

Disconnect

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Content Disclosure: Sexual Situations

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It's 7:12 p.m., and Simone has this guy in the palm of her proverbial hand. Technically speaking, it's not her hand. The guy is on a date with Alexis, one of Simone's most loyal clients at Connect2. Simone is clicked into her terminal three miles away. Alexis has flipped the switch, giving Simone full control over her actions and words and full access to her thoughts and sensations. Each client feels different to pilot. If the client has joint pain or a headache, the pilot feels it. Many pilots find their first week on the job an almost spiritual experience, feeling the similarities and differences in how various human bodies move through the world. Simone, one of the most respected, in-demand pilots at Connect2, has inhabited over two hundred people.

Piloting Alexis is fun for Simone. Alexis has the sharpest sense of smell Simone has ever encountered, and her near-

constant pulse of nervous energy feels energizing to Simone. Alexis is a well-oiled Porsche, and Simone is a racecar driver. Or something. Simone doesn't really care about cars, but Alexis has some strong memories associated with her father's prized Maserati. It's not Simone's job to unpack this. It's her job to make this guy fall for Alexis.

It doesn't hurt that Alexis is beautiful. She's gorgeous in a predictable, blonde and leggy way. She has a nice laugh, too, which Simone deploys now to show this guy that she gets his Vonnegut reference. Simone hasn't actually read Vonnegut, but she knows enough to recognize popular characters and ideas. Guys never want to talk about the books anyway. They just want to throw down the reference to see if their date picks it up. "You're funny," she says to the guy. This is a bit on the nose for Simone, but she's calculated right; the guy preens and, as if repaying a social debt, asks her about herself. Or rather, he asks her about Alexis. Or, rather, he asks "Alexis" about Alexis.

If Alexis were in control right now, she would demur. She can't stand talking about herself and honestly finds a question as broad as "Tell me about yourself" borderline aggressive. Simone, however, has no problem with this. In her own life, she can happily monologue about the flurry of worries and amusements filling any given day. It's only slightly more difficult to do this for someone else. She tells the guy about the book Alexis is reading, about Alexis's sister's impending wedding, and transitions seamlessly into a story about a business lunch that draws attention to the impressive company where Alexis works in HR. She's careful to speak in Alexis's syntax. The less successful pilots at Connect2 go too far, making their clients perfect embodiments of charm. When the client flips the switch

back and tries to take over, the discrepancies are glaring, and the subsequent dates are disastrous. Connect2 estimates that close to 15 percent of first dates in Los Angeles involve a pilot, but getting caught as a passenger on a date is still considered a red flag in the dating world. The trick is to present Alexis as faithfully as possible—just amping up a few parameters to make a better first impression.

Simone has just revealed where Alexis went to college, and the guy makes a face that both women read as patronizing. Simone feels Alexis's impulse to flinch, but she stifles it. She pauses for a moment to see if Alexis is going to signal that she'd like to take control of the date, but she doesn't. Generally, clients flip the switch to take control mid-date in two situations: when they want to end the date prematurely or when they want to get physical. Every now and then, Simone gets someone who wants her to pilot the first kiss, but anything beyond that is forbidden by the Connect2 code of conduct. In Alexis and Simone's first few months together, Alexis would constantly flip the emergency override switch—forcibly seizing control against Simone's advice. A guy teasingly mocks her order? Emergency override. A guy doesn't get Simone-as-Alexis's funny joke? Uber is en route. After enough dates like this, though, Simone has earned Alexis's trust.

This guy seems judgmental, but Simone has gotten some positive bio-signals from Alexis. Part of Simone's job is to debrief with Alexis after the dates. To help her clarify her own feelings about a guy and choose a course of action. The consulting part is fun, but what Simone loves most are the dates themselves. Some of her friends think that piloting is like a superpower, but in truth, it's easier to see (and be) what someone

else wants when you don't have to tend to your own personal desires. A surprising number of pilots at Connect2, including Simone, are single.

"I'm honestly shocked how many girls I go on dates with who just *don't read*," the guy is saying.

"Okay," says Simone, "I could be wrong, but is that tattoo on your wrist a literary reference?"

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The day after the date is Alexis's twenty-ninth birthday. She knows it's not a big deal birthday. Next year, she might force herself to throw some sort of party for the big three-O. To pick the best, quietest, quirkiest bar in Silverlake, spend twelve hours crafting the perfect three-sentence email invite, then despair when only ten people show up and no one stays past midnight. Probably, though, she won't. Alexis doesn't act, she reacts. She receives, she waits, she happily makes the second move. It's a safer, easier way to move through the world.

Alexis doesn't list her birthday on social media, but it still feels like a personal affront that she's only gotten a handful of birthday greetings so far. None of them feel at all personal to her. She's got messages from her parents and her sister on the family text chain, but those feel rote, too. Alexis can't help but read this as a referendum on the quality of her personality. If she were smarter, funnier, kinder, she would probably be surrounded by gifts, confetti, and people who love her.

Her twenty-eighth birthday wasn't bad. Her boyfriend at the time took her to dinner, but just at their local Italian place, which had paper napkins and fewer cheese and pepper flake shakers than tables; the wait staff would ferry them back and forth between diners as needed. They talked, as they usually did,

about his fantasy hockey league and how unethical and stupid various politicians were. The quotidian quality of the date made Alexis wonder if he was planning on dumping her. A few months later, he did indeed end things; Alexis was never sure if the lackluster birthday dinner was an early warning sign or not.

In an effort to celebrate herself (something culture seems to want her to do), Alexis takes a cupcake from her fridge and a birthday card from work out of her bag. All her coworkers have signed it, but the closest thing to a personalized message is the drawing of a rat wearing a party hat that her colleague Meredith drew in the card's lower right-hand corner. Meredith draws *Birthday Rat* on everyone's cards, but at least it has more personality than the usual "Happy birthday" and "Hope you have a fantabulous day!"

Her doorbell rings as she's stoically waiting for her cupcake to warm up and lose that cold fridge feeling. She springs to the door with an embarrassing dose of optimism. She's greeted by an old Asian woman bearing two dozen roses, which Alexis signs for and brings to the kitchen with cumbersome happiness. The card informs her that the roses are from Connect2. She's disappointed that they are from a company and not a person, but she has to admire their customer service.

Alexis suspects she's probably one of Connect2's most active users. She had hated dating before, but dates piloted by Simone are fun, and the debriefs are even better. Sometimes Alexis even accepts a date with a guy she knows she's not interested in, just so she can make fun of him with Simone after the fact.

Alexis's phone dings. It's an email from Simone listing

twenty-four things to love about Alexis—one for each rose in the bouquet. Alexis lifts the cupcake to her lips, reading the list again and again with each chocolaty bite.

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Alexis shows up twelve minutes early for her debrief with Simone, sits in her car until she is only four minutes early, then enters the Connect2 building. The door to Simone’s office is open, and Simone has implanted herself into a beanbag chair with two coffee mugs in front of her. Alexis lowers herself into the other beanbag as Simone exclaims, “Girl! You’re wearing the sweater!” Simone and Alexis spent a good ten minutes going over the pros and cons of purchasing a turtleneck, debating whether Alexis could pull it off, and delving into what the larger ramifications of such a sartorial choice might be. Alexis shrugs with some pleasure.

“It looks so good!” says Simone. “You look like a stylish bunny rabbit. Can I touch it?”

Alexis nods, and Simone runs her hand down the length of Alexis’s arm. To Alexis, it feels like the kinesthetic equivalent of ASMR. “Mmmmm,” says Simone. “Softness.”

“This is my first time wearing it,” says Alexis.

“I’m honored I get to see it on its maiden voyage!” says Simone. “So, obviously, we have an agenda, but can I tell you a story first?”

“Always,” says Alexis, settling into her beanbag.

“Okay, so I had an intro session with a new client yesterday. A really rich guy who just decided to open his marriage and wants to find a new sidepiece, these are his words, ‘as efficiently as possible.’ So, we finish up the regular intake stuff, and then he asks me... if I’ll cut his hair.”

“What?” Alexis laughs.

“Yeah, I was like, my dude, that is not part of this service, but best of luck to you.”

“I might have done it,” says Alexis, picking up the mug Simone has set out for her and inhaling deeply.

“Do you know how to cut hair?” asks Simone.

“A little. I cut some friends’ hair in college. I’ve always thought there’s something kind of romantic about it. In the right context, I mean. Something about how they trust you. It’s like you’re doing a loving act of service.”

“Plus, you’re kind of molding the person into a new version of themselves. New do, new you.”

“Right. Like in those spy shows where the woman gets a new haircut and suddenly no one recognizes her.”

Simone laughs. “So, shall we discuss our first order of business? Thumbs up or thumbs down on our Great Literary Mind?”

Alexis does a sideways thumb, and Simone lets out a theatrical groan. “Alexis!” she says. “They can’t all be sideways thumbs! Seriously, is there *any* chance *this guy* is your soulmate?”

“There’s a chance this coffee is my soulmate,” says Alexis, making the kind of joke Simone makes and liking how it tastes in her mouth.

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Simone clicks into her terminal for Alexis’s next first date, and when she sees who the date is with, she almost chokes. Alexis is on a date with Jason. Neurotic, goofy, charming Jason. It’s not unheard of for pilots to encounter someone they know in real life while on the job. The Connect2 code of conduct doesn’t forbid it; you just need to fill out an extra form

disclosing your situation. Simone knows immediately she will not be truthful when she fills out the form about Jason. She has harbored what could only be referred to as a tragic crush on him for close to two years. Members of the same running club, they often fall into pace with each other, and have even grabbed breakfast together after their runs on occasion. Simone has hinted pretty aggressively that she is interested, but Jason, a paragon of tact, has never acknowledged her overtures. He's perfected his Friend Face—a look that says *I adore you, but nothing interests me less than seeing you naked.*

Simone as Alexis goes through the basic opening pleasantries with Jason, asking about his day and how he chose this place. She is always invested in getting a good outcome for her clients, but for the first time, she feels nervous. It's strange seeing Jason in date mode. His hair is still wet from a shower, and she's never seen this plaid shirt before. She feels a strange mixture of jealousy and titillation.

“There's this painting,” Jason says. “I don't know the name of it or who painted it, but it's of this woman in a field, sort of looking over her shoulder at the painter or at someone. It's weird, but I keep thinking you look just like that woman in the painting.”

“Where did you see the painting?” she asks.

“I had a postcard of it in my room growing up,” Jason answers.

“I had postcards in my room, too!” She gets a quizzical burst from Alexis, who never collected postcards. Simone doesn't think including this one personal detail from her own life will blow the facade. She has never felt this tight, focused kind of energy from Jason before. There's no harm in enjoying

it for a moment.

“I’m so afraid of rambling on and sucking all the oxygen out of the room,” says Jason. “Tell me about yourself.” Simone goes through her basic intro to Alexis spiel. Jason asks if she wants to stay for another cup of coffee. Simone does.

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The next day, after a 5K, the whole running group goes out drinking. Simone and Jason are sharing a massive plate of nachos, the bar is playing one of Simone’s favorite albums in its entirety, and life is good. Even though she knows she did not actually go on a date with Jason the day before, she feels closer to him. She shifts her weight under the table, rubbing her toe up the leg of Jason’s jeans. He stands abruptly, saying the next round is on him. Their friend Diane approaches and starts talking about whether or not she should quit her job. Simone looks to the bar, catches Jason’s eye, and he makes a face at her like *we know the same thing*. She knows it’s not a great sign that when she flirts with him, he pulls away, but her gin and tonic is delicious, and she is invincible. Jason sits back down with Simone and Diane, and the three of them go over the few pros and numerous cons of her job.

“Simone, you like *your* job, right?” slurs Diane.

“Being a professional Cyrano?” teases Jason. “Who wouldn’t like that? Simone gets paid to date.”

“And I get glowing reviews,” Simone preens. “Promoted three times in as many years, *and* my picture is on our recruiting pamphlet.”

“The face of the faceless,” Jason says.

“Let’s play a game,” says Simone. “Everyone think of a secret about the person to your left and whisper it to the person

to your right.” She leans close to Jason and whispers, “There’s someone at this table I want to kiss more than Diane.”

Jason smirks and bonks Simone on the top of her head. “Good secret, drunko.” He leans over to Diane and whispers, loud enough for Simone to hear, “Simone has two levels, totally sober and totally wasted. Nothing in between.”

Diane leans into Simone and whispers, “I fucking *hate* my job.” She has not fully understood the assignment.

They stay out until closing, and Simone and Jason are the last two standing on the curb, waiting for their Ubers. Simone keeps reaching for Jason’s hand, and he keeps holding it for a few seconds, then letting it go.

“I think you’re just the cat’s meow,” says Simone. Then, taking his hand again, “I’m not tired yet.”

“Simone. Not tonight,” says Jason.

A minute or so later, his Uber shows up, and he gets in. Simone knows rejection when she hears it. But she can’t help coming back to the possibilities that all non-tonight nights might still hold.

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Simone is still feeling cocktails four through six from the night before when she meets Alexis for their next check-in. Alexis is paying three dollars a minute to meet with her, wrapped into her monthly bill, but Simone often gives her an extra ten minutes or so for free because Alexis is one of the sane ones. Simone genuinely would like to see a happy ending for her.

“For me, Jason is a pass,” Alexis says, once they’ve briefly compared notes on the previous night’s episode of *The Bachelor*. “He was so in his head. I felt like we were both so nervous; it was

hard for me to get comfortable.”

Simone is genuinely surprised. It’s hard to picture someone not liking Jason. “To be fair,” says Simone, “you don’t usually feel comfortable when first meeting someone.”

“I didn’t take an official tally,” Alexis says, “but I think he apologized to me, like, ten times over one coffee.” Simone guffaws.

“Yeah, he did seem pretty eager to impress,” says Simone. “If you want, next time I can keep an official ‘I’m sorry’ count from my terminal. We can make an over/under bet, and if you win, I’ll let you give me a haircut.”

“I think if I win, you should give *me* a haircut,” says Alexis.

“You may find the results alarming, but yes, I’m in,” says Simone, shaking Alexis’s hand.

“So, you really think I should see him again?” asks Alexis.

“Has he reached out to you?” Simone asks, trying not to sound overly invested.

“He asked if I’m up for dinner on Friday,” Alexis confirms.

“Tell him yes,” says Simone.

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Getting dressed for her second date with Jason, Alexis is thinking about soulmates. As part of the intake process at Connect2, clients have to describe how they picture their soulmate. Most people jot down a few sentences about being someone’s priority or feeling sparks that mature into smoldering embers. Alexis wrote close to a thousand words. Alexis thinks a soulmate is someone who knows all of your thoughts and still accepts you. She thinks a soulmate gives you small doses of optimism when you can’t get out of your own

head. She thinks things that are hard for you will be easy for your soulmate. Where Alexis is shy, her soulmate will have chutzpah. Things that Alexis fears will be welcome challenges for her soulmate. Simone, trying to lighten the mood, proclaims all sorts of people and things to be her soulmate: the deli cat next door to Connect2's offices, the writer of that one SNL sketch that was actually really good, comfortable shoes, a nice breeze. The message, Alexis thinks, is that her soulmate might be right under her unusually sensitive nose. Alexis thinks Simone may be right about this.

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When Simone clicks in for Alexis and Jason's dinner date, she sees that Alexis has not even worn one of her top ten date outfits, but Jason is looking sweaty and serious in a way that Simone finds lovely.

"I've got you," Simone says to Alexis, as she always does right before she flips the switch to take control. "This is going to be a good night."

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Over dinner, Jason asks Alexis question after question. He asks if she can hear him chewing (she can), if she has ever gotten so mad she's wanted to hit someone (she hasn't), if she thinks David Lynch is going to make any more films (she doesn't care). As Simone's words come out of her mouth, though, Alexis realizes that Simone cares. She cares about David Lynch films; she teases Jason with a warmth Alexis doesn't feel. Alexis learns more about Simone on this date than in all of their debriefs together.

Alexis lets her mind wander, thinking about how strange being piloted is. She smells the flowers Jason has brought her,

thinking *I am letting Simone smell flowers*. She raises her hand to her cheek. *Simone is touching my face. Simone tastes the sweet whipped cream I'm swallowing*. Simone has access to these thoughts, but is focused on the guy sitting across from Alexis.

The check comes, and Jason looks down. "So, I don't know if you'd want to, I dunno, go for a walk or maybe come to my place for a drink?" he says.

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Simone has seen Alexis's engagement drifting as dinner has worn on, but she feels like she's on one of the best dates of her life. Especially when the conversation turns philosophical, and she can push aside Alexis's biographical specifics and share more of her own views. When she makes Jason laugh, she feels like a queen.

Simone doesn't see what harm a quick postprandial walk could do. She gets that Alexis isn't attracted to Jason, but she hasn't flipped the switch to take control and end the date.

"You live near here?" Simone asks as Alexis, knowing that he does.

"Just a couple blocks away." Jason smiles.

It has rained, leaving the air cool and the streets glistening. They cut across a park and, in a few minutes, arrive at Jason's building. Simone tries to soak in each second, knowing that Alexis will take control and end the date at any moment.

"God. I can't get over how beautiful you are," says Jason. Then he kisses her. It's a kiss Simone has been thinking about for over a year, and just the fact of it finally happening is mind-blowing. She kisses him back.

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Alexis does not like kissing this loud-chewing, ever-

apologizing guy. His lips feel gummy against hers. She's fascinated, though, by the idea that both she and Simone are in the same kiss. How strange, she thinks, to be a conduit for someone else's pleasure. Jason's hands are all over her now. His touches are all too gentle like he's trying to tickle her. Meanwhile, Simone is using Alexis's hands in ways she never would. She's pulling handfuls of Jason's hair, biting his lips. Alexis concentrates on being there but not there. She imagines herself as the spoke of a wheel, perfectly still, warmly wrapped in the embrace of perpetual motion.

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Here are the things Simone most likes remembering from her night with Jason. The way that he put his hand between her head and the backboard of his bed so she wouldn't bang it against the wood. The fact that after taking off her blouse, Jason folded it and put it on his nightstand. Sure, it's not her blouse, not her head, but the experience was immersive. Her favorite memory is the few seconds of silence after they'd slept together, broken by Jason saying, with a goofy smile, "So, that was fun." Alexis hadn't flipped the switch until they'd finished coffee and a crossword the next morning.

She knows that if her supervisor digs into the logs for this date, it won't be good. Alexis's biodata didn't align with the choices Simone was making for her, and Simone has violated a clear rule against piloting a sexual encounter. Technically, it's a fireable offense, possibly even one with legal consequences. She's confident, though, that if Alexis really wanted to take back control, she would have. Maybe, Simone thinks, Alexis was even giving her some sort of gift—intuited Simone's investment in the moment and decided not to take it away from her. Simone

knows she's done something wrong, but until an outside party tells her how wrong, she's going to assume the transgression was minor.

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That Sunday, Simone sits across from Jason, digging into diner eggs after a run. Simone keeps trying to steal potatoes off Jason's plate, and Jason keeps pushing her fork away.

"What's up with you this morning?" Simone finally asks.

"It's nothing," says Jason. Then, after an uncharacteristic silence between them, "I kinda get the feeling that you don't love it when I talk about my romantic life."

"That's crazy. You can talk to me about anything."

"Okay. Well, I guess I'm in a funk because I went on what I thought was a really great date with this girl, but she ghosted me."

Simone fills her lungs with courage. "I mean, I know I'm not this amazing girl who ghosted you, but *I'd* be pretty into taking you on a date sometime." Jason looks at his eggs. Too many seconds pass. "Maybe a romantic trapeze lesson?" she appends lamely.

Finally, Jason arranges his features into Friend Face. "You're such a loon," he says, taking a forkful of potatoes and plopping them onto Simone's plate. "Eat your eggs and stop prying into my sad love life." Simone has been drunk on the great flood of serotonin coursing through her ever since the date. Here, in this overbright diner, rejected once again, she crashes hard. They finish breakfast in relative quiet, both thinking back to their own separate versions of the same night.

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Alexis brings macaroons to her Monday session with

Simone. For some reason, she wonders if Simone will bring some kind of confection herself—if they will be faced with an embarrassment of desserts—but when she arrives, Simone is empty-handed, slumped in her beanbag.

“So,” Alexis begins, “crazy date, huh?”

Simone smiles weakly, then seems to resolve to engage and sits up a bit straighter. “I counted twelve on the apology tally, so I think I owe you a haircut,” says Simone, but her eyes aren’t fully smiling. The excitement Alexis had felt on the drive over starts to evaporate. It’s not that she’d imagined passionately kissing Simone. She hadn’t even imagined Simone thanking her. She’d just pictured the two of them sipping coffee and dissecting their shared experience.

“I don’t think there’s going to be a third date with Jason,” she says carefully.

“Well, you can’t force yourself to be into someone you’re just not into,” says Simone. Alexis wonders if Simone is referring to her own disdain for Alexis. She wonders if Simone thinks she is pathetic. To be rejected by someone who is literally paid to spend time with her would be a new low.

Meeting with Alexis usually energizes Simone, but today even Alexis’s open face, her receptivity to all Simone has to offer, isn’t enough. Simone knows what Alexis wants from her, abstractly at least. If she was piloting someone else in her shoes, she would give Alexis a hug, tell her the date had been wild and she’d never done anything like that before. Tell Alexis that she’d love to get dinner sometime, just the two of them. As both pilot and passenger, Simone can’t get any of this out.

“What’re all these boxes for?” Alexis asks.

“Well, my friend, it’s the end of an era,” says Simone.

“Today is my last day at Connect2.”

“Oh, did you....”

“My manager reviewed the logs from your date with Jason.”

“Weren’t you pilot of the month last month?”

Simone is briefly impressed with Alexis’s memory. “Yeah, for the third time. But, they take the code of conduct seriously.”

“I wasn’t... I would have taken back control if... I mean, I think it was an interesting night for everyone.” Alexis can’t quite articulate why she let things go so far. It has something to do with the overfull sensation of being touched by one person while your thoughts stream to someone else. It has something to do with grasping for the only kind of connection you can reach.

“Being a star employee was sort of *my thing*,” says Simone. “But, at the end of the day, I’m just a girl who gets fired for cause. Anyway, I guess they’ll assign you a different pilot.”

“I don’t really want another pilot.”

“Yeah,” Simone sighs, with a roll of her eyes. “I’m basically irreplaceable.” She takes a half-hearted bite of the macaroon Alexis brought. “These are good. You didn’t have to do this.”

“Oh, I know,” says Alexis. “I wanted to.” Then, reaching shyly into her bag, “I brought something else.” Alexis pulls out a hairbrush and a simple pair of cutting scissors. She guides Simone from the beanbag to a proper chair, spreading an old sheet she brought from home on the floor around them. She smooths Simone’s hair. She runs her fingers across Simone’s scalp. She brushes out Simone’s wild mane until it is a cloud around her head. She begins to cut.

“New do, new you, right?”

Simone feels herself relax, if only a little. She tries to breathe out Jason, breathe out her manager's disappointment, and breathe in the feeling of Alexis's hands at work. To embrace the idea that a macaroon and the friend who brings it to you is a thing of great value.

"This haircut is my soulmate," Simone says. She's not entirely wrong.

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