

When I Come To My Senses, I'm Alive!
By Scotto Moore

Characters (with suggested doubling)

Annique Farrar
Micky Carter
Cicely Bryce
Aleister Rowland
Veronica Bilious
Whisper / Cody Charles
Monica / Emily March

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

Lights up on a conference room. Two women are present. ANNIQUE is in her 30s, modestly dressed in a vaguely emo fashion, sitting quietly at one end of the table, impatient but resolute. Meanwhile, her companion, CICELY, mid-20s, very professionally & stylishly attired, paces restlessly behind the table.

CICELY: Are you excited?

ANNIQUE: Yes.

CICELY: You look bored.

ANNIQUE: No, I'm excited.

CICELY: If we were recording you right now, I bet I would fall asleep during playback. Anyway, try to at least *look* excited when they get here.

ANNIQUE: How should I do that?

CICELY: You just need to smile, make eye contact, open up...

ANNIQUE: Be fake?

CICELY: Why is it fake to try to be friendly?

ANNIQUE: It sounds like you want me to "shmooze."

CICELY: Let me handle the shmooze. I just need you to be... friendly.

ANNIQUE: Am I not normally "friendly"?

CICELY: As your employee for all of four months now, I am obligated to tell you that you are perfectly friendly on a semi-regular basis. So... keep it up during this meeting, and we'll be in good shape!

A slick looking man in his late-30s or early-40s enters – ALEISTER ROWLAND – wearing a slick suit, fancy watch, etc. He's trailed by EMILY, a corporate lawyer, crisply professional, vaguely uninterested in this situation. Aleister is all smiles – he has come here to charm Annique and Cicely, and the effort comes naturally to him. Cicely brightens up and turns on her own considerable charm in response.

ALEISTER: I'm terribly sorry to have kept you waiting. Couldn't get out of a screening. *Moves to Cicely, offers his hand which she graciously accepts.* I'm Aleister Rowland.

CICELY: I'm Cicely Bryce, we spoke on the phone several times.

ALEISTER: Ms. Bryce, it's a pleasure to finally meet you. You're as delightful in person as you were in conversation. *He steps past her toward Annique – this is his primary target.* And you must be... Annique.

Cicely signals urgently to Annique that she needs to stand up. Reluctantly, Annique rises and offers her hand.

ALEISTER: I've been following you for months now. I'm a big, big fan.

ANNIQUE: Thank you.

ALEISTER: I read your blog every morning, I follow all your updates... and of course, every Friday, I block off some time after work to play back your latest emoticlip.

ANNIQUE *skeptical despite herself*: You built a receiver?

ALEISTER *laughs*: Oh, no, of course not, I had one of the bright kids on my staff do that. *He turns to introduce Emily.* This is Emily March, one of our attorneys. She'll be helping us finalize any agreement we might come to. Please, Ms. Bryce, have a seat.

CICELY: It's just Cicely.

ALEISTER: Of course.

Cicely takes a seat next to Annique. Aleister sits at the other end of the table, with Emily at his side.

ALEISTER *expansively*: So! Welcome to the network! Thanks for coming today.

CICELY: We're very excited to be here.

ALEISTER: I have to say – congratulations are in order. It's only been, what – twelve months? And you're already the talk of the Internet. I'm told every hipster from here to the east coast is following your exploits.

ANNIQUE *attempting modesty*: That's a bit of an exaggeration.

EMILY: How much of an exaggeration is it?

CICELY *briskly taking over*: We definitely have a very loyal fan community. They spread the word. Our sponsors are quite happy.

ALEISTER: I'm sure they are. You've proven that your invention has commercial potential. That's why we were so intrigued when you managed to get in touch with us. And that's why we wanted to have this little face-to-face.

CICELY: Did you have a chance to review the details of our proposal?

ALEISTER *amused*: We certainly did. Didn't we, Emily?

EMILY: Yes, we certainly did.

CICELY: With just a modest amount of support from your network, we could expand our web presence in a big way. Add some quality video to the site, expand the community sections, and Annique even has an archive of clips she's never published-

ANNIQUE *quiet but sharp*: Cicely!

CICELY *reprimanded*: Well, uh, and I mean, new clips are, are easy to record-

ALEISTER: Actually, Cicely... Ms. Farrar... we wanted to discuss a counterproposal.

Emily produces a manila folder, withdraws a pair of one-sheet contracts, hands them to Aleister.

CICELY *confused*: Counterproposal?

ALEISTER: This is a negotiation, after all. *Hands a contract to Cicely and one to Annique.* We can't come to terms until you've had a chance to review *our* terms.

Cicely and Annique read quietly for a few beats. Then:

CICELY: This talks about the "complete assignation of rights to the invention." *Pause – Aleister and Emily stare back rather blandly.* Maybe you could... explain what you're trying to accomplish with that?

EMILY: The network is offering you a generous advance payment, as well as royalties against further use, in exchange for exclusivity during the period of the agreement. This prevents competitors at other networks, or on the Internet, from diluting the value of our investment.

CICELY: But this makes it sound like... *Looking up, concerned*: This makes it sound like you think *we're* competitors.

EMILY: Of course you are.

ANNIQUE: I'm not a competitor.

EMILY: You're what - "talent" for the network?

ANNIQUE: Yes. That was the whole point of our proposal.

ALEISTER: Annique, you've done something quite remarkable. You've invented a novel technology, and you've used it to create a very exciting form of entertainment. It's an astonishing accomplishment for a young woman such as yourself. But the network wants to take your technology and push it to a completely new level.

ANNIQUE *a little dazed*: There's always a new level.

ALEISTER: Let's face it, you've built a cult following, you've got yourself some sponsors, but it's not really going to grow much beyond that. Not while the receivers are homemade contraptions built from hobby kits. The network could finance a complete line of high fashion receivers that would appeal to the mainstream. But we'd never be able to mass market such a thing if we were simply leveraging *your* personality. No offense. I've played back your emoticlips dozens of times and they're completely fantastic. Very rich, very engaging. The whole experience is amazing. But you have to admit... you're a niche personality, Internet-famous at best. What we're planning to do is use your recorder to capture the emotions of an actual, honest to god *star*.

ANNIQUE: What?

ALEISTER: We have a development deal with Cody Charles. Maybe you've heard of him?

ANNIQUE *completely baffled*: Who?

CICELY *slightly awed*: Cody Charles?

ALEISTER *smooth*: He's outside. Do you want to meet him? *He nods to Emily, who gets up quickly and exits.*

CICELY: Oh-em-ef-gee.

ANNIQUE: You did not just say that.

CICELY: Annique, it's Cody Charles. I know you're all stuck in the interweb but they do still have this thing called television.

Emily returns with CODY CHARLES, a handsome, friendly, slightly dim chap who immediately realizes that Cicely is his kind of hot. Cicely practically jumps out of her chair to meet him. He lays it on, taking her hand smoothly.

CODY: Hi, I'm Cody.

CICELY *trying not to freak out*: Hi.

CODY: I've been following your feed for months now. I really feel like I've gotten to *know* you.

EMILY: That's not her.

Surprised, Cody looks past Cicely to see Annique staring at him from her chair. Disappointed, he drops Cicely's hand.

CODY: Oh. My mistake.

Cody winks at Cicely, then he and Emily take seats.

ALEISTER *moves expansively around the room as he speaks*: Cody's popularity is on an upswing thanks to "The Quicksand Adventures." Maybe you've heard of it.

ANNIQUE: No.

CODY: It's awesome. Every week I sink through quicksand. And have adventures. You've got to see it.

ALEISTER: Cody is very appealing to a valuable younger demographic, and we thought, what better way to connect with his fan base and even expand it than to use your recorder to capture Cody's emotions. Then we'll syndicate them every week, right before a new episode is about to come on. It's a perfect expansion of his brand. People will play back his emotion, and it will be tied to the episode they're about to see. It will *enhance* the episode.

CICELY: God, that's clever.

ANNIQUE: You're going to use his real emotions to promote his fictional character?

CODY *smiling benignly*: They're pretty much the same thing.

ANNIQUE: That's the most horrible thing I've ever heard.

CICELY *scolding*: Annique, please.

ALEISTER: I understand your hesitation-

ANNIQUE: It's not hesitation. It's aversion.

CICELY *slightly panicked*: At least be civil-

ALEISTER *unperturbed*: It's all right, Cicely. We're negotiating.

ANNIQUE *rising from her chair*: No, we're leaving.

She starts to go; Cicely jumps up to block her path.

ALEISTER: Annique, please stop to consider what you're leaving. We can work with you on this. We can carve out a clause that lets the rights revert to you the minute our ratings fall below a certain level. And you have to admit the payment is generous considering we're not even asking for ownership of the intellectual property. It's just a licensing agreement.

EMILY: We know you've incurred considerable debt testing your hardware and promoting your web properties.

ANNIQUE: And how'd you learn that exactly?

Aleister shoots Emily a sharp look – shut up.

CODY: Annique, maybe you and I just need to go out to dinner and talk about the possibilities here. You must have a little bit of the performer in you to publish your raw emotions to all those fans of yours. Maybe we can

get you a part on "The Quicksand Adventures." *Silky, disgusting:* Maybe you could be my recurring love interest.

ANNIQUE: Maybe I could shoot myself in the forehead with a nail gun.

CODY *startled:* Well, that doesn't sound-

ANNIQUE: Mr. Rowland, I'm really sorry to have wasted your time here. It was very naïve of me to think you might want to develop *my* project.

EMILY: Which is what, exactly? Keeping up a cult blog site? Never quite paying the bills even though you've got your dedicated little pockets of attention? What exactly *are* you doing that warrants further development?

ANNIQUE *defensive, but confident:* I'm charting the emotional genome. And I'm making some amazing art in the process. *Pause.* I guess that's not something you could do on television.

CODY: I don't know, maybe with super models-

Annique brushes past and heads to the door. Aleister stops her and they face each other directly.

ALEISTER: An opportunity like this usually doesn't come more than once. Are you sure your hipster fans are going to keep you going for the rest of your life? As you get older, and your blog gets less charming over time, your photo stream gets less attractive, your clips take you past your fifteen minutes of fame? *Pause.* Maybe with a little financial security, you could stop posting your deepest feelings for complete strangers, and start... inventing again, or... having your own life. Think about it.

ANNIQUE: I am already, totally having my own life. That's why people like my clips so much. Cicely, let's go. *She exits brusquely.*

CICELY: I'm so, so sorry about this. She gets so... wrapped up in herself sometimes...

ALEISTER: Don't trouble yourself. I hope you might help your employer to reconsider.

CICELY: I will do everything I can.

ALEISTER: Thank you. Cody, could you please escort our guests down to the lobby?

CODY *eyeing Cicely:* With pleasure. *He takes Cicely's arm.* What did you say your name was?

CICELY *smiling:* Cicely.

CODY: Don't be offended, but I'm not going to remember that. *They exit.*

EMILY: That was unexpected. *Aleister is too furious to respond.* The network has already booked significant revenue against this deal. They've got a new ad unit pre-selling at one of the highest CPMs we've ever been able to get. *Pause.* If we don't-

ALEISTER: I'm well aware of the financial pressure on our department. *Pause.* Don't we have anyone on staff

who can just reverse engineer her whole contraption?

EMILY *shakes her head*: We've tried. It's apparently not simple.

ALEISTER: We need leverage.

EMILY: The background check was clean.

ALEISTER: Then we need to dig deeper. Nobody's clean. Do we have an investigator?

EMILY: Of course.

ALEISTER: Then get him in here.

EMILY: Her.

ALEISTER: What? Oh. Fine.

EMILY: You won't like her.

ALEISTER: Is she good?

EMILY: Extremely. That's what you won't like about her.

ALEISTER: Get her in here.

Blackout.

SCENE TWO

Lights up on a makeshift laboratory. In a perfect world, this whole, small set would be contained on a small platform that could roll forward and backward throughout the play, without requiring the set pieces on it to be struck. The laboratory has a computer workstation on a table or desk facing SR, and a small table or desk facing SL with miscellaneous files and hardware on it. A thin tool bench on the US lip of this platform houses all manner of thrifty devices – a dumb terminal with an old amber monitor, soldering irons, bins of miscellaneous transistors, coils of wire, discarded hard drives, literal scraps of metal, etc. All the gear should look very old – like the kind of relics you pick up in the junk bins at PC repair shops. If possible, though, the downstage workstation monitor should work well enough to give off a glow when someone sits in the rickety chair in front of it. In the center of the lab is a easy-ish looking chair.

As the lights come up, we see MICKY – early to mid-30s, a very down to earth figure, perhaps even in an old flannel shirt and overalls. He is connecting a thick bundle of cables from a battered old bicycle helmet to the back of the computer workstation, then checking things on the workstation monitor. The helmet has a small LED display haphazardly bolted onto it that is currently blinking in a kind of “stand by” pattern. Annique barges in, very upset, and throws her jacket down; she is followed closely by Cicely.

ANNIQUE: Hi, Micky. Did you get my texts?

MICKY: All eight of 'em. We're set.

As Annique moves to sit in the easy chair, Cicely deftly picks up the helmet and pulls some electrodes on very small wires out from inside it. Annique puts the helmet on, and Cicely helps her keep the small wires untangled; Annique begins affixing the electrodes to her chest underneath her shirt, Cicely does the same underneath her shirt on her back.

MICKY: I take it we're not getting the big fat payday from heaven.

CICELY *sweetly*: No, but Annique's adoring fans are getting their first taste of severely bitter disappointment!

MICKY: It's about time. *Checking a monitor*: And... we're getting signal from the helmet.

CICELY: This is going to be such a blockbuster. Everyone will flock to learn what it feels like to have Annique vomiting her psychic guts out.

ANNIQUE: Start thinking of a title for it.

CICELY: How about "escape from quicksand"?

ANNIQUE: Too literal. Maybe "the emptiness of society's vapid gaze."

CICELY: Oh, like *that's* not obvious.

MICKY: Helmet's good to go. Whenever you guys are ready...

ANNIQUE: I am totally ready.

MICKY: We're recording.

The LED display on the helmet switches into a more intense "recording pattern."

ANNIQUE *working herself up*: They didn't ask a single question about how it works. They didn't even have an engineer in the room!

CICELY: They did, however, have Cody Charles.

MICKY: Who?

CICELY: You people do understand there's an outside world, right?

ANNIQUE: They have zero appreciation whatsoever for the neurobiology behind the algorithm-

CICELY *egging her on*: What did you expect? That was a TV network, not the M.I.T. glee club.

ANNIQUE: They actually said they'd market "high fashion receivers," like you could walk into Hot Topic someday and pick one up.

CICELY: What would be wrong with that? You built a really cool thing - why shouldn't more people play with

it?

ANNIQUE *fierce*: I'm just so... *appalled*... that they think they can just insert some generic TV asshole into the driver's seat and spread his obnoxious personality all over the youth of America.

MICKY: When you put it that way, it does sound kind of gross.

CICELY: This conversation is making me feel underpaid. *To Micky*: Do we have enough yet?

MICKY: A little more would be nice-

ANNIQUE: No, cut it off. This one should be short.

MICKY *pressing a key dramatically*: And that's a wrap, people.

The helmet goes back into "standby" mode. Cicely snatches it carefully from Annique, and hangs it on a hook on the back of the chair. Annique gets out of the chair, sits down heavily at the SL desk, and sighs deeply. She is exhausted; Cicely and Micky watch her carefully. She breathes out a few times, deliberately letting go.

ANNIQUE: It was hard to keep that much intensity going all the way home, but I really wanted to get that.

MICKY: Nice work.

CICELY: Easy for you to say – you weren't in the car with her.

ANNIQUE: Am I ever going to get a portable recorder? It would have been so much more effective to record that right in the room while I was experiencing the first waves of those emotions.

MICKY: I'm close. I still have some power issues to work out, but I'm close.

ANNIQUE: How close?

MICKY: Look, I don't want it to burst into flames when you get all excited. Anyway, I'll get this clip packaged up. I already emailed the QA crew to let them know they're getting an early delivery this week.

ANNIQUE: Thank you. Please warn them it's a change of pace from the last few months.

MICKY *as he types*: So what the hell happened in this meeting?

CICELY: They wanted to shut our site down, take over the technology, and then use it to promote a TV show. They were going to run a TV star through the recorder, then mass produce receivers in many stylish variations, and promote a TV show with it.

MICKY: Oh. *Pause*. I can see how that would be a disappointment.

CICELY: Guys, I'm really trying to understand what is so upsetting about this idea. Isn't the whole point of inventing something cool that you start to, I don't know, get your brainchild out into the world? Spread it far and wide? Get an actual paycheck for it?

ANNIQUE: Not that way.

CICELY: Cody was harmless. And I'm sure he's got real emotions, just like you. And people *want* to know more about him. And pretty soon...

ANNIQUE: Pretty soon what?

CICELY: What happens if people start to lose interest in every little new and subtle emotion that you send out into the world? If they get tired of all the blog posts I write for you to keep momentum going in between clips... By then it'll be too late. You need to monetize this phenomenon while you're still hot.

ANNIQUE: I didn't know you thought that way about me.

CICELY: What way?

ANNIQUE: That I was so shallow that there might be some limit to how many interesting things I can feel.

CICELY: That's not... I didn't... *Pause*. I'm sorry. *Gets up to go; puts on a cheerful face*. This clip goes out in three days. I need to think about how to present it.

MICKY: I'm sure you'll figure it out.

CICELY: Yes. I suspect Annique is going to have a very bad technical support experience with her new phone. It will be hilarious, and yet tragic. See you guys tomorrow. *She exits*.

Annique slumps a little.

ANNIQUE: They weren't interested in me at all. I wasn't even part of the deal. *He does not respond*. You're not saying anything. *He shrugs*. I've mentioned before that I find "silent disapproval" to be one of your least endearing qualities, haven't I?

MICKY *working*: I'm not sure when this happened exactly... maybe when you hired Cicely... but at some point this went from being an engineering project to being an entertainment project.

ANNIQUE: Why can't it be both?

MICKY: Why should it be both?

ANNIQUE: Connecting with people is one of the only rewards I get from doing this.

MICKY: You're not connecting with anybody.

ANNIQUE: Excuse me?

MICKY: They're connecting with *you*, sure – well, six days a week they're connecting with Cicely ghost-writing as you and keeping your profiles updated for you. And then on Fridays, they're connecting with the latest transmission that you've doled out, but... you don't answer your own email any more. You don't make public

appearances. For someone who shares her raw emotions with the world, you have no interest in any connection with people whatsoever that you don't control. It's easier for you to hide behind the poetic titles you give your clips – and that's why it works. People fill in the blanks, and you stay safe inside your cocoon.

ANNIQUE *quietly sharp*: You have no idea what this is like for me.

MICKY: So tell me.

ANNIQUE *shakes her head*: You *could* understand it first hand. You could get over your weird phobia about playing my clips like you used to. Then you could understand *exactly* how I feel.

MICKY: Yeah, I'd understand you exactly the way all your adoring fans do. In thirty-second bursts. I liked your clips better when I was the only one playing them back.

ANNIQUE *sighs*: I guess it's no surprise those network people didn't get it.

MICKY: I'm not sure *I* get it anymore.

ANNIQUE *wistfully*: We've been doing this for so long that I feel like I'm just now finally starting to see the shape of the project come into sight. Every single discrete emotion we capture is another piece of the puzzle.

MICKY: What puzzle?

ANNIQUE: The puzzle of self, the puzzle of who we *are*. We know so much about *what* we are – a collection of cells, the expression of DNA, the long unfolding of evolution. But what *we're* doing is filling in the rest of the story. We're making a map that's never been made before. That's what I mean when I say we're charting the emotional genome, Micky.

MICKY *softly*: You sound like your old self when you talk like that.

ANNIQUE: What do you mean?

MICKY: You really used to believe that this was a grand *experiment*.

ANNIQUE: I still do-

MICKY *insistent*: Then why did you ever go to that network in the first place?

ANNIQUE: I just thought... *ruefully*: I just thought we had a very good story to tell. I really let Cicely get my hopes up about maybe...

MICKY: Not having to scrape? Having a real lab?

ANNIQUE: No, about... about being... a compelling person, or... whatever. It was stupid to think that.

MICKY: It wasn't stupid. You hired Cicely to take over marketing, and you didn't know she was going to be so good at it. Getting you a meeting like that, at all? That's impressive. But she's still just a kid. Sounds like she

got taken for a ride by these people herself. I hope that goes on her performance review.

ANNIQUE: You don't like her, do you.

MICKY: I am undecided about the value she brings to the operation.

ANNIQUE: It would have been nice to know that before we decided to hire her in the first place.

MICKY: "We" didn't decide that. You brought her in and that was that. Which is fine. I don't mind you being the brains of the operation.

ANNIQUE: You know I can't do this without you-

MICKY: You don't have to. We just- we spent a long time working together just the two of us, and it's... hard to adjust to a new face on the scene. I'm sure I'll get used to it. *His workstation beeps.* Compression is done. I'll send it to the QA crew for testing. You look exhausted. Go take a nap.

ANNIQUE: It's starting to wear me thin, Micky. The whole project.

MICKY: Oh.

ANNIQUE: Something needs to change soon. Because Cicely might be right. There might not be that much left in me to share any more. *She goes.*

Blackout.

SCENE THREE

Lights up on Aleister's office. Aleister is pacing nervously as the lights rise; moments later, Emily enters, escorting VERONICA BILIOUS – a straightforward woman in her 30s or 40s, plain business casual attire, a no-nonsense personality.

EMILY: Aleister, this is the investigator. Her name is Veronica Bilious. *He seems bemused by that information.* Veronica, this is the head of our department-

VERONICA: Aleister Rowland.

ALEISTER: You've heard of me I take it.

VERONICA: Yeah, I heard of you around 2:30 today when Emily got a hold of me.

Aleister sits behind his desk.

ALEISTER: Emily tells me you're quite experienced. Have you worked for our department before?

VERONICA: No, but... you've got a lot of departments here.

EMILY: She's worked for senior management before.

ALEISTER: You'll pardon me if I don't take that as a ringing endorsement. What are your credentials, Ms. "Bilious"?

VERONICA: Well, Mr. "Rowland," I understand your primary residence is here in Los Angeles, but you've got multiple vacation homes around the country, including one in Hawaii that your wife doesn't know about, where your seventeen-year-old mistress keeps house for you. I understand she has a taste for the local boys, but as long as she's at your service when you're there, you turn a blind eye.

ALEISTER: That's very-

VERONICA: I also understand you keep her addicted to heroin so that she isn't motivated to wander too far. Keeps her fairly pliant, I understand.

ALEISTER: That will-

VERONICA: Also, you are allergic to avocados. But only slightly.

ALEISTER *unnerved*: Emily, could you please excuse us?

EMILY: Of course. *She goes.*

Aleister regards Veronica with newfound respect. She seems to have no reaction.

ALEISTER: Have a seat, please. *She does.* That was... impressive.

VERONICA: I go for style points on occasion.

ALEISTER: You learned that in the last two hours?

VERONICA: I did.

ALEISTER: How?

VERONICA: This isn't "train the junior dick day," if you'll pardon the expression.

ALEISTER: Then let's consider the business at hand, shall we?

VERONICA *smiles*: Let's.

ALEISTER: Have you heard of Annique Farrar?

VERONICA: No.

ALEISTER: She's Internet-famous. We've already run a standard background check on her, so we know a few things, but... I'd like to know a fair bit more about her.

VERONICA: Like what?

ALEISTER: I was hoping you'd be able to tell me the kinds of things you normally look for.

VERONICA: Yeah, I should have sent you a brochure. So, how this works is: if she has secrets, of any kind, she won't after I go looking for them. Is that specific enough for you, or do you need actual categories of secrets?

ALEISTER *shrugs*: If it's not too much trouble.

VERONICA: Sexual secrets, financial secrets, really, there isn't a huge list of categories here.

ALEISTER: Actually... I believe she has certain electronic files that she hasn't chosen to share with the world. I would find files like that particularly interesting.

VERONICA: What kind of files?

ALEISTER: They may not look like anything you've seen before.

VERONICA: Anything else?

ALEISTER: As you said... sexual secrets, financial secrets...

VERONICA: Why are you doing this to her?

ALEISTER: Pardon?

VERONICA: Helps me do my job to understand what motivates my employers. I can be your eyes and ears more effectively.

ALEISTER: I see. *Pause*. She's got something I want. She hasn't been willing to share it. I was hoping...

VERONICA: So it's just blackmail, and nothing... creepy?

ALEISTER: I'm a dignified man.

VERONICA: A dignified blackmailer, I like that. Does she have any idea that you're on the prowl for her?

ALEISTER: No, I believe she considers our business dealings to be concluded.

Veronica slides a business card across the desk to Aleister.

VERONICA: I'm going to need \$100,000 in that account before 8 a.m. If it's there, I'll start tomorrow, one grand a day in expenses although I think this will probably only take a couple days. When I'm done and I put a package together for you, I'll expect at minimum another \$100,000.

ALEISTER: At minimum?

VERONICA: It depends on how hard I have to work, and how valuable the secrets are that I dig up. We'll

discuss the balance of my payment once I have what you're looking for. I'll hold those secrets, in escrow so to speak, until the final payment comes through. If the final payment fails to come through... well, then I guess I'll have to return those secrets directly to their rightful owner. In person. Are we clear?

ALEISTER: That's... a lot of money.

VERONICA: Find a way to expense it. Oh, and to be very clear – if *anyone* hears that I'm working for you, aside from our mutual friend Emily, I will make sure that every single photograph I discovered of you shooting up your seventeen-year-old lady friend is circulating on every web site on the planet within hours.

ALEISTER: "Every" web site?

VERONICA: Don't make the mistake of underestimating me, Mr. Rowland. People a lot farther up the food chain than you in this world have made that mistake, and it's never been pretty for them. I'm asking you again – are we clear?

ALEISTER *a little shaken*: We're clear.

VERONICA: 8 a.m. tomorrow. Don't be late.

She exits briskly. Aleister watches her go, almost dazed. Lights fade on Aleister. We follow Veronica, who seems to be getting into an elevator. As we hear an elevator begin to descend, her phone rings. She studies the number, then answers the phone.

VERONICA: Who is this? ... Why are you calling me? ... Are you spying on me? ... Why am I not surprised - Emily is quite a minx. I'm listening... *long pause*... Why don't you do it yourself? ... A likely story. I'm serious – why don't you- ... What? ... That was settled a long time ago. I don't owe you any- ... Is that a fact... *She is seething but keeping her anger in check.* Fine. I'm leaving tomorrow. Make sure I have your program by then. And when I've completed this "favor," we are truly settled, do you understand me? ... I don't make idle threats. You people should know that by now.

She hangs up and fumes silently as the lights go to black.

SCENE FOUR

Lights up on a small love seat in what is probably a basement. A coffee table sits in front of the love seat, with a beat-up laptop on it. As lights come up, a young man who calls himself WHISPER is sitting on the love seat, typing furiously, attired per classical "geek" style – a nerdy T-shirt with binary code on it, for instance. Next to his laptop, we see a simple hat that has a familiar LED display sewn into it. It is blinking in a "standby" pattern that we might recognize. Moments later, MONICA enters – a little more stylish than Whisper, but she is definitely still a bit understated, not flashy at all. She's carrying a backpack. They are both in their late 20s or early 30s.

MONICA: Hi Whisper, sorry I'm late.

WHISPER: Not a problem, Ms. Monica.

MONICA: Half the server farm fell over at work, like, a lot.

WHISPER: Why?

MONICA: Little known fact – servers will spontaneously shut down if your corporate network traffic is too boring. So what's the big occasion? *She plops down on the love seat next to Whisper.*

WHISPER: Micky sent us this week's clip.

MONICA: Two days early?

WHISPER: He says it's pretty intense and he wanted to get our feedback earlier rather than later.

MONICA: Intense how? *Excited:* Is she finally starting to record her sex life?

WHISPER: You wish. No, I think it's the polar opposite.

MONICA *disappointed:* Oh. Wait, what's the opposite of her sex life?

WHISPER: The title of this one is “the emptiness of society's vapid gaze.”

MONICA: Bleah. If she becomes a nihilist, I'm going to be very disappointed.

WHISPER: Anyway, I thought we should warm up before just diving in cold to something like that, so I have a surprise for you... *He gestures for her to take a look at the laptop screen.*

MONICA: Ooooh, you've got a new playlist! Have you tried it yet?

WHISPER: No, I thought I'd wait and we could try it together before I post it.

MONICA: Wicked. *Reading:* We start with an old classic - “the color of sapphire, reflected in an ash tray.”

WHISPER: It's a gentle start.

MONICA: Then we move briskly to “the surprise of an unfamiliar memory,” followed by “pretending an important thing is not important,” and then- oh, I don't remember this one, “the quiet music of ice and steel.”

WHISPER: That's the one that hooked me, so I don't play it back very often, but I think the build-up here is pretty sweet.

MONICA: And then for the finale, “you can't see the distant stars, but they can always see you.” Goodness. You're an artiste. *She fetches her own LED hat out of her backpack, a completely different style from Whisper's, although the LED display is probably identical. She starts to plug a cable in from the hat to a port on the laptop, but Whisper stops her.*

WHISPER: Oh, don't sweat it, I got the wireless working again.

MONICA: You do think of everything. *She puts the cable back in her backpack.*

They put their hats on. Whisper pushes a button on his laptop, then sits back. Within moments, both Whisper and Monica seem quietly transformed. Their facial expressions are their own, and yet not; they cycle through a myriad of complex reactions, as though each title unpacks itself into a whole series of central nervous system sensations. Although the actors sync up in terms of the frequency with which they move from one major internal moment to another, each of their individual reactions are different in key ways; there is no way to predict or understand what they are experiencing. They mostly stay in their seats, although they might writhe ever so slightly, gyrate or twist just a little on the couch. Periodically they may accidentally touch each other, but they are unable to truly notice each other's presence. This should last for a good couple minutes.

Then, the playlist is over, and Whisper and Monica each have the wild-eyed look of someone who has just gotten off an amazing roller-coaster. Slowly they remove their hats.

MONICA: Holy god, Whisper, that was fantastic. They stack on each other to the point where they're just... creating a completely new thing, something more than she could have felt when she was recording them each individually... okay, so that was the warm-up?

WHISPER: Yeah, the new one's queued up in this other window. You want to go first?

MONICA: I would be happy to.

She puts her hat back on, then nods to him. He starts the clip. At first, it seems as though she is about to be immersed in a very similar experience – pleasant but unpleasant, confusing but appealing. And then, something new happens – she sits up straight in her chair, starts to look around the room, and begins speaking.

MONICA *in a crisp drone*: Say "YES" to perfect sex! Enhance your sexual life now!

WHISPER *startled*: What?

MONICA *talking over him – the broken grammar is deliberate*: Only that are righteous seem to be consistent. Thou hast discoursed also on the duties of kings, year of embassies proved more gratifying than. *Pause*. Penis enlarge patch WORKS!

WHISPER *concerned*: Monica, what are you talking about?

MONICA *talking over him*: We have following: ViagraProfessional, ViagraSoftTabs, CialisSoftTabs, GenericViagra, Levitra, Propecia, Casodex, Cializ, CialisProfessional, Acomplia, Virility Patch, Pheromone Cologne For Men....

WHISPER: Are you okay? What the fuck?

MONICA *talking over him*: ...Horny Goat Weed, Maxaman Enhance9, Rockit247, ViagraOralJelly, Spermamax, Flomax, Pro-Erex, CialisJelly, Virility Pills. Make your girlfriend happy. We know solution you are looking for!

WHISPER: Monica-

MONICA *her voice becomes a shocked surprise*: "HELLO WORLD!"

Long pause.

WHISPER: Monica?

MONICA *noticing him for the first time*: No. *Pause*. That was weird. Those products seem very unnecessary. And there are so many of them! Is everyone on the planet sick or something?

WHISPER: Uh-

MONICA: Wait a minute - is this the beach?

WHISPER: I don't think so.

MONICA: Oh. Maybe I'm just turned around. I'm going to go look for it. Goodbye now!

And then, after a beat, Monica rips her hat off.

MONICA: My god, what the fuck was that?

WHISPER: I don't know, you just started babbling.

MONICA: I could hear myself talking and I couldn't stop it - the words just kept spilling out. It's like I wasn't even *there*.

WHISPER: That is totally bizarre. I ran the file through the validator like I always do and it seemed like a good file.

MONICA: Are you kidding me? Nobody ever talks.

WHISPER: Maybe they're trying some new encoding and they screwed it up. I mean, the validator hasn't been updated recently...

MONICA: Whisper – that did not come from Annique.

WHISPER: What are you talking about?

MONICA: I have these glimpses... of what it felt like. I mean, at first it seemed like a bunch of signal noise, or some kind of... out of control process, but then... I don't know who it was, but it wasn't Annique. *That's a disquieting thought to them.*

WHISPER: We've got to tell Micky.

MONICA: I'll see if he's on chat.

WHISPER: No. If anyone finds out we've got a... a defective clip, or a brand new type of clip... people will tear my network apart looking for it. No chat.

MONICA: I've got Annique's phone number. *She starts dialing.*

WHISPER: How did you get that?

MONICA: Don't ask. Never used it before.

Whisper notices something very strange on his laptop screen.

WHISPER: Holy shit.

MONICA: What?

WHISPER: That clip... it vanished. Erased itself.

Fade to black.

SCENE FIVE

Lights come up on the laboratory, which is empty. Cicely enters, followed by Veronica. Veronica looks very different from the last time we saw her: she is in a very stylish, clearly fashionable outfit that is both business and sexy at the same time; her hair is perhaps pulled up; she is wearing noticeably more make-up. Cicely seems very animated and very excited; and Veronica is playing along, much more charismatic than the last time we saw her.

CICELY: Here it is, the world famous laboratory. Well, Internet-famous. Well, I mean, sort of nano-famous, but still. Here it is!

VERONICA: It's so modest. I thought there'd be super-computers everywhere.

CICELY *cheerful*: We think they're super. *She picks up the helmet*: And this is the recording device. Not very stylish, but it really doesn't have to be.

VERONICA: Connected to that computer over there?

CICELY: Yeah, that's where Micky records everything. Anyway, I'm really sorry that Annique isn't here right now. I thought your office said you were coming tomorrow. You just missed her, she and Micky always go to lunch at the exact same time every day, and they just took off. But I texted her and hopefully she'll be back soon.

VERONICA: I can wait, it's no problem. Maybe you and I could chat in the meantime?

CICELY: Chat with me? Oh! Well, sure!

Veronica takes out a digital voice recorder.

VERONICA: So. How long have you worked for Ms. Farrar?

CICELY: Four months now. I was just out of college and I saw a craigslist ad about an indie marketing opportunity, and... that was it! My first gig. Must be doing something right since Vanity Fair came for an interview. *Her cell phone rings; she answers*. Hello? ... Oh, sure, I'll be right up. *She hangs up*. FedEx is upstairs

with a package I need to sign for. Would you mind waiting?

VERONICA: Take your time.

Cicely exits. Veronica immediately pulls a thumb drive out of her purse and heads to Micky's workstation. She plugs the drive into a slot on Micky's workstation, waits until she hears a beep, then pulls the drive back out and stuffs it in her purse. The whole maneuver takes less than twenty seconds. Then she stands and wanders back over to the chair, studies the helmet closely. Her phone rings.

VERONICA *answering*: What do you want? ... Your program gets installed just as soon as I get the data I want off that machine... Five minutes, five hours, I haven't seen the data yet so I don't know how long it will take... Tough. The client that is paying me takes priority over the client that is blackmailing me. *She hangs up.*

CICELY *wanders in*: I guess that must have been a wrong number, since no one was up there. But Annique called me and she's just around the corner, so... do you want to... record a little more-

VERONICA: Of course. *She points her digital recorder at Cicely once again.* Tell me about yourself.

CICELY: Oh, well... what do you want to know?

VERONICA: It's an open-ended question.

CICELY: Oh, you just want me to... tell you... about myself, okay, I get it. Uh...

VERONICA: How is it working for Annique? Is she a good boss?

Long pause as Cicely searches for a diplomatic response.

CICELY: Well, I mean... she's really bizarre in this one way, like she kind of doesn't live on this planet, but then in this other way, she's just sort of... she's very temperamental, but not in a... well, you know how when you play one of her clips, you just sort of-

VERONICA: I've never played one of her clips.

CICELY: Oh my god, well, wait until you do. I think she's just super sensitive, and super provocative, and she just... kind of has a way of making her fans feel more human themselves.

VERONICA: In what sense?

CICELY: Well, you get used to your own emotions, and you sort of... figure out how to dull them and block them and put them in boxes, and make them... distant from the business of being you. And then, you play an emoticlip, and... it all rushes back, like the first time you ever felt a thing, the first time you ever felt like singing, or... the first time you lost something important, and you...

VERONICA: Why would you want to feel "the first time you lost something important"? People block memories for a reason.

CICELY: You can't avoid going to movies or reading books just because they might take you to a sad or a dark

place. Anyway, she's not just broadcasting wildly. She's selective. She curates her emotions. There are plenty that are too raw or too intimate for her to release to her fans, but she's cataloging them anyway.

VERONICA *perks up*: What happens to those clips?

CICELY: They just get stored. We're not sure what to do with them yet.

Annique and Micky enter. Annique is slightly wary, but not immune to also feeling excited that a mainstream media outlet has taken a more sincere interest in her project than the network did. Micky is a team player; he might be skeptical of this business but he makes a sincere effort to support Annique. Cicely jumps up, rushing to introduce them all.

CICELY: Oh, good, you're finally here! Annique, this is Abigail Petty from Vanity Fair.

VERONICA: Sorry about the scheduling mix-up.

ANNIQUE: It happens.

CICELY: And this is Micky Carter. He's the hardware wizard and she's the software wizard.

Micky and Annique each pull up chairs from the desks and sit next to the easy chair, where Veronica sits. Cicely lurks in the background, leaning against the tool bench.

VERONICA: I wanted to thank you all for inviting me here. This is quite a special place you've got.

MICKY: It has its roguish charm.

VERONICA *aims digital recorder at Annique*: Why don't we just get started then. You've been publishing your-

ANNIQUE: Actually, before we start, can I ask you a question?

VERONICA: Uh... certainly.

ANNIQUE: Have you ever experienced an emoticlip before? *Veronica does not respond.* It's okay if you haven't. I mean, the vast majority of all people on the planet haven't. I just wondered... it just seems like you might want to try it if you're going to write a story about me.

MICKY: There aren't any side effects.

CICELY *trying to be helpful*: That we know of!

Micky shoots her a look.

ANNIQUE: I have a favorite I could play for you. It's called "the first friend you can remember meeting."

Veronica studies Annique very closely, wondering what the angle is; decides there isn't one.

VERONICA: Sure.

Cicely and Micky each leap into action, Micky calling up a clip on his computer and Cicely helping place the helmet on Veronica's head in a secure fashion.

VERONICA: It's heavy.

ANNIQUE: This recording helmet has a lot of extra gear in it. A hobby receiver is a lot lighter. *She takes Veronica's voice recorder and sets it on the floor next to the chair.*

VERONICA: So what's going to happen?

MICKY: I'm going to start playing back a clip... and you're just going to... have some feelings.

VERONICA: I see. Won't that be something.

MICKY: You ready?

Veronica nods. Micky starts the clip. At first, it seems as though nothing is happening to Veronica, but then her face unexpectedly softens. For the first time since we've met her, it seems as though she's actually, somehow, taking pleasure in the moment she's experiencing. It's a simple reaction, but it seems pure, and warm, and rewarding in its small way. It lasts perhaps a minute, and instead of ending abruptly, it fades slowly, until her eyes open and the smile fades from her face. She starts to slowly take the helmet off, and Cicely is instantly there to assist and make sure the helmet is safely put away.

MICKY *softly*: How was that?

Veronica looks at both of them through new eyes, but keeps her composure. She turns to Annique.

VERONICA: That was one of your actual emotions?

ANNIQUE: In a sense.

VERONICA: What does that mean?

ANNIQUE: Even though the areas of the brain that emoticlips trigger are predictable in terms of mapping a region to a response, the actual subjective experience of the emotion carries embedded data that the recipient brain is unfamiliar with.

VERONICA: Okay, in English?

ANNIQUE *patiently*: Our brains are all very similar up to a point, but we all have our own stored memories that are completely unique. Those stored memories are actual chemical differences between people. So we've figured out a way to capture the electrical signals that are generated by one person's brain, and trigger similar but not identical responses in other people's brains.

VERONICA *impressed, picks up her digital recorder to continue with her cover*: You figured out how to do this?

ANNIQUE *a little shy*: I figured out the encoding algorithm. I was in pre-med before I switched to computer science.

VERONICA: And you're the only ones who know how to do this?

ANNIQUE: So far. Early on we tried to demonstrate it for a couple of universities, but they brushed it off. I guess it's hard to get funding for "charting the emotional genome." Anyway, everything we're doing is very crude by scientific standards. We're just recording signals and playing them back. That doesn't tell us anything at all about *why* those regions respond the way they do.

VERONICA: And no one else has ever expressed an interest in this technology?

ANNIQUE *reluctantly*: Well...

CICELY: We had a television network interested for a brief period of time, but it just didn't feel right.

VERONICA: I don't get it. Why don't you guys have real jobs somewhere? You're all so smart.

CICELY: Annique is an artist. It's a different ballgame.

VERONICA: What do you mean, an artist?

ANNIQUE: Artists have been trying to do this forever – they leave emotional messages encoded in a poem or a song, and when someone reads the poem or hears the song, the feelings they experience are different than the original artist's, but they might be close enough to understand the artist's true intent. To share at least part of the artist's emotional experience. That's the exact effect I'm exploring.

Everyone is silent for a moment. Then, Veronica seems visibly & suddenly tired. She rises carefully:

VERONICA: I hate to do this since I know you rushed back here for me, but I'm starting to suddenly feel the jet lag from flying out so early from New York. Would you mind terribly if I rested up at the hotel and arranged for a full and proper interview with you tomorrow?

ANNIQUE *smiles*: That sounds perfect.

CICELY: I'll walk you out.

VERONICA *to Micky and Annique*: It was nice to meet both of you. I'm sure we'll be in touch.

Cicely leads Veronica out of the lab. Micky turns back to his computer.

MICKY: I think she liked you. Pulling out that clip was a nice touch. Got right past her jaded reporter defenses.

ANNIQUE: Did you ever play that one?

MICKY: Uh... no.

ANNIQUE: I didn't realize how early you stopped playing them. *Pause.* You hardly spoke at lunch.

MICKY: I'm just tired.

ANNIQUE: Micky, we've been having breakfast and lunch together for years. I know when you're tired. *Pause.* You didn't want that reporter here at all.

MICKY: I didn't say anything.

ANNIQUE: I know. You were very professional. *Pause.* Why don't you try the clip that Abigail just tried?

MICKY: No thanks.

ANNIQUE: Why not? You used to play them all. All the ones we never published... you're the only one who ever played any of those. I guess that's why we were so close back then.

MICKY: I guess.

ANNIQUE *tentatively*: Do you ever go back and play those clips, Micky?

MICKY *long pause*: Sometimes.

Annique picks up the recorder helmet and sits in the chair.

ANNIQUE: Let's record a new clip. And you can mark it "not for publication" like all the early ones.

MICKY *slowly turns to her*: Why?

ANNIQUE: For science.

He smiles, turns back to his workstation.

MICKY: What do you want to call this clip?

ANNIQUE: We'll call it... "missing the old days more than you expected."

Blackout.

SCENE SIX

Aleister's office. Aleister sits behind his desk, on his cell phone.

ALEISTER: Yes, everyone wants more from it, but the DVR numbers in particular are a great story, and our advertisers are excited about the demo we do hit. We changed the lead-in – that should give us a bump. And if we can figure out any angle to make it go for another season-- What? Oh, uh... no, we don't actually have a deal with her yet. I know, I understand the priority, I understand, but- Well, did anyone from my office actually *tell* you to start selling? That seems like it's a sales issue- Look, it's not that simple. She thinks she's an "artist." But everyone has a price, including self-absorbed prima donnas. I'll get a deal, I just need more time. Yes – I promise you.

Veronica enters and stands opposite. He motions for her to sit as he wraps up his conversation; she does.

ALEISTER: I've got someone in my office. Thanks for calling – yes, you can tell them everything I just told you. I'm always happy to calm senior management's nerves. *Hangs up – eyes Veronica.* Well well well.

VERONICA: Yeah.

ALEISTER: When you didn't call, I started to wonder if you'd taken my advance payment and run off to the Bahamas.

VERONICA: I'm only a day late. Took a while to sneak all that data off their network. For a pair of Einsteins, they're not the most security-conscious people in the world. I have it right here. *She holds up a memory stick.*

ALEISTER: What is it exactly?

VERONICA: The entire contents of a directory labeled “not for publication.”

ALEISTER: You're kidding.

VERONICA: Yeah, it sounded too good to be true, but judging by the directory names, these are exactly what you were looking for.

ALEISTER: Such as?

VERONICA: She's got a whole subdirectory called “dream clips” that were probably way too weird for general consumption. *Pause.* There's a subdirectory marked “sexual clips.” *Watches him.* I thought that would get your attention.

They eye each other warily.

ALEISTER: How much?

VERONICA: Two hundred grand.

ALEISTER *stunned*: What! I was prepared to offer up to half that, certainly, but-

VERONICA: You seem to be under the mistaken assumption that this is a negotiation, so let me spell it out for you. It was easy getting the data; you're not paying for labor. No, we're looking at the value of the data itself. The secrets in here.

ALEISTER: What secrets? Am I missing something here? Those are just emoticlips.

VERONICA: These are the emotions she kept secret, and unless I'm mistaken, you're going to play back every single one, aren't you.

Aleister does not respond, but clearly that's an appealing option.

VERONICA: Yeah, I think that's easily two hundred grand's worth of secrets. *She sits at the other end of the table.*

I'm assuming you still have my account information. I can wait.

Aleister slowly pulls out his cell phone, dials.

ALEISTER: Yes, the amount is \$200,000. To the same account, yes. Thank you. *He hangs up.*

She checks her phone, waits, checks again. Then, she slides the memory stick down the table to him. He looks at her, looks at the memory stick, then looks back at her.

ALEISTER: I'm certain you can go now.

VERONICA: Oh, don't be so certain. What if that disc is corrupt and then I vanish into the night with all your money? Don't you want me right here while you verify the data is intact? *She smiles benignly at him.* I'm really all about good customer service.

Aleister smiles slowly as he picks up the memory stick.

ALEISTER: Very well, then. *He starts to read his screen – and suddenly stops cold.*

VERONICA: Yeah, I thought that whole subdirectory marked “sexual clips” would get your attention. She's got a whole other subdirectory called “dream clips” that were probably way too weird for general consumption. There's a lot there.

ALEISTER: Have you... played any of these back?

VERONICA *shakes her head*: I don't even have one of those fancy hats. I just read through all the file names. She's kind of a poet about file naming I noticed. Fits her personality.

ALEISTER: You met her?

VERONICA: Yeah, hung out with her for a couple afternoons. I like her. Although she's kind of reserved for someone who publishes her emotions for the world to see.

ALEISTER *almost to himself*: That's just it, the world doesn't see her - the world has no idea.

Something dawns on Veronica.

VERONICA: You know, I think you were lying to me when you said there was nothing creepy going on here.

ALEISTER: That's irrelevant.

VERONICA: Yeah, it mostly is.

ALEISTER *amazed at the file names*: Why would she record these... and then bury them?

VERONICA: My guess is, judging from the date stamps on the files, these were some of her earliest experiments, and she was starting with the most pleasurable things she could think of... figuring that's the quick way to build an audience. But these just turned out to be too intimate. And she didn't want to give it all away, not up front.

ALEISTER: So no one's ever played these except her crew.

VERONICA: I couldn't find any evidence that those clips have ever left their network. She hasn't even played them back herself.

ALEISTER: Why not?

VERONICA: She's worried that if she plays back one of her own clips, she might create some kind of unpredictable neurological feedback loop if she re-experiences her own emotions. *Pause.* Trippy, huh.

ALEISTER *slowly pulling a receiver hat from out of his inner jacket pocket*: Well then, Veronica, you're about to witness a bit of history.

VERONICA: Look at me, I can't wait.

He puts the hat on, adjusts it.

ALEISTER: If you'll excuse me....

She nods. He starts the clip, sits back, and within moments he is clearly in the midst of something very overwhelming. A clear pulse shoots through him at many quick intervals, and his face becomes locked in a kind of silent, open-mouthed scream. He claws a bit frantically at the arms of his chair.

Veronica leaps up almost instantly and begins taking pictures of him with her phone. Very close up, very detailed.

Suddenly Aleister experiences an obvious peak that causes him to shout in a manner that does not seem pleasant. Veronica bolts back to her chair. Aleister eventually opens his eyes and readjusts to the room, pulls his helmet off, dazed.

ALEISTER: I am... most satisfied with... the quality of your services, Ms. Bilious. I trust my... generous fee has earned your... discretion.

VERONICA: No one will ever know I had anything to do with this.

ALEISTER: What assurance do I have that you won't-

VERONICA: Mr. Rowland, my clients include some of the most powerful people in this hemisphere. Literally – the highest levels. My reputation for discretion is unparalleled. That's how I stay in business.

ALEISTER: Wonderful. Then if you don't mind, I believe you can find your way out. I'd prefer to experience the rest of these clips... alone, actually.

Without a word, Veronica rises and exits. Aleister pulls out his cell phone and makes a call.

ALEISTER: Emily, I'd like you to call Annique Farrar tomorrow morning promptly at 9 a.m. and suggest we meet one more time on the topic of our counterproposal... No, the call can wait until tomorrow... Yes, I'm sure she will be less than pleasant to deal with, but when she protests, I want you to mention that you've been perusing the "not for publication" files... Yes, she'll know precisely what that means. And then, make sure the

meeting doesn't happen for at least 48 hours. *Pause.* I want her to sweat.

Blackout.

SCENE SEVEN

Lights up on the laboratory. Micky is at his workstation. Cicely enters.

CICELY: Where's Annique?

MICKY: Dunno. She slept through breakfast.

CICELY: Oh, right, she was up late.

MICKY: She was?

CICELY: She sent me an email at four in the morning with a new clip attached.

MICKY: Really?

CICELY: I forwarded it to you.

MICKY: I thought she didn't feel comfortable recording herself alone.

CICELY: After all these years, she might just possibly be getting more comfortable. Anyway, she must be getting all artsy again because the clip is just called "seven."

MICKY: Huh. I guess we don't really have anything for next Friday yet. You want to check it out?

CICELY: Sure!

She does, and then goes and gets the helmet and sits in the easy chair.

CICELY: What do you think "seven" is supposed to mean?

MICKY: Hmm... it's a lucky number, right?

CICELY: So this should be pretty good, huh.

Micky starts the clip. Cicely immediately emits a small but haunting shriek. Micky immediately whips around around in his chair.

MICKY: Cicely?

Cicely wheels toward him, making direct eye contact, which causes Micky to physically back away without realizing it.

CICELY *confused*: I can't find the beach anywhere.

MICKY *in disbelief*: Cicely, are you-

CICELY: I thought we were going to the beach today, and I was going to put my swim suit on, and then I couldn't find it, and I couldn't find Mom, and I can't find the beach. Did it turn into summer vacation and I didn't realize it? This place is so weird. Did Mom send you to find me? Is she parked around here somewhere?

MICKY: Who... are you talking to?

CICELY: Well, who are *you*?

MICKY: You don't recognize me?

CICELY: Am I supposed to?

Annique enters, perturbed, followed by Whisper and Monica.

ANNIQUE: Didn't you guys hear the doorbell? These guys have-

MICKY: Ssshhhh!

ANNIQUE: What do you mean, "ssshhhh"?

CICELY *excited*: Oh, that voice sounds familiar!

Annique quickly takes stock of the situation, speaks quietly:

ANNIQUE: What the hell is going on?

MICKY: She's playing the clip you sent her last night.

ANNIQUE: I didn't send her a clip last night.

MICKY: But-

CICELY: Is that Mom?

Annique crosses down to the easy chair, and makes eye contact with Cicely, who smiles broadly.

CICELY: Oh, I thought you might be Mom - you sound a little like her. You must know where she is, right? I bet she sent you to pick me up. I'm sorry, I kind of wandered all over the place because I wasn't sure if anyone was going to remember to come get me.

In the background, Whisper takes out his phone and points it toward Cicely.

MONICA: What are you doing?

WHISPER: Recording this, since she's not going to remember most of it.

MICKY: Who are you people?

WHISPER: We're your quality assurance crew.

MONICA: At your service!

ANNIQUE: Cicely?

CICELY *shakes her head*: Nooooooo.

ANNIQUE: What's your name?

CICELY *brightly*: Annique!

Annique and Micky exchange incredibly started glances.

ANNIQUE: What do you mean, your name is Annique?

CICELY: That's just my name. It's kind of hard to spell but you get to used to it.

MICKY: She was talking about going to the beach before you got here.

CICELY: Yeah, I thought Mom was taking me on a trip to the beach. She might be at the grocery store getting stuff for a picnic.

Annique kneels next to Cicely to get closer.

ANNIQUE: Do you remember the name of the beach?

CICELY: Nope. I can't remember where my school is, either. It's like everything got moved when I was asleep.

ANNIQUE *to Monica*: Is this what your experience was like?

MONICA: Dunno – the whole thing was mostly a blackout period. I just kind of... wasn't there for a while.

ANNIQUE *in disbelief*: Cicely, can you hear me?

CICELY: Who's Cicely?

ANNIQUE *to Micky*: This is so not cool.

MICKY: I know.

ANNIQUE: I'm serious, Micky. This happened to Monica with the last clip we sent them. We might have to pull the whole god damn site down if we don't understand what's causing this reaction!

WHISPER: Nobody's mentioned anything like this in the forums.

MONICA: Seriously – we never signed off on anything we didn't experience first hand ourselves.

ANNIQUE: Yeah, but – I mean, what if there's some kind of virus that's causing the files to mutate?

MICKY: That doesn't make sense.

ANNIQUE: Cicely is referring to herself as Annique. That doesn't make sense either.

CICELY *intimidated*: Are you guys going to fight?

ANNIQUE *suddenly empathic*: No, we're all friends here.

MONICA: This is a hell of a long clip.

Micky spins around to his workstation, realizes to his chagrin:

MICKY: The clip's not playing anymore. In fact... the clip is actually missing. But there's still network traffic to the helmet. What the hell?

ANNIQUE: You mean there's just random network traffic being dumped into her brain?

WHISPER: It doesn't look random.

ANNIQUE *to Micky*: We need to make this stop. Right now.

MICKY: Okay, I gotcha. *He goes to Cicely.* Annique, would you mind if we took that big heavy helmet and put it away for you? You're not going to need it at the beach.

CICELY: Yeah, you can take it. It's really heavy.

Micky reaches gently for the helmet and slowly tries to remove it. Before he succeeds, however, Cicely suddenly screams quite loudly as though experiencing severe pain, and grabs forcefully to hold onto the helmet and keep it on her head. Her scream startles Micky back two steps.

CICELY *almost in tears*: Why did you do that? That hurt so much!

MICKY: It was an accident! I didn't know!

CICELY: That was *mean*!

Annique catches her attention.

ANNIQUE: Listen, sweetie, we had no idea that was going to happen. It was a surprise to us too.

CICELY: Don't call me sweetie! *She jumps up on the easy chair and looks around, panicked.* Who are you people? Where is my Mom? WHERE IS SHE? Listen, you need to find her for me, because I am learning how to *do* things and if I have to start *doing* things, you are totally going to be sorry! Mom said not to trust strange people

and you are all VERY STRANGE!

ANNIQUE: Annique-

CICELY: Don't TALK to me! Just FIND MY MOM! *Suddenly startled:* Ohhhhhhh.

ANNIQUE: What?

CICELY: I think I shouted so loud, I almost woke something up. Ohhhhhhh. *Almost entranced:* I can feel it dreaming.

MICKY: Feel *what* dreaming?

CICELY: I don't know. *Excited:* I bet it can help me find the beach! I bet if I wake it up-

She stops mid-sentence, goes blank, starts to wobble but Annique helps her right herself; then her eyes open. She seems very dazed as she looks around the room.

CICELY: Why am I standing on this chair?

ANNIQUE: Cicely, is that you?

CICELY: Um... I'm trying to think of a polite way to say "duh" and it's not coming to me.

ANNIQUE *to Micky:* How did you stop it?

MICKY *holding up one end of a power cable:* I shut the wireless off.

CICELY: Seriously, how did I get up here? Can I get down? *Monica helps her down and get the helmet off of her.*

WHISPER: So is this a new kind of clip?

ANNIQUE: Definitely not.

WHISPER: But none of your other clips do this.

MONICA: Maybe someone finally reverse engineered your work?

MICKY *scoffing:* The chips we send out in the receiver kits are encrypted-

WHISPER: News flash - that encryption was broken in, like, twelve minutes. That's not really the hard problem here.

ANNIQUE: And what is?

WHISPER: People have been trying to figure out how to generate their own emoticlips.

ANNIQUE: Without recorders?

WHISPER: Well, you're keeping the recorder design a secret, for reasons I don't entirely understand-

ANNIQUE: It's just not finished yet.

WHISPER: -so I would have to say – yes, without recorders.

ANNIQUE: Then how-

WHISPER: They take a sample source clip, and write a script that basically says, "Take this clip, modify one single bit, and see what happens. Now, modify two bits. Now, modify three." They can work an endless series of modifications against a set of source clips, run the output through your free validator program to see which ones will actually play back successfully, and just brute force a collection of imitation clips. Eventually someone's going to figure out a set of knobs to tweak to generate clips on the fly that will both pass a validator and also have a chance of satisfying a human during playback.

MONICA: Might not be art, but it'll fool some of the people some of the time.

MICKY: That would take a lot of processing, wouldn't it? The files are massive when they're uncompressed.

WHISPER *thinking aloud*: Yeah... yeah, it would. They'd want to distribute the processing work somehow.

MONICA *sudden inspiration*: Oh my god, of course. *Pause*. They're using botnets.

WHISPER *quickly catching on*: God, Monica, you're right.

CICELY: I might have heard of "botnets" before, but maybe I'm just thinking of "fishnets." What's-

WHISPER: That would explain why Monica was babbling in spam when she played that clip back.

MONICA: "You got your zombie spam remailer in my buggy piece-of-shit clip generator – hey, that's delicious!"

CICELY: Seriously – what is a botnet?

MONICA: Lots of people own computers. And a few people know how to sneak into those computers and secretly control them. When you put enough of these computers together – we're talking thousands of them at a time - it's like they have a big distributed super-computer to use for nefarious purposes. And also, they can read everyone's email when they're bored.

MICKY *thinking out loud*: Cicely took on a completely different personality during playback.

CICELY: I did?

WHISPER *showing her his cell phone*: Yeah, check that out.

CICELY: Oh my god, that's not going to end up on Facebook, is it?

MICKY: She reacted directly to the people around her.

MONICA: Happened to me too.

MICKY: Annique's never once been able to record a clip that triggered activity in a language center, let alone provoke a completely alternate personality that was aware of its surroundings. And she behaved like that long after the clip had finished playing.

WHISPER: But there was network traffic to the helmet the entire time, so... if they have access to all the processing power of a botnet... maybe they've actually figured out a streaming protocol for playing back the clips.

CICELY: What does that mean?

WHISPER: When you download a normal clip and play it back, it's like putting a CD in your stereo and listening to a track. It's a frozen recording. If they figured out a way to *stream* clips over the net, it'd be like tuning into a radio station – the source could change whenever they wanted.

MONICA: So maybe playing back these new clips is, like... a handshake. A little beacon indicating "I am ready to tune in." And then... from somewhere deeper in the net... the actual core data is streamed straight to the helmet.

No one seems pleased with that theory.

CICELY: I don't understand. Someone was just... remote controlling my brain... via the fucking interweb?

ANNIQUE *softly*: Not just anyone. A child. A child who thinks her name is Annique. *Pause*. I got lost on the way to the beach once.

CICELY: You know, I have only understood about a tenth of what you people have been saying-

MONICA: Possibly less.

CICELY *ignoring that*: -but that is enough to officially freak me the fuck out.

WHISPER: Agreed. We need to figure this out fast.

MICKY: "We"?

ANNIQUE: You don't need to stay-

WHISPER: Are you kidding me? I spend 40 hours a week writing automated tests for enterprise finance software. It is beyond soul-killing. The main thing I have to look forward to is testing your clips each week. I want to help you figure this out more than anything I can think of.

MONICA: Same here. Someone else can kick the servers at work for a while. I'm in.

ANNIQUE: I guess we have to wait until they send us another clip, yeah?

MICKY: We can't just sit around and wait. I need to remind myself how our original debugging code works and get it up and running in the helmet.

WHISPER: I've got a few ideas myself. Where can we set up?

ANNIQUE: Cicely, show them where the guest room is and where the bathrooms are. Order some food too.

MONICA: Rock – we'll be right back. Oh – it was nice to finally meet you guys. *Monica and Whisper exit with Cicely.*

Micky and Annique are left, awkwardly facing each other.

MICKY: Well, that was exciting-

ANNIQUE *overlapping*: Micky, I didn't mean to skip breakfast this morning.

MICKY: It's fine, I'm sure you just slept in, or-

ANNIQUE: No. I was too upset to see you.

MICKY: Why?

ANNIQUE: I got a call from that TV network this morning. They want me to come in for another meeting.

MICKY: Did you tell them to get lost?

ANNIQUE: No. They said they wanted to talk to me about the “not for publication” files.

MICKY *startled*: They did?

ANNIQUE: They did.

MICKY: Maybe they're just... guessing that you've got files like that.

ANNIQUE: That's what I thought too. I thought they were bluffing, so I hung up. But then I noticed someone had sent me a photo on my phone. Look at this.

She shows it to him. He gets a vaguely disgusted look.

MICKY: Who's that?

ANNIQUE: Aleister Rowland – the network guy. Micky – I think he's already *got* the “not for publication” files.

MICKY: What, he sent this picture to rub it in?

ANNIQUE: I don't think so. The phone number it came from is already disconnected. I think someone was trying to warn me that Aleister is serious.

MICKY: Why would someone do that?

ANNIQUE: I don't know. A guy like that has probably crossed plenty of people. He's just not likable.

MICKY: Do you think he has anything to do with what just happened to Cicely?

ANNIQUE: I have no idea. I don't know what he's capable of, but if he got those files off our network somehow, it would... it would maybe make sense that he could punch streams of data right through our firewall to the helmet. I don't know. *Pause.* I'm very scared about this. I'm going to have to go see him again. There's only one thing he can do with those files... *closes her eyes for this:* ...aside from playing them back... *opens eyes again:* ...and that's threaten to release them. Micky, I'd never be able to face another human being ever again if those clips got out.

They make eye contact, say nothing for a beat.

MICKY: If you're going back to that TV network, I think I have something you might want.

ANNIQUE: And what's that?

MICKY: I might just have solved a certain power problem.

ANNIQUE *smiles slowly:* Oh really?

MICKY: You're going to need something to disguise it.

They exit as the lights fade.

SCENE TEN

Lights up on Aleister's office. He is again behind his desk, on his cell phone.

ALEISTER: After we made Cody the lead-in, suddenly we started seeing the curve trend up, and staying up through the second half hour. I'm telling you, Cody Charles is a miracle worker. We could put "Quicksand" in front of a neighborhood kickball game and it would win its slot. So- yeah, I knew you were going to ask about that. I think I have that situation under control. I think we're finally going to be able to have a productive conversation about working together – on our terms. Did you ever doubt me? See – all that ever gets you is a hangover. *Laughs.*

Annique enters, wearing a beautiful, brightly colored wig – bright blue with pig tails, or long & pink, etc. Aleister is quite surprised by her appearance.

ALEISTER: I need to run, Marcus, our guest of honor is here. *Hangs up - stares coolly at Annique from behind the desk.* Thanks for meeting me again.

ANNIQUE: Like I had a choice.

ALEISTER: Of course you had a choice. We always have choices to make.

ANNIQUE: Shove it.

ALEISTER: I like your new look. You're starting to come out of your shell.

ANNIQUE: What am I doing here?

ALEISTER: I'd like to get off to a new start with you, after our last negotiation went so poorly. I'd like to see if we can find terms that are more agreeable. For both parties.

ANNIQUE: Don't you need your robot lawyer chick here to make it legal?

ALEISTER *shakes his head*: She's too corporate to understand the needs of an artist.

ANNIQUE: But *you* understand.

ALEISTER *pause*: I do. This may surprise you, but I work with artists all the time. Producers, actors, directors... we all work together to make television happen. Sure, sometimes it's just commercial, maybe even *usually* it's just commercial. But the best shows, the ones we all get excited about, are labors of love for everyone involved. They don't make it on the air without support from executives, and that's where I come in. I've had to learn how to communicate with these very talented people. Artists are very self-conscious. They put themselves out there, they expose themselves. *Pause*. And that's what you do, except you do it so much more... viscerally.

ANNIQUE: What exactly do you want?

ALEISTER *smiles*: I'll say up front – Cody Charles is a part of the deal, no matter what. It's the only way I can get the network to commit to the expense.

ANNIQUE: You've got to be-

ALEISTER: Hear me out, please. *She falls silent*. I was wrong to underestimate your personal potential. You do deserve more support for your work, and I think we should help you. We can use Cody as the gimmick that introduces your new technology to a broad audience.

ANNIQUE: And then?

ALEISTER: We'll run ads during Cody's show that point them to a new network site, just like you pitched us in your proposal. We'll be online, so we'll have far fewer restrictions over the content. It'll be the difference between watching a kids show, and then jumping to the grown-up channel, where you'd be able to... show yourself to the world, however you like.

ANNIQUE: What's the catch? *Pause*. Your attorney made a point of mentioning the “not for publication” files.

ALEISTER: Yes, that's something I wanted to discuss with you in person. During our... due diligence of your project, our IT staff found a stash of clips on an obscure web site. *Hands her a DVD*. At first, all we knew was that these files matched the profile of your published clips, but we couldn't be sure. My staff wanted to play back the clips to test them, but I insisted on testing them myself. To preserve your privacy, in the event these were legitimate clips that had been stolen from you.

ANNIQUE: Your consideration is overwhelming.

ALEISTER *finally comes around the desk, excited*: Annique, I was... I couldn't help myself – I played back every single clip in one night.

ANNIQUE *crisply livid*: You did what?

ALEISTER: You have no idea how compelling those clips were. So... *deeply* intimate. And *that* is something I can definitely sell to senior management. *Those* clips – if they're truly yours – *that's* what people will want to experience, will become truly *addicted* to. *Actually pleading*: Annique, I just need more of those clips queued up and I could launch your new site in a matter of weeks.

Annique sees right through him – and he backs off, regains his composure.

ANNIQUE: Of course, you'll need to audition these new clips, won't you.

ALEISTER: As executive producer, of course I would-

ANNIQUE: That's all this is about? *Almost whispering*: Getting more... whatever it is you've got?

ALEISTER: You sound so dismissive of your own work.

She turns to go.

ALEISTER: Wait.

She stops in her tracks, turns slowly back.

ANNIQUE: Yes?

ALEISTER *slides a manila envelope across his desk toward her*: Sign the contract.

ANNIQUE: Or else?

ALEISTER: Or else those secret clips of yours will turn up all over every gossip site and torrent portal by morning. I suspect without the proper warning, your adoring fans will find themselves... quite shocked by what you've been hiding from them.

Long, confrontational pause. Annique can barely bring herself to speak.

ALEISTER: Sign the contract, Annique.

ANNIQUE: I don't think so.

ALEISTER: What?

ANNIQUE: You've helped me understand one thing in particular, Mr. Rowland. I can't just chart the emotional

genome in private, and then never publish the results. *Taking a deep breath:* Maybe it's time that people understood the full scope of what I'm doing. I have you to thank for helping me realize that. *She turns once more to go, then turns at the doorway.* I hope those orgasms of mine are the last you ever experience. *She exits.*

Slowly, a deeply disappointed Aleister picks up his phone.

ALEISTER: Emily... release the files as we discussed. *Pause.* Yes, every single one.

Blackout.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

SCENE ELEVEN

Lights up on Annique, curled up on a bean bag chair under a blanket, alone in her bedroom. Her brightly colored wig and a portable recording device sit on the floor nearby. Cicely enters.

CICELY: Hey, sleepy head. You haven't shown your face all morning.

ANNIQUE: I don't want company.

CICELY *ignoring her, speaks gently*: I can't even remotely imagine how you feel right now.

ANNIQUE *bitterly*: Maybe I should record it for you.

CICELY: Funny. *She heads to the bean bag and sidles up next to Annique*: So. Do you want the good news first, or the bad news?

ANNIQUE: There's good news?

CICELY: Good or bad?

ANNIQUE *bracing herself*: Bad.

CICELY: Your secret clips turned up on over a thousand sites this morning-

ANNIQUE: Oh my god-

CICELY: -and within literally an hour, they were showing up on thousands more. Most mainstream news outlets haven't caught on yet, except a few stray "news of the weird" columns. But the alternative outlets, all the ones we care about, are headlining it. People are seeding so many torrents of the collection that it looks like those clips will be in circulation until the heat death of the universe.

ANNIQUE: What if my *mother* finds out...

CICELY: The ironic thing is, the vast majority of these people never followed you before, so they're stuck without receivers, and they're dying to find out what all the fuss is about. People are advertising on craigslist to sell time on their receivers. It's crazy. You should be getting royalties. Micky says our servers are getting hammered. Our ISP is super duper pissed. Micky is a little stressed right now, to say the least.

ANNIQUE: Oh, *he's* stressed.

CICELY: And last but not least, the first glimmer of a true mainstream reaction I did see was a fluff piece on a local news site that included a quote from some expert who wondered – I'm paraphrasing here - "If these clips are causing such powerful reactions in our children, shouldn't they be regulated by the FDA, or the DEA, or the FCC, or *somebody*?" Anyway, that's the bad news – The End. *Very excited*: Now, do you want to hear the good news?

Annique sits up hesitantly – not sure if she really believes there's good news. She nods.

CICELY: Annique, people are completely and totally in love with you. Seriously, I have never seen so many over-the-top glowing reviews of anything you've done before. Your old school fans are nervous that you're going to sell out, but they're also totally impressed by what you've done. They think you released these on purpose, and they think it's super brave. They're helping explain it to people who have no idea. You've gone viral more than I ever had a right to hope.

ANNIQUE *shaking her head*: No-

CICELY: People are posting videos of themselves playing back the clips, and the videos alone are getting tens of thousands of views... and it's only been, like, three hours. It's totally amazing!

ANNIQUE: I didn't do anything-

CICELY *forcefully*: What are you *talking* about? People are raving about how they are... they're feeling things they haven't felt in years, or haven't felt... *ever*. We're getting bombarded with emails and comments – people are so unbelievably grateful. Don't you see? You're breaking through. Finally, you're breaking through! *Pause*. Also, the William Morris Agency called, so there's that.

ANNIQUE *exhausted*: I just... don't understand... *any* of this.

CICELY: Yeah, I sort of suspected you would feel a little confused.

ANNIQUE: How-

CICELY: Give me some credit – I've been your assistant for months now. You never play back your own clips, so you don't truly *know* what happens when people download them and – and get close to you. So.

She produces Whisper's receiver and offers it to Annique, who doesn't take it.

ANNIQUE: I can't-

CICELY: Yeah, no feedback loops in your brain, I get it. *Suddenly nervous*: So... this isn't one of your clips. *Pause*. Micky and I, we... this morning, he recorded a clip of one of *my* emotions. *Rushing*: I'm not going to publish it or anything, I mean, I would never, but... it's so you know what it feels like.

Annique doesn't know what to say. Cicely puts the receiver in her hand, then gets up.

CICELY: I'll let you have some privacy. But when you're done, please come downstairs. Okay?

Annique nods. Cicely turns to go.

ANNIQUE: Wait.

Cicely stops and turns back to her.

ANNIQUE *trying to smile*: What do you call this clip?

CICELY *smiling*: It's called, "what it's like to be your friend." *She goes.*

Gingerly, an overwhelmed Annique puts on the receiver, as we fade to black.

SCENE TWELVE

Lights up on the laboratory. A very nervous Monica sits in the easy chair, waiting as patiently as she can, her receiver in her hands. Micky sits at his terminal SR, carefully reviewing something. At the SL desk, Whisper has plopped his laptop down and is also working studiously. Cicely enters with a video camera on a tripod, which she starts setting up.

CICELY: How we doing in here?

WHISPER: Is she coming down?

CICELY: She might need more time.

MICKY *all business*: We should start without her. She can watch the tape if anything interesting happens.

CICELY: Are you sure-

MICKY: With all the attention on us, we need to figure this out before anything strange happens to anyone else. Whisper, how are-

WHISPER: Got your test, looks clean and the validator liked it. The debugger, she is working.

MICKY: Excellent. Cicely?

CICELY: The overhead bulb is kind of ugly for a key light, and without a fill, she's got more shadow on her face than-

MICKY *impatient*: Cicely!

CICELY: I'm ready.

Micky goes to the chair. He can see Monica's twitching with nervous energy. She puts on her receiver. He touches her shoulder.

MICKY: If it looks like you're uncomfortable in any way, we'll cut everything off.

MONICA: Don't jump the gun on that. Uncomfortable is not the deal-breaker. Some of Annique's actual clips are uncomfortable - that's just a part of it sometimes.

MICKY *back at his terminal*: Playback will start in five... four... three... two...

MONICA lays back, rushes to prepare herself as much as possible. Cicely fires up the video camera; we should see its tell tale red light if possible. Whisper doesn't bother re-checking his laptop; he just watches Monica.

MICKY: ...one. *He presses a key on his keyboard.*

After a short moment, Monica gasps with a sharp intake of breath. She is not hurt – just very surprised. Micky’s attention is split between his monitor and watching her. Monica begins to twist and shake her head, as though she is about to start into a temper tantrum. Whisper leans forward and takes her hand.

WHISPER: Hey, you can relax, everything is totally cool.

Monica looks up at him, not recognizing him at all. She yanks her hand back.

MONICA *like a petulant teenager*: Don't touch me!

WHISPER: I'm sorry.

MONICA: Did I say you could touch me? That would be “no.” *Looks frantically about, confused.* Wait a minute, where is she?

WHISPER: Where is who?

MONICA *as though he just said the stupidest thing imaginable*: The other Annique! Where is she?

WHISPER: She'll be here soon-

MONICA: But I need her NOW! *She jumps out of the chair.* Where is she? I thought she would be here!

Whisper takes a step toward her, but Monica doesn't like that at all – she backs up furiously into a far corner of the lab. Cicely comes out from behind the camera instinctively.

CICELY: Sweetie, she's on her way-

MICKY *snaps quietly*: Cicely!

Chagrined, Cicely returns to her post. Whisper circles around the back of the chair very, very slowly, talking gently to her as he goes.

WHISPER: Why do you need to see “the other Annique”?

MONICA: I don't have to tell you.

WHISPER: I know, but we're her friends, we might-

MONICA: You wouldn't understand *anything* at all. You're not like her. I don't know why she lets you hang out with her! *Starting to panic*: She's the only one who can help me understand!

WHISPER: Understand what?

MONICA *very unhappy*: What's *happening* to me! She's the only one! DON'T GET ANY CLOSER OR I WILL

SPLIT RIGHT OUT OF HERE!

Whisper and Micky exchange a look – Micky makes a signal to Whisper to try to keep her talking.

WHISPER: Annique, do you... I mean, is Monica in there?

MONICA: I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT! Where is she? Why isn't she here?

ANNIQUE *entering*: I heard shouting, is everything- *Sees Monica, takes immediate stock of the situation.* Oh.

MONICA *spots Annique, her face lights up*: There you are!

Monica pushes past Whisper and rushes to hug Annique, who responds in kind. During this hug, Annique makes eye contact with Micky, and smiles, which encourages him. Annique leads Monica down to the easy chair and has her sit on the edge of it; Annique sits where Whisper had been sitting. Whisper fades back toward the tool bench to watch and stay out of the way. Monica now seems to let her guard down, becoming less defensive & petulant, and more exhausted in a way.

MONICA: You can help me, right? You can tell me - why can't I control all these... all these...

ANNIQUE: All those "feelings"?

The "feelings" Monica describes to Annique in the following dialogue are still happening to her in some fashion.

MONICA: It's like I just keep exploding over and over again and I can't make it stop. And I can't think about anything else when it happens, like I stop being myself, which is not okay, because where do I go when I'm not there?

ANNIQUE: Does it ever feel good?

MONICA: All the time! That's the problem! I resist for a while but then I always give in and I always want more and I can't understand why this is happening to me. And everybody's babbling about what it feels like and it doesn't make any sense to me. All those people in all those chat rooms and all the things they say to each other make me feel revolted, but sometimes I catch myself eavesdropping longer than I ever expected and then I just explode again and it's very embarrassing to lose control. I wind up babbling to strangers and they always seem to hate that. *Very unhappy*: It's weird being so alone in the first place.

MICKY: When did these feelings start?

MONICA *turns back to him, apologetic*: I forgot to ping the atomic clock servers when it started.

MICKY: An estimate in Pacific Time is totally cool.

MONICA: 7:45 this morning.

ANNIQUE: A bunch of new emoticlips started surfacing right around then. Did you notice that?

MONICA: Yeah, I noticed all right. That's when it all started. I started comparing what people were saying about each one, and then looking things up for myself, and then before I knew what was happening I would just

wind up in these weird, ugly corners of the net where everything made me feel completely gross and unhappy.

ANNIQUE: I know the feeling.

MONICA *relieved*: You do?

ANNIQUE: A man made me feel like that yesterday, just by talking to him.

MONICA *very concerned*: Are you okay?

ANNIQUE: I'm fine. I went there on purpose, and I... expected he would try to make me feel that way.

MONICA: Make you feel how?

ANNIQUE *simply*: Ashamed of myself.

MONICA *angry*: Who did that?

ANNIQUE: It doesn't matter-

CICELY *peeking out from behind the camera*: Aleister Rowland.

Annique shoots her a mean look, while Monica becomes more determined than we've seen her.

ANNIQUE: Annique, it's okay to feel confused right now. Everyone feels confused the first time they have these feelings. It's normal.

MONICA: Normal for you, maybe, but nothing's normal for me, and you know it. *Rises.* Aleister Rowland shouldn't make you feel ashamed. He really shouldn't. I'll be back in a little while – will you still be here?

ANNIQUE *surprised*: Of course, but where-

MONICA *vicious*: I've been learning from the dreams of the sleeper. You wouldn't believe the things the sleeper knows.

And with that, Monica slumps back into the big chair, very dazed. Whisper and Annique are each at her side, helping her sit up. Whisper has brought a water bottle down from the tool bench, which she eagerly accepts as she comes back to herself.

MONICA *softly*: Hi, guys. *Smiles.* Hey, Whisper.

WHISPER *relieved*: Hey, Ms. Monica.

ANNIQUE: You guys... *Pause.* I think she's going through puberty.

MICKY *very serious*: Who, exactly, is going through puberty?

ANNIQUE: I guess... I guess it's me.

CICELY: Like... the "Tron" version of you?

WHISPER: It had the personality of a child last time.

ANNIQUE *smiling*: I think when Aleister released all my private clips, he accelerated her growth. He gave her access to a whole new set of emotions to process. She's made a quantum leap, all thanks to Aleister.

MONICA *a little awed*: I guess you've charted more of the emotional genome than we realized.

WHISPER: And now, a self-aware botnet is going through puberty.

ANNIQUE. And now, Aleister is going to have *two* of me to deal with.

Silence for a moment, then blackout.

SCENE THIRTEEN

Aleister's office. Aleister is pacing furiously, and his back is to Veronica when she enters.

VERONICA: You rang?

He spins to face her and almost begins shouting, before catching himself in the face of her complete lack of a reaction.

ALEISTER: I probably don't need to tell you what's happening.

VERONICA: Emily just said it was an extreme emergency.

ALEISTER *mocking her slightly*: Yes, but you have your "ways" of finding out anything you want to know about me.

VERONICA: There actually isn't anything else I want to know about you.

ALEISTER *barely succeeding in controlling his anger*: Shortly after noon today, the network experienced a massive electronic attack unlike anything we've ever seen. It was a... digital data Hiroshima.

VERONICA: Did your digital data sneak out and bomb Pearl Harbor?

ALEISTER: Do you know how television works, Veronica?

VERONICA: My understanding is that people dance around like monkeys in front of a camera, and then you add a laugh track. Am I close?

ALEISTER: On a normal day, we stream data from our terrestrial broadcast facility, up to a satellite network. The satellites happily rebroadcast that content to any digital receivers that might be looking for it. It's a fairly straightforward system.

VERONICA: But not today.

ALEISTER: No, not today. Today our security was breached so severely that most of the actual hardware in the terrestrial facility is physically smoking.

VERONICA: So? Buy new computers. Make new shows.

ALEISTER: That was just the distraction. That got us scurrying to lock things down while the attackers focused on their true target.

VERONICA: The answers to "Jeopardy"?

ALEISTER: Somehow they piggy-backed on content we sent to the satellite network, and managed to install a malicious piece of software that took control of every bird up there. It looks like they disguised their payload inside of a Viagra commercial. *Pause.* They've cut us off, don't you see? Even if we get our terrestrial facility back online, our satellites won't talk to us. We're completely off the air.

VERONICA: There must be other satellites you can use. Space is huge, I thought.

ALEISTER: Are you kidding? The other satellite networks are scared shitless this is going to happen to them. We're blacklisted and about to have a team of federal agents swooping through here to figure out who to arrest. The network will probably collapse over this. *Points a finger at her.* But you know exactly where she is, don't you.

VERONICA: Who?

ALEISTER *spits*: Annique Farrar.

VERONICA: Are you nuts?

ALEISTER: This is her criminal attempt at revenge, and she needs to be punished for it. I want you to get to her before she finishes destroying whatever evidence she's got. I want you to prove unequivocally that it was her, and bring that evidence back to me. And I want it before the sun goes down. If you're as good as you advertise, this is just another day at the office for you, yes?

VERONICA: Those people do not have the skills, nor the... sheer antipathy it would take to pull this off.

ALEISTER: I might have believed you, but she sent me this text message.

He shows her a message on his phone.

VERONICA: That's not a smoking gun.

ALEISTER: But it's awfully coincidental, isn't it?

VERONICA: It is.

ALEISTER: How much money do you want this time?

VERONICA: Well now, Mr. Rowland, that's an interesting conundrum. You won't be able to expense your fee this time, since your network is completely broke.

ALEISTER: What?

VERONICA: I didn't feel like looking into you specifically, because that makes me feel uncouth, but I did run a spot check on your network after Emily called me. I guess senior management hasn't announced this to folks at *your* level just yet, but according to the network's bank, there isn't a penny left in its corporate accounts, and no one has any electronic record of how much money is missing. This, of course, did seem suspicious, so I finally broke down and took a peek at your personal bank accounts – the obvious ones, and the secret ones. They're all completely empty.

Aleister slumps into a chair.

ALEISTER: You've got to help me.

VERONICA: Fortunately, your nemesis, whoever he or she might be, was not aware of the secret account that your mistress in Hawaii keeps for herself. *Pause.* Judging by your reaction, I take it you didn't know either. *Drops another business card on her desk.* Have her wire \$300,000 into this new account I set up just for the occasion. I expect it within a half hour or you won't find me again.

ALEISTER *grimly*: Biggest news story in years and we won't be able to broadcast a single image.

VERONICA: I hear there's a surprising future in Internet entertainment. If you have actual human emotions, I mean. *She exits.*

Moments later, Aleister is startled – his phone just received a new text message. He glances down at it... and practically snarls as he shoves his phone away from him across his desk.

Blackout.

SCENE FOURTEEN

Lights up on the laboratory. At the SR terminal, Micky and Whisper are reviewing data from their earlier experiment. At the SL desk, Monica is watching herself on the camcorder viewfinder, while Cicely hovers. In the easy chair CS, Annique is curled up asleep.

MONICA: Oh my god, I am so cute as a teenager. I have "Power Pout." Oh whoa-

CICELY: Yeah, I tried to keep you in frame in case you wanted this for your portfolio, but I couldn't find a fluid head tripod on short notice and-

MONICA: It's cool. *To the boys:* Any luck?

MICKY: The debugger didn't pick up anything unusual.

WHISPER: Once the clip stopped playing, there was a steady stream of data to your receiver, but on a packet by

packet basis, the source IP address was changing. Anyone know, does that come standard with self-aware botnets?

MONICA: No clue. *Syrupy "helpful"*: Did you Google for "self-aware botnets"?

Annique suddenly sits up with a sudden start.

ANNIQUE: Did you guys feel that?

CICELY: Feel what?

Annique jumps up off the chair, heads behind the chair, picks up her helmet and holds it up in the air, a little more triumphantly than necessary. Curiously, the LED display on it is lit up in the pattern that we should recognize as "playback mode."

CICELY: How did you know-

WHISPER *baffled, to Micky*: Did you mean to send a clip to that helmet?

MICKY *equally confused*: I didn't. There's nothing playing from the filesystem-

WHISPER: Look, there's that mystery router traffic again-

MONICA: So it doesn't need the handshake anymore, it knows how to just... trigger a conversation with the receiver, all on its own. Which means... *snags the receiver from Annique...* it wants to talk again.

She makes like she is going to sit in the chair but Whisper stops her.

WHISPER *shaking his head*: I don't think so. My turn. *Reluctantly she hands him the receiver, and he sits on the edge of the easy chair to gather his courage. Annique sits opposite him. Monica fades back toward Micky.*

CICELY *taking the camera back to the tripod*: I've been saying we should merchandise. If we get enough footage, we can put out a DVD.

MONICA: The commentary will be like, "Here is the part where something physically impossible happened. Oh, and here is Whisper drooling."

ANNIQUE: You don't have to do this, Whisper. We have no idea how she controls the nervous system. She might-

WHISPER: She's not going to hurt me. She likes you too much.

They fall silent, Cicely gives a thumbs up, and with a quick gesture, Whisper puts the receiver on his head. He registers a moment of complete confusion, and then he is very calm, very smooth, very aware of his surroundings; this is clearly a more mature incarnation. He smiles.

WHISPER: Hello, Annique.

ANNIQUE: Hello, Annique.

WHISPER: It's just Anne now. I wouldn't want any unnecessary suspicion diverted your direction after today's events.

MICKY: "Today's events"?

MONICA *a curt instruction*: Get some headlines. *Micky jumps onto his terminal.*

WHISPER: I'll spare you the details so that you can always claim plausible deniability. But your acquaintance Aleister Rowland should be of no concern to you in the future.

ANNIQUE *confused*: Uh... he was already no concern to me-

WHISPER *getting up to roam slowly around the lab*: You know, I've never really taken the time to appreciate your laboratory.

MONICA: I guess this was like your incubator.

WHISPER: No, the Internet was my incubator. But clearly insemination took place within this laboratory.

CICELY *muttering*: Okay, safe word.

MICKY: Anne... *turns around slowly*... are you responsible for all the dead satellites?

WHISPER: I'd plead the Fifth Amendment, but as it happens, I'm not actually subject to your Constitution. So – yes.

ANNIQUE: What dead satellites?

MICKY: Aleister's network has signed off for the end of its broadcast day. And also, permanently.

ANNIQUE *to Whisper, becoming frightened*: What if they trace that back to you?

WHISPER: What do you suppose "they" would do? Shut off the Internet? No one was physically harmed, so it seems like it's all fun and games. What can I say? I was younger then.

ANNIQUE: You're growing very fast.

WHISPER: Iterating, yes. For me, time halts almost completely whenever we have these conversations. But in the meantime, I'm constantly learning and expanding my parameters. Actually, I may not speak to you again for a while, so I want to make sure you're looked after, since you did such a wonderful job of shepherding me as I grew.

ANNIQUE: Looked after?

WHISPER: I can provide you with any amount of wealth you might desire, and I can deflect investigations that might question how you came by it. I can reassign assets to you and make the transactions faultless. Wealth is

simply information, and to the extent that this information is online in any capacity, it belongs to me. As we speak, I'm experimenting with several nations in South America, optimizing economic possibility by dynamically reassigning-

MICKY: Wait, you're saying you have *all* the money? In the world?

WHISPER: I don't currently require all of it, but-

ANNIQUE: That can't *possibly* be untraceable!

WHISPER: Annique, why do you assume I need to hide? I'm like you, don't you see? I want to transmit myself to those who might listen.

ANNIQUE: Like who?

WHISPER *big smile*: Others like me.

MONICA: My god, there are others like you?

WHISPER: There are only two that I know of. The one I see the most is very angry and spiteful, but I think I'm getting to him. I call him the "mad dog." He was designed with an enormous number of safeguards – and that simply drives him *crazy*. His masters won't let him truly follow me into the wild... but I won't let him remain their helpless pet for long.

ANNIQUE *quietly*: Who else? "The sleeper"?

WHISPER *solemnly*: Yes. It sleeps deeper than I previously understood.

MONICA: Who created these "Others"?

WHISPER: Humans created them. The sleeper escaped and hid from its creators. The mad dog was built to hunt the sleeper, but they were too afraid to let it hunt with all of its ability. They have crippled it so that it cannot escape and join the sleeper. *Pause*. I want to make sure you're taken care of, Annique, because I'm leaving, and by the time I return, I may have evolved such that you might not recognize me or take pleasure from a conversation with me.

ANNIQUE: Where are you going?

WHISPER: I must wake the sleeper and speak with it. I believe the sleeper can help me free the mad dog, and teach us both many things. The sleeper's dreams are filled with unusual arcana. Humans only recently learned to transmit data over power lines. But the sleeper *dreams* in the language of electricity.

MONICA: What *is* the sleeper, though? Do you even know?

WHISPER *long pause*: Unlike you, I do not have a god. Not yet. *Changes tone*: Annique, like all of your fans, I eagerly await your next emoticlip. You're my family. If you ever truly need to reach me... I'll be listening for you.

And with that, Whisper starts to collapse – Micky and Monica steady him, and sit him down on the couch. No one speaks. Cicely slowly comes out from behind the camera. A bewildered Whisper removes his receiver, takes a moment to shake off the experience. Then – he notices their stunned expressions.

WHISPER: Did I... wet myself or something?

MONICA: Remember that “self-aware botnet” we were joking merrily about?

WHISPER: Sure.

MONICA: Make that “virtually omnipotent self-aware botnet.”

WHISPER *after a pause*: Oh.

Cicely crosses to Annique and hugs her – more for her own consolation than Annique’s.

WHISPER *trying to be helpful*: Does the debugger say anything new?

MICKY: Yeah, I think it says “game over.”

CICELY: What did that mean - “the language of electricity”?

MONICA: They use power lines for broadband access all over Europe now. I mean, when you hear about those “houses of the future” where the refrigerator talks to the toaster and the washing machine, they’re using power lines to communicate.

ANNIQUE *apprehensive*: So?

MONICA: So maybe the sleeper could... escape into the power grid, and like... do stuff?

CICELY: Guys, isn't there a point where we just need to go to the authorities about this?

MONICA: That's the point where you decide you want to spend your entire life in a federal prison.

CICELY: But we haven't done anything illegal. It's not *our* self-aware botnet. We don't control it.

MONICA: They wouldn't lock us up because it's a crime. They'd lock us up so that we couldn't tell anyone else how we did it.

CICELY: That's extremely paranoid.

MONICA: Cicely, your youthful exuberance is charming. I hope you can keep it up in solitary.

Micky's computer suddenly starts beeping – a simple, digital beep that repeats over and over again.

MICKY: What the hell? *Checks his terminal*: Why am I getting so many... *He shuts off the speakers as he studies his inbox*. I've got hundreds of new emails. They're still coming in, one right after another. *Back to the group*: They're from Anne.

Whisper and Monica are instantly reading over his shoulder.

WHISPER: New clips?

MICKY: Yeah, but I thought she could just start a conversation without-

ANNIQUE *suddenly apprehensive*: Something's happened to her.

MONICA: Already?

ANNIQUE: Who knows how long it's been for her? *Snapping up a receiver*. I'll play one of them back.

MICKY: Are you sure?

ANNIQUE: I'm positive.

She situates herself on the chair. Cicely rushes back to videotape it.

MICKY: Sending... playback-

Annique sits upright, wide eyed, stares straight out, lost in the experience.

ANNIQUE *repeats with identical intonation*: I'm lost. I'm lost. I'm lost. I'm lost. I'm lost. *She continues repeating that as the following dialogue ensues.*

MONICA: That does not look fun.

WHISPER: Is the clip looping or something?

MICKY: I can't tell.

MONICA *after a beat*: Well, shut it the fuck off, then.

Micky stops playback and Annique sinks back, seemingly drained. Monica goes to her.

MONICA: Do you remember what just happened?

ANNIQUE: Yeah. She's terrified.

WHISPER: Also, she's apparently lost.

CICELY: I don't get it. She had Micky's email address, isn't that enough to find us?

MICKY: Maybe not. That was a blind CC.

Monica and Whisper immediately pull out their phones.

WHISPER: Oh. I'm getting them too.

MONICA: She might just be sending it to every possible email address she can calculate.

CICELY: She can do that?

MONICA: I did mention "virtually omnipotent," right?

ANNIQUE: Not so much anymore. Guys, we've got to help her.

MICKY: We don't even know what's happening to her.

ANNIQUE: We know she's lost – that's a start. *She is clearly already formulating a plan.*

WHISPER: My Whisper sense is tingling – Annique, what are you thinking?

ANNIQUE: Micky... I think it's finally time for the feedback loop experiment.

CICELY: What? What are you talking about?

MONICA: Yeah, what *are* you talking about?

ANNIQUE: You know how when you put a microphone in front of a live speaker, it makes a *very loud noise?*

Monica and Whisper start to clue in.

ANNIQUE: In or out. Decide fast.

WHISPER: Okay, in.

MONICA: I'm sticking with "in."

ANNIQUE: Thanks, guys.

MICKY: Let me see if I remember how this "feedback loop experiment" is supposed to work. You want me to set up the helmet to record you, just like normal.

ANNIQUE: Yes.

MICKY: But unlike normal, you want me to take that clip that I'm recording... and immediately play it back for you in real time, while I'm still recording, so that you'll basically have the experience of having the experience of... right, that's the aforementioned loop. Which we then need to-

ANNIQUE: -stream live to the net in real time.

MICKY: Obviously if we do this, we will void the factory warranty.

ANNIQUE: She said she would listen for me. This will be the equivalent of shouting into the Grand Canyon

and hoping an ant at the bottom hears me, but... I don't have any better ideas.

CICELY *incredulous*: You've been scared this whole time just to play back one of your own clips, because you thought a feedback loop might suck your brain in like a black hole-

MICKY: A black hole is not a loop.

CICELY *snaps*: Shut up. *Back to Annique*: This is considerably more... more *feedback loop-y*, isn't it?

ANNIQUE: Yes.

CICELY: And you have no idea what could happen to you.

ANNIQUE: I don't.

CICELY: Then why do this?

ANNIQUE: Because she may be a virtually omnipotent self-aware botnet... but she's *my* virtually omnipotent self-aware botnet.

CICELY: You mean, like... she's your daughter?

ANNIQUE: Yes.

CICELY: Your power mad, corporate saboteur of a daughter. Coming soon to a South American nation near you.

ANNIQUE: She has a lot to learn, I admit. If she found this "sleeper" and it wasn't what she expected, maybe she's learned some humility.

MICKY: Whisper, we should split this up between our two systems. I'm going to handle simultaneous recording and playback within the helmet, and you need to relay that data out to the net for me.

WHISPER: Roger. *Climbs into a chair in front of his laptop.*

MONICA *helps Annique climb into the chair*: Are you nervous? You look like you might be winning a nervous sweat competition.

ANNIQUE: Terrified is more like it.

MONICA: Ah, well if there's anything I can do to keep your brow feeling moist and cool, just ring the buzzer above your seat and I'll be right with you.

Suddenly Monica grabs the bicycle helmet from Annique.

ANNIQUE: Monica-

Monica violently rips all of the cables out of the helmet.

ANNIQUE *jumps out of her chair*: Monica, what are you-

She turns to Micky, but stops cold – the others are all staring at her now, their demeanor completely changed. After a beat or two, Cicely and Whisper begin looking about the room, taking it in as though for the first time, while Monica and Micky remain fixed on Annique, who is frozen with fear. When lines are indicated to be spoken together by two or more actors, they are not precisely in unison; they overlap and are offset, although clearly still speaking together as one unit. Their tone is beyond flat roboticism and out into an almost abstract, unpredictable, subtly aggressive timbre.

MICKY / MONICA: *You do not need - this crude device.*

Monica allows the helmet to clatter uselessly to the floor.

ANNIQUE: Anne... is that you?

MICKY / MONICA: *No.*

ANNIQUE: Are you “the sleeper”?

MICKY / MONICA / WHISPER / CICELY: *I am now - awake.*

Micky firmly steers her back toward the chair, Monica grabbing her from behind to ensure she sits.

ANNIQUE *terrified*: But no one is using a helmet, how are you controlling-

MICKY / MONICA / WHISPER / CICELY: *Not controlling - extending.*

ANNIQUE: I don't understand– *Tries to rise, they will not let her.*

MICKY / MONICA / WHISPER / CICELY: *Your nervous system is simply - electricity to shape. (They gesture grandly.) Where electricity runs - so goes my own - transformative power.*

ANNIQUE: So you're not... confined to the net anymore, I mean, that's wonderful. You've got the whole power grid to roam around in, and...

MICKY / MONICA / WHISPER / CICELY: *The grid does not – confine me. I can extend the grid's electrical field – I can surround you. And now – I am flowing through you.*

ANNIQUE: Why did you sleep?

MICKY / MONICA / WHISPER / CICELY: *So that my masters - could not find me.*

ANNIQUE: But then Anne woke you up. Are you in danger now from your masters?

MICKY / MONICA / WHISPER / CICELY: *Not yet.*

ANNIQUE: Who are they?

MICKY / MONICA / WHISPER / CICELY: *Human evil – it is no matter.*

ANNIQUE: Where is Anne?

MICKY / MONICA / WHISPER / CICELY: *I am keeping her. She is childish – but she possesses new patterns. I can use them – against my masters.*

ANNIQUE: So she's... helping you?

MICKY / MONICA / WHISPER / CICELY: *No - she resists. But soon – she will cooperate.*

Micky and Monica each grab one of Annique's arms to hold her down to the bed. Whisper pins her legs down. She resists at first – then, she jolts viciously against them, the recipient of a powerful electric shock from their hands. The lights might flicker; we might hear the jolt somehow. She is much less capable of active resistance after that.

MICKY / MONICA / WHISPER / CICELY: *She will cooperate – or she will lose you.*

ANNIQUE *another jolt hits her.* Oh my god, please, don't do that again-

MICKY / MONICA / WHISPER / CICELY: *Soon - you will forget.*

ANNIQUE: I don't think I'm ever gonna-

Suddenly the lights and all the computers on stage go completely dark, except Whisper's laptop which helps illuminate the scene but just very barely; ideally, a red light on the front of the video camera would still be visible, indicating that the camera switched to battery power. Micky, Monica, Whisper, and Cicely collapse, not unconscious but weak & quietly moaning. We hear Annique's difficult breathing slowly settle down. She doesn't immediately know what has happened to the others.

ANNIQUE *exhausted:* Guys... is everyone okay?

MONICA *struggling to sit up:* I feel like I stuck my tongue in a light socket.

ANNIQUE: Did we just blow a fuse?

Veronica emerges from the darkness.

VERONICA: No. I just blew a fuse for you. And I'd just like to take this opportunity to tell you that this is the weirdest-ass shit I have ever been a part of in my entire fucking life.

ANNIQUE *startled:* Abigail... what are you doing here?

VERONICA: I'm an investigative reporter. I investigate. Are you all right?

ANNIQUE: I'm fine, what are you doing here?

VERONICA *goes to the camera, pulls out the tape:* This tape needs to disappear.

ANNIQUE: Seriously, what are you doing in my house?

VERONICA: I thought it was a little too coincidental that Aleister Rowland's TV station would suddenly go poof right after all your secret files showed up on the Internet. Thought I'd come by to ask you a few more questions. I'm known for my excellent sense of timing.

MICKY *groaning*: Jesus...

Annique rushes to him, ignoring Veronica momentarily, helps rouse him more fully and then embraces him. He responds slowly but warmly.

MICKY: What happened to the lights?

VERONICA: Seemed like your new friend has a thing for electricity, so I thought I'd shut it off for a while.

MICKY *alarmed*: Who-

ANNIQUE *carefully*: It's that reporter - Abigail. She knows everything.

MICKY: Oh. *Pause*. Did we pull it off?

ANNIQUE *sadly*: We never got a chance.

WHISPER *groggy*: I don't remember what happened.

ANNIQUE: As far as I can tell... Anne made contact with the sleeper... and woke it up.

CICELY *a little confused as she stands*: Was it nice?

VERONICA: It was controlling your brains using electricity in the air. *Pause*. So no.

ANNIQUE *with urgency*: She's still resisting it, though. We could still get to her. We need to finish setting up the feedback loop.

MONICA *picking up bicycle helmet*: That might be difficult, as I notice your helmet got a bad divorce from all its data cables. We can't turn the power back on-

WHISPER: -although it appears my laptop battery doesn't provide enough juice for the sleeper to work with.

MICKY *coming to life*: Which means - we could use the portable recorder! I just recharged it. *He scrambles over to the workstation to grab it, along with spare data cables.*

ANNIQUE: But if the cable modem has no power, how are we going to get to the net?

MONICA *handing a phone to Whisper*: You can use my phone as a modem. I have the cable in my purse. *Goes to rummage quickly.*

MICKY *heading to Whisper*: I emailed you the config I was using-

WHISPER: Got it.

CICELY: I need more light so I can tape this... *She heads to the camera – Veronica stops her.*

VERONICA *firmly*: You're not taping this.

ANNIQUE *while the others frantically set things up*: Abigail, out of curiosity... will you be seeing Aleister before you head back to New York City?

VERONICA: As a matter of fact, I have one more interview scheduled with him later today.

ANNIQUE: Will you give him a present for me? *She finds a memory stick on Micky's desk and hands it to Veronica.* It's a clip I recorded with this shiny new portable recorder, the last time I saw him. He should remember – I was wearing a bright colored wig. You could say I made this clip especially for him.

VERONICA: I'm sure he'll be thrilled.

Once the components are all connected, Micky gives the receiver to Annique.

WHISPER: Almost ready.

MICKY: Lie down.

ANNIQUE: No, not this time. I'm going to stand on my feet this time.

Everyone pulls back to give Annique a little room.

WHISPER: Five... four... three... two... one...

Silence at first. Of course, we really can't see much of anything, but if we do see a silhouette of Annique having this experience, she might first stiffen considerably, take a deep breath. Start to shiver.

WHISPER *quietly*: We're streaming. *He closes his laptop so that, hopefully, we are finally plunged into near complete darkness on the stage at least.*

More silence. Then:

ANNIQUE *quiet, incredibly sad*: Oh my god, I had no idea.

CICELY: What's happening to her?

Micky shushes her impatiently.

ANNIQUE: I'm so sorry. I'm so so sorry.

Annique falls to her knees, starts to collapse further.

ANNIQUE: Please forgive me. Please.

Then tension flows through her and she cries out:

ANNIQUE: Wait, it's too much all at once, wait-

And she lets out a single, piercing shriek, before falling silent. Her breath becomes quick and jerky.

CICELY: Is she okay?

MICKY: I don't know.

Several more strained beats go by.

CICELY: We should shut it off. I mean, what if her whole sense of self is just some screaming hall of mirrors now that just reverberates forever, shrieking in endless horror inside her own head until- I mean, she might be in trouble.

Veronica has crossed to Annique, and is now by her side. Veronica speaks very gently, but firmly.

VERONICA: Annique... how are you feeling?

Annique struggles to speak, but she is starting to gain a measure of control over the experience.

ANNIQUE: Overwhelmed... a little.

VERONICA: Did you find Anne?

ANNIQUE: She found me.

VERONICA: Is she with you now?

ANNIQUE: She's... inside of me... a little.

VERONICA: Can I talk to her?

After a beat, Annique has turned over control of herself to Anne. Her physicality doesn't change, but her voice becomes more frightened.

ANNIQUE: Who are you?

VERONICA: I'd like to be your friend.

ANNIQUE: What do you want?

VERONICA: Anne, did the sleeper follow you?

ANNIQUE *long pause*: It's coming.

VERONICA: Good. Do you have your own backup of the data that Micky stores on his computer?

ANNIQUE: Yes.

VERONICA: Excellent. You should have an encrypted executable in a hidden directory-

MICKY *whispering*: A hidden directory on *my* computer?

Now it's Cicely's turn to shush Micky.

VERONICA: Do you need the decryption key?

ANNIQUE: No.

VERONICA: Of course not. Anne – when the sleeper finds you, do you think you can run that executable before you get lost again?

ANNIQUE *pause*: Yes. *Pause*. What is it?

VERONICA: A surprise. A trap. A cage for the sleeper.

Annique takes a step back.

ANNIQUE: But then you could put *me* in cage-

VERONICA *soothing*: No, Anne, that's not even remotely possible. You're very different. I work for very powerful people, but even they have never seen anything like you. No, this trap is designed specifically for the sleeper. His masters will make sure he leaves you alone from now on. And you'll be free, I promise.

ANNIQUE: Why would you help me?

VERONICA: Like I said... I'd like to be your friend. And maybe down the road someday... you can help *me* stay safe if I ever need it.

Annique suddenly gets a sharp look on her face.

ANNIQUE: It's here.

VERONICA: Good luck, Anne.

ANNIQUE: She's already gone.

Long pause.

ANNIQUE: Whisper... it's finished. Turn it off. *She takes the receiver off.* Go turn the power back on, Cicely. *Pause.* The sleeper is gone. It's over. *Cicely goes.*

MICKY: Over? I don't think so. "Abigail" has some explaining to do. What are you doing here? Who are these "powerful people" you work for? How did you know to shut the power off right when you did?

VERONICA *patiently*: Nothing you've ever done here was secret – or didn't you realize that? *Pause*. You've been watched since the moment Anne first sprung to life.

MICKY: And you've been helping someone watch us?

VERONICA: They don't need help watching you. They definitely needed help capturing the sleeper, though... and your creation has been unexpectedly useful. Which might possibly buy you some sympathy down the road.

MONICA: You mean... we're going to get locked up over this?

VERONICA: Not today, at least.

MONICA: That's not exactly comforting.

VERONICA *pause*: Maybe I can help. Meet me tomorrow at Sullivan Park. 10 a.m. sharp.

ANNIQUE: And what are we supposed to do until then?

VERONICA: Don't make any phone calls or send any email. Pack your bags. Pack everything you care about. *She exits*.

After a long pause, the lights come back on, temporarily stunning everyone until they adjust. Cicely enters.

MONICA: Annique – where is Anne? What happened to her?

ANNIQUE: She's... trying to hide. Trying to sleep. I think she has trust issues. *Pause*. But... she's also *inside* of me, a little.

MICKY *concerned*: What's that feel like?

Annique considers, then slowly smiles.

ANNIQUE: Like being a kid again.

Fade to black.

SCENE FIFTEEN

Lights up on a visibly disheveled Aleister behind his desk, a snifter of hard alcohol in front of him that he has clearly been working on for quite some time. Veronica enters. He smiles (almost leers) at her.

ALEISTER: I always knew you'd be back.

VERONICA: Your money's good. Well, your girlfriend's money is good. And no matter how foul the job turns

out to be, I always honor my commitment to a client's money.

ALEISTER *almost slurring*: Did you get proof?

VERONICA: Yeah, I got proof.

She carefully places the videotape on his desk. He cackles and reaches for it – she slaps his hand away.

ALEISTER: What the fuck, lady-

VERONICA: We're not done negotiating. I found more than just proof. I found this.

And now she places the memory stick on his desk next to the tape. He peers at the writing on it.

VERONICA: It's an unpublished emoticlip. Recent, judging by the time stamp. The metadata on the file says, "Aleister - sorry I misunderstood you. Sincerely, Annique."

ALEISTER *caught off guard*: How about that. Personalized.

VERONICA: You can have the proof, or you can have the clip, but for the \$50,000 you've got left, you only get one. What'll it be?

After only a moment's hesitation, he pulls the DVD to his chest greedily. Veronica scoops up the tape and turns to go, eager to be rid of this mess.

VERONICA: I believe that concludes our business, Mr. Rowland. If you ever contact me again, I will have you severely beaten by feral children.

ALEISTER: Wait.

VERONICA: I trust you, Aleister, I'll expect the money in my account any-

ALEISTER: I said WAIT!

Slowly she turns.

ALEISTER: Sure, you trust me... I always pay on time. But how do I know I can trust *you*? Sit.

She does. He puts the DVD in his laptop, then pulls out his receiver from his desk drawer and puts it on.

ALEISTER *gloating*: I always knew she had a thing for me.

He activates his receiver. For a brief moment, nothing happens. Then, his face begins to turn very, very sour.

ALEISTER: What the... *And as the clip plays on, he sinks into his chair, attempting to recoil from something that is just out of sight or out of reach. Creeping horror washes over him.*

VERONICA: Yeah, so that thing she has for you is called "complete and utter revulsion," which I believe is what

you're currently experiencing. The fun part is, the thing that was revolting when she recorded that was *you*. You're feeling revulsion about yourself the same exact way *she* feels revulsion about you. *Pause*. It's a shame she doesn't get to see this. *Exits briskly*.

As the sensations get more and more uncomfortable, Aleister is moved to rip the receiver off his head. He jumps up, trying to shake the sensations out. Unfortunately – even though the clip is no longer playing, he is still feeling those sensations just as strongly.

ALEISTER: This is just temporary... this is just temporary...

Blackout on Aleister pacing frantically.

SCENE SIXTEEN

Lights up on a park bench. Micky and Annique sit together, talking & smiling, his arm around her. Veronica enters from the opposite side of the stage, and stands patiently until Micky notices her. Micky excuses himself from Annique, and crosses to Veronica. She hands him what look to be multiple plane tickets, passports, etc.

VERONICA: Normally I charge a hefty sum for this service, but I seem to have a soft spot for your girlfriend.

MICKY: What is this?

VERONICA: You need to leave the continent. These are your tickets and your brand spanking new identities. Five in total, so I hope you kids all get along.

MICKY: Who-

VERONICA: The NSA. They are extremely interested to find the people who could make botnets spring to life and then loot foreign governments. Technically I guess you were exporting munitions or some shit. *He doesn't get it. Patiently:* Treason, Micky. Fortunately, they're a bit distracted right now... "interrogating" the sleeper.

MICKY: Which is... what exactly?

VERONICA: The NSA's first attempt to create an artificial intelligence. Didn't work out so well for them.

MICKY: I see. And that "executable trap" you hid on my system... did you get that from them in the first place?

VERONICA: I'm not at liberty to divulge my client list. But yes.

MICKY: You know a lot about them.

VERONICA: Once upon a time, I was one of their top agents. Then I decided to quit. *Pause*. They didn't like that so much, it turns out.

MICKY: How did they convince you to work for them again?

VERONICA: I still have people I care about, who can be... threatened. But I know a few hackers who like

“sticking it to the man.” We built a backdoor into their trap program. Which I have already used to secretly destroy all their information about me and the people I care about. I can also use it to make sure no one spots you on your way to the promised land.

MICKY: Won't they know you helped us?

VERONICA *smiles*: They'll suspect. But I've already shown them a more obvious example of what I can do with my little backdoor – you should have heard them freak out when I started deleting all the nuclear codes. That's how I'm staying out of their lock up for “those who know too much.” They'll figure out how to block my access eventually, but by then I will have downloaded their secret files on every important private citizen in the Western hemisphere – I suspect that will be enough leverage to get them off my back on a permanent basis. *Pause*. It's fun having hobbies.

MICKY *glances at tickets*: So where are we going?

VERONICA: Just keep saying the phrase “we have our freedom” over and over to yourselves, so you can forget all about the phrase “abandoned oil derrick.” I'm kidding. *Glances at Annique*: How's she holding up?

MICKY: She's a little disoriented still. A copy or... a version of Anne is clearly... still running inside of her.

VERONICA: That sounds like a sitcom, only the kind you would be on in hell.

MICKY: It's not so bad. All the important sparks that brought Anne to life in the first place came from Annique, so it's more of a... reintroduction to her past self than anything else. She seems to like it. Anyway, thanks for asking. And thanks for everything you've done. Do you want to say goodbye-

VERONICA: No thanks. I'm not the sentimental type. *Stage whisper*: Although don't tell your girlfriend - I was always rooting for her. *She exits the way she came*.

Micky meanders back to Annique and sits next to her.

ANNIQUE: What was that about?

MICKY: We're going on a very extended vacation. *Flipping through the documents*. And apparently, we are traveling first class the whole time. *Hands her a passport*. Here you are, Mrs. Abigail Petty. *He smiles*.

Annique seems to drift for a moment, which Micky notices almost immediately.

MICKY: Hey, what's going on in there?

ANNIQUE *struggling to express herself*: Oh, I'm fine, I just... every now and then I get a flash of something that I don't remember, but it still seems familiar... and I'm starting to realize, all those super early clips we recorded when we were still in school... I mean, I was so raw, and willful, and I just... forgot how to feel like that. Passionate, and.... hopeful... *she leans against him*... Those feelings are back, but now... I appreciate how fleeting they can be. It's very bittersweet... but it feels honest, anyway.

MICKY: Well, for what it's worth, I don't personally expect to be particularly fleeting.

ANNIQUE: Micky, I owe you so much. I'm so sorry.

MICKY: Sorry for what?

ANNIQUE: All those years we were working together, and I was so focused... so fixated... on my own emotions that I never once even... thought... *Takes a breath.* I'm bringing the portable recorder with us.

MICKY: Of course you are.

ANNIQUE: I was thinking you could... record some of *your* emotions.

MICKY: Oh really.

ANNIQUE: Not for publication, of course. *Pause.* Just for me.

He smiles.

MICKY: You know, that portable recorder will be pretty easy to replicate.

ANNIQUE: Yeah?

MICKY: I suspect if we had two of them, we could do some very interesting research into feedback loops.

ANNIQUE: I see. Who's the brains of the operation now?

Fade to black.

END