

WARNING: This story contains themes of abuse, violence, and harsh topics

I was so nauseous that I could barely think. I wish I hadn't eaten breakfast.

I sat in between a younger woman and an older man. They had their spines straight and hands neatly folded in their laps, and I tried to mimic their posture; my back began to ache after a few moments. I looked down at my shoes, shiny and new, contrasting with my old, worn down outfit. Josephine had bought them for me. I didn't want her to, but she insisted. She was always so kind, which is why I didn't understand how I could be where I was.

The letter for jury duty had come in the mail two months prior. I told Josephine about it, since my parents weren't much help and I wasn't sure how to proceed. She encouraged me to go through with it. She didn't tell me a lot about why she was going to court, but she did inform me it was her case. I shouldn't have lied to get on the jury, but she needed my help. She insisted that whoever was charging her was in the wrong and she didn't want to be falsely imprisoned. I didn't know anything about why she was actually on trial, I just knew Josephine. What harm could possibly be done? Besides, I liked being a part of something. I liked the way Josephine paid attention to me; more than my own mom or dad ever did. The only time I really talked to them is if they needed my help. "Drew," They'd say, "We need you to be a man in this house. An example. Can you do that?" And I tried, for eighteen years, to be a man for them. It feels like I've been an adult since I started walking.

Josephine quickly became a motherly figure to me. Other than taking care of my siblings, I was a quiet person, much preferred to keep to myself. I'd saved all my allowance money for a walkman so I could at least listen to music. That helped me a lot, especially because I didn't have

many friends, but it didn't matter because I had little free time to see anyone outside of my family anyways. Even with the club, my parents got angry every time I left the house. I stopped caring, solely because I found something that was mine, something that made me happy.

Annie Jessica Jenkins had turned up very much alive after being missing for almost nine months. Once a bright young woman with sweetness in her eyes, she was now malnourished, scarred, bruised, and had enough PTSD to scare a soldier. The trial had taken some time to get going because Annie had needed some time to get herself together. Literally. She showed up at the police station with nothing on but an old bag around her pelvis. Her body was a mix of fresh cuts and aging scars, and her hair looked like it had been growing from an old buzzcut. She was both a mess and a survivor. Now, Annie sat beside her lawyer, looking the complete opposite of how she did a few weeks ago. Her hair was clean and styled neatly—it now had some length to it—and her tiny frame was dressed in a grey pantsuit. Her face looked healthy, but you could see the raised skin where the scarring was. Annie knew Josephine, clearly, but I didn't know Annie. If she was in the club at some point, it was before I joined. I tried not to think about the potential that I could have been Annie's replacement. My imagination, at times, was uncontrollable.

Josephine came into the room in handcuffs. It was strange for me to see her in such a position. She was one of the kindest people I'd ever met, at least that's what I believed. The only reason I was living this double life of jury duty on a case that my mentor was now involved in was to help her. I knew she was innocent, at least I was finding every reason to convince myself, and I would do whatever it takes to convince the jury that Josephine was innocent. I had a purpose, and she had given it to me. The least I could do was help her clear her name and keep her freedom.

I can recall every detail of the first time I met Josephine.

I was walking through the city, something I usually did when I'd finish fighting with my family, and she was standing outside a book store I sometimes went to. I almost didn't stop walking because it was too often you saw some man or woman in a public setting, preaching about Jesus, which I already knew too much about. Or if it wasn't religion, it was something weirder, like a cult or propaganda. Those were pretty common for some time now. But this was different; Josephine wasn't preaching, she was speaking.

"...It is because of our greatness, they are scared!" She said, and the people around her cheered. "They are afraid of what they could never understand!"

I walked over, staring at the small crowd standing in front of Josephine. Each person was captivated by her, completely ignorant to everything around them. I knew this because I got smacked in the face with an elbow by a woman who had no idea I was behind her.

"Oh god, I'm so sorry!"

"Shit," I put my hand up to my nose; it began to bleed.

"I'm not used to my own strength." The woman said.

I raised my eyebrows. "What?"

I didn't realize Josephine stopped speaking until she was standing in front of me. "Oh goodness, are you okay?" She brought her hand close to my nose. "Here, let me-"

I stepped back. "What're you doing?"

She hesitated, then again lifted her hand to my face. She wiped her thumb under my nostrils, and the blood stopped. I stared at her.

“How did you...” I said, but I couldn’t finish the thought. It had to have been a coincidence that my nose stopped bleeding; it was only a quick hit anyways.

“I just can.” She said, “Do you trust me?”

“I don’t know you.” I said.

She held her hand out to me to shake it, which I did. “My name is Josephine.”

“Andrew. But, just Drew is good.”

“Well, just Drew, how old are you?” She asked.

“I’m eighteen.” I said.

Josephine smiled wide. “So you’re an adult!”

“You could say that.”

“Here,” She said. “Walk with me.”

And just because she could, Josephine told the crowd that she’d be back in ten minutes.

She led me away from them, and even though I didn’t have to, I followed her. I felt safer around older, mature people. She was inviting, but also had this edge to her; like she could make me love her or hate her with one word.

“Are you religious?” She asked.

“Sort of.” I said. “My parents are super Christian, but I wouldn’t call myself one.”

“Why’s that?” Josephine asked.

“It’s not really my thing. Plus, anytime I’m sad, they just tell me to pray. It never helps.”

Josephine nodded. “Do you go to school?”

“Yeah. It’s okay. I usually just keep my headphones in, besides when I’m learning.”

“What if I told you I think you’re meant for more?”

I stared at her. "You sound like my teachers."

She laughed. "You funny little thing. But do you?"

For a second, I thought about what she asked me. I've never really considered what I could do with myself because I was so used to always doing what my parents told me. They had ten kids they couldn't take care of, so myself and older sisters had to cover what they couldn't. I loved my siblings, but I resented them. I'd see kids my age doing things I could only dream of, like going to a party, having a girlfriend, applying to colleges. I can change a mean diaper, but I barely know how to talk to people my own age. I never had my own space, my own time, my own plans. Everything was for the family. I only ever had time for my walks, which was also my exercise. And now, after being asked about what I want, I'm angry that I can't give Josephine an answer.

"I think I'm meant for more, but I don't know what."

Josephine's eyes lit up. "What if I told you I can help you?"

"With what, college applications?"

Josephine chuckles. "No, Drew. I can help you become someone."

"Like, someone successful?"

"Someone with a greater purpose."

Josephine sat in between both of her lawyers. The one on her left, and older woman, was scribbling notes on a page with her back hunched over the table. The one on her right, a younger man, sat up right, staring straight ahead. Josephine leaned over, whispered something to him, and he snapped his head to look at her, before slowly moving it back. I tried to picture what she said,

something encouraging like, “we got this,” or perhaps something more sinister, like “she’s going down,” but even that coming out of Josephine’s mouth must’ve been laced with honey. She had as much of a calming voice as it was commanding. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference.

“Will the defendant please rise?” The judge said. The room fell silent.

Josephine stood, smoothing out her black pants which matched her blazer. She was tall, legs up to her neck, and slim. She was attractive for an older woman.

“Josephine Whittaker,” The judge organized the papers in front of her.

“Your honour,” Josephine said.

“You are here today on the account of three charges filed by Miss. Jenkins. You are being charged with conspiracy, child abuse, and kidnapping. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty, your honour.”

The judge nodded. I tried not to, but I zoned out after Josephine sat down. I knew jury duty was going to be boring and I wished for my walkman; Siamese Dream by The Smashing Pumpkins had come out and I wanted to listen to it. But I had to do it for her. She needed me here, to help prove her innocence. I pinned my attention to the courtroom.

“The prosecution calls Marlene Jenkins to the stand.”

Annie’s mom, Marlene, had made it her mission for the past nine months to locate her daughter. She put up signs, created a hotline for tips, organized weekly searches around the outskirts of the city; she had done everything in her power to find Annie. Even though Marlene didn’t technically discover her daughter’s whereabouts herself, here she was, sitting tall on the stand, her greyish-blond hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. She wore a nice white blouse

with what looked to be cream-coloured pants. You could tell she was Annie's mom, they had the same eyes.

“Where were you the night of your daughter's disappearance?”

“I was home, making dinner for Annie and I. She called me, I picked up, and she was frantic. She was crying, yelling, I could hardly make out what she was saying.”

“What did she say on the phone call?”

Marlene shudders. “She said mom, mom, I'm trying to come home but I can't. I asked her why, and she tried to speak, but before she could, I heard someone say, “you little bitch”, and then it was dead. Then I didn't hear from or see my daughter for eight and half months. Then she turned up.”

“And you believe that Miss. Whittaker is the one who spoke on the phone?”

“Yes.” Marlene said. “Annie kept mentioning this club she had been going to, but she never gave too many details. When I discovered her journal, which she had hidden, she constantly wrote about the club, which was called Greater Purpose.”

I looked at Annie, who visibly tensed up at the name. Her lawyer leaned over, whispering to her, and she nodded.

The first meeting I ever went to, Josephine was dressed all in white. She met me at the door, excited as ever to see me.

“Drew, Welcome! I'm so glad you could make it!”

She hugged me, which caught me off guard, but I returned the gesture. My parents were

never the affectionate type, they didn't hug or kiss me growing up, and they mostly spoke through bible verses or orders. It was nice to be embraced.

Josephine led me inside her home and into the living room. There were quite a few people already, some scattered in the living room while the others leaked in and out of the kitchen. I looked through the crowd to catch a glimpse of the dining table, which was covered in appetizers. Josephine saw my eyes glued to the food and sent me to grab a plate. I scanned the various dips, sandwiches, chips, any pub-style appetizer you could think of was there. A man walked up to me, a dumpling in his gloved hand.

"Want one?" He asked.

I stared at the ball of dough, then at the man. He was older, around Josephine's age maybe, and had a big smile on his face. I nodded at him and he placed the dumpling on my plate.

"Careful," He said. "My hands can be a little hot."

"What?"

He walked away. I poked the dumpling and felt the warmth radiating off it. Josephine emerged from the kitchen, and she waved for me to follow her.

She took me through the living room, out the front door, and around to the backyard. There was a small shed, and beside that, what looked like a large garage. She walked up to the entrance of the garage, grabbing a key from under the welcome mat, which is the same colour as the brown door. She unlocked it, beckoning for me to come inside. There was this feeling in my gut, an awful feeling, but I ignored it, and walked in.

The floors were shiny, bright, fresh wood, and the walls were a soft baby blue. There were headshots of people hung up all over the interior, with a large photo of Josephine at the top of

the stairs. It was slightly cold, and Josephine handed me slippers for my feet. I put them on, shuffling behind her as she led me up the stairs, into a room. Same floors, same baby blue walls. There were only two chairs in the room, facing each other. Josephine invited me to sit.

“Drew,” She said. “I’d like to talk about the club, if you’re interested.”

I nodded.

“Well, as you mentioned before, your parents are Christian, yes?”

I nodded again.

“That’s sort of what we have here, but it’s not like Christianity. It’s not a religion. It’s something much better.”

Josephine stood, walking out of the room, returning moments later with a small knife. She held it in her palm, then cut a small slit. She threw the knife on the ground, pressing her finger onto the cut, then letting it go.

“Look.” She said.

The cut was healed. Still there, but healed. Had she magically made the wound disappear? There was no way, her blood had simply clotted at the right time. I stared at her hand, then at her. She was smiling.

“We call ourselves Greater Purpose.” She said. “We aren’t just super-powered, we are here to guide people. We are here to show others that even though they are inferior to the level of which we attain ourselves, we are in this together.”

“So, you think you’re better than normal people?” The words left my mouth before I could stop them.

Josephine's face fell, but only for a moment, and then she smiled again. "Is that how you see it?"

I shook my head. "It's a bad habit of mine. I call it reading between the lines. I sum up what people say, in a mean way."

She has a perplexed look on her face, sitting down on the chair in front of me. "Do your parents tell you that?"

I nod.

"You're very smart, Drew. And here, at Greater Purpose, we value knowledge. We will value you. If you decide to join, you'll have a home here."

"You think I'm smart?"

My parents never complimented me. They'd thank me if I did something they needed me to, but other than that, they never acknowledge me in a positive light. It felt good to hear someone call me smart; I never thought I was stupid, but I never think much of myself as is. And coming from someone as wise and well-liked as Josephine, it meant the world to me. I looked up at her.

"I want to know more."

When Annie Jenkins stepped onto the stand, the room was suffocated with tension. I sat up straight and glanced at Josephine, who looked calm as ever. Annie wouldn't look in her direction, instructed by her lawyer to keep her eyes on her.

"Do you know this woman, Annie?"

Annie nods. "Yes."

“What’s her name?”

“Josephine Whittaker.”

“When did you first meet Josephine?”

Annie gulped. “When I was seventeen. About two years ago.”

“Where did you meet her?”

“She was preaching outside the mall downtown.” Annie said. “I was walking, and I stopped to listen for a moment. As soon as she saw me, she came over and started talking to me. She told me I was pretty, and asked me how old I was.”

“What did she say when you told her your age?”

“She asked me if I was with my parents. When I told her I was alone, she invited me to her home with the rest of the group.” Annie paused, holding her breath for a moment. “I followed her, and that was when she first told me about the cult.”

“Objection your honour!” one of Josephine’s lawyers shrieked. “My client is not affiliated with any said cult or conspiracy.”

“Overruled.” The judge said, then motioned for Annie to continue.

I thought back to my first interaction with Josephine. It was incredibly similar to Annie’s, which gave me a cold feeling in my gut. There wasn’t a single part of me that ever doubted Josephine, I knew this. But looking at Annie, seeing her face, the way she can’t even look at the side of the room where Josephine sat, it was the first time I ever had an inkling of doubt.

“Th-the club,” Annie continued. “She told me about the club...” She stops, shuddering. She looks as if she may vomit.

“Take your time, Annie.” Her lawyer said.

“Greater Purpose,” Annie announced after a moment. “The club was called Greater Purpose, and Josephine was the leader. She believes that some of us have superpowers, and those of us who do, we’re the elite. The upper class of society. Josephine believes she is some kind of god.”

I looked at Josephine, who still looked stone cold. That was one thing I noticed about her; she always looked composed. The third meeting I went to, one of the members named Helen, a woman who could wield fire, accidentally set a curtain aflame. I didn’t see it happen, but I heard her scream as she tried to put it out. Everyone was freaking out except for Josephine, who grabbed a bowl of water and threw it on the flames. She cleaned up, took Helen outside for a few moments, and when they came back, she still had a smile on her face. Helen’s eyes were glossy and she suddenly had the cardigan that Josephine had been wearing. When I reached to grab her arm to get her attention, she flinched, claiming she was okay, just cold.

I’d never witnessed Josephine raise a hand or her voice. All of us adored her, but it made sense to fear her. Her kindness could come off as threatening at times, only because if she could be so nice, it was scary to think how ruthless she could be if she needed to. Because of that, I did what I was told, and it was the least I could. Josephine gave me a home away from home, she taught me about finances, relationships, she bought me new shoes. The same shoes I’m staring at now, wondering if Annie really is crazy, wondering if me lying to be on this jury is going to help or wreak havoc.

“I thought my super power was mind reading. I was always right about what was going to happen. That’s called intuition.” Annie’s voice is firm. “She manipulates you into thinking basic human abilities are “super”,” Her voice rises. “She beats you and berates you when no one is

around, but only if you're a woman. She gaslights you into thinking your life is awful without her, constantly asking you things like, "how's your father? Oh goodness, I forgot he's never coming back" and then you're crying again, and she sinks her claws deeper and deeper," Annie stands. She's finally looking at Josephine. "All I wanted was to go home! I was just a kid! And you'd rather me dead than tell the world of the evil that's inside you!"

The guards ran to remove Annie from the stand. She was crying as they lead her out of the courtroom.

Josephine asked for a tissue to wipe her eyes. "I don't mean to get emotional, I've just never seen such neglect in a child. I only yearned to help a girl with a single mother." Josephine said, as if she was trying to be quiet, but she knew the jury could hear her. If looks could kill, Marlene would've been the one charged for murder.

Josephine had never once physically threatened me. But looking back, thinking about that night with Helen, the way she was cowering after her alone time with Josephine, the way she wouldn't take the cardigan off, even after I saw sweat on her forehead. These things just seemed like random parts, but the way I was piecing them together, it frightened me. I was smart, I knew this now, and it was all beginning to add up in a way I didn't like.

"Your honour," one of Josephine's lawyers spoke up. "Due to the nature of Miss Jenkins' hysterical outbreak, we'd like to dismiss the claims of the phone call."

Annie's lawyer interjected. "Miss Jenkins is protected under the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act. She went through various psychological tests beforehand to solidify her position to speak today. Ordered by the judge themself."

Josephine shifted, crossing one leg over the other. Her lawyer didn't respond.

I think back to a few weeks ago, when I had a one on one meeting with Josephine. She only did these with specific members, and only if you're male.

She took me back to the clubhouse, but instead of taking me to where we were last time, she took me to another room with nothing but a bed and a nightstand.

"Have you enjoyed your time so far, Drew?" Josephine asked.

"Yes!" I said. "It's so wonderful to be a part of something, to feel like I belong somewhere. And to spend time away from my parents."

Josephine laughed. "I'm sure they miss you when you're not around. You're a bright, funny person."

My face felt warm. "Thanks Josephine. I appreciate how nice you are to me."

She walked over to me, grabbing both my hands. "I care about you. A lot. You're a member, yes, but you're very special to me."

I smiled.

"Part of being a member of Greater Purpose is to experience the greatest pleasures in life." She let go of my hands, walked to the bed, and took a seat. "Pleasure can come in many forms, which I've seen you experience already since you joined us: good food, new clothes, new friends.." Josephine patted the spot beside her and I walked over, taking a seat. "Have you ever had a girlfriend Drew?"

I shook my head. "I've had crushes if that counts."

Josephine giggles. Like, a school girl giggle. Was she trying to be flirtatious? Why did I enjoy it? "I'd expect you to have girls at your feet."

“I can hardly make friends let alone get a girl to like me.” I said. “I’m better at talking to older people.”

“The people here love you, Drew, all of them.” Josephine said, then she paused before asking me, “Have you ever been touched by a woman?”

I shook my head again, feeling slightly embarrassed to reveal this. I’ve never really had this type of conversation, ever.

“Oh, Drew.” Josephine said, resting her hand on my leg. “Touching, wanting to be touched, it’s natural. It’s healthy. You need sex as much as you need water.”

“I’d die without water.” I said. “I’ve gone eighteen years a virgin.”

Josephine giggled again.

“But I know it’s natural, I just...” I can’t find the words. My face is burning.

“You know, the neck is one of the most erogenous spots on a person.” Josephine said, bringing her hands to my shoulders, rubbing her thumbs above my collar bones. “I always found that to be fascinating. As a kid, I used to hate when people touched my neck. I’d watch shows or movies and squirm when someone’s throat got slit, or their neck broken. A neck is meant for lips, it’s meant for love.” She looked at me. “Do you trust that I would never hurt you?” Josephine asked.

I nodded.

“Do you trust me?”

“More than anyone.”

Then she asked me, “Can I kiss you?”

I looked at Josephine. Like, really looked at her. She had dark green eyes, with thick lashes that curled up perfectly. Her skin was still taut, fine lines around her mouth and on her forehead, and her hair was curly, cascading over her shoulders beautifully. I never thought of her, or anyone really, in this way before. I felt like my entire life was simply me repressing things so others could be happy. I wanted to be loved. I wanted to be touched. Josephine seemed like the one who should give those things to me. She cared about me. She gave me a home.

“You can kiss me.”

Annie was back on the stand. Her lawyer held a small notebook in her hands.

“Miss. Jenkins, I’m going to read some excerpts from your journal, and I’d like you to tell me if you remember these events. Is that okay?”

“Yes.” Annie says.

“Here, you write, ‘Josephine is really pretty. All the guys at the club always talk about her,’” Her lawyer begins.

“That’s true.”

“You then wrote ‘she doesn’t like when others call me pretty. She slapped me the last time it happened,’”

“True.”

“‘Josephine has favourites, and they’re all men. She only allows one on one time with herself and the guys. She always takes them to the bedroom, and they come out smiling,’”

“True.”

“I don’t know if it’s true, but apparently she has sex with them. Even the younger ones.”

Annie nods. “It’s all true.”

“Objection your honour!” Josephine’s lawyer says. “How credible is a teenager’s journal? Do we even have dates as to when this was written?”

The lawyers began to argue back and forth, but all I could hear was ringing. My stomach dropped and my hands were clammy. My tongue felt like sandpaper from how dry my mouth went. I needed to leave, but I didn’t think I could. Everything that shouldn’t make sense was becoming crystal clear; It wasn’t proven how much of Annie’s story was really true, but I also knew that these things weren’t coincidences. Josephine comes to mind and the warm feeling I used to get turns hot. It starts scorching my insides and I don’t know what to think, I don’t know what to do, and as I glance at Josephine, she’s looking at me. Thinking of her was one thing, but looking at her was too much. The room goes black.

When I woke up, I was in the hospital. My mom was talking to the nurses, and my dad was nowhere to be found. Probably at home with the family.

“Drew? You’re awake!” My mom said as she walked to my bed. “What the hell were you doing in a courtroom? You have to be forced to church but go there on your own?”

“Jury duty, mom. I guess I didn’t eat enough, hence the fainting.” That was a lie, but she didn’t need to know the truth. Not yet, at least.

“Hence the phone call that nearly killed your father and I. Lord have mercy.” My mom ran a hand through her hair. “At least you didn’t end up like the other young one.”

I sat up. “What do you mean?”

“Annie Jenkins.” She said. “She had a breakdown in the courtroom as I’m sure you saw, then they found her dead. Suicide. Broke her neck jumping from the courtroom window.”

“What?”

My mom looked upset. “Poor girl had a lot more going on than any of us know. God bless her soul and may she rest in his care.”

“But she was fine.” I said. “After the breakdown, she came back and testified. She wouldn’t have killed herself.”

“Pitch that to the court.” My mom said. “Or better yet, confession.”

“What about-” I stopped myself. “What happens now? Is there still a case?”

“They’re saying it’s unlikely. Annie was what made most of the evidence credible. If she’s gone, they don’t have much to work with.”

“So it’s over?” I asked her.

“I guess so.”

“How long was I out?”

“Only a few hours.”

I stared at my mom, then laid back down. It felt as if my blood had frozen. Annie was dead. She killed herself. At least, that was the story, and it was a good one.

“A neck is meant for love,” Josephine said to me once. I wonder if that crossed her mind when she murdered Annie Jenkins.