

STATE OF INSANITY

“Hey, Amanda!”

“Hey, Brad!” Amanda shifted her eyes from the notebooks in her locker to the tall, broad-shouldered school-mate who was in her Algebra class. “What’s up?”

“Nothing much. You?”

“Nothing much here,” she adjusted a heavy gold chain reaching her chest. “Gotta go,” her interest in the conversation equaled the absolute zero.

“Okay, see you in class. Nice chain, by the way.”

“Ah, thanks. A birthday present,” the girl shook her head, letting her long brown hair conceal her face, and smiled.

“Yeah, it was your birthday on Saturday. Happy b’day, hottie,” Brad grinned.

“Thanks. You’re such a jerk!” She smiled and left.

Her choir class went as usual — Mr. Humphrey made them go through the warm-up, scales, etc., etc. Karen, her best female friend since the seventh grade, looked depressed and acted as if Mandy had stolen her iPod. *PMSing again*, Mandy thought going through the familiar choir routine. *Or, maybe, it's something else. I should ask her about—*

“So, how are you and Ryan?”

“Oh, just peachy!” Karen’s voice reeked of sarcasm. “You know how he is!”

“Broke up again?” Mandy whispered.

“Kinda... What’s this chain about?” Mandy shrugged.

“A birthday present.”

“From whom?” A shadow of a doubt appeared on Karen’s face.

“You know from who,” Mandy grinned. “From my uncle of course.”

“Holy shit! It must cost a fortune!”

“Dunno. But I like it anyway.”

“Who wouldn’t!?! Da-a-amn, look at this thing!” She extended her arm and lifted the chain with her forefinger - the intricately interwoven tri-color threads weighed heavily on the finger-tip. “Awesome!”

They were walking down a long school passage, with classroom doors on both sides and red lockers built into the walls. This or that student, that guy or that girl, would waive at her or say, “Hey, sexy!” to either or both of them. An advantage of being a high school sophomore, slim, cute, daring, and attractive...

The bell rang. Amanda entered the classroom and lowered herself at her usual desk; she dropped her backpack onto the floor.

“Hey, Mandy! Want to go to the movies after school?” The same Brad landed himself on a chair next to Amanda.

“Is it a date?”

“If you want it to be a date — it’ll be a date,” he laughed, running his eyes up and down Mandy’s tight sweater and what looked like low riders.

“Lemme think about it, okay?” She placed a text-book on the desk and a spiral notebook on top of it.

“Okay.”

“Well, if it’s a date, then — no.”

“Why not?”

“Just ‘cause.”

“You’re so mean to me! And you didn’t invite me to your b’day!”

“What, looking for make-up now?”

“Nah,” he paused. “Or, maybe, I do. But I’m just wondering.”

“Ah, okay. For a moment I thought you were jealous or something. And there’s nothing to wonder, it was just family and close friends.”

“Oh, I see! NOW I’m not a close friend, eh?” He sounded a bit angry.

“Just because we went out once, it doesn’t mean you’re my CLOSE friend.”

“I see. To be considered a close friend, I should have slept with you twice, eh? Fine!” He moved to another desk mumbling something that sounded like *What a bitch!*

The test was dragging on and on and on. Mandy was playing with her bangs, biting the tip of her pencil, bubbling the answers on the sheet. Her mind was somewhere, somewhere away from school, the test, and the winter outside the second-floor window overlooking the parking lot full of cars. She thought about the birthday party on Saturday, what presents she had got (the ‘Pirates of the Caribbean’ DVD from her Mom was a really cool present), the cake she had, about the friends who came...

“Who’s there?” Entering the house, Mandy heard her Mom’s voice from the bedroom on the second floor which she shared with her husband, Mandy’s step-father. Paul was a contractor and, a long time ago, he decided to renovate the house: For at least seven years, the inside looked as if a bomb had exploded in there. By now, all he had managed to achieve was a doubling of the size of the house and building a huge bed-room overlooking the backyard and

the street; any repairs to the rooms occupied by Mandy and her younger sister Kristen were totally disregarded.

“It’s me, Mom!”

“Okay. How’s school?” Another question came from the bed-room. Her mother was confined to her bed — fibromyalgia with acute pains allowed Diana to leave her room only a couple of times a week. Paul was buying food and whatever was necessary for the household. “Is Kristen home?”

“Haven’t seen her yet. And school was O.K. I had another test today. Math,” Mandy entered what was called the kitchen, a converted old sitting room furnished with Paul’s desk, a dresser, a fridge, a table with a microwave oven and a pizza warmer, and an aquarium. There were three more doors in the kitchen — to the old bed-room of her mother and Paul, her own bedroom, and the third opened to a narrow staircase leading upstairs to her sister’s room and the new bed-room. “Anything to eat?” She yelled filling the cats’ bowls with dry food and water.

“Check the fridge!” Came from upstairs.

There was nothing in the fridge except a half-finished pizza and a couple of Hot Pockets boxes. In her room, a paper plate in her hand and a bottle of water between her feet on the floor, Mandy sat down on her bed with no headboard, actually a mattress resting on a box spring. She was sick of the renovations; she was sick of not being able to entertain her friends properly. The girl scanned the small bed-room that only contained her bed serving as a couch if necessary, a narrow desk, a wicker chair, and an old big wooden cabinet TV-set. She gazed at the light brown veneered walls with posters cut out of the popular and music magazines, the posters depicting the stars Mandy liked... *Wish I could live with my Dad. His girl-friend is a bitch. Her two kids are real brats... And what do we really have for our room in his house? Two beds in a converted basement...*

She pulled one of the green desk drawers open and took a pink notebook out. She stretched on her belly, placed the open notebook in front of her; her teeth bit into the tip of her pen. Mandy sighed and wrote:

November 21st, 200_

It 's been a year since I have seen my cat Jack. I miss him very much. In the past year a lot has happened in my life. My cats have had many litters of kittens. I have had to watch 2 cats die. My house is still not done and probably will never be. My dad went out of business, broke up with his gf Katie, got a new gf, Lisa, and moved us in with her and her 2 kids. My mother needs a new husband. What did she ever see in Paul?

The bell rang. Another test — this time, in English. Mr. Lee was handing out the booklets and the answer sheets, while Mandy's thoughts were wandering elsewhere.

"Amanda McLeod, please report to the school office," she heard the loudspeaker and looked at the teacher quizzically.

"You may go, Amanda."

Slowly, she descended the narrow stairs to the first floor, approached the school office by the main entrance, and entered it.

"Amanda McLeod?"

"Yes, ma'am," Mandy looked at the principal's assistant. "What did I do?"

"Nothing, as far as I know," Miss Schmitt, a tall, skinny, blonde woman in her forties, looked straight at Mandy. "Somebody wants to talk to you. Please go in."

Mandy smoothed her baggy sweater, knocked on the door, and entered the principal's office. The principal, one of the school counselors, and a woman she didn't know sat at a round table in one of the corners.

"Ah, Miss McLeod. Thanks for stopping by," Mr. Stekker waived her over to one of the chairs. "Take a seat. You know Ms. Brown of course?" Mandy nodded. "And this is Mrs. Wayne from the Social Services."

"Social Services?"

"Yes, Amanda," Mrs. Wayne injected. "May I call you Amanda?" A nod of agreement, and she continued. "I'm here to talk to you."

"About?"

"We are concerned about your welfare, Amanda."

"Why?" Mandy sounded genuinely surprised. "What's the matter?"

"May I ask you a question?" Another nod. The woman's blue eyes pierced the girl like two knives. "Where did you get this chain?"

"How is it your business?" Mandy asked sharply, even though it wasn't her intention.

"There's no need to be rude, Amanda," the Principal said softly. "Mrs. Wayne is here for your benefit."

"What benefit? What's m-m-m-my benefit h-h-have to do with m-m-my chain?" Amanda started to stutter, as she would always do when agitated. "What do you want from me?"

"Amanda, please calm down," came from Ms. Brown.

"All right, all right..." Mandy took a deep breath.

"So, where did you get this chain?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"We're just concerned about you, Amanda," another piercing glance.

The girl shrugged. "My uncle gave it to me for my birthday."

"Your uncle?"

"Yeah, my Uncle Robert. Is there a problem?"

"Not really," the blue eyes showered the girl with suspicion. "But don't you think you're a bit young to be getting such expensive presents?"

Mandy shrugged, kept silence for some time. "He always gives me presents like—" She paused, gulped. "I guess he can afford it."

"And what does he do by the way?"

"He's. .. Um... Well... He owns some property. A house. I mean, houses..." She ran her tongue over her dry lips. "And has tenants I believe."

All three nodded in unison; a silence hung in the room. Mandy could hear the ticking of the watch on the Principal 's wrist.

"You said he always gives you presents, right?"

Mandy nodded. She felt sick to her stomach. Perhaps, she shouldn't have mentioned the presents... *What do they want from me anyhow?*

"What kinds of presents?"

"I dunno. .. Um... Why does it matter?"

"Because it's not natural for a grown man to give such expensive presents to a fifteen-year-old female, Amanda."

"He's my UNCLE!" she exclaimed not comprehending the situation.

"You do realize that this chain is made of gold and, possibly, platinum?"

"I don't care," big tears started to roll down Mandy's high cheekbones, down her cheeks, dropping onto her sweater. "I don't care."

“But *we* care,” another piercing glance. “We do care when an adult showers a young female with presents.”

“Why?” Amanda whispered.

“Because of the welfare of that young female, Amanda,” Mrs. Wayne paused. “Tell me something, Amanda. At any time, did he... errrr... touch you inappropriately?”

“Like what?”

“Your private area? Your breasts?”

“No... Not really...”

“Not really?”

“NO! HE NEVER TOUCHED ME INAPPROPRIATELY! NOT THIS WAY! LEAVE ME ALONE!”

And she stormed out of the Principal’s office, and onto the street. She was walking away from school, past the parking lot chain-link fence, past the gas station/car shop on the corner. She crossed New Pinery Road and entered the Walgreen’s. Her thoughts running through her mind, Mandy was wandering aimlessly along the aisles. *I want to go home... No, the Burncoat Road house isn't my home. What used to my home is now in repairs... Something is missing in it... The feeling of my previous self?*

October 12th, 200_

Uncle Robert,

Hey! How are you doing today?

Even I've told you this a million times, once more never hurt — I love you so much! You are so awesome and I don 't know what I would do without you. You mean the whole world to me. I really wish that words

could express how I really feel. You remember I called you that night when one of my cats died and you were comforting me until I felt better? You are so kind to me - you know exactly what to say and when to say it. You satisfy my every need - physically, mentally, emotionally - EVERYTHING! I could never repay you for all you have given me. I would be willing to go through any pain for you. I would run in front of the gun if it was aimed at you I would die for you. Really, I would do anything for you. I am going to get a job! I really need one! I am going to take that paper route - both of them. Or maybe I'll call that modeling agency in Chicago. I need to save for my car! WOW! I must seriously need to fill my life - with a job or something.

I'll call you later.

Love,

Mandy

(I love when you call me Mandy in your soft low voice.)

"It's me, mother!" Mandy yelled entering the house.

"You're early!"

"I'm not feeling well. And I'm having a headache! I'm going to bed!"

"All right, honey!"

A loud knock on the entrance door woke her up. Then she heard a couple of male voices introduced themselves as Detective Karn and Detective Schoenke, of the Tanchorage Police Department. Diana called Mandy on her cell phone asking her to come upstairs. A splitting headache, Mandy slipped in her jeans and climbed up the dusty stairs; then, down a narrow littered passage, through her sister's windowless room, and into her mother's bedroom.

"Amanda, it's police," Diana motioned at the two men who stood in the center of the 40x50 foot unfinished room. "They've come to talk to you. What is it they want?"

Mandy shrugged, mumbled, "No clue."

"I'm Inspector—"

"I know who you are," Mandy interrupted the taller man. "I heard your voices from my room."

"Amanda!"

"Mother?"

"I think we all should calm down and have a talk, ma'am. We're here to ask you and your daughter some questions."

"Regarding?"

"Regarding the present your daughter allegedly received from her uncle."

"What seems to be the matter?" Diana cast an incredulous glance at both detectives. "I'm fully aware of the presents my daughter gets from my brother."

"Ma'am, you do realize that this is an expensive—"

"Are you telling me what my daughter may or may not receive from her uncle? What are you implying?"

"Ma'am, what I'm saying is that the Social Services are concerned with that present and your daughter's welfare."

“My daughter’s welfare is MY business!”

“Not only yours, ma’am.” He looked around. “This house is—”

“What’s wrong with the house?” Diana interrupted him. “It’s not a police business or a concern for the Social Services!”

“Ma’am, we’ve been notified by the Social Services about their concern. And we’re here to investigate,” Schoenke said. “We would appreciate your co-operation.”

Diana sighed, ran her hand over her fake blonde hair, and looked at her daughter.

“We’ve also run a check on you, ma’am,” Karn pulled a manila envelope file folder out of his brief-case. “Here I have a warrant for your arrest, ma’am. You know what is it about?”

“You tell me,” Diana uttered with a challenge in her voice. “Couldn’t you have told me about THIS before you made me call my daughter up here?”

“Well, ma’am, apparently, you’ve issued some bad checks, and—”

“OH MY GOD! OH MY GOD!” Amanda covered her face with her hands. “Are they gonna take you to jail?” She was sobbing openly.

“Mo-o-o-m! I’m home!” Kristen slammed the front door. “Whose car’s in front?”

“Come up here!” Diana raised her voice. “Now!”

“Oh my god! Oh my god!” Mandy was whispering incessantly. “Oh my god!”

The sound of footsteps up the stairs, the door opened letting the short, a bit plump, Kristen in. She stopped abruptly and stared at the group in the room.

“Mom, what the blip is going on?” The girl inquired, her brown eyes opened wide. “Why’s Mandy crying?”

“They’re taking Mom to jail!” Mandy screamed backhanding the tears off her face. “They are! OH MY GOD! It’s all my fault!”

“What?!”

“Kristen, calm down,” Diana said in her normal voice and lighted a cigarette. “And stop crying. Both of you!”

“Ma’am, we have grounds to believe that your brother has been having a relationship with your daughter Amanda.”

A knock on the door. Another one. Robert crossed the room and peeked through a crack between the curtains: Two blue uniforms stood on the front porch, their hands on the holsters. He opened the door.

“Yes, officers? What can I do for you?”

“Mr. Wilson? Mr. Robert Wilson?” said the one with a Kampf nametag.

“Yes, it’s me.”

“Can we ask you a couple of questions?”

“What about?”

“May we come in?”

Robert waived the officers in. They lowered themselves on the couch and on one of the arm-chairs.

“Well?”

“Please take a seat, Mr. Wilson.”

“What’s the matter, officers?”

“A routine questioning, sir. Do you know an Amanda McLeod?”

“You’re not talking about my niece? Anything happened?” He flipped his cell phone open.

“Hold on, Mr. Wilson.” Kampf warned Robert. “There’s no need to make any phone calls. Do you know her?”

“Of course, I know her. She’s my niece. But what’s happened?”

Kampf rose to his feet and walked towards a low glass curio cabinet with framed pictures on top, scanned them briefly with his eyes. “Nothing’s happened. When was the last time you saw your niece?”

“At her birthday, of course. What, she’s run away?”

“No, she didn’t. Did you give her any presents?”

“Yes, I did. Why?”

“By the way, who took this picture?” Kampf picked up one of the photos of Amanda and Kristen, a couple of years younger, in their underwear, standing on the porch, a lake at the background.

“I did. Can you tell me what the matter is?”

“In a minute, Mr. Wilson. What did you give her for a present?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Please answer my question.”

“A chain. I gave her a chain,” sweat broke on his forehead.

“I see,” Kampf approached Robert. “Mr. Wilson, please stand up and turn around. You’re under arrest for sexual assault of a child,” Kampf and the other officer swiftly handcuffed and patted Robert over, and pushed him slightly towards the front door. “You have the right to remain...”

Thirty minutes later, the police cruiser entered the carport of the county jail on Jackson Street. A search, a wait in a single cell with a metal bunk (a blue mattress on it) screwed to the concrete floor; then, booking in. Then, a rough blanket, a pillow and sheets in hand, Robert entered his first cell. The one he would share with the other twenty-seven detainees till—

“Karen? Can you come over? Please? Please? Please?” Amanda was chocking with tears.
“I do need you right here.”

“Okay, okay, Mandy. I’m on my way,” Karen plugged a hands-free device into her cell phone and hurried out of her house. Then, down Pine Street, towards Burncoat Road, towards Mandy’s house. “What’s happened?”

“The police were here! Asking me about my Uncle Robert!”

“Shit! What did they want to know?”

“They think he and I have been having sex!”

“Wow!” Karen opened the front door and entered the house. “Hello, Mrs. Stevenson!
“What did you tell them?”

“Hello, Karen! Mandy ’s in her room!” came from Diana.

“Let’s have a walk,” Mandy hugged her friend and put her coat on. “I can’t stand this place!”

The girls walked down Burncoat road to the Cattail Park and sat down by the baseball diamond fence.

“I told them we never had sex. And that he did give me that chain. Oh my God! What an idiot I was to wear it to school!”

Karen put her arm around Mandy’s shoulders. “It’ll be all right, Mandy. I don’t think they meant any harm to you or your uncle.”

“His cell phone doesn’t answer,” Mandy sobbed. “And there’s nobody at his place, either. I’m so worried, Karen,” she whispered.

“He may be in his car. Somewhere—”

“I have bad feelings. . .” Mandy interrupted her friend, brushed tears off her face.

“Oh, come on! What can happen to your uncle? I’m sure it’s really nothing!”

Mrs. Winston, Mandy’s English teacher, approached her during one of the breaks.
“Amanda, the school Counselor wants to see you.”

“When? Now?”

“Right away. She’s in her office.”

Mandy turned around sharply and headed towards a narrow staircase leading onto the first floor, walked through the passage with lockers, and approached the Counselor’s office. She hesitated for a second and knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

“Good morning, Mrs. Brown. You wanted to see me?”

“Yes, Amanda. Please take a seat.” Mrs. Brown opened a file folder. “How are your today?”

“I’m fine. I’m worried. I couldn’t sleep last night...”

“It’s only natural, Amanda.”

“Natural? To go through all that crap? To be questioned by the police? To have your mother nearly taken to jail? THAT’S n-n-natural?” Amanda started to stutter again.

“But your mother didn’t go to jail, did she?”

“N. .. No, sh... she did not.”

“That’s great. Amanda,” she leaned back in her office chair and tented her bony fingers.
“I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Is it about that stupid chain again?”

“Yes and no, Amanda,” the Counselor looked at the page stapled to the folder. “I understand you’ve been questioned by the police.” Her intonation rose, as if she asked a question.

“I. . . I g. . . g. . . guess you know I h. . . have b...b. . . been.” Amanda raised her voice. “Oh my God! H. . . how long are you g. . . g. . . gonna do all this crap to me?”

“Amanda, it’s just a concern about your welfare. What did they ask you?”

“W. . . w. . . why wouldn’t you ask THEM?”

“I will. How are your grades?”

“Bs... Cs... Sometimes, As... English, mostly.”

“Why Cs?”

“Cause it takes me a lot of time to understand what that crap’s about?” Amanda balled her hands. “Y. . . you don’t really c. . . c. . . care about my grades.”

“Yes, I do. My notes say that you never wanted any extra help with your classes, right?” Mandy nodded. “Why not?”

“Cause I didn’t want any help.”

“Would you like some help with your studies?”

“Not really. I c. . . c. . . can manage all b. . . by myself.”

“All right,” Ms. Brown stole a glance at Mandy. “Now, I want to ask you about something totally different. And please be as truthful as possible, okay?”

“Okay.”

“What’s your relationship with your uncle?”

“Oh, crap! N. . . n. . . not again! I’m sick of that! How is it business of yours? Just ‘cause he gave me that fucking—”

“Watch your language, Amanda!”

“F...f...fuck you! And fuck your fucking questions! L..l..leave me alone, you fucking bitch!”

Mandy jumped to her feet and, trembling, left the office. She was running down the street, towards her house. Under the railroad bridge, she took her cell phone out of her pocket and pressed a couple of buttons. *Hey! You know what to do! Talk to you later!* She heard the familiar voice, with the beginning of the ‘Jump, jump, jump around’ song as the background. “Uncle Robert? It’s Mandy. I c...c...can’t reach you and I must... MUST... t..t..talk to you... Please, please, please, call me back... Love you...”

Another message had been left... She couldn’t recall which one in a row...

Where IS Uncle Robert?

“You’re such a slut! Fucking your own uncle, eh?” Brad pushed Mandy on her chest. “Now I know why you trashed me, whore!”

“What are you talking about, jerk?”

“As if you don’t know!”

“Don’t know what? What am I supposed to know?” Mandy slapped him on his hand. “What I know is that I’m late for my next class!”

“Hey, Justin! Do you have that newspaper with you?” He reached out and, grabbed *The Daily Register* opened it. “What, you haven’t read that?”

Mandy’s eyes caught the *Uncle Charged With Sexual Assault of His Niece* heading splashed all over the front page.

“What’s that crap about?” She couldn’t believe her eyes. “It can’t be Uncle Robert!”

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