boys thought it would be impossible to rent this place again after the last guy legged it. Been empty a couple of months now, even with the rental crisis...’

The agent beamed at Ben but then looked embarrassed when he merely stared back stone-faced.

'Oh, I'm sorry. Blathering away again. I'll leave you to it. Just remember six-fifty a month. Cheque or money-order. None of that fancy bank-transfer stuff. Just drop it into the office.'

Ben nodded and gratefully trailed the agent to the door. *It doesn't matter, I won't be here in a month anyway.* The thought formed automatically and Ben had to remind himself that it wouldn't be like that this time. That he would be settling down. Looking for work. *He wouldn't need to be gone this time,* he thought as he watched the agent waddling down the driveway past the flickering light outside number three.

He tried his best not to glance at the strip of light visible through the chink in the curtains next door but his eyes drifted to it of their own accord.

Sam Tramontano glanced back over his shoulder as he shuffled across the road towards his immaculately polished Kingswood. The guilt was heavy in his stomach, making him feel all gassy and bloated. He knew his indigestion would be acting up again tonight.

Shit, almost spilt the beans a couple of times there, he thought as he unlocked the door and heaved himself into the seat. *And maybe I should have...*

Yeah but then what? He'd probably want to go to the police or at the very least not want to stay there anymore and he really needed his commission on this one. Not to mention that extra two hundred. He

needed to get that fucking bookie off his back. The smug prick was sending final demand letters and Christ, friggin' Maria had almost got the last one.

And then the landlords would find out too. Sam shook his head as he slotted the key into the ignition. *It was just lucky he'd got there first. Got to scope it out a little. Had a chance to clean up before they'd dropped by.*

As he started the engine, Sam tried hard to convince himself he'd done the right thing but didn't quite succeed. *Shit, what could he have done, huh? He needed the money and the landlords would have just freaked out. Besides, he didn't really know what had happened to the last tenant. The man was a fucking nutcase and with that friggin' ridiculous get-up he used to go around in... There could have been any number of explanations for the stains. Guy was probably holding some sort of satanic rituals in there or some shit.*

Despite his justifications, as he shifted into gear and pulled away from the curb, Sam still couldn't help feeling guilty. *Maybe he should have said something. Given the new guy a heads-up. The guy had seemed nice enough, a little spacey maybe, didn't say much, but still...*

...Fuck it. What could he do? He needed the money.

Nothing will go wrong, he assured himself as he pulled away into the night.

It took two trips to his beat-up Magna for Ben to move in. After pulling into the car park out the front, Ben made one trip to retrieve the inflatable lilo from the boot and a second to remove the two duffel bags from the back seat.

Even though he knew he shouldn't, he couldn't resist a peek on the last trip as he passed the chink in his neighbour's curtain. He didn't dare linger though and his glimpse revealed nothing more than a tantalising swath of colour. He needed to check things out first. Make sure she didn't have a boyfriend like the last one. No one to disturb him. He needed to...

... He needed to take his pills, he thought as the door slammed shut behind him, shocked at how easily he'd dropped back into the old thoughts and trying to suppress the doubts as they bubbled up. Of course the pills would work. He was just being stupid. What the fuck would Mandy know about medicine anyway? She was a fucking PA for fuck's sake.

Ben dumped the bags next to the lilo on the floor and crouched beside them. Carefully, he pushed the khaki one off to the side, wedging it against the wall. He still wasn't certain why he'd retrieved it from where he'd stashed it. It wasn't something that he'd need in his new life. When Slavia had finally signed off on his release from the clinic and he'd stepped up to the bus stop, he certainly hadn't intended to get it. No, he'd headed straight for his brother's house to begin getting his life back on track.

It wasn't until he'd overheard the argument, until he'd heard Mandy say the word placebo, that he'd

found himself heading over toward the footbridge that crossed the freeway at the end of Hope St. He hadn't known that at the time though. It wasn't until he was clambering down the scrubby embankment and levering himself up the concrete pylon into the underside of the bridge that Ben had realised where he was going.

What seemed a lifetime ago, he used to live in a small group of flats one block across in Cumming St. The spot where it had all gone wrong for him last time, and after the boyfriend had walked in to find him looming over *her*, he'd sprinted away desperately searching for a place to stash his tools before the cops caught up with him.

And almost instinctively his feet had taken him to the footbridge.

It was his special place from his childhood. Back when he lived in the commission house on Albion. An almost sacred place for him. The place where he'd hole up from all the unpleasantness; hide away from the horrible rasp of *her* voice. The place where he could just escape it all for awhile, daydreaming as he stared at the underside of the bridge. The place where revenge had first crossed his mind. Where the Red Room had first come to him, slowly coalescing as he'd stared in frustration at the lines of cigarette scars littering the lengths of his arms like sucker marks from a tentacle.

His special, secret place that he had told no one about...

And when he'd clambered up onto the concrete ledge, just over a year from the day he'd stashed his

tools, he'd just known that they would still be there. *I don't have to use them again*, he clearly remembered thinking as his hand had probed around the girder and found the crack in the cement underside. *It would just be... nice... to have them*. And he had felt a sort of completeness when his fingers had finally found the strap and he'd dragged the bag clear. A sort of completeness that now, as he stood peering at it against the wall, seemed totally unfathomable to him.

He deliberately forced his eyes away from the bag even though his fingers were twitching to open it. To rummage through and pull out his playthings. Instead he yanked open the blue bag and removed a bottle of Southern Joy Bourbon and, after a bit of further pawing through the change of clothes inside, a small, orange, plastic vial of pills.

Ben popped the top and looked at the little pastel pink spheres inside. He only hesitated briefly before shaking two out into his hand and washing them down with a swig of bourbon. He sat back for a moment and treated himself to a cigarette from the crumpled pack in his pocket as he waited for them to take effect. Each drag, however, only seemed to lead to more doubts.

Would they work?

Of course they fucking would.

It wasn't long before the doubts forced him to his feet, dragging back deeper and deeper on his smoke until the last half disappeared in one suck. Frustrated, he dropped the butt to the floor and ground it into the carpet with his heel. He really felt like another but forced himself to sit back down and take a swig

of bourbon instead. He was down to half a pack of smokes as it was and he had to make them last. He only had the hundred bucks his brother had snuck him while Mandy wasn't looking to tide him over – the rest of his savings had been sucked dry by the bond – and twenty of that had gone on the bottle of bourbon. *Who knew how long it would take to find work?* It wasn't something he'd had to worry about before.

The alcohol helped a little and he sighed as his eyes drifted to the brittle and tattered cloth blind over the window. He saw the faint glow of the outside fluorescents around its rim and without a thought he was rummaging through his duffel bag again and removing a thick, silver roll of duct tape. The rip as he tore a strip free evoked earlier memories but the pills had made them blurry and indistinct: just the odd glimpse of flesh and the merest whisper of a strangled scream.

Had they really though?

When the curtains were all sealed shut, Ben sat back down and sighed in relief as he took a swig of his bourbon. The pills were making him feel a bit listless – *see nothing to worry about* – and it was a struggle to summon the effort necessary to blow up the lilo that his brother had given him, along with the cash, as a little gift to help him cope with the guilt of having kicked him out. Ben didn't blame him though. He knew it wasn't his fault. He could still hear her voice even through the fuzz of the pills: *but he's fucking creepy. How long is he going to stay? I don't feel safe sleeping in my own bed...*

Wil was a good guy and despite the fact Ben couldn't understand why he'd hooked up with such a bitch, he hadn't wanted to ruin the life his brother had built for himself. Sometimes, looking at him, Ben couldn't help wondering about how different his own life could have been.

With another sigh, Ben leant his head against the wall and wondered once more whether he should have ever agreed to Slavia's experimental treatment. It had led to his early release but maybe it would have been better for him to stay locked up in the psych ward. Maybe he hadn't been ready? He'd already retrieved his tools. There had been flickers of the Red Room. Even just thinking about Mandy seemed to have lessened the effect of his medication. Things just didn't seem quite so hazy and that scared Ben a lot because he *did* want this to work... *Didn't he?* And then there were the thoughts he'd been having about Mandy herself... *and she didn't even really look like her.*

There was a faint murmur drifting through the wall and without thinking, Ben twisted his head and pressed his ear against it. The lady's image floated up in his mind but despite his doubts, the pills had reduced it to a misshapen blob.

The screams his mind summoned sounded more like the mewling of kittens than anything else.

Still, he found his penis rising to life again.