

## Undress Rehearsal

“Shut up! I want to hear this song.”

The oldies station was playing *Summer Wind*, and the man loved his Sinatra. This was one of his favorite arrangements, but the girl’s muted screams made it hard to hear. *Hope she doesn’t puke. Dying of pulmonary edema would be an agonizing way to go.*

He reached over and cranked up the volume. *If she’ll just settle down back there and listen to the music, she might actually enjoy herself.*

The old motor home lurched and bounced with every bump and pothole, and her handcuffs made little metallic ‘clinks’ now and then. He was driving very deliberately, just under the speed limit, because he knew this would be a tough one to talk his way out of. But after a decade of sifting through the detritus of other people’s crimes, he was pretty sure he knew how to pull this off without getting arrested.

He glanced at her over his right shoulder as he drove. “Hey! Kick my seat if you think you’re going to throw up!”

They’d been driving since early evening and now that it was dark he needed to get rid of her without any witnesses.

Weeks in the planning, now that it was nearly happening he had to admit he wasn’t impressed with his execution. He had found the girl easily enough, they were all over downtown. But he’d clearly miscalculated her tranquilizer dosage wrong for her weight, and she’d awoken early. *Well, to be fair, I haven’t worked narco in years, but still.*

He frowned at her in the rearview. *She doesn’t even look like Asya, but she’ll do for now.* He didn’t think it mattered much what they looked like, anyway, he just wanted the obsessing to stop. *Well, that’s what today’s exercise is all about, isn’t it? Working out the details?* If nothing else, he counted himself a detail man, and that was a handy thing to be in his line of work.

Higher and higher above Santa Barbara they went, up the steep, winding San Marcos Pass. The engine strained to keep up with the occasional car or truck, the headlights barely piercing the pitch-black mountain darkness. He wasn't sure how far he would need to go when the time came, but this route was as good as any, he figured, and far from prying eyes.

He imagined trying to explain this dubious game to someone unfamiliar with his compulsion. *They would have to understand what happened to Anastasiya. The fact that I've not been with anyone, since...ever since she—*

Quite abruptly, the man brought his own train of thought to a halt. *That's ancient history. Next time, if there ever is a next time, she'll go willingly, or, if she resists, by force.*