

If You Want
Part One

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” I told him matter-of-factly. “And I’ve heard some really dumb things in my day.”

“It’s true,” the new guy replied. “It’s not a very *useful* superpower, but it’s more than most people can do.”

“Are you really doubling down on this? You really expect me to believe that you have magical powers?”

“I don’t know that they’re magical, per se. They might be genetic, kind of an X-men kind of thing? Or maybe I’m possessed, or cursed, or... who knows. But I assure you, my power works.”

“OK. Just so we’re straight, you expect me to believe that you have a super power, and that said power is the ability to make people do what they already wanted to do. That’s what you’re telling me,” I said dryly. I swear, people take one look at me – pale blonde hair, pretty face, ample curves – and assume I’m some kind of moron. Still, this was next level.

“That’s right. Don’t believe me? Try it. What’s something you want to do right now?”

I rolled my eyes. “End this stupid conversation?”

He extended his hand. “Done.”

I shook my head in disgust. I almost gave him one last parting shot, but I figured he at least shut up when he was told. Friggin’ new guy. First day in the office and already making himself look like an idiot. I moved to another table and ate my lunch in merciful silence.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Mr. Superhero,” I said as I strode into the break room the next day. Looks like we were on the same schedule. I usually took an early lunch because my job consisted of half data entry and half reviewing other people’s data entry, and by 11:00 I was already bored out of my damn mind. New Guy was probably in here this early because he’d already made himself the laughing stock of the office and was dodging derision.

“It’s Grant, actually,” he said, raising his coffee mug in greeting, “and I never said I was a superhero. Just that I have a super power.”

“Ugh. Please don’t start with that weird shit again, OK? If that’s what your dating coach told you to do to spark conversations with women, you should ask for your money back.”

“Oh, and she’s a funny one, too, folks – look out,” he said, laughing good-naturedly. “Come on, it worked yesterday, didn’t it?”

I slipped my bagel into the toaster. (I know, I know, I was putting on a few and I could probably do without the carbs, but whatever. My last boyfriend had been a total fitness nut and I was happy to be out of the gym.) “Worked? First of all, it didn’t work because I only did what I was already going to do anyway, which was to stop talking to weirdos. Second of all, it didn’t work because it isn’t real and you really need to lay off with that crap.”

“What if I could prove it?” he asked, annoyingly not put off by my abuse. Not a surprise, though, that Captain Superdouche over here was used to people mocking him.

“Prove it? Your so-called ‘power’ – not that I believe it for a second – is to make people do something they were already going to do. That’s like me saying I have the power to make things fall to the ground at the exact speed of gravity.”

“You could use that to make planes and helicopters and stuff fall from the sky. That’d be pretty powerful, actually.”

I gave him an exasperated look. “No, dummy, they’re already having gravity pull on them but they keep on flying.”

“But you said the power was to make things fall. You didn’t say it could be resisted by equipment.”

“Of course it’s resisted by their equipment! It’s a goddamn airplane – I’m not going to make it fall just by...” I caught myself. “How on earth did you even drag me into this idiot tangent? God, I’m going to sound as crazy as you if I keep this up.”

“Look, all I’m saying is–”

“I know what you’re saying, and I’m tired of hearing it. So if you’re going to give me what I want today, how about you use your power to make yourself shut up.”

“My power only makes you do what *you* want to do. I can’t use it on other people. But I can voluntarily pipe down, if you like.”

My bagel popped up. I snatched it out of the toaster and quickly smeared on some cream cheese. (Shut up! I’ve only put on, like, ten pounds. Or so.) “Save it. I *want* to eat at my desk. Undisturbed. OK?”

“You got it,” he said. With that, I stalked back out of the break room. The nerve of this guy.

Three more days Grant and I bumped into one another over our lunch break, and every time, he kept it up. I was ignoring him now. The man was clearly nuts. Worse, he'd made *me* look nuts – I'd asked some people on the elevator if they'd heard about the new guy and his crazy tales of superpowers, and apparently nobody had. I asked him over lunch why he hadn't told anyone else, but he'd shrugged and said I was the only one who liked to eat as early as him.

That was the last we spoke. It was best to ignore him. But now, three days later, I was stressed and angry and he just had to go picking up on it. "You look like you're having a rough day already, Mallory. Something bugging you?"

What the hell. Give him one more chance to seem normal. "Yeah, there is. Do you work at all with the TRF-10 forms?"

He nodded. "Yeah, some. I've seen them, at least."

"Then you know how detailed they are. And idiot me, I let myself get backed up on them because I put a big stack in the TRF-6 stack and they need to be entered and checked by the end of the day tomorrow, so between now and then I'm losing my mind trying to get them entered. And you know how they have all those duplicate questions?"

"Uh, no, but I do now."

"OK, so like page 1 it asks current address, then again on page 3 it asks for mailing address, which is always the same so the system doesn't even have separate entries for it, but somehow like a quarter of the time these morons manage to enter totally different data, so I have to go and figure out which one they really mean and *ARGH*. The urge to make me pull my hair out is the only thing keeping me from falling asleep from the tedium."

He frowned sympathetically. "That sounds pretty aggravating."

"I assure you, it is."

"Anything I can help with?"

I arched an eyebrow. "Do you even know how to use the Firmsoft system? I'd have thought you were still in training."

"Oh I am, but I didn't mean like that. I meant, you know... with my--"

I jabbed a finger into his bony chest. "If you say 'with my super power' I am going to shove this wrap up your ass." I paused a moment. "Besides, how on earth would that help me anyway? I'm already doing the work, ya jackass."

"Well that's what I was trying to say the other day," Grant answered patiently. "Sometimes *wanting* to do a thing and actually making yourself do it are two totally different things."

I sighed. "OK, I'll bite. What's the difference, exactly?"

"Well sure, all right. Say you want to lose some weight. You *want* to go to the gym, you *want* to have a salad, but actually making yourself do it can be pretty hard. See?"

I scowled. "Are you telling me I need to lose weight? Because if so, you can go to hell." Not to mention that this skinny bastard knew the trials of dieting like I knew the difficulties of peeing standing up.

“Oh gosh no! I’m so sorry – that was only an example, and since I was eating, it probably just popped into mind first.”

My scowl grew marginally less intense. “Good.”

“Anyway, if you want, I could, you know, make you want to focus, be efficient. Maybe get it done a little faster, a little happier?”

I snorted. “If you can make this nightmare fast and easy for me, be my guest.”

“Done.” He snapped his fingers, then laughed after a moment. “The snap was being theatrical. I’m not Thanos or anything.”

“Who in the hell is Thanos.”

“Never mind. You enjoy your lunch, Mallory – I hope it works out for you.”

I swear, it had *nothing* to do with Grant and his delusions. Talking it over at lunch helped me remember that I'm the master of my own fate. When I sat back down at my desk, it was with a renewed sense of purpose. Yes, the task was ill-conceived, boring and thankless. I wasn't going to let that get me down though. All I needed to do was come up with a system and stick to it. And that's what I did! I used the index numbers to sort them by department or origin, and from there all I had to do was filter results according to each department's priorities for the form!

I was making such good time, I even made a little game out of it. Maybe it sounds embarrassing, but I sang the tasks to Mary Had a Little Lamb in my head while I went down the lines. "First we do the client name, client name, client name; then we enter addresses which are found on line twooooo..." And so on. It passed the time, and if it got too stale, I simply switched to a new tune, or found some small way to reward myself at milestones. A task that I'd originally thought I'd have to come early and work late that day and the next for, and I had it done by ten o'clock the second day.

"Well?" said Grant annoyingly at lunch.

Sheesh. In a single word, this doofus managed to take my accomplishment high and flush it down the tubes. "Well what?"

"How'd it work for you? Great, right?"

"Please don't start with this stuff again, Grant..."

"Oh come on! Just admit that it went well. Admit that it worked and I won't bring it up ever again."

"Heh. Well if those are the stakes, then yeah, it worked like a dream."

He grinned. "I told you it would!"

"I only said that to shut you up!"

"You still admitted it."

"You're still talking about it."

"Ya got me." He grinned. "Well if you ever need another boost, let me know."

"Oh yeah, the next time I find myself wishing someone could sprinkle me with pixie dust to solve my problems, you'll be the first one I call."

True to his word, Grant didn't bring it up again. As the office's two lunch time early birds, we still shared meals, but we found other things to talk about. We worked in the same office, so I gave him some tips and pointers for navigating office politics. We both watched *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, were both Eagles fans, even had compatible enough world views that we could talk current events without wanting to kill each other. The guy wasn't the best conversationalist, but he was pretty tolerable. Plus, he never tried to flirt with me in the least, which was another big reason I ate my lunch before anybody else did in the first place.

The only thing was... try as I might, I could *not* get that energy going again. I didn't take it out on him – I'm not a total bitch, no matter what my ex says – but I was getting crabbiest about my job by the day. It was so. Freaking. Dull. The more I tried to tell myself nothing had changed, the more my inner voice reminded me that for one glorious, fleeting day, it had actually been weirdly fun and pleasant. But even trying to do the same thing again, the buzz simply eluded me.

I vented to Grant about it after a couple weeks. Not to get a reaction or anything; he'd asked me how my day was and I was too demoralized to keep it bottled up. I had to hand it to him, the guy didn't bring up his supposed powers, even though I could tell from that furtive look in his eye he was thinking it. He sympathized, and we moved on. Except for the feeling. That stayed.

Now, I know it's stupid. I'm not exactly what you'd call gullible. I don't believe in god. I don't believe in ghosts or demons or any of that bullshit. Friday the 13th is just another day to me, and Halloween is only interesting in that it lets me wear something skanky without all the judgment. Still... there was this nagging little voice in my head that wondered if maybe – just *maybe* – Grant wasn't totally full of shit.

"I'll give you one more chance to prove yourself," I said one morning. Ugh. It was time for end-of-quarter compliance reporting, and I was swamped like before. I'd kept procrastinating in the hopes that that spark would return and I'd be able to breeze through it again, but each day the stack kept growing and growing.

Grant gave me a smug smile as he feigned ignorance. "One more chance to what, Mallory? I thought we weren't supposed to talk about that."

"Oh shut up. If you can make me not hate my job again, you can talk about whatever the hell you like. So can you do what you said or not?"

"If you want," he said. "That's how it works."

"I want. But if you are bullshitting me, I'm going to kick you in the groin tomorrow, capeesh?"

"Understood, ma'am."

"Don't call me ma'am. So are you gonna do it or what?"

"Already did." He grinned. "The hand-waving, finger-snapping... all theater. It's purely mental. Didn't even feel it, did you?"

But what I did feel was a surge of energy and enthusiasm for my work I hadn't had since... well, since the last time I invited Grant to do his thing. Yeah, yeah, so I can admit it. The guy actually can somehow do what he claims. I feel nuts even admitting it to myself, but suddenly I was working twice as efficiently, and, more bizarre still, I was *enjoying* myself. Don't get me wrong, I know my job is boring as hell. But all that day, I was bouncing in my seat with energy, smiling at every complete mundane task. It felt *good*.

The next day, I invited Grant to do it again. He said his power lasted right around a full day, so all I had to do was keep joining him for lunch and he'd keep me enjoying life as a data entry technician. (I think the company called it a "technician" because "drone" was too on the nose.) So joined him I did. Like I said, he wasn't bad company, and now I was in such a great mood simply to be at work that pretty much everybody got a smile out of me.

Pretty soon my supervisor, Perry, started to notice. I was out-pacing the workloads of the rest of the DETs by half, at least. I was coming in early, staying late, and so darn chipper that some of the staff was starting to avoid me. Whatever. These days, it was the world outside the office that was stressing me out. Watching all my friends have their happy perfect meals and vacations and families on social media, the news always telling me the world was on the verge of collapse, finally starting to realize that distancing myself from my fitness buff ex had made me start going from cutely plump to just plain plump...

"Oh come on, you look really pretty, Mallory," Grant tried to console me over lunch one day as I was venting. "Nobody else is looking at you and thinking judgmental thoughts."

I rolled my eyes. "That's sweet, Grant, but it's also bullshit. I used to get hit on all the time, and now sometimes I go days without some creep trying to get in my pants. I was a size 4 my whole life and now I barely fit in half my clothes."

"Well hey, there's more to life than being thin and hot, right?"

The guy was skinny, yeah, but I doubted he'd ever been called hot. He was no troglodyte, but he was basically a wallflower. Like a stock photo, without the fake smile. "Feh. I'm always just so tired by the time I get home I never feel like exercising any more. And I'm doing so good here that I'm always rewarding myself with food."

"Well," he said tentatively, "there is one thing we could do... if you wanted."

I arched an eyebrow, but I took his meaning a moment later. "Oh! You could do that?"

"I could, if that's what you really want."

"What I really want?" I pinched the muffin top squeezing out of my pants. "No, 'cause I think this is a really great look on me. You're sure there won't be side affects or something? I don't wanna, I dunno, burn out, or whatever."

He waved a hand. "For one, proper diet and exercise make you healthier, not less healthy. For two, if it starts to feel bad, you'll stop wanting it, and the power will stop working. Automatic self-correction. Shall we give it a try?"

I lost fifteen pounds that month. I'd always wanted to try going vegan, but had never been able to give up meat. With a nudge from Grant, I gave it a go for a week, and then that was one more part of his daily touch-ups. Nine hours at the office, one at the gym, one and a half on meal prep and cleanup, plus transit for all of the above, and my life was chock full. Nonetheless, I felt incredible.

I had energy, a spring in my step, a feeling of success and accomplishment. Perry even got me a modest raise and told me as soon as a position became available, they'd be considering me for management. Already he was taking me under his wing, involving me in a lot of the departmental meetings and decision-making. I was being groomed, he said. He even got me to enroll in some business classes at the community college, paid for by the company. It was another couple hours a night, but for now my social life would have to deal. For now I was just glad to be getting recognition, to say nothing of my relief that I was starting to look like my old self again. Although now I'd lost so much weight that now some of my clothes were starting to get too baggy.

"Good problem to have," said Grant, taking a bite of his tuna sandwich.

"If you can afford it. Here it is the middle of summer and I'm wearing sweaters and loose dresses because my tight stuff makes me look like I'm a kid playing dress-up in Mom's clothes." I plucked at my top.

"Come on, Mallory. You look great, and you know it. That's for *you*, not us. What does it matter if your co-workers can't see it?"

"You so do not understand women, Grant." I patted him on the arm patronizingly. "Part of the point of looking good is because you want a little recognition. Let the boys get a little friendlier, the ladies get a little jealous."

"I apparently don't get women. I thought catcalls and wolf-whistles were generally considered a bad thing."

"I'm not saying I want to be harassed, you neanderthal. I'm only saying that we're visual creatures, and sometimes, yeah, we like to... I dunno, get visual."

"So if you want to dress a little more flattering, why not just buy some new clothes? I hear you're management track now – may as well invest a little moolah."

"Bleh. My parents are giving me crap for missing the holidays last year. So now, I have to fly home for Thanksgiving *and* Christmas, and that's eating all my fantasy management track dough. Not that they gave two shits about spending time with me when I was under their roof, but now that I'm fifteen hundred miles away, suddenly they want quality time. I wish I could just tell them to piss off."

"Why not? Got a big inheritance coming your way?"

"Nah. I have two brothers and a sister, and there's not gonna be much to split to begin with."

"So... why not...?"

I laughed. “Sometimes, Grant, I think you think your little power can solve every one of my problems.”

“It’s doing a bang-up job so far, right?”

“Damn, girl! I would never have the guts to try and pull that off – you putting in for a raise today or something?” my work-friend Valerie said as she popped by the break room. It was a second coffee run for her. My usual early lunch for me.

“Or something.” I gave a humble shrug of my shoulders. Bared shoulders, as it were. Today it was a shoulderless blouse, two sleeves and a snug bodice held in place by breasts alone. It showed a lot less cleavage than I had been lately, but it compensated by showing off my dynamite midriff. Two months in to my new workout routine, and the only reason I wasn’t rocking a sixpack was because I wanted to keep my figure a little more feminine.

After all, with the way I was dressing lately, I almost needed to.

I’d started out modestly, some new blouses, a few knee-length pencil skirts with one-inch heels. It flattered my new and improved figure a lot more than the old stuff. Plus, I had to admit it felt nice to be a source of gossip. My mistake was admitting that fact to my lunchmate, Grant. Two guesses what his solution to wanting to dress a little sexier was. I’d told him I didn’t actually *want* to dress sexier, but he said if that was really the case, his power wouldn’t work anyway. If I was simply being coy, however, he said he’d spot me the first new outfit I bought.

The v-neck red silk blouse, maroon leather skirt and designer five-inch pumps I’d bought set the poor guy back almost \$400. To be a good sport about it, I let the compliments and lingering glances of my co-workers compensate me for the \$80 in underwear that nobody got to see. Except me. And dammit all if I didn’t look amazing in it.

I’d actually sort of figured I’d wind up getting some kind of reprimand about it at some point, but as luck would have it, Perry decided to take me aside in the break room. No doubt he’d figured that way he could do it privately. Only he didn’t realize Super Grant was on the scene! He opened with a gentle reminder that this was a professional workplace and everyone was making concessions to their personal style to adhere to certain expected norms. After a quick ocular exchange with Grant, I batted my eyelashes, smooshed my boobs together and asked him if he didn’t want me looking so good for him?

As he blushed and stammered that of course he, Perry, mighty supervisor and manly man among men, totally wanted to see what I’d bring in tomorrow... Grant struck. He said he wanted it, and there it was – Grant made him do what he wanted. Since then, I’d been able to wear whatever the hell I liked. Frankly, the power of it was kind of intoxicating. Blouses that clearly showed my bra through the sheer material, skirts with zippers up the side that looked more appropriate for clubbing than the office, boots up to mid-thigh that still showed a little skin before the dress began... I was young and hot and fit and untouchable. I figured why not enjoy it while it lasted?

Today, however, was not such a day. One of those times when everything hits you at once. In the short span of the three hours preceding my usual lunchtime with Grant, I was made chairperson of one committee and member on two others, asked to revise the specs on a major project, and found out I’d forgotten an old friend’s wedding the past weekend. I didn’t even realize I’d skipped it until I saw the pictures go up on her instagram.

“I just don’t know what to do any more,” I said, slumping down to place my head on my forearms. “It’s like the better I work, the more work people give me. There’s no saving time any more, because Perry just finds new ways to fill it.”

“I read a story in college about third world sweatshops, and there was this woman working as a seamstress making bluejeans. She was pumping those puppies out like crazy because they got paid per unit instead of hourly. So the company saw she was earning twice as much as anyone else, and so they fixed it by reducing her pay to half the amount per article.”

I glanced up at him. “That’s the most depressing fucking thing I’ve heard all week.”

“Yeah. She died from stress-induced illness not too long after that.”

“So you’re saying I might at least have an end in sight.”

He laughed. “Oh come on, Mal. Surely you’re at least living it up at night, right?”

“If by ‘living it up at night,’ you mean taking a vegan cooking class so I don’t bankrupt myself eating out, exercising two hours, answering Perry’s emails for another hour, then collapsing by nine from sheer exhaustion, then yeah. Totally living it up.”

“You can at least work for the weekend.”

“Sounds cool. Let’s see, this weekend I’m coming in Saturday to finish up one project, but Sunday I’m only teleconferencing with two clients, which I can do from home once I clean the place up so it doesn’t look like I’m a hoarder.”

“On a Sunday? What kind of client wants to do meetings on a Sunday?”

“One Jewish and one Asian. I think it’s Asian, anyway. Trisha Nguyen. Which reminds me I need to learn to pronounce that in one of my six free minutes between then and now.”

He winced at my butchering of the name. “You sure do.”

“And you know what’s worst of all? One of these days, I’m going to come by at lunch and I’m not going to keep wanting to kick ass any more. I can barely sustain it now. Then I’m going to need to find a new superbuddy whose power is letting me fucking relax for one goddamn day.”

He stroked his chin. “Well, what if you already knew such a fellow?”

“We can’t make more hours in a day by wanting it, Grant. Unless your power can now slow the rotation of the sun.”

“Earth.”

“Whatever.”

“Come on, hear me out. It sounds like what you need, to me, is to have everybody stop coming to you with stuff. When you were doing your DTE stuff, things were good, right?”

“How can I already be nostalgic for two months ago.”

“So let’s work backwards here. Why do you think everyone keeps loading more responsibilities on you? Pretty sure it’s not your dynamite fashion sense.”

I managed half of a grin. “If anything, that’s the only thing making them doubt my intelligence is the Barbie vibe. So yeah, I guess I just got too good. Thanks to you, I work faster and better than anybody else in my department.”

“There’s your problem, then, Mal.”

I shook my head. “No way. You can’t bail on me now – you’re the only thing keeping me sane here, man!” I clasped his hands pleadingly. It was hard to say it out loud, but there was no denying his help was absolutely essential for maintaining my lifestyle now.

“No, that’s not what I mean – and sweet of you to say. I’m saying, your problem is that you’re the best and brightest.”

“How is that a bad thing?”

“Don’t you see? You wanted to focus so your job would be easier. But all it did was free up time and energy that’s being sucked away into other tasks. Maybe what you need now is to *un-focus*. Don’t you want to blow some of this crap off?”

“Only some?” I frowned. “Still, I dunno. I don’t wanna get fired or anything.”

“Fired? In that outfit?” he joked. My top was practically a corset; I didn’t think anyone had even seen the miniskirt I was wearing with it. “But seriously, I’m just saying to think it over, and if I can help, let me know.”

It was Monday before I took him up on it. Sunday night, after the two teleconferences had turned into four plus extra time on other side projects, I was up all night with stress dreams. I dragged myself into the office feeling like hell, not the least of it because it was Monday morning and I'd had to go two and a half days without a productivity bump from Grant.

I was a little nervous, I admit. After all, it doesn't take a genius to know that most of us are harboring some self-destructive impulses inside us. The kind that urge us to get a neck tattoo, or go home with that sketchy guy from the bar, or, in my case, totally flake out at work until people left me the fuck alone. I've seen *Office Space*. That whole fantasy of getting promoted for doing nothing is just that – fantasy.

Still, I was desperate. Grant was his usual unquestioningly supportive self, but he did what I asked him to do. I just wanted to be a little less driven. *Maybe* even slightly less competent. If these sixty plus hour weeks were what getting ahead meant, screw getting ahead.

As days became weeks, there were two curves, and of opposite types. The first one was my productivity and reputation. It started gradual; I quit most of my committees, and deliberately sabotaged a project by pretending I'd heard Perry say he wanted the opposite of what he'd wanted. ("Why would I want *more* time scrutinizing the CCR?! I already told you they're phasing those out next year anyway!" "That's what I thought, but I'm sure I heard you say that's what you wanted.") Within a few weeks, I was becoming persona non grata. People not only didn't want to invite me to their meetings; they specifically tried to steer me away from them. By the start of the new quarter, I was back to data entry and form review. There was open speculation that I only kept my job because I was sleeping with somebody on the board.

The second curve, however, was the one that mattered to me – my own happiness. This one was a rapid spike that came practically overnight. Fuck all this deadweight. I realized precisely how much bullshit all this corporate rat race was. All I wanted to do was to ignore the hubbub and enjoy myself. I was young, I was hot, I was single, and pretty soon, my life outside of work was mine again. I was still keeping up my diet and exercise, but now I was ducking out of work early whenever possible, coming in late, and feeling free.

As I talked it over with Grant, I had sort of an epiphany about my brief rise and fall. I'd done it to myself. I'd been raised to think that as a woman, I had to be the best at everything. I had to work harder, longer, and with more grief than my male counterparts. It had made me driven and competitive, always looking for an angle. It had brought me a few extra thousand in my bank account, but deprived me of everything worth spending it on – friends, dates, a boyfriend, all that stuff.

What had made me happy was closing my eyes, plugging my ears, and la-la-la-ing until there were no more of those ugly thoughts to deal with. I was tired of having the gears of my brain constantly whirring away; what I really wanted was to relax, unwind, and just *be*.

"Um, what?" I said, shaking myself. "Sorry, I sorta spaced out again there."

“Welcome back, cadet,” Grant said, grinning. And looking a bit down my plunging neckline, but, like, whatever. I wanted men to look. It reminded them I was more than another DTE filling a desk seat.

“Cadet?”

“You know. Space cadet?”

I giggled. “Oh!” That was another thing I’d realized I wanted. To laugh more.

“Anyway, I was asking if you saw that article I posted, about the factory fire in Malaysia?”

I shook my head. “Nope. I haven’t really been reading much lately, ya know? There’s so many sad things, and I want to be happy.” Did I sound like a simpleton? Probably. That was something I’d realized I’d wanted, too – if I looked and sounded the part, people left me alone. Any more, I was pretty sure Perry was only refraining from firing me because he wanted to have sex with me before he did, and Grant was helping him keep pursuing that goal. What a nice guy. I undid another button, to be nice back.

“Fair enough.” He pushed his food around his plate with his fork. It smelled *sooooo* good. My lunch was kale salad and a raw carrot.

“Did *you* see that thingy I posted the other day?” I asked, taking a nibble of my carrot.

“Hmm? No, I don’t think so. What was the article about?”

I giggled. “Not an article. It was a selfie. The one where I’m on my balcony and the sun’s behind me so I’m just a, um... what do you call it? Shadow-thingy?”

“Silhouette, Mal,” he supplied. (I knew the word, but I didn’t want him thinking I was too smart or he’d start expecting me to be more than the hot DTE girl.)

“Yeah, I was a silhouette. You couldn’t even tell I was topless, I don’t think.” Pretty much every guy in the office was following me on instagram now. Or had made secret accounts they were hiding from their wives or girlfriends.

“Ya know, I did not see that, I don’t think. I don’t check very often.”

“Really? Here, let me...” I brought the picture up and held my phone out to him. Already three hundred likes! I wanted people to like me, so long as it was for looking thin and hot and not for working hard.

“Wow. I dunno, Mal, I don’t think it’s that hard to tell you’re naked.”

“What?” I snatched my phone back, then slapped my forehead. “Oh! Durr, that’s my dating profile pic. Here, I meant... no, that one’s naked, too... and that one... and that one...”

“I’ll take your word for it,” he said with a little smile. “So you’re dating now, huh? Filling those extra hours with a search for companionship?”

I nodded. “Yeppers. Basically have my pick of the guys on here.”

“I’ll bet. How’s it going so far? Any keepers?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Nah. All anybody on these apps wants to do is hook up. Nobody’s looking for, like, a relationship.”

“That’s what I hear. What kind of a guy are you looking for? Maybe I know somebody.”

I thought about it. Which was weird – work wasn't a place where I did much thinking any more. Home either, honestly. Once I got a taste for it, I wanted to feel carefree *all* the time. "I dunno, like, somebody nice, ya know? Somebody who's going to be good to me, who shares my values, my interests, my priorities... Somebody who only wants to be with me and not go around nailing every girl that looks his way."

"You're sure that's what you want?"

"Yeah. That's what most girls want, Grant. Not the thot squad, maybe, but most of us."

"Did you say 'thought squad'?"

"Thot. It's a letter thingy" (oh crap I actually forgot a word again – practicing too hard!) "that stands for That Ho Over There."

"Aha. Hadn't heard that one. Tell you what. That's what you want, I'm gonna help you get it."

"So, what, you can make an amazing guy appear out of thin air now? Your power's growing almost as fast as your cock while you keep checking out my boobs, bucko." I grinned, but didn't obscure his view. I'd teased him about getting caught ogling me so many times now he didn't even blush.

Acronym! That's the word. I think.

"Well... what about... me?" He raised his shoulders, offering a cute, dorky, feeble little grin. "I know, I know, we work together, and I don't want to make things weird. But if you think about what you said you wanted..."

I frowned. Grant was supposed to be helping me *not* think. This was the opposite of that. I sighed and gave it a go as he walked me back through my own definition. "You want somebody nice, you said. And I think it's fair to say I've always tried to be nice to you – helping you with your job, your physical and mental health. Right?"

"Riiight," I conceded. "But—"

He immediately cut me off. "And you said you wanted somebody who's got similar interests and values. We have lunch every day, and we've always had an easy time finding things to talk about. Even when we disagree, it's amicable."

"It's what?"

"Friendly. And obviously I share your priorities. Remember, I spent two hours this weekend helping you pick out your new lingerie?"

I was wearing some of it right now, actually. I'd overnighted the order. "Yeah, I guess. Still—"

"And you said you wanted somebody who'd be true to you. Now I know we've never dated, but in the six months I've been working here, have I ever stood you up for lunch?"

"I don't think so..."

"Have you ever seen me use my power to help anyone but you?"

"You use it on Perry and some of the management guys every day!"

“Yeah, but that’s for *you* – do you really want to go back to showing up on time and adhering to the dress code?”

“Ew, god no.”

“Right! And I’m single, not interested in anybody else. Have you ever heard me talk about my romantic interest in another woman?”

“I’ve never heard you talk about women period.”

“So there you have it. I’m a nice guy, good to you, common interests, shared values, loyal to you. That’s what you said you wanted. Isn’t it?”

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