

## The Vending Machine

By Nicole Moen

"Hey," the dark haired guy said casually as he walked up along Brently who was staring at the vending machine.

"Hey," Brently said and looked away quickly. Did he want salt or sugar, he wondered.

"You... Brently, right?"

"Ah, yeah," Brently said and turned back to study the selections in front of him. He looked over the row of candy bars and tried to decide if any of those would satisfy his craving.

"I'm Alex," the other boy said. "I live on the tenth floor. I see you all the time in the elevator."

"Oh, ah, nice to meet you," Brently replied politely, keeping his eyes on the Snickers bar in front of him. His mother had drilled it into his head for years that it was impolite to ignore people. It just is not the southern way, she would say. Mentally he rolled his eyes and looked back at the candy bar. Maybe he would have a Snickers bar, good mix of salt and sugar.

"Having a hard time deciding what to get?" Alex asked nonchalantly.

"Oh, yeah, I guess so. I was hungry when I came down here. Now I don't know."

"Sugar or salt, huh?" Alex said with a smirk.

"Ah, yeah," Brently replied giving him a queer look. "You can go ahead if you want though."

"Nah, I'll wait. You were here first, ya know."

"I really don't mind, you can go ahead of me," Brently said, hoping to get rid of him.

Alex shrugged no, and the two stood in silence for a moment.

"You always have this much trouble making a decision?" Alex asked casually.

"What?" Brently asked, momentarily startled.

"I mean, in your every day life. Is it hard for you to decide what you're going to do?"

"No, yeah, I don't know. Sometimes I guess. Why'd you ask me that?" Brently asked annoyed.

"Well, I just noticed that you've been standing here for a few minutes now, and you haven't even made a move toward that coin slot."

"Oh. Well, I guess. I just don't know what I want, and I don't have any more quarters so I wanted to make sure it was the right thing, that's all."

"Hmm...sounds like you have a hard time trusting your inner feelings."

"What? What are you, one of those psychology freaks?"

"Me? No, I'm a writer, actually."

Well, why don't you go write somewhere else, he thought. His mother's voice interrupted him, scolding him for being rude. 'Get over it, you old bitch', he thought taking pleasure in defying his mother...even if he would never dare say it to her.

Maybe he would have a Pay Day.

"Brently...how'd you get that name?" Alex asked after another long moment of silence. "I mean, why not Brent or something?"

Brently looked back at him sharply and then looked around helplessly. The elevator was out of order and he had to trek all the way back to the 13th floor. He had no food in his room, and a ten page paper ahead of him. He was not going to go back empty handed again. He had already done

"Hmm, what? What does that mean?" Brently asked when it became evident that Alex was not going to share.

"Nothing, I just think that's kind of an uptight name, that's all."

"Well, no one asked you, did they?" Brently retorted.

"You did."

"When?"

"Just now. You asked me what 'hmm' meant?"

"Yeah, well I don't need a commentary on my name, ok?"

"It wasn't a commentary."

"Huh?"

"I said, it wasn't a commentary. It was a comment. There's a difference."

Brently did not reply. He looked toward the stairwell and then back toward the vending machine, trying to decide if it was really worth it to stay there. "Why don't you just go ahead?" he asked a little desperately.

"Have you ever thought of committing suicide?"

that he had him hooked, "you can't make a decision so you're obviously afraid of commitment. You're afraid of your inner self, as evidenced by the fact that you asked me if I was one of those 'psychology freaks.' You were trying to make me feel inferior because you were insecure. It didn't work. And," Alex finished, giving him a knowing look, "you can't stand up for yourself."

"Why do you say that?" he asked hesitantly.

"Because anyone else would have told me to piss off about five minutes ago. But, you, Brently my friend, have just stood here like a turnip rooted to the ground. It's like you're waiting for someone to come pull you up, roots and all so you can get on with becoming somebody's dinner. You want to say something to me, I can see it in your eyes, but you don't have the balls to do it. People like you are the reason we have crime in this country. It's that indecisiveness that causes the problems," he said slapping the back of his hand against his palm.

"Criminals, who I, myself, prefer to call opportunists, see somebody like you and they see weakness. Who could blame them for exploiting it? I mean, come on, do you think the government gives a shit about the Kurds?" he asked and went on before Brently could answer. "Course they don't, but they care about cheap oil, so they exploit the weakness. They go over to Iraq and buddy up to those chumps and make it look like they're doing the right thing by killing everybody. Do you see us messing with Castro? No, and why? Because Cuba doesn't have anything that we want. That's why. There's nothing to exploit over there except cigars, and we can make our own damn cigars."

Brently looked at him blankly, "What does not wanting anything from Cuba have to do with the Kurds being weak?"

Alex rolled his eyes. He had obviously not gotten the point across. "Ok, let me put it to you this way...hypothetical...you're at a party, and some drunk sorority girl walks up to you and asks you to take her home. Say the one with the nice tits...yeah I saw you looking at her. Anyway, so you get her home, and she says 'stay with me.' Now you know she's drunk off her ass and wouldn't look at you twice in the harsh light of day, but what do you do?" Alex asked and looked at him expectantly.

"I don't know."

Brently shifted uncomfortably.

"You see Brently, this is why you are food for criminals. You fuck her, Brently. You exploit the weakness. Geez, man, it's American. See, but you didn't know that. So, I say you got a decision. You can go ahead and kill yourself now or you can go on being a schmuck for the rest of your life. Me, I wouldn't want to be known as a chump for the rest of my live long days."

"I'm not a chump," he said, sounding unsure.

"Yes, you are Brently. I've had my eye on you. I know that you're the one who tried to brick your RA into his room. Only thing is Brently, if you're going to do something like that, you don't use toothpaste as the cement. It doesn't work."

"I didn't do that," Brently said, in what he

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that once tonight when he saw that girl with the great tits was down here getting a Diet Coke. If this jerk would simply go away, he thought, he might be able to make his decision.

"I don't know," he finally said. "I just kept Brently. I never really thought about it."

"Hmm," Alex said, poking his lips out a bit as if in deep thought. After a minute he seemed to decide something, then remained silent.

"What?! No! What kind of question is that?"

"Just wondered," Alex said flippantly. "You just seem like a likely candidate, that's all."

A moment passed, and Brently unwillingly allowed himself to be sucked in. "Why?" he finally asked in an almost inaudible voice.

"What?" Alex asked.

"I said, why?" Brently repeated a little louder.

"Well," Alex began slowly, secure in the fact

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