

**A
WOMAN'S
GUIDE
TO POWER**

UNBOUND

KASIA URBANIAK COFOUNDER OF
THE ACADEMY

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kasia Urbaniak is the founder and CEO of The Academy, a school that teaches women the foundations of power and influence.

Urbaniak's perspective on power is unique. Over the course of nearly twenty years, she has worked as professional dominatrix, practiced Taoist alchemy in one of the oldest female-led monasteries in China, and obtained dozens of certifications in different disciplines, including Medical Qigong and Systemic Constellations.

Since founding The Academy in 2013, Urbaniak has taught hundreds of women practical tools to step into leadership positions in their relationships, families, workplaces, and wider communities. She has spoken at corporations and conferences worldwide. Her students include artists and politicians, philanthropists and aid workers, lawyers and judges, as well as executives from some of the biggest corporations in America, including Amazon, Google, and the major banks. She has counseled Oscar-winning film producers and Oscar- and Tony award-winning performers and directors and has spoken at the Yale School of Management, at Wharton School of business, and at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), as well as at conferences worldwide.

To my students,
and to each and every woman who chooses
to ride into battle with us

Power without love is reckless and abusive, and . . . love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Knowing others is intelligence. Knowing yourself is true wisdom. Mastering others is strength. Mastering yourself is true power.

LAO TZU, *TAO TE CHING*

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INTRODUCTION

THE CALL TO POWER

This book is a training manual for battle. It will prepare you for war when it's necessary and skillful collaboration when you desire it. It is a field guide to the impossible, the outrageous, the unimaginable. It contains instructions for achieving unattainable goals, ones so far out of your reach you feel stupid or crazy *thinking* them, let alone saying them out loud.

It is an education in breaking the ingrained conditioning that keeps women silent and accommodating when we should be expressing ourselves and having influence. It will teach you to know what you want and how to get it, which will change the world around you.

It is a guide to power.



My name is Kasia Urbaniak, and I spent seventeen years studying to become a Taoist nun while working as one of the most successful dominatrices in the world.

These seemingly contradictory tracks gave me unexpected and unprecedented insight into how power works. In studying Taoism around the globe, I learned to read the human body, so I'd know a person's intention to attack or retreat before they'd moved a muscle or uttered a word. It taught me to follow and trust what's most alive—what's humming with energy and possibility.

From my work in the dungeon, I learned all the ways that imagination can heal us and help us to discover deep emotional

truths. In playing games with power, I learned to differentiate between real authority and a performance of it.

From both, I learned about power dynamics: influence on others that exists beyond the level of language alone.

In 2012, I founded a school with Ruben Flores, an emergency field coordinator for the humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), to teach other women what I had learned. At the beginning, our school felt like an exclusive but growing secret society of powerful women whose headquarters just happened to be my Manhattan apartment. We were a modern-day, real-world Bene Gesserit, a coven of the righteous, planning world domination and achieving it.

But in 2018, many women began speaking out about their lived experiences of sexual harassment and assault, which gave rise to larger cultural conversations about feelings of powerlessness in family units, in romantic and sexual relationships, and in the workplace.

As the #MeToo movement gathered speed, women at large started speaking a truth that my students already knew and had trained for, that most—if not all—of us had clutched in a high-stakes, high-stress situation.

**When it was most important for
us to know and speak our truth,
we were unable to.**

The world is on fire, and the concepts I teach are ones that every woman should have access to. That is why I am writing this book.

This book *will* inoculate you against “no” and resistance of all kinds, including your own. It will help you to identify the life-force, the juice, the beautiful moving energy in every interaction, which is the key to understanding true desire. It will provide you with a constructive channel for all of the rage every woman has spent her

adult life tamping down. And it will teach you to harness one of the most powerful weapons we have—your attention.

And while there will be erotic absurdity and transcendent insight, what I really want to share with you is what I discovered *underneath* every interaction. Because power isn't a mood, an outfit, a moment, or a pose. It is the ability to access your deepest desires, express them fully, and use them to influence other people and the world at large.

Ultimately, this book is about *relationships*—in the den, in the bedroom, in the workplace, in Congress, and at the bar. It is about the dynamics that define them and decide their fate. It is about strength and vulnerability, dominance and surrender, and how each affects the flow of love, power, and influence.

I use binary terms—man and woman—when I speak about gender, not because I see gender as binary, but because my work is so deeply rooted in the cultural conditioning that all of us received when we were assigned “male” or “female” at birth. Regardless of how you identify now, the expectations of and treatment by your parents and society at large imprinted you, and make a difference in the way you behave in relationship to others.

You'll also notice that many of the examples I use are heteronormative. Much of what I teach addresses the ways that women have been conditioned to interact with men, including as romantic partners. But the behaviors outlined within these pages can be used with a spouse, sparring partner, coworker, friend, child, parent, or lover of any gender. Breaking the ties that bind will allow you freer, more powerful communication—with *everyone*.

When you play skillfully with power dynamics, the world changes. You stop being a servant of the life you're living and become a creator of the world you want.

Let's get started.

PART ONE

IT'S NOT YOU

Revealing the Invisible Bind

CHAPTER ONE

THE CONVERSATION UNDER THE CONVERSATION

The Hidden Architecture of Power

Women are furious. Instead of frolicking through fields of equal pay and the state-funded child care our feminist foremothers fought for, we're hanging on by shredded fingernails to rapidly eroding fundamental rights. Sexual assault doesn't seem to disqualify a man from public office; instead, they brag about it like it's a qualification. And every news cycle seems to bring a fresh story featuring our girl children, trafficked for the pleasure of wealthy, powerful men and covered up by their cronies.

We know that it has never been more important for us to speak—to be able to communicate the truth of our experiences, to ask for what we want, to be able to articulate our vision for the future we want to live in, and then make that vision happen.

And yet what I hear most from women is self-blame.

Truly badass women tell me about freezing—moments when they know they should say something, moments when they *need* to say something, or maybe it's too many things, but when they open their mouths, nothing comes out. Sometimes this freeze happens in high-stakes scenarios, when a job or their safety is on the line. On one hand, this makes it worse, and certainly more dangerous; by the time

they've returned to their bodies, his hand is up their skirt, the job has gone to someone else, or they've agreed to do something they really didn't want to do.

But on the other hand, they can't understand why it happens in ultra-*low*-stakes scenarios, too—like when the guy making their latte asks if they're single. And why can't they predict when this speechlessness is going to set in?

Baffled women confess that they don't know which version of themselves is going to show up for a meeting. Will it be the deer in the headlights, peeling herself off the conference room floor only to get steamrolled again—the one who mumbles a brilliant idea into her mug, just so the guy next to her can helpfully restate it and take the credit? Or the fearless Amazon who effortlessly holds the room in the palm of her hand, whose logic and charisma make her so irresistible, she could ask her team to ride to hell and back? Mansplainers and maninterrupters exist in every workplace; so how come she's mostly able to neutralize those guys with a cocked eyebrow—except on the days when she sounds like a harsh, bitter shrew, even to herself?

I can—and have—filled pages with women's bewilderments:

"I was just about to ask this guy to help me with my stroller on the stairs—but when he offered to help me, I heard myself saying, 'No, that's okay; I'm fine.'"

"When my boyfriend said he wanted a night alone, I got so depressed, I went straight to bed. I knew he just wanted to play his new video game, but I still felt completely annihilated; it felt like he was rejecting *me*."

"When the holy day came, and my boss finally asked me *exactly* what resources I needed to complete a major project on time, why did I only give him half of my list?"

A recent study showed that women who knew the average salary for a job proceeded to ask for *less than that* when they were negotiating for themselves. Another study: many women find it much more challenging to ask for a raise than to remain catastrophically underpaid. And another: women wait to be 100 percent qualified for management positions, whereas men don't hesitate to apply—which at least explains why so many women end up answering to less-qualified men.

At first blush, the items on this laundry list may seem unrelated except in the most general sense—"women getting in their own way."

But, in fact, every one of these is a symptom of the same underlying cause. And that cause is not insecurity, or childhood trauma, or women loving themselves less than men do; indeed, these paradoxes show up in the lives of the most therapized, self-actualized, self-loving women I know.

In fact, what appears to be a confidence gap could be considered yet another symptom of this underlying problem. Of course it is fundamentally destabilizing to realize that we can't trust ourselves to reliably, consistently, *effectively* advocate for ourselves, and to know that speechlessness may ambush us at any time, no matter how prepared we are.

The mystery isn't solved by a big-picture concept like sexism, either, though there's no shortage of evidence that misogyny is alive and well. Actually, it's good news that sexism isn't the culprit, because it means we don't have to wait to dismantle the patriarchy to put our hands on the levers of power, to dispel those confusions, and to learn to trust ourselves.

Every one of the bewilderments listed above took place—and could have been resolved—in a single moment during a conversation between people. In that one moment, a woman could not speak, or speak as effectively as she needed to. Which also means that if we can reclaim those moments, then we don't have to search for a psychological solution to these problems, or to wait until we've fixed the culture from the ground up.

The whole world is built on agreements, born from the conversations that happen inside relationships. All the seemingly fixed phenomena that surround us—from love to laws, from families to corporations to governments—are the direct result of an agreement. Private property is an agreement. So is monogamy, the nuclear family, the dictates of major religions, and our justice system. Even money is a collective agreement.

Many of those agreements were made without any women at all involved in the conversations that gave rise to them. We're at the table now, though—and this is why we must be able to have these conversations, reliably and well.

So what is it that stands in our way?

There is a set of mechanics, invisible to most of us, but consistent in every conversation, whether high stakes or low. These mechanics determine who has control—who leads, who follows, what is under

discussion, and where the conversation will go next. The conditioning that women receive from earliest childhood makes access to these mechanics infuriatingly, and sometimes dangerously, unpredictable.

These mechanics are invisible to men, too; this isn't one of those times they "forgot" to invite us to the meeting. But because men are trained and conditioned differently, they have easier automatic access to these levers, even if they don't have the slightest idea *how* they work. (Most people don't know how a carburetor works either.) The invisibility of those mechanics, and of the conditioning that gives men access to them, also explains why even the very best ones can't really understand why we get tripped up.

But the cost for women is devastating. In fact, you could argue that the invisibility of these mechanics has resulted in a giant, culture-wide gaslighting for half the population.

But before we can talk about how power works, we have to talk about what it is—and what it's not.

A Practical Definition of Power

"I want to be able to stand in my strength," women tell me when I ask what they want. "I want to *feel* powerful." "I need to build my confidence." "I have to find my voice."

These urges are valuable. They contain the germ of what I call "choiceless choices"—the desires we harbor that cannot be ignored. And we can do this; we can unroll our yoga mats, get our journals out, and recite affirmations all day long. I'll be right there with you, and I guarantee we'll have a great day, and end up feeling better rested than we have in years.

But that's not power.

Power isn't a feeling. Power is *influence*, which means it must

take place in a dynamic.

You'll note that I use the word "influence," as opposed to "control." What I am describing is not an imposition of will. To control another human being's behavior without making sure that they're on board—without their heart, their intelligence, their imagination, their ingenuity—is a terrible waste. Control squanders a tremendous amount of energy for comparatively very little reward. And, as every dictator knows, tyranny is fundamentally unstable; you're always going to need more capital, more control, more suppression to stay on top. Inevitably, the revolution comes.

Influence is the opposite of control. If you are able to powerfully influence someone, then you gain access to all of their inner resources: their smarts, their creativity, their passion. This kind of cooperation often creates a third possibility, a solution *even better* than either person involved could possibly have imagined by themselves.

So the kind of power I'm talking about is generative, not destructive, but it does mean being able to *ask* people for all kinds of things, including for what you want. (We are going to talk a lot about asking in this book.) Power means *doing*, and *receiving*.

Which is why power requires us to control the direction of the conversation. This might mean deploying the verbal jujitsu necessary to get the hell out of the hotel room, if that's what's required. Or deflecting a question you're not ready to answer, or keeping the topic focused on your concerns, despite someone else's discomfort or insistence on another direction. Ultimately, it means being able to move another person—staying curious in the face of someone else's entrenched resistance, and staying with your desire until they change their minds.

When students come to me talking about wanting to "feel" empowered, I ask them to tell me what they would *do* if they felt that way. "What would it look like, if you were more confident? Would you make an appointment with your accountant to open the stack of unpaid medical bills you've been ignoring for six months? Would you finally break up with the person you've been dating because you're

no longer afraid of being alone? Would you name your childhood abuser? Would you embark on an all-female polar expedition?”

Of course, there are as many answers as there are women in the room, but the question breaks the spell. Instead of wandering the wilderness, hoping that we'll stumble onto the magic formula that delivers us into our own power, we can start to refine these vague, amorphous inclinations into concrete desires. And then we can formulate the skillful conversations that will get our bosses, our partners, our enemies, and our friends to participate in the creation of a new reality that will satisfy those desires.

As you will see, it's crucially important for every one of us to identify our own deepest inner signal, to locate and feel what is alive in us. *But it's not enough to feel it.* We have to be able to speak it, to express it, and to make it show up—in our relationships, in our workplaces, in the world.

You know when you're really going to feel like you're strong and powerful? When you can rely on yourself to speak, no matter how inappropriate the question or how badly it triggers you. When you can navigate another person's opposition to your ideas with generosity and skill, recognizing it as an opportunity for intimacy or access to critical information instead of seeing it as a slammed door. When you can ask anyone for anything, and greet even the hardest *no* with a sense of humor and persistence and curiosity.

When you can do this, you're not going to need power poses or advice on how much jewelry to wear with your pantsuit if you want to be taken seriously. You're going to feel exactly as confident as you should—and everyone else is going to feel it, too.

Turning the Spotlight: Exposing the Hidden Levers of Power

Cue drumroll: It's time to pull back the curtain to expose the inner workings of power—to make the invisible visible, to throw flour on the ghost.

To do this, I'm going to teach you a technique called “Turning the Spotlight.” This technique will get you off the spot when you're

frozen, regardless of the circumstances or the stakes. It works equally well when a stranger asks when you're planning to have a baby as it does in the moment after a movie mogul has thrown open his bathrobe.

This technique will take you ten seconds to learn, and while it may take you a little longer to master—we do have millennia's worth of conditioning to contend with, after all—that's okay. We're going to spend the rest of this book getting you in fighting shape.

Here it is: The next time you find yourself speechless and on the spot, opening and closing your mouth like a goldfish without the slightest idea what to do or say next—*Ask a question.*

Don't explain yourself; don't justify your position—simply ask the other person a question about themselves. It doesn't have to be a witty zinger, or a setup for Katharine Hepburn-style repartee. In fact, it can be a complete non sequitur: “Do you swim with sharks?” or “Where'd you get that tie?”

A single question will break the freeze. To go one step further, swinging the spotlight so it's shining in his eyes instead—and this is the part that's going to take a little training—ask another question. And another one. And another. Don't stop until you've got him where you want him.

That's it.

It works every time. Why and how it works is the story of this book, but I can give you a sneak preview there, too: simply put, Turning the Spotlight works because

*asking a question reverses the
flow of attention.*

And control over the flow of attention is power.

Animal Bodies, Communicating

I came to this realization about power and attention in an unusual way.

I spent seventeen years studying to become a Taoist nun, traveling around the world to study martial arts, Chinese medicine, and alchemical practices with people so knowledgeable and skilled, the work they did seemed like magic. I paid for my studies and travel by working as a professional dominatrix. It was one of the most expansive, beautiful periods of my life.

One year, I spent a week in the desert with a martial arts master. Outside his house was a labyrinth made of discarded school desks, piled high into walls. His students had to run through that labyrinth blindfolded, without touching any of the desks. To do this, they had to sharpen their senses, becoming present to every subtle cue, like a wolf running wild through a dark forest.

After one of these incredible training sessions in the desert, I flew back to New York City to work at the dungeon. Except that it was sleeting, and even the most dedicated submissives won't brave New York's wintry mix. The other women in the lounge balanced Chinese food containers on shiny thigh-high boots and joked about the rom-com on TV, but in my heightened sensory state, their laughter felt abrasive, and the smell of the food nauseated me. So instead of joining in, as I might have a week earlier, I fled to a quiet windowsill where I could be alone.

Sitting there, feeling the cold glass against my skin, absorbed in the surreal transition between my sensory expansion in the desert and the crude realities of the dungeon, I picked up the dog-training book Mistress Josephine had bought to help with her new puppy.

The premise of the book (although I understand the trainer himself is now under some scrutiny for his treatment of both animals and women) is fairly simple: most people make the mistake of treating their dog like he's a human.

Your dog doesn't understand words; he registers what your body and tone communicate. So if you tell him to stop eating the couch in a soft, pleading voice, it reads as praise; he's listening to what your body and tone of voice are saying, not your words. And the message he gets is that he's the alpha, in charge of the pack. Which means you've put him in an impossible situation: how can he lead his pack, feeding them and keeping them safe, when food arrives unpredictably and in bowls, and enemies approach constantly,

delivering FedEx packages and pad thai? Also, what the fuck is a couch?

We think deferring to the dog is a kindness, but all it does is confuse him, setting him up for stress and failure—which is how so many people end up with neurotic dogs.

But what happens to the vast majority of dogs when an experienced trainer walks into the room?

They *relax*.

It's not what the trainer does or says so much as the way he is. When the animal of his body tells their animal bodies, "I've got this; I'm in charge," they let go of their terrible vigilance.

Watch, and you'll see them submit, their bodies softening with relief.

Reading this manual in a dungeon after an entire week of exploring the energy body, it came to me: "This is exactly what I'm doing with these men! They say they want bondage, or a foot-fetish session, but what they really want is to be fully held in somebody else's attention—someone with enough energetic authority that they relax and begin to *feel* themselves."

And so, that wet, freezing afternoon, the energetic work I'd been doing in the desert crashed into the energetic work I'd been doing at the dungeon. Josephine's dog-training manual turned out to be the spark required to illuminate a whole new way of seeing for me.

What if humans weren't just forgetting that their dogs were animals, but forgetting that other humans are, too? All living creatures communicate, although only humans have language. A huge amount of what we "say" happens nonverbally, and it goes way beyond body language. Energetics are how you know in an instant whether someone is an attacker or a healer, or the way someone's physical presence can soothe or disconcert you, even before they've said a word.

What I wondered was: what if we could feel—and meaningfully direct—what our animal bodies were saying to one another?

Becoming aware of this primal "conversation under the conversation" is one of the most powerful communication tools we have. *We cannot talk over what our bodies are saying to one another.* That revelation would prove to be the cornerstone of everything I would do at the school I founded a few years later.

In a flash, I understood that both the Taoist nuns and dominatrices I most admired were powerful precisely because they *could* control that conversation under the conversation—and it wasn't through a self-conscious manipulation of their body language. Instead, they did so, just as a successful dog trainer does, with something far more powerful and primal: *their attention*.

Power moves with attention.

What I had been learning in the desert, in the dojo, and in the dungeon, then, could be summed up this way: the art of attention. Attention dictates where the energy is—the juice, the qi, the life force—in any given interaction. It is how our animal bodies communicate with one another. Language is important; so are physical gestures. But more important than both is where the attention is directed.

This is why real power is available to you whether you're the janitor or the CEO. Skillful awareness and mastery of where your attention is placed—*not* status, or access to resources, or a title—are what will put your hands on the steering wheel.

CHAPTER TWO

DOMINATION AND SUBMISSION

The Art of Attention

E quality is a beautiful concept.

But the truth is that, in every moment of every interaction, every conversation, every collaboration, someone is leading and someone else is following. In a great conversation, two people switch back and forth, and the transition between leading and following happens so effortlessly and seamlessly that it's practically invisible, like a dance. This subtlety doesn't mean it's not happening, though—one of them is *always* directing, the other receiving.

This is the first way that women find themselves at a disadvantage as it pertains to power. Most women have been trained to be profoundly uncomfortable with hierarchy. Many of us prefer to deny that power dynamics exist, outside of games played by greedy, dishonest manipulators. But, like gravity, just because you deny the existence of something doesn't mean it doesn't affect you. Power dynamics are how humans and animals organize themselves, and women are participating whether they like it or not. Our denial simply means that we're participating at a disadvantage.

No more.

In this book, I will use the term “dominance” to describe the state when your attention is focused out and what you *do* from that place,

and the term “submission” to describe the state of attention turned inward, and what you *feel* from that place.

Both terms are loaded, but let me reassure you up front: neither is what you think. My definition of dominance has nothing to do with the violent, toxic mimic of power we see every day; it’s not screaming, or bullying, or “acting like a man,” whatever that means. Neither is there anything obsequious or subservient about submission in this system.

In fact, all the negative connotations that come with our first associations with those words relate to when both are done badly—specifically, when someone is exhibiting dominant or submissive behavior (screaming orders, for instance, or asking for something in a cutesy little-girl voice) without properly attending to the direction of their attention.

The World of You: The Surrendered, Submissive State

“Oh, honey! Submission’s not an option,” Cheryl tells me flatly. “I’m a small business owner and the mother of three kids under twelve. If I’m not in complete control every second, this ship will go *down*.”

Ah, submissives. The passive, pathetic, mewling weaklings in the corner, barely worthy of a second glance.

Or, with that assumption, are we making a dangerous mistake?

I often encounter resistance around the concept of submission from successful women: *Hey! I’m nobody’s doormat girl*.

And yet virtually every religion includes a practice designed to deliver us into a surrendered, inward-looking submissive state, whether it’s meditation, asana, or prayer. Among themselves, writers and artists talk endlessly about how to penetrate the veil that separates them from their unconscious. And who among us hasn’t been desperate for the opportunity to give ourselves over completely to a gifted lover, where our only job is to close our eyes and receive, receive, receive?

That is the submissive state I want you to envision, one in which you are completely and safely held by someone else’s attention, and

can therefore relax and concentrate only on *what you feel*. Your role as a submissive is to turn your attention inward, and to feel what you want so completely that every cell in your being is saturated with it.

“What does this have to do with power?” new students ask. The answer is that when you achieve this submissive state, where you are totally connected to your needs and have no resistance to receiving, you gain a *legitimate* feeling about those wants and needs.

One of the most prevalent misconceptions I encounter is the idea that influence is achieved only through dominance. In fact, a person who is fully occupying the surrendered submissive state can very successfully influence another person because she knows exactly what she wants and what she needs. Her desire is pure, and will be expressed clearly because she feels it so strongly.

Submission is *not* powerlessness, but connection.

This is why a request from the submissive state doesn't mean groveling. It simply means that you're asking with a profound connection to what you *know* to be true: “When I get more people on my team, I will be able to grow this business 25 percent by the end of the year.” Or: “When I get home from the airport to find that you've drawn me a hot bath and poured me a glass of wine, I will feel like the most loved creature on the planet.”

A few things to note here. First of all, these are both requests, and there's nothing passive about them. But they are requests made using submissive language—“I” language, emotional language with an exclusive focus on the speaker and her experience.

And because in the submissive state a person's attention is turned in, toward herself, her body is also communicating from this submissive space. She might find herself touching herself as she speaks—placing a hand over her heart, for instance. Her body will be soft and pliant, and there will be a luxurious quality to her voice. She

is not just telling the other person what her world would look and feel like if they said yes, but painting a picture for them with her whole self.

In the submissive state, you create a world in which your desires have already come true, and invite the other person to join you in it.

A submissive ask should feel very, very good.

Much of the time, the other person *will* agree to join you in the world you've created—the world where you have what you want—because a connected, submissive Ask has a fundamental *integrity*, a very powerful place from which to make a request or an invitation. Someone who is truly in the submissive state is a pleasure to help because she doesn't have any resistance to what's on offer. A person who is connected in this way is *legible* to others; her signal is crystal clear. Often she gets what she wants without even having to ask for it.

So when I advocate for the submissive state, I am not talking about sending women back to the Stone Age. We do, however, need to know what we're feeling.

This is a message easily lost in our culture, for both men and women. One of the very first instructions we receive is that it's okay—indeed, expected—to lie about our feelings. “You may rejoin the group when you say you're sorry,” your first-grade teacher tells you. You're *not* sorry, not at all, but it's cold and lonely in the corner. You don't want to be on the outside—nobody does. So you fake contrition and rejoin the herd.

This disconnection from our feelings and desires continues to be rewarded, especially for women. You ignore your hunger and skip dinner so you'll fit into the dress you bought for the eighth-grade dance, and keep your mouth shut when the intern coordinator who will write your recommendation tells an off-color joke. You injure your knee on a morning run you knew you were too tired and sore to do safely, and date men even though they don't do it for you. You take the job with the best benefits, not the one that makes your heart sing, and convince yourself that you can make a beach vacation work because it will make your husband and your kids happy, even though you hate the sand and the sun.

And then someone like me asks you what *you* want, what's alive for you—*not* minor upgrades to the stuff you already have (more money, fewer pounds, a shorter commute), and not what's going to satisfy your peers or your parents or your partner or your children or your church or your political party or your clients or the people who work for you—and you come to realize that you have *absolutely no idea*, and no idea how to find out.

Over a lifetime of ignoring our own basic inner cues, we lose touch with what we're actually thinking and feeling. We go numb. We lose discernment, the understanding that subtle differences make a difference that isn't subtle at all. We lose our connection to the inner signal—to the life force itself.

And that's no good: *We need to know what we are feeling.*

We must be alert to our inner signal, attentive to its spirit and to the information it carries. This space is where the treasure lies. It is the place from which our deepest desires, the ones that fuel our destiny and feed our life force, are born.

These deepest desires may not noisily announce themselves. They may appear as nothing more than a vague impulse, a feeling you can't quite settle into, a shapeless longing that takes the form of dissatisfaction and the vague suspicion that there has to be something *more*. These desires may seem mysterious or confusing, contradictory or impossible at first.

It will always be easier to ignore them, to bypass the uncertainty they arouse—indeed, many of us spend a lifetime doing it. But whatever ideas you hatch without connection to that deep inner signal will always run the risk of lifelessness. Desires born from true connection carry the vital spark of something essential, something

unique, something only you can bring into the world. Think of the difference between a cheap plastic bowl, made with thousands of others in a factory with a history of human-rights violations, and one that is hand-thrown with craft, beautifully glazed, and fired with intention.

The primary superpower of the submissive is her ability to connect to a deep inner signal and to communicate the truth of that signal to others.

We will spend some time in this book accessing the submissive space in order to get back in touch with our inner signal, with an eye to unearthing some of those deep-rooted desires. If we don't know what we want, then what is the point of having influence? To be able to buy a bunch of crap we think we should have? To do and be what others expect us to do and be—only better? That's not power.

But if we use this powerful sub state to connect to our deepest desires, then a whole world opens. We gain a legitimate feeling about our desires and about our right to ask. The emotions we're not supposed to feel—rage, shame, fear—have a tremendous amount of energy tied up in them; this sub state is how we access and alchemize those emotions, so we can harness that energy for good. It gives us the chance to explore our own resistance, which will help us to navigate it when we encounter it in others. And it leads to the most transformative force we have access to: self-celebration.

We are here to use the life force, to ride its momentum to the sun. Accessing the submissive space is how you will tap into its riches. To open that treasure chest, you must turn your attention inward.

In Good Hands: The Power of the Dominant State of Attention

What comes to mind when you hear the word “dominance”?

Do you imagine a woman clad in sky-high leather boots and a corset, brandishing a whip?

Given how unskilled most people are at managing these dynamics, it's more likely that other, less comely images come to mind, like the bullying father who “taught” you to swim by tossing

you, terrified, straight into the deep end. A domineering manager, rampaging through the office, leaving a poisonous cloud of negativity and fear in her wake. An ex who controlled through manipulation, leaving you feeling diminished and wrong-footed, no matter what you said or did.

We call these “bad dommes.” True dominance, as you have no doubt gathered by now, has absolutely nothing to do with cruelty. A firefighter dousing a fire is using a dominant state of attention; so is a skilled massage therapist and a good mom. And a dominatrix! (Although only the good ones.)

A truly dominant state simply has to do with the flow of attention—attention out.

You’ll note that I say “out,” as opposed to “outward,” because that is how I want you to think of it. Your attention goes *out*, *onto*, and *into* someone else’s body. In this case, “out” is not a direction or a suggestion, but a location. Because, as we will see, big communication problems arise when you aren’t completely and fully occupying one state of attention or the other.

A screaming boss storming through the office may be offering plenty of instruction and dominant language, for instance, but her attention, however miserable it’s making you, is turned *inward* on her own rage and fear and inadequacy. She may be yelling, “Never do this again,” but her animal body is saying, “Look what you did to me!”

This is *incongruence*—the disconnect between behavior and the state of attention. Your boss is domineering, but not dominant. She’s not curious about you, about your capability or talents or capacity, as a good *domme* would be. She’s not sensing and testing, assessing your responses to her corrections, or helping you to determine whether your resistance serves your ultimate goals or holds you back. She may be using the language of authority, but she will never have real influence until she puts her attention *out*.

I saw this, over and over, when I was training less experienced dominatrices. A woman would look the part, but if her attention was turned in on herself, then all the custom-fitted latex in Germany wouldn’t be enough to compensate for what her animal body was communicating.

True power isn't performative.

“They taught me *what* to say,” students often complain to me after they’ve taken a negotiation seminar. “And it worked great in the classroom. How come it falls flat when I try to use it in real life?” The answer is that they’re using dominant language without directing their attention.

Indeed, this confusion about the flow of attention is also why so much of the advice on women in the workplace dilutes women’s access to power instead of strengthening it. Instead of showing women how to turn their attention out and keep it there, all those helpful instructions about what to wear, what to say, and how to say it *turn a woman’s attention back onto herself*. This amplifies women’s destructive self-policing tendencies, exacerbating the problem instead of solving it.

To dominate another person, you have to turn—and *keep*—your attention out. You hold them in the tractor beam of your attention and guide the conversation from there, determining what subjects are being discussed, what actions will be taken or prevented, what corrections will be made.

Later in this book, we will spend some time training you to assume and hold the dominant state; for reasons I will explain, the default state of attention for women is *in*. But we can begin here by introducing you to dominant language.

Begin sentences with the pronoun “you”—“You will,” “You can,” “You are,” “You get to.” Be concise; don’t explain your motivation for asking. Give extremely *specific* instructions, telling the other person exactly what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. So instead of “Be more romantic,” you will say, “Clear your schedule on Sunday night and take me for dinner at Lapérouse.” Leave “I” language out of it entirely; your attention is on *them*.

If you absolutely must insert yourself, use third-party language instead of the word “I.” For instance: “Organizations benefit,” “Studies show,” “A woman really appreciates a man who,” “A relationship flourishes when.” This may sound awkward and stiff, not at all the way you ordinarily talk. That’s not surprising, given

how many of us default to apology and softened language when we ask for something.

Dominant language on its own isn't enough; ultimately, the person you are dominating will be responding as much to the weight of your attention as it is transmitted by your posture, the steadiness of your gaze, and the timbre of your voice—one animal body communicating with another—as to what you say. True domination will come only when the authority of your animal body has commanded someone else's animal body, leaving them comfortable and relaxed enough to move into a more submissive state, so that they can accept your correction and instruction.

In that case, it won't matter what you say, so much as how you say it. And because your attention is out, you will see how your suggestions and corrections land with the other person. (A truly embodied *domme*'s attention is so far outward that she practically disappears to herself.) This focused attentiveness is the real gift of the dominant state of attention.

With the information you harvest through your attentiveness, you will know exactly how caring, ruthless, truth-telling, funny, formal, strict, or playful to be. It's through attention that you will know exactly what's needed, not because you've been told what "should" be the right next step.

If the other person's shoulders are hunched in protection and their face is frozen and non-expressive, for instance, then you will know they are guarding themselves, which will in turn suggest that you offer a soft introduction to the hard truth you're about to deliver. A scattered, disoriented state—which the other person may reveal to you through a series of erratic, skittish movements—might require a grounding statement, a description of what's happening right now: "It seems like my comment has upset you." An inability to make or maintain eye contact is often an indication of shame, which might require a judicious application of charm and humor.

Charm and humor might also be a good way to disarm a raised voice and aggressive body posture. But this is why these are not prescriptions: if you see X, do Y; a joke might infuriate someone who's already agitated. With your attention out, you will know that you haven't hit the mark, and pick up clues as to what might work better—a sharp instruction, for instance, or a hug. Trust your animal body to know what is required; it will, if you keep your attention out.

And you will know it is working because you will see the other person's body change—a thousand microexpressions to indicate softening and trust.

When I was training new dominatrices, I noticed that they were often quite oblivious to what was *really* going on with the other person in the room. Because they were self-conscious, they were missing the more subtle reactions, signals that the other person had gotten triggered or lost or shut down. They didn't notice when a client's shoulders melted, or his face relaxed, indicating that they could push further. And they weren't attentive to bracing or flinching or retraction, warnings that they were moving too fast or too hard.

We are not encouraged to think or talk about what our animal bodies know. It's considered woo-woo; it's not science. And yet, imagine going back a hundred years and telling your great-grandmother that she needed to stay hydrated; she would have looked at you like you were completely insane. If your great-grandmother was fortunate enough to have access to clean water, she drank when she was thirsty. But because we are so out of touch with our inner signal, we can no longer be trusted to do that anymore, so we police our bodies with smart water bottles connected to apps that remind us to drink, or rules about how many ounces we need to choke down every day.

With this dimming of our awareness of our own inner signal, of course it's difficult for us to feel where another person is at—especially during a difficult conversation, when emotions are running high on both sides. Many times, in a high-stakes conflict situation, people don't know how they themselves feel. But if influence is your goal, then it is essential to know what is really going on with the other person. And the best way to do this is to get your brain out of the way, so your animal body can do the feeling.

You have to let your animal
body feel what is happening in
the other person's animal body.

We will train so you can stay there. You will learn to resist the tendency to recoil back into yourself when a situation becomes difficult, or when you hear the word “no,” because recoiling puts the attention back onto you—your pain, your right to ask, and the feelings you’re having about the rejection—not on your desire, or what you’ve asked for, and certainly not on how you can move the other person.

The moment you lose connection, you lose control and influence.

From the dominant state of attention, you can *locate* the other person—figure out what’s going on with them—and help them to locate themselves. You can ask for anything. And because attention out gives you exquisite sensitivity to the reactions of the other person, you can surf their resistance until you arrive at a solution.

This is how you lead another person, heart, mind, and soul.

Attention Out—Without Influence

“Hold on!” some of you are thinking. “I feel like my attention is out all the time! I’m always alert to how everyone on my team is feeling. If anything, I’m hypervigilant to who needs a snack or a word of praise, and what needs to happen next.”

This type of attentiveness is very common, especially for women, but it’s not dominance. It is attention out, without influence—no persuasive communication takes place.

We’ve seen what happens when someone exhibits so-called dominant behavior without attention out: this is the mansplainer lecturing a woman about a book she herself researched and wrote; the boring professor who drones on and on without checking in to make sure his students are engrossed; the lover who bangs away, oblivious to his partner’s responses and needs.

Women do this too, sometimes—think, for instance, of the stage mom whose own ambitions supersede the happiness of her child. But in my experience, it is much more common for women to exhibit attention out without influence, which often means without instruction.

Looking around a cocktail party to confirm that you're dressed appropriately is fine if that's the information you need, but it isn't a dominant state of attention. Patiently listening and holding space for a friend who just got back from her dad's funeral is a kind and loving and wonderful thing to do, but it is not a dominant state of attention, either.

In the dominant state of attention, your job is not just to see the person in the submissive role in the dynamic, but to *move* them.

It is only when you combine *attention out* with *instruction*—which may take the form of a seductive invitation, a playful suggestion, a stern correction, a demand, a request, or a direct order, and everything in between—that you have influence.

Dominance and Submission A RECAP

I once watched a nine-pound cat “dominate” a seventy-pound pit bull without moving a single centimeter from her loaf position on a chair. What happened between them that had this dog bowing and whimpering and hiding behind his owner like he'd been kicked? And what does that cat know that we've forgotten?

Let's recap some of the attributes we find in the dominant and submissive states of attention.

When a woman is in the dominant state of attention, her attention is *out*. A *domme* is commanding, and leads the interaction. She is dedicated to staying on course, and her empathy is used for information-gathering: she

keeps her attention out so that she doesn't miss anything. With her body language and gaze and tone of voice, she penetrates into the space of the other person. She is curious when facing resistance, and asks probing questions in order to get to the heart of her sub's defiance. She uses everything that comes up, and uses even unwanted responses to move the interaction forward. She calibrates her own responses—using a light touch or more pressure, all the way up to a stern call-out—depending on the information she gathers from looking at the body of the other person and listening to their tone of voice. She uses “you” language; gives direct, specific, and concise instruction; and keeps herself out of the conversation.

When a woman is in the submissive space, her attention is *in*, on her own emotions, physical sensations, and experience. She is in touch with what she wants. Indeed, she is so connected as to be unshakable. She is open to inviting others to join her in creating the great vision she finds within herself, and is able to paint a picture for them of that vision that makes their participation irresistible. She uses “I” language; her soft gaze and body language reflect the flow of her attention, which is in. She is ready to receive from the other person without any bracing—questions of whether she qualifies or what she deserves or what she will owe. She stays focused on what she wants, even when distractions occur.

Remember: The direction of your attention is the only one of these rules that really matters; I can (and have!) dominated people very successfully while curled up in the fetal position and using only “I” statements.

None of these rules will work if your attention is not properly directed. These are simply observations of behaviors that people tend to exhibit in a dominant or submissive state—not rules you must follow in order to get there.

Best of Both Worlds: Flipping the Switch

There's an energetic partner exercise in Taoism called “Pushing Hands,” which is more or less what it sounds like: partners seamlessly switch between pushing and being pushed—between dominance and submission. Done properly, it's a dance: force is both applied and absorbed so subtly by both parties that the four hands seem almost to be moving themselves.

You don't have to choose between being a good domme or a good sub.

Become adept at both, and you can choose the state of attention appropriate for the occasion—a “switch.”

You're already practicing this; in healthy dynamics, this switching happens effortlessly and without calling attention to itself, all the time. Every really great conversation you've ever had, the kind where you hear and feel heard, has been a beautiful dance between dominance and submission.

Say you and a friend sit down over a glass of wine; you can't wait to tell her the funny interaction you witnessed on the way over. As you tell your story, you are watching your friend, noticing if she's happily engaged with what you're saying, or if her mind has wandered. A good domme, you take note of what makes her smile, and throw in a little more of that, to make her laugh.

As your friend listens, her attention is inward, checking with herself to see how your words land. Does she understand what you mean? Does she agree or disagree? How does what you're saying *feel* to her?

Then something you say prompts a memory or an anecdote, and suddenly, *she* begins to speak. As she assumes the dominant role, her attention moves out. Now she's watching you, judging the impact of what she's sharing, adjusting her words in accordance with your understanding and mood.

Please note: At no point are you or your friend half in and half out of a dominant or submissive state of attention. Whichever state of attention you are occupying, you are occupying it *completely*.

I've broken this conversation down in a painstaking way to illustrate the point, but of course, in a really good conversation, this switching happens seamlessly and fluidly. Most interesting of all? You feel like equals at that table, but your conversation is working precisely because, moment to moment, you are *not*. What you're

really doing is fluently and easily switching—from top to bottom, dominance to submission.

This dance is essential. Without this polarity, there's no movement, no life to your conversation.

The dynamic between two people *has* to move.

If your friend were to spend the entire dinner telling you about her own life without ever checking in with you, then she'd be deathly boring. Conversely, if you never took the reins in order to offer your own thoughts and impressions, she'd leave your interaction depleted and resentful; you'd be dead weight in the dynamic.

This is true about every working relationship and every romantic one; it is true about every sexual encounter, every negotiation, every creative collaboration, and every Thanksgiving dinner. And when relationships or dynamics get stuck—any time there's a lack of connection and intimacy and movement—it's generally because fixity has set in.

This is a Taoist principle, and the truest thing I know. In Chinese medicine, stagnation is the cause of all illness. The yin/yang symbol—the circle with the swervy line separating the light and the dark?—is a representation of a wheel in motion. Life must move.

When I first started teaching power to women, I used yin and yang to describe the two states of attention, as opposed to submission and dominance. It was a beautiful teaching tool when applied to relationship dynamics because it revealed the little bit of surrender—the yin—inside the *domme*, the yang; and the strength and immovable truth—the yang—inside the yin, or the sub.

But as far as changing behavior is concerned, talking to a room full of Western women about yin and yang was like talking to zebras about city planning. So I put my dominatrix boots on. When I talked about dominance and submission—even as states of attention—I could see the bodies of the women I was training understand what I

meant far more effectively than they had when I talked about concepts borrowed from an ancient Eastern spiritual tradition.

The terms may be different, but the conclusion is the same: fixity is death. Sometimes, what would serve a relationship best is for a sub to step up, turn her attention out, and tell you what she wants. Sometimes a domme needs to quiet down and get connected to her own desire, letting someone else drive.

As we will see, the states strengthen each other. And it's not about one state of attention being stronger or weaker than the other; it's about which we use when, and for what.

EXERCISE

See and Be Seen: The Description Exercise

I'm going to end this chapter with something that feels really good, an exercise that we do six or seven times over the course of a weekend class. It's a simple way to explore the power dynamics that we have discussed in this chapter—and to explore working with another person.

In class, the group splits into pairs, with one person standing to assume the dominant state of attention. The submissive partner silently raises her face to receive her partner's attention, as the dominant partner begins to describe her: "You have two eyes. You have two arms." She continues describing her partner in detail—her eyebrows, lashes, freckles, lips, earrings, tattoos, the expression on her face—all the time using the weight of her voice and gaze and attention to hold her partner and keep her safe.

Each sentence begins with "You." The word "you" helps direct more of the dominant partner's attention outward. She does this until there is a visible shift in the other woman's body—until she sees the sub move into herself.

The language is intentionally simple. There is no judgment or instruction, just the dominant guidance of attention to the submissive's being. When the dominant says, "You just smiled," it makes the sub's smile even bigger. When she tells her, "You have brown hair," it is not a command or an attempt to influence, just the energetics of attention in its simplest form: she is using her own attention—attention out—to guide the sub's attention into herself.

Then they switch.

I use this exercise to change the energy in the room, and the walls virtually hum with it when we're done. The women who took the dominant role last exude a quiet, calm control—they feel like safety personified. And the submissives, eyes sparkling against their flushed skin, look as refreshed as if they'd spent a day at the spa. They are transformed, physically, in a way a

child could recognize—simply because they’ve basked in someone else’s careful, dedicated attention for a few moments, because they’ve been well and truly *seen*.

The exercise takes about four minutes, tops. But every time I watch the women in my classes do it—as I watch them move from resistance to relief—I am reminded of the tremendous, evolutionary, revolutionary potential of mastering both states of attention in a power dynamic.

By the end of a weekend together, the women in the room have done this exercise so many times that they no longer need language. Indeed, on the very last day, participants find a new partner, someone they’ve never done the exercise with before. In under a minute, using only eye contact, the two of them will *wordlessly* decide which one of them will assume the dominant state of attention first.

Nobody ever gets it wrong.

You no longer have to imagine a world where you can spell-cast another person to feel confident enough in your authority to surrender completely. Or one in which you are so well held, so cared for, so comfortable in the assured clasp of someone else’s energetic authority that your animal body can relax entirely, allowing for true renewal.

The flow of our attention, which is really the flow of our life force, is the most precious currency we have, and yet we live in a world that profits every time it is scattered. The economy *runs on it*. Learn to skillfully shepherd that currency, and it will begin to feel like you’re working with magic.

It’s not magic; it’s *attention*.

CHAPTER THREE

THE GOOD GIRL DOUBLE-BIND

Me trying to ask someone for a favor: Hey could you help me with this thing? Absolutely no pressure though. Totally ok if you can't. If you'd rather run me over with a car that's cool. Are you mad at me?

MEME, COURTESY OF THE INTERNET

I guarantee it: the times and circumstances where you have felt truly powerful in your interactions with people in your life, you were completely occupying the appropriate state of attention.

That pitch, when you were so filled with conviction about what your company could do for that particular account—the complete strategy was so apparent to you, fully formed and perfect—you knew they were yours before you'd even started your spiel, right? And that morning you wanted your lover to come back to bed? You asked from a profound connection to that desire, and there was absolutely no way she could resist your request.

It feels magnificent when this happens, like there's a current running through you right into the other person, a mind-meld that makes anything possible.

But what I am interested in is what happened during the times when you *weren't* able to access those states—why you lost track of the person you were guiding, even though you were in the dominant

state, and why you lost track of yourself when you were in the submissive one.

Why do you say no to the thing you want? Why do you suddenly find yourself mealymouthed and stammering, despite months of intense preparation? Why is that guy so visibly pissed off by the request you just made, even though you were so careful not to step on his toes—even though you were so *nice*?

In short: What happens to your attention, to jam up the works?

The answers lie in the way women are conditioned, which gives rise to a compression that makes it very difficult for us to feel safe and comfortable in either the submissive or the dominant state.

An Old Instruction Manual for a New World

Name one Good Girl who changed the world.

You can't—because she can't.

It is the Good Girl's job to maintain the status quo.

Good Girls are chaste and selfless. They're modest, accommodating, upbeat, friendly, low-maintenance, and appropriate—while remaining sexually available to sanctioned partners, of course.

A Good Girl is moderate, in temperament and appetite. She avoids conflict, responds in a timely fashion, considers others first, and is an expert at making do. She never outshines anyone, but she never falls behind, either. She adapts and harmonizes, responding to circumstances, and she doesn't ruffle feathers—which is precisely why she can never be a catalyst for change.

These qualities have been passed down and enforced—by society, by other women, and by ourselves. Good Girls exist because women

are good at what they do, and for millennia, the best an ambitious woman could hope for was to marry as well as she could. Now, of course, we're expected to operate in a brave new world, one that presumes equality—but our conditioning comes straight from a manual that might as well be called “How to Be Marriageable,” first printing circa 1890.

Good Girl conditioning pops up in myriad sneaky ways—in your rush to smooth the tension at every family gathering, the unnecessary disclaimers you offer before delivering a well-rehearsed presentation, the way you apologize to your intern, even though the feedback you gave him was clear, necessary, and in no way unkind. It's why one of my students didn't scream during her rape—“I didn't want to embarrass him”—and why another one stood aside and let her boss disinvite her to the meeting where he planned to launch the concept she'd spent three months developing.

Maybe you're nodding your head, cataloging all the Good Girl behaviors you engage in. And maybe you're thinking: “Hey, fuck that. I'm no Good Girl.”

Yeah, I'm not either. Except for the way I clean up before my housekeeper comes. Or the way I said I didn't care where a meeting was held, even though I strongly preferred that we do it downtown. Or the way I found myself absentmindedly apologizing when a guy bumped into me on the street.

Most of the women I know and teach are powerful agents of their own destinies, moving through the world in impressive ways. But the truth is that very, very few of us escape Good Girl conditioning entirely. It may lie dormant for weeks and months; it may show up only in certain relationships or under duress. But the fiercest women I know describe, often with tears in their eyes, how it is their most dangerous—and unpredictable—saboteur.

And we haven't even gotten to the Good Girl's newest and most insidious iteration: the Independent Woman, or Good Girl 2.0.

The Independent Woman brings home the bacon and fries it up in a pan. She doesn't ask for help; she doesn't need it! She's *got* this—and if she doesn't, she's a wizard at MacGyvering what she needs from nothing.

Of course, it's a trap. Whereas the Good Girl is supposed to behave and not want anything, the Independent Woman can have whatever she wants—as long as she can get it herself. She doesn't

burden anyone. She doesn't ask for help or favors. She's endlessly resourceful and competent, which usually means that she ends up helming the ship.

No wonder she's utterly exhausted. The Independent Woman might *feel* more powerful than an old-school Good Girl, but she's running on empty, and she's resentful as hell. And when she's doing it all so she can have it all, is she really as masterful as she would be if she could ask for the resources and support she needs?

While I usually find that talking too much about society and its various ills is a dodge to avoid talking about what happens in a given moment between two people, this is a good example of the way that various societal structures have really let the modern woman down.

Women used to be property—and yes, that sucked for a whole lot of reasons I don't need to detail for you here. Now we own property; that's better. But as we move from noun to verb, we're doing so without many of the structures that used to support us. And we're doing so without any new ones in place, or, indeed, any of the invisible support systems that men rely on. (Like wives.)

To be clear: There's absolutely nothing wrong with either the Good Girl or the Independent Woman. Accommodate all you want in times of peace—my goal is to make you more generous and loving, not less. If your partner is dying for sushi and you don't care one way or the other, by all means, meet for dinner at the Japanese place. And I truly believe, as a woman who was raised by one, and who has spent the last six years training them, that the Independent Woman is a real heroine, evidence of women's graceful flexibility, tremendous stamina, and range. I'd never dream of asking her to relinquish her hard-won autonomy.

The problem comes when we default to these behavior patterns—when we say “I'm fine” because we don't want to rock the boat or wear ourselves out doing it all because we can't ask for help. Gracious capitulation simply isn't appropriate when a doctor is dismissing your chest pains as indigestion, or when your boss is strongly implying that your promotion is tied to your willingness to date his nephew.

In *those* moments, we have to be able to say no, and to keep going when we hear it. We have to be able to ask difficult questions. We have to be able to stay on message until our words land, without freezing or allowing a louder voice or a higher-status person to hijack

the conversation, dragging in another topic so that the original issue is not resolved, or is resolved in an ineffective and inefficient way.

To do this, we have to be able to break the compression that Good Girl conditioning causes in us—a compression that has a detrimental effect on how we communicate.

Too Much and Not Enough: The Smush

Your tits are too big, or they're not big enough. You're too mousy or you're too outspoken. You're an airhead or you're a know-it-all bore; you're a pushover or you're a bitch. You're frigid or you're a slut. (And when I ask a room full of women how many of them have been accused of being both—sometimes at the same time, and for the same behaviors!—I see a sea of hands.) You care too much about your family and not enough about your career, or maybe it's the other way around, but either way, you're walking a tightrope so narrow that there's barely an inch to move in either direction before you've fallen off the other side.

Sound familiar? Meet the Smush.

The Smush—an inelegant name for a precarious position—is the ledge most women live on, the almost invisible amount of real estate between “too much” and “not enough.”

I'm hardly the first person to point out these unfair binaries. But the real problem, and my real concern, is what happens to your body—what happens to your energetics, to your vibe—when you're smushed.

It gets smushed.

When you're walking the impossible tightrope strung up between Bossy and Needy, a request or communication you make has to wind its way through that compression. And what that sounds like to the animal of someone else's body *freaks them out*.

This is why it can be so very difficult for a woman to ask for something or tell someone to do something in a way that feels good to her and to the person she's asking. A Good Girl doesn't want to seem pushy or domineering, but she doesn't want to seem helpless or pathetic, either. Contortions—verbal, physical, energetic—ensue.

With the help of the male volunteers at our school, we have had hundreds of opportunities to watch what happens to someone's body as they listen to an *incongruent* request, one that comes through the Smush. Even if the volunteer's face remains neutral, his body recoils.

What our body communicates
when we make a request can
be as loud as the words we use
—and if we're not fully
occupying one state of
attention or the other, what we
transmit will be in contrast to
our intentions.

And I will tell you one thing for sure: If you rile up the animal of someone else's body, you do not stand a chance of capturing their heart or their mind.

Let's take a look at an example of the Smush in action.

It's almost midnight on a Tuesday. You get home, exhausted from a long day, wanting nothing more than to splash your face and sink into bed, but your next-door neighbor's music is so loud you can feel it in your molars.

You're furious. Who does this guy think he is? And seriously, *Whitesnake*? But you're also a nice person—a Good Girl—so you dutifully go next door with your polite request. “Um, sorry to bother you? I live in 6B, and your music is really loud. And I have a really big day tomorrow.” Your voice is getting higher and louder; the fury you're feeling is starting to seep out around the edges. “So I was just wondering if you could turn it down a little? I'd appreciate it.

Because it's, like, *midnight*." *You asshole*, you'd like to continue, but of course you leave that unsaid. "So, yeah, thanks." That sounded tight, brittle, bitchy, and you know it, so you give him a big Good Girl smile. Except that the smile never quite reaches your eyes and it's too late anyway: that throbbing vein in your forehead has already revealed your rage.

Of course, this interaction goes badly. Maybe he gives you the finger and turns the volume up. Maybe he turns it down, visibly pissed, and you leave the exchange puzzled: "How come he seemed so irritated? I was so *nice*." His irritation is the outward manifestation of the cringey, unpleasant feeling you gave him—a response to your incongruence, or the fact that you failed to fully occupy a state of attention, shrinking away from both dominance and submission.

What I am most interested in is the opportunity lost. Ask your neighbor to turn the music down in an incongruent way, and he'll never be more than the guy you ignore during awkward elevator rides. But, as we will see, an Ask like this can be an opportunity to create a huge and exciting new role for someone in your life. Break the Smush, get congruent, and discover that confronting your neighbor about his noise is a blessing in disguise, an opportunity to create a new ally. Ask with congruence, and you might discover you've met someone who can accept packages, feed your cat, or let you know when someone creepy is loitering in the hallway. Yes—your neighbor might be a complete asshole, too! With your attention out, you'll be able to determine what you're dealing with. But you're never going to know if you don't break the Smush.

This is how Good Girl conditioning stands in the way of our ability to communicate powerfully in every situation, and at all times. Not because it makes us too nice, or because there's anything wrong with kindness, or service to others, or being polite, but because *the Smush prevents a fully inhabited, embodied position in either of the two states of attention*.

A Good Girl can't sink into the delicious, surrendered space of the submissive; she's too worried about seeming incapable, needy, or frivolous. Instead, she specializes in not-needing, in "whatever you want to do is fine with me." Afraid of appearing selfish or greedy, she's uncomfortable receiving, and because she's always "fine," she never reaps the wonderful rewards that come from being cared for.

She categorically minimizes herself, and then collects the dubious moral reward of seeing herself small.

And of course she can't ask for what she wants! She's spent a lifetime denying that she has any appetites at all. Indeed, she may be so proficient at this Good Girl fuckery that she doesn't even recognize her desires for what they are.

Neither is she able to confidently assert herself in a joyful, embodied way when it comes time to step into a position of dominance. She has a plan, and she knows more than anyone else in the room, but she never wants to seem like she's taking over. A lifetime of Good Girl conditioning has trained her to hold the part of herself back—the natural authority—that would make it safe for others to relax and submit in her presence.

When she has to make a request, the Good Girl tends to default to dangerous leveling behaviors: body and spoken language to reassure the other person: "I'm no better than you are." She apologizes, equivocates, makes herself small (sometimes even physically, to the point where she stoops or cowers, or softens her words with a placating hand on the arm).

If she has to deliver a correction, she camouflages her legitimate frustration in fake smiles. "What you've done is so great, obviously, but I was wondering if maybe next time we could try it a different way?" Of course, her animal body is telling the truth—that the job he did wasn't very good at all—and his body is hearing it, loud and clear.

Two people using "I" language in a discussion can be a fantastic and nonviolent way to disagree: "I feel and believe X." "But *I* feel and believe Y." But because the Good Girl is afraid to move into the dominant state of attention, she often uses submissive language to launch an ambush: "I feel like you don't give a shit about me." "I hate living in this city." "It would be really nice if you could take your kid to school for once in your life."

You've likely heard this called passive-aggression, although I actively dislike the term because nobody really knows what it means. I prefer to call this state (and every one of us has been there) "bad sub," because it highlights the most important aspect, which is that the direction of attention is contradictory to the desired intent.

So let's take one of the comments above—"It would be really nice if you could take your kid to school for once in your life," and turn on the subtitles: Why does a comment like this look like a request and

feel like an attack? Because of what it implies: “You are failing as a father and a husband. Every time I did drop-off, I secretly resented you. Even if you do it this one time, you’re still worthless and self-involved in my eyes. If you were a better man, I wouldn’t even have to bring this up.”

How is he supposed to respond to that? Imagine hearing a request like that yourself. How would you feel? The so-called sub’s attention is not in on herself, but out—on blast. She can drape her request in apologies and compliments and all the sweet talk she wants, but the other person’s body knows the truth: it’s being attacked.

Imagine how much more both parties would gain if the woman in this scenario could ask, with genuine curiosity about the answer, “Could you take the kid to school on Mondays and Wednesdays?” (a dominant Ask) or “It would mean a lot to me if I didn’t have to take our kid to school every day. Could we have a conversation about that?” (a submissive one). Even a *very* dominant Ask—“Starting next week, it’s your job to drop the kid off at school. Do you know what you’ll need to do to make that happen?”—has a higher likelihood of moving the dynamic forward, as long as she asks with her attention all the way out—with congruence.

I use the phrases “bad sub” and “bad domme” to describe people who use words and body language in contrast to where their attention is placed. And I use “bad” not because these people are acting amorally—I frankly don’t give a shit if they do—but because they tend not to be effective at achieving their goals.

Anger is an outward-moving emotion. When it gets trapped in the Smush—when all that rage and attention are driven inward instead of moving up and out, the other person feels like they’re standing next to a suicide bomber. You’re not holding them in your attention and giving them an instruction on how they can heal or rectify the situation, but threatening to self-detonate.

When your words seem
submissive, but your gaze and

tone are set to kill mode, the other person's animal body will withdraw in response.

When we're trapped in the Smush, squeezed between Bossy and Needy, we can't ask questions like, "Are you saying that you're going to fire me if I don't sleep with you?" We huff and slam cabinet doors instead of asking for help. We end up crying when we're mad, and screaming because nobody listened the first ten times we asked. The Smush is why we hear ourselves ask a waiter for a cup of coffee like we're asking him to donate a kidney instead of to do his job, and why it's easier to walk down the aisle with the wrong guy than it is to tell him and everybody else that he's Mr. Wrong.

Historically, there have been heavy penalties and prohibitions against a woman assuming a dominant role. And because there are so few socially sanctioned ways for the Good Girl to say what she wants, she often ends up in a situation where it's easier to complain about the absence of something than it is to request it. When the Good Girl is faced with destructive behavior and needs to read someone the riot act, she often resorts to indirect incriminations: quiet, poisonous, sideways attacks. Or she holds her rage in for so long that she eventually explodes, recklessly and ineffectively.

This is what people are talking about when they say men don't like dominant women. Men, like every other living creature, respond very well to dominance—as long as the person embodying that dominant state of attention is fully inhabiting it. What they respond badly to is incongruence.

Congruence is what occurs when your attention—your body's language—is aligned with your intentions and words. It's hard to define but impossible to deny when felt or witnessed. You may have heard it called "embodiment," "alignment," "integrity," "resonance," or "the law of attraction"; I believe it to be a human being's natural state.

Practically speaking, congruence is what happens when we fully occupy a state of dominance or submission—when the direction of

our attention is entirely aligned with the language we're using.

Most of us mistake communication for what we say. But true communication is measured by its impact, and our energetic authority extends past mere words. If what you say to others conveys information, then *how* you say it tells them how to receive it, how to feel about it, how seriously to take it, and how to act upon it.

Language tells the other person what to do; your body tells their body how to feel about it.

When there is a disparity between what our words are saying and what our bodies are saying, our requests and corrections add to the problem in the dynamic instead of resolving it.

So, in the case of your noisy neighbor, you could turn your attention outward, laying your voice and gaze on him like one of those delicious weighted blankets people use to treat anxiety, and make a dominant request: "Your music is really loud, and it's late. Will you turn it down, please?"

Or you could hunker down into a sweet, submissive state and make the request from your deep connectedness, as if you're already inhabiting that blessed silence, sinking into your tub with a glass of wine and no hint of a driving bass line to torment your parasympathetic nervous system: "I've got a big day tomorrow, and I'd really love some quiet tonight. Will you turn your music off?"

In neither is there any: *Well, I'm asking for something but I feel bad about asking for it and I don't feel like I deserve to get it and I don't know how to ask so that I don't seem like a controlling bitch or a desperate maiden in need of rescue, so I'm going to do this confusing, manipulative dance instead.* . . . Both requests are clean.

And because they are clean, they have a much higher likelihood of success.

What happens next is the possibility of influence.

Say you've approached your neighbor in sub mode, cozy in your pajamas and already living like the only sound you can hear is the wave setting on your meditation app. You make your request for a little peace and quiet, and the guy says no.

It's time to move into a dominant state of attention—to turn your attention outward, onto him, so you can start asking some questions. “How come the music needs to be so loud?” He's studying, and he can't think without his dub-smash. “Okay, when do you anticipate being done?” He's going to be at it for a couple more hours.

That won't work for you. “Is there another room you can study in, one that doesn't share an adjoining wall with my apartment?” Nope, it's a studio. “Could you move the speaker off the wall?” That, maybe, he can do.

Attention unlocks and reveals.

And this is so important, because keeping your wits about you will help you to correctly assess the situation. Maybe your neighbor's not a bad guy—just one so terrified of flubbing the bar exam again that the only thing keeping him at his desk is the *Newsies* cast recording on repeat and turned up to eleven. Maybe he is a bona fide jerk, and you're going to need to get your landlord involved.

From a submissive state, you can check in with what you're feeling and find out what you need. From a dominant state, you can see your neighbor clearly, make an assessment about what's going on, and sense and test your way toward a solution. Completely inhabiting each state of attention and moving fluidly between the two, you can create the possibility of a rapprochement.

From the Smush, you can't do anything at all.

As you practice, you will find that sometimes your language will be well directed while your attention wavers, or that your attention is out on the other person like a laser, but that you've slid into asking

self-referential questions, which we associate with submissive language.

But if you keep working with your language and attention over a sustained interaction, you will feel a shift. You'll know that you're succeeding the very same way that a dog trainer or professional dominatrix does—the other person's body will loosen as they move into a more submissive space. Their eyes will soften. Their shoulders will drop. They might sigh a little or lean toward you. You will start seeing your words land in their body.

**When a domme is completely
seated in her energetic
authority, her sub can relax.**

You reward that trust by keeping your attention out and guiding the action, determining what comes next. A relaxed, effortless intuition will kick in: Without conscious thought, you will know what to say, and how, in order to lead your sub. In the present, moment by moment, you will feel and be able to pursue signs of what's alive in the other person. Following those signs dictates what's next. It's an open-book test, and they are the book—everything you need to know is right there.

This is where influence begins.

CHAPTER FOUR

EMBODIMENT

The Difference between Knowing and *Knowing*

Case closed! Good Girl conditioning leads to the Smush, which leads to incongruence—an inability to occupy either the submissive or the dominant position completely. The Smush makes it difficult for us to give an instruction or to speak our truths in a way that feels good to the person we’re communicating with.

So all we have to do is be congruent—completely occupy the dominant or the submissive state when we’re asking for something or giving an order—and voilà! We arrive at the life force. Problem solved. Go forth and conquer, ladies.

It really *is* that simple. But it’s not quite that *easy*—something I’m keenly aware of, after working with thousands of badass women in the laboratory provided to me by our school.

Again, my students aren’t shrinking violets, damsels in distress. They have impressive jobs and families, and operate with tremendous power in many areas of their lives. And yet, what I see repeatedly—even with huge celebrities, even with CEOs—is that women need training to get their attention out.

“Show me an eight on the anger scale,” I say to Nkechi; I happen to know that more than a thousand people report to her at work. “Get mad!” Then I ask the room how she’s showing up. They lovingly but honestly rate her first attempt at a two or three. I jump in: “Tell

him exactly how you feel about what he did. Don't stop until his balls are hanging off your belt!" Her next attempt is a five. The male volunteer, by the way, is standing in for the man who molested her kid; if she could tap into the molten core of lava-like rage that everyone in the room can feel running just under her immaculate surface, I'd probably be arrested for endangering him. As it is, it takes us about ten minutes of cajoling and encouraging to get her up to a very civilized eight.

"Penetrate his space," I tell Lucia, who runs her complicated household like a brilliant military campaign. "*Dominate* him. Violate his boundaries; get in there." She's told me privately that she worries about being too strong, too *much* for the people in her life. But it's only when she's in a room full of supportive women, whooping and whistling encouragement, with me modeling how to straddle the volunteer and shove a riding crop into his chest, that she is even able to tiptoe over the line into a state approximating real dominance.

When I'm teaching Turning the Spotlight, I say to the room, "I'm going to ask one of you an uncomfortable question. No matter what: *Don't answer my question*. Instead, put your attention out—on me—and ask me one back."

Despite my explicit direction *not* to answer my question, the first woman I hand the mic to answers the question I've asked her, Good Girl auto-responder in full effect. The whole room erupts in laughter. Even so, the second woman answers me, too. Sometimes it can take three or four tries for someone to ask me a question back instead of reflexively answering the one I've asked. Almost no one, before they have trained, can truly turn the spotlight back on me, putting *me* on the spot.

These students know all about dominant and submissive states of attention. They know all about the Smush and the compression that female conditioning brings. But they can't *do* it yet; they can't achieve congruence by fully occupying one state or another.

The reason why has everything to do with women's default state of attention, another facet in the difference between the conditioning that men and women receive.

How We Reward Billy and Mary

I should say up front that I have zero interest in a biological cast on this material; I'm not a scientist here to argue nature versus nurture, and I have absolutely no idea what the fundamental differences are between men and women, if indeed they exist at all.

But I am faced every day with the consequences of the differences in how boys and girls are educated to move through the world, and these absolutely *are* gendered.

Take two kids, a boy and a girl: we'll call them Billy and Mary. Even when they are very young, are Billy and Mary rewarded for the same types of behaviors?

They are not.

Billy is rewarded and punished for what he does when his attention is *out*. "Look what Billy did! Look what Billy made! Do you believe what Billy said?" Whereas Mary is rewarded when the attention—hers and others'—is placed on her. "Look at Mary's pretty dress! Doesn't she have lovely manners? Isn't she sweet?"

From the very start, then, boys are rewarded for agency—for what they *do*—while girls are rewarded for how they *are*. Boys are verbs; girls are nouns.

The world is changing, and for the better. But for many of us who are adult women now, this pattern was in place when we were learning how to be people: we were rewarded for attention *in*.

For Women, the Default State of Attention Is In

In many cases, women's ease with "attention in" manifests as an attunement to an inner signal—the much vaunted women's intuition—or a refinement in taste. This sensitivity to subtlety is a result of how we are educated, from our earliest days. It is also why we are prone to freezing: when a woman is put on the spot, she stays on the spot, because that's what she has been trained to do—to put her attention inward. This both makes us more susceptible to speechlessness and makes it harder for us to break out of it.

What we are *not* trained to do is turn our attention out. Indeed, women often take a disproportionate amount of heat for what happens when they turn their attention out. Think about the

classroom: boys are generally expected to misbehave, but it's shocking when a girl runs amok.

Nor does this conditioning stop in childhood. How do we as a culture discuss politicians and celebrities when they act out? A man's behavior is forgivable, even when it's questionable: "That Billy sure is an asshole, but he *gets things done*." Mary's achievements, on the other hand, remain invisible—even while she's being called a ruthless bitch.

Our culture is obsessed with what men *do*, and who women *are*.

This default state of "attention in" is a big deal when it comes to power dynamics. Your ability to successfully influence someone may require you to turn *and keep* your attention out—that's what dominance is. Because of what we know about Billy's upbringing, this state of attention turned out may very well be a more comfortable state of being for him; after all, he's been training for it since he was in diapers.

Women don't have that advantage. They can and do learn it, but we're bringing centuries of conditioning to the project. Old habits die hard—not to mention that we can't always tell with 100 percent accuracy what our bodies are really saying. All most of us know is that we don't get the response we want, as often as we should.

The beauty of understanding power dynamics as "attention out, attention in" is that it renders them gender-neutral. We don't need to drag the past into the future, but we do have to see clearly what has taken place in the past, especially all the ways it affects our present.

This is why we train.

It takes training for women to be able to put their attention out, and it takes a lot of training for them to learn to *keep* it out. That training involves practice, yes. But it also means breaking the

compression of the Smush in other ways, which is precisely what we will be doing in the exercises in the second part of this book.

Not Just Why, but How

I don't want to settle for merely revealing the invisible landscape of what we're up against, and I don't want you to settle for that, either.

Yes, seeing the conversation under the conversation can make a huge difference in how you move through the world, but that insight alone won't bring about the radical shift you seek. Women come to me all the time with great and powerful insights about the problems they face, but it's only after they've broken the gendered compression and incongruence of the Smush and their tendency to get trapped in a default, submissive, attention-in state of attention that they are able to use the insights they have.

This is where the title of this book comes from. The ability to skillfully participate in influential conversations is the key to changing the world as we know it. My mission is to unbind you from the gendered patterning that stops your speech or makes it less effective than it should and can be.

The exercises that follow will show you how to break that gendered compression *in an embodied way*. Intellectually understanding a concept does not mean it will be right there for you to use when you need it most. This is what I want for you: reflexive, instinctive access that goes beyond mere knowledge, the difference between knowing how to play tennis and knowing how to play tennis the way Serena Williams knows how to play tennis.

Plus, the compression of the Smush that gives rise to incongruence happens *in your body*. So a cerebral understanding of how to break it won't touch it; you have to *feel* it.

You will not need to police yourself for congruence. Do the exercises in this book, and this unbinding will happen naturally. You may find that I am pushing you to the extremes of too much and too little. We are doing this to break this ancient compression, the agent of inner censorship, one that no longer serves us in this new century. Allow yourself to imagine and feel the outer extremes of some of

these exercises, and you will find not the middle path, but your own unique voice: sometimes ruthless, sometimes nurturing, but always powerful and precisely calibrated to the situation at hand.

This embodiment is what sets this book apart from the thousands of others that exquisitely detail the problem, get you all fired up, and ultimately leave you wondering why everything you've learned doesn't work. When "why" stalls out, "how" needs to pick up the ball and score the goal.

Usually, what the Good Girl does is *try harder*. Losing weight, getting pregnant, getting a new job, even being more powerful!—a Good Girl can be counted on to do it the way it's supposed to be done. And when that doesn't work, she grits her teeth and doubles down, doing the same thing, only with more effort—which makes it more painful when it doesn't work.

In the next section, I will suggest a different course, driven by curiosity: *imagination over effort*.

One of our students permanently lost fifty pounds by having every morsel of her food prepared and fed to her by adoring men. Another one left her job, asked for it back, got turned away, and ended up running the company and firing her old boss. A student no longer attracted to her husband because she was tired of being the primary breadwinner sent him to sex school. The two of them are now renowned Tantra teachers, traveling the world and, in their sixties, having the best sex of their lives.

None of these solutions came out of the grind; they came from inspiration, by-products of imagination, creativity, experimentation, and ingenuity.

They came from following the life force.

Ultimately, this is the goal: that vital feeling of being fully awake. This is why we have to shed our Good Girl bondage and the compression that comes along with it. This goes past congruence and the ability to communicate in a clean way. In a contracted state, it is not only difficult to fully access power, but it's hard to feel fully alive.

This has nothing to do with right and wrong—those judgments tend to be cultural and situational. I prefer a much more personal, embodied code: what is alive and what is not.

Not only do I want you to exercise great care to protect and nourish the life force, but I want you to hunt the life force in everyone and everything you encounter. You will place your attention

on it, get curious about it, find what's sexy and alive and energized, and do what you can to explore and expand that, creating heightened and electrified situations.

Whether it's choosing a relationship or a piece of art or which side to take in an argument about politics, we train ourselves to be vitality barometers. Sometimes what's dead can look really good—safe, tried and true, “realistic.” But the wisdom of experience shows us that the path always peters out; following it depletes us, leaves us with less and less energy. Logical or not, a woman who is truly standing in her power will always choose the option that burns brightest, the one that fills her body with energy and expansion.

As a teacher, I witness daily what happens when women start to see the invisible bondage we've inherited. I see the radical, transformative acts of love and creativity women are capable of when we can identify and speak what we want. This is what I'm interested in: your highest vision—for yourself, for women, for the planet. I want to know what lights you up, what sets you ablaze, what makes you feel most alive.

That is what will deliver you to your own, unique destiny, and that's good for everybody.

When you play skillfully with power dynamics, the world changes. You stop being a servant of the life you're living and become a creator of the world you want.

PART TWO

BREAKING THE BIND

A Training Manual for the Revolution

CHAPTER FIVE

YOUR HUNGER KNOWS

The Power of Desire

What do you really want? When I ask my students this question, they share their goals and aspirations, personal and career benchmarks they want to achieve. Often, they tell me everything they want to fix and change so that they can move toward a more perfect ideal.

But your true desires aren't goals: a cost-of-living raise, an organized garage, shedding those last ten pounds. They're not the cravings you scroll past on Instagram, not your immigrant parents' hard-won dream for you, not everything you think you would want if you were better at being a human.

This is not the hunger that knows, the deep subterranean pull that will lead you, full-bodied, toward your destiny. This is not the life force, inciting your animal body to hunt for its greatest pleasure and joy. If anything, these resolutions to fix and improve will only stand in your way.

We're going to dig way deeper than that. The desires I'm talking about in this chapter are the ones that tap into the fire burning deep within you. Because knowing what feeds you, what lights you up, and what you can plug into that will always nourish and inspire you is the power of desire.

When we move from fixing ourselves to creating our lives, we shrug off the Good Girl conditioning that tells us we're not enough.

When we access the magic of every one of our greedy, lusty desires, we smash the Good Girl taboo of being ashamed for wanting too much. Doing so by plugging into the life force means we won't exhaust ourselves in order to get to some mythical "there" where we'll be replenished; it puts us on a path that will feed us, every step of the way.

Knowing what we want is a prerequisite for moving powerfully through the world. Without an intimate, connected relationship to our own desires, all the money and all the resources you're able to secure won't get you anywhere you want to be. This is why so many fantastically rich and "powerful" people are so unhappy, even though they seem to have everything; they have not turned their attention inward to ask themselves what they truly *want*.

True desires are a message
from you, to you, about what
will make you feel truly alive.

The task for everyone—whether you have it all, or nothing to speak of—is the same. We start with desire so we know what the power is for.

Choiceless Choices

True desire is a fully embodied truth, an appetite for what makes you feel truly alive—a lust for the life force. These desires are like the sun: nourishment incarnate, needs so central to your survival that, like a plant, you can't help but turn your face up and grow toward them. Managed skillfully, these kinds of desire are our most potent energy source. They have the power to transform you. Well handled, they take you places you never imagined you'd go.

And the very first thing you need to know about those desires? They're nonnegotiable.

By this, I do not mean that you will automatically get what you want. But what you are leaning toward? You don't get to choose.

This goes for turn-ons, deep-seated emotional cravings, ambitions—every category you can name. We tend to talk about these as if we pick them, the way you set a goal or make a New Year's resolution. But nobody says, "I want to want." We don't create desires, and we don't choose them—they arise within us.

We *do* have a say in whether we discover what our wants are, and in what we do with those desires once we've uncovered them. So there will be a time to choose and declare, and plenty of decisions to be made about how we will bring our creativity to bear on how to proceed.

But the call itself? You don't get to pick that. Nobody does.

Desire is choiceless. You have no say in what you want.

This is why desires don't go away when we deny them. A desire that arises and is suppressed, or is poorly identified—one that you don't locate or honor—sticks around. It nags and grouches, whines and lurks, sapping your energy until you acknowledge it.

If you continue to fail to attend to it, you'll find that it causes all kinds of seemingly unrelated mischief. I've seen it a thousand times with students in the late stages of desire suppression: at best, they're collapsed in on themselves; at worst, they find themselves plagued by mysterious illnesses. Desires will not be ignored.

I'll say it again: You are responsible *not* for the existence of a desire, only for how you choose to play or engage with it. So you don't necessarily have to give in to it, but you do have to see it. *The game begins once you acknowledge what you want.*

It's true: desire can be a monster. She scoffs at good choices and sound judgment. She doesn't care if you're happily married while

she's leading you into the arms of another. She doesn't care that you need to pay your bills when she's convincing you that it's a good idea to quit your corporate job so you can do experimental performance art, full-time. She can take down friendships, companies, governments.

And yet, all change begins with her. This is why a big part of my role in teaching women how to get what they want is training them to be creative about this usually inconvenient and sometimes downright destructive force. Because when a woman knows what she likes, what would fulfill her, what would make her happy—which direction she wishes to grow in next—she is mapping her destiny.

So let's play. Let's liberate our imaginations, unleash our inner Pippi Longstocking, the giddy, cartwheeling rebel inside all of us.

When you get a glimpse of that adventure and magic, when you start to feel the glimmer of that excitement in your body, heart, and mind, you will find a whole new set of uses for the power practices you are about to learn. They will help you not only to solve the very serious problems in our world, but to ensure that you have a damn good time creating the kind of life that makes you wake up wanting to dance.

EXERCISE

The Bad Girl Protocol

This exercise is a playground where you get to do whatever the fuck you want to do.

Meet your inner Bad Girl.

On a sheet of paper, copy the following prompt:

IF I WERE A BAD GIRL, I WOULD _____.

What would you do if you allowed yourself to break all your rules? What kind of trouble would you try to get into, if there were no consequences—for *anything*?

Be as playful, as greedy, as selfish, as frivolous, as lawless, as vain, as neglectful and useless and lazy, as hypersexual, and as straight-up evil as you want to be.

Think about the sex you want, the justice you want, money you want to spend, the laws you want to change or break. Conjure the people you most want to humiliate, or spread your legs for.

Let yourself be a slut, a tyrant, a seductress, a spoiled princess, a con artist, and a pampered, delicate little flower who can't do a thing for herself.

Maybe what you're envisioning is wild, generative, and hilarious; maybe it would blow up your life. Both are great. Don't judge your Bad Girl Protocol; this is a free-for-all. Invite all the sides of you to come out to play, especially the ones you don't ordinarily invite to the party. Let the lustiest, greediest, most shameless version of yourself free.

Some examples from my students, to get you going:

"I'd hold an *American Idol*-style televised audition for sperm donors. They'd have to wear swimsuits, sing, and do a striptease to prove their DNA is the best. America decides."

"I'd keep a harem in my basement, make them scour my house while I'm at work—and then take turns giving me oral sex for hours on the clean sheets. In this Bad Girl's house, sexual gratification goes only one way."

"I'd steal a giant pile of diamonds and crash celebrity parties under the name of a countess of a country that doesn't exist."

"I'd get my ex to leave coffee and the newspaper and a toasted, well-buttered corn muffin from the best bakery in the city on my doorstep every single morning—without me ever having to lay eyes on him."

"I'd start a girl gang to roam around torturing men for various offenses, including catcalling and manspreading."

Use these as inspiration to think of no one but yourself. Keep going until you run out of steam.

The Good Girl Jailbreak

Why does doing the Bad Girl Protocol feel so good?

The answer lies in its name—which, by the way, is deliberate, even though I hear the occasional complaint from new students about the word “girl.” A little kid doesn’t care how many grams of sugar are in a chocolate bar or how much something costs. She doesn’t concern herself with the logistical difficulties involved in keeping a pony on the tenth floor of a New York apartment building. She just wants what she wants—until it gets trained out of her.

When I first started teaching, I spent a lot of time wondering why so many women default to complaining instead of simply asking for what they want. I can’t think of a single complaint that couldn’t be stated as a desire, and with a far better result. So why is it so much easier to say, “You never buy me flowers,” than it is to ask for a bouquet?

The answer has to do with a culture-wide prohibition against female appetite. Good Girls aren’t supposed to want anything; we’re supposed to be *wanted*. It’s not “attractive” to admit that you’re hungry, or that you want sex. Wanting success makes us seem unfeminine; a desire for love makes us seem weak.

Too much, too little: it’s the Smush all over again.

This is what makes a complaint so much easier for most women to access than a request. It’s also why connecting to our desire—and then going out into the world and enlisting others to help make those desires come true—is so effective at breaking this compression.

The most radical thing a woman can do is *want*.

Knowing that every complaint hides a desire is a useful insight, though, especially because it’s helpful at peeling back Good Girl conditioning to get at some of our deep-seated desires.

If you make a list of everything you complain about, from the way your tech-bro boss fist-bumps everyone in the office, to the run you found in your stocking this morning, you will find that some of the desires masquerading as complaints can be easily dispatched: if you

bought ten pairs of better-quality stockings, then getting dressed in the morning would be much less of a pain.

But others will still nag, an indication that the desire hiding behind the complaint is bigger than you initially suspected. Is your desire for a bouquet of flowers a simple one—you love freesias, and would like to have some? Or does “You never buy me flowers” hide the desire for an entirely new, rejuvenated romantic landscape—for your partner of a decade to become your seducer again, with two-hour-long body worship sessions and rose petals and love letters left on your pillow?

One of my students listed her workspace as a complaint when we did this exercise in class. “I know it seems petty, but I can’t stand my desk at work, and I can’t get it changed. It’s ugly, the drawers stick, it’s enormous, and I hate sitting behind it. It’s so trivial! But it’s driving me nuts.”

After a few passes, my student began to realize that her complaint was really with the Kafkaesque hoops she’d have to jump through in order to get her desk changed. The frustration she was feeling about her desk was directly related to the frustration she felt trying to get *anything* done or changed in her workplace, a government office badly overburdened by bureaucracy.

The exciting realization was that within her complaint, there was an opening for her to make authentic change. Because the true, hidden desire behind her complaint wasn’t another desk with drawers, but an influential conversation with her boss where she shared her ideas about how to make the office more efficient, more productive, and inspiring for everyone who worked there.

Before the class was over, she’d asked her boss for a meeting.

“How much do you care about that desk now?” I asked her.

“If he gives me that meeting and takes my ideas seriously, I’ll work from the floor.”

Panning for Gold: The Power of Specificity

Desires often appear first to us in the form of vague impulses, a loosely sketched fantasy, a nagging sensation that you’d like to try

something different. This imprecision is a completely normal and necessary part of the process.

Beginning to feel these desires is an essential first step. But power is inviting others to participate in the creation of your envisioned reality. Before we can go after these desires and invite others to participate in collaborating with us to make them come true, we have to refine them, separating them from the fears and expectations that often accompany them. Think of an archaeologist delicately brushing debris from a find in order to reveal the treasure beneath.

Getting specific makes a desire tactile, so that you can feel it in your body. Consider the difference between “I want romance” and “I want to be held tightly for at least ten minutes, in an all-encompassing, never-let-me-go kind of hug.”

What happens when you formulate your desire that way? The first thing is that you know—right away—whether it’s right or not. You think about getting that hug, and either your body relaxes—“Yes! That’s totally what I want!”—or you start feeling a little uncomfortable, a little claustrophobic, indicating that the Ask you came up with to satisfy the desire wasn’t exactly the right one. That’s fine: it simply means you have to get connected again to what you want, then come up with another Ask.

And if it *is* what you want, then everything you’re feeling will be present in the signal you send to the other person when you do ask, including a detailed energetic map of what you want. Any time you ask for something, the other person’s animal body is hearing a lot more than you think. When you’re connected to a deeply detailed vision of your desire, you will transmit the subtle contours of that map. If you’re unconsciously bringing all the times they’ve let you down to your Ask, or asking with the belief that they’ll never get it right, you’re instructing their animal body in hopelessness—“You’ll never get this right.”

Whether you’re asking for the kind of sex you want, a raise, a small favor, or conveying your vision for the country during a presidential debate, the conversation under the conversation begins with you.

The Book of Desires

The Bad Girl Protocol is fantastic at getting us out of a rut—at breaking the compression of the Smush by giving us permission to see and want whatever it is that we want. The reckless freedom it imparts burns off Good Girl conditioning, as well as all the rage and vitriol and pain that come along with that conditioning.

It prepares us for our desires.

The next exercise, the Book of Desires, is for everything you unearth in the process. If your Bad Girl Protocol had an entry about storming into your boss's office, climbing up onto his desk, and peeing on it, as one of my students' did (Hi, Daiyu!), then what goes into your Book of Desires is what remains: in this case, the specific acknowledgments that would make my student feel appreciated in her workplace.

Both are necessary, especially because many of us would never arrive at that second desire without getting wicked first.

EXERCISE

Book of Desires

As we start delving into power dynamics and all the ways that you can create new roles for the people in your life by asking, you will need to know what the deepest parts of you need and want. This is where your Book of Desires comes in. It is a protected space where you safeguard important messages *from you to you*, about what makes you feel alive.

You may choose to carry around a little notebook or to create a special folder in the Notes app on your phone. As you move through your day, log anything and everything that you would like to have. Write down as much as you can, as often as you can.

Over time, your desires will become refined; for now, document them with a sense of freedom.

Your entries may be huge: a phenomenal life purpose, fame and celebrity, enormous wealth, leisure time, a baby, a cloistered artistic life, sainthood—or a pair of kitten-heeled pink fuzzy slippers, a shiny new hardcover book, or black coconut ice cream. They can be venal, or epic acts of humanitarianism; they can be snacks. Be indiscriminate: “I want a city of tree houses, connected by rope bridges and zip lines.”

The only criterion: that your body feels a sense of expansion and elation when you think about having what you have written. *Follow your feeling sense.* Make sure every entry lights you up and excites you, sending a lightning bolt

right down to your pussy. The body knows. Which desires make you feel most alive?

Self-attack will only slow down the process, so in these early stages, go gently. Mark it, sketch it, get it wrong, knowing that even the slightest move in the direction of what you truly want is of real value.

One caution: Your Book of Desires should not read like a to-do list. Don't let reality pollute your log! If it starts to go that way, imagine that you're commanding a fictional support staff with infinite energy and resources. Whatever you want, they will make it happen.

As long as you're bound to figuring out how you can make something happen, you're bound to the ground, and to the reality of today. This will prevent you from clearly seeing this desire, much less the one that lies underneath it, or the one underneath that. Be impractical, unreasonable; we will eventually return to earth, but for now, we need to take flight. And let go of the concept of "deserving." As we've said, you have no say in what you want.

Don't wait until you've bought a special notebook, or until you feel ready, or have thought of a "good one." Put this book down right now and write something—anything, or a lot of things—in your Book of Desires.

Your Desire Is Your Destiny

In the pages that follow, you will allow some of these desires to blossom into articulated requests. You will feed and test what you want with different kinds of Asks, and various invitations to collaborate.

The important thing to know is that this process—moving from desire to Ask, and then another, and then another—doesn't end. It's a way to live.

Sometimes my students ask for things, get them, and discover what they asked for is not what they wanted. This happens all the time: you believe that a particular job, or a particular lover, or a particular piece of cake will make you happy. Sometimes it's perfect! Sometimes it's close, but not quite right. Other times, the reality—for a million different reasons—fails to live up to the dream.

Often, this used to shame and silence us: "You said if you got X, you'd be happy, and now you have it and you're not happy and this is

clear evidence that you're a terrible person who doesn't know what she wants and doesn't deserve happiness."

But there's absolutely no reason that asking for the wrong thing should be where the asking ends. That's just information: you use what you've learned about yourself and the shape of your desire to make another Ask.

And while it's common to talk about the satisfaction of a desire as a bad thing—once you've gotten what you want, you don't want it anymore, and you move on to wanting something else—I always wonder: Why is this a bad thing? A desire satisfied is a step completed. Why would you want the most recent step you took to be your last? What a static way of looking at human identity, and at our life experience!

Of course, what you want will change over time. Who you think you are will change, too. Being able to periodically ask yourself these questions—What makes me feel alive *today*? What do I desire *at this moment*?—is the only way to stay updated with yourself as a being who evolves. Each new desire represents the next step on your unique path.

Live in accordance with your
desires, and you will make a
life that is absolutely, uniquely
your own.

When you are able to read your deepest inner signal, and understand that you have no say in what you truly want, you are using your life force as a compass, and it's the only one you need. When you find creative ways to honor those internal signals, you are guaranteed to find your unique destiny.

It is the most satisfying way I know to live.

CHAPTER SIX

EMOTIONAL ALCHEMY

The Power of Rage

Oh, I'm not *angry*," women tell me. "That's not really resonating with me; I'm not a very angry person."

Bullshit.

And here's how I know for sure. In class, we do an exercise called "Things Unsaid," where students make a list of everything they've left unspoken. After we're done, students raise their hands and volunteer items from their list; these range from the trivial ("I've never told my boyfriend how much I detest mushrooms on pizza") to the positively devastating:

"I didn't tell my mom my dad was cheating on her."

"I didn't say anything even though I knew my partner was lying in a multimillion-dollar negotiation."

"I never told my molester not to."

"I never told the medical board that my husband stole my prescription pad."

"I've never told anyone that I used to have sex for drugs."

“I never told my ex that 50/50 custody wasn’t right for me, or for the kids.”

“I never told the coach training me for the Olympics that I hated to swim.”

“I never told my daughter that she was conceived during a rape.”

As the students speak, we feel a heaviness settle over the class. Sometimes, just to show everyone the universality of the experiences we’re dealing with, I ask, “Who else feels guilty that they didn’t expressly confront their abuser by telling him to stop?” Now, you can read all the statistics you want, but when nine women out of forty raise their hands, the reality of childhood sexual abuse hits you in the face like a bucket of ice water.

The fog in the room gets heavier, denser. Students yawn, slump over in their seats, prop their heads up, and shift around like they’re ready for a nap.

So let me ask: Do you think the thick sleepiness that creeps over the room in the wake of those revelations is *boredom*? Or do you think, given the vast universe of female pain we’ve just summoned, that suppressed rage is a more likely culprit?

When anger doesn’t have anywhere to go, it has an uncanny way of making us feel listless, exhausted, overwhelmed—numb. A lot of us live with that feeling all the time. Many students describe a low sex drive, a lack of direction, the feeling that they’ll never figure out what their mission in this life is. At least one woman in every class I’ve ever taught has said something along the lines of “I’m tired of feeling like I’m looking out at the world from behind a pane of glass.”

That’s powerlessness.

Good Girls are taught to suppress their fear, their shame, their rage. We chase compression! “I just need to hold it down, keep it together, get a grip, put on my game face, never let them see me cry,” we tell ourselves and each other. We make ourselves tighter, harder, and more brittle as we white-knuckle our way through the world, gritting our teeth and gutting it out, sending ever more poisonous messages to the people around us underneath our ever more professional smiles.

But it takes a tremendous amount of energy for us to suppress all these emotions—and furthermore means that we don't have access to any of the energy that's locked up there. Most important, the deep inner wisdom all those powerful emotions carry *cannot be heard*.

In the previous chapter, we talked about breaking the compression of the Smush by moving past Good Girl prohibitions against desire. In this one, we're going to explore what happens when you tap into the power behind the ugliest, nastiest emotion, the one a Good Girl can never admit to: rage.

From Rage to Power

In talking about suppressed rage, I sometimes use the analogy of a leg that has fallen asleep.

It's numb, and if you try to walk on it, you'll pitch right over. Let the blood flow a little so that it starts waking up, and it's scary; it hurts more than you think it will. But we learn to tolerate the horrible pins-and-needles stage, knowing that after we've given our leg a good shake, the pain will disappear entirely, leaving only mobility restored.

The same thing is true about rage. When you first awaken it, it's painful, and you can't use it well, like the leg you can't walk on. But would you intentionally cut your circulation off again, putting your leg back to sleep? Of course not—and yet, that's precisely what Good Girls do with their rage.

We deny it, suppress it, lock it away in a little box. When it seeps out around the edges, we contort ourselves to disguise it. Occasionally, the top blows off, and then nobody's safe from the shrapnel, including ourselves.

This is why we experience anger as such a destructive force in our world: because most of us get only halfway to the goal. We end up stuck in the middle phase, where our rage is painful, destructive, and useless, which means we either cause damage or shut down again so we won't. We never get to the good part, to the clarity and energy that alchemized rage can bring.

Maybe you're terrified that if a leak springs in the fury you've spent the last forty years tamping down, you'll end up with a felony conviction, wearing a straitjacket or a necklace made from skulls. And it will feel dangerous to invite those unacceptable parts of yourself to the table; a god ignored is a demon born, as they say, and usually, when these hidden facets first emerge, they have a whole lot of ugly on them. ("You guys know that you're not actually supposed to kill people, right?" I once felt compelled to ask a group of students after a particularly gruesome Bad Girl Protocol.)

But once you've acknowledged them, it doesn't take much effort to clean them up, these hidden and denied aspects of ourselves. And the reward is enormous. Because when you unleash all the grief and anger and despair and violence inside of you, when you see and love and legitimize forbidden emotions like anger and fear and shame, you generate enough energy to light the Manhattan skyline. Free that energy up and it's yours to use! Move from numbness through the painful chaos of that middle phase, and on the other side is a laser focus—a vigor, lucidity, and the kind of powerful bodily presence that other people's bodies can't help but respond to with respect.

If a woman goes around suppressing her emotions, then she's doing what men have been asked to do for centuries, and suffering in the very same way. She ends up accepting a dehumanized form of power—a power that's despite herself. And yet, the feeling that we have to override and deny our emotions to be seen as powerful is a myth that women in particular can be susceptible to.

The key isn't suppression, but alignment—congruence. Bring the animal body along, and you uncork a tremendous energy source. Instead of cluttering the path and getting in your way, those valuable inner signals turn into tools, neatly laid out so that you can pick them up and use them when you need them.

This technique of moving an emotion from its excluded, unusable form where it threatens to hijack your whole system to one where you draw untold energy from it is a powerful tool, one that smashes through the compression of the Smush.

It's called *emotional alchemy*.

EXERCISE

Things Unsaid

Maybe you find yourself constantly losing your temper over the small stuff; maybe you feel like you're wrapped in a layer of thick cotton, not feeling much at all.

The human experience is full of ecstasy, anger, sadness, doubt. It's time for us to harness the emotions a Good Girl is not supposed to have. It's time to say some of your Things Unsaid.

These are the statements that rose up in your body but got stuck before they made it out into words. Whether you chose not to say them or couldn't, this is the place to empty that reservoir. The topics we are least willing to talk about are what get stuck—and the cause of our biggest problems.

You will not have to say these things; you just need to know what they are. Write the following phrase at the top of a piece of paper:

I never told _____ about _____.

Keep going until you've filled the page. Don't censor yourself, and include the big stuff as well as the small.

There are a couple of variations on this exercise that may also be helpful to you:

Do Things Unsaid, but for one person: your ex-husband; your coworker; your mom.

Do Things Unsaid every day for a month. I tried this as an experiment with a class that had a lot of pent-up, unreleased feeling, and it was a revelation for students to realize how many times in the course of an ordinary day they silenced what they were feeling. By the end of the month, we discovered that doing this exercise for five minutes in the morning entirely changed how they moved through the world.

Do Things Unsaid as a partner exercise. This may actually be the optimal way to do this exercise. (Indeed, many of the exercises in this book are best done in groups. See [this page](#).) Here's how it works: You say, "I haven't told _____ that _____." Your partner does not coach or give advice or try to fix the problem; she says, "Thank you. What else haven't you said?" After five minutes, you switch.

Saying these words out loud to another person is one of the best ways to alchemize the anger—and to mitigate the haze of pain that tends to accompany the process. There is a very good reason that every religion has a form of the confessional: it is a primal human need to be heard, and for someone outside of us to bear witness with neutrality.

Please do not use this exercise as an excuse to beat yourself up over the things you did not say. (Do not use *any* exercise in this book to self-attack.)

Your Things Unsaid list is a victory, and should be celebrated as such: awareness brings choice, which brings freedom.

In a book about radical change, it may seem counterintuitive to be told to *do nothing*. And yet that is exactly what you should do with your Things Unsaid.

Simply by writing this list, and returning to update it periodically, you're already doing something. Now allow yourself the great gift of watching everything your awareness and attention can make happen.

Invisible Labor, Revealed

Your Things Unsaid list could probably also be titled Things a Good Girl Wouldn't Say. And while you were listing yours, you may have noticed that all this silence also leads to a tremendous amount of hidden work.

Instead of saying, "You're an alcoholic and you need to leave my dinner party right now," the Good Girl makes a thousand accommodations. She'll rearrange the seating, leave an extra glass of water by the drunkard's elbow, and brightly ask "Who wants dessert?" after one of his sloppy rants—then quietly call to apologize to her guests the next day.

Instead of asking her husband, "Do you mind being the primary wage-earner while I stay home with the kids?" the Good Girl compensates for her guilt by doing his company's bookkeeping, scouting for potential customers in her own social network, placating his most difficult clients, and bringing lunch to his staff—all without receiving a paycheck.

Instead of asking her colleague, "Do you want to cut this shit out, or would you prefer that we take this to Human Resources?" the Good Girl invests in a wardrobe that doesn't show an inch of skin, finesses travel arrangements so she'll never have to be alone with him, then secretly starts looking for another job.

Not all invisible labor arises from Things Unsaid. But invisible labor is a tremendous source of rage for women—rage that, most of the time, doesn't even get to surface.

One of the most surefire ways I have to rile up a class is to ask them to think of everything they do that they don't get directly credited, acknowledged, or compensated for—everything they do in their lives that isn't seen, that's taken for granted, that's not paid in kind. It's astonishing, the amount of time most women spend trying to prevent other people from making a mess, guessing at what other people are feeling, or comforting them after they've delivered a necessary correction.

Just as with hidden speech, all this invisible labor can turn rancid. If you are a first responder, the kind of person who responds immediately to a crisis, then you train the people around you to reach out the moment they have a problem. And in no time at all, you're surrounded by people who need you, not feed you. For some of us, this invisible labor makes up 80 percent of our work. No wonder we're exhausted all the time; no wonder we have no energy for our own passion projects, or even to think about what those might be.

Invisible labor can also be incredibly beautiful. I am not trying to tell you that you cannot stay late to tutor a student who's falling behind, pick up litter on your beach walk, or connect a friend who's starting a business with the investor who can make her dream happen. But awareness of what it is that you're doing, especially if your Good Girl auto-responder is jumping in before you've been asked to do anything all, is critical. Because

with awareness comes choice.

EXERCISE

Think of all the things you do that are outside the scope of your actual paid work, especially the things you do without even being asked—either because they're expected, or because your responsiveness to a need is so heartfelt and fast that you nurture or help someone before they've even had a chance to formulate a request.

Does your partner think the laundry does itself? Are your colleagues more careless than they should be, because they know you'll catch their mistakes? Who plans the gallery opening, then runs out to buy wine? Who decorates the house for the holidays? Who found the marriage counselor? Who booked the appointment?

Just today: What did you think about? What did you do? Where did the bulk of your mental, physical, and emotional energy go? How much of what you did and thought and worried about was for you, and how much of it was for someone else? How much of it is something that you can expect to be reciprocated, without needing to ask? How much of it would you *like* to be reciprocated, even though you haven't asked? How much of it was credited, and how much of it stayed unseen? How much of it remained invisible, even to the person who benefited the most?

When you start seeing this labor as the labor it is, you can start making choices about whether or not you want to do it. What's working for you—and what isn't?

Simply recognizing how much invisible labor you do can be incredibly liberating, in and of itself. But once you start becoming aware of this invisible labor as a choice you are making, then the people around you *start to see it too*.

And when you start acknowledging all the invisible labor you do, and giving yourself credit for it (even when others don't), it gets easier to ask anybody for anything at any time. If you are the kind of person who doesn't feel you have the right to ask for anything, that will start to shift when you begin seeing the work you do as *work*—as opposed to the tax you pay just for being female on the planet.

The skills to ask will come in a later chapter. But for now, treasure this newfound awareness, and celebrate every time you notice yourself embarking on an act of invisible labor, and every time you choose whether or not to do it. With each choice you make, that labor goes from being an automatic performance to an intentional act of love, or the decision to prioritize yourself.

Your Book of Desires will be a great ally as you start to negotiate the time and space that gets freed up when you make your invisible labor visible. Return to it—both to add items and as a source of inspiration.

EXERCISE

Conversations I'm Not Having

You may be having a lot of big feelings by now: this is appropriate for the chaotic middle phase. In this swirl of emotions, it's totally logical that there would be themes and conversations emerging that you know you should have with the people in your life.

Having those conversations is best done when you've reached a point of clarity, but note them now; the chaos of the middle phase is when they start to make themselves known.

Again: these are *not* conversations you will have to have. As with beginning to recognize invisible labor and the Things Unsaid exercise, we are first bringing these issues to our own attention and documenting them. (Though it often happens that students find these themes emerge organically, after they do the exercise.) When I have given you the tools you need to have these difficult conversations, you will get to decide whether to have them or not. For now, logging them is enough.

Write the following sentence at the top of the page:

I'm not having a conversation with _____ about _____.

For example:

I'm not having a conversation with my kid about how she never empties the dishwasher without being asked.

I'm not having a conversation with my mother about my sister inheriting our childhood home.

Create as many entries as you can.

After you've finished your list, do a separate pass for conversations you're not having around money, and conversations you're not having around sex.

Locate, Approve, Influence

What feelings came up for you when you wrote your list of Conversations I'm Not Having?

Locate these feelings; name them. Did you feel helplessness, hopelessness, fury, sadness, sickness, frustration, a desire for vengeance, glee? All of the above?

Approve of whatever feelings came up. By approval, I don't mean accepting the emotion; I mean accepting the fact that it exists. Let's say one of the feelings that came up is a crappy one: jealousy, for instance, or resentment. Approving of that feeling doesn't mean condoning it. It doesn't mean resigning yourself to the fact that it's never going to change. It simply means resigning yourself to the fact of what *is*—what is happening right now. Pretending that something else is happening—telling yourself that you feel grateful because you should, when in fact you feel really sad—is denial.

When you disapprove of the existence of a feeling that's come up, you disconnect from it and have no influence over it. It's only when you acknowledge what's actually there that you stand a chance to say where that energy goes and how. That's *influence*.

The magic word I use with myself is "Welcome." If I do the Bad Girl Protocol and a homicidal maniac shows up, a Valkyrie who wants to take a bullwhip to most of Congress? I say, "Welcome." A pathetic, whining little girl, who's overwhelmed and just wants someone to take it all off my plate so I can be alone and rest? "Welcome." The Good Girl people-pleaser who wants to say yes and impress and satisfy others, even though it means overextending myself? "Welcome."

Anxiety is unalchemized enthusiasm; worry is unalchemized care; sadness can signal a return to yourself, and expose a desire for more of the tender things in life.

Rage is unalchemized passion
—absolutely a force for good, if

it wakes people up to the truth in the world.

There is no such thing as a vice or a virtue, only the role that you give it. You can work with *anything* that comes up, as long as it's not buried. Get in contact with an emotion, and you can steer it—use it. Suppress it, and it will run amok.

Fighting Against to Fighting For

Conversations I'm Not Having invariably pulls back the curtain on feelings you've been avoiding—and on some pretty juicy desires, too. You likely didn't write, "I'm not having a conversation with Susan about the rings of Saturn"—because unless you're an astrophysicist with strong opinions about gaseous planets, there's no rage you're suppressing around that conversation, and no desire, either. But when you look at your own list, I'd bet that every entry is a little undetonated bomb of both.

Avoidance is a form of protection. We protect what's meaningful to us. So the conversations you're avoiding are filled with information about what's important to you, what's tender and painful and in need of protection. Use your Conversations to create a few new entries in your Book of Desires. Just as you mined your complaints for hidden desires, investigate these conversations you're not having for longings.

Include a few concrete and *specific* ways you would know that the desire had been manifested. Some of these will be straightforward: "I would finally know exactly how much money we have in our joint savings account." But how would you know your dad respected you? What could he do that would give you that feeling?

Approve also of the fact that you haven't (yet) had these conversations! Maybe you don't have enough information, or you're afraid, or you don't know how. The training you'll receive will move

you through all of the spaces and skills you will need to have in order to have conversations; logging them early is a fantastic benchmark. There will be lots of time to acknowledge and celebrate the process and the progress you're going to make.

Moving through this arc—from numbness, through rage, to a new clarity and energy around our desires—allows us to create transformation in ourselves, and in the world. What comes next is accessing the kind of power that will make those conversations possible—and that protection unnecessary.

This process of taking an unspoken, unacknowledged, suppressed emotion and shining light on it so it becomes acknowledged, located, and approved of is how we get from that chaotic middle phase to the final stage of clarity and power.

Another way to think about this: We are moving from what we're fighting *against* to the thing we're fighting *for*.

Desire is our link to what we care about, what we're willing to fight for.

We cannot afford to forget the love that lives inside of rage.

You're not fighting against your roommate's messiness; you're fighting for a space that's beautiful and well cared for where you work on your photography, as well as for better communication with the person you live with. You're not fighting against the office bully, but for a workplace where everyone feels safe to brainstorm big. You're not fighting against sex trafficking, but for the recognition and protection of the human rights of little girls around the world.

Rage is everything you're fighting against, the pins-and-needles phase of waking up a limb that's fallen asleep. Complete the arc, and you'll see that rage was really a desire trying to make itself known—what you're fighting for. And we can use the clarity and energy we find in our rage to give us direction. It may seem dangerous to lean

into our anger, but we don't get powerful by unplugging; we get powerful by tapping into the current.

Connecting to our desire—and acquiring the skills to get those desires met—is what transforms that rage into power.

It is a powerful thing to fight against police brutality. But it's even more powerful to fight *for* the sanctity of the lives of innocent men and women, and for a justice system that works equally well for all races. The dream of what *that* world would look like will move you—and whoever joins you in your crusade—much further than wanting to overcome police brutality will.

“Fighting against” is the middle phase. We're taught to stop there, to smash our head against the obstacle, to lock our attention onto what we *don't* want, instead of looking to what's beyond the wall. But there's always going to be more juice in what you *do* want, what you're fighting *for*. And almost always, we find the desire we're fighting for is way bigger and more inspiring.

Figuring out what we are fighting for changes our orientation—it angles us toward vision, not obstacle. The problem of what we're fighting against still gets tackled, but it does so while we're on our way to something bigger and better: our greatest, greediest dreams for ourselves and for humanity—everything worth fighting for.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SOLID AS A ROCK

The Power of Legitimacy

A woman raised her hand after watching a demonstration I'd done with Ruben, cofounder of The Academy and my verbal sparring partner in class. We'd staged a fight where his only job was to say "No!" to me, no matter how convincing I am.

"I'm pretty sure I'd cave the second or third time he said no," she confessed. "How do you hold the line?"

I asked her what she did for a living, and she told me that she was a nanny. So I asked: "What would you say if a total stranger walked up to you in the park and said, 'I'm going to take this little boy you're taking care of for a walk, just the two of us. Would that be okay?'"

"Absolutely not," she said, without a second's pause.

I tried again: "Maybe I'll just take him over there, behind that building with the bathrooms. Would that be okay?"

The class was laughing by that point at the outrageousness of the scenario, and she was too—unless you were watching her body, which was locked and loaded. Her brain knew I was messing with her; her body was poised to tear my throat out.

My point is this: There was *nothing* that anyone on earth could have said that would have convinced her to let some random stranger take that little boy out of her sight.

Do you see how incredibly powerful that is?

Now imagine that what she was protecting wasn't the child in her care—but her dream of being a sculptor, or her organization's vision for housing justice. Imagine feeling so completely sure of the correctness of your conviction that there's no argument on earth that could persuade you to dump that dream.

That is how rock-solid I want you to feel about your desires.

This is legitimacy—the true superpower of the sub state.

The Unshakable Self-Knowledge of the Submissive State

What does legitimacy have to do with submission?

In order to know exactly what you want and how you want it, you have to go inside. When you turn your attention inward and connect to what you want—exactly what it will taste and smell like, feel like, and what will change when you have it—then you give yourself permission to take it seriously.

You need that permission to confess your desire, to express it, to expand it—and to communicate it to someone else with the full weight of your desire behind it. Women's conditioning—all the rules that tell us it's not okay to be dissatisfied or horny or hungry or mad—weakens our connection to desire. And if we can't feel it fully, we can't transmit the richest version—one we feel in our bodies, and that the other person can feel in theirs.

Most men don't have a problem feeling or conveying legitimacy. In fact, when we talk about male privilege, one of the things we are describing is their sense of legitimacy. Men don't ask permission to ask, as women do (the infamous "Can I ask a question?"). Often, men don't even bother asking; they simply tell you what's going to happen next.

When you feel legitimate about
a desire, you are 100 percent

connected to the feeling of wanting it.

Can you imagine what it would be like if we lived in a world where people *felt* what they wanted? They didn't just know, in some arm's-length, theoretical way, but connected to it as a burning need, completely embodied.

What legitimacy does to our bodies, and the energy we transmit, cannot be quantified. When I met my first female Taoist teacher, one of the most esteemed abbots in China, I was blown away by her physical presence, and by the bodies of the nuns around her. She was so grounded—so rooted—that her small body felt to me like the visible tip of a massive tree, its roots buried a hundred feet into the ground. When she walked, it was as if the earth walked with her.

And although she and the other nuns were part of a celibate sect, her rootedness contained a surprising quality: it had an immense erotic power. Not a superficially sexy performance of female eroticism, but the real thing: life force. Her vitality was stunning.

I couldn't help but compare her body to the bodies of so many of the women I knew back home—how they dressed themselves in apology, how high and shallow their breathing was, and how much tightness and compression they carried. Looking at her showed me the invisible restraints binding most of the women I knew.

And looking at this nun's body—feeling it—I had no trouble at all believing the legend many people had told me about her. In the 1960s and 70s, the Communist army destroyed many ancient temples and monasteries in China. But as the army gathered on the mountainside, preparing to storm her abbey, she appeared above them on a narrow outcropping.

She just stood there; she didn't say a word. And the army turned tail and ran.

This is what I mean by legitimacy. It is deeply rooted, it is embodied, and the truth it carries is completely unmovable.

Asking for the Right to Ask at All

Asking with legitimacy for something doesn't necessarily mean that you are convinced you're going to get it. But it does mean that you know, at a cellular level, that you have the right to ask for it.

Good Girl prohibitions against desire—against wanting, and against asking—can muddy these waters. So it may sound like you're asking your boss for a promotion. But what you're really asking, and what your supervisor's animal body is responding to, is whether you're entitled to ask for one at all. Sometimes this even makes its way into the language we use: "Can I ask you a question?"

I call these "meta-asks." These meta-asks make it much more difficult for the other person to reply honestly, especially if they want to say no—because they know, as you do, that saying no isn't just saying no to your request for a date or a promotion or a seat on the subway, but to the premise of your very existence. Not surprisingly, when someone does say no to you when you're in that state, even if they have a valid reason for doing so, it feels like they're annihilating you. And if they do say yes to avoid the discomfort of harming you, it's much more likely to be a false yes—an agreement they're going to waffle or pull back from as soon as your back is turned.

Because these requests tend to be unsuccessful (either you don't get what you want or you get what you want and nobody feels good about it), communicating this way creates a negative feedback loop, one that cannot help but continue to erode your confidence.

After all, the person you're talking to isn't the only person affected by the energetics of the Smush! Bracing for a no, qualifying our desires, or lying about them—these broadcast weakness and doubt and confusion to your own nervous system as well as to the person you're talking to. Asking *without* legitimacy stirs up all of your own worst fears: that you don't have the right to ask for what you've asked for, that the person is going to say no, that everyone always says no, that you're alone and it's always going to be that way.

By contrast, a congruent request creates a connection, which in turn creates allies, and leads to intimacy and collaboration. A congruent ask *feels* good, to both of you.

Legitimacy even takes the sting out of no. Because you're not relying on anyone else to confer validity on your request, a rejection

of your invitation doesn't register as a fatal wound. Instead, that no is transformed into a piece of relevant data—often, a source of excitement, and one that leaves open the possibility of a longer conversation.

Feeling legitimate about your desire is the first step toward congruence.

Legitimacy Is Permission

Maybe you read the words “You have no say in what you want,” and felt the truth of them on an intellectual level. But we can't get anywhere unless we're bringing our bodies along. Your brain doesn't need convincing; she's read all the books on empowerment, heard all the brilliant women give their TED Talks and explain their theories on podcasts. Strengthening your legitimacy lets *the rest of you* know that it's okay to want what you want.

This profoundly impacts how other people read you, even when you're not speaking. Think of a time you were incredibly stressed out. The number-one gesture someone else could offer to change your channel is a hug. You love hugs! But you're so incredibly jangly and revved up that a hug is the very last thing they could imagine giving you. They might try anyway—you might even ask for one!—but to do so, they're going to have to push their own body to climb across some pretty scary vibes. This shows how our energetics can work against us, and how legitimacy confers *permission*. It's the nonverbal permission other people need to *give* you what you want. And it gives you permission to want what you want.

How many times have students told me that they were offered exactly what they wanted, and yet still found themselves saying no, faster than they could catch themselves?

Why on earth does this happen?

We say no to the thing we most want because we've already negotiated against ourselves and made peace with ourselves about not getting it. We've already made the case for why we don't get to have it, and why we're going to have to make do without it. It may be

exactly what we want, but we've already set the course for not having it, so our quick answer is, "No, I'm fine."

It happens in seconds—a knee-jerk. And the only way around it is preparing to receive, which is important for many reasons. Getting something you want is a big deal! And it can be a big deal in an intense, not-wonderful way, if you're not properly prepared. Think of a bride, rampaging on her perfect wedding day, or the huge percentage of lottery winners who lose it all in the first two years, or the hundreds of celebrities whose sudden rise destroyed them from the inside out.

Getting what you want changes the landscape of your life. Feeling legitimate about it beforehand means that you've envisioned that altered landscape before the Ask is made, before the surprise offer comes—not only so you don't accidentally reject it, but so that your life is already oriented and adjusted toward having it, incorporating it, enjoying it, and using it fully.

It's Okay for Them to Say No!

The words you speak carry information, and your body tells the other person how to feel about that information. When you ask someone for something, sure that they're going to say no to you, you brace energetically against the *no* you think is coming.

This negatively affects your Ask. Even if you're asking for something that would make you truly, truly happy, when you presume the answer will be no, then your body broadcasts a flinch.

What this transmits energetically is that he's hurt you already. There's already something he has to feel bad about, something to make up for. Which also means that he won't feel safe saying no, even if he wants to. So he may dodge or avoid the question, or agree to something he doesn't want to do—and then flake out later.

And if he wants to say yes, you've stripped the pleasure from it by asking like he was going to say no. This is the result of bracing against no, even if your request is something he wants to comply with.

This is familiar, isn't it? I'm sure you can easily call to mind a scenario where you were asked for something you would have happily given, but the way the person asked pissed you right off and made you want to say no instead. That's because their request wasn't congruent. Even if you did say yes, you did so over the protests of your animal body, which is why the exchange felt so bad.

This plays out very differently if the person asking feels *entitled to ask*. (Note that I said entitled to *ask*, not necessarily entitled to have the desire met.) When you're no longer asking if it's okay to want the thing you're asking for—if you're not really asking, Good Girl-style, if it's okay for you to exist, or to have desires at all—then the other person can answer honestly, *even if that answer is no*, without feeling like they're killing you.

In order to get to yes, the
person you're asking has to
feel it's okay for them to say no.

It's only when they feel like they have the right to say no that they will feel safe enough to reveal *why* their answer is no. That's the information you will need to achieve influence—to get to a yes, or to something better.

Protect Your Dreams

Legitimacy also allows you to safeguard and protect the desires that are most important to you.

When you feel completely connected to what you want, and allow yourself to pour all of yourself into feeling it—physically, emotionally, at the very deepest level—then you will immediately feel

when your precious charges are threatened, just as my student did when I was pretending to creep on the child in her care.

You won't need external warning systems or constant, paranoid vigilance. You'll automatically become alert to subtle violations, mushy agreements, unnecessary compromises, gaslighting, hidden sacrifices, invisible labor—all the crap that other people will throw at you that gets in the way of your desires, not to mention the crap you throw at yourself. No matter what they say, no matter how they try to persuade you that what you want isn't worth anything, or that you don't want what you want, your answer will be a quiet, immediate, don't-ask-again-or-I'll-rip-your-throat-out “Absolutely not.”

That friend, always calling for advice that she never heeds, the one that keeps you on the phone for hours? If you're serious about writing that fantasy novel, saturated in your desire to do it, then you won't answer when her name lights up your phone during the three hours you've set aside to work on a Saturday afternoon. Feeling legitimate about your desire to work on your novel will fuel you not to answer.

That's an easy one. But desire—and the Legitimacy exercise on the following pages—is also a tool you can use when the interruptions aren't so easy to pass up. For instance: What if someone offers you a contract to write a TV show? The money would be great, the showrunner is prestigious, and I don't need to tell you about the weather in L.A. But the commitment would be twenty-four/seven, and it would certainly take you away from that novel for a year, if not more.

What do you do then?

You will have to spend some time with the question, allowing yourself to turn inward and really imagine, at the deepest level, what it would feel like to have both. And then ask yourself which of your choices—or one that's not even yet on the table!—would make you feel most alive, most unbound, most like your own creature.

This is how the submissive superpower of plugging into our desires connects us to our truest destiny. Master legitimacy, and like a flower, you will know when you have turned your face toward the sun.

EXERCISE

The Legitimacy Exercise

This exercise strengthens your connection to your desires by creating a chamber for them.

To begin, locate something that you want, something you feel a little shaky about, something you don't quite feel like you deserve.

Hold the desire in your mind. Imagine exactly what it would feel like to have this desire fulfilled.

Close your eyes and imagine *having* it.

Now we're going to cycle through a few rounds of checking in with our physical sensations, our emotional reactions, and our thoughts.

First, note the physical sensations that arise when you imagine this desire satisfied. How does it feel? Are your cheeks flushing? Did your lungs contract or relax? What about your stomach? You will likely "feel" this desire in your body—in your heart area, the base of your belly, in your face. Place your hand or hands over that force field.

Open your eyes, grab your notebook, and make a note of those sensations.

Next, we'll move into the space of the emotions. Embody that space, where you already have whatever it is that you want. What comes up for you emotionally? Fear, sadness, anxiety, giddiness, excitement, expansion, pride, dread, validation, satisfaction?

Open your eyes and write those emotions down.

Next, we'll move into the mental sphere. What thoughts do you have, now that you've gotten this thing that you really, really want? What does having it prove about you? What new opportunities are available to you because you have it? What experiences will you now get to have that you couldn't have before? What will you get to see? What will your having it enable in the world? Who will you share it with? What will it enable you to become?

Open your eyes and write those thoughts down.

We move through this cycle three times, experiencing a deepening each time. Every time we pass through, we get more clarity and specificity, and a closer alignment between the body, the emotional field, and the mind.

All of the exercises in this book are designed so that you can return to them over and over, as your desires move and change. The Legitimacy exercise is one in particular that you can always count on, a safe place that you can return to whenever you begin to feel shame or greed or anxiety or uncertainty about wanting something. It is designed to help us check in with our minds, our hearts, our bodies, our souls, connecting to the deep legitimacy of what we want and need. Ultimately, we will learn to ask from this place—although once

you've fully embraced this sweet surrendered state, you may find you don't need to ask at all.

For many of my students, this exercise is a lightbulb moment. But it can also give rise to some very uncomfortable sensations. When we imagine getting what we really, really want, a lot of stuff we *don't* want tends to rise up with it—like the fear of *not* getting it, of never having it, of getting it and not enjoying it, of it taking too much time or energy or money, of getting it and offending or alienating others, or causing us to be seen as breaking with or being disloyal to our families or community.

What I'd encourage you to do, the next time you do the exercise, is to police the perimeter for those thoughts. Be vigilant; this exercise is the sacred vessel you are creating for your desire. Nothing else goes in there—not worry or other people's jealousy, or doubts about your own abilities, or fear.

And if a concern does sneak in, you have the power to neutralize it. Just as you can imagine what you want, you can imagine having it exactly the way you want it. You'd love a house on the water in Maine; then again, those types of houses tend to be old and cranky, and you have no idea how to deal with a septic tank. Don't let that stop you. Instead, imagine a legion of shirtless septic specialists on speed dial.

In order to clarify the signal of
what you *do* want, we need to
protect it from what you *don't*
want.

There is another reason to keep this space pristine, and it's that this desire isn't likely to stay private—because you won't want it to! Once you feel its full power, you'll not only want to share it, but people will feel it, see it, and want to be a part of it. However, if you

ask for what you want while you're still tapped into what you *don't* want, then your signal will not be clear to others. You will unwittingly transmit the bracing, the fear, the lack of legitimacy, and the uncertainty; these feelings will make your signal wobbly.

So for the span of this exercise the next time you do it, imagine that you already have the thing that you want. Not what it's going to cost you, not the consequences you will have to deal with if you get it, not the responsibilities that will come with it. Just close your eyes and imagine *having* it, exactly the way you want it.

The mental field, the emotional field, and the physical field are always at play, but they're not always in alignment or in agreement. This is a brand-new way of building a case—one that, crucially, includes the body in the creation of a new reality.

People often find themselves trapped in a loop: emotions to thoughts, thoughts to emotions. "I had a thought, and it made me scared, and that made me have another thought about being scared, which made me even more anxious." If that sounds familiar, it's because it's the structure of a shame spiral, or a panic attack.

The way to break the circuit is to ground the sensation in the body, to feel the physical symptoms—pleasant or unpleasant—that arise when you think about having the thing you want.

We can't break through without bringing our bodies along.

The Legitimacy exercise will enable you to locate and approve of your own truth, especially when tensions are high and it's not immediately clear. Practice this skill, and you'll find it's much easier to answer the questions "What do I want?" "How does this feel?" and "What's most alive for me, right now?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

CLAIMING YOUR WINS

The Power of Self-Celebration

My student Sasha tells me that she's stuck—scattered, disorganized, always late. I try to get to the root of the desire behind her complaints, but no dice: when she does the exercises designed to unleash her suppressed rage, the only person she's angry with is herself.

“My entire life is defined by my absolute failure to get anything done, or done on time. And I can't fix the problem because I can't focus.”

God, I love a stubborn woman.

Instead of leading her down a path where she can slam on the brakes at every turn, I point out: she was focused enough to formulate the question, and she did get to class on time. “How many of those little victories do you notice over the course of a given day?” I ask her.

“I'm supposed to celebrate being able to ask a question? That's pathetic.”

Fine—it's pathetic. Nevertheless, I lead her through a self-celebration exercise where she homes in on the victories of the day, including asking the question. Because every time Sasha tells herself she is a chaotic mess of a human being, she is reinforcing the exact behaviors she wishes to be released from.

“Do you remember the moment today that you realized it was time to leave for class?”

She says, “Yeah, but I messed around for another five minutes before I got up to go.”

“Take a moment,” I say, “to note that you knew when it was time to leave, messed around for another five, and got here on time anyway.”

It is crucial for Sasha—for all of us—to register evidence of *when we got it right*. Men do it all the time—how many “big fish” pictures have you seen in your life? And yet, over and over, I see women achieve a 97 percent victory—and then focus all of their attention on the 3 percent that didn’t land.

This is a mistake, and not just because self-punishment as a form of behavior change very rarely works, but because of the imprint it leaves. That focus on the missing 3 percent virtually guarantees that a woman will continue to identify as someone who never gets it right.

Focusing on the triumphant 97 percent does exactly the opposite; it cements your understanding of yourself as the kind of person who is capable of making your own dreams come true. Self-celebration reinforces the idea—it sends a message to yourself—that you can trust what you want, and that you can trust yourself to make good things happen for yourself.

**Self-celebration dispels shame.
It helps you trust that you are
good.**

I’m not kidding: I think female self-celebration is the cure for the patriarchy. But it’s not always easy to see what this has to do with power—in fact, it’s the step that the women who come to me looking for shortcuts are most likely to skip. But when you build your library of wins, you strengthen your attunement to *your* inner signal and

reinforce what that win felt like for *you*, in *your* body—which changes how you choose in the future.

The Good Girl's Propensity to Self-Attack

One of the most insidious by-products of the patriarchy is the isolation that makes it feel like every woman's problem is personal and psychological—as opposed to systemic and sociological.

The danger with this category error is that it leads to self-attack.

This is a Good Girl problem. The Good Girl is lovely to others—polite, solicitous, forgiving, and generous to a fault. But she is fucking *vicious* with herself.

This habit of self-attack is so common that it's invisible to most of us. It's not just the endless, relentless mental chatter, the "God, I can't believe I just said that" or "I could never wear that dress." It's the downplaying and discounting we do all the time—the way my student told me she went to college in California instead of saying she graduated cum laude from Stanford; the way another student returned a compliment about her sweater by telling me she'd bought it on sale; how we talk about our promotions and commendations and accomplishments like we got lucky, and anyway, the committee was probably drunk.

Give a woman a compliment, and often, she'll argue with you! It sometimes seems that there is no victory—no amazing relationship or new baby or rediscovered passion or professional triumph—that a woman cannot use against herself in this game of constant, perpetual diminishment we're engaged in.

This is even true about what I teach. My students don't say, "Holy shit! I'm going to burn down the world with what I've learned here." They say, "I have so much regret for all the time I wasted! I'm so stupid for not figuring this out earlier."

In class, that wound is immediately healed because invariably, another woman in the room chimes in: "Ugh, I feel that way, too." In isolation, though, Good Girl conditioning scrambles our internal compasses. It tells us that there's nothing worse than a mother who doesn't feel like spending every single minute with her little angels,

unless it's a woman who leaves the house without makeup, a woman who doesn't care if she ever gets married, a woman who doesn't want to work.

Good Girl—colored glasses are why we feel so out of step when we guiltily want things that we shouldn't want, or don't want what the culture tells us we should. “What's wrong with me?” we wonder, walking that impossible tightrope. But there's nothing wrong with us; we've simply been trained to think that there is.

We come by this habit of self-attack honestly. Our default state of attention, remember, is *in*—and most of us were trained to use that attention in to monitor and police ourselves. This was a gift from our foremothers, who were reflecting their own truths: that the tallest blade of grass is the one cut first, that the one in the shortest skirt is “asking for it,” that the squeakiest wheel stays unmarried in the best-case scenario—and is stoned or burned at the stake, in the worst. For the women who came before us, these Good Girl accommodations were survival skills. When they told us, “Watch yourself closely,” it was because they were trying to keep us safe, physically and otherwise.

We can be grateful for the gift they gave us, even as we acknowledge that these skills no longer serve. In fact, we can now see how this originally protective hand-me-down now works against us—because of the effect it has not just on our self-esteem, but on our communication and subsequent access to power and influence.

Just as attention turned out without instruction isn't dominance, attention turned in so we can self-police is not a true expression of the submissive state of attention. Submission is a deeply felt connection to the truth of who you are right now—today. When you're monitoring yourself, you're still reflecting some percentage of your attention out, onto what others are thinking about you, and what they're likely to do or say about it.

This incomplete occupation of the submissive state is why, despite our default state of attention (*in*), we're still so starved for it. Attention in, when it's critical or self-policing, strips the nutrients out of what should be the luxurious surrender of the submissive. There's nothing rejuvenating or regenerative about turning your attention inward in a critical way—especially because self-attack usually leads to invisible labor: resolutions to work out more, to drink more water, to take better notes, to set up an automatic savings

plan, to dress better, to start making your own organic applesauce. . . .

Thus, self-policing leaves you both undernourished by the submissive state and bleeding out the other way.

The antidote to this is a dose of self-celebration. In a culture where women are taught to turn their attention in for the purpose of criticizing themselves, it's deeply healing to use that same impulse to commend ourselves instead. This is especially important in the wake of trauma or disappointment or heartbreak. It's breathtaking to defy our inherited superstitions and to discover that we are, in fact, no less safe when we abandon self-criticism and self-attack.

EXERCISE

The Victory Log

In order to create new ways of expressing and behaving, we have to pay attention to what has worked, and we have to celebrate it. This is another way that we break the compression of Good Girl conditioning; it is how we learn to trust ourselves again.

I often recommend an evening practice where women take five minutes to journal their wins—everything, big or small, that deserves celebration.

Write: "I celebrate _____." Keep going until the page is full.

There are only two rules here. First, be specific. Specificity—concrete places, times, the points you made—is how a celebration moves out of the theoretical and into the real.

And let yourself *feel* the victory in your body—even if the win was only a small part of what happened. What emotions does the win bring up for you? What opportunities does it create? And where do you feel it, in your body? Slow down and let the joy and satisfaction you feel in the wake of it travel through your whole being.

This will help you to do it again.

When you anchor a win in your body, you reorient yourself toward the sun; you recommit to the person who is on the path to her destiny as dictated by her desires. Boast and brag enough, and you create a feedback loop: the more you self-celebrate, the more you'll find to celebrate. You'll notice what you do that works, and you'll remember—in your body—how it feels.

Celebrate Yourself—and Each Other

Another radical concept: it's important to celebrate our triumphs with others.

Here, of course, we bump heads with our Good Girl conditioning: a Good Girl doesn't trumpet her victories, but obsesses over everything she's done wrong, more fully sealing in a feeling of powerlessness, even if she's just making herself small for the sake of the herd. It's not accidental that there isn't a single shared space in our culture (and *do not* say Instagram) where women can say, "I'm fucking amazing."

It's incredibly taboo to do this! And yet it's essential.

For this and other reasons, I recommend that you form a Mistress group. (For more information about how to do that, see [this page](#).)

The other reasons first: at its heart, this training is about power dynamics, and the best way to explore a dynamic is through interaction, especially because this is a body-based practice. Much of what we discuss will require that you be able to read what's going on in someone else's body, and that's hard to know if you're working in isolation.

This is why the exercises work so well in class, even when they feel like playacting. If you ask someone for something in a way that makes her want to slap your stupid face, even if she's playing along, in the split second before she recovers enough to laugh it off, she'll flinch. This is the amazing thing about energetics: the body doesn't lie.

These clues are how you will know your influence is working; they are how you will tell whether it's time to retreat or to push further. In order to get good at reading these reactions, you will have to practice, and a Mistress group will give you the chance to do that.

If there has been any silver lining to the political garbage fire of the past few years, it has been watching women show up for one another. Women act as catalysts for each other all the time in my classes. "I want X," a student says, and the woman next to her realizes she wants that too. Even better, she repeats her fellow Mistress's dream back to her, amplified, improved, greedier—better. Sometimes we dream better for others than we do for ourselves.

But your Mistress group can become an important site for self-celebration. Read your Victory Logs to each other. (This makes for a wonderful opening ritual.) Or start a WhatsApp group, as many of my students do, where you all post your celebrations. When you hear someone else celebrating themselves, join the party. Repeat what you heard them say, and tell them how good it felt for you to hear a woman declaring that she did something really cool. Tell them what *you* see.

The only difference between envy and inspiration is connection.

By honoring yourself in the presence of other women, you're teaching other women to honor themselves in yours.

A note about the word “mistress”: Mistress is the title a dominatrix often uses; that's not why we use it. And a mistress can be a homewrecker, the agent of infidelity; that's definitely not why we use it. We use it because it's the feminine form of the word “master.”

I would love for us to reclaim this term, rather than default to the male standard. Many “mastermind” groups already exist, but I would much rather exalt women's unique role in the coming and current changes in our world.

The Victory Hangover

You might notice something strange happen after you enjoy a big win. Maybe you made a move that increased your visibility, or you've made a Difficult Ask and gotten a yes you didn't expect. Maybe it's just that someone saw you and did something really fucking nice.

If you've truly pressed an edge and expanded past a place that you're accustomed to (and I assure you, as you read this book, you will!), you may feel euphoric in the hours after the win. But the next day, you might experience some very unpleasant feelings indeed. We call this "post-expansion contraction," or a Victory Hangover.

Often, a Victory Hangover takes the form of a shame spiral. You might feel despair or a sense of unease. You might find yourself obsessing over a minor detail or a mistake. Your hangover may feel like rage or fear. You might feel overexposed, resulting in a desire to hide. Sometimes this contraction can make you feel floaty—like you're lost, untethered.

Why does this happen? Your mind may know the difference between something you want and something you don't want, but your energy body simply records a change. It might be a rise, or an equally precipitous fall, but your energy body doesn't differentiate—it registers what has happened as a sudden change in altitude.

The truth is: You're not the same person the day after your gallery show opens to fantastic reviews. You're not the same person after you perform your first surgery, after you get a green light to make a movie or a baby, or after you've confronted an estranged parent. The different parts of you will need a moment to catch up.

You *will* expand again, and develop a new set point. In the meantime, there are really boring, simple remedies that can ease the drop. You know most of them already: pajamas, Netflix, a bath with Epsom salts, lots of sex. A massage if you're feeling flush, and a good cry if you're not. Movement and dancing—anything body-based—will help. Ruben likes to recommend that clients buy themselves flowers while they're still in the euphoric phase so they can look at them when they're not. I like to throw on my Victorian bathrobe and call myself the Mistress of Darkness while I elegantly "take to my bed."

Here's what won't work when you're in the throes of a Victory Hangover: analysis. In fact, even a Victory Log is a bad idea. Also a bad idea? Picking a fight, which may seem tempting.

Sharing what's happening with you will also help—but choose the ears carefully. People don't generally want to hear about how terrible it can feel to get something amazing. This is a great experience to share with your Mistress group.

The most important thing is not to misinterpret the hangover. It is not a sign that you've screwed up, or that you don't deserve the

accolades or the visibility. It doesn't signal that you're not safe—even if that part of you feels like it's doubling down during the contraction. It wasn't a terrible mistake to expose a vulnerable desire, or to go after something you wanted, and it's definitely not a warning that you should never ever again challenge the status quo.

Ignore the words and nurture your animal body. This contraction is natural, and it doesn't last long, usually one to three days. As unpleasant as it might feel, you should celebrate it when it comes, because it almost always means you've done something really, really cool.



Celebrate your wins. Celebrate the little tiny germ of the win inside the disaster. Celebrate the disaster and then celebrate the fact that you're celebrating the disaster.

If desire is how we know what the power is for, then legitimacy and self-celebration are about creating the ability to fully receive it once we get it—to anticipate it, enjoy it, revel in it, and use it fully. Self-celebrating allows us to absorb all the nutrients in our wins, so we can go out and win again.

CHAPTER NINE

A BRAND-NEW GAME

The Power of Asking

EXERCISE

The Asking Practice

Take a piece of paper and write the following at the top:

“I could ask _____ for _____.”

We’re going to start with men. Go through every single man you know, and think of something you could ask them for. There are no barriers to inclusion: any man you know personally is fine. (Why only men? Because if you train to do this with men, where the dynamics are so exaggerated, you’ll see the subtler ones between women more clearly.)

You will not actually have to ask for these things, so explore the edges of your imagination. It’s fine, too, to include items you aren’t 100 percent sure you want.

Write your list quickly and without thinking too hard, to increase the likelihood that you’ll end up in unexpected territory. You’re done when the list of men you can think of is done.

One of the very first dungeons I worked at was gorgeously appointed. Every themed room (and there were many) was meticulously clean and impeccably equipped—but none of them made me swoon like the Throne Room.

However, I learned that it was difficult to do an entire session seated, as you quickly run out of requests: there are only so many times a man can scrub a floor or kiss your feet. So I started to make

lists—extensive, crazy lists—of things I could ask my clients to do while I was seated on that beautiful throne.

I loved the project so much that I opened my personal address book one night, wondering what I could ask of my friends and relatives. Some of my Asks were “reasonable”: Jeff could take me to meet the members of that band I liked; Safra could join me for a picnic and poetry in the park. But because this was all in the realm of my imagination, some of my Asks got pretty wild.

I had no idea that I had stumbled on a powerful healing tool with the Asking Practice until I began teaching; I simply loved the audacious feeling it gave me to become the creator of these adventures—and the clean, rut-busting light this simple imaginative exercise cast on desires I had pushed aside or forgotten about, or couldn’t quite come out and own.

By making this a practice in my own life, I came to see how Asking liberated me from the curse of the Independent Woman: thinking that I had to do everything myself. It helped me to plumb my deepest desires. It elevated my relationships. It invited the people I knew to collaborate in my life in new and unforeseen ways, and allowed me to summon new people into my life, capable of meeting new needs as they arose. It was a way of following the life force, and tempting others to join me.

In short, Asking completely changed the landscape of my life, and theirs.

A Thousand Sneaky Ways

Women often have a hard time asking, though, and part of that has to do with a misunderstanding of what it means to ask.

Many of us were taught to think of asking as a gesture of last resort, one born of weakness, a sign that we’re in need, or lesser than. Women’s recent and hard-won independence means that for many of us, being in the position of supplicant feels humiliating, a confession of vulnerability akin to begging.

Here are some common responses I hear as to why a woman’s Asking Practice is blank:

I can't think of any men I can ask to help. (See the box on [this page](#).)

I can't ask for something I can pay for myself.

I can't ask for something I could do myself but don't want to.

I can't ask if I haven't earned it.

I can't ask if the person isn't already in my debt.

I can't ask if it means I'll owe him later.

I can't ask unless I'm desperate.

I can't ask for something I want but don't really need.

“But I don't know any men!”

This is one of the excuses I hear most often in class, and I love to call it out when I hear it.

In fact, about half the people you encounter on a daily basis are men, so: *Do an Asking Practice on men you didn't initially consider.* Who didn't you think of to ask? Professors from college? Exes? The chief medical officer at your company? The uncle who sends you really sad articles about animal rescues on Facebook? The bartender at the restaurant where you sometimes stop off for a glass of wine after work? The guy who parks your car? Your boss?

This is an exercise in imagination; you don't actually have to get in touch with any of these people, so cast your net widely: everyone is fair game! What I want you to see is the army you *could* command.

This resistance to asking is yet another manifestation of the Smush. Ask for help with something you don't want to do, and you're bossy. Ask for something you can't pay for, and you're pathetic, needy. Ask for something *before* you're desperate, and you're an entitled princess; wait until you really, really need it, and haven't you ever heard of planning? And who the hell do you think you are, to ask for something you haven't earned?

Better, then, not to ask at all, but to shut up and pull a solo mission: Independent Woman to the rescue, again.

Women often hesitate to ask because they have been trained to believe that asking will create an implied debt, a bill that too often feels like it's going to come due in the form of the reluctant exchange of sexual favors. There's a confession along these lines in every single class I've ever taught: "I felt like I should have sex with him, because he came over and helped me put up a shelf." Or a recent one that broke my heart: a woman who didn't eat on a *two-day-long trip* with her lecherous boss because she believed that consuming food he'd paid for would give him the tacit yes he'd been looking for.

These women aren't crazy; in many cases, there is an assumed sexual quid pro quo when a guy shows up at your house with his drill. But the solution cannot be to do everything ourselves, or to starve on a two-day work trip. The first step is to establish what's going on—whether you're dealing with someone who expects you to trade sex (or anything else) for handyman duties, or whether this is your assumption about what he expects. A tool called "location," which you've already learned to use on yourself and will find more about using with others in chapter 14, will help you to cut through the fog of ambiguity. Of course, it's much easier to embark on that quest with confidence when you know you can handle whatever might come next.

Even more women don't ask because they're deathly afraid of hearing no. This one is so pervasive, and such a missed opportunity, that I've dedicated the whole next chapter to it. Suffice to say: Once you can confidently keep your attention out on the other person, the word "no" is simply a doorway to the good stuff. Just as your own resistance is how you are protecting the most important parts of yourself, so is resistance in another person merely their attempt to keep an important part of themselves safe. Their resistance, then, is an opportunity for intimacy that yes can never be: it is your chance to learn something really important about the other person's world, and what they have to offer.

But because there are such strong prohibitions against asking, women have devised a thousand sneaky ways to ask without asking. We've already talked, for instance, about how women tend to complain instead of asking. We also tend to hint at what we would like instead of asking directly for it. Instead of saying, "Close the

window?” we say, “Oooh. It’s a little chilly today, no?” Other women read these implied Asks and respond to them: “You’re right! Let me shut this window.” Men tend to need a more direct Ask, though, which often leads to frustration on both sides: you asked him to close the damn window, didn’t you? Except that you didn’t.

In a similar vein,

women often substitute reciprocity for asking.

Instead of making a request, we give what we want to get. (So many blow jobs!) Unfortunately, reciprocity isn’t like gravity—there’s no universal law. In fact, this assumption is based on a false premise: people tend not to create mirror roles, but complementary ones.

This reciprocity trap is a particularly dangerous one, because it creates an invisible balance sheet, where the man is failing to perform tasks he doesn’t even realize he’s been assigned. You do it all, but he doesn’t mirror you—so not only do you not get what you want, but you’ve further entangled the two of you in a dynamic of failure and disappointment.

The result, then, from these non-asking Asks is that we don’t get what we want—or not exactly, anyway. As we will see, that’s a tiny price compared to all the other riches that are lost when we don’t ask. But before we get to that, let’s reshape what you think of when you think of an Ask.

Redefining Asking

Nearly every social interaction already contains an Ask.

When a stranger gets on the elevator and says, “Wow, it’s a scorcher out there!” she is making a request. We don’t know yet the desire behind it—whether it’s a bid for attention, connection, or

simply a social grace note, intended to make everyday intra-elevator awkwardness a little less acute. But it is a request.

This is true of most of our interactions: we're all asking for things all the time, often without explicitly stating our opinions and desires. We set expectations, make requests, and issue invitations every time we make contact with other humans, even when we aren't using words. And we are training the people we interact with how to behave around us all the time, through our language and behavior, whether we're aware of it or not. (The simplest example: if you never pick up your phone before noon, the people in your life will eventually stop calling you in the morning.)

Asking simply takes all those hidden requests and cues and makes them explicit by putting them into language. Asking makes these interactions visible and allows you to be deliberate about them, so you deploy them with awareness.

For women not to ask is a terrible loss. I understand that it can be frightening for those of us who pride ourselves on our independence to realize that bringing a dream into the real world may require the assistance, help, support, and collaboration of others.

But when we look at men who are succeeding, we see that they are asking for and receiving help *all of the time*, although many of those Asks are camouflaged as commands or factual statements: "You're going to pick up the dry cleaning after work, right?" and "After you've picked up the dry cleaning, text me to let me know they got that stain out." This is not to mention the ten thousand invisible structures set up to facilitate men's movement through the world.

The idea that we can do anything truly meaningful alone is a misconception, and a dangerous one.

Nothing meaningful is built
without collaboration, and no
collaboration exists without

conversations, arguments, and agreements.

Any time we wish to create something bold and new in our lives, we need to enlist allies.

An Ask can be a confession of a desire, and a first step toward seeing it satisfied. It can be an invitation into your inner world, and a means of making space for someone else to join you there. It can be an expression of agency, a confirmation of alliances, the transformation of a dynamic. It can be the instigation for a game, a new conversation, or a different way to play.

Asking Creates Roles

Women are taught early that asking creates debt, that it automatically leads to quid pro quo. Ask someone for a favor, and you'll owe them—of course you do, because giving depletes them.

That's just *wrong*.

Asking doesn't take away from the people you ask; instead, it creates new and exciting roles for them.

When my friend Jeremy worked as a substitute teacher, his tried-and-true method for gaining control of a new classroom was to quickly identify the saboteur (the “bad kid”)—and then assign that

kid the most serious responsibility in the classroom: “Will you take attendance, and then take the roll book down to the principal’s office?”

It worked every time. The kid’s back would straighten as he called out the names; afterward, he’d carry the book down the stairs like it was a holy scroll. He was already trying to be in charge of the classroom! Jeremy simply put his desire to work, transforming his role—from troublemaker to trusted teacher’s assistant—with an Ask.

Asking raises people up and creates unprecedented opportunities for cooperation and engagement. We don’t always realize how much control we have over the way people show up in our lives, and who they show up as. An Ask is the conscious creation of a role for a person in your life—and the role you create for them can be a parasite or a monster, a knight in shining armor, a nurturing mother goddess, or a mentor.

Asking is how we expand people’s functions in our lives; it is how we solicit them to move into new ones that are better for both parties.

Every time you ask someone for something, you are offering them a role in your life. So instead of a lengthy negotiation, why not just decide what role you want the other person to play, and then ask them to step into it?

Who are you going to invite to be your partner in crime? Who’s going to teach you about wealth, about fame, about how to conduct a legendary love affair? The brother who’s been picking on you since you were five is the absolute best mock opponent to prepare you for a tough negotiation; if you let him take the gloves off, there’s no way a hostile co-op board will catch you unprepared.

My student Julia, an impoverished artist who was gifted a class at The Academy, went on to earn seven (!) figures from her paintings that summer. She’s currently in contract for a property in Vermont that she’s planning to turn into a retreat center for others—because the Ask she made transformed an estranged uncle, a man without a clean role in her life or her family, into a noble benefactor of the arts and a treasured mentor.

Using Asking as a way to invite someone into a new role is especially valuable in long-term relationships, particularly ones where the dynamic has gotten stale. The right Ask can get the energy moving again.

When my student Glyn and her husband were getting a divorce, she insisted on splitting everything in half. It was so fair! And yet everyone was miserable—by the time I was talking to her, mediation had completely stalled.

I didn't think the stall had come *despite* the equitable split—I thought it was *because* of it. Unlike Glyn, I do not necessarily buy into Good Girl expectations of reciprocity. After a quick conversation with the two of them, it was clear to me that by insisting on parity, Glyn had robbed her husband of any role that might allow him to feel okay about their split.

I advised her to pay for more of something else if she felt so passionate about an equal division, but suggested that she assign her soon-to-be-ex husband financial responsibility for *all* of their daughter's education. Glyn did make him the master of that realm, the negotiations proceeded, and her ex gratefully stepped into the role of Great Dad. He still takes a good deal of pride in that role.

Which of your friends has a genius for costume design? Is there an Ask you could make of her that would turn her from someone who complains endlessly about her boyfriend into a fun fairy godmother who comes over to completely reimagine your wardrobe, and your identity along with it?

When a relationship is stuck, the first thing I do is look for what the unmet energetic needs are; every relationship has them. Then it's time to figure out if there's an Ask that will answer them.

A long-married couple came to see me, bored and dissatisfied. The wife told me she wanted to see other people, so she first asked for one-way monogamy. After a few months, her husband agreed, and although she didn't actually end up seeing anyone else, just that Ask was enough to improve relations between them—so much so that, a few months in, she told him she wanted *him* to be able to see other people, too.

Neither of them ended up sleeping with anyone outside the marriage, but the Asks allowed them to admit that they're sometimes attracted to other people, and helped them to see each other as free agents again. Update: They're currently fucking like rabbits. They gave each other freedom, only to realize that they wanted each other.

Unmet energetic needs can be emotional withholds, or a lack of clarity around finances, or around sex. It could be something you're not saying—something you feel that you've sacrificed or need credit

for. (I sometimes joke that we could call this book *Things Unsaid*, present that single exercise, and call it a day.) And the Asks that satisfy these might be deeply unconventional, seem silly or strange—but they are correct.

Every complaint hides a desire.

Use your desires as your compass. Interrogate your complaints. Chase those vague impulses. Think about what the Ask might be that would change the landscape. Before you ask, turn it around so you know what role you are inviting the other person into.

This is how you create an intentional community of people who are supporting you. The right Ask can transform a relationship. Once you've asked someone to invest in you and they have seen the results, *they want to do it again*. When you let someone contribute to you in a new way, they become part of your life in a new way. More often than not, once they've had the pleasure of supporting you or collaborating with you, or simply being party to your joy, they start looking for other ways to make that happen.

The Cost of Not Asking

The women I work with hear things like “Thank you for choosing me.” “Thank you for thinking of me when you needed something.” They're thanking you for allowing them to show up in a new role in your life, a better one—a role that's closer to the person they want to be.

This is why *the cost of asking too little or not asking at all is higher than you think*.

Many women pride themselves on being low-maintenance. Either there's nothing in the world a woman needs from the people in her life: “I've got this.” Or she gets mad that nobody has read her mind about what she wants, so she goes ahead and does it for herself. The

message the people in her life get, over time, is that they might as well not even try.

How many kickass women do you know who have over-supported and over-given to their men, and by doing so have made him useless in her own eyes? This is how we train men to be losers in our lives: We never let them shine. We put them in our debt and never let them get out of it. And when we start to feel bitter about the fact that they're such losers, we comfort ourselves by feeling morally superior.

A woman prides herself on never asking, not needing anything—and then she's surprised when her spouse leaves her for someone that he can provide for and impress. "Of course, the other woman is always younger," they say—but in most of the cases I've seen, the new relationship is one in which the man finally has an opportunity to show his agency, to feel used and needed in all the best ways.

**Every time you ask someone
for something, you are offering
them a role in your life. Asking
someone for less means
offering them a lesser role.**

I'm not blaming here, please understand—this self-fulfilling prophecy is all part of Good Girl conditioning, and it's a great example of why this particular set of conditions sucks for men, too.

What if we reassured the men in our lives that we wouldn't let them be losers when it came to bringing us joy? What if we told them that we would never let them fail us, without providing a subsequent opportunity for success? What if we gave them ample, abundant opportunities to get it right, and rewarded them when they did? What if we were to shine a bright light on our desires, so that it

became an orientation point for them, a compass heading, their True North?

Make no mistake: this is very different from the ways that Good Girls are trained to “take care” of their men. In fact, empowering the people in your life this way is a step toward unraveling that conditioning.

I don’t want you to become less of a phenomenally loving person, but *more* of one. Love is anything that moves people toward truth and growth, and the Good Girl is really, really bad at that. Instead, she protects, gives false compliments, withholds essential information, and offers silence when she should be delivering truth.

Stop briefly to consider all the dangers that come along with the “Well, the captain’s been drinking, but everything’s fine” paradigm.

It might be easier to look at this behavior in someone’s else life. I’d wager that you know a woman whose relationship is characterized by withheld information—things not said. This woman specializes in secret sacrifices, everything she’s given up that has gone unacknowledged by her partner. Not that she brought his attention to those sacrifices, of course—how then would she be able to hold his not-noticing against him?

She uses her martyrdom in the name of tyranny. She bludgeons him with his own ignorance and confusion, using her own dissatisfaction as a tool for control. “You’re doing it wrong,” she tells him, but she never tells him how to do it right, so he retreats and does less, while she gets angrier and angrier. She’ll go so far as to go without in order to deny him a win, hiding her pleasure so deep he’ll never find it, and she’ll never stop castigating him for his failure.

This ugly outcome, my friends—this truly advanced-level rage—is what happens when you don’t ask, when you don’t tell him how you like it, when you don’t say what’s true for you. And doing so—skillfully, creatively—is the only way out of that hellscape.

There is *no such thing* as a low-maintenance woman. There is no such thing as a low-maintenance *person*. Buying into this myth means leaving a lot of opportunity on the table. Power is not something one experiences in isolation: you do not sit in a room quietly and empower yourself. Power is a function of strong relationships, where what you receive from the people in your life is exactly what you need and want, and where what you give is valued by the receiver.

So the next time you think, “I don’t need to ask him for that,” or deny your own desires by saying, “I’m okay; I don’t need that at all,” I’d like you to remember this: Every time you *don’t* ask someone, you are depriving them of the opportunity to play a specific role that the profound intelligence of your deep desire is trying to call forth.

The Making of the “We”

It’s no secret that we live in one of the most isolated times in human history. Despite all of our virtual connectedness, the consensus is that we have many fewer close friends and people we can rely on.

Add Good Girl conditioning and the bittersweet victory of the Independent Woman, and you see how isolated women can become in this insular society—and how we end up connecting only through what we can offer, how we measure up.

When you are content to settle for only the crumbs that fall off the table, you insulate yourself unnecessarily, walling yourself off from an entire realm of collaboration, adventure, and magic. More than that, you cede your rightful position as active creator of your life; you relinquish the steering wheel and put yourself in the passenger seat with your desires locked in the trunk.

Asking is a revolutionary act against the isolation of the current age, and the blow that breaks the chains of the compression wrought by thousands of years of conditioning, leaving us free to connect and gather in communities where we can create things that no one person could do alone.

This is why I want you to feel not just good but fantastic about asking. If desires are a message from you to you about what makes you feel most alive, then an Ask is an extended hand, a way of inviting other people to participate in that part of you. If what they bring is the part of *them* that is most alive, then every link is powerful, and you are looking at the beginning of a truly transformative community.

Alia was one of my students, facing down one of the most unpleasant tasks that comes up when a marriage is over: she and her

soon-to-be ex had to split up their possessions and sell the house they'd lived in together.

The heavy emotional weight of what she needed to do—sorting through everything in the house; figuring out what to keep, what to sell, and what to store; and then getting rid of everything else, cleaning the house, putting it on the market, showing it, negotiating the deal—was really bogging Alia down, so much so that she'd stopped being able to do the exercises in class. What she was facing was a huge amount of work, fraught with all her grief and guilt and disappointment about the end of the marriage.

My first question: “Why does it fall to you to do this, and not him?” Hello, invisible labor!

“I never really thought about that—I guess I do care more about some of the stuff in the house than he does.”

“Great!” I said. “What if you just went and took the things that you like?”

“I'd still have to figure out what to trash and what to sell. God, I wish I could hire someone to break in and steal the items I want to keep.”

Which made me jump up and down with excitement. “I love this idea! This is what you're going to do! You're going to burgle your own house! Who's going to come with you, to help carry all your loot?”

She named five or six women, at least three of whom were in the room. One of them, hearing the plan, hollered: “Yeah! We'll dress up like pirates!” Another one, wanting to play, offered her spacious living room as the ideal place for the pirates to sort their booty into piles of keep, sell, and store. Another one offered to bring the champagne.

“If you could ask for anything to happen here, what would that Ask be?”

“I'd ask if I could go in and take the things I want, leaving everything else for him to deal with—including the sale of the house.”

“Text him and find out,” I said.

Alia was shocked by her ex's response, which came immediately: “Sure. Sounds good.” A solid month of hard, horrible work—poof! Gone. Just because she asked.

Meanwhile, her other Ask—for some Mistress support at her looting party—was also making magic. Alia could certainly have gotten a friend to dutifully accompany her on this loathsome errand;

it was just so hard and heavy that she didn't want to ask anybody. But as soon as it turned into a pirate party, she could have sold tickets. Isn't an unpleasant, heavy task like divvying up the family photo albums a little bit more fun if you're wearing bandannas and eye patches and hollering, "Avast, ye scurvy dogs!"?

This is emotional alchemy. This is turning a complaint into a desire. It's also an Outrageous Ask. *This* is how you create roles that not only transform relationships but create communities and transform reality.

After the pirate party, which by all accounts was a complete blast, her ex never went back to the house. He hired a specialist to get rid of the furniture that was left, a hauler to pick up the junk; the broker handled the rest. (Note how easily he sidestepped all that difficult emotional and physical labor!)

And Alia never had to do a thing she didn't want to do.

Not only did she get everything from the house that she wanted, but she got more than she ever dreamed of having: an adventure for the ages, and some heavy-duty bonding with a new girl gang dedicated to solving weighty problems with levity and joy. Are you surprised to learn that that night transformed classmates and acquaintances into deeply connected friends—and a Mistress group that, three years later, has a regularly scheduled call?

What had been an incredibly painful prospect, loaded with dread, procrastination, avoidance, guilt, and self-attack, turned into a pirate raid, complete with champagne swigged straight from the bottle—and a celebration of the beginning of a new chapter in Alia's life.

The cost of not asking is much greater than whatever you're not getting by staying silent. The cost is the realization that you're not sitting on the throne of your life, enjoying and being enriched by all the unforgettable experiences, games, and creations that your lust and wild imagination could summon.

The kinds of desires you're beginning to excavate will require that you get other people on board: after all, you can't even make an apple pie without inventing the world. So the solution cannot be *not* to ask, but to get good at it. We will tackle this together, but before we do, it's time for a booster shot.

We need to inoculate you against no.

CHAPTER TEN

THE LOVE BEHIND THE STOP SIGN

The Power of Playing with “No”

Imagine all of the amazing ideas in this world that never came to be, all of the really important requests that were never formulated, the secret longings never shared, the intimate connections never made—simply because the person who wanted to propose them was afraid of hearing the word “no.”

Too many women never hear no *because they never put themselves in a position to hear it*—they don’t ask. Which also means they don’t hear yes as often as they should, either.

The waste is colossal.

You know how to dig deep into your desires and how to alchemize your emotions. You understand how to use power dynamics to break the compression of Good Girl conditioning, and you see what a powerful tool Asking can be in creating new roles for the people in your life. But even with all of these skills and mastery over your attention and passion and freedom and power—guess what? You’re still going to occasionally encounter the word “no.”

Are we going to let that stop us? Hell, no.

If and when a no does come, you cannot let it be the last and final word. You can respect the no, but still stay connected and engaged—it can be the beginning of a conversation, not the end of one.

We must be able to hear no— and keep going.

It's time to immunize you against no.

Redefining Conflict

Women aren't trained to deal with conflict; this lack of skill leaves us avoiding it. Good Girl conditioning teaches us to smooth and accommodate, not to advocate for ourselves, especially in the face of someone else's resistance.

And yet all of us will encounter some form of conflict every day—in our interactions with doctors and lawyers and airport gate agents, in our sexual and romantic relationships, in our creative partnerships, in our workplaces, and in our families of origin and choice. So we operate at a tremendous disadvantage if, instead of becoming skilled at moving someone through their resistance, we avoid it instead.

People don't say no (most of the time) to fuck with you; they do it to protect something that matters to them. Just as you have a right to say no, so do they. And just as you might say no to protect something you care about, so do they.

This is resistance. And being able to hear no is the very first step in being able to navigate someone else's resistance.

Culturally, we have two ways of working with resistance: we either crush it or avoid it. Neither method forces us to truly engage with it; not surprisingly, neither works particularly well. Say you commit to working on a novel and promise yourself that you'll write four pages every morning—except that one day your four pages just won't come.

You've encountered resistance.

Maybe you grit your teeth and grind the pages out anyway, crushing the resistance in your path. If you do that long enough,

you'll end up with a manuscript, but in the process, you'll have pounded all the tender, joyful life out of the writing, and you'll end up with a dry, soulless piece of work. On the other hand, if you avoid your resistance entirely and drift away from your desk, then you'll never move forward.

We do the same thing when we encounter resistance in others. Either we drop the subject entirely, letting a completely valid concern or desire or important conversation fall by the wayside, or we proceed without their consent, ramming our desires down their throats.

Force someone to comply with your orders using threats and intimidation and fear, and before long you'll find yourself powering the whole ship because you've completely shut them down. This isn't the kind of leadership the world needs, nor is it actually powerful in the sense that it doesn't use all the energy available, it doesn't use all the love available, it doesn't use all the ingenuity available.

And when you steamroll another person, you aren't able to hear what might be vital information that the person is carrying about the project or the relationship. They may be saying it in a clumsy and inappropriate way, or the information may not be valuable at all, but you'll never be able to make that determination if you flatten them.

Avoiding resistance doesn't work either. One way to avoid resistance is never, ever to ask for anything that might receive a no. In one way, it's true: if you stick to utterly safe requests, you will not have to deal with much conflict in the moment. But where is the potential for growth and transformation if every single thing you ask for is one you're 100 percent sure will be met with a yes? And ultimately, you'll find that you've won the battle and lost the war because, as we've seen, all these "things unsaid" fester to become a highly destructive force, a major driver of disharmony and disconnection.

If a resistance-avoider accidentally ventures into difficult territory, she tends to swerve or back away. Often, this is a gesture made out of love. Many of us are afraid of causing pain or embarrassment or discomfort in another person by voicing something that has gone unspoken for too long: "Fourteen years in, and *now* I'm going to tell him I don't like the way he eats my pussy?"

Or maybe she asked for something she wanted and got it, only to find that it didn't satisfy her underlying desire, so now she's decided

that (instead of refining the Ask), her only option is to go without. “I just don’t want to get into it with him again,” students tell me, about partners or coworkers. “It’s not so bad. I can deal with it the way it is.” Or, Independent Woman–style: “It’s easier just to do it myself.”

But if you can’t meet the people in your life with your truth because you’re avoiding everything that might hurt them, then you are not protecting them; you are hiding and lying. If you can’t express where you are at because you are cringing from conflict, then there’s no *you* for the other person to respond to. This isn’t intimacy, but the kind of fake peace that leads to stagnation and an insidious conformity.

It certainly isn’t power.

And this is especially true because resistance is often a site for real transformation. I’m not just interested in redefining *power* in this book; I want to redefine *conflict*:

Healthy conflict is where two worlds meet.

Conflict creates tension, yes, but also intimacy and invention. Friction, let’s not forget, is how babies are made. This is why I get so excited when I meet opposition. In my opinion, it’s not something to be feared, but something to be welcomed—in many cases, nothing less than a doorway to shared intimacy.

Learn to engage with another person’s resistance, and not only do you get what you need, but you do so by collaborating with the skills, fears, concerns, and desires of the other person. *That* is power; *that* is synergy—a way of being that is generative, not destructive. To work this way does not waste anything—including the other person’s own resources through violence or suppression.

I want you to be so deft at managing resistance that you’ll begin to court those nos. You’re going to invite them, get excited for them, and delight in them when they come because you’ll know that, handled with curiosity and sensitivity, they’re often the first step

toward the kind of imaginative collaboration that makes relationships sing.

You won't bulldoze past the other person's no like a dictator, or run for cover because you can't manage the conflict. You won't force the other person to explain or defend their no, but to reveal their concerns. Sometimes what's behind their no will be simple, easily dealt with. Other times, it will be unexpected—a gateway to an even bigger desire, a previously unimagined opportunity to collaborate on a project even greater than the one you were initially proposing.

We'll find the space *inside* the resistance, which is where the magic happens.

When we stay curious—when
we stay in the uncomfortable
place—we reach the thing they
really care about.

But first, we have to get used to hearing no.

The Leash of Attention

Here, as always, our success will depend on the *quality* and the *direction* of our attention.

One of the very first things that happens to many women when they encounter any form of resistance—whether that's a straight-up no or a less direct form of it—is that our attention snaps back onto ourselves.

We hear no, or sense conflict brewing, and it drives us inside: “Ugh; I knew I shouldn't have asked,” or “He would have agreed if I'd

phrased that differently,” or “I should have taken another look at the data before opening my mouth.”

Then either we stay in that sub state and run away or the rubber band snaps back the other way as we try to force ourselves into a dominant state while our attention is still on ourselves. Which usually means that the next thing that comes out of our mouths is going to be incongruent—it’s going to sound to the other person like an attack. Cue a finger-wagging reprimand, delivered with both an apologetic Good Girl head tilt and the furious laser eyes of death, a tense, tight smile, and a tone of voice that makes it clear she’s sacrificing herself—*again*—for you, all stated in the form of a question.

But the real casualty of this snapback into sub state is energetic: the other person feels like they’ve been *dropped*. You were holding them in your attention—and now you’ve disappeared into yourself! Whatever sense of safety you might have created is gone, whisked away with your attention. And what he takes away from the encounter is the understanding that he can’t say any kind of no to you without hurting you beyond repair.

When you resist the temptation to retreat into yourself and instead stay with the other person, no matter what they’ve said or what they’re doing, then you create a situation where the other person feels safe—safer, even, than they did before the conflict arose.

Do not drop the leash of attention. Keep your attention out.

Keeping your attention out after a no is an extremely powerful move. When someone begins to understand that they can share their whole truth with you, and that you can hear it without bursting into flames, even—especially!—if that truth is different from your own, then you are creating a situation where the other person can

continue to reveal themselves. This is the beginning of a real conversation, a space where change happens.

So stay there.

EXERCISE

Inoculating against No, Part One: The Rigged No

You'll need a friend for this one. It's a good one to do in a group—many Mistress groups use it as a warm-up.

Partner with another Mistress. You are going to ask your partner for twenty objects and experiences, things you want and things you don't—a smoothie, a kiss, a castle, a promotion, an iguana, or for them to pay off your student loans.

No matter what you ask for, they will say no.

See and feel what happens in your body when they say no. It's more than likely a contraction—even though your Ask is a fictional one, and may not even be something you want! Don't beat yourself up, simply note the response and, as quickly as you can, turn your attention back out onto the other person. When you're ready, ask the next question.

Any time you feel yourself recoil or freeze—celebrate it! The first part of the vaccine is working. As you go, note how it becomes easier to keep your unwavering attention out, on them. After twenty requests, switch roles, so that you're the one saying no.

Be warned (and get excited!): This next exercise is meant to be ridiculous. It's meant to be hilarious, silly, outrageous—and everything in between. It's also the second phase of your vaccine against no.

EXERCISE

Inoculating against No, Part Two: Begging for No

Pair off into twos.

One of you will get on your knees and play a sub who begs "Please." The other will play a domme who says "No."

That's it! Set a timer for three minutes, then switch.

If the function of the Rigged No is to train you to keep your attention out when you hear it, then the goal of this one is to hear no a thousand different

ways, and a thousand times. For the duration of this exercise, throw out everything you've learned about attention in or out—the focus here is to explore every desperate, funny, tyrannical, sexy, ridiculous way you can beg “Please” and your partner can say “No.”

Both domme and sub will get the chance to play many different characters. Have fun! If you're begging: Cajole. Tease. Holler. Ask like a sexy vixen. Ask like you're furious. Beg like you're desperate. Throw a bratty temper tantrum. Whine. Ask like you don't care.

If you're the domme saying no: try it cheerfully, and then like an ice queen, and then like the request is beneath your contempt. Try it like you're flirting, like you're delighted they asked, like someone woke you up from a nap, like your father says it, like you're saving their life.

If you're horrified of sounding strident, go ahead and screech. If you tend to avoid conflict, explore how it feels to stomp and holler and demand. If you're a yeller in everyday life, try wheedling instead. Go there, in this safe space, so you can access the energy locked up in those forbidden roles.

You will inadvertently find ways of saying no that feel good to you—that's not the goal, but it will happen. The same thing is true about “please,” but again, it's incidental. We beg for no so that we experience the surprising power of learning what it's like to hear that tiny, powerful word—and not just once, but fifty, sixty, eighty times in a row, and many, many different ways—irritated, loving, funny, deadpan, scorching.

Every one of them reinforces the message: hearing no won't kill you! A powerful takeaway, given that most women are so terrified of hearing that word that we *never* ask for anything where it might be a possible outcome.

This megadose knocks the power right out of it.

How was that? Did you love the experience of getting to say no a thousand times—and realize how little you get to say it in real life? Did you find yourself eagerly looking forward to your partner's next no so that you could find a brand-new way to beg? Did you find yourself looking forward to your partner's next beg, just so you could get super-creative with your next despicable no?

If this exercise didn't make you laugh, then rinse and repeat—there's a reason I do it with private clients before their big negotiations and difficult conversations. It helps to break them out of the bracing against no that communicates a mixed message: what you want, and what you're afraid of at the same time. And it injects a spirit of carefree playfulness that's a hallmark of great domination.

Begging for No is an exercise that underlines for me the importance of actually *doing* an exercise, as opposed to simply reading about it. In class, people tend to embark on this exercise feeling a little self-conscious and stagy. But after about thirty seconds, that falls away as students start to feel what's happening in their bodies—and to see what's happening in the bodies of their partners.

I love to watch how the person saying no responds to different kinds of begs. And even though she knows it's impossible—even though there's no content whatsoever behind her “Please!”—the woman on her knees will really start trying to convince her partner with her beg. She'll start to stretch herself, experimenting with modes outside of her comfort zone. As one of my students joked to me after class, “I've never asked for anything in a sexy voice in my entire life—including sex.” But she did while she was Begging for No—and was surprised to discover that it was the “please” that landed most successfully in the body of her partner.

Advanced Play: Congruence and Begging for No

When you've Begged for No a number of times, you may want to experiment with a more advanced version: one that explores congruence.

To do this, both the person using the dominant state of attention and the person using the submissive one will try to sincerely embody the impulse behind their please or their no, regardless of which state of attention they are occupying. Use whatever feeling is rising up in your body at that moment. Try to convince your partner with your please; when you're on the other side, really reject them with your no.

Watch the other person's body to see how your communication lands. Did she soften, like she wanted to say yes to you—even though you weren't actually asking for anything at all? Was the sharpness of your no just enough to move her into the submissive state, or did she recoil a little, a sign that you'd gone too far and shut her down?

In one class, I watched a woman commit to her begs with a fake, coy, sexy little-girl tone. It was a submissive-style Ask, even though her attention was turned out—there wasn't a congruent thing about it. There was nothing wrong with what she was doing; I'd given no instructions about congruence at all. But whether she knew it or not, her animal body was communicating with her partner domme's animal body—and the sub's disconnect meant that her domme was practically crawling out of her skin with irritation and disgust.

As the woman using the dominant state of attention concentrated on getting her own attention back out again, the nos she delivered went from irritated and self-aware to providing the safety her (very incongruent) sub needed in order to feel good about begging. The domme was skilled enough to realize what was happening: had she remained turned inward and focused on her own discomfort, she would not have picked up on her sub's need for safety, and her sub would have stayed disconnected. In fact, her incongruence would likely have escalated.

But because the domme was able to turn her attention out, the sub moved into a more submissive space, and saw the body and face of her domme change when she tried a more aligned approach.

It was a beautiful thing to see.



Another person's no must be respected, but it cannot be a stop sign without exploring what's behind it first. Not only because that means powerlessness for you, but because it means you lose an important opportunity to engage with another person about what they care about, what they value, what matters to them—the desire, the potential, the love behind the no.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE IRRESISTIBLE INVITATION

Elements of a Powerful Ask

Whether you're asking your partner to agree to pull the kids out of school to have a Swiss Family Robinson-type adventure, for your brother to share the responsibility of your parents' elder care, or for your sweet husband to try a bodice-ripping role play on your next date night—it's time to Ask.

You know what you want, and you've worked through a lot of the feelings you have about asking for it. You know *why* to ask, and you're inoculated against no. In this chapter, we get to the *how*.

Of course, the most important component will be where your attention is focused. But directing your attention successfully will be easier if you have seen to some of these other elements.

Remember: You have no say in what you want, and nothing is more compelling than the true burning desire that shines through your Ask.

Refining Your Ask: Get Specific

Go back to your Asking Practice; it's time to get granular.

Specificity is essential when you're formulating your Book of Desires, and it's important when you're celebrating your wins. For all

the same reasons, it's also (even more!) important when you're making an Ask.

When I look at a new student's Asking Practice, I often see a lot of vague, intangible requests, what I call "impossible requests destined for failure," like: "I want you to mentor me," "Be more romantic," or "Show me more respect."

Those are completely worthwhile desires! But they're not (yet) Asks, and this is important.

First of all, we want you to get what you want, the way you want it. "But he should just *know*," women tell me, even as they're throwing resentment his way because he doesn't have the slightest idea what she means by "romance" or "respect." What these women are really saying is: "Figure out how to make me feel loved, esteemed, and admired." This simply isn't fair. How can our partners, classmates, and friends know what symbolic weight we've attached to our desires, when we're so wildly and wonderfully varied in what we want?

Let's look at this in the workplace.

Over cocktails after work, four women might say they have the same desire—"to have my talent and efforts recognized and rewarded." But when they actually drill down on what will satisfy their individual desires, we find four radically different impulses.

Miki wants her diligence acknowledged with a raise, because money is the symbol that matters most to her, whereas Jane would feel most rewarded by a more flexible, independently determined schedule. Tasha, in the next office over, wants a shinier title and the bump in prestige that would come from a move up the corporate ladder, whereas Sari's whole body lights up when she talks about presenting her work at the annual conference in Beijing.

How will they make those desires explicit? With specific Asks. If Sari never tells her boss about her conference ambition, then her boss can't be faulted for rewarding her by giving her a raise. Everyone wants more money, right? And of course Sari will accept that bigger paycheck, even though it's not what she really wants. But if Sari *asks*—if she speaks up about her Beijing conference dreams (and please notice how specific this Ask is; not: "I'd like to travel more")—then everybody gets the chance to start winning really big. Sari will get what she really wants, and her boss will feel the satisfaction of making her star employee really happy. And doesn't

the company benefit from brilliant Sari taking her research into an international forum?

It's deeply unfair to make the people you are in relationships with guess what has the most symbolic weight for you—especially when even the people who know us best can easily get it wrong.

“I want to do something special for my fortieth,” you tell your best friend—so she plans a surprise where a hundred far-flung acquaintances ambush you at a bar. That sure is special; it's also the opposite of what you had in mind. What you really wanted this year was for the three women you love most in the world to join you at a cabin in the middle of nowhere for a weekend of swimming and hiking and cooking and talking long into the night. In all likelihood, all you had to do to get exactly what you wanted was to make a specific Ask.

In classes, I ask my students: “What would it look like if you had more time together, more romance, more authority?” What does more independence at work mean, or a better sex life? Because we can keep asking for intangibles like “respect” and “closure”—but all it ever seems to yield is dumber men and angrier women.

If Asking has the potential to create new roles for the people in your life, then these Impossible Asks create the conditions for failure by setting them up to disappoint you. If you tell your dad, “I want to feel like you care about me,” all he's going to hear is: “You failed me as a father, and there's nothing you can do.” Again: ask five of your friends, and you'll get five different answers to describe a fantastic father-daughter relationship. So how is your dad to know what *you* want?

But everything changes as soon as you say, “Dad, will you send me a text every Monday morning, telling me you hope I have a great week?”

There's another, more selfish reason to get specific. If you don't set very clear parameters, then how will *you* know whether the Ask you came up with satisfied the desire it was designed to address?

Let's say you identify a desire to feel more connected to your lover after a long spell of working too much. “I just want to spend more time together,” you hear yourself saying. But that request isn't explicit enough; it's a science experiment! Do you know exactly how much time you're currently spending together? How many more minutes or hours a week do you want? Can the time spent be doing

anything at all, or is it “quality” time—yet another intangible—you’re after?

With this Impossible Ask, you’ve created a situation where your lover is very likely confused, and will almost certainly fail to deliver. He can’t read your mind! Tell him exactly what to do and how to do it, and how long to do it for, though, and the lines are clearly drawn. Very often, you’ll find that a specific request, delivered congruently, will come as a tremendous relief to the men in your life.

The other problem with an Impossible Ask is that it’s also impossible for you to know whether the Ask you’ve come up with is adequately addressing your desire. Please don’t take the importance of this for granted: We are mysteries unto ourselves. It happens all the time that an experience doesn’t hit the spot—no matter how closely it matches a fantasy or an idea we had. It is only through the lived experience that we move closer to what we want and who we want to be.

Every Ask is really an experiment, and to complete the experiment, you have to ask yourself, “How did that feel?”

Let’s say Ruby asks her boyfriend for more “quality time,” a classic Impossible Ask. Her boyfriend—utterly befuddled by the request—takes a stab at pleasing her by suggesting they go to the movies. She appreciates his effort and therefore glosses over the fact that her actual desire, which was to be seen and heard, and to see and hear her partner, was completely unmet by the two hours they spent eating popcorn in the dark. She never got the feeling she wanted—but she may not even allow herself to recognize this because it would seem “ungrateful.”

Maybe going to the movies didn’t really work. And when she refined her Ask—“Can we go out for dinner and talk about our summer plans?”—*that* didn’t scratch the itch either. But the half-hour the two of them spent, reading silently together on the couch, feet entangled and the cat between them? She can’t stop thinking about that. So it’s time to go sub, to isolate what she liked so much about that—and then come up with an Ask that will give her that feeling again.

Getting what we don’t want—recognizing that, and changing course—is a huge part of living a desire-driven life! But it can’t work if we get something close and don’t allow ourselves to feel what’s really true: that what we got didn’t hit the spot.

This is why we call an intangible Ask an Impossible Ask. It doesn't provide the giver the information they'd need to succeed, or even to get close. And it doesn't give the receiver the information they'd need to know whether the desire was satisfied. Not to mention that it doesn't allow the giver the satisfaction of knowing that what they gave hit the spot, and the receiver the satisfaction of getting it exactly how she wants it.

We are constantly discovering ourselves and each other. One of the best ways to do this is by constantly refining our desires and changing course.

If you say, "I would love to spend an hour with you on Tuesday where all you do is listen to me yell at you, and then at the end of that I'd like you to thank me and then fuck me," then your lover knows exactly what you want them to do.

You will also know exactly whether it happened or not. It's too easy for someone to say yes to a vague request, then fail to follow through. Sure, they'd be happy to "be more affectionate." But if you say, "Will you agree to shut off all electronics while we cuddle and watch a movie together on Tuesday night?" then you know right away whether it happened—and if not, you'll get some very clear information about where the resistance lies.

Best of all, once you've gotten your electronics-free movie and cuddle, you'll know whether the Ask you came up with satisfied the desire that gave rise to it in the first place. Did it work? Do you feel more connected? If you don't, then you can try another (specific) request, and see if *that* moves the game forward.

And what if your lover doesn't show up? Or tells you they're not interested in your Tuesday plan?

That simply means that you've encountered some resistance—and Academy students know that's when the real fun starts. You can play there, renegotiate, come up with a solution that's better than the one that you (or they!) initially proposed. We will talk at much greater length about how to turn resistance into an amazing opportunity for intimacy in chapters to come. For now, just know: A specific Ask is an essential first step.

If you're feeling irritated or frustrated by the idea of adding another item to your invisible labor to-do list: I get it. I understand that women want men to know without telling them.

But I will say two things. First, the bulk of the work *isn't* coming up with specifics to ask for—it's getting in touch with our own desires enough to do so. This is a valuable process in itself, and work that will ultimately profit you. Because once you know it and feel it and own it and feel legitimate about it, the Ask either has happened by itself or is going to be very easy to speak.

And there's still plenty of opportunity for them to surprise you, too. Once you have successfully introduced the people in your life to the landscape of your desires, once you have taught them the unique language of your pleasure and satisfaction and happiness through your Asks, then they will start to improvise.

Once your girlfriend understands that roses don't work as a romantic gesture but hair-pulling and dirty talk really does, then she's going to have a lot to play with when Valentine's Day rolls around. When your sister understands that you'd rather spend time with her than add another scented candle to your collection, she has the chance to surprise you with an experience—a trapeze class!—that you didn't even know you wanted. Once Sari's boss begins to understand what lights Sari up and why, he's going to start asking how else she can invigorate her research by cross-pollinating her ideas with other top-level experts in her field. Chances are, he knows about openings Sari doesn't.

By asking, Sari has expanded her boss's role and invited him to collaborate in her satisfaction, so that instead of "Why isn't she happier with her raise?" the question becomes, "Why stop at Beijing?"

But we're getting ahead of ourselves—this chapter is about the how. So how should Sari make her Ask?

She's already done some of the exercises in this book. She knows what she's angry about, what she's not talking about, and has started to close in on a few deep-seated desires, like the trip to Beijing. She's celebrated some wins with her Mistress group. She's starting to understand the power Asking has to transform relationships, and has gathered a few clues about why what she's been doing hasn't been working so well. The Ask she made of her kids this morning was very specific—instead of screaming, "We're leaving in five minutes! Get ready for school!" she put her attention out on them and said, "Put your lunch and your homework folder in your backpack first, then get your shoes on," and it worked.

What's next? How does she take what she's learned and walk into her boss's office and tell him that she wants to present at the conference in Beijing?

First, Sari has to turn her attention inward and connect to her desire. Then she does the Legitimacy exercise. She really goes there—she feels the giddy excitement and delicious sense of adventure she will have reviewing her PowerPoint as an Air China flight attendant offers her a drink. She feels pride in her chest as she picks up her badge at the conference center, her name above her company's name. She traces the Chinese characters with her finger, imagines sending a picture of the badge to her Mistress group's Victory Log thread.

She envisions everything this trip will make possible for her—the international contacts she'll be able to reach out to in the future, the knowledge and perspective she'll return with, the way she'll carry herself in her new role as the company's representative in Asia, and then the rest of the world.

That legitimacy will help when she goes to make her Ask. It will also make her more legible to her boss, who will be able to see—and feel!—that she is not only ready for this new role but already occupying it. The physical sensations will train her body in the win, the emotional connection will help her to transmit her desire, and the mental stage will not only inspire her but help her build her case.

This is why we do the Legitimacy cycle three times, each time adding language and sensation to the landscape of the Ask.

Then she will do a version for her boss, addressing *his* mental, emotional, and physical concerns—the positive, and the negative. How will his landscape change with what she's proposing? What will her Ask cost him, and the company? What value will it add?

She might want to role-play the Ask with her Mistress group. How would she make this request from the deeply connected, inward focus of the submissive, or the attention-out agency of the *domme*?

A submissive Ask might be a very good way for Sari to present this idea to her boss—drawing her boss into the inner world of her wants and needs. “I’m on fire about bringing what we do here to an international audience,” she might say, speaking from her heart. “I was born to do this, and I know that the strength of my passion will translate into incredible opportunities for us. I want to go out there and deliver our vision in a groundbreaking way. Will you back me?”

Can you feel how compelling Sari's connection is to this desire—and to the Ask that it gave rise to? Can you feel how much power there is in this type of legitimacy? Can you see how this kind of Ask will fundamentally change Sari's relationship with her boss—how it expands what he knows about her, and how he can imagine himself playing an expanded role in her career? There's nothing weak about an Ask like this—just a compelling sense of connection, so in this case, a submissive Ask might be a very good choice.

Or Sari might decide to ask using a more dominant state of attention. (And no: There is no magic formula for how you decide. You will feel it in the moment—one state will feel more alive. And if one thing doesn't work, you will try another.)

How would her dominant request sound? She will put her attention out, onto her boss: "You have a rare gift for nurturing talent, and you create an environment where people are inspired to pursue excellence. You have a vision for this company, and for our global expansion—would you be my sponsor as I bring that vision to the annual conference in Beijing?"

Nice! But this presumes that Sari's boss is a good guy, inclined to give her this chance. What if she goes into the meeting knowing he's leaning toward no? She would almost certainly want to do a few boss-specific rounds of Things Unsaid. "I never told you that your temper creates an unsafe workspace and quashes the creativity and motivation of the people who work for you." And: "I never told you that I think I could do your job, only much better and with less drama."

That list might be long, but once she's alchemized some of that rage, knowing that he's disinclined to say yes, she might role-play a more forceful dominant Ask: "You run this company like a military commander; this leads to exceptional efficiency. And like a military leader, you're known for taking bold but calculated risks. You want a global empire? Send me to Beijing, and I will *own* that conference for you. Make me your lieutenant in this."

We'll talk more in an upcoming chapter about preparing for a Difficult Ask, but this is a good start. And if Sari, role-playing this with her Mistress group, feels wobbly, or can't decide whether a dominant or a submissive Ask is the way to go?

For that, we have an exercise called the "Three-Way Ask."

The Three-Way Ask

Let me take you by the hand and lead you to a room filled with flowers and lit only by candles, so you can watch a woman ask a male volunteer a high-stakes Ask.

Feel in your body what happens when she asks at first, her voice a little too friendly but also too aggressive—apologetic and demanding all at the same time. She's walking the tightrope of the Smush, and we hear the compression, the bracing, the holding back.

The problem is that we *know* this woman. We've spent time laughing with her and listening to her. We've heard her desires and seen her strengths, and we know that she is ferocious, passionate, and profound, a force to be reckoned with. But where is the person we have come to know? She's not in that chair.

Now watch how quickly we can help this woman clean up her energetics. By breaking the compression, we put her back in touch with herself.

One technique to create congruence is to dramatically exaggerate each of the states of attention in a play situation *so you fully occupy both* before you ask for real.

I ask the women I work with to tell me their worst fears about asking. "I'm going to feel like an evil, castrating bitch if I actually say what I'm thinking out loud," she might tell me. Or "I can't stand feeling like a pathetic, needy girl. I need to be able to handle this myself."

Then I encourage her to enact those fears, in the most dramatic way possible. If she's afraid of appearing weak, we keep going until she's whining and begging and crawling on the ground. If she's concerned about cruelty, I (gently) goad her to *go there*: "Let's hear the worst thing you've got. Make him cry." After she has fully inhabited both of these states of attention, amplifying both to the point of absurdity, her next version of the request comes out really, really clean.

This is the genius of energetics. There's juice tied up in roles we don't allow ourselves to occupy; giving yourself permission to go there unleashes all that power, so that you can use it. The version of yourself that you're so afraid of—the pitiful, pathetic whiner, the bratty, foot-stamping bitch—is already in your body anyway. By

embodying these states and experiencing them fully, you pass through them so they don't sneak up and surprise you. After you've mapped the territory, you stop being afraid of falling off the edge. You get to control them, instead of letting them control you.

Exaggerating these states of attention in a practice scenario also lays bare what's really happening with the flow of attention. It takes a little while, and a lot of practice, for us to learn how to direct our attention effectively. The woman who is most worried about being too overbearing and invasive is almost always not going far enough out—some part of her attention is still turned inward, which will make the signal she transmits wobbly, the instruction less than completely clear. Conversely, the woman who is afraid of weakness is almost never really fully tuned in or connected to what she wants.

When you practice your Ask by performing the most overstated and embellished version of dominance or submission, as silly as it may feel, it will get your attention where it needs to be. I've seen it hundreds of times—after channeling Cruella de Vil for a few minutes, her riding crop shoved into the guy's chest, our domme will eventually whisper one or two words into the volunteer's ear, and the whole room will respond with an electric jolt. After all that overacting, she's finally *out*, her animal body communicating dominance to his.

Similarly, when she role-plays submission, after she's crawled and wailed and begged, we'll finally see her connect with herself and her desire. Suddenly, she's asking like she already has what she's asking for. The histrionics die down, and with no attention out to confuse the signal, she'll become legible to us, as easy to read as a picture book.

The whole room knows when she has truly achieved the state of attention she is after, whether it's out or in. And while I am framing this in the context of a class at The Academy, I know you've experienced this exact same phenomenon, even if you've never attended a class. Maybe you've felt it in church, or in a conference room, or in a lecture hall. On your way to the concert, you weren't even sure you want to go—but as soon as the singer hit that first soaring high note, you were on your feet, dancing and screaming yourself hoarse along with everyone else in the stadium. What's certain is that this kind of legibility cannot be denied.

When a state of attention is completely occupied and a person communicates their truth from that place, every *body* feels it land.

When a woman rehearsing her Ask has embodied both extremes and touched her fears—even the ones that don't want to be seen—she makes her Ask again. When she speaks, she places her attention on the male volunteer, and we will watch the impact of every word she says as it lands in his body. She might as well be quoting scripture, or speaking a spell, because the room is riveted: we witness the power of her attention filling him with so much beautiful energy that he cannot help but say yes.

So this is what you will see—a woman moving from her private, powerful self to a compressed, smashed mess, to a beggar, to a dominatrix, and then, finally, to the most powerful and influential public version of herself.

This is congruence.

Many of us have achieved congruence by accident. Maybe you went way too far in both the whiny sub and furious domme direction while complaining to a friend over drinks, and ended up in a place that felt just right. Congruence is what happens after a long and terrible night of fighting with your spouse, when all the screaming and weeping and glass-throwing ends, all that drama crystallized into a single, true statement at four a.m.: “I am not moving to Seattle.”

The Three-Way Ask is how you get to congruence on purpose.

The Three-Way Ask

In your Mistress group, or with a trusted friend, role-play your Ask.
First, ask however it arises naturally.

How are you most afraid of being perceived? Are you worried you'll seem entitled, or spoiled, greedy, the kind of big shot who needs to be brought down a notch or two? Or do you not want to seem pathetic and incapable, like a feeble, pitiful, pitiable girl? *Go there*. Role-play your worst fears. Ask like you're an empress ordering an execution; beg like an orphan in a Charles Dickens novel. Embody both extremes.

Then watch how your Ask comes out when you ask again, for real.

Break the compression of the Smush, and your natural state—congruence—will follow. The power of this state cannot be denied. It took millennia for this ancient patterning to silence us, but because congruence is our natural state, it takes only minutes to undo these bindings. And when a woman accesses her entire emotional field and breaks the compression of Good Girl conditioning, when she reaches the true depth of her desires, when she gains legitimacy about it and embodies it fully and Asks from that place, there's absolutely nothing that can stop her, and nobody who wants to.

Tell Them How You Like It: The Power of Praise Training

That woman you know, who gets so well treated by the men in her life? It's not because she's the most beautiful, or because she has sex superpowers. It's because she demands it, through her Asks. And, just as she celebrates her own wins, when she catches him doing something right, she praises the shit out of what he did, and asks him for more.

You like how he pulled your chair out at dinner? Tell him so, and ask him to collect your wrap from the coat check. Watering the seed of what you like is going to work much better for you than pointing out the seventy-five things he did to disappoint you.

I don't know where we got the idea that being stingy with praise was the way to conserve our power. When you feel like a victim, praising someone feels like you're giving something away, like you're losing points. But a woman who is moving from self-attack to self-celebration, a woman who follows what's alive, a woman who is more

aware of the good in her world and is able to celebrate it, can afford to let go of whatever crumbs of power she might have gained from assuming a victim role.

The Power of the Process

Of course, there's no guarantee that Sari's boss will send her to Beijing. Even if she strengthens her legitimacy and feels like she has every right to Ask for what she is asking for. Even if the expression of her Ask is completely congruent, meaning that when she is talking about herself and her desire to go to Beijing, her attention is in on herself, and when she is talking to her boss about what she wants him to do and how her travel will positively impact him, her attention is completely out.

Even with all this work, Sari's boss might still push back. This shouldn't alarm you: much of what we will do in the chapters to come will train you to negotiate resistance. But the beautiful thing about strengthening your legitimacy is that it becomes very easy to see that a no is not a no to you, but simply a no to your request. There's no need to personalize it, or to feel catastrophic about the no.

And when her Ask is congruent, even if he does say no the first time, Sari doesn't have any weird feelings; her body will feel good because she wasn't transmitting uncertainty to herself. She'll know she played well on this first foray, and can take what she's learned when she comes back to try again.

Even if that door stays shut—Sari has done some important work. She knows what she wants, and everyone in the company will know that she knows what she's worth and isn't afraid to ask for it. In cases like this, where you have done the real work, power begins before you've even opened your mouth, and the reclamation of it happens every step along the way.

What happens, for instance, when the person we most want to make a Powerful Ask of is truly, profoundly unavailable? What if they have died, or are no longer in our lives? What if you have an Ask bottled up inside, but know that the person you need resolution from

will never be able to provide it? What if even communicating with that person has the potential to be physically dangerous?

Is it even worth the work—the inner excavation of your desires, the emotional alchemy, coming up with a specific Ask—when reaching the other person seems as unlikely as growing wings and flying to a holy mountain in Bhutan?

Yes.

Yes, we are here to get what we want. But the reclamation of our power does not depend on getting a yes. Fortunately, this process is deeply beneficial—and this is true *even if we never get to make the Ask in real life*.

I am thinking of the class where my very young, very buttoned-up student Elizabeth volunteered to do a Three-Way Ask with a male volunteer: “I’m applying to law school, and I want to ask my dad to contribute five thousand dollars toward my tuition,” she tells me.

I tell her to ask the male volunteer, but when she turns to him, she can’t get the words out. She’s mumbling, meandering; it’s hard to hear what she’s saying, and I’m standing right next to her. I try to stay with her, but she’s going so far inward, I can’t follow. Now she’s making half-words.

Since she’s so deep inside, I take the risk of having her get on her knees. “Don’t worry about the money for now. Just say the words: ‘Please, Dad.’”

She says it, and says it again, but it’s clearly very difficult for her; she’s crying, struggling, and the room is in agony right along with her. I’d been thinking that five thousand dollars wasn’t anywhere near enough for law school, but there’s clearly something else going on here.

I kneel next to her and place my hand on her back. “Please, Dad: what?” Very clearly, she says, “Please, Dad, tell me I’m good for something other than sex.”

As the story slowly starts to reveal itself, Elizabeth alternates between constrained crying and pulling herself back together. Her father would rape her when she was four and five years old, and whisper in her ear that she was good for nothing except sex. It emerges that he’s a convicted sex offender who ran a child pornography ring, who never went to jail, who’s still married to her mother.

I ask her: “Are you angry?” She says, “I don’t know. I don’t want to hurt my mother, and I really want a dad.” I ask her, “Are you willing to try getting angry?” She nods and stands, barely keeping her balance. After a minute or two, she puts her attention on the volunteer.

“You need help,” she says, with the little strength she can summon. “You need help.” She’s choking over the words, so I tell her just to make sounds: “Growl, for that five-year-old.” She makes a strange sound. “Stand over him, as though you have complete control.” This helps. She finally says, “You will stop, you need help.” She calls him a fucker, but weakly; her attention is all over the place.

While she may not have gone all the way there, it’s clear her state has changed. This progress is more than enough. She sits in the chair and I ask the volunteer to leave. She doesn’t have to do the final Ask, but I ask her what she wants. She can’t think of anything, so I offer some thoughts: “Do you want him to go to jail?” She nods.

“Do you want him to suffer? Do you want him to write a book, confessing to your entire community what he’s done?”

Yes.

She takes over, starts talking. “I want him to tell my mom, who never believed me.”

“What else do you want? Be outrageous; don’t settle for crumbs.”

“I want him to give a million dollars to a foundation for the survivors of sexual abuse.”

“Bigger.”

“I want him to single-handedly rid the world of sexual offenders.”

“Amazing. Do you want him to apologize?”

“No, I don’t want to talk to him yet. But I want a dad. A real dad, who’s healed, who loves me and protects me. I feel guilty about the qualities I love in him, knowing what he did, but I want to make a dad out of the one I have. I don’t think it’s possible, and I don’t know how.”

I tell her that she’s already begun to make herself ready to receive the fatherly love she longs for—whether or not she ever speaks to her father again.

“I feel that.”

We stay in touch. Over the next six months, Elizabeth writes me a number of times about the impact this exercise had on her. She uses the techniques to ace all her interviews, and gets into an Ivy League

law school on a scholarship; she doesn't need her father's contribution after all. She reports that she's unfazed by the toxic men she encounters at school. She's in a new relationship and enjoying her sexual power.

But it's only after six months that Elizabeth tells me what she's really been up to: while achieving all these other astonishing victories, she also decided to volunteer to counsel inmates, the majority of whom are sex offenders, and many of whom have been sexually abused in jail. She chose this as her training ground, should she ever encounter her father again. "I taught myself to be calm in their presence, to listen, to understand—and to prepare for facing my dad and getting what I want: his healing and a real dad. And I don't care if I ever get there—every step in this process has brought me closer to who I want to be."

CHAPTER TWELVE

EMBRACE FRICTION

The Power to Navigate Resistance

The truth: Nobody *wants* to resist.

It's uncomfortable. It doesn't feel good to say no; it feels much better to say yes, and to mean it. So people dig their heels in only when there is something very important that they're protecting.

This is why resistance is so tricky to play with—and why it's so very rewarding to hunt for the borders.

Other people's resistance is a rich source of information—and of potential connectedness.

Like so many things, I learned this in the dungeon. Do you have any idea how boring a dominance session is when there is no resistance?

It's excruciating.

A man comes in; I tell him to kiss my feet. He does what I ask, perfectly. If there's no resistance, I have to find some—or invent it!

Maybe I call his name and accuse him of turning his head too slowly, even though his head-turning happened at a completely normal rate. Otherwise, we're in for a long hour: instructions given, then dutifully, faultlessly carried out—a fully automated machine, no more interesting than a parking meter.

In a session without resistance, nothing happens between us. Nothing moves; nothing grows. Nothing is discovered; nothing is achieved. I might as well have dropped off a printed list of instructions and left the room.

Now imagine a different version of the same scene. That same guy is at my feet. I issue my command but see a certain stubbornness in the set of his chin when he hears it. He's holding back: something's stuck, something's hidden.

Suddenly, I've got something interesting to play with.

I start playing by putting attention on the resistance I've noticed, locating it: "Did my request frighten you? Are you embarrassed? Is that a difficult order for you to follow?" And then I chase whatever comes up.

When I do that, a whole new space to play in will open up, something brand-new in the room.

I started learning real and beautiful things about the other person in the room, just by watching how they followed my lead. These lines of inquiry would often go very deep, very fast. I'd call attention to a heaviness in a client's chest, a flutter of his eyelids, a contraction of the stomach, and all of a sudden, he would be experiencing and sharing feelings and desires that had been quiet for him for a long time—secret shames, ungrieved losses, a huge, trembling new hope.

I might have been the lead, the one in charge, the mistress of ceremonies, but whatever he was bringing to the room that day became the story. We were creating something together. Sessions became psychological, creative, generative, collaborative, surprising—and meaningful, for both of us.

What I learned in the dungeon is true outside of it: resistance becomes a gift, beautiful to encounter, when we come to understand that it's really a neon arrow pointing straight at something of deep importance to the other person, whether it's their heart, their vanity, their shame, or painful questions about their rightful place.

This is what makes connecting with it the greatest fuel, and not just for the next negotiation, but for collaborating on truly

transcendent solutions. Because if you play well in places you're not sure you have permission to go, you'll discover resources you didn't know were available.

Of course, an individual's expressed wishes are paramount, everywhere and always. This isn't a guide to brutally steamrolling over what another person wants or needs. Even in a sadomasochistic session, if you're "punishing" someone, it works only if you do it just right; you want to wake them up, but if you go too fast or too loud or too hard, their bodies will shut down. That's what a tyrant does—the ultimate bad domme.

And yet, if there is no conflict, or if we fail to engage with the conflict that naturally arises, there is no energy in the relationship, no movement—no *life*.

More often than not, Ruben and I have found that the kind of active cocreation that happens when two people work through resistance together gives rise to something *more* than was previously possible. What we've seen, over and over again, is that two people together creating options out of the crucible of resistance will often do something better than simply getting to yes. They will come up with a *third solution*, one that wildly outperforms both of their expectations—and one that would have been previously unthinkable before the conflict arose, simply because nobody was looking there.

In The Academy, we have seen over and over that these Difficult Asks don't harm relationships, as women are so often afraid that they will, but instead *strengthen* them by giving air and light to a crucial but previously unspoken desire. Having the courage, the love, and the power to be able to speak about these difficult topics is not only the gateway to tremendous influence, it's where connectedness begins. And so many times, I've seen how the solutions the partners arrive at satisfy an unspoken need, not just for the person asking, but for *both* of them.

What follows is a template for skillfully managing resistance in another person. In the real world, of course, there's no tried-and-true blueprint—every person's resistance will manifest differently, and every development will require a different move in response. Patience will be required. But progress will come if you return—and keep returning—to these fundamentals.

Keep Your Attention Out

In order to deal with someone else's resistance, you have to be able to keep your attention out.

Not all the time, of course—you need to be able to check in with yourself, to gauge how the responses you're getting are sitting with you. Nor does this mean that you cannot make a submissive-style Ask. But moving someone through their resistance requires sensing and testing, and that means attention out.

Let's backtrack for a second. When someone says no, you've encountered resistance. Men are all too aware that hearing no can be very painful for women—which is why a lot of them won't say it at all. They find other, less direct ways to resist. For example: he'll agree to your Ask, but without passion or conviction, so you leave the encounter with the uneasy feeling that you lost him somewhere along the line, even though you technically got a yes. He might go on the offensive, attacking your logic or your right to make the request at all. He might strike for the jugular, delivering a devastatingly hurtful insult designed to shut you down. Or he might withdraw into himself, stone-facedly serving up monosyllabic answers to your requests instead of the spirited debate you came prepared for.

These are all forms of resistance, and you can play with all of them. But this is why your attention must be out. Because when we're talking about resistance, we're talking not just about what someone consciously does, but *where they're at*.

If you get stuck with your attention turned inward, then you've lost the other person entirely. The feeling they get, when you recoil in response to their no, is that you've dropped them energetically. Their no injured you—and now they don't feel like it's safe to tell you the truth.

And this is a very vulnerable moment in which to drop them. Imagine you're the one saying no. Wouldn't it be wonderful to feel that, after you said no, the other person expressed an interest and a respect for and a curiosity about exactly the thing you're trying to protect? What if you felt the possibility that they were willing to invest in protecting it?

This is why it's so important to train to overcome the body's contraction in response to no, and to keep your attention out after

you hear it. Get curious about this thing they value. Showing that you take it into consideration is one of the main things that differentiates powerful influence from tyrannical control.

Locate, Approve, Influence

You already know that you've stumbled onto something important—the other person's resistance tells you so. But influence comes only when you have established exactly what it is about the request you've made that's earned this reaction.

What is the other person protecting? What are their concerns? What do they care about? What are they passionate about? What would your plan expose? What are they hiding? What are they afraid of?

The key to working with
someone else's resistance—as
with our own—is to get *curious*
about it.

Effectively working with someone else's resistance is more than making a really good case or a bulletproof argument. It's about creating a whole experience for the other person—one that they may not even be aware of.

So: with your attention out (at least at first), your curiosity on alert, and a gentle touch (go slow—impatience is generally a lack of confidence!), you'll *locate* the other person's resistance, *approve* of it—and then *influence* the other person, asking, “How do I use this information to inspire and motivate and excite you, so that we're creating this next adventure together?”

To be clear: This is not a neat process, but rather steps in a sequence that you will return to, over and over, until you have moved closer to the result you desire. In long-term relationships, or over a particularly intractable issue, you might return to the same disagreement a number of times. Then again, a major conflict can sometimes be entirely resolved in the location step.

But if you keep returning to these steps—locate, approve, influence (and I’m going to say them so many times you’re going to be sick of reading them)—then you finally avoid the trap that derails too many relationships: having the same fight over and over again. Almost always, that’s a function of skipping one of these crucial steps.

Bear in mind: The way we deal with resistance in others often mirrors how we deal with resistance in ourselves. Women who are conflict-avoidant and who back away from the things that they want (often by saying that they have no self-discipline) may repeat that evasion in their relationships. And women who will gut it out no matter what, who will push on and force themselves through their own resistance long after they’ve lost connection with the life of the project, will very often do the same thing when they fight. Stay mindful of your tendency as we take these next steps.

The first step toward influence, after getting legitimate about your request, is to *locate* the person. You will do this by asking the person a series of questions about the circumstances that led to their no, and watching their responses—not just what they say, but what happens in their bodies.

Asking “Why not?” in response to a no or other manifestation of resistance will feel to the other person like an attack. (Which is why it’s so often met with a responding slap: “Because I said so.”) A true effort to locate the other person, like “How did it make you feel when I asked you that?” is more likely to yield a response. Your goal is not (yet) to figure out what’s bothering them about the scenario you’re proposing, but to help them to label where they are, what’s coming up for them in that moment, and how they’re doing.

Or you can name your perception of the other person’s state, and then confirm it. “You seem a little shocked that I’d ask to move to a four-day workweek. Is that true?” “You seem irritated by the statement that we need more secretarial-type support. Is that true?”

“You seem dismissive of this alternative drug protocol I found in the course of my research. Is that true?”

Locating the other person may take a couple of tries, especially if big feelings are involved. Stay connected. Take the time you need to feel yourself—and the other person. The minute you lose embodiment, this becomes just another shitty fight—a reaction to a reaction to a reaction. Speed past your feeling sense and you are flying blind.

You control the pace. Never move faster than you can feel.

Let’s look at this in context. I’m deliberately using a fantastical example here to demonstrate that it doesn’t matter what the conflict is about. You might be asking your boss to expand your role, or asking your husband to consider opening your marriage or to have another child. It could be a weighty, freighted conflict between siblings about a property you’ve inherited jointly, or one with much lower stakes (even though it may not feel like it!), such as asking your roommate to do their own damn dishes. The circumstances will change; the sense of curiosity and playfulness you bring to the conflict should not. And in every instance, your success will be dependent on your ability to keep your attention out.

So let’s look at what happens when Abby tells her husband, Emilio, that she’s interested in purchasing a unicorn farm.

In one scenario, Emilio immediately flies off the handle. “What are you talking about? You want us to have unicorns? I thought we were committed to raising dragons!”

Abby makes a first attempt to locate him: “It seems like you’re pretty angry.”

“I’m not angry!”

“Okay. Is it fair to say that you’re upset?”

“Of course I’m upset! You want to throw everything we’ve worked for in the trash!”

Congratulations to Abby! Although her husband is still quite upset, she *has* located him—and she can tell because he’s started to divulge valuable information about the nature of his resistance, revealing that he automatically equates Abby’s desire for a unicorn farm with a desire to throw their dragon hatchery away.

Even though Abby knows she’s not throwing their dragons away, she moves to *approving* of the state her husband is in. Remember: Just as with ourselves, approving of a state does *not* mean condoning it. It simply means acknowledging what is *actually* happening, as opposed to what you wish was happening.

Approving means getting aligned with what *is*.

So if your boss is being a jerk just because you’ve mentioned receiving another offer in a salary negotiation, then approving of her might sound something like “Hey! You’re being a real jerk right now! I understand why: you thought I was looking to jump to another company after you’d invested a lot of time and energy in training me, and you probably felt taken advantage of.”

Abby can combine approval with location: “You’re upset because you think that I’m throwing our dragons away. I love that you’re so passionate about our hatchery. But I’ve given this a lot of thought, and I think this is how we deepen our commitment to magical creatures, not end it.”

Approval is a very powerful move. Logically, it *should* move the fight into a more incendiary place—you’re poking the other person right where they’re trying to hide. And yet we often find that the opposite happens: simply seeing the person and acknowledging where they’re at defuses the situation instead.

Approval certainly does not mean that you permanently accept the state the other person is in, or are resigned to living with it; in fact, it’s usually helpful in being able to move them to a different one. If you yell, “You’re not actually mad about this! You have no right to

be mad about this!” at someone who is angry, you’re gaslighting them, telling them they’re not feeling what they’re feeling. And even if you succeed in getting what you want, it will be through shame or intimidation, not influence.

Skipping the approval step—refusing to acknowledge where someone is, rather than where you want them to be—is often why people get stuck having a version of the same fight over and over; the other person will keep dragging you back to the scene of the crime until you *see* them where they are. But if you really get to the core of someone’s resistance and connect with it, then you’re actually going to get somewhere.

Never be afraid to locate something that already exists. When I work with women, I say, “Use *everything*”—every vice, every bit of ugly, every source of shame that arises. Everything that has the power to be negative also contains within it the power to be positive. Witness it, and invite it back in; find a place for it that transforms its essential qualities into something positive, creating expansion and light and heat so that you can then direct that energy creatively.

This is true emotional alchemy—a concept I personally came to a deeper understanding of thanks to a guy with a very, very small dick.

I had been working as a dominatrix for about two years, and had skyrocketed to great success. The same outward-turned attention that I used when practicing Chinese medicine and evading my sparring partner’s hand before it connected with my cheek served me well in the dungeon; I could read my clients’ bodies with precision, and use what I saw to guide the sessions in ways that were deep and profound.

I hadn’t expected to provide transcendence at the sex-work job I’d taken to pay the bills, but as my reputation for delivering those experiences grew, so did my client list. So I was ultraconfident and at the very top of my game when I walked into my session with Mark—until he undressed, and I saw his micropenis.

I hadn’t encountered one before, and it shocked me. Nor was I used to feeling pity for my clients, who tended to be master-of-the-universe types. I recovered, and the session went fine—except that I wasn’t used to settling for “fine.” I hated feeling like I was just going through the motions, performing for him like I was there to punch a clock.

Which is why, forty minutes in and frustrated, I called Mark *pinkie dick*.

We made eye contact then, and a wave of shame—his, mine, society’s—rose up into the room. I knew immediately that it would crash down and drown us if I couldn’t find a way to lean into what I’d just said. So I kept going: “You can’t fuck a woman with that dick. You can’t fuck anything! I bet you’ve had to spend your entire life figuring out different and twisted ways to get off. You must be a *magician* of deviant sexuality—a Prince of Perversion. The King of Kink! In fact, I bet you could teach a whole course on hot, alternative sex. I bet you could school *me*.”

That was when the whole room lit up. By connecting through the discomfort, I had located Mark’s deepest shame and approved of it, and suddenly the two of us were at the center of a vortex of energy, digested and transformed. It turned out to be one of the most brilliant sessions I did in my entire career.

It’s exciting to look at someone and recognize that there’s something hidden. And it’s a rare person who thinks, “There’s something held back there. I am going to put my attention on it, and use my imagination and sense and test and play until something moves,” knowing that when it does, *everyone* will be nourished because the release will provide light and heat and imagination and juice—passionate fuel for everybody involved.

This, of course, is *influence*.

Achieving Influence: Follow What’s Alive

With location and approval, you are using your attention to determine what is trapped and needs to move in another person. You can then ask: “What’s needed? What’s the next thing that needs to be clarified or felt? Where’s the energy, the heat, the life? And what will move us into a different—more exciting, more collaborative—place?”

As far as achieving influence is concerned, there's only one rule: *Follow what's alive.*

Remember: Every Ask is an invitation to play, and to relate in a new way. So stay attentive to the hot spots.

This may take a little practice, especially if you're someone who traditionally moves away from conflict, but it may also be the most important concept in this book.

Another way to think about influence is moving the other person from what he's fighting *against* to what he's fighting *for*. We've talked about fighting against/fighting for in the context of discovering our own passions; here, we use the same framework to think about playing with resistance in another person. This is why engagement with resistance isn't just a way of getting what you want, but a gift you give to the other person: you are discovering things about the other person *that they don't even know about themselves*.

Abby's husband may sound like he's fighting against the possibility of the two of them raising unicorns, but what he's really doing is fighting *for* their dragons. She needs to show him, through the Asks she makes and the commands she gives, that she is doing the same thing. She'll do that by locating him and approving of what's going on with him—and by proposing a solution: for the two of them to deepen their relationship with magical creatures and the strength of their connection to that world by embarking on some glorious and exciting new adventures together.

Influence isn't ordinarily achieved with a single Ask; it almost always involves a series of incremental steps, an organic series of moves that will differ in every situation. But I guarantee: if you return to locating and approving with every shift, the next step toward influence will be apparent, because you'll be connecting so deeply with the other person that the experience itself will start to lead.

Because it's so very rarely a straight line from location to influence, Ruben and I often stage fights in our classes so that

students see what it looks and feels like to move someone through this state. This tends to be very effective, in part because Ruben happens to be fantastically, devilishly, infuriatingly good at serving up some typical forms of male resistance.

People are very good at protecting their secret fears, their deepest worries, and their shame. So Emilio is most likely not going to come straight out and say to Abby: “I’m not secure enough in my masculinity to become The Unicorn Guy.” Chances are, he’s going to find another way to make an end run around the conversation.

He might, for instance, invoke a third party: “A wife should . . .” or “The Church says . . .” or “Everyone says unicorns are . . .” Of course, there are only two people in a dynamic. When someone starts dragging a study or an institution into the conversation, it generally signals a deflection.

He might fundamentally delegitimize her request: “You’ve been under a lot of stress recently, and we both know how you get around your birthday; I think you’re letting your emotions get the better of you right now. Unicorns aren’t going to solve your midlife crisis. You’re not clearly seeing the risks.” *Oooh!* Paternalistic and condescending—infuriating!

Emilio might try to gaslight her by telling her she doesn’t really want what she wants: “You don’t really want to get involved with unicorns; you’re only thinking about this because of those influencers on Instagram.” Even if that’s true, Abby has taken my class, and knows she has no say in what she wants. Emilio telling her she isn’t feeling what she’s feeling isn’t going to return the “I want a unicorn” genie to the bottle.

Or Emilio might try to switch sandboxes, which is our shorthand for hijacking a request or turning a conversation so that it centers on something more comfortable for the hijacker: “Of course dragon farming has started to feel unsexy, given that I’m exhausted, working night and day to support your shoe habit! Do you have any idea how much your credit card bill was last month?” If Abby’s not careful, they’re going to end up talking about her spending habits—which might be absolutely fine and appropriate at another date, but is miles away from the conversation *she* initiated about beginning to raise unicorns.

Hurt and ashamed and angry, Emilio might come after Abby with a threat: “If you keep talking about unicorns, you’re going to find

yourself without a husband.” Or he might reach for the death-ray option, designed to humiliate and shut his wife right down. “Nobody takes you seriously now. How do you think they’re going to respond when they see you on a *unicorn*?” Killer comments like these can be a very effective way to cancel the conversation (woman exits stage right, weeping), unless Abby keeps her wits about her and remembers what she’s trying to achieve.

(A note: Every one of us has said something absolutely heinous during an argument, and it’s usually not grounds for divorce. That said, I don’t countenance abuse; if threats and humiliation are par for the course in their marriage, Abby might want to think about ending it, instead of adding a bunch of unicorns to the mix.)

Or Emilio might shut the conversation down by powering down himself: “Absolutely not. This is not open for discussion, now—or ever. I’m going out; I need to be alone now.” One way to end a game of tug-of-war is to drop your end of the rope.

This isn’t intended to be an exhaustive list of the many, many ways that people have of shielding their pain and shame, but I bet many of these are familiar to you from conflicts you’ve weathered in the past. (There’s also cross-examination: “But you just said five minutes ago that you wanted more time for leisure, and now you’re saying you want to start a whole new unicorn business?” Or what Ruben and I call “the sub-off,” where both parties make exhaustive lists of how much they’ve sacrificed for the other person: “I can’t believe you’d come for me with this unicorn garbage after I’ve worked a seventy-hour week at a job you know I hate, just to keep you and the dragons in the fancy house you couldn’t live without. . . .” And there are *hundreds* more.)

But it doesn’t really matter what Emilio does in the name of the resistance he’s feeling—what matters is Abby’s ability to get to what’s *behind* it. There are a million different reasons that a man might feel fear or shame or trepidation when his wife suggests that they adopt a few new legendary creatures. If Abby really wants to get him on board with the plan, then she needs to figure out what Emilio’s specific resistance to her proposition is, using location and approval to get him to say more. Is Emilio worried that she’s saying that the hatchery is boring? Is he concerned that her dissatisfaction with their dragons really means she’s tired of him?

And then she needs to use what she’s learned to influence him.

So, just as Ruben and I would in class, let's go through some possible responses that Abby might use to guide Emilio through his resistance. (As good as Ruben is at throwing up resistance, I am even better at parrying it. . . .)

Let's say Emilio invokes a third party by yelling about their peer group: "Normal people don't do this! How am I supposed to explain it when my buddies start giving me shit about my sparkly, horned horse?" Abby can start by locating him: "It seems like you're worried about what other people are going to think; is that right?" and then approving of what she's located: "I totally understand why you'd be scared that other people are going to think you're less of a man because we raise unicorns." Then she moves to influence: "But can you also imagine how your friends are going to feel when your never-been-done-before business idea takes off, and you're laughing all the way to the bank?"

If he gaslights her, trying to tell her that she doesn't actually want what she wants, she locates his skepticism and neutralizes it: "You don't want to believe that this desire is mine. But I want this. I want this for me; I want this for us. I want you with me; I want us to do this together. This isn't about Instagram; it's about us." (This is a great example of why it's important to do the Legitimacy exercise before a Difficult Ask; the more legible Abby is to Emilio, the more effective this will be. This is also an excellent example of a submissive-style Ask.) Then she can locate him again: "You're afraid that you and the dragons aren't enough for me, and that I'm leaving. Is that true?" Or she can be a little sterner: "Have you considered that this might actually be very well thought through? I have no intention of hurting or embarrassing you. That's why I'm talking about it with you, instead of running off to a unicorn auction behind your back."

If he tries to switch sandboxes, she can locate him by not letting him get away with it: "Why are we talking about my credit card bill right now? Am I supposed to change my spending habits before we can talk about getting a unicorn?" Or try something a little softer: "I agree that we need to have clearer communication around my/our spending. But let's set another time to talk about that so we stay with the conversation we're having now."

If he goes on the offensive and attacks her, she could try something like "Do you really believe what you just said about me, or

are you just trying to make me feel bad so that I stop talking about this subject, which is obviously terrifying to you?” or “You called me a horrible bitch. Either you believe that or you need to be vicious right now. Which one is it?” (Both of these encourage him to locate himself, and might be all that’s needed to get him to calm down and apologize for name-calling. Or cause him to escalate, which is also information.)

Let’s say Emilio responds to that with: “I’m not getting vicious. *You’re* the one trying to humiliate me in front of God and everyone we know.”

Success! Abby’s got some information to work with now: “You feel humiliated right now, and that sucks. But you’re getting ahead of yourself and imagining that what I’m proposing will exclude and embarrass you. Is that true?” Or “I have no intention of hurting or humiliating you. That’s why we’re talking right now.” Or “Nothing has happened yet! We’re just sitting here in the living room, talking. You need to be able to tolerate this without fast-forwarding to an imaginary, worst-case-scenario future.”

If he continues to attack, she can say something like “Say what you need to, but I’d like to slow this down so I hear and understand your concerns.” Always, she is trying to elicit more information about his resistance, more data about the tender spots he’s hiding and protecting by saying no: “What else?” “What are you scared of losing?” “What do you need right now?” “Say more about that.” “What do you mean by that, specifically?” “I see that you’re angry; what else are you feeling?” “I want to know more about why you believe this is impossible.”

If Emilio shuts down, declaring the topic closed forever, Abby can locate him—“I see that you’re upset”—and approve: “I know you’re upset because our dragons are important to you, as they are to me. If you need to take a break, that’s cool—but you don’t get to stay shut down; we’re in this together.” And then she can go digging: “What would you need to hear in order to keep talking about this? What are you afraid to tell me that makes walking away from this conversation easier than talking?”

If Emilio is legitimately too upset to continue, Abby might agree to let it go—but not forever. “I understand that you’re too upset to have a conversation about this now, but I would like to schedule a

time to revisit this when you're less distraught, because I've given this a lot of thought, and the topic isn't going to go away for me."

In all of these scenarios (and again, this is just a quick sampling of the virtually infinite ways a conversation like this could go), Abby is returning to the fundamentals. She is paying attention to where Emilio is, approving of it, and using the information he shares to move him from resistance to passion. Her goal is not to get him from angry to not-angry, but into a state where he wants to collaborate and play, to come up with new solutions.

The dynamic becomes generative when it gets *connected.*

If you've become really skilled at gaining legitimacy, you'll recognize what Abby's really doing, which is using language to help Emilio to link his mind to his emotions, and to his body.

It's very common for someone to get stuck in one body or another. For instance, Emilio might indicate that he's stuck in his physical body by saying something like "Can't you see how much pain you're causing me?" or "The thought of having to deal with a unicorn makes me physically sick."

This is actually a good sign; at least he's in touch with what he's feeling. When Abby locates and approves of this, she can respond with something like "I'm sorry that the thought of raising unicorns makes you feel sick, but hearing that makes me feel flattered and turned on, because it means I married a passionate man." She could use humor: "What if we get a really *butch* unicorn?"

If Emilio responds with something like "Of course I'm afraid. We've sunk everything we have into dragons, and now you're bored?" Abby will again locate and approve: "Have you considered that this isn't just boredom? Have you considered that I knew exactly how difficult this would be for you, and brought it to you anyway? I had

doubts before I brought this up, but I decided that if saying my truth was going to ruin us, then we aren't as solid as I want us to be. If I'm hiding something from you, I've already taken a step toward ruining our relationship, and that's not what I want. When has hiding anything from each other ever worked?"

If he's stuck in his head, which is fairly common for men, he might try to logic his way out: "We cannot raise dragons and unicorns at the same time. I know it might feel as if it's possible, but it's not. It's a bad idea; it doesn't make any sense." To break him out of this, Abby can encourage him to get in touch with what he feels: "Putting aside reason for a minute, I just asked you to entertain a very challenging proposition. How did it feel? What emotions came up for you? Are you scared? Does any part of my plan excite you?" (Notice that she's not arguing the merits of the case. Facts never changed anyone's mind; if they did, no one would smoke or eat junk food or drive over the speed limit or vote against their interests.)

Always, she is locating, approving, and using those hot spots to inspire him. "You work so hard and give me so much. This is going to take even more work—hard emotional work—but it could be the next chapter in our dream life. You're seeing how hard this could be. Can you also imagine how fun this could be? For us both?"

It may take more than one conversation. And it may take imagination: What about a trial period? What if they sign up with an agency that will let them foster a unicorn?

I'd encourage Abby to celebrate *any* progress the two of them make toward what she wants. Of course, there is also the possibility that the two of them will come up with a third solution, one that will bring back the fun and the spontaneity of the life they had when they first got the dragons without getting any unicorns at all. Maybe Emilio makes a tender list of his own boundaries and concerns, and within it reveals something *he's* always wanted—a desire Abby might be more than happy to pursue with him, one she didn't even know she had herself. (This, of course, is how they end up breeding phoenixes.)

This may seem like a silly example—but the very same principles Abby is using with Emilio apply whether you're trying to get your con-man dad to show up for his grandkid's graduation, or asking your boss about going to a conference in Beijing: You locate the other person's resistance, name it, acknowledge it, celebrate it. And you

keep your attention out so you know the next move to make toward influence. My intention with these mock arguments is not to provide you with a cheat sheet of things that you might say, but to model the myriad ways a conversation like this could go—if you, like Abby, continue to return to the fundamentals (locate, approve, influence), stay with what’s alive, and use your imagination.

Working with other people’s resistance in this way is a skill—maybe the most valuable one in this book because of the potential it unlocks. When the person you’re leading trusts you enough to reveal their resistance, and to say what’s actually happening for them, then you not only lead more powerfully, you can lead using *all of that person’s* resources, imagination, and a kind of connectedness that there is no substitute for.

Just as with our own hot spots of suppressed shame, when you acknowledge the hated, hateful aspects of another person, a whole new field opens. Possibilities abound, not just for the next negotiation, but true collaboration.

Preparing for a Difficult Ask

When faced with the idea of creating a cheat sheet on how to prepare for a difficult conversation, my body squirms. On the one hand, I’d love to create something simple—a checklist that a reader can return to, six easy steps that she could take to check in with herself and integrate what she’s learned.

On the other hand, this book is about subverting formulas—breaking with convention, and with our conditioning. Not to mention that I know exactly what happens when I’m in a room with a student asking me how to prepare for a specific Difficult Ask, which is that neither one of us could ever predict or prepare for what would come out of that conversation.

The real answer is that, if Abby came to me talking about unicorns, I would put my attention on her and ask her a series of questions, trying to feel—and to help her feel—what is most alive.

After a Things Unsaid exercise, we might learn that she’s still angry with Emilio for the way he grieved (or failed to, from her perspective) the miscarriage she had when they first got together. We might uncover that both of them have too much shame to face his gambling addiction, or any of a thousand other secrets. We might discover, chasing what’s most alive, that a unicorn is not exactly what Abby wants at all.

The good news is that the process I'd go through with Abby is exactly what I've taught you to do throughout this book, with yourselves and with one another: it wouldn't be me domming her, but chasing her life force. And it very well might send us down a path neither of us would have expected.

The tools in this book aren't laws or formulas, but compasses that point you toward what's most alive. They're presented in a sequence so that the book makes sense as a system, but I trust you and your Mistress group to use them however they work best for you: out of order, mixed and matched, or reinvented entirely in accordance with what feels most alive. Follow what's most exciting, most pleasurable, most confronting. Hunt everything you're drawn to, and see if it scratches the itch.

So use the template that follows—or Frankenstein it into something that works better for you. Whatever you use, do so to deepen and honor and respect the vitality barometer that you are.

Desire Check: Do a quick check to make sure the thing you want is big enough, broad enough, specific enough. Does it need to be more inclusive, more expansive, more outrageous, more visionary? Play with the Ask itself—is it what the desire feels like?

Legitimacy Exercise: Next, you'll do three full cycles of the Legitimacy exercise to ground your signal. Which means: You'll connect to the physical sensations that come up when you imagine that you already have what you're asking for. You'll notice what emotions come up when you imagine already having it, and you'll imagine what having this will change for you. You'll tap body, heart, and mind—and you'll do it three times each (as on [this page](#)).

Write Your Ask: Write down your Ask in a single sentence, three times: first, neutrally, then using submissive language, and then using dominant language.

Do a Three-Way Ask: If you're concerned about congruence, do a Three-Way Ask with your Mistress group. You'll ask first, however the request comes out naturally, then you'll role-play a version using a very dominant state of attention (allow yourself to play, and even exaggerate this) and a very submissive one, where you get deeply connected to what you want. Isolate your worst fear about asking this person for this particular Ask (seeming like a whining child who can't take care of herself when you're asking for a loan from your dad, for instance) and lean into role-playing that fear. Then practice your Ask again.

Do Legitimacy for the Person You're Asking: Next you're going to do a version of the Legitimacy exercise *for the other person*. You're going to address their mental, emotional, and physical concerns—the positive and the negative. See how their landscape changes with what you're proposing. What will your Ask cost them? What amazing additions will it bring to their lives?

It's in the third, or mental, stage of the Legitimacy exercise you're doing on their behalf that your own case will get built.

Role-Play the Ask: If you're working with a Mistress group, you may also want to role-play the Ask. (You can also do this with a trusted friend.) Switch sides, so that you play the person you're going up against, and another Mistress plays you. This encourages you to explore the objections you're likely to face, which is another form of preparation. And it gives you access to a greater range of possible responses. How do your fellow Mistresses, with all their varying skills and life experiences, greet the objections you lob at them?

Make a Plan: You may also want to brainstorm the logistics of the meeting with your sister Mistresses or a friend. Because, and this is especially true if the conversation is an important one, you're going to want to do some planning on *when* you ask, and *where*. His office or yours? The living room? The bedroom? A restaurant? Do you want to do it at the beginning of the day or at the end? After dinner or before?

It's worth taking this kind of special care if a meeting is important enough. You want to feel excited about inviting the other person into a space where they're going to be safely held, and where they can be however they need to be throughout this conversation.

State Your Intentions: As for the conversation itself, I do think it's helpful to state your intention for the conversation, and set a time limit. This makes a *container* for the conversation, which increases everyone's sense of safety. Even though it seems like a difficult conversation should be allowed to take as long as it needs to, it's good to have an "out by." That way, if the conversation becomes unbearable to either party, they know how much time is left.

Remember: Resolving a Difficult Ask may take a whole series of conversations. You can always pick up where you've left off.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TURNING THE SPOTLIGHT

The Power to Break the Freeze

Nice view,” your new spin instructor jokes as you lean forward. “I love how exotic you look,” says the guy on the next barstool. “Where are you from?”

Ro’s husband asks her how she wants to celebrate their tenth anniversary, and the answer is on the tip of her tongue: what she *really* wants—more than a necklace or a trip—is the courage to tell him that he’s never made her come.

We’re going to pivot now, from difficult conversations and Outrageous Asks that you can prepare for, to some resources you can use when someone blindsides you.

Every woman I know has experienced what I call the Freeze: a moment of neuromuscular lockdown that comes after a proposition or a betrayal or a certain kind of inappropriate or difficult question. The mind searches frantically for a response, while the body is unable to move. What follows is speechlessness, or its equivalent; you cannot speak, or you say yes, implying consent and agreement when in fact you’re desperate to say no.

Life means that we will sometimes be blindsided by an unforeseen attack—a comment, inappropriate or not, that catches us totally off guard. These are moments that no repetition of the Legitimacy exercise would prepare us for. But we can train for them—and in this chapter, we will.

What follows in this chapter is a verbal self-defense dojo, which will train you in the kind of jujitsu you will need to break this Freeze, in both high-stakes scenarios and low-. But these aren't just techniques you can use in moments of crisis. What you will learn here is especially useful because it can also be applied, with some calibration, when you need to keep your attention out to navigate someone else's resistance.

Before we begin your training, I'd like to be clear about two things.

The first: There is nothing inherently dangerous about silence. There are many scenarios where not saying anything is a valid and powerful choice. *The decision to choose silence is different from the Freeze.* When you opt for silence, you are exercising agency—to speak, to stay silent, to walk away. When you're frozen, your nervous system feels like it's been hijacked; even if you want to, you cannot speak or respond powerfully. These skills are for those moments.

The second is that, despite the dojo metaphor, these techniques were not designed to help you navigate dangerous or violent people. If you think you may be in danger, do not stay to play. Leave the situation as quickly as possible.

It will be powerful, although not necessary, to do the work in this chapter with your Mistress group. These skills increase in value as you gain proficiency, and the way to gain real facility is through practice; when you run these drills with other women, you're honing your reflexes in a safe environment. In the meantime, you can cheer your fellow Mistresses' elegant responses, and find inspiration in one another's power plays.

Why This Matters So Much: The Hidden Costs of the Freeze

There is a moment that breaks my heart in every class I've ever done:

"How many of you have had sex you didn't want?" I ask—and the whole room raises a hand.

Or I ask, "What's the last thing you wanted to say no to but didn't?" and the answers range from picking up his boxers to having

a baby she didn't want. "I didn't say no when my husband wanted to have make-up sex after our fight." "I didn't say no when my high-school art teacher showed me a book of nudes and asked how they made me feel." "I didn't say no when the DA told me he was reducing the charges against the man who molested me because he didn't think I was strong enough to take the stand."

This is the first, devastating cost of the Freeze: things happen to us that we do not want to happen, and we are powerless to stop them. We end up in compromising positions, or shouldering responsibilities that we absolutely can't afford to take on, or agreeing to an agenda that we know deep down in our hearts is wrong.

This alone would be too dear a price to pay. But there are other, less obvious costs to the Freeze. One of those is the other party walking away with an assumption that just isn't true. Maybe he thinks you're a dumb bunny or a pushover—nicer, or more of a cold fish than you really are. We can tell ourselves that it doesn't really matter what he thinks, but when you add up all the times you weren't able to speak, you may come away feeling that you didn't really have influence in the world—"that my vote didn't count because the ballot got stuck in my throat," as one of my students memorably described it. Or that by silently agreeing to the status assigned to you, you have missed opportunities to be seen for who you really are.

And, of course, not speaking comes with a heavy tax that we impose on ourselves, which is shame.

I've seen over and over how these moments of speechlessness completely alter the course of women's lives. Alison came to me looking for romantic advice. When I asked about her job, she told me she was working as an executive assistant after giving up her dream of being a comedian.

I nodded—comedy is notoriously hard to break into. But that hadn't been the problem: in fact, Alison had been successful, booked year-round in clubs that were getting bigger all the time.

"I just wasn't cut out for it," she told me. But then she described taping *Saturday Night Live* every weekend as a kid, so that she could painstakingly transcribe her favorite sketches word-for-word, taking them apart to analyze how they worked before writing and acting out her own.

So what did she mean when she said that she wasn't "cut out" for comedy, given that it was the only thing she'd ever wanted to do?

Had the dingy motel rooms in random college towns gotten to her, dinners scrounged in the early hours of the morning from vending machines? No: those trips had always felt like a wonderful adventure to her. Being on the road ten months out of the year made it tough to have a pet, let alone a relationship, didn't it? She shrugged; she'd never been a homebody. Was it the depressing, half-empty bars, the belligerent drunks and hecklers? Nope—she loved a challenge, and had come up with some of her most provocative material trying to win over those difficult rooms.

Except that a well-regarded male comedian had said something to her after a gig that had made Alison go speechless; she froze. What he said isn't important—in fact, when she was telling me about it, she couldn't even remember exactly what he'd said. What she *did* remember, and couldn't stop punishing herself for, was the shame she felt over freezing—the fact that she hadn't said or done anything to stand up for herself. That event, and two more moments of freezing—an inability to come to her own defense—over the following months, had convinced Alison that she wasn't “cut out” for a life in comedy.

Three times, she had frozen instead of speaking, and the rot had gone deep. Alison felt she'd sold herself out. The way she internalized those experiences led to her making devastating assessments about her aptitude for the work and her capacity to continue with it, so that she dashed her childhood dreams and threw away countless hours of happy work as an adult. That's not just a disservice to her, by the way, but to the whole world, because when someone lives out her life's true purpose, it *matters*. But Alison never got that, and *we* never got what she had to give—all because of those three experiences of the Freeze.

The Freeze may also mean that we do not deliver important feedback to the person who is harming us. Perhaps they don't suspect they've put you on the spot, and would stop if they did; perhaps, if you could speak, they would proceed differently with the next woman they encountered. Or maybe they are deliberately muddying the water, taking advantage of the fact that you can't accurately evaluate what's going on. Because the Freeze doesn't just limit our voices, it limits our perception, or our ability to gauge the safety of an interaction. Break the Freeze, and you reclaim not only

your voice, but the ability to cut through the fog of these murky scenarios.

We will talk about how to clarify these ambiguous communications in the next chapter. For now, we need to teach you how to get off the spot—and how to stay off it.

Turning the Spotlight

You're already holding the magic bullet, the one that is guaranteed to get you off the spot: ask a question.

Questions are a femme superpower, for two reasons. First: When you ask a question, you wait for an answer—you turn your attention out, and curiosity keeps it there, even if just for a second. Second: To answer a question, the other person has to go inside. Even if it's for a nanosecond, they have to pay attention to themselves.

This is how you flip the power dynamic, breaking the Freeze: your attention moves out, and theirs moves in.

That's how it works on paper, anyway. In class, we practice and practice and practice—and even with all the cheerleading from their peers, not to mention me modeling and pushing, it takes an enormous effort for women to get far enough out.

I have students tower over the volunteer, straddle him, grab his hair. “Violate his personal space,” I tell them. “Be a bully. Breach his defenses. Invade! Pillage! Dominate!” I have them insult him, and yell, and mash his face with their hands. I give them a riding crop and tell them to push the point into his chest: “Penetrate him! Pierce him! Follow the crop and *pin* him with your gaze and attention,” I coach. “When your attention is all the way out, you should be able to take his pulse just through the intensity of your gaze.”

Even with all this, it can take a few minutes for a woman to shed the make-nice, make-yourself-small habits of the Good Girl. But we stay with it, because this is what's required.

Most of my students are already great lovers, great mothers, great therapists, great nonviolent communicators—Good Girl conditioning and the world we live in has taught them those things. But right now, women are at war. The average Academy student doesn't need her

waiter to think she's nice—she needs to be able to confront the father-in-law she suspects has designs on her eleven-year-old daughter, the husband who is siphoning her inheritance, a higher-up whose unethical practices quite literally threaten the world's food supply. These women don't need to be better mommies; they need to be Ruthless Motherfucking Ninjas.

Which is to say: as you practice the exercises that follow with your Mistress group, be ruthless, and be honest with one another about what you see. Further than you think is likely just about right.

EXERCISE

Uncomfortable Questions

This exercise is really, really fun to do in a group setting, but works just as well done solo as long as you're in a safe, private space—somewhere you'll feel comfortable talking back to your book or screen.

If you do this in a group setting, one person volunteers to ask the questions; the rest of you come up with as many questions in response to the question as you can yell out before moving on to the next one. Turn your attention out, onto the asker.

Do not answer the uncomfortable question. Your return questions can be as funny or as raunchy or as snarky or as kind as you'd like. They can be relevant, or total non sequiturs.

Use your return question to move the attention off you and onto the asker. Double points if you ask a question about their question; triple points if you question the legitimacy of their question. But if you're stuck, remember you can always just ask them where they got their tie.

The list below is taken from the People Can Be Truly Terrible circular file I've gathered from my students over the years. Use these, or consider them inspiration to make up your own, knowing that the questions most likely to trigger a Freeze for some of my students are often the deceptively simple ones like "What do you do for a living?"

Allow yourself to imagine being blindsided in a range of contexts: at a party, on a job interview, on a first date.

"Why don't you have kids?"

"Are you married?"

"Don't you think that affirmative action is kind of unfair?"

“How old are you?”

“Are you pregnant?”

“Have you put on weight?” “Oh, are you eating bread again?”

“What are you?” “Where are you from?” “Are you Jewish?”

“When did you come to America?”

“So have you published anything real?”

“Does your husband mind that you make more money than he does?”

“Have you gone on any dates since he left you?”

“I guess you’re a lesbian because you were molested?” “So which one of you is the guy in your relationship?”

“Did you have to sleep with someone to get this job?”

“Did you have to have a mastectomy?” “Were you scared you were going to die?” “Were your kids scared that you were going to die?”

Sometimes a question will not even seem that uncomfortable. “Are you single?”—indeed, it might seem easier to answer the question than to think of one to ask back. Do not answer the question. Ask one instead, like: “Why do you want to know?” “Did you just ask me what I think you asked me?” “Do you realize a question like that could make a woman feel very uncomfortable?”

Don’t worry too much about calibration (about being too harsh or too tame); for now, it’s enough just to play at Turning the Spotlight. As you go, take note of moments when your attention turns inward and you experience the Freeze.

It’s tricky to keep your attention out, isn’t it? You probably did notice how much more fluidly your responses came after you’d had a little practice.

But I’m not content to train you so that you can do this exercise. I want you to be able to rely on your ability to direct your attention in any and all situations—including the most squirm-inducing, confronting, disorienting ones you find yourself in.

This is where The Jason comes in. This technique, which I developed when I was tasked with training new dominatrices, will serve as an attention-out boot camp.

How to Get on Top—and Stay There

Sex, as you may or may not know, is explicitly forbidden in a dungeon. This is true across the board, and it is nonnegotiable—which does not stop a specific kind of creep. He always picks the new girl, and he gets off on bullying her, on trying to get her to cross a line. Of course, sex workers are particularly vulnerable to this kind of harassment because of the nature of the work; there's no HR department in a professional dungeon.

He says, “This is great and all, but when are we going to fuck?”

What often happens, especially with a less experienced woman, is that she Freezes. Her attention turns inward: “What did I do that made him think he could say that to me? And what do I do now?”

But if her attention is turned in, how is she going to recover the power dynamic? It's her job for the next hour to be the boss of him, and in the first five minutes, he's turned that upside down. He's in control of the conversation, asking the questions and making the demands—and her response has been to go sub, to turn her attention in. But if her attention *stays* in, she's not going to be in control of anyone. She's going to spend the next fifty-nine long minutes being dominated.

What she needs to do is get on top—and stay there. To practice how to do this, we are going to use the same tool we use to break the Freeze: the power of the question. But you're going to keep it going. Turn your attention out by asking a question, and then keep it out by asking another question, and another one, and another one.

EXERCISE

The Jason

I use male volunteers when I'm training women to keep their attention out. In fact, this exercise is named after the intrepid volunteer who first let us play with him in this way. (Our school would not be possible without these generous men.)

I hand my student a riding crop and tell her not to let him get a word in edgewise. She has to keep the flow of her attention and language out, keeping him in his place.

This is a perfect exercise to do with your Mistress group, or with a trusted friend playing the obnoxious man. It's fun to play dungeon, so you may want to start this exercise with one partner saying, "This is great and all, but when are we going to fuck?" If you'd prefer to do something different, you can also go back to the original Uncomfortable Questions and ask them again—but the partner being asked, the one Turning the Spotlight, won't stop after she's asked a single question: she'll *keep going*.

You're not just Turning the Spotlight, but keeping it on your partner as you build an endless stream of questions. Keep going as long as you can, even after you feel like you've ventured into the territory of the absurd. Be patient with your own pauses when it takes you a minute to come up with the next question. These will disappear in time, and with practice.

And be mindful that you don't turn inward to find the next question! This is an open-book test: if you're stuck, ask your next question *based on what you see in front of you*. "Was that a smirk I just saw on your face?" "Are you cowering away from me now?" Even, "Where the hell did you get those stupid socks?"

Take note of what happened to you in your body when you felt yourself moving into the dominant state of attention.

Did you find yourself getting closer to the person you were moving into the submissive state of attention—maybe even uncomfortably close? If you started seated, did you find that you got to your feet, even if it meant standing over them and looking down at them in an intimidating way? Did your voice deepen? Was it softer or louder? Could you feel that your voice had a physical weight that the other person could feel, like a steadying hand on the shoulder? What about your gaze? Was it focused? Penetrating? Reassuring?

These aren't "tips and tricks" to get you into the dominant state—they are by-products of your state of attention, not the cause of it.

Language and physical contact
help lead attention.

But attention is the queen.

There is nothing you can do with your arms that will replace this careful direction of attention, and no wardrobe error or girlish upspeak that can rob you of your power when you have mastered it. But just as the other person's animal body is affected by your state of attention, so, too, is your own.

When you train with The Jason, you are training to sustain your attention out powerfully, and for an extended period of time. Practice every time your Mistress group meets—get really good at it—and you won't ever get caught speechless; you'll learn to take up space, to naturally assume dominant body language, to signal your alpha status for the time that you are speaking, to speak to the body of your sub, to watch your words land with authority in his body.

This is the dominant state. This exercise creates that state of attention, and sustains it.

—

Most of the time, the women I teach *don't* Freeze. They are the kind of powerful bitches who will holler back at a catcall, who can bat most inappropriate questions away like a bored cat.

But this is precisely what is so dangerous about the Freeze: a woman can be in her power 99 percent of her life, and then freeze during the 1 percent that counts the most. It's in these moments—the moment when she knows she doesn't trust the babysitter and doesn't feel safe to speak, the moment when the last person on earth she thought would turn out to be a creep turns into one—where the course of our lives can be decided.

These are the moments we train for.

Which job you get, which relationship you commit to, where you live, even what you charge for your services—these are too important to be determined by a temporary incapacity. We always need to be able to flip the power dynamic so that we can buy ourselves a little time, because it's very difficult to change course once it's set. Once you've agreed to joint custody even though you know your ex has a drug problem, once you've stood silently by as an arms dealer was appointed to your board, once you've let one joke about “the diversity hire” slide—it's much harder to do something different, or make the change you want to see.

This is how the Freeze limits the influence of women, and it is what we are here to change. *If you don't know how to say no—or how to play with someone's attention on you while you decide whether you want to say yes or no, then you are powerless.* And powerlessness is not at all what I want for you.

This biological hijack is nearly universal among women. Know that you are not alone—in the unwilling silence, or in the shame afterward. You *are*, however, the result of millennia of cultural conditioning. As you practice breaking the Freeze, you will not only be more free to speak in the most difficult moments, but recrafting a pattern that took thousands of years to imprint. It's powerful work.



Congratulations. You are now a graduate of the Verbal Self-Defense Dojo.

There is much to celebrate, because what you've learned isn't just a self-defense tool or a way to manage the people in your life; it's a way to change the culture. We can make all the rules we want to; we can shake our fingers at people, and tell them how they should behave. But every one of us is training the people around us how we (and other women) want to be treated every minute, and nothing will ever be more powerful than giving the other humans in our lives feedback on what does and doesn't work for us.

Sometimes a pitiless smack is exactly what's needed to stop the person from doing harm not only to you and other women but to themselves. Because what's harder to see is that this behavior also hurts the person doing it, whether they're aware of it or not.

Love often comes with big smiles and hugs, but love has many faces: in its simplest form, it is only and exactly the thing that is most

needed. When your kid is running into traffic, do you stop and politely explain to them why playing in the street is dangerous? No—you yell to get their attention and yank them back to safety. Love is delivering what's required in order to bring a person into alignment with what's alive. It can look like a takedown, or a hug, or an Ask, or a question.

Love isn't nice; love is what's needed.

Admittedly, not every asshole is someone to play with. But sometimes the people we need and want and care about having in our lives also act like assholes. You may decide that reeducating this particular idiot is not going to work with your calendar today, thank you very much. You may decide to stick around long enough to rip them a new one, or simply walk away.

Or you may continue with a softer touch in order to establish if there's a third narrative that the two of you can explore together, one that will be generative and productive and create intimacy and connection and allow for the possibility of the influence you seek.

This is how real change happens, one human interaction at a time.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CUTTING THROUGH THE FOG

The Power of Location

Many stories of harassment and intimidation are straightforward: a man in a position of power unzips his pants and asks a woman how much she wants the job.

More often, though, the situation is ambiguous, and all the more insidious for it. These fuzzy interactions are destabilizing because you can't pinpoint exactly where the line was crossed, or prove later to an outside party that a line was crossed at all. Because it's hard to name the bad behavior, it's too often given a pass and allowed to prevail.

Here are some examples from students:

"My mentor was standing across the room, laughing with a bunch of guys in senior management, and it was very clear that he was talking about me in a sexual manner. But when he beckoned me over and told me he wanted to introduce me to some colleagues, I went over and politely shook their hands. And then I wanted to die."

"My pastor asked me a lot of extremely specific questions about my sexual experiences with my boyfriend during a counseling session. Even though he didn't technically say or do anything inappropriate, I felt like I was going to throw up the whole time."

"We met to talk about how much he loves my work and the possibility of a show at his gallery, but as soon as the drinks arrived, the questions got more and more personal, and I couldn't steer him

back to talking about art. I never figured out what was going on: Was he saying that if I had sex with him, he'd give me a show?"

When you're frozen, you can't clearly determine the difference between an awkward, clumsy communication and genuine harassment. People who want to abuse their power often deliberately exploit that confusion; they keep it cloudy so that they can maintain plausible deniability—"Hey, now! I was just asking an innocent question."

While you're stuck to the spot,
trying to determine whether a
question was innocent or ill-
intentioned, abusers slide right
in.

This type of ambiguous communication creates ideal conditions for the Freeze because it floods us with questions of our own, turning our attention in: "Wait, did he just say that? Did he mean what I think he meant? What happens if I'm overreacting and he didn't mean that at all?" All of this makes it very hard for us to get off the spot.

Break the Freeze, and you reclaim not only your voice, but the ability to cut through the fog of these murky scenarios.

Sometimes ambiguous communication *is* just clumsy. Maybe your new boss asked if you had a boyfriend because he doesn't have the social skills to come up with a question that wouldn't offend you. He asked if you have kids because he's been up every night for three months with a crying newborn and is desperate to commiserate. He asked if you like getting underwear for Valentine's Day because he's confused about what to get his new girlfriend, and you're a woman he feels comfortable talking to. He *does* need to learn that these

questions are inappropriate in the workplace. But you won't have enough information to correct him properly until you've figured out if he's a genuine scumbag or just a dummy.

Often, as we well know, this ambiguity isn't clumsiness at all. Predators say things like "It'd be a shame to lose a friend like me so early in your career, don't you think? You're going to need to prove to me that you really want this opportunity." Leaving you to wonder, "Well, what the hell does that mean?"

It's not accidental that it's hard to tell exactly what is expected of you in these scenarios. These indirect, ambiguous statements cue the Good Girl to fall in line, and the predator is sensing and testing to find out if she has. If you freeze, he'll press forward, which is how so many of us have ended up in situations we did not want to be in, later blaming ourselves for not saying no quickly or loudly or emphatically enough. And if your response is negative, a predator can always use the gray area to walk it back: "Whoa, whoa, slow your horses! Nobody said anything about sex!"

Indeed, the bad guys often use these denials as a way to compound a woman's confusion and humiliation: "I've got a very nice wife at home. I don't have to get my rocks off with a silly little girl who thinks every guy who tries to be nice to her is the Big Bad Wolf." Or "Look, kid, you're cute, but you're not that cute, okay?"

Of course, given what we now know about power dynamics, it's clear why this tactic is so effective—comments like these, surgical strikes designed to shame and humiliate, push a woman *deeper* into the Freeze by putting even more attention on her: they skewer her in place.

We cut through this ambiguity using *location*, the very same tool you'll use to navigate someone else's resistance.

When dealing with ambiguity, the first step is to verbally identify the situation as you perceive it. This is a really simple sentence: "It seems like _____." The second step is to immediately ask for verification from the other person. "Is that true?"

"It seems like you're not entirely comfortable with the idea of a woman wearing a headscarf in a front-facing role; is that true?"

"It seems like you're more interested in a romantic or sexual relationship with me than you are in a friendship. Is that true?"

"It seems like you're saying that I need to prove to you that I really want this promotion by sleeping with you. Is that true?"

Whether they verify or deny, you now have them in a spot you can work with. Maybe you misconstrued his intention, but now you've both agreed on what's appropriate and what isn't. And if the guy uses the ambiguity to backtrack when you know damn well he was being predatory, use your next communication to lock in his denial. "Oh! I'm so relieved this isn't *that* kind of a workplace, and that my promotion will be dependent exclusively on my performance!" Then both of you know that you have his number.

This tool is useful in a variety of situations—not just to determine who's a predator and who isn't. For instance, I particularly like to use location as a way to defuse backhanded compliments—the kind of double-edged flattery that contains both praise and insult. Because these contain two contradictory messages, they will likely require two location statements.

Your sister-in-law says: "I'm really happy that you're starting to dress in a way that's flattering to your body."

You need to locate both messages, and ask for verification: "It seems that you admire my suit. It also seems like you have some judgments about other outfits I've worn. Is that true?"

You follow the response with a question that Turns the Spotlight back onto the asker, calibrated according to context and what you'd like to happen next.

"Are you trying to be hurtful?"

"Are you familiar with the concept of the backhanded compliment?"

"How do you think it feels to be on the receiving end of a backhanded compliment like that one?"

"Is it customary for you to play fashion critic for the women you know?"

Let's look at another one.

"Usually girls who wear as much makeup as you do aren't smart enough for me, but I would actually date you."

Locate and verify: "It seems like you find me intelligent. It also seems like you have a lot of judgment about women who wear a lot of makeup. Is that true?"

"Yeah, I mean, girls that look like you aren't usually very bright."

Location again: "It seems like you're saying I'm both super-attractive *and* smart—and that somehow shocks you. Is that true?"

"I usually find it's one or the other."

Turning the Spotlight: “You have a lot to learn about women, don’t you?”

Depending on how much fun you’re having, you can keep going, or opt for a harder slap: “Do you know how incredibly obnoxious that question made you seem?”

It’s very important to be able to have fun with ambiguous communications in this way, especially in low-risk, low-stakes situations. If we don’t have the skills to clarify them, these ambiguous statements end up providing us with “evidence” of our own suspicions, without any interrogation of whether these are actually true.

“Of course he’s accusing me of being too emotional; men always use that as an excuse not to take a woman seriously,” you think darkly—when in fact, your friend was just clumsily trying to make sure that your feelings were taken into account.

This tool, then, not only helps us to clarify communications with others, but also helps us to sense and test our own held beliefs.

Testing Our Own Beliefs

Every terrace on the building across from mine has its own wooden owl. These owls don’t move, or make frightening sounds, or smell like predators, and yet the neighborhood pigeons stay away; the mere shape of an owl is enough to convince the pigeons that there’s danger.

This is a shortcut in the pigeon brain, and a worthwhile one, because their very survival may depend on it. But we’re not pigeons. And it presents the question: How many of our own fears—that she’ll be mad, that he’ll never agree, that they’ll say no—are really just wooden owls?

As I went through my twenties, I watched my female friends analyze the text messages they received from colleagues, bosses, family members, and potential love interests. My friends would create intricate stories around those texts—they were being insulted or ghosted or disrespected or shut down—based, as far as I could tell, on nothing but their own superstitions and assumptions.

“But how do you *know* he’s seeing someone else?” I’d ask, frustrated. “Have you asked him if he’s breaking up with you?” or “Shouldn’t you find out if your boss really meant that he’d never promote you, before you quit your dream job?”

The world becomes very small when you never check your assumptions for talons. I see this all the time now, when I’m counseling people in relationships. “Oh, I can’t ask for monogamy,” Brooke tells me—because of an offhand comment her guy made one time after a movie. “He doesn’t like vacations; he never has,” Kryssie explains about her husband of thirty years. But people grow, and their desires change all the time; how can a relationship possibly thrive when it’s constrained by a thirty-year-old fixed belief?

Are your owls real—or make-believe?

Many times, we can determine whether something is an owl or a decoy with a simple question: “Hey—are you breaking up with me?” But if we never check, then the baby goes out with the bathwater. We end up throwing out a whole category—most men, at most times—because they vaguely resemble owls.

Because we’re not pigeons, we can walk right up to that shape and give it a knock, especially now that you have some amazing tools, like Asking, and the location tool to help you assess what’s really going on.

A clumsy text from a new suitor might read as a “red flag.” Show it to your girlfriends, and they’ll confirm: “Don’t go there.” If you don’t test it, though, all you end up with is an accumulation of evidence that the world is full of stupid, unworthy, hopeless men. You never get the chance to see who they truly are, or to use your influence with them to create an ally. The prison walls around you are made of your own assumptions.

When you reflexively avoid all potential friction—especially without verifying what you suspect to be true!—you also avoid

discovery. Every time you walk the line back on what you are willing to investigate, your world gets a little smaller. But there's no cocoon small enough to keep you safe; even if you never leave your house, the world will still find a way to hurt your feelings and step on your toes.

The only way to truly feel safe—and, ultimately, powerful—is to venture out, confident that you have the ability to accurately determine what's going on, and knowing that you'll be able to handle what happens next.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WHISPER OR SHOUT?

The Power to Calibrate

There are twelve hundred women in this lecture hall. I feel how amped up they are—the take-no-prisoners feeling in the room is unmistakable. They’re on fire, and what they want to know is: “How do I crush, destroy—eviscerate—the assholes in my life?”

I scan the audience for a raised hand, and task them with the Turning the Spotlight exercise you’re so familiar with by now. “Don’t answer the question I’m about to ask you. Instead: put your attention out—on me—and ask me back a question.” Then I lob an uncomfortable question: “Do you like giving blow jobs?” Or: “Do you think being black helped you get into Harvard?” Or simply: “Are you single?”

You know what happens next: that first woman answers, and so does the second. The third asks me: “Have you been picturing me giving blow jobs?” She thinks it’s a slam, but where’s the attention, if I’m thinking about her giving a blow job?

The next one asks me where I got my belt. That’s great—it gives her a moment to breathe, but it’s too easy for me to call out her deflection: “How come you didn’t answer my question?”

The one after that comes out swinging: “Who the fuck do you think you are, to ask me that?” she screams. Her delivery is so harsh that the whole room roars. This is phenomenal self-defense; at this stage, I’d much rather see her deliver a body slam than get stuck in

the Freeze. And she has moved the room into a real, if raw, understanding of the dominant state of attention.

But a wild counterattack like that won't always be appropriate. In real life, it's likely to shut the game all the way down—which is fine, if that's what's needed. Still, we want her to have a choice: the same skills she uses to defend and attack can also be used to transform many of the assholes she encounters into enthusiastic allies. A heroic soldier dedicated to your cause tends to be much more valuable than a castrated corpse.

And so, in this chapter, we'll explore *calibration*, or how hard to hit back.

In class, a woman's first attempts at calibration can be pretty messy. Sometimes, she thinks she's been very firm, when she actually sounded accommodating and willing to compromise. More often, though, she thinks she's tossed off a witty little quip when in reality she's practically blasted the guy's face off with the rage she's accumulated over a lifetime of being female on this planet.

Without alchemizing the emotions behind the question, the communication is likely to come across as incongruent—too harsh, like my friend above, or manipulative instead of a gentle touch. This is why I suggest that before you embark on a Difficult Ask—or any Ask, actually—you do a Things Unsaid.

We do find that the more skilled practitioners in the school—women who have spent a lot of time doing exercises like Things Unsaid ([this page](#)) and Bad Girl Protocol ([this page](#))—tend to calibrate unconsciously.

The Power of Curiosity

The most important tool for calibration is to get your attention out—really *out*.

When a student's attention is really out on me, they pick up on my nonverbal cues. They can tell, just by watching my body and listening to the tone of my voice, whether I'm playacting an innocent dope or a lecherous predator. And so a question like “Why don't you have children?” might be met with a sharp rebuke, like “Do you

realize how incredibly uncomfortable a question like that might make a woman feel?” while “Do you like threesomes?” might be met with a flirtatious “My, aren’t you bold! Why do you ask? Are you taking a poll?”

Attention out is how you will know whether you’re hitting too hard or so softly that you’re not even reaching the other person. There’s a whole spectrum between a whisper and a shout! How will you know where to land? *The right amount of pressure will shift the other person into a receptive space.*

There’s a video I like to show of a golden retriever taking control of her pups. When the mother dog comes into the enclosure, the scene is chaos: the puppies are hysterical, falling all over themselves, nipping at her and each other. She gets her body clear of them, turns around, and barks—loud and hard.

Right away, most of the pups settle down. She is fierce with them, but if you watch with the sound off, you see that her body is relaxed and calm, and the puppies aren’t frightened, even the one she snaps at most aggressively. Instead, you can see the puppies move from attention out—gimme, gimme, gimme!—to attention in. They lie down to rest and groom themselves, reassured by her show of strength: “Oh, thank God. Mom’s home!”

The video shows a spectacular display of dominance—it’s wild to watch how skillfully this experienced mother moves her puppies into a submissive state, their attention turned back onto themselves. But what’s most interesting to me is how meticulously the mother dog calibrates her reprimands. Her first bark is big and quite scary—but there are a lot of puppies, and they’re *really* out of control. After the majority of them have settled down, she barks again, really sharply, at a couple of the fractious ones, the stubborn cases who haven’t quite gotten the message. After that, she has only to look hard at the one last straggler before he falls in line, too.

The intensity of her dominance is precisely what is required—exactly and only—to move and keep the puppies into a submissive state.

One Question, Three Scenarios

To explore calibration, we're going to use a request that very well might cause you to freeze—"Tell me your sexual fantasies." But there are a thousand different ways that question can be asked, and we're going to look at how you might calibrate your response in three very different scenarios. What happens next—and what you *want* to happen next—will depend largely on the context of the question.

While a question about the question may be the blunt-force fix to get yourself off the spot, context is what determines how hard you should hit back.

Context determines calibration.

In all of these scenarios, you will put your attention out on the other person; you will occupy the dominant state of attention. In all of these scenarios, you will ask the other person a question about the question, and sense and test your way to more information.

The only difference is in how hard or soft you choose to play.

Scenario 1: You and your boss are ending a long conference day by shutting down the hotel bar with a whiskey, or six.

Scenario 2: Your second date with a very intriguing and attractive person is going very (very) well, but you're not quite sure you're ready to answer such an intimate question from them yet.

Scenario 3: Your loving and generous partner genuinely wants to know how the two of you can deepen and expand the incredible sexual chemistry between the two of you. You're thrilled that they asked—the question felt like a lightning bolt to your pussy, in the very best way—but you've never been very good at talking about sex stuff.

So here we have one question and three very different scenarios—all of which might, for different reasons, cause you to Freeze. Your primary strategy, Turning the Spotlight with a question about the

question, will not change. But the questions you ask, and *how* you ask them, will.

In Scenario 1, you're likely going to want to shut this down using a fairly hard touch. Some questions you could turn on your drunken boss: "Do you realize that you're being incredibly inappropriate at this moment?" "Are you aware of the damage a question like that could do to our working relationship?" "Do you realize what kind of position you put a woman in with a question like that?" (Note the use of dominant and third-party language here.)

A softer touch would be something like: "Don't you think it's time for you to stop talking and go to sleep?" This amounts to a hall pass, which is yours to issue, should you choose. Men are humans, and every one of us can make a shitty mistake, like hitting on a subordinate when you've had too much to drink. I also believe it is possible to correct men for behavior like this, and for women to accept their apology and move on.

Of course, I've also heard hundreds of stories from friends and female students—of men who apologized, only to pursue the nineteen-year-old intern instead; of subtle, untraceable punishments for sexual rejection that ruined careers; about HR departments more concerned about snuffing out potential lawsuits than guaranteeing the safety and welfare of female employees.

There's very little way to tell how a scenario like this will ultimately play out, which is another reason why it's so unfortunate. But being able to break the Freeze will allow you to gather your wits about you long enough to make an assessment about what comes next—whether that's a trip to HR or a big glass of water and a good night's sleep.

In Scenario 2, our sexy second date who's gotten a little ahead of themselves, you will want to get off the spot without answering a question you don't want to answer, but also without shutting the game all the way down. So you could play with flirtatious, delaying questions like "Aren't you forward, to be asking about sexual fantasies on a second date?"

Your next "question" doesn't always have to be a question, if the first one got you off the spot. "You're going to have to wait a little longer and work a little harder before you get an answer to a question like that." Note the use of dominant language: a "you" statement, and an instruction.

And with our loving partner in Scenario 3, you'll want to use a very light touch indeed. You get yourself off the spot with a question about the question like "How long have you been thinking about asking that?" "What inspired you to ask that tonight?" "If you find out, how will it make you feel?"

And you can push this even further, into a scene that might be very fun for the two of you to explore: "How would it feel to know that you have a shy, secretive wife, full of sexual fantasies you're going to have to gently tease out of her?"

What I'd most like you to appreciate is how much space you can create for dialogue and influence—if you so choose—once you're off the spot. Consider the following:

One of my students, a successful small business owner, is often asked, "You look like such a baby—how old are you?"

For years, the question caused her to Freeze: she'd splutter and become defensive, letting her irritation show. Now she Turns the Spotlight—and finds that it's an extremely valuable opening for a new client to talk about his priorities and concerns.

"Why does it matter to you how old I am?"

"It's just that you look so young."

"What's your real question? Are you really asking how long I've been doing this? Are you worried that hiring me is going to be a waste of your money?"

"No, of course not. It's just that I'm going to have to go back to my board and explain to them why we should go with a small boutique agency instead of one of the big guys. So, yeah, I guess I am a little worried about your experience and the depth of your bench."

That's a valid concern, which she can now address if she keeps her attention out.

"I can prepare a packet of materials that you can bring to your board, which should more than satisfy their concerns."

He nods, but her attention is still out, and she can tell by what she sees in his body that he's not completely convinced. She wants to land this account, and tries another strategy to move him.

"How about I fly back to New York with you, to present the materials myself?"

She sees his eyes light up and his body relax. Bingo.

The Power to Play

When we do Uncomfortable Questions in class, I notice that my students begin to calibrate all by themselves after a couple rounds.

It's not so much that they've gotten into the swing of Turning the Spotlight—it's because they're having fun.

They're calibrating naturally because they're starting to play, something they can afford to do only because they're no longer afraid of shutting down. And it's how I know that they're starting to feel what I'm teaching, as opposed to simply hearing it. That playfulness is a sign that they're truly embodying their power.

I'm known in class for trying a million different things when I'm working with a woman: Ask like you're Scarlett O'Hara! Grab your tits! Put on this Sherlock Holmes hat!

As much as I'd like to tell you this is a brilliant, preplanned, multifaceted technique designed to open a student to her inner truth, all I'm really doing is *sensing and testing*, which could also be called "playing around." I'm trying something, seeing how it lands, and recalibrating. Did she giggle? Did a really uncomfortable look pass over her face when she put her hand on her heart? What worked? What worked better? What hits the spot?

Every child knows: There are no mistakes when you're playing. And if you stay curious, you're always learning something, even if it's not what you're looking for. I might try fifty things before I get the burst of energy that tells me I've landed on something important, but a sense of playfulness and genuine curiosity turns what a Good Girl might call a series of errors into a dance of discovery that continues until we land in the spot that's most alive, the one that will move the game forward.

Curiosity is essential for effective calibration—especially if you want to keep the conversation going once you're off the spot. Asking a question you genuinely want to know the answer to, even if that question is "Seriously, what the fuck made you think you could ask me that?" is much more likely to effectively shift the dynamic than a random one, or one that's scripted to score a point.

So if your first question is designed simply to get you off the spot, then try for your second question to be informed by curiosity—to

come out of what happens when you really notice the other person and are driven to know more.

And if context is difficult to determine—as it might be with someone you don’t know well—use your location tools: “It seems like you’re flirting with me, but you’re also being really insulting. Did you read one of those idiotic pickup artist manuals? Is that what happened?”

Playfulness and curiosity can take you to incredibly provocative and intimate places. There’s nothing soft about these power tools, even though they’re gentle to hold and fun to explore.

When I see a woman who can ride into a difficult situation while maintaining both her power and her sense of play, relying on her imagination and her curiosity about the life and movement in a dynamic, then I know she’s graduated from what I can teach her, and I tell her to go out and spread the word.

“What if I Go Too Far?”

In almost every class, someone raises their hand with a concern: “What if I go too far?”

First of all: On a cosmic scale, the harm caused by women *not* speaking is so colossal, so massive, and so out of proportion to the harm that might be caused by a woman stepping out and asking for something, it almost doesn’t matter if you go too far. If the next two thousand years were spent with women riding slipshod over men and their desires and their rights as human beings, we still wouldn’t be caught up; a woman inelegantly asking for a raise or more administrative support or different sex doesn’t even begin to tip the scale.

I’m much less concerned with calibration than I am with getting you off the spot—with giving you the tools to break the Freeze. Better that you should come off as too harsh or a little mealymouthed than betray yourself by having sex you don’t want or agreeing to more work for less money than you’re worth. In an ideal world, you’d be so graceful and skilled that he wouldn’t even notice you’d routed him

until he was blocks away. But if someone is going to leave the interaction wounded, I'd much sooner it be him than you.

More practically? The breakage just doesn't happen. Women leave my classes charged up and asking for all kinds of crazy-ass shit in sometimes unlovely ways, and they tell us how it went.

What they report is that once they got their attention all the way out and could keep it there, they could say and do a lot that would have been hurtful, offensive, or inappropriate if their attention had been turned inward, or jammed up in the Smush. Attention out meant they were energetically holding their sub, which made the correction easier to take, and because they'd done the emotional alchemy work in Things Unsaid and Bad Girl Protocol, their calibration was appropriate.

If Asking and negotiating conflict in the ways that we teach destroyed relationships, we'd know about it. Sometimes women do come back to us for help with the next step, but in the years we've been doing this, I cannot think of a single request that has resulted in damage. Indeed, every day, the very opposite is true: women report the truly enormous, jaw-dropping, desire-quenching requests they've made, and share their life-altering, surprising, game-changing results.

That said, of course it's not impossible to go too far, especially at the beginning. Maybe you'll make a mess. Maybe you'll be cruel; maybe you'll do something morally reprehensible. You very well may hurt someone's feelings. But that is *not* the same thing as actually hurting them, or causing irreparable damage.

In fact, one of my students has a tattoo that reads "99%"—a reminder to herself that 99 percent of the time, she can get herself out of the trouble she got herself into. The tattoo prompts her to embrace friction, and serves as a physical reminder of how much fun it is when she goes far enough out to get into trouble.

I trust you. I trust you to keep your attention out so that you'll know if you've crossed a line. I trust you to see the effects of your actions, and to clean up what you've done if you need to. But when you're truly speaking your desire, speaking up on behalf of what you're fighting for, it's hard to go too far.

In general, we find that women trend conservative. Even when they think they've gone too far, they haven't gone far enough. So, in a world where the presiding ethos is to move fast and break things, I'd

urge you to go further than feels comfortable. Be direct. Be outrageous. Be skilled. Be playful. We've got a lot of ground to make up.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LET THEM LIGHT YOU UP!

The Power of the Outrageous Ask

Remember the student who hated her desk? The one who said she'd work from the floor, if only her boss would meet with her and give her ideas a fair shot?

You don't seriously think I let her stop there, do you?

We're not in this to beg—and settle—for crumbs. Every request, suggestion, invitation, or Ask has a tipping point. Below that point, the question is basically what can be done to fix a problem—to get back to zero. But I have a higher purpose for your Asks. I want them to move into the space of creation—not just to correct a mistake or some perceived flaw you see in yourself, but to manifest something great in the world. I don't want you running around fixing yourselves, plastering holes in a crumbling wall, using your attention to find problems and make minor corrections. My vision is one in which you harness your attention and imagination to fully acknowledge what's present, both good and bad, and then extend invitations that will help you to make your world just as you like it.

You'll know you've met this tipping point when you vibrate with everything the Ask will make possible for you. When you meet the possibility of it coming true not with “Yeah, that's fine” or “I guess that's better” but “Holy shit, that would be huge!”

These kinds of Asks—often Outrageous and Difficult—also transform the people around you.

Why do you think it's such a relief to most people when you make a specific Ask? Yes, there's a comfort in the fact that they finally know what you want, which means they're not perpetually guessing and getting it wrong, or guessing and getting it partially right. But the real satisfaction comes from the fact that they get to express the love and respect and admiration that they have for you *in a way that lights you up*.

This might be one of the most crucial points in this book, because another dodge women use to back away from Asking is to ask for less than what they really want—which has the exact opposite effect of what's intended.

I call this concept the Right-Sized Ask. And you should know: oftentimes, the right size is Outrageous.

The Right-Sized Ask

Too often, I see women begging—badly—for crumbs, accepting them, and then blowing a gasket down the line because they're starving.

The problem, often, isn't that they're asking too much. It's that they're not asking enough.

Say you're scared to ask for 100 percent of what you really want. Maybe you're not sure you deserve what you're asking for, or you don't feel like you've earned it, or what you're asking for is really big—so outrageous it scares you. Even if you did ask them for it, you're not sure they'd be able to pull it off.

So before you've even opened your mouth, you negotiate yourself down and ask for only 80 percent of what you want.

You know what's going to happen? They're going to do exactly what you asked them to do, because you're going to be super-influential after reading this book. But when they offer it to you—"Look! I did it!"—*they're not going to see you light up*. Because it wasn't 100 percent, and it didn't hit the spot.

A person's animal body lights up when a gift really works, and the other person's animal body knows it. When the present he chose was truly perfect, when the erotic adventure he planned was exactly what you always wanted, when the advice was what you most needed to

hear, you will positively overflow with pleasure and gratitude and joy, and he will get to bask in your glow: “I did that! I lit her up.” That lights him up, too.

But if you compromise even a little bit in your request, you’ve doomed him to labor in vain. “I did *all that* for ‘thanks’ and a lukewarm smile?” It doesn’t matter what words you choose, or how good your acting chops might be; even if you’ve laid the gratitude on thick, it won’t land.

Most of the time, women don’t even ask for 80 percent. We ask for 20 percent of what we want. Before we even make the Ask, we’re negotiating against ourselves. “I want to try that fancy French restaurant, but he’ll never go for that on a weeknight. I guess we can go to the place on the corner instead.”

This is a case where even 99 percent right is 100 percent wrong.

**An Ask not only has to be
specific; it has to be big enough
to light you up for real.**

So look at your Asking Practice and supersize those Asks. You remember how transformative an Outrageous Ask can be. How big does an Ask have to get before it’s really the right size? Let yourself overshoot the mark, to make sure you’re not inadvertently settling for crumbs.

The Path to Power

As I’ve said before, power isn’t sitting on a yoga mat with an ionizer and a humidifier and feeling powerful. And it’s not asking for what you’re entitled to, or what you’ve already earned. It’s being legendary in the world.

This is how you achieve power: by going out and doing powerful things in the world.

Make yourself strong—feel good! But know that if your attention stays turned inward, the default state of attention for women, then the slightest nudge will be enough to set you wobbling, hurt and defensive and pissed off and insecure.

You can be as positive as you want; you can process and achieve catharsis and closure. You can work on yourself all day and feel great—but don't you dare work for a bully, or walk by a construction site, or be around anyone suffering from anxiety or depression or addiction, or embark on a difficult conversation with someone about the sex you want to have or the money you want to make or the world you want to live in.

You've got all the skills you need to go *big*; it's time to try something different. Go out and get something fucking outrageous for yourself, using the tools in the book, and then tell me how you feel.

The Transformational Power of the Outrageous Ask

I know, better than anyone, the power of the enormous, transformative, creative Ask. The Academy itself was born out of one.

Ruben and I were dating while he was trying to decide whether to return to doing incredibly important humanitarian work in Africa or to stay in New York with me. It was a complicated time in my own life; I was distracted, desperately searching for a way to live my own life's purpose. We hit a crossroads: if he was going to stay, he explained, he needed more—more of my time, more commitment, more attention.

I responded with an e-mail so audacious that my hands still shake when I think about pressing Send:

I have a totally unreasonable and outrageous request. After all you've done for me, I want even more.

I am on the cusp of everything I've ever wanted. I have to be fierce for this. I have no choice but to completely disregard your request for attention and tell you what I need. What I need so that I can build the life I want.

I am looking for a man who will put his primary attention on making my creativity the source of our livelihood.

This isn't a request for a nice boyfriend. It's a desire for the greatest most devoted partner in love and work that's ever lived. I've never met a man capable of what I am asking until I met you. Of course I want it to be you.

I have struggled on the cusp of bringing my creations into the world for a while now. Here I am again, but at the right place and at the right time. Crossing over is the most important thing right now, more important than dealing with darkness, even more important than keeping you around and, yes, more important than meeting your needs.

I know exactly what I am saying. After your hurt over being invisible and not having attention on you the way you need, I am pretty mercilessly responding with "yes and I want even more from you." More attention on my gifts, strengths, my soul's work in the world. It might not be fair but it is the truth of what I need and what is happening.

The alternatives are dismal to me.

You don't owe me shit. I can't ask for this on the basis of debt. I can't even promise that if you choose to play the game I am proposing, you will eventually get yours.

I am asking you to assist me in every way possible in bringing my work into the world, be devoted, enthusiastic, hard-working, without asking for anything in return.

I realize that this presents you with a very powerful option to decline.

I don't believe there is anyone who can be this and do this for me and with me. That doesn't mean you should. You are the greatest man I have

ever met but I am prepared to do it alone. You've never witnessed me in the throes of work passion and you should know that it might leave you feeling even more neglected, unless you can find personal satisfaction in connecting with me through the work and serving what I am creating, and me as the creator of it by extension.

Please understand that I have written this e-mail with the highest respect and deepest love.

The request that started this exchange was *to go to the movies together more*.

Ruben loves going to the movies, but every time there was something he wanted to see, he'd find me surrounded by a pile of books, making furious notes, and wanting to get into some intense conversation about gender and influence. As intense and thrilling as those conversations were, they weren't intimate, and Ruben needed more.

I countered his small Ask with an Outrageous Ask—a greedy, selfish one, that he give up everything, his job, his financial security, even our relationship, to help me. He wanted to go to a show; I asked him to go to war.

In that same e-mail, I went on to make very specific work-related Asks of him, and others about how our financial and domestic life together would need to change in order to entirely support my work.

My Outrageous Ask didn't come out of a calculated understanding of exactly where we were and what each of us needed. Instead, it was a cry from my heart: "I need this, I want this, come join me!" We didn't even know at that point that we were going to start a school.

But when I came home that night, he had an enormous smile on his face. Yes, he'd give me everything I wanted and needed; yes, he'd join me in this adventure. We went from being a new couple squabbling about balancing quality time with professional time to throwing both quality time and our professional lives out the window to start a crusade.

My Outrageous Ask gave Ruben something to fight for that was bigger than a war zone. And it unwittingly opened the gateway to a bigger desire he had, one I hadn't even known was there. While he was in Africa, meeting with providers about prenatal care and

maternal mortality statistics and other issues directly related to women's health, more often than not he was having those conversations in a room *without a single woman*. He'd never articulated this to me, but he had already understood in an on-the-ground, embodied way that he wasn't ever going to be able to create the kind of change he wanted to see unless the issue of gender equality had been addressed.

There's going to be a time for Ruben to talk about what he's learned from being the only man in the room; that's not my story to tell. But much of what I teach now was born in the conversations between the two of us—the ones we had before I asked, and the conversations we had afterward.

This is why the school we run together is not a woman-only space. We practice with male volunteers, and every weekend class involves asking an army of men in our lives to send us texts, letting us know that they're thinking of us. Men and women go together; we need to know how to do this together. Transformation of womankind and the world cannot happen without a transformation of the way women are with men.

But in order to excite and incite men to join our crusade, in order to turn them into our greatest allies, we have to Ask.

In class, we use the Three-Way Ask as an opportunity for the students to role-play Difficult Asks. What is so transformative about watching these is not how easily or well we are able to clean up a woman's energy so that she achieves congruence. What is truly remarkable is how often an Outrageous Ask is Right-Sized.

Let me show you with two examples of the Three-Way Ask. To remind you, this is when a woman asks however she would ask if she has to do it right now. Then she asks again, using "you" language and a strongly dominant state of attention, and then a third time in the surrendered, submissive state, turned in on herself and her own experience, using "I" language that communicates her connection. Often, I push her to exaggerate both states of attention when she's role-playing, and to concentrate specifically on her worst fears; this frees up the energy trapped in those forbidden roles.

Ruth volunteers to do a Three-Way Ask. She wants to role-play asking her ex-husband to pay his share of their children's tuition. He's supposed to send her a check every year, according to the

agreement they signed, but he's fallen behind, like he always does, on what he owes her.

During her first unfiltered Ask, this bright, professional woman slumps in her chair as she says, "I want you to pay half the kids' tuition, like you're supposed to." The request is completely mangled by the bitterness and hopelessness, resignation, and self-blame she feels. It would have been cleaner if she'd just said "Fuck you"—but if she could say that, or any of the other Things Unsaid that power her unalchemized rage, she wouldn't have to.

I have Ruth stand. Anger moves upward and outward, so standing is a good first step toward accessing the dominant state of attention. "Say 'Fuck you,'" I tell her, and she does—but she's not entirely comfortable with swearing, and she's clearly scared of him. I hand her the riding crop, have her place it in the center of the volunteer's chest, and instruct her to let that riding crop lead her attention directly into his body.

"Fuck him why?" I ask. "What has he done?"

"Fuck you for making me ask for what you should automatically do."

I egg her on. "Keep going!"

"Fuck you for doing this to me again; you pulled this shit last year, too."

"Oh? So he owes you eight thousand dollars, not four?"

She's taken aback for a second, then recovers herself: "Fuck you, you owe me eight grand. And after all you put me through! Fuck you!" She's still a little hesitant—something feels weak. So I ask: "What did he put you through?"

I have her vent a really messy—aggressive, apologetic, cruel—Things Unsaid. As I suspected, there are a lot of things she hasn't told her scary, temper-prone ex-husband. When the dust has settled, I ask: "Are you sure eight thousand dollars is enough?"

What I mean by that is: What kind of role are you assigning him right now? Right now, she's cast him as the guy who failed at his marriage, the guy who's late with all the checks, if he sends them at all. "Do you know how easy it is for him to procrastinate or forget altogether when signing those checks serves as a reminder of what a loser he is? What Ask could you make that would give him a different role?"

She shakes her head. “Forget about it. Trust me: I know this man. If I can’t get him to do this, I can’t get him to do anything more.”

“Okay—then let’s be outrageous. What’s the most outrageous thing you could think of to ask him for, something you’re absolutely sure he’ll never do?”

“There were some stocks in the divorce settlement. He’s supposed to sign them over to me, but it’s not worth braving one of his terrifying outbursts to get them.”

“Sorry, Ruth, but that Ask is nowhere near outrageous enough! You’re still in the realm of *what he actually owes you*. If he was the ex-husband you wanted him to be, and if you knew he had no choice but to say yes, what would be the most outrageous thing you could think of to ask?”

“I’d ask him to buy me and the kids a house.”

With that, I could see that Ruth’s rage was spent: what was present instead was sadness, and the impossibility of that request ever coming true. Sadness moves our attention inward, which is why it is a powerful gateway to the submissive state. To encourage her body to follow the movement of her attention, I asked her to get on her knees.

“Kneel in front of that fucker?” A final burst of rage.

“Do it, thinking about the house and the kids.”

She kneeled, looking uncomfortable, so I told her to close her eyes and do a quick version of the Legitimacy exercise: “Tell me about the house. Somehow, miraculously, you got that house; you asked, and he bought you your dream house. What do you feel in your body now that you have it? What are the emotions that come up; what does it make possible?”

“I feel strong and soft. I feel a burst of enthusiasm. The kids live closer to school, cutting our commute time, which means I have extra hours every day to myself to focus on my writing. It also means I get to move out of the narrow-minded religious community that defined my marriage, so that I’m surrounded by people who think like me. There are new friends I can make, things I can learn. I have a space where I’m going to start teaching writing workshops again, and do the coaching that I know uses my greatest strengths. The kids are closer to their friends. They’re happier, and can spend more time out of the house.”

The more time we spend here, the more the possibilities expand.

“Now that he’s done this,” I ask her, “how do you feel about him? How has his role changed, in your eyes?”

She says, “He just went from deadbeat dad to the protector and provider I think he always wanted to be in our marriage—but he never knew how.”

I tell her to stand, and I don’t even need to prompt her: she is both soft and powerful as she asks. “You love your kids. You tried your best. You wanted to show up as a real man. You can do something phenomenal for your family now. Buy us a house, and provide safety, security, shelter for us. You can become the man you always wanted to be.”

Then she turns to me and says, “But I don’t want to deal with the details—finding the house, all of that.”

I ask, “Is he good at that?”

“Yes—he’s an accountant. Details are his thing.”

“So tell him.”

She leans into the volunteer, taking the riding crop from my hand. “You are excellent at handling all the boring technical details. You’re going to find the house, deal with the real estate agent, set up all the payments and make them. You’re going to show me the house once, just before the paperwork is final. It’s going to be in the neighborhood I choose, with the features that are important to me. And you’re going to change all of our lives.”

She sits back down across from the volunteer for her final Ask. Before she speaks, she pauses, and I know what she’s thinking: we went from four thousand dollars to a house, and still, she’s beginning to wonder if this Ask is really so outrageous after all. “Just ask,” I say. She does. Her body is calm, her voice is clear, and what shows up for the first time is the love she has for him, hidden underneath all that rage and fear.

Three months later, they have a closing date set for the house he is in contract to buy for her. She writes me in disbelief over how four thousand dollars felt like too much, but asking for a house started this brand-new relationship with a man she’d known for twenty years. She forwards me the pictures he’s been sending her, of renovation possibilities. This is not the man she divorced; this is the man she glimpsed on their wedding day. With an Ask, she changed his role; in this different role, she has no problem getting him to show up.

Here's another:

Valentina, a bohemian woman in her forties, gets up to do the Three-Way Ask: she hasn't been able to find a way to request that her dear friend—a wealthy, elderly man—include her in his will.

As she says this, I feel the whole room bristle: Why on earth does she think she has the right to ask a man who isn't related to her to leave her his estate? Her desire is easy to judge, but I know better. First of all, she has no say in what she wants, and, as we are about to discover, this desire has arisen for good reason.

For her first, raw version of the Ask, she sits across from him, tells him that she loves him and that he's the only man who has ever felt like a father to her, and asks simply to be added to the will. She does not say that she wants him to leave her everything, but the love I know she feels for him feels wrong when it's spoken in the same sentence as his implied death and a money conversation they haven't yet had.

The Ask feels off—icky.

I have her get on her knees in front of the volunteer, and go inward. She begins talking about how much it means to her that his money backed her to form a theater company, of which she is the director.

I stop her: "Wait! This is about a job?"

She says, "Yes. But the money doesn't really matter to me, so I never thought of it that way." Suddenly, she starts to cry. She says—to me, not to him in the form of the male volunteer: "The last thing on earth I'm going to want to think about when he dies is that I've lost my job, and that this beautiful thing that we created together is also gone. It will be a triple loss."

With that, she's made a powerful statement about what she doesn't want. I ask her what she does want, and in a beautifully vulnerable voice, she tells him: "I want to go to your funeral with the entire theater company, and for all of us to speak about the impact you've had on our lives. I want to cry about the father I've lost with people to whom you are also a father figure. I want us to toast the legacy you've created, strengthened in the knowledge that we will continue the work you've continued."

Suddenly, she pops up: "Oh! And I want the house, too."

It feels like a non sequitur, but I follow it: "Why? What's up with the house?" "Oh, that's where the actors live—we're an intentional

community.” This community, then, is another, uncounted loss that would accompany his death. “And you’re in charge of all of this?” I ask. “Yes. It’s my life purpose. I never think of it as a job, even though I do get paid. That’s why I never thought about how important the money would be, if we wanted to keep his vision going.”

Now I have Valentina stand. I ask her to make “you” statements, to put her attention outward. She stands over the volunteer: “You’re the only father I’ve ever known. You’re the benefactor, the one who made this beautiful artistic community we created together possible. This is your exquisite contribution to this world and you want it to outlive you, to grow even after you are gone. Charge me with the protection of your legacy. Set up your will so this work can continue, so that it can stand as your gift to humanity.”

Quickly, I want her to get on her knees again; I want her to say to him what she said to me: “I don’t want to suffer the loss of you, the most important person in my world, and my life purpose on the same day. I want to be protected from that experience. I want to be the protector of your legacy. I want you to live on in this form. Will you put me in your will? I want to inherit the money, not just to keep this going, but to grow it so that it becomes what we always dreamed.”

Now the whole room feels it: that seemingly Outrageous Ask wasn’t so crazy after all. It sounded at first like she was making a greedy grab for his cash; now we understand exactly why he would agree to what she’s asking. She sits in the chair across from the volunteer, and I say, “Go ahead and ask, however it occurs to you.”

In three simple sentences, she asks him to leave her his estate. The Ask is filled with such love, clarity, power, and total legitimacy that it’s impossible to imagine him saying no.

And, as she reports back a few weeks later, he doesn’t say no—he says yes, and more. In fact, her breathtakingly inappropriate, shockingly forward, greedy Outrageous Ask turned out to be too conservative. After the Ask, her mentor also formed a foundation, which will fund the company in perpetuity. Valentina is artistic director for as long as she’d like to be, and the foundation is also funding a residency in New Zealand, where she can take two weeks a year to steep herself in the most beautiful nature in the world while she develops new talent.

Is Your Ask Outrageous Enough?

The question I always have about a seemingly Outrageous Ask is: Who are you to judge your desires? With what faculty do you designate a desire as outrageous? Is it more outrageous to demand change, or to go along with the warped and twisted world we live in?

Sometimes the pure desire
behind an Outrageous Ask is
actually sanity.

I've never met a woman who wasn't carrying a desire in her heart that could change the world as we know it. I teach so that women can break the bonds that constrain them, and so they can have a powerful influence in shaping our individual worlds. But my students have shown me that we can go much, much further than that.

The outrageous desire that lives in your being only *seems* outrageous because of the skewed world we live in.

Once upon a time, in the not-so-recent past, a woman went to her superior and said, "Here's the deal: I'm going to have a baby. I want you to continue paying me while I have my baby, even though I won't be working. Then I'd like to spend some time at home with the baby, and I would like you to pay me while I do that. Later, I would like to return to my position, with the same salary."

It's likely that this Ask sounded selfish, greedy, outrageous—insane, even. Yet now maternity leave is an accepted part of working life for many women. (Though not enough!) We see its stupendous benefits for women and children and families and society at large.

So I'd ask you to double-check your selfish, outrageous desires and the Asks that would make them come true. You have the skills you need to have those difficult conversations. Is your desire more outrageous than Rosa Parks's was? Or Susan B. Anthony's? Or Malala Yousafzai's? Or Greta Thunberg's?

Every one of these women was willing to acknowledge the enormity and the truth of the life force they carried. So before you censor yourself, talk yourself down, negotiate against yourself: Ask. Does your burning desire—your Outrageous Ask—carry the cure for what's wrong with our world?

CONCLUSION

THE POWER TO BIRTH A NEW WORLD

The last exercise we do before students graduate from the most advanced courses we offer is called “The Firing Squad.”

Public speaking is already most people’s worst nightmare—and The Firing Squad is the worst-case scenario pushed to its most outrageous. One student delivers a presentation, and her fellow advanced students—who are now skilled in all forms of provocative attack—take her *down*.

They criticize her clothing, her credentials, her mannerisms, her weight. They raise time concerns—“How much longer are we going to have to sit here?”—and yell unrelated questions. They call out of turn: “This is fucking boring”; “Aren’t you too old to be teaching us about technology?” They tell her she looks hot, and ask her out on dates.

Watching this soon-to-be graduate own the room is a sheer delight. Because she doesn’t just handle it—she tames an audience who has gone fully feral without skipping a beat or missing a word, without turning her attention in or ever losing her dominant sense of presence.

A woman who has read this book knows how to ask, outrageously and congruently. She can spot a wolf in sheep’s clothing and a sheep in a wolf’s. She’s fireproofed against no, so that when she hears it, she says, “Fuck yes—time to play.” She loves nothing better than

swatting bullshit resistance out of the way, turning the most difficult negotiations and conversations into games, where she shifts roles as if she's starring in a movie, exhilarated by her own imagination and imbued with a sense of play.

But as valuable—and indeed lifesaving—as many of these tools are, they are just that: tools. And their most valuable purpose for you will be in using them to hunt the life force—in yourself, and in someone else.

The direction of our attention—the conversation under the conversation—is a direction of the life force. Attention makes things grow, and you are now a vitality barometer. Not only can you hear no, but you hear the invitation to intimacy the other person is confessing with it. You will use what's alive in yourself to tap into what's alive in another person. This leads to a new kind of conversation—one that is fully embodied, deeply meaningful, and powerfully influential.

Conversation is what made the rules, and it's what will change them.

The new desires, ideas, and directions that come out of these new kinds of conversations are wonderfully unpredictable. They question and test the reality that we've created. These conversations lead to new visions, new actions—and new conversations, ensuring that the cycle toward life and light continues. And they are transformative, because these conversations unearth the truth of what we all deeply want and need.

This isn't "positive thinking," but phototropism—how we change in order to grow toward the light. We have been told that we're fundamentally sinful and wrong—animalistic monsters that need to be monitored and self-policed. But our natural tendencies are to move toward what's alive, and what nourishes life.

If that is how you are moving through the world, then, like one of my students, you might find yourself negotiating with a dictator to save enormous swaths of the rainforest. Or having your first orgasm—and then meeting with Muslim clerics to teach them how the Koran supports women's sexuality.

You don't have to examine the past to heal it; with these tools, we create a present that proves to you that the future can be anything you want it to be.

This book tells the story of Good Girl conditioning, and how we break out of the compression it imposes on us on our journey toward a new kind of power.

Men have their story, too. For millennia, they've been told to stuff down their feelings, to man up, to go to war and die for us. Their conditioning doesn't really work for them, either. The immensity of the emotional violence they experience in order to become men and the punishments that follow for many of them when they start feeling their empathy are tragic.

I don't teach men. But it is my hope that teaching women the art of powerful conversation and attention will also help men to recover what they've lost. A woman who has mastered these skills can do a lot to shepherd a man toward what's missing.

Stories end. Romantic stories often end with a wedding—but any married person will tell you that's the beginning, not the end. Adventures end when the villain is defeated, but that's just the setup for a sequel.

Where we are, as women today, is not the end of the story, not by a long shot. So while this book is coming to a close, the story—your story—is just beginning. This is where a new kind of life, lived intentionally and collectively, begins.

What happens next will be wildly unexpected—and absolutely perfect.

APPENDIX

Joining or Starting a Mistress Group

Academy graduates run Mistress groups in cities around the world. Our website, www.weteachpower.com, has lists of Mistress groups that are accepting new Mistresses in your area.

If you want to set up your own, register on our website to receive bonus assignments, videos, and exercises. You can choose to make your group open to welcoming new Mistresses, keep it completely private, or do it in your own way.

What's important to me is that women share these tools with their communities, adapt them, and use them to change the world around them.

Here are some best practices.

WHO?

Your group may be as small as two people. For in-person groups, we find that four to eight people is an ideal number. For online groups, we've found that the ideal range is three to twelve women. More is cumbersome.

Find at least one or two women who agree to meet up. That can be more than enough—you can always invite others to join once you've gotten the ball rolling.

You can call your Mistress group whatever you want. (Our school boasts some pretty colorful group names.) If you choose to keep the word "Mistress" and anyone questions you, you can politely inform

them that the word “mistress” is the only feminine form of the word “master” in the English language.

Some of the names the groups choose reflect their special focus: Mamma Dommies, Money Wielding Wonder Women, Mistresses of Justice (they’re activism-centered), and the Mistress Mayhem Mischief Makers, who focused on the Bad Girl Protocol and having as much fun as they could—and who went on to found the Bad Girl Summer Camp.

HOW DO I ASK PEOPLE TO JOIN?

DOMME: Hey! You’re one of my favorite women! Do you want to join me and a few other women for an evening to create a secret society that will take over the world? I’m hosting a Mistress group!

SUB: Hey! I have an amazing idea! I have a dream of getting the best women I know to acquire the skills necessary to take over the world! I imagine us getting together and plotting world domination. I’d love it if you were one of those women! Will you join us?

WHEN?

If you’re doing an online group via Skype or Zoom, we find that one hour is usually perfect; for in-person meetings, one to two and a half hours.

WHERE?

We recommend your first gathering be somewhere quiet and private. Subsequent meetings can take place in parks, bars, or dungeons! Communities and groups have a way of evolving naturally. For the first one, however, a member’s living room might make the most sense.

HOW?

Here's a general protocol for Mistress groups.

CHECK-INS

"Right now I'm feeling _____."

Go around the room, one by one. Everyone answers the following prompt:

"My name is _____, and right now, I'm feeling _____."

Single word answers are encouraged.

"The thing I'm thinking about a lot this week is _____."

Once again, everyone answers the following prompt:

"The thing I'm thinking about a lot this week is _____."

Two minutes per person is usually a good amount of time. At the end of the two minutes, the organizer thanks them.

No coaching or feedback.

In subsequent meetings of your group, you can change the prompt. For prompt examples, check out our website.

Partnered Exercises

These exercises work well done in pairs: Things Unsaid, Bad Girl Protocol, Asking Practice.

(See Things Unsaid on [this page](#) for an example of how an exercise might work in partnership.) For worksheets with instructions for the other exercises (and additional ones not covered in the book), check out our website.

Have everyone pair off. If choosing who starts first is awkward, come up with a universal rule, like "The person with the longest hair goes first!"

General Rules for Partnered Exercises

Both partners have to take a turn.

Choose a time limit (anywhere from five to fifteen minutes per person, for example).

One person keeps time and lets the other person know when they have thirty seconds left.

No coaching or feedback other than what the scripts provide.

When time runs out, the person who was holding space reflects a frame. “I frame the moment when you . . .”

Frames

This exercise, which you may already be familiar with from other systems, is an offering: everyone shares the moment that made them feel most alive. They share these descriptions without intellectual analysis or stories about their own experiences and past.

Frames are confined to a moment in time, and felt in the body.

For the person who is *being* framed, frames are a way to anchor what she felt. For the people *doing* the framing, it's a way of educating yourself, of imprinting what you've seen on your own psyche, of deciding what you want to keep.

Some examples, from Mistress Alia's pirate party:

“I frame all of us running down a dark suburban street; I haven't felt that free—that *bad*—since high school.”

“I frame the moment you said ‘I always hated my mother-in-law,’ and let a piece of her wedding china drop to the floor.”

“I frame sitting on the couch at Kim's, seeing our pirate captain make ruthless decisions about her past and how she was going to create a new future.”

“I frame the moment we couldn’t stop laughing after we discovered we’d accidentally stolen one of your ex’s shoes.”

And a frame from Alia to myself: “I frame that this thing I dreaded turned out to be more fun than my bachelorette party. And my wedding. And I frame realizing how unattached I am to all of this crap.”

Another way to do this is to say what you thought was hot. “I thought it was really hot when you said . . .”

In class, we use frames all the time—to start a session, to end one, and to cap every exercise. The person doing the exercise is the only one who doesn’t get to see it. And because so much happens in class, it’s helpful for everyone else to be able to take a mental snapshot of the moments that had the greatest effect on them.

“When you said that you wanted to keep the baby, your spine straightened.” “It was a whisper, but we could hear it throughout the whole room.” “I was moved to tears by the way you told him you wanted to keep the baby; I’m crying just thinking about the way you said that.”

When we frame moments of vitality, and learn to reflect what’s radiant and alive, we bypass social conditioning and strengthen our own recognition of the living impulse. It encourages you to ask: What was alive about what I just saw? What was true? What needs watering? What wants to grow?

Framing a moment is basically the same technique as a high-quality self-celebration—specific, grounded in a moment in time, and body-based, not intellectual. Which moments do you want to keep? What do you want to celebrate?

Avoid getting abstract with your frames or providing interpretations. The more concentrated, the better.

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