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PRESENTS

TOUCH SENSITIVE

[EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW]

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1

Ever since I discovered my sensitivity, shit has done its very best to turn up on my doorstep. Today's shit is a missing girl. But rather than doing anything practical to track her down, I'm stuck here, waiting.

Waiting is the majority of the job. I've become a little too good at it. Sitting or standing just out of view, sometimes even in plain sight. The key is to think yourself invisible, passive enough to be ignored. Inconspicuous. Nonchalant. You get good at word games and coming up with synonyms when most days are nothing but killing time. Without them, all this loitering isn't great for one's sanity. The mind wanders whilst the body lies fallow.

I'm sat on a lone wooden bench inexplicably placed on a small patch of suburban wasteland. There used to be grass and trees here, a visual respite from the surrounding buildings, hiding behind a knee-high redbrick wall.

Sometime recently, the council had some money to burn, an underspend that needed to be overspent. They ripped up the grass, shifted a few trees, and dumped tarmac down to make a path. A slim island of grass still remains, a few feet wide by maybe ten feet long, but it looks like someone clumsy took a sledgehammer at the wall to let the path meet the street. Not *that* much money to waste, obviously, or they would have made it all pretty. Maybe these days this is the city equivalent of woodland. A dogshit-stained oasis. A little bit of green to relax the eyes from the monotopian greys and browns that lie beyond its borders.

I'm loitering just off a nice street, South Bedford. They call this the Georgian Quarter, and if the facades were more cared for, they'd probably feel illustrious, affluent, erudite. But the house I'm staring at hasn't been painted for years. Brickwork cracking, paint peeling from the door and window frames. No longer are these the million-pound houses fit for wealthy families. They've long since been broken up into apartments, as many as can be shoved into the weary, flayed skin of once-great buildings. Rooms constructed of thin plasterboard walls, a former magnificent sitting room turned into an open-plan lounge and kitchen, two bed and bath. That's how we live these days—either sharing a fraction of a relic from a bygone era, or in a newly constructed cube that lacks anything close to character or charisma. A soulless void with some IKEA trimmings to make it something close to habitable. Desmond Morris knew this was coming, that Western society was building itself a zoo. He saw the isolation epidemic decades before it had a hashtag, Spotify ads, and support line.

This level of isolation is an amorphous beast, thriving on dark thoughts, growing in the crevices of the subconscious. Spreading roots through the unobserved, backward swamps of neural tissue. Laying foundations of loneliness with a mighty thicket of demonic foliage. Stretching contorted vines, night-blooming flowers blossoming from thorny black stems. Sickly, putrefied pollen of despondence carried on the gentle breeze of absentminded thoughts, whisked on a forlorn wind of half-remembered nightmares. A weakened mind is prone to an allergic reaction, an assimilation of those twisted, sorrowful notions as one's own.

Knowing that those crippling, chronic, paralysing feelings of dejection aren't your own doesn't make it

any better. There's no easy or quick fix. Not if you don't have a support system or the faculties to escape a self-destructive mindscape. You start to become invisible. Disappear in plain sight. To catch eye contact from a stranger gets the paranoia bubbling. *"Why would they be looking at me?"*

Another smoke will clear the air. Figuratively, at least. Sitting in one place for too long can be mad-making. A casual observation becomes a rant becomes a deconstruction. All presented in a soliloquy, to an audience of one that already knows the lines, reading from the same damn page. Therapy was *not* helpful. It encouraged this, if anything.

I've been here for close to two hours. If patience is a virtue, what does that make waiting? The path to equanimity? An off-ramp for the *potentially* virtuous? Eleven cigarette butts lie by my feet, the twelfth soon to join them. Normal people have watches; I have smoking as my sundial, cancer as my copilot. I know I should stop, but at thirty-something, I've been smoking for more years than I haven't. It's part of who I am, etched into my bones, the grain in the wood. And if I stopped, how would I get through all this waiting? Other PIs have a healthy podcast addiction, but the only ones I listen to tend to result in laughter, and a guy giggling to himself doesn't make great for inconspicuous. Plus, I got to keep my head in the game.

He intended to return in twenty to thirty minutes. That was a half hour or so before I got here. Junkies can't keep time for shit, unless it's for their appointment at the dole office. That's unfair, a broad statement. I should appreciate a day sitting outside in the sun, right? Even if I can only glimpse it through the canopy of leaves above. Be happy that it's not grey or cold or raining.

But there's a girl missing. Every second could count, and I've wasted 7,200 seconds sitting here waiting for this shitbag to get back. I think about moving, going back to his door, getting another read on it. Maybe I missed something.

Maybe he left a memory of where he was going. People do that, when they're thinking clearly. Unfortunately, his mind was a thick, opiate sludge. Like trying to find a needle in a rotting, pulsating, oozing haystack of disjointed thoughts, decisions, intents. Sense memories seen through a fog of drug-seeking aimlessness and distraction. I don't know how these people function. Fifteen minutes becoming two hours. Time stretched, contorted, every second elongated beyond recognition. There's probably a Nobel Prize waiting in the wings for whoever figures out the correlation between junkie time and normal time.

If only the building didn't have a key fob entry, a magnetic lock on the door, I could have been in and out by now. An hour and a half closer to finding her. Need to learn about RFID frequencies, work out how to hack them. Been waxing lyrical about investing time and money into that shit for nigh on ever. Times like these, it'd be handy. Yet I keep putting it off—as if I've got other, more important things going on.

In all honesty, nothing is more important than the work. Yet I procrastinate from learning things that would be handy to the job. Sensitivity has made me apathetic. Knowing the deepest, darkest thoughts and the most closely guarded memories of strangers has made me hate the world around me. Hate people—all of them. Everyone seems to have something they're ashamed of, or something they *should* be ashamed of, that they keep locked up deep inside. Not deep enough, though, when someone like me is around.

There are no secrets you can keep from a sensitive.

2

Another cigarette meets my boot heel as he finally returns. Looks different to the image of himself I got from the read. In the sense memory, he was more clean-cut, cleaner in general, with designer stubble and coiffed hair. His *imagined* self is probably built on facets of his *former* self; doesn't slouch, his hair isn't thinning, his clothes don't look like hand-me-downs from a hobo. It's amazing how different people's perceptions of themselves are to the truth. Everyone is like that, not just junkies. As a species, they seem to have perceptual dysmorphia about their appearances.

We, not *they*. I'm still human, I *am* human. Even though it's increasingly difficult to remember that—or hard to admit it, given the filth I crawl through on an almost daily basis . . .

Dysmorphia, that's only usually a diagnosis for people with eating disorders, the ones who look at their skeletal frames in a mirror and still feel like they need to lose another ten pounds. Sensitives, we see everyone else's distorted perceptions. After this long, the way we see ourselves has pretty much lined up with reality. We're maybe the only ones who see ourselves as we really are, and in truth, it's yet another checked box in the long list of reasons why this is a damn curse. Delusion, fantasy of one's appearance would be nice every now and then.

God, he's taking forever getting to that door. Tiny, snail-pace footsteps, like he's thinking long and hard about each one. Heel-toe, heel-toe. He's moving slow, but erratically, looking over his shoulder like he's expecting to be followed, stopped, searched.

Obviously doesn't know that when you look as suspicious as this fettered dickspurt, you're *more likely* to get stopped than not. He's clutching the record bag hanging off his bony shoulder like his life depends on it. There's probably a brick in there, already cut with powdered milk, maybe caffeine. When he bags it up, he'll cut it down again for sure, with flour or talc, I reckon. Cheap and dumb cutting.

On reflection, I've spent too much time reading dealers and their doors. Nobody needs to know this kind of junk unless they're in the trade, and I keep my addictions on the legal side of the fence. I know I should put a call in, get this prick and his gear off the streets, but it'll have to wait 'til *after* I get what I need.

As he reaches the door, I get up from the bench and start to make my way out of the urban "fauxaxis." Slowly. Don't want him noticing me, but also don't want the door to slam shut before I can get to it. He struggles with the key fob, refusing to let go of the bag, as if allowing it hang from his shoulder without two hands grasping it is a massive risk. I'm at the edge of the pavement, about to cross the road. Come on arsehole, open the damn door . . .

The fob meets the security panel, beeps. The door clicks as it unlocks. From my read, I know it's about eight seconds from when someone enters to when it swings shut and the maglocks screw my day up.

A faster strut. He's not looking over his shoulder now he's inside. I burst into a jog, get across the road, back on the pavement, through the gate, and up the path, planting a boot just as the door is about to slam. Hold my breath. Stay perfectly still. Will he notice the latch didn't meet the strike plate? Hopefully his opiate haze and thrill of success will keep him from turning back.

I wait a moment, just to be sure, then push the door open, keeping hold of it with my gloved hands as I enter, gently letting it swing back. I don't want it slamming, don't want his ears pricking up, letting him know that someone else has come in, set his paranoia bubbling away.

The hallway is dilapidated. Wallpaper curling down the walls, as if a giant was about to turn a page in a building-shaped book. The carpets are thin, patchy, stained. No one gives a damn about this place. The owner's probably just in it for the rent cheques. This used to be a grand old house, that's what I got from the read. Refined people used to live here—and now it's filled with whatever scum can drop eight hundred a month. Six years ago, when I first moved to the city, the rent here was probably about half that, maybe less. You pretty much *have* to be a drug dealer to afford that now, or have a real job, I guess. This isn't exactly a "real" job.

All these doors look alike. Four of them on this floor, stairs ahead lead up to another two floors, probably four or six apartments on each of those. I don't want to have to read them all. This is where deduction comes in. Sherlock Holmes shit.

First door has a welcome mat. Who the hell has a welcome mat? Old couple, or hipsters being ironic. Second door is new, painted—someone trying to make a good first impression on whoever comes by. Definitely not my guy. Third still has the keys in the door. Bingo. Paranoia does *not* mean you're smart.

I pull the black leather glove from my left hand. Take a moment, a breath, knowing that this is about to suck and probably leave me with a residual opiate hangover. He'll have touched this door as much high as straight, maybe more so, and the former is going to kick my medulla in its balls.

Another breath. Reaching myself. Exhale, stretching fingers out, and psyching myself up. Grit my teeth before I lay bare skin on the door.

*

There's a jolt, a spasm up the spinal column, a punch at the base of the neck. Getting reads off inanimate objects isn't so bad. It's worse if the object is older. This door is cheap, a thin veneer posing as wood, ten years old at a push. Its earliest sense memories are of the factory it was made in, from a chimera of original materials, none of which make up enough of the surface area to retain anything from before that time.

I always go back to the first memory. It's not intentional, it's just how my sensitivity works. They say the first memory you pull in a read speaks volumes about you. If you go straight to a sexual experience or whatever, then I guess that makes sense. I go to the beginning of the story, get the full picture. Maybe that's a refraction of myself. Who I became when the light hit the surface of this lake of watery bullshit.

The girl was here before her disappearance, and had been here regularly before that. She honestly didn't seem the type from the photos or the way her parents talked about her. But what do parents know? All they see is their sweet little girl, pigtails and smiles, great grades at school. They don't *know* her. Nobody ever *knows* anyone. Not like a sensitive can know them.

She didn't want to show the cracks, let her doting folks see the stress she was under. When she first came here, she was just after something to help her concentrate. He dealt at the door back then, flogged whatever Adderall or Ritalin knockoff was cheap at the time. The more she visited, though, the more he took

to her, the more he fantasized about her, the more he pushed on her to manipulate the situation. Pretty soon the deals were going on *in* the apartment. She was in and out in five minutes at first, then ten to fifteen, then longer, and longer. But that's all the door can tell me.

*

I pull out of the read, lift my fingertips from the veneer. I've got everything I can from the door. There's only so much of the story it was going to be able to tell. I turn the key in the lock and slowly, silently, lean my shoulder against it. Pushing it wider without making skin contact and getting lost in another read, knowing that the hinges will creak as their arc hits around thirty degrees.

I know that, because the sense memories are still floating around in my head, will be for a little while at least. They start to fade after contact is broken, with a shorter half-life than real memories. But they're still there, time-mapped to my neural circuits, older ones vague, the newest crystal clear. Not just memories of the girl and her deals, but *all* the deals and *all* the girls. All the junkies. All the dealers. Not to mention neighbours banging their fists on it to complain about the noise. If someone touched the door, I've got the memory of it. Most of them are ignored, pushed down, like trying to forget an embarrassment or an ex. You know the memory is there, somewhere in the back of your mind, but you concentrate on anything else so you don't get overwhelmed.

Overwhelmed. That's an understatement. Most sensitives are completely fucking insane. Not so much the touch ones, like me. But the others—I don't know how you could discover you're a sight or sound sensitive and *not* lose your mind the first day in. Smell

and taste sensitives are kinda on the middle ground, could go either way. That probably makes me one of the lucky ones.

Lucky. Jesus, people who say things like that can't even comprehend this goddamn life.

Carpeting throughout the apartment, now *that's* lucky. I can get a read on all the footfall and narratives without having to venture too deep into the flat, risk ending up on the wrong side of the guy's steak knife. I bend down onto one knee and let my hand make contact with the scratchy, discoloured fibres.

*

The carpet doesn't have sense memories from before the discount carpet warehouse, where it was priced it at fifty pence a square metre. The guy still felt like he was overcharging for it, given that his dog pissed all over the roll. There's a nice memory of a close-up of a dachshund's urethra, which I really *don't* need floating around inside my head.

There are too many memories of scumbags who've trodden their shit-stained boots through here. Sensitivity is an art, not a science. You have to think of the memories as an extension of your own, but seeing as you don't have context for the new memories, it becomes a game of finding a face and following that narrative thread as far as it will go until the next memory of the same person.

Found her. But it's not pretty . . . When she was short on cash she offered herself to him. Handjobs at first, but soon she was part-exchanging pussy for a score. But that's too far along. I'm missing something.

Door deals became hallways deals became sit-down-and-smoke deals. He filled her "prescription" for kiddie speed, hooked her up with weed for the come-

down, gave her freebies of molly every now and then, convinced her to try crystal and crack.

She liked him.

I don't get how, but she really did.

"What the fuck y'think y'doin, la?!" shouts a voice.

For a moment I wonder if it's a memory. But deep down, I already know it's not.

*

Pull my hand from the carpet, pull out of the sense memories, and look up. Shitbag junkie is standing over me. He's wiry, twitchy, shifting on the balls of his feet like a kid that needs to go take a piss. He thinks he's imposing, scary. He's not. His words are slurred, slow. I could take him. Got twenty pounds of muscle on him, and I'm at least two and a half thoughts ahead. Could go for a shot to the balls and a head butt as he keels over. A quick glance to his crotch; dry semen crusted around the fly. Hit that with my ungloved fist and I'll get a first-person view of the inside of his scrotum, until a load is shot clumsily into a sock. And the head butt would take me out for longer than it would him. Rather take the punch I see coming, his skinny shoulder swinging back, elbow cocking like the hammer of a short-range pistol made of bone. He doesn't have the muscle mass to do serious damage. What's another broken nose? Maybe it'll fix the bend left by the last one.

The friends I have left tell me I get punched in the face too much. I like to think I get punched in the face just the right amount, and by the right people. All in the service of doing the job.

Don't even feel his knuckles crunching into what's left of the mangled cartilage that once used to

be a proud, Semitic nose. As soon as his skin touches mine, I'm already reading him. And my head feels like it's about to explode.

*

If reading inanimate objects was a knock at the door, reading people is having the door blown in by a rocket-propelled grenade. Electricity surges up the spine. it feels like it engorges, quickly starts ploughing away at the soft, squishy meat of the brain. A skull-fucking of rapid thrusts sending the entire body spasming as pulses of borrowed memories are woven over your own. Singeing fragile neural tissue with echoes of a life you never lived.

Neglect. That was his first memory. Abandonment. Then foster home after foster home, beaten and neglected some more. What a cliché. I should feel sorry for him, and I almost do—until I remember where he's just been. Where he's left the girl.

Totally worth a fist to the face.

3

He only hit me the once. Must have backed off as soon as I started seizing and hit the ground. Bet a little part of him is proud of that; he'll spend the rest of his life telling the tale of how he knocked a guy unconscious and into a seizure with a single punch. Little does he know that he only needed to make the slightest skin contact to knock me to the floor and turn me into a human vibrator with a twenty-three-second battery life.

It's always twenty-three seconds, across the board for all sensitives. Nobody on the forums or message boards knows why, but they're rife with speculation. Twenty-three is a number loved and obsessed over by conspiracy theorists. It's Robert Anton Wilson's fault. He brought it into public perception after hearing a story about it from William S. Burroughs. As much as I love the idea of some magical and mystical reason for our skin-contact seizures lasting twenty-three seconds, chances are it's just a coincidence. You look for anything hard enough and you're going to see it everywhere.

I come to in the hallway, groggy, the ephemera of every drug he's ever taken coursing through my system. Right boot is half-off my foot; he must have dragged me out of his flat whilst I was doing the horizontal shimmy and shake. I consider knocking on his door, telling him it's not good practice to move someone when they're having a seizure, but that isn't important now. His memories are still mingled with my own, and I've got to get the hell out of here.

Pulling my glove back on, I leave his building and

call Mary, the girl's mother. The glove has some dull memories to impart of its time in my pocket since I took it off, as does the phone as I hold it to my ear. With inanimates that stay in close proximity, the first touch is full of memories, but following touches are essentially status updates, short bursts of the moments since contact was last made.

Again, there's no science to it—no real science at least. "*Psientists*" have claimed it's something to do with morphic fields, but most others have pretty much called bullshit.

Mary answers on the first ring. She's been my contact through this whole show. As far as I can tell, the father's been near-catatonic since the girl disappeared. Blames himself, I reckon. Although, curiously, he wouldn't let me shake his hand. His wife had nothing to hide. Nothing of consequence at least, just a little shame that she has a closer relationship to her Hitachi than her husband. I always find it suspicious when a person who's come to me with a problem doesn't want to be read. But I get it. Privacy is a big deal these days. And whilst it's one thing for a faceless corporation to know what posts you like and what porn you watch, it's another thing to be face-to-face with someone who knows literally all the secrets you've held through your entire life. He didn't have anything to do with his daughter's disappearance, that's clear, but I'm pretty sure he's having an affair. Not that it's my business. Not unless the wife comes back to *make it* my business.

"Mister Ballard . . . Have you found her?" There's a tremble in her voice. Sounds like she's either been crying or is about to cry.

"I think I know where she is," I say, trying to think of the nicest way to put the situation. "We're going to need to . . . barter for her."

“Barter?” The word croaks over short, shallow breaths.

I didn’t phrase that well. Need to be more careful about the words I use. “I know this is hard to take in, especially over the phone, but Lisa was . . .” Take a breath, don’t want this to sound like a tabloid headline. “She was a drug user, and fell in with the wrong people.” Not much better, sounds like a damn public information film. She’s crying now. There had to be a better way to lay it out. Idiot. “She’s being held as collateral for a deal. But we can get her back.”

I pause whilst she takes it in and gets over the flurry of emotion. No point shovelling more shit on the pile if she’s not in a fit state to absorb the situation, let alone what needs to be done next.

As I wait for the crying to stop, I start walking back down the street, hanging a right at the main road and walking round the block. The dealer’s house is only five minutes away. I can do recon whilst she composes herself.

The street is full of kids. Three universities in the vicinity, all of these teens and twenty-somethings living in a world of obnoxious ignorance. No clue of the scum and bullshit that lie just feet away from their self-involved conversations, stressing over relationships and exams and homework. Like that will actually matter in a year or two when they have a useless piece of paper that declares them an expert in pop-culture references of the 1970s through the 1980s. They’re going to get a big shock when they realise there are fifteen hundred applicants for every job out there, and after three years and twenty-one grand, all they’re qualified for is standing in line for jobseeker’s allowance.

“How much do we need?” she asks. I had almost forgotten I was holding the phone to my ear, waiting

for her to fight through the tears.

"Two thousand," I say. "Can you get that together today?"

She sniffs, breath heavy, through quivering lips.

"Of course," she says. "Whatever it takes."

"I'll text you an address," I tell her. "And act as intermediary. You don't need to meet these people, don't need to see how they've been treating her."

"I want to . . ." she starts.

"No," I say, insistent. "You really don't."

4

I sit outside at a café, round the corner from the house where the girl's being held.

Lisa. I keep thinking of her as “the girl,” trying to take the human out of the equation. Make it about a theoretical entity rather than a person, a daughter, a three-dimensional human being. Building a wall of separation, trying to keep emotion from becoming involved, even if it's only vicarious emotion I borrowed from my read of the mother. If she's a person, if her parents are anything but clients, if I empathise, then it becomes more than just a job. It becomes personal. Being attached clouds judgement, that's why I want the mother meeting me here, rather than outside the house. Who knows what idiot thing she'd do if she was shown where her daughter was being held. Not that she seems like a stupid person, but even the smart ones do stupid things. Especially when they're overcome by emotion.

If there's one good thing to come out of the loneliness and isolation that stems from my sensitivity, and “good” is relative here, it's an increasing lack of emotion. Or should that be a decreasing amount of emotion? A utilitarian calm pervades all situations, almost robot-like. When I first noticed it, I thought I must have had a stroke at some point in the night. Then I put it down to adult-onset autism. Neither were true, and both were vaguely humorous distractions. In truth, I knew all along. It was the sensitivity.

We all have it. The forums are awash with other sensitives trying to come up with explanations, as if knowing why we're emotionally numb makes a damn

bit of difference. I make the most of it, though . . . Whilst it's not great for a normal, it's the perfect state for a PI who's suddenly found himself in the role of negotiator. And as soon as I walk into the building, that's all I'll be.

As I bring the takeout cup to my lips, I relive its creation, packaging, unpacking, and stacking. The searing shot of coffee boils my insides as it pours out of the machine, joined by boiling water filling me up to the brim, steam licking under my skin. It's recycled, biodegradable. A short life repeated over and over. The karmic cycle in microcosm. Made of myriad pulps, each with their own personalities, lives lived to various lengths, but only fragments are present in this current iteration. My tongue takes in the recent sense memories of the water and grounds, but they don't go back further than when the coffee was brewed. I'm fortunate in that regard; experiencing the water cycle from the dawn of time is not what I need right now.

Bringing the cigarette back to my lips, I relive its creation, packaging, being stacked in the corner store, sold, unpacked, rolled, ignited. I know that life story as well as I do my own, and find a smile on my lips, a small modicum of appreciation. I could have it worse—if my sensitivity didn't stop with touch. A taste sensitive would have to suffer the complete memories of every drop of water in the cup, every bean ground. They'd probably remember the growth, harvest, preparation, and packing of every single leaf of tobacco. Their lives must be hell.

I read that they feed themselves intravenously, try and avoid using their mouths as much as possible. There was one in the news, maybe three years back, who sewed her lips shut so she wouldn't accidentally swallow a fly or inhale dust floating on a breeze. The things we do to try and be normal . . .

Maybe I'm remembering that wrong—it seems too theatrical. Maybe she just superglued her lips shut. That's how I'd do it. Sewing flesh is harder than you'd think. You need a good needle. Wish I didn't know that from personal experience.

A car pulls up, and I drop the cigarette butt in what's left of the coffee, throw it in a wheely bin before walking over to the vehicle. The husband's in the driver's seat. No wonder it took her twice as long as it should have to get over here.

"I'm coming with you," he says, as he battles with his seat belt and gets out, slamming the door aggressively.

That kind of anger could get his girl killed.

"Bad idea," I say, eyeing his wife, who looks away. She wants no part of this conversation. "These people aren't going to like *me* turning up, let alone *you*." I'm trying to be diplomatic. I'm not good at diplomacy. "Don't want to spook them any more than we have to. I'll be in and out, as little contact as possible. You're emotional—"

"Damn right I'm emotional!" he grunts. He's angry. At me, but also at himself. Definitely blames himself. Thinks he should have seen this coming, like you can see anything like this coming . . .

"Emotion is only going to risk your daughter's safety," I say. "This needs to be a quick negotiation, hand the cash over, and get out with your girl. You have to let me do this alone."

He stares me down, then huffs and throws an envelope across the roof of the car. Even now, he doesn't want to get too close to me. Part of me wants to take a glove off and plant a hand on him. Screw the pain and seizure, forget the girl and her rescue. When someone is this much of an arsehole, when they're hiding something so obviously, I just *want* to know.

Like the ex you stalk on Facebook, there's an easy way to find out what's going on. But I don't take my glove off. I won't.

The first rule I set myself when I discovered my sensitivity—after I picked up the pieces of my life—was to never read someone without a good reason. Preferably with their permission. He had no part in his daughter's disappearance, that's clear from the evidence. He's just a paranoid piece of shit. Worst he's done is cheat on his wife and steal office supplies.

I grab the envelope and walk up the street, taking a right onto the dealer's road. I can hear their car. They're following me. I glance back over my shoulder and give them a knowing look. The father at the wheel, edging along behind me. His wife is in the passenger seat, looking away, still wanting no part of it. I sigh, turn on my heels, and pull off a glove as I walk over to their car. His eyes open wide as I approach, he reaches for the lock. I wrench the door open with my gloved hand before it clicks shut. I hold my bare hand in the air in front of him, wave my fingers, and bring them towards him.

"What are you doing?!" he squeals.

"You're following me," I say, narrowing my eyes, reaching deeper into the car. "You're jittery. You were almost catatonic, and now you're ablaze with emotion." He's pulling back, trying to get out of his chair, over to the passenger side, clambering over his wife whilst the seat belt constrains him from getting too far. "You're hiding something, and I'm going to find out what." My fingers are millimetres from his skin. He's sweating, nervous, terrified of what I might find.

"I'll stop! I won't follow you!" he begs, whimpers, almost in tears.

I stop encroaching on his personal space, freeze

in midair, study his face. He's telling the truth. He cares more about his secrets than he does about punching some junkie shitbag.

"Okay," I say, pulling my hand back, replacing the glove. I turn back towards the street, move closer to the house from the dealer's memories. The car's engine purrs in the background.

Peering back over my shoulder, I see they haven't moved. The husband's watching me, refusing to blink, whilst his wife fires questions at him. She's finally caught my curiosity, noticed how freaked out he is by me. Most don't. Maybe they don't want to. Sometimes it takes your overweight, fifty-something husband clambering on top of you to escape the touch of a guy who can know all his secrets to make you question whether they've always been honest with you. She seems too proud to hire me for that, though. Couples therapy, counselling, that's how they'll attempt to fix their marriage. He'll lie through his teeth, no doubt, but it'll be cathartic. For her, at least.

Coming over a crossing, I see the house just up ahead. Another Georgian terrace that's seen better days. Rusting, four-foot-tall fences enclose the house like it's a giant, retarded animal in a shit zoo. There's fifteen square foot of garden locked in there with it that was once probably beautiful. Now you can't see the grass for the cigarette butts and roaches, stolen traffic cones, and shopping trolleys. What the hell do people steal trolleys for? A gnarled, anorexic tree stands at the centre of the garden, all angles and knots, branches shed of their leaves, looking sickly and bald. Looks like it died a while back and is waiting for someone to notice.

Two doors sit side by side, separated by a fence branching out from the enclosure. Each with a gate leading up to them. Blue door to the left, red to the

right. Would old-school, anaglyph 3-D glasses only see one door? That'd make for a good sci-fi movie: two doors seen by normal folk, leading to normal houses, only one door visible to someone with the red/blue glasses, going to somewhere fantastical. I search the dealer's memories. Blue door. And it leads to the diametric opposite of fantastical.

I hit the buzzer. One short press, then one long, two short. They have a code to get in. It's as adorable as it is idiotic. The buzzer squeals angrily with each press, a mechanical "Ow!," like I'm flicking it in the balls. Now to wait. Junkie time. It usually takes them anything from two to five minutes to answer.

Every second they make me wait is one second longer that they'll be doing something awful to her. But this, like so many things, is out of my hands. They have all the power here—for now, at least.

5

They finally buzz me in, and I make my way up to their flat. They're on the top floor, three flights up, no elevator. The stairs smell like stale piss and beer. They're tiled, stained with boot prints and blotches of fluids. A wad of fresh phlegm hangs from the bannister on the second floor, loose spit making snail trails down the wall beneath it. A den of shitbags and wannabe villains.

Once I'm out with the girl I'll call this place in too, tip the cops, get these disgusting bastards off the street—along with the dealer who brought her here. Traded her like fucking cattle. I used to think that kind of thing only happened to Asian or Russian mail-order brides, Moldovan or Ukrainian women thinking they were going to the UK to be models. Maybe that's all changed since I forced myself to stop reading the *Daily Mail*. People now used as human Bitcoin, drugs replacing mining, their value fluctuating depending on how useful or pretty they are.

There was a time when I wanted to see how beautiful the world was, go to India or Machu Picchu. Now all I see is these dark recesses of the human stain. Parasites and demons propagating in the shadows.

At the door to the apartment it's the same code again; a quick knock, a harder knock and a pause, then two quick knocks in succession. The latch clicks twice as it's turned, sending a shiver down my spine, reminding me of the sound of shotguns being cocked in 1980s action movies. But that's not my memory—that's his, the dealer's. Every time he comes here, he

mimes cocking a shotgun as they unlock the door. What an absolute prick.

The door opens a crack, revealing dull eyes forked with red veins. They're trying their hardest to focus and recognise me from under thin, greasy strands of hair. "Who are you?" mumble the scabby lips that lie beneath the strained gaze.

"Friend of Lisa's," I say. "Here to pay the vig."

He looks confused. I thought "vig" was a common expression with the criminal element for a debt owed. Obviously not. Or, more likely, this guy is just a moron whose brain has been reduced a thick, drug-addled stew.

"For her freedom," I explain. "Got what's owed."

I show him the envelope, lifting the lip for him to see the cash. His eyes widen, mouth too, revealing far too many teeth absent and the scent of rot on his breath. He pulls the door open for me to enter, straight into the living room. It's exactly what I would have pictured, even if I didn't have the dealer's memories floating amongst my own. More clichés of dilapidation and lack of care. Wallpaper peeling and damp rising. A smell in the air of sweat and mould, mingling with smoke and weed. I worry I'll never get the stink out of my clothes. He closes the door behind me and I hold back, observing the other guys in the room. Two more, just as fucked up as the idiot at the door. Their faces are all angles, sunken cheeks, and hollow eyes. Pale, spotty, greasy. These fucks need to be sat in the sun and given a box of oranges to suck on. That's all they'd probably be able to do with oranges; I've got as many teeth in my mouth as they have between the three of them, and they probably don't have the structural integrity to bite into a marshmallow. They're sitting on shitty couches pockmarked with cigarette burns. Overflowing ashtrays and cans of Coke that

have *become* ashtrays sit on a coffee table in front of them—a coffee table in name only, as it's probably never seen a real cup of coffee. Maybe instant, but fuck instant.

They outnumber me, sure, but an unsettling confidence, cockiness, tells me I can take them. I wonder if that's mine or the dealer's. Personality traits merge like that sometimes, temporarily. But I'm not here to fight.

"Haven't got all day, guys," I say, sternly. "Got your money. Where's the girl?"

They look at one another, then the one who answered the door heads over to another room, a bedroom, and knocks.

"Fuck off!" shouts a man inside. His breath is heavy, he's exerting himself. That sends a chill up my spine. I know exactly what's happening behind that door.

Pushing past the idiot at the bedroom door, I barge it open with my shoulder. The bedroom is thick with the stench of damp. Mould crawling halfway up the walls. It's also marked out territory on the carpet, encroaching on the filthy bed at the centre, creating a fungal moat. Another piece-of-shit junkie is standing over the bed, his pants round his ankles, thrusting away with guttural gasps and grunts. The girl is on her back. She isn't moving, apart from when he pounds at her.

"You'll get your go!" he shouts, not even turning at the interruption.

This has to stop. Now. I grab the back of his shirt and pull him away from her. He trips over the trousers round his feet and falls back to the floor. Eyes blank, crazy, confused. He tries to form words with his dry, scabby lips, but I don't think he's worked out what's happened yet. He's looking around at the bed, the girl,

me, the floor below him. His shrivelled, soft cock looks as confused as he does, nestled in a thicket of pubic hair. That's a little good news for when she comes to. At least she won't wake up with junkie spunk dripping out of her. He couldn't get it up, was either imagining that he had the capacity to get hard or just putting on a show for the others.

"Payment in full," I say, throwing the envelope at him. It hits him hard in the chest and bounces into his lap. The cash spills out, protecting what little modesty he has left.

Leaning over to the girl, I pull her panties up and her skirt back down. "Lisa?"

No response. She's breathing, but out of it. Fucked up on whatever they dosed her with. I check my gloves are secure, then kneel down and put a hand under her knees, the other under her back, lift her from the semen-encrusted sheets, take her to the door.

"Hey!" says the shitbag on the floor. "You can't do that!" he tries to get to his feet.

"You've got your money," I say, nodding to the envelope, the notes fanned out across his crotch and carpet. "You're done with her."

Leaving the bedroom, I carry her to the door, the other three junkies watching me passively, like it's a damn soap opera.

"Little help?" I say to the idiot from the door, who looks at me with a confounded expression, then reaches for the girl as if I'm giving her back to him. "Door!" I grunt. She's heavier than she looks. Or I'm more out of shape than I think I am.

I get halfway down the stairs before I start to struggle. I have to hold her at an awkward angle. Supporting her legs, which I can have closer to me, but also her upper body, which I have to hold

downwards and away. Can't let her head get too close, in case her hair brushes my cheek and we both take a tumble down the stairs.

Close to the ground floor, I lay her down on the step, take a moment to recover, catch my breath. A moment to curse myself for smoking, for drinking so much, for not working out more, whilst also thinking about how I really need a smoke and a drink.

A few minutes later, I'm carrying her out of the door, down the path. The parents' car is parked up outside, even though I told them to hold back. But in all honesty, I'm glad I don't have to carry her much farther. The father runs up, through the gate, grabs his daughter from me. He's truly relieved to have her back, doesn't even seem to be worried about getting too close in the process. His wife joins him, and together they help her into the back seat. Real relief. He genuinely seems happy to have his family back together. That doesn't seem like that reaction of a man who's cheating, or lying, or worse. I could have just been projecting, seeing or assuming the worst. Or maybe, since discovering my sensitivity, I've yet to find someone who doesn't have something shitty to hide.

I watch them drive off, the girl still unconscious in the backseat, her mother sitting with her, propping her upright, keeping an eye on her breathing. The family is back together, their little girl safe. But how long will it last . . . ? How long before she has a drink, has a spliff, thinks about getting high more often, ends up back on the pills, getting pulled back in with the wrong crowd? As much as I'd like to believe this is where their nightmare ends, I can't help feel like it's going to start all over again somewhere down the line.

This kind of cheery disposition is probably why I'm not invited to parties much . . .

*

I hope you've enjoyed this preview of
TOUCH SENSITIVE

The full novel is available now from Kindle Press,
exclusively at Amazon.

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Thank you kindly for being an observer of my mental deterioration.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee Isserow is an award-winning screenwriter and filmmaker with over fifteen years spent trawling the back streets and dark alleys of the entertainment industry.

He's pretty sure he's on the autism spectrum, because he's been constantly working and obscenely prolific for the entire duration, writing over a hundred screenplays, many of which he's adapting into forthcoming BAMs, because very few people are willing to turn them into movies. For now.

He lives in Liverpool, England, because he accidentally bought a house there. He's not quite sure how that happened—but assumes part of that is because he used to drink a lot.

If you'd like to watch the pretty things he makes, you may find them at LeeIsserow.com.

You may also interact, call him names, and read his awful jokes and observations on Twitter [@Lee_Isserow](https://twitter.com/Lee_Isserow).

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