

Step 3: The Funding

*Denny's. It is late at night.*

*The DJ sits at an ever-sticky table at the local Denny's. His sleeve is resting in the syrup atop his Super Slam Pancake Stack, but he is unbothered. This person is obviously a monster.*

*STEPH sits across the booth, arms crossed, body shifted as far from the DJ as possible. The conversation clips at a Gilmore Girls level of fast, each attempt at conversing is expertly deflected and swatted down by STEPH. She's a seasoned pro at dealing with DJ.*

DJ:

How's your father, Steph? Is he in remission yet?

STEPH:

Not talking about it.

DJ:

Did you keep the ring I gave you?

STEPH:

No, it was worthless.

DJ:

How was the rest of your mother's funeral, did it liven up after I left?

STEPH:

Yes, it really got popping. What do you want?

DJ:

I live with my sister now. I take care of her kids. They're dirty and not very interesting, but they'll do what I tell them to do. I convinced the oldest one to willingly eat paper the other day.

STEPH:

I don't care. Why am I in this Denny's at midnight?

DJ:

*(A genuine question)* Aren't we supposed to engage in polite chit chat before I ask you for favors?

STEPH:

Usually, but that's only if the person you're talking to doesn't want you dead.

DJ:

Mm. Yes, that makes sense, thank you.

STEPH:

You're welcome. What do you want?

DJ:

Well, it is late, but "America's Diner is Always Open," and I have a proposition for you.

STEPH:

Nope! Big no. I don't want to be a part of it. Whatever your scheme is, whatever fucked up shit you're doing to some other poor souls I don't want to hear about it.

DJ:

Then why did you come?

STEPH:

I was bored. And wanted to see if I was wrong.

DJ:

*(genuine)* Are you bored because I'm not around?

STEPH:

You self-important piece of shit. I'm going, don't ever call me again.  
*(STEPH stands to leave.)*

DJ:

I robbed a gift shop in Atlantic City once. Well, I guess robbed is a loose term here. I held up a gift shop in Atlantic City. I didn't actually take any of the money. The money wasn't the point.

STEPH:

You-

DJ:

Steph, it's rude to interrupt, I'm telling a story. *(She sits.)* And I didn't actually have the gun. I did that thing you see on tv, where the guy runs in with his hand in his pocket. Ya know, the fingers poking through the pocket. It's brilliant. I just have to present it. Just like *(he sticks a hand in his pocket)* and the human brain just imagines the rest of it. Fear is lazy like that. No one checks out the facts, they just allow themselves to squirm. I held them there for 3 hours. I made them sing a song, it was You Can Call Me Al. That Paul Simon song. The one where he sings about hiring a girl named Betty as his bodyguard. I started making them all do push ups-

STEPH:

What are you talking about?

DJ:

I'm talking about hearts, their tiny frantic little hearts started beating in sync. A stunning chorus, I could hear the thudthud, thudthud. Their hearts at my beck and call. I walked out of that gift shop and flew across the country, I knew now what would finally satisfy me.

STEPH:

Scaring people?

DJ:

Controlling hearts. In masses. I moved to Arizona and became a Soul Cycle instructor. For months, I had rooms of people sweating, heaving, every heart begging for a leader... and it disgusted me. They wanted it.

My gift shop, they begged me to stop. The cyclists begged for more, returning each week just for me hurt them over and over. It's the desperation that sullied my joy. I'd rather they weren't aware of the effect I had on them. That's why I've asked you to this Denny's, Steph.

*He leans back in the booth, finally retrieving his sleeve from the clasp of the syrup.*

I'd like you to lend me \$1,000 for disc-jockey equipment so that I can control the hearts of vast numbers of young men and women without their knowledge. Think it over if you'd like, I will point out that the Everyday Value Slam I bought you is getting cold.

STEPH:

You're sick.

DJ:

You already knew that. Steph, If you don't think I'm a good person, why did you want to be with me for so long?

STEPH:

Honestly... your utter lack of respect for other human beings made me feel like a better person.

DJ:

Oh. I see. I thought you'd be proud of me, Steph.

STEPH:

Proud? In what-

DJ:

I could have gone back to that gift shop. I could have robbed it for whatever it was worth. I could have stolen the equipment.

STEPH:

Why didn't you?

DJ:

It's against the rule book.

STEPH:

My rule book?

DJ:

Yes. *(DJ pulls out the very large, handwritten stack of papers. It is very worn, crumpled in places, well used. It's an itemized list.)*  
Steph's Rules for Societal Living Number 36: Don't steal from others.

STEPH:

I wrote that one after you sold my laptop to buy a Cuisinart mixer.  
You still carry that thing around?

DJ:

I don't understand a lot of these niceties, I don't have that  
capability.

STEPH:

Yeah, I figured that out on my own.

DJ:

But I understand lists. I understand rules. So I check the list.

STEPH:

I made that so you'd stop fucking me over so much.

DJ:

Did it work?

STEPH:

For a while, it did.

DJ:

Why did it stop?

STEPH:

Because it was an act! All of it. You have no goodness in there, none  
that I didn't plant there for my own gain. It's just a well rehearsed  
character that you play.

DJ:

Play?

STEPH:

You play it to get what you want, you manipulate. Now you know what  
you're supposed to do, but you have no emotional connection to why  
you're doing it! So it's false. All of it is false.

DJ:

I have emotional connections. I asked you to marry me.

STEPH:

You didn't propose to me because you loved me, you proposed to me  
because you needed me around. To teach you how to better manipulate. I  
thought I was teaching you how to love, I thought I was fixing you,  
but I just created a monster. The only time I could see you genuinely  
happy to be with me were moments when you were asking me to teach you  
a new trick. And that's why I made you a handbook, because I wanted  
that genuine, love-moment, again and again. It was an addiction, that  
momentary happiness when I thought you might be capable of love. So, I  
kept adding on to your tool belt of manipulation.

DJ:

You were happy when you taught me. You used to find my social incompetence endearing. You can keep teaching me. We can keep being happy. I can make you feel loved-

STEPH:

But you can't love me. You just said it. You can make anybody feel anything, I taught you how. But you can't actually do it. I thought maybe something would click when I kicked you out... I came to see if it had worked. But, I can't keep letting myself believe you have a soul, because you don't. There's nothing in there. You're empty. Your parents saw that, that's why they wanted to have you committed. Your teachers saw it, so they kicked you out. You ran away because no one in your life fell for your shit anymore, except your doe eyed idiot little sister and that's because she thinks you shit gold. And I saw through it, don't think I didn't. Or maybe I just wanted a project. So, what now? You want me to help you? When you've done nothing but lie to me and everyone you come in contact with? What gives you the right?

DJ:

*(slowly flips to the last page of the handbook. He slides the papers across the table and points to the last rule.)* Rule number 153: Don't be afraid to ask for help from people who care about you.

*STEPH sits and thinks for a few moments. She makes her decision. She digs through her vast purse to the very bottom. She pulls out a ring box and smacks it on the table.*

STEPH:

I already had it appraised. It's worth \$1000, you cheap bastard. Sell it. But if I do this for you, you are never allowed to contact me again. I mean it.

DJ:

But what if I-

STEPH:

No. Never. Look *(She grabs the rule book. She scribbles hard and fast.)* Rule number 154: Leave Steph alone. Okay? I'm moving to Thailand. You'll never see me again. Got it?

DJ:

Thank you, Steph. I know you're lying about Thailand but I won't ask any more of you. You've been extremely useful. I hope your boredom is relieved soon.

STEPH: Fuck you.

*She leaves. DJ eats her Everyday Value Slam.*