

William Lemon

A Part of Love

It was impossible to man the Persuading Station that morning. Each phone call followed the same boring pattern, no matter who was on the line. Things got so bad I forgot when to drop in the advertisements. Earlier, I slipped in a jingle for Kitty Greenz while Mrs. Knutsen received the news about her mastectomy. A cat sang over her sobs, praising his new Eco-Friendly litter with a show tune. The call soon devolved into a chorus of cat meows and swear words, all directed toward me. Following that performance, I wore the headset around my neck, inserting ads only when necessary.

All that misery soon disappeared once I heard her voice. *Hot Horny Teen* giggled with subtle beauty, even when she described sex acts that were illegal in forty-two states. Despite her fake name, I soon found a hint of vulnerability in her cadence. It wasn't hard to imagine her after that bit of information. *Hot Horny Teen* was a frail girl in her early twenties, forced into this life of phone sex by her stepfather. I almost vomited onto my desk while listening to this mess he created. Their relationship had a clear pattern, one that would continue indefinitely. I jotted down the number, determined to free her from this injustice.

I carried *Hot Horny Teen's* number in my pocket, even to the Performance Update, which was in Peter's office, since he was on the horn with an irate customer. He was on his fifth cup of the day, and pretended to choke

himself each time the caller asked a new question. I drank from his pot of coffee, then picked at his desk, intrigued by a new photo next to the computer. His family was crowded around a cabana, holding a sign that read, *Life's a beach!* I placed the photo back onto the desk, a little upset I hadn't been invited.

“So,” Peter said, hand cupped around the receiver, “how ya doing today?”

“I've got a Non Com,” I said, pulling out *Hot Horny Teen's* number. “I just need to requisition the Dialogue Reports ASAP.”

“What'd they do?” he asked, almost whispering.

“Seems this woman is getting others to consume her allotted advertising minutes.”

“Oh God. Check that out right away,” he said. “Hey, before you go. Have you seen the new EZ-Drop? It might help you out with that.”

“No, can't say I have.”

“You've got to try it out.”

Before I could ask to help, he was holding a giant cellphone, which was connected to an archaic Cal P. B. & E. laptop. He juggled the EZ-Drop in both hands, trying not to drop it.

“This is the future of our company. Not only can we track a call with this baby, but we can even record conversations.”

“Is this for my department?”

“Not yet, buddy.” he replied. “Pretty soon, though. Then we'll be doing this from home.”

“That'll be the day.”

“Say, why don't you take it for a test-drive. I can spare it for a couple days.”

“You won't get into trouble with the Dept. of Corporate Protocol?” I asked.

“If you keep everything on the up and up we should be fine.”

I laughed a little too hard at that joke. Instead of calling attention to my red face, he brushed it off with a high-five, followed by several slaps on the back. We drank another cup of coffee after he got off the phone call. I attempted to listen while he spoke, nodding at each joke, face still blotchy. But his voice seemed unimportant, almost singsongy.

Hers was only one that mattered.

It would've been a sin to go home, especially when you considered the obligation I now had. I just wanted her phone records, but now I had everything. The EZ-Drop provided me with a way of maintaining contact, without having to actually be close to her. That didn't mean I planned on staying away, hidden in some hotel like a coward. I could now set-up camp not too far from the call's origin, yet remain hidden in my car. It was the perfect way to keep her safe.

For the stakeout, I ordered a couple of combo meals from Kingsley's Burgers & Such. This is the restaurant where you-know-what happened, so I'm allowed to use the take-out menu, but everything else was verboten. It's an old castle someone moved over to California, in hopes that it might become part of the new amusement park called Animalia. Once that didn't materialize, Think Fast!, the restaurant chain, turned it into a family restaurant, full of servers dressed as kings and wench. Now you could see where the lawsuit came from. After all, she was a wench, a homely wench, yet a wench nevertheless. The judge wouldn't let me argue that in court, even though he told me to be honest.

The sun decided to hang off in the distance, teasing me with its slow departure. I ate the burgers one after another, glare in my eyes, pausing only to drink my Coca-Cola. After finishing the Feudalism Fries, I set-up the EZ-

Drop on my passenger's seat, then plugged it into the cigarette lighter. The EZ-Drop showed about thirty active phone lines, with twenty of those being Talk-N-Watch. This type of line had both phone and video transmission, making it quite clear that the girls had video-chats with perverts online, along with standard phone-sex. At the time, I didn't know whether or not *Hot Horny Teen* was a part of the video side of the operation, which, as you might imagine, tore me up. I could hardly finish my last Double Squire Burger.

I spend the night in my car, huddled up near the EZ-Drop. Most perverts called around eleven, desperately seeking approval when their worst impulses got the better of them. I figured I should track their habits while attempting to discover *Hot Horny Teen's* identity. I kept the EZ-Drop running, ear glued to the receiver. The conversations reminded me of listening to my brother and his girlfriend through the bedroom wall. Pretty soon my erection poked through my boxers, just like it did when I was a kid, threatening to burst out of the zipper. That throbbing only got worse after I found her specific line.

Hot Horny Teen was just as potent as before. While under the influence of her voice, men were able to feel whole, a part of something larger. I listened to them transform while slurping the last of my Serf Shake. Surprisingly enough, it took over five of these phone calls to find out her name was Chloe. My cheeks became flush with anticipation, forcing me to practice the court-order breathing exercises, which were designed to curb my abnormal behavior. It calmed me down in ten seconds flat. I was now able to see *Hot Horny Teen* as a complete entity, rather than an abstract voice. To celebrate the occasion, I placed my hand underneath my pants, then made love with her for the first time. Her voice played in the background as I imagined her body on top of me.

The next day, I decided to wear something special to work, just to test out the new look I'd recently developed. Christopher Haylow, my favorite magician and dating expert, recommended that men adopt certain

feminine qualities when attempting to attract a woman. In his book *Abraca-Nab-Her*, he suggested the use of dark eyeliner, along with his brand of slim-fitting black t-shirts, which had studs and glitter imbedded into the fabric. Evidently my t-shirt was a bit snug, because the girls in Corporate Receiving kept walking past my office, giggling as they rounded the corner. Normally this would have elicited one of my patented moments, yet those feelings never arose, only hovered near the surface.

The conversations seemed to drone on into the afternoon, one blending into another. I fell asleep listening to two housewives discuss whether or not a friend actually got a boob-job. Between the chatter, I began to imagine what sort of conversation Chloe and I might have. I pictured us on a park bench, arm and arm, nuzzling as our children played in the distance. She whispered in my ear, commenting on our little boy's cheeks, which reminded her of my ruddy complexion. I laughed with my whole body, tickling her midsection when I regained control. We were perfect in that moment.

Halfway through the dream, the alarm buzzed in my ear, reminding me to place another commercial into the conversation. I flipped through the schedule, but could not find the appropriate jingle. I played an old standby about absorbent feminine napkins, sung beautifully by the late Robert Goulet. As he described the efficient cotton-weave fabric, I looked at my notes, attempting to find the correct commercial. It was no use. I neglected to update the system this morning, which meant no new text, no new jingles. When the commercial ended, only static remained. I disconnected the phone line, but it was too late. The red lights began flashing above my desk, blinking intermittently, signaling to the entire office I was now offline.

Peter rushed into the room, panting, holding a fistful of Corporate Protocol printouts in both hands. I quickly stuffed the EZ-Drop into the desk, shuffling Kingsley's Burgers & Such wrappers to make room for the machine.

“Why are you offline?” Peter asked, gripping the printouts.

“Look, Peter, it was just an accident,” I replied. “I’m downloading the new Advert Placement Program as we speak.”

He began scanning the documents, using his index finger to read. I didn’t need them in front of me to know what they said. The Dept. of Corporate Protocol had my every movement traced, even the print out of the conversations I’d eavesdrop on. Being offline was the least of my worries. Once he got to the part where I used it for Non Persuading Phone Calls, I’d be toast, thrown out on my ass.

“Do you still have the EZ-Drop?” he asked.

“Why?” I replied, head sunk into my chest. “What does that have to do with this?”

“Just bring it out.” he shouted. “Now.”

I nodded, head shaking from up and down, just long enough to distract him. Inside my desk, near the hand drawn pictures of Chloe, was a Haylow Smoke Bomb, which was designed for dramatic exits. For instance, if you were at a bar, speaking with several attractive women at once, you could drop the Haylow on them, sending a cloud of smoke into the air. Then, after the dust had settled, you’d be gone with the hottest chick on your arm. The other bimbos wouldn’t even know what hit them. I cracked one of these open in my office, clouding the room with white smoke and chalky residue. In the chaos, I stumbled outside, EZ-Drop in hand, chased by several men in dark suits and sunglasses.

That meeting wasn’t the only thing awry. Operation Free Chloe hit a big snag when I arrived at her workplace. The street in front of Chloe’s building was blocked off from public use, shut-down to accommodate The Guild of Stay at Home Americans, a growing organization of adult men who choose to live with their mothers. I drank from a

bottle of Doc Wiggle's Olde Timey Spiked Lemonade, positive I'd never be able to find Chloe before the Dept. of Corporate Protocol arrived to take the E-Z Drop away from me. After all, I'd used it on Non Persuading Phone Calls all week. It was only a matter of time.

I staggered out of the car, head clouded with a quarter bottle of Doc Wiggle's. Members of G.S.H.A. waved hello, convinced I was a part of their movement. Even though this group accepted me, I felt like an impostor who looked the part. Maybe that was my lot in life. I'd drift from one woman to the next, then end up in some old folk's home, weary from a broken heart. I stopped near one of the gaming tents, which was adjacent to Chloe's building, heart still in pieces.

Dozens of men stared at a large screen, pretending to be a group of Marines, who were protecting a W.W. II concentration camp from hordes of Nazi zombies. The men flinched after being hit with shrapnel or bitten by a crazed S.S. guard. In a sense, they were inside the game, yet distant from any real part of it. I laughed out loud, finally able admit that we were both the same. We were so afraid of being swept up by history that we created a virtual world. I had to rise above that phony life, not give into it.

I sobered up at the Mt. Dew fountain, explaining my thoughts on love with anyone who would listen. Most rolled their eyes, or asked me about the latest Brooklyn Tanner comic, which made me think they weren't ready for my ideas. No one seemed to get the simple fact that all love is based on fear, and if you don't rise above that anxiety, then you'd never truly experience real love. Before I could explain this thought, I saw the Dept. of Corporate Protocol searching through the crowd, honing in on me. It was now or never.

I climbed up onto the bar, sweat glistening across my forehead, and used the loudest voice I could muster. The crowd soon grew silent, all eyes directed upward, fixed on me.

“Everyone,” I said, “there’s a surprise happening inside the adjacent building. We’ve been told to wait in the lobby until it’s ready. I’ve heard it’s quiet important.”

Like lemmings they followed me across the street toward Chloe's building. Sweaty men soon filled the lobby, blocking the entrance and emergency exit. I waited for the group to settle before pulling the fire alarm. Girls ran from their rooms, half naked, confused by the heard of sweaty middle-aged men occupying the lobby. I scanned the crowd, searching for my Chloe in this mass of naked flesh and black t-shirts.

I spotted a fully nude girl crouched into a ball, shivering with fear. Even though I had only heard her voice, I knew I had finally found Chloe. Everything I’d imaged about her seemed to match up. She had transparent skin, speckled with light brown freckles and auburn hair that could only be natural. I pushed through the crowd without fear.

I grabbed hold of Chloe, tossing her onto my shoulder for safe keeping. Our bodies pressed against one another until they became one. Despite my reassurance, she screamed for the security guard, repeating his name over and over. I tried to settle her down with a kiss, but that seemed to make the situation much worse. The security guard fired his taser at me. I twitched at the entrance, shaking each time someone stepped on a body part. Chloe’s outline faded into blackness, finally disappearing when I passed out.

When it became light again, I was strapped to a table, questioned by men in white coats. They poked and prodded, then sent me into the General Population Area. Down there, it’s nothing more than a collection of strangers, eating pudding with plastic spoons around a television set. We’re all given a standard issue robe, which will never quite close, leaving your backside always exposed. I told my doctor about this last week, and he didn’t do a damn thing

about it. He told me that I should focus on what led me here. I said I already figured that out. He disagreed. That's when I yelled at him. He wrote down a prescription for more pills and told me that I should exercise every day.

I wandered the halls, just like he suggested. At first, it felt kinda pointless, yet I pressed on anyway, half-sure something was around the bend. Near the end of the hallway, past the soda machine and ping-pong table, I found a small talk-box that was connected to the nurse's station. A woman answered after I pressed the button several times.

She said her name was Chloe.