

18+

STUDIO
BAN



Erick Poladov

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18+



Erick Poladov
Studio «BAN»

«Издательские решения»

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НЕЗАКОННОЕ ПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ НАРКОТИЧЕСКИХ СРЕДСТВ,
ПСИХОТРОПНЫХ ВЕЩЕСТВ, ИХ АНАЛОГОВ ПРИЧИНЯЕТ
ВРЕД ЗДОРОВЬЮ, ИХ НЕЗАКОННЫЙ ОБОРОТ ЗАПРЕЩЕН
И ВЛЕЧЕТ УСТАНОВЛЕННУЮ ЗАКОНОДАТЕЛЬСТВОМ
ОТВЕТСТВЕННОСТЬ. They're still students, but their ambitions know no limits.
Willing to sell their blood and even volunteer for medical experiments, they'll do
whatever it takes to launch a startup, produce top-tier adult films, get rich, and
become kings of the industry. All they need is a camera, a cast, and the perfect
angles. What could possibly go wrong?

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PROLOGUE

«THE \$12 BILLION PORN INDUSTRY HEIST,» read the headline in *The Wall Street Journal*. As he read it, Marcus Duff, a senior at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology already disillusioned with his chosen path as a history major, found himself genuinely wondering why there were people out there willing to pay for a static photo or, at most, a two-minute clip of plain nudity where nothing actually happens. The internet was flooded with free adult films of every imaginable genre, style, and subject matter — enough to ensure even the most seasoned deviants would find something to pique their interest. The article cited figures for the total annual turnover of monetized platforms where creators post their explicit photos and videos. By the most conservative estimates, revenue over the past year alone exceeded \$12 billion. The more Marcus read, the more convinced he became that it was all just a glorified tease.

Look, but don't touch.

The watch on his wrist, featuring Usain Bolt on the dial, showed 12:30 AM, but curiosity proved stronger than the urge to sleep. Marcus climbed out of bed and sat down at his computer. Unlike those with money to burn, he had no intention of paying for content on those platforms. He decided to investigate the phenomenon, to dig for the truth and find the answer to one sacred question: what is wrong with modern porn?

Coffee and energy drinks allowed him to cut his daily sleep down to three hours. His roommate was away on a tournament with the basketball team, and the dead silence — which Marcus failed to notice, unlike the Sydney Sweeney poster on the bathroom door — became his only companion. Two trips to the supermarket were the extent of his contact with the outside world during those days.

For exactly one week, Marcus gathered statistics from every open source available; he scoured the interfaces of the most popular adult sites, collecting data on ratings and view counts across a vast array of categories and assessing the variety of clips. Ebony, Asian, doggy style, gangbang, missionary, 69, blondes, the boss, in the kitchen — all these words and thumbnails flashed past Marcus's conscious mind. Ignoring the algorithm's suggestions, he focused solely on the numbers, titles, and tags.

After organizing his findings into a compact spreadsheet, Marcus began cross-referencing data from the major porn sites with data from monetization platforms. These figures clarified the picture far better than any abstract reasoning about the obvious or the illogical.

And that was when Marcus began to wonder: how much would users be willing to pay if something truly unprecedented hit the market? And it seemed he knew exactly what the world was missing.

1. SAFETY LINE

As his time to enter the university approached, Marcus found himself growing increasingly interested in politics. To him, it seemed obvious: politics was the breeding ground for all the scumbags who set the rules of the game in this life. Becoming one of those scumbags seemed like a perfectly reasonable goal. Easy money, power, impunity, indiscriminate licenses to kill, the top-tier hookers, a global map instead of a chessboard, and surface-to-air missile systems instead of pawns. Furthermore, Marcus was convinced that only a lunatic who didn't value real power and room to maneuver would ever actually strive for the presidency. Thus, his ultimate ambition was to become a gray eminence in a world of liars and harlots. Granted, in the modern world, things had become a bit more complicated, considering how much a single mention in certain kinds of files could ruin your life. So much so, that merely mentioning the name of those files was already dangerous.

First and foremost, of course, Marcus was interested in the big money. He didn't believe for a second that a massive fortune could be amassed through honest labor. It seemed obvious to him that behind big money, there is always filth, machinations, crime, corruption, and violence. Once you gain power and influence, the money inevitably follows. Based on this worldview, Marcus pursued a simple goal: to reach the level of the high-stakes political game where massive cash flows start drifting past you. In this sense, he agreed with Marx and Engels that major capitalists were the ultimate bastards exploiting humanity. However, that was where his sympathies for Marxism ended.

Marcus was certain that to succeed in politics, one had to study the dirty laundry of the past as thoroughly as possible to avoid repeating others' mistakes and to understand what made those who managed to climb to the very top — becoming the chief bloodsuckers on the body of humanity — successful. History was the perfect tool for this.

However, over time, the contact in Marcus's mental wiring began to loosen, until finally, someone had to flip the breaker. He wasn't entirely sure himself what had caused him to lose interest in his political ambitions: whether he was going through some sort of age-related crisis, turning into a sociopath, or if he had simply dug up too much historical shit to keep from getting covered in it. Regardless, Marcus's plans for a career as a gray eminence began to rot as rapidly as the belief in the Immaculate Conception after one's first time having sex. Marcus decided to finish his final year just to check the box, so that all his previous efforts — and a mountain of his parents' money — wouldn't go to waste. Who knew how many more times the switch in his brain would flip? Consequently, he put the absolute bare minimum of effort into his studies.

As a result, «Big Politics» in Marcus's head was replaced by «Big Sex.» That was now his American Dream. After analyzing the figures he'd gathered over the week, Marcus spent days on end watching thousands upon thousands of minutes of top-rated porn, aiming to identify all the flaws in the current mainstream and to find the opening for an unprecedented hit.

But Marcus knew that doing this alone would be difficult. He needed someone else.

Nine students, all preparing to become media and communications specialists, sat in a small seminar room. The professor, who bore a certain resemblance to Einstein, was showing slides in the darkened room, lecturing on the heavy footprints that random events sometimes leave in human history.

«But before we go any further,» the professor continued, turning to the students, «let's pause for a moment on the things, events, and ideas that were planned, or that humanity strove toward for a long time. In your opinion, what three things have most significantly influenced the course of human history? Stavros?»

With his characteristic nonchalance, Stavros Reims didn't bother overthinking his answer: «World War II. The Internet. And the airplane.»

«Interesting,» the professor said thoughtfully. «The first two are obvious. But why did you include the invention of the airplane in that list?»

Stavros possessed a rare talent for formulating detailed explanations and building arguments on the fly. In many ways, this was the result of his habit of speed-reading. It saved him time — something he valued immensely — and he preferred to fill in the gaps of information himself, constructing a logical sequence as he went. He did the same this time:

«Before the airplane, intercontinental communication was handled by maritime shipping. Goods, resources, and weapons moved across the world thanks to ships. They carried literally everything across the globe: from feminist propaganda to venereal diseases and cocaine.»

Laughter filled the room.

Stavros continued:

«But the airplane accelerated all these processes a thousandfold. The rate of racial blurring in many countries spiked sharply simply because traveling the world became faster, more affordable, and safer. If it weren't for the airplane, maybe Pepsi and Playboy wouldn't have conquered the world so quickly.»

The professor spoke highly of Stavros's answer, despite certain parts of it being somewhat provocative.

Soon the seminar came to an end, and Stavros headed to the campus's North Quad, slinging his messenger bag over his shoulder. He was of average height and not overly lean, having packed on a bit of muscle back when he did gymnastics in high school — a hobby he'd quickly grown bored with. Stavros wore a short, artsy haircut with horizontal stripes shaved into the sides, and a silver hoop had been dangling from his left ear for three years now. Frequent use of an electric razor was a must for him, though he never shaved down to the skin, making sure his face didn't look like a child's.

His best friend was already waiting in the yard. He was of a similar build but sported a much lower-maintenance haircut.

«So, how's it going?» Marcus asked, shaking his hand.

«Heaven isn't in a hurry to see me yet, so I'm managing.»

They sat on the grass under a tree, facing a green lawn bordered by a concrete sidewalk. The yard was framed on all sides by the brick and concrete buildings of the lab departments. Crowds of students loomed everywhere. Some were passing by, while others, like Marcus and Stavros, were sprawling on the grass. The weather was the kind you'd expect in the first days after the creation of the world, before the upright parasites had a chance to ruin anything — not a cloud in the sky, warm sunlight, and a dead calm. This part of the campus looked so picturesque that no one would have suspected that here, among the greenery, the people passing time included hackers who'd breached a crypto exchange, eight swingers, a weed dealer, heavy metal devotees, radical leftists, and the lover of a physics professor's wife, who was currently demonstrating the real force of friction to her.

At the sight of this scene, Stavros took a deep breath, feeling the effect of a natural antidepressant. And the weather had nothing to do with it. It was all about the way a skirt had hitched up on the hip of a girl lying not far from them. Catching a glimpse of the southern pole of two squeezed hemispheres, Stavros stared for a while until his head was cleared of all the junk that had accumulated since morning.

«What's new?» he asked Marcus.

«I actually called you out here for the sake of something new.»

Stavros spread his arms, inviting him to lay it out.

In a few words, Marcus described his observations and showed Stavros the printout of the erotic content market data. While Stavros analyzed the spreadsheet, Marcus continued to talk about everything he'd managed to learn about porn production, weighing their chances of starting such a venture. Marcus repeatedly emphasized the potential for growth because, despite the abundance of genres, the porn industry hadn't covered every gap in the market.

Like a man possessed, Marcus said:

«Dude, just imagine the kind of bank girls with zero analytical skills are making. Now imagine what we could achieve if we just aim properly before taking the shot. Screw office work. The days of putting up with a boss's shitty attitude are over. This is the field where we need to rake in the cash.»

But as he studied the printout in his hands, Stavros wasn't thinking about his friend's words; he was thinking about something else. His attention was drawn to Marcus's disheveled hair, his overgrown stubble, his wrinkled T-shirt, and the slight bags under his eyes. He asked:

«I see you've been working your ass off to put this analysis together.»

«Yeah, well,» Marcus replied, «took a little bit of tinkering.» Before he could finish his last few words, he let out a wide yawn, which brought a slight smile to Stavros's face.

«You should get some rest; you look like you've been run through a meat grinder.»

Marcus's face remained stone-cold, once again betraying a clear lack of sleep. He scratched his temple and asked:

«So, what do you say?»

Returning the paper, Stavros replied:

«Looks like there is a vacancy in this market, but the question is how to fill it. Lust squeezes money out of people better than any threat or gamble. We just need to figure out how to make users shell out for a film.»

«Any ideas?»

«Give me a break,» Stavros said calmly. «Millions of women play crowds of fools for everything they've got with nothing but a pair of tits and an IQ below a hundred. Our main task is to shoot the porn. The rest won't be a problem. Besides, there are plenty of monetization platforms these days.»

«So, you're in?» Marcus asked, spreading his palms. «You've got a cold, calculating brain. I need a sharp mind on board in case I miss something. You're my safety line.»

Without getting up from the lawn, Stavros bent his legs, rested his elbows on his knees, and said:

«And let you flush an idea like this down the toilet? Who else is going to watch your back if not me?» Marcus gave his leg a solid punch with his fist, making Stavros wince slightly, and then added: «In the end, if we're met with shame and failure, at least you'll know you're not the only loser. There'll be at least two of us.»

They shook on it, and then Stavros asked:

«What's the budget looking like?»

«Well, it's a bit thin. Just a little over three.»

«I've got a stash,» Stavros said. «I can chip in another fifteen hundred or so.»

«Actually, I was going to offer you a stake in the studio.»

«All the more reason. Consider it a buy-in.»

Marcus punched Stavros again, but this time on the shoulder and much more gently. Stavros continued digging for details:

«Have you hammered out any of the specifics yet?»

«So far, I've only looked into what documents we need to file to incorporate the studio.»

«Seriously?» Stavros said, surprised. «And what are you planning to call it?»

«Limit Entertainment.»

«Limited edition porn,» Stavros quipped sarcastically, making them both laugh. «Alright, what else?»

«Just some minor stuff for now.»

«Have you thought about where we're going to shoot, for example?»

«At first, I wanted to rent a house for a few days, but there are risks involved. In the end, I figured we should wait until mid-May.»

«Yeah? What's so special about May?»

«My parents are going on vacation. Same time every year. I doubt they'll break the habit this time. We'll have about ten days, give or take.»

Stavros said thoughtfully:

«Well, at least we'll save some money there. What about the, uh, labor force?»

«From what I've gathered about production, and given our budget, we need someone who knows their way around high-end cameras. I even found a place where we can rent them. The only question is how to actually operate the damn things. I've watched a ton of videos, and it seems straightforward enough, but who the hell knows. Ideally, we'd find someone who knows how to shoot, but if it comes down to it, we'll figure it out as we go. But as for the audio — that's a whole different animal. We'll really have to put in the work to solve the equipment issue there. Even the pro studios use post-production to dub in moans, slaps, and all the rest, because whatever the mic picks up live usually sounds like crap.»

Stavros squinted, thinking for a moment, then said:

«I know a guy. I see him around quite a bit.»

«How savvy is he?»

«He definitely knows how to handle a camera. I think he even owns a couple. Pretty sure he does editing, too. Maybe he can help with the sound. We'll have to talk to him about it.» Smiling, Stavros added: «He even manages to pull off some visual effects using whatever he has on hand.»

«Well, look at us, we've got ourselves a qualified cinematographer. Now we just have to talk him into it.»

«Talking him into it won't be a problem. He's a good kid.»

«But the lighting rigs... those are going to be a pain in the ass.»

«Yeah, I've heard that's a real headache too,» Stavros added after a short pause, scanning the campus yard. «On the bright side, I know where to look for actors.»

Marcus replied as if reading his friend's mind:

«Yeah, they're everywhere here.»

2. BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

Having reached a final decision, Marcus and Stavros immediately tackled the most fundamental task for any venture of this kind: the budget. Realizing that their current funds might not cut it, they went to donate blood and put some of their belongings up for sale. Yet, as they tallied the proceeds, the guys were still dissatisfied with the size of their seed capital.

After nearly a month of searching for ways to fund their mega-project, they found themselves sitting in a lecture hall at Boston University. Besides them, forty-seven other people were present.

«I've got a bad feeling about this,» Marcus whispered, turning his head toward Stavros, who was sitting next to him.

Unlike his friend, Stavros remained dead calm, preferring to focus on solving problems rather than falling into the arms of panic.

«Relax. It's huge money, especially considering the spot we're in.»

A professor entered the room wearing glasses from the George H.W. Bush era and a white lab coat cut much like those worn by people who conducted experiments on POWs in the Third Reich. His gray hair grew only around the edges and looked like it hadn't seen a barber in a couple of years. He looked exactly like a prototype for a comic book supervillain. As is always the case in such situations, the professor began by lecturing on the vital mission — perhaps for all of humanity — that those gathered in this room might fulfill. He rambled on about a scientific breakthrough and a looming revolution. The last time humanity got inspired by a revolution, it ended with millions killed and sent to labor camps. And something suggested that the revolution this professor had in mind risked the same result, albeit without weapons or prison cells.

«And now,» he moved to the second part, «let's talk about the risks you will assume should you agree to cooperate. Primarily, this section covers the potential side effects the drug may cause. These include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, drowsiness, insomnia, dizziness, itchy armpits, dry mouth, rash, heartburn, speech impairment, hair loss, hemorrhoids, hiccups, erectile dysfunction, visual hallucinations, auditory hallucinations, and involuntary erections.»

Out of the forty-nine people in the hall, only six remained — the bravest, or perhaps the most desperate test subjects willing to undergo a medical experiment.

Under the pressure of circumstances, yet following Stavros's lead, Marcus signed the contract, becoming a participant in Phase I clinical trials for a new drug. Stavros had signed the same form without a moment's hesitation.

Apart from a few bouts of heartburn and mild diarrhea for Marcus, and an eight-day stretch of insomnia for Stavros, the two months of the experiment didn't go too badly.

And so, having finally pocketed their cash, they reached a unanimous conclusion: they could now definitely afford to make their own porn.

With the financing settled, the guys kept the momentum going. First, Marcus invited Stavros to his parents' house, where he'd occasionally retreat on weekends to swap the dorm atmosphere for something more low-key. Marcus lived in North Cambridge in a two-story house with a two-car garage. But this time, he showed up on a weekday while his parents were at work. He led Stavros to the second floor and showed him his bedroom, which he proposed as the film set. The room contained a queen-size bed, two nightstands, a couple of bookshelves, a desk with a computer, a built-in wardrobe, and posters of Bill Goldberg and Che Guevara, along with a dartboard on the door.

Stavros scanned the room from the doorway, lit a cigarette, and then asked:

«Where's your parents' bedroom?»

Marcus's reaction was instantaneous:

«No. No way. That's not even on the table.»

Stavros took another drag and said:

«Marcus, we don't just need porn. We need *premium* porn.»

Trying to convince himself that these sacrifices were all for the cause, Marcus reluctantly led his friend into the master bedroom.

Stavros stepped inside and began meticulously inspecting every detail. The room featured a set that included a king-size bed, two nightstands, an ottoman, a vanity with a mirror, a bed bench, a dresser, and a wide wardrobe with two full-length mirrors. All the furniture had an ivory gloss finish with a chocolate pattern stylized after Ancient Egyptian motifs. The walls were painted a creamy shade, and a Rococo-style chandelier hung from the ceiling.

«Now *this* is what I'm talking about,» Stavros said, nodding approvingly from the center of the room.

«Look,» Marcus said, his tone bordering on a plea, «maybe we could check out the guest rooms? Just in case?»

But Stavros kept insisting that they wouldn't find anything better than this room even if they went to a five-star hotel.

They went downstairs to the living room. Marcus headed to the kitchen, grabbed two beers from the fridge, and came right back. Handing one to Stavros, he said:

«I propose a toast.»

Hearing those words, Stavros realized he'd almost made an unforgivable mistake. They clinked bottles and drank to a successful debut.

Hardly after the first sip, Marcus pulled his laptop from his backpack, and they got down to planning. Their first priority was the most fundamental staffing task: finding the leading lady. To do this, they brainstormed and jotted down a list of every sexy girl at the institute they knew of. In the next stage, Marcus suggested evaluating each girl based on various criteria: face, hair, height, chest, glutes, hips, and proportions. They rated each criterion on a five-point scale, then totaled the points and calculated a grade point average. Then Marcus sorted the list by score, from the top priority candidate down to the backup options. The final list consisted of thirty-two girls.

Pacing back and forth in the living room as he mulled over the task at hand, Stavros said:

«Alright, look. We don't just need a bombshell; we need a lady with significant experience, and ideally, one who is, if not promiscuous, at least someone with loose morals. It's not just that it'll make negotiations easier — it'll save us a ton of time because we won't have to waste our breath on some Puritans.»

Listening to Stavros, Marcus felt a rush of enthusiasm as if he'd just taken a horse-sized dose of stimulants. He was in a state of pure ecstasy because they were moving so confidently and rapidly toward the practical stage of production. He was more convinced than ever that he'd made the right call with his business partner.

Running through the list, they decided to scrap six names.

«Sorry,» Marcus said, «you didn't pass the audition.»

Next, Marcus suggested calling up friends and acquaintances who had slept with at least one of the girls on the list. They planned to ask about the girls under the guise of wanting to get to know them. Stavros liked the idea. Marcus dialed the first number, which seemed the most obvious given that Nicholas Roth had earned a reputation as the campus's top-tier dog.

«Seriously?» Marcus said into the phone after thirty seconds of conversation. After talking for a bit longer, he said goodbye.

«And?» Stavros inquired, staring at Marcus with an obsessed look.

Marcus took a deep breath and began to speak with his eyes shut tight, trying not to scramble the massive amount of info Nicholas had just dumped on him:

«Basically, Janet is seeing someone, Carla is knocked up, Rebecca is in the hospital with an ulcer, Raquel is knocked up, Sharon has a ton of moles on her body, Pamela has an appendectomy scar, Anna is knocked up, and Lily is knocked up.»

«Our list has gotten pretty thin,» Stavros noted. «So, who's at the top of our rankings?»
Marcus looked at the first line.

«Barbara Farr. Seven out of seven. A goddamn masterpiece.»

«And what do we know about this masterpiece?» Stavros asked, pointing at the laptop screen.
«Or rather, what do *you* know? Personally, I've only seen her a few times, and even then, from a distance.»

«I know her, but we haven't exactly been close. Just „hello,“ „how's it going,“ that's about it. We've chatted about small stuff a couple of times. But from what I know, there's reason to believe she's pretty uninhibited and, apparently, single.»

Stavros spoke up, his tone decisive:

«Then let's not waste time. We start with the top-shelf stuff.»

3. CASTING: ARTHOUSE LEADING LADY

Like Marcus and Stavros, Barbara was a senior. But unlike them, she was a finance major. For that reason, she was more accustomed to trusting hard numbers rather than abstract stories with fuzzy phrasing. She trusted data, and Marcus had provided plenty of it: turnover, demand, growth dynamics over recent years, and so on.

Seeing Barbara up close, Stavros truly felt like he was looking at a fine wine that had been aged for an eternity before being revealed to the world. She sat across from them in the café, and at that moment, Stavros realized what the pinnacle of perfection looked like. Dark chestnut hair falling past her shoulders in soft waves; honey-colored eyes, full lips of just the right size and shape, neat eyebrows with a slight arch at the ends, thick lashes, and a physique that made the standard «36-24-36» look obsolete.

Marcus, however, was experiencing mixed emotions. On one hand, he imagined the massive breakthrough they'd achieve if they could talk this beauty into it. On the other hand, sitting at the table across from her, he was so sold on her candidacy that he knew he'd never forgive himself if these negotiations fell through and they failed.

But there was one thing Marcus and Stavros were in total agreement on. They were both already mentally picturing how stunning Barbara would look undressed on a bed, and if they were to...

«Let me guess,» Barbara said, her tone laced with suspicion. «Now you're going to tell me I need to demonstrate my skills in bed with one of you, for the 'casting,» so to speak?»

«No,» Marcus replied. It was his first outright lie.

Knowing how masterfully his friend could conceal the truth, Stavros chimed in without hesitation to shift Barbara's focus from Marcus to himself as quickly as possible:

«Your reputation precedes you. You don't need to prove anything.»

Taking a sip of her coffee, Barbara said:

«I honestly don't know whether to be proud of that or ashamed.» She looked off to the side for a moment, then continued: «Fine. But what makes you think this film will make us rich? Even insane view counts don't guarantee a solid financial payoff. These days, porn is more accessible than mainstream cinema. And the variety is already beyond impressive. What exactly can you offer the public that's so special?»

«Well, for starters,» Marcus began, «Pornhub isn't even part of the equation. We'll only post short clips on public sites as ads to drive traffic to our own website.»

«Your website?»

«Exactly. We're launching our own platform with monetization options. Say, a dollar to watch the first five minutes, another dollar for the next five, a dollar for a replay of a specific scene. Or we could charge five bucks for the full movie. These figures are just placeholders, of course. We'll discuss the specifics a thousand times over.»

«Fair enough. And how do you plan to motivate users to part with their hard-earned cash? What can they get from you that isn't available for free?»

«Well... I've spent a lot of time digging around online, and I noticed that the 'rape' genre is in a serious deficit.»

«So, it's going to be a rape scene?» Barbara clarified.

«Yes.»

Suddenly, Stavros cut in sharply:

«Not exactly.»

Marcus looked at him, puzzled, as did Barbara. She asked:

«And what else?»

Stavros replied, keeping a perfectly straight face:

«A *MILF* rape scene.»

Picturing the scene in full color, Marcus said:

«Actually... I like that.»

«Did you guys just make that up on the spot?» Barbara asked. «Boys, you're poorly prepared.»

«No,» Stavros countered. «I just had an epiphany.»

After a short pause, Barbara asked:

«And when are you planning to shoot?»

«In the second half of May.»

Raising her eyebrows slightly, Barbara said:

«Right before finals?»

«Barbara,» Marcus let out a weary sigh, «screw the exams. You've already learned enough to coast through. You're not going to end up without a degree, but our schedule is as flexible as a crystal vase.»

Smiling, Barbara looked from one to the other and said:

«I see you guys aren't losing any sleep over your studies.» She tilted her head back, stretching her neck tight, and began tracing it with her fingers, lost in thought for a moment. «It's going to take some real effort. Porn actors know how to fuck, but they have zero acting skills. But if the rape looks convincing... yeah, there might actually be a pretty large target audience.» Barbara paused again, pressing her index finger to her lips, and added after a moment: «It's just this whole «mommy' thing that bugs me. I don't look that old yet.»

«What are you even talking about?» Stavros cut in with a hint of indignation. «You're a total smoke show. I mean, I'm paying you a compliment here.»

«I get it,» Barbara cut him off sharply. «My point is, we need to find someone who looks really young to create that contrast — that's what'll sell the «mommy' effect.»

«Then we should look among the freshmen,» Marcus suggested. He began to bore into Barbara's face with an intense stare, asking: «Have you slept with any of the new guys yet?»

Barbara looked down, licked her lips, and then said with a touch of resentment:

«Marcus, are you here to hire me or to dig through my private life?»

«Just answer the question.»

«What, you think I'm some kind of deviant?!» Barbara snapped, her voice loud enough to draw looks from people at the neighboring tables.

«Did you sleep with them or not?!» Marcus repeated, losing his patience and sounding a bit high-strung.

After a long pause, her eyes darting around, Barbara answered:

«I did.»

«And...?»

«You need an actor with an abnormally large piece. Or at least something massive. Those guys were all short-stackers.»

«So you've had a few of them?» Stavros asked.

Barbara shot them a look that was almost pure rage and said:

«Either you shut the hell up, or I'm walking out of here.»

«Take it easy, take it easy,» Marcus rushed to calm everyone down. «Stavros, that's enough.» After a brief silence, he asked: «Well, what about the sophomores?»

Trying to compose herself, Barbara said:

«I haven't been with anyone from the sophomore class yet.» She paused, thinking, and then suddenly remembered: «Wait, actually...»

Marcus and Stavros tensed up in anticipation.

«Pamela. My roommate. She was seeing some nuclear engineering major. A sophomore, I think. To be honest, I've never actually seen him, but they were together for eight months, and apparently, it was all because of his monster. At least, according to her.»

Marcus and Stavros exchanged a glance and gave a synchronized nod. Then Marcus said firmly:

«We need to get a look at this sexual titan.»

Barbara added sharply, raising a warning finger:

«But no gangbangs. The rape scene is solo.»

Suddenly, Marcus looked suspiciously deep in thought. Barbara caught it immediately and almost shouted across the entire café:

«Marcus!»

As if snapping out of a trance, Marcus muttered in a timid voice:

«No, no. It's fine. No gangbangs.»

Meanwhile, Stavros was watching Barbara, thinking about how some truly brilliant ideas never actually make it to market. The more he pondered the commercial potential sitting right in front of him, the more he cursed the world.

After a short pause, Barbara asked:

«This is all well and good, but I'd like to know — what's in it for me?»

«I'll be straight with you,» Marcus began, «our budget is far from astronomical. So, we're offering a hundred bucks upfront, and as your primary payment, you'll get a stake in the company and a share of the total profit corresponding to that stake. Specifically, ten percent.»

By that point, Barbara had long harbored a secret ambition to open a brokerage account. The thought had parasitized her mind the moment she mastered the intricacies of stock trading in her sophomore year. It was her grandest dream. She wanted to build a massive portfolio of securities and precious metals — enough to eventually kick back and relax, only occasionally dabbling in speculation and playing with cash-settled futures and premium options. But for that, she needed capital. Massive capital.

The end goal is all that matters, regardless of the route taken to get there, Barbara thought.

She reflected once again on the fact that none of her relationships with men had lasted more than five months. This observation led her to conclude that she could stop counting on a «happily ever after.» She was starting to believe that domestic life simply wasn't for her.

Noticing how deep Barbara had sunk into her own thoughts, Marcus leaned over the table and said:

«Barbara, are you in or not?»

Stavros didn't take his eyes off her face, trying to determine his next move in case the negotiations went south.

Barbara snapped her head up and looked at the guys as if waking from a stupor. She tilted her head back, squinting, and traced her fingers along her neck, contemplating her future. She tried to imagine what awaited her after graduation. Thoughts of whether she had a «Plan B» began to plague her.

It took a little while longer before Barbara found her way out of the labyrinth of her thoughts. She extended her open palm across the table, shook Marcus's hand, and said:

«Three hundred bucks.» As she said it, Barbara flashed a smile as if pouring every bit of acting talent she had left from her high school theater days into it.

Holding her hand, Marcus paused to think, then kissed it in the gallant style of a bygone era. Barbara liked that; a hint of delight almost flickered across her face. Then Marcus spoke:

«To be honest, I thought you'd ask for five hundred. But since that's the case — it's a deal.»

Frustrated, Barbara lowered her eyelids and whispered almost to herself:

«Fuck.»

Standing up from the table, Marcus leaned in before leaving and whispered erotically into Barbara's ear:

«Ten percent, babe.»

Thinking once again about how badly she had undersold herself, Barbara nearly collapsed onto the table, resting her forehead on her folded arms.

Heading for the exit, Marcus felt like the master of the universe. He was more confident about the future than ever. It felt to him that even if the mountains shook and the oceans roared, and the plagues of Egypt descended upon the planet, nothing could stop him and Stavros now.

As they stepped out of the café, Stavros remarked, maintaining a degree of composure compared to Marcus:

«Do you even realize how much we were underestimating ourselves?»

Marcus was ready to scream with delight. He was already mentally counting the profits. But more importantly, it was the feeling he got from upsetting Barbara. He tasted power. He wasn't just spending less of the budget than he'd expected — he had made someone feel defeated in a cunning game, even if this game was only one of the first steps in his ascent. And the fact that this person was such a bombshell gave Marcus an indescribable rush of ecstasy.

4. BEDROOM AERODYNAMICS

Not far from the bathroom, dozens of plastic jugs and a pile of rose stems lay scattered. Marcus paced around a bathtub filled with a hundred and twenty liters of milk, dark red rose petals floating on its surface. Barbara entered the bathroom. She was wearing a black silk robe with a length that resembled a slightly oversized T-shirt. She looked at the contents of the tub while slipping the robe off her shoulders. Dropping it, Barbara bent her entire body forward and began to slowly lower her first leg into the bath. To Marcus, it felt as if after this scene, every piece of porn he had ever watched in his life would lose its appeal. While these thoughts spun in his head, Barbara was already lowering her second leg into the water. The rose petals beneath her body dipped into the milk along with her. She lay on her back, closed her eyes, and played a look of sheer pleasure across her face. She was preparing to take a deep breath. Marcus was waiting for her breasts to break the surface of the milk, expecting the rose petals to stick to the most revealing patches of her skin, when suddenly...

Marcus opened his eyes to the sound of his phone alarm and cursed everything in existence. His worst nightmare was waking up from a dream like that. He comforted himself only with the knowledge that he was destined to see this body in reality anyway. He just needed to be patient.

The two producers and co-founders of Limit Entertainment kept tackling their staffing issues. The next task was to find a tech guy to handle the equipment. So far, the sole candidate under consideration was another senior, Vincent Lehmann, an aerospace engineering major. While the negotiations with Barbara had required meticulous preparation — since the outcome remained unpredictable until the very last moment and the stakes were sky-high — Stavros had absolutely no doubts when it came to Vincent.

Vincent had little interest in social circles and interpersonal relationships, as evidenced by his relatively small number of friends. He preferred computing systems and the components of intricate mechanisms, which behaved with maximum predictability and compliance — unlike human beings with their schizophrenic minds, where two opposing ideas could perfectly coexist. To him, it only made sense to work on things that could be measured and calculated, because then everything was clear-cut: either it worked, or something was malfunctioning. You knew exactly which part needed to be replaced to get everything running again. That was his philosophy of life.

For three years now, Vincent had been designing what was supposed to become the world's best fixed-wing combat drone. He used the Shahed 136 as a design blueprint. He'd even built a miniature prototype in his parents' garage during summer vacation. But for the drone to become a fully operational war machine, one final, yet most crucial component was missing: dynamite. And that had turned into a real headache, one against which even the Second Amendment was powerless.

As for his other hobby, Vincent was into shooting with video cameras, of which he had accumulated quite a collection. He'd mastered photography at an average level, but it didn't capture his interest the way a steady stream of frames did. However, Vincent wasn't looking for the most picturesque views to shoot. He was drawn to locations that offered the potential for sharp editing and creating simple visual effects.

Lacking their own office at the dawn of their startup, Marcus and Stavros decided to talk to Vincent in the very same café.

«You want your hobby to bring in some serious cash?» Stavros asked.

Lost in thought, Vincent said:

«Well, I've already got some ideas for a movie. I'm thinking of cutting the budget to a bare minimum and trying to...»

«Screw your movie,» Stavros cut him off. Marcus wanted to put the brakes on him, but Stavros plowed ahead: «We need a tech guy. Besides the video camera, can you handle the audio gear? Plus the editing and all that?»

«Piece of cake.»

Stavros looked at Marcus. Marcus gave a gesture that said, «*Well, go on, since you started,*» and Stavros delivered:

«Basically, forget Hollywood and mainstream cinema. We're offering you the *most* mainstream cinema possible.»

«Shooting for YouTube?»

«Porn.»

Vincent almost started laughing, but seeing no signs of a prank on Stavros's face, he instantly froze.

A waitress approached the table and set down their orders of coffee and pastries. Vincent stared at the saucer. To him, it caused the same irritation as an unnecessary part in a mechanism — something that takes up space and drives up costs while offering zero utility.

Waiting for the girl to leave, Vincent said, sliding the saucer aside and leaving only the cup in front of him:

«And you already have actors? More importantly — a leading lady?»

«We have the actress,» Stavros continued in a calm tone. «We'll find the guy too. So, what do you say? It's a pretty good way to bankroll the budget for your blockbuster.»

Vincent looked down and began scratching the back of his neck.

«Look,» Stavros pressed on, «Stallone started out in porn too. And he's actually an actor. Nobody's asking you to get in front of the camera. You just need to move around the room with the gear and shoot everything from the best angles.» After a brief pause, Stavros added: «Trust me, once you see our actress, especially with her clothes off, you'll be begging us to shoot a sequel.»

«And what's my cut?»

«Our budget is tight, so at first, it'll be a hundred bucks upfront, but instead of a standard salary, we're offering you a stake in the business. You'll get five percent of the company, and consequently, five percent of all future profits. We'll draft a contract, everything completely official.»

In reality, that was the only thing Vincent cared about: concrete numbers, not fluff. He dismissed Stavros's words about the hot girl as nothing more than aggressive marketing designed to scam buyers out of their money.

«It's a deal,» Vincent said.

That was way too easy, Marcus thought.

He and Stavros took turns shaking hands with Vincent, after which Marcus asked:

«So, let me get this straight — you have a whole arsenal of video cameras, right?»

«Sorry, man,» Vincent said with a shrug of regret. «But my cameras won't cut it for this. We need a camera with a tracking focus feature, so the main subjects stay locked in regardless of how they move in the frame. It would also be great to have real-time eye autofocus. When the star of your film is faking an orgasm, that feature is going to come in very handy. If you're planning to shoot in low light, we'll also need fast lenses. And in-body image stabilization, if you want to move the camera around. But for porn, I'd actually recommend a static multi-angle setup, especially if we work on the framing and the angles.»

After the words «tracking focus,» «fast lenses,» and «static setup,» Marcus and Stavros's brains temporarily short-circuited. The only thing they understood was that they had definitely come to the right place.

«What about the audio gear?» Marcus asked. «I heard that professional studios often dub the audio tracks during post-production because capturing quality sound live is a nightmare.»

Vincent took a sip of his coffee and said:

«That's because the porn industry is run by degenerates. We'll rent a shotgun mic to capture the primary audio, plus a bunch of lavalier mics that we can hide around the set so they're out of sight. They'll be close to the sound source and pick up everything we need. Plus, the quality of those

mics these days is so advanced that they can cancel out ambient noise, making the main audio much cleaner.»

«Alright,» Marcus said. «What about the lighting rigs?»

«Now, that's going to take some tinkering. For our purposes, we'll need something large, capable of lighting up an entire room evenly from multiple directions. I haven't worked with that specific gear before, but I'll look into it. If you give me some time, I can probably figure it out.»

«Don't sweat it. You've got plenty of time,» Stavros said. «Production doesn't start until May.»

With a hint of anxiety, Marcus asked:

«Are you sure you'll be ready by then?»

«More than ready,» Vincent replied.

But a fly in the ointment on this smoothly greased road was still inevitable. According to Vincent, launching and developing their own website would require far more cash than initially projected. However, their enthusiasm was too strong to back down now.

«We should probably get a safety net and dig up some more cash, just in case. But where the hell from?» Marcus asked as they walked back to campus.

Stavros lit a cigarette, looked at his friend, and said:

«Dude, you're disappointing me. You donated blood, right?»

«Yeah, not that long ago.»

«Well, I'm not saying you need to donate blood again.»

«What are you getting at?»

«I'm talking about donating, just not blood.» Stavros took another drag and continued: «You're making a porn movie, for Christ's sake. Hasn't that thought even crossed your mind?» He then put his arm around Marcus's shoulders and said: «Don't sweat it, we'll do it together. It's our joint studio, so we'll distribute the risks evenly.»

«And what if even that isn't enough?» Marcus asked, knitting his brows slightly.

Stavros smiled and replied:

«Well, it's not like we're going to start selling our organs.»

After his friend's words, Marcus felt another surge of unwavering faith in their success.

That evening, Marcus dug into the internet once again, evaluating the earnings of models who monetized their photos and videos. He looked at the latest figures, his eyes already burning with the realization that he could rake in a profit several times larger than anything he was seeing on the screen.

5. WEAK LINK

«What, you want me to fuck on camera?» Samuel Green clarified, wanting to make absolutely sure he had heard them right.

They were standing in the hallway of the academic building while crowds of students, and occasionally professors, drifted past them.

Sam was well below average height and noticeably underweight. No matter how much he tried to gorge himself on tons of the greasiest, most high-calorie junk food, it never helped. In that sense, he would be the envy of anyone ready to put one foot in the grave just to lose a couple of ounces. Sam would have been glad to put on about forty pounds, but nature had revolted against the idea. On top of that, Sam couldn't grow stubble to save his life. Whenever he went clean-shaven, his face could easily be mistaken for a kid's.

«No,» Marcus replied. «You're going to fuck on camera exactly the way we tell you to. Start when we tell you to. Pull out when we tell you to.»

Sam's face twisted into a grimace of either fear or shame. He pictured it in full color: standing in the middle of a room, getting ready to engage in what seemed like a fairly common activity (and over the last couple of months, an almost daily one), while these guys stood around telling him where to stand, where to lie down, how deep to go, what position to take, and at what rhythm to work his jackhammer. In his mind, he was already comparing himself to a trained dog that obediently follows commands.

«But that's with people watching,» Sam said.

«What did you think? That it was going to be a hidden camera?» Marcus asked.

«In porn, there are no outsiders,» Stavros added.

Shifting his weight from one foot to the other and glancing around, Sam asked:

«How much are you offering?»

«Five hundred.»

«A thousand,» Sam said without hesitation. But Stavros countered just as quickly, executing a swift calculation in line with his sharp way of thinking: «Girls get a thousand, and that's only if they've got business-class bumpers.»

«Eight hundred,» Sam countered.

«Let's go,» Marcus said, gesturing toward the exit. He and Stavros turned to walk away, but they had only taken a few steps before Sam called out: «Alright. I'm in.»

Marcus and Stavros walked back at a much brisker, less theatrical pace than when they were leaving. After a short pause, Stavros said:

«Are you sure you won't chicken out at the critical moment? Get this through your head: we're sinking crazy money into this, so if you even *think* about backing out, I'll realign your orientation real quick. Capiche?»

The moment Stavros mentioned how much money the film was costing them, Marcus recalled the massive bouts of diarrhea he'd endured during the medical experiment to fund it.

Sam gave a couple of jerky nods without making a sound.

«Are you eighteen?»

Sam nodded silently once more.

Marcus added:

«All that's left is to check the caliber.»

Five minutes later.

Marcus and Stavros stepped out of the restroom, and Stavros said:

«If we dress him up in the right gear, he'll do just fine.»

Later that evening, Marcus and Stavros were sitting in the dorm room, scanning through porn clips. Over the span of a couple of hours, they had reviewed footage from more than two hundred movies.

Watching yet another scene from a video that had racked up 197 million views, Stavros said:

«Now, if Barbara could pull off a position like that, it would look incredible. But I guess that's not an option for us.»

«Why's that?» Marcus asked, surprised.

«Did you forget? According to our script, it's a rape scene. If she positions herself like that, it looks way too consensual.»

«Fair point,» Marcus agreed.

After a brief pause, Stavros said:

«Let's go back to that video with the Black guy with the long braids. In the second half, his movements sort of look like a struggle.»

«Should we bookmark it?» Marcus suggested.

«Good idea. We might want to weaponize that scene later.»

Every time he clicked another link, Marcus looked at the view count, multiplying one or two percent of those views by a couple of dollars for a download of their own film, preferring to calculate the financial potential based on the lowest baseline. And all he saw before him were millions of bucks. The thoughts were blowing Marcus's mind. He calculated the theoretical metrics, and every single time, he came up with seven-digit figures. He could already taste the new life waiting for him.

Stavros, meanwhile, was pondering the scheme he had mapped out from the very beginning. Marcus suspected nothing, and Stavros knew his friend had no business knowing. Marcus was laser-focused on solving the immediate tasks, but developing a backup plan was completely alien to him. Stavros, on the other hand, chose to ignore the main exit, instead wondering exactly how many fire escapes the building had.

6. MAINTENANCE

Marcus was already about the call Barbara and Sam to set up a meeting at the clinic, where they were supposed to get tested for STDs. However, Stavros told his friend to put the brakes on. He enlightened Marcus on something that the would-be éminence grise of international politics, alas, didn't have the brains to figure out himself. Stavros suggested talking the actress and actor into getting tested at their own expense, on the condition that if their systems came back clean, they would reimburse the costs out of pocket. In the event that either the actor or the actress turned out to be a venereal weapon of mass destruction, Marcus and Stavros wouldn't compensate them for a damn thing, since any involvement in the shooting process would be completely off the table.

«It's called 'budget optimization,»» Stavros added at the end.

Marcus thought the idea was brilliant, but he decided not to admit it openly and did his best to keep a straight face.

Since Sam was running late, Stavros stayed behind to wait for him in the clinic lobby, while Marcus and Barbara headed off to the lab.

After giving his blood sample, Sam approached Stavros, holding his arm bent with a cotton ball pressed against the vein. But before he could even open his mouth, Stavros said:

«If everything checks out, you'll take another rapid test the night before the shoot. Until then, you're dismissed.»

«What about the results?»

«Don't sweat the results.»

«And what's next?»

«I'll call you.»

Sam headed back to the institute, while Stavros stayed to wait for the lab report. He adjusted his messenger bag, tugging the strap over his shoulder, and walked toward the nearest bench. At that moment, a nurse, looking to be about thirty, walked past. Stavros followed her with his eyes, evaluating the contours of her body through her white scrub pants. His first thoughts were about how good this little nurse would look in front of a camera lens, and she'd certainly have no trouble getting into character. Then he thought that maybe he should go over and try to pick her up. As soon as those thoughts let go of him, Stavros realized with a pang of sadness that working on the pre-production for a porn movie was starting to take too much of a toll on him. In any case, mentally, he had started veering off the main road onto the shoulder every single time he caught a glimpse of an attractive female silhouette.

He urgently needed to clear his head, Stavros thought to himself.

An hour later.

Barbara and Marcus were sitting in the clinic's cafeteria, already holding the finalized lab results. While waiting for Stavros, they chatted about the upcoming battles with their own weaknesses, vices, and fears.

«Tell me, does it bug you — what's going to happen when your parents find out?» Marcus asked, finishing his coffee.

Barbara propped her chin up with her hand, staring blankly into space. Her voice sounded a bit drained:

«You guys said yourself that this is all going to be paywalled. I don't think my parents are the type to watch porn on a subscription basis.»

«Yeah, but screen-recording software exists. Some asshole is bound to pull that trick, and then our production will leak online for anyone to see. That drastically increases the risk that someone your parents know will recognize you and immediately want to ask them if they're aware.»

Barbara paused to think, then said:

«Either way, I'm just going to hope there's too much porn on the internet for ours to stand out from the crowd.»

«But still, what if the news actually reaches them?»

Barbara dropped her hand to the table, leaned back in her chair, and let out a deep sigh:

«It'll mean it's time for me to order a tombstone.» A brief silence hung in the air before Barbara continued: «But I need that brokerage account, and I need as many assets in it as possible. I have no intention of waiting until retirement age for my investment portfolio to start yielding a financial return. I want to start spending money on a comfortable life as soon as possible. Even better, I want to be able to afford a move somewhere like Spain or Greece.» Looking at Marcus's curious face, Barbara leaned in and asked: «Well, what about you? Will your parents be cool with you just being behind the camera?»

«Well, I'm thinking of using a pseudonym in the credits. And once the payoff is tangible, my folks will probably lecture me for a bit, but given the financial metrics, I'm hoping they'll get over it pretty quickly.»

Barbara averted her gaze, sinking even deeper into her thoughts, and said:

«Yeah. Your dilemma isn't nearly as terrifying.»

A mix of materialism, ambition, anxiety, and a thirst for freedom played across her face.

«Oh!» Marcus exclaimed. «Look, here comes our guy.»

Stavros approached their table and, sitting down at the edge between Barbara and Marcus, said:

«Well, our rapist is clean.»

«That means we can keep moving forward,» Marcus said, clapping his hands together and rubbing them briskly.

Unlike him, Barbara's appearance radiated zero enthusiasm. In her mind, she was cursing Marcus for getting her to open up about her relationship with her parents.

Marcus mentally checked off another box in his business plan, feeling like he had just advanced one step further.

Closer to evening, Stavros set up a meeting with Sam on campus. They crossed paths in the courtyard, which wasn't as crowded by that time of day.

Glancing around to make absolutely sure no one was nearby, Stavros pulled a contract form out of his messenger bag, handed it to Sam, and said:

«Sign it.»

Sam's mouth hung open for a few moments while he processed what was happening.

«My parents will literally rape me themselves if they find out,» he said, holding the form in his hands.

«Nobody's asking you to show this piece of paper to your parents. And besides, in porn, nobody looks at the guys. Everyone's only tuning in to gawk at the women. Come on, quit jerking around.»

Overcoming his own hesitation, Sam signed it anyway.

7. «LIGHTS-CAMERA-STRIP» COLLECTION

Marcus and Stavros thought this task was simple enough to handle on their own. After all, they still had plenty of time. But as it turned out, staging a set isn't as simple as taking out the trash. The two producers quickly came to the conclusion that they needed to hire a designer — someone who could fix up the master bedroom and dress Barbara and Sam in the right gear. Their top candidate was Gloria Yaz, with whom Stavros was on excellent terms. Marcus knew Gloria too, though not as closely, and he completely agreed that if anyone could solve their problems with a snap of her fingers, it was her. All that was left was to see if she'd agree, though both of them suspected that money would hardly play a deciding role, given the kind of crazy ideas that rattled around inside Gloria's head.

«Ah, boys,» Gloria said, opening the door to her dorm room when she saw Marcus and Stavros on the threshold. «Come on in.»

Gloria rocked a short blonde haircut with side-swept bangs and short strands framing her temples. She was slightly above average height (though, considering her passion for high heels, she was actually *significantly* above average), not too thin, and always bursting with an excess of energy that came through in her gestures and her voice. If Gloria ever decided to become a brand ambassador, she'd definitely be the face of Duracell.

She was majoring in Art, Culture, and Technology.

The guys stepped inside, and their eyes were immediately drawn to an unusual creation on Gloria's desk. For her latest practical project, Gloria was crafting a multifunctional, transforming cabinet. Four months of work had turned the piece into something mind-boggling. Multiple layers of plaster, each with a different shape and contour, rotated on various pivot points. As a result, the cabinet could take the shape of Marilyn Monroe's face, but when certain layers were rotated to a specific marker, Guy Fawkes's face would emerge.

«Holy shit,» Marcus said when Gloria pulled off the trick, spinning the plaster layers.

«Just wait till I paint it, it's gonna look completely different.»

As it rotated, the cabinet's storage capacity shifted, revealing hidden pockets and a false bottom where valuables could be stashed. Overall, Gloria's creation resembled a complex combination lock; to open each of the internal compartments, the plaster layers had to be aligned in a specific position, and there were nineteen of them in total.

«Don't you think you're a little too smart for this major?» Stavros asked.

«Thanks, Tiger,» Gloria replied. She had never been one to mince words since the first time she saw Stavros with his edgy haircut — the one with the horizontal shaved lines on the sides. She compared them to tiger stripes, and ever since, she called him «Tiger» whenever they met, completely ignoring his actual name, which was her habit with many of her friends and acquaintances.

«So, what did you guys want to talk about?» Gloria asked, her chin tilted up, playing into the wild curiosity that had consumed her ever since their phone call. She stood in her usual stance: her left arm held horizontally, while her right arm rested vertically against it, her fingers rubbing her palm.

Scratching the tip of his nose, Marcus said:

«We're shooting porn.»

Gloria's face twisted into a vivid grimace, though it was hard to tell if she was surprised or wondering, «*Why the hell did you come to me with this?*»

«We need a designer,» Marcus added. Gloria began pacing back and forth across the room as Marcus continued: «We need to pick out the right wardrobe for the actors and set up the room.»

«So,» Gloria started, not breaking her stride and pressing her index finger to her chin, «interior and wardrobe. Look, boys, clothes are a non-issue. We'll definitely find something at the malls. The real question here is the combination and the context — and yours is quite scandalous. What exactly is going to happen in front of the camera?»

«A teenager rapes his friend's mom.»

«Fascinating!» Gloria emphasized with sheer enthusiasm. «So, a mature woman and a total half-baked punk. Yeah, the archetypes are clear enough. Now, as for the interior...»

The guys already knew that her answer was a definitive yes. Gloria's face was practically glowing with the anticipation of getting to work. It seemed as though, just by turning the tasks over in her mind, she was on the verge of having an orgasm herself.

«No. I'll deal with the interior once I see the room. You do have the space already, right?»

The guys nodded in unison.

«Wonderful. The only thing we can do right away is buy a bedding set.» Gloria paused to think for a moment, then said: «Alright, here's the plan. Tomorrow afternoon, I'll have a three-to-four-hour window. Get your cast together, and we'll all go hitting the shops.»

When it came to clothing, Gloria viewed the world rather simply. She either saw an expression of subtle taste on people, or just sheer junk and basic rags.

At the appointed time, Marcus, Barbara, Gloria, and Stavros walked into the women's clothing department of the mall, while Sam was left sitting on a bench, waiting for his turn.

Despite her high heels, Gloria walked with a pace so fast and energetic that the others could barely keep up with her.

Passing the entrance to the department, Stavros abruptly slowed down, and then stopped altogether. His attention was caught by a girl checking out customers at the register. He forgot about the purpose of the mall trip, the porn, and everything else in existence. The only thing occupying his brain was a girl who looked suspiciously like his ex — Vivian. He had dumped her after she started throwing herself at some descendant of the victims of slavery. And they clearly weren't talking about segregation, but rather the opposite — close integration.

But that had only been the last straw. Before that, Vivian had managed to completely drain Stavros's sanity. She was annoyed by his ringtone and his constant requests to fuck in the cowgirl position. She began demanding that he get rid of his T-shirt featuring a rabbit screaming, «Long live freedom!» Soon after, the moment Stavros let his guard down for half a minute, she went through his texts with his friends and his cousin, whom Vivian mistook for a mistress. But to top it all off, she attacked his most sacred territory — his edgy haircut and the earring in his left ear. In short...

Seeing the girl at the register, Stavros couldn't help but think of his ex. The resemblance was so striking that all the worst moments of the last months of their life together began flooding back into his memory. It seemed like the sight of this girl should have triggered pure negativity in him. Yet Stavros was certain that the world couldn't possibly contain a second bitch of that magnitude.

Meanwhile, Gloria, Marcus, and Barbara were already standing near the mannequins displaying evening gowns.

«Alright,» Gloria began, evaluating a dress in meticulous detail, «we need something that adds about ten to twelve years to your age.»

Barbara looked at the dresses and pictured herself in them. On a bed. Raped. Three times over.

Marcus walked up and whispered almost directly into Gloria's ear:

«You do realize that we absolutely cannot do without high slits and a plunging neckline, right?»

Gloria gave a reassuring reply:

«My sunshine, you don't have to worry about a thing on that front. I'm going to turn her into the most explosive bombshell. We'll dress her up so well that every impotent guy within a mile radius will be instantly cured.» Sorting through various clothing styles for a couple of minutes, Gloria asked Marcus: «Tell me, is the mommy rape scene the only thing you've got planned?»

«No. We'd like to do something else too. It's just that the raped mom is going to be the main feature. Do you have some suggestions?»

Gloria said, maintaining a thoughtful look:

«I know it sounds cliché, but how about a queen and a rebellious slave? Or, say, a female boss coercing her young subordinate into sex... No! Better yet, an intern, but the sex suddenly shifts into rape as revenge for all the humiliation he took from the boss. How does that grab you?»

Following those words, Marcus's imagination flared in vivid color. He said:

«That's interesting.» He looked around and called out: «Stavros...»

But Stavros was nowhere to be seen.

While Gloria continued inspecting the dresses, beckoning Barbara over, Marcus searched for Stavros through the aisles. Soon, he spotted his head bobbing above the clothing racks. Stavros was walking toward Marcus, clearly deep in thought about something, and kept glancing back toward the cash register in a highly suspicious manner.

By the time Stavros walked up, Gloria had finished picking out the dresses and moved on to selecting pants, skirts, and blouses.

They approached the fitting rooms, where Barbara began trying on the wardrobe tailored for women in the 35-to-40 age range.

The moment Barbara stepped out of the fitting room in the first dress, the first complication hit. Marcus found himself trapped in the classic paradox of women's fashion aesthetics: the sexier a woman was dressed, the faster you wanted to strip her naked. He stared at the cream-colored dress, which put Barbara's left thigh on full display along with a cleavage window that he desperately wanted to cup.

If nothing else, it was clear that Gloria knew her stuff.

«Well, how do I look?» Barbara asked, spreading her arms and tilting her head up slightly. She closed her eyes as she did it, as if expecting to be ambushed at any second by either a crowd of screaming fans or a sex crazed maniac.

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