

THE STRING

CALEB
BREakey



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For Brittney, my love and treasure.

The branding iron pulsated reddish orange in the corner fireplace.

It was time.

The conductor applied the last bit of cakey white paste to his face and pulled his hood over his eyes. He took a seat in front of a tripod-mounted camera in the center of his basement and pressed Play. The woman on the other end of the private feed was probably picking up static this very minute. He held his breath.

An icon appeared to show that his audience of one had tuned in.

“Hello, Janet,” he whispered into the lens. Behind him, firelight cast waves of mango glow onto a crate in which lay Janet’s treasure—her companion, her confidant.

The pup yawned.

“Hold a moment, Ruby is stirring.”

The conductor walked to the crate, unlocked its door, and tousled the dog’s ears. Soft as a lamb’s, they were. The Labrador casually scanned the unfamiliar lair, still disoriented from

the muscle relaxants he'd snuck into her food dish. She looked into his eyes with such trust, such innocence.

The conductor hooked a retractable leash onto her pink collar and led the delirious pup directly in front of the camera. "Don't mind her clumsiness. This little jewel has been tripping nirvana for hours. She was a very hungry girl."

How was Janet doing so far? Tearing up? Feisty little thing was probably cursing him out.

"This is a one-way feed, Janet—wouldn't want emotion getting the best of us, given your relationship with lovely Ruby." The conductor sat and crossed his legs. "Life and death—we think of these as destinations, but they're not . . . they're *not*. They're choices. And you have a choice to make. For you. For your sister. And for your stupid dog."

The conductor tossed the leash over a support beam and caught it on its way back down. Then he yanked.

Ruby yelped at the pressure and stood on her back legs, whimpering but able to breathe, her putrid dog breath permeating the air.

"Good girl. You were choking but you altered your position." The conductor gazed into the camera, letting his eyes linger. "What a concept."

Still gripping the leash, he walked toward the fireplace and raised his arm to its limit. Ruby was suspended in the air for a moment before the conductor dropped her back to one foot.

He pulled the branding iron out of hissing coals and gazed at its glow. "Animal branding used to be so unassuming. No tattoos, earmarking, RFID tagging. Just stick it in the fire and press it to the flesh." He turned back to the tripod. "But I wouldn't last twenty minutes enforcing an iron's will onto live-

stock. I'm tired just hoisting Ruby." He leaned forward. "So the simple way to do this is the eyeballs."

He let Janet digest his words as he knelt next to Ruby, gripping the iron in one hand while stroking her ears with the other. "You're one of a kind, Ruby, that blend of serene trust and innocent joy. I wonder if Mama Janet will make sure you stay that way."

The conductor looked at the camera, tilted his head, and flatly said, "Call 555-3203."

Moments later, his burner phone rang and he answered. "Hello, Janet—"

Tear-filled obscenities shot from Janet's mouth like a cannon, quickly chased by a detailed torture regimen she promised to inflict upon him should he so much as look at Ruby again.

A fireball, this one.

But then she melted into spasmodic weeping. They always did.

"As I was saying," the conductor said, "it's time for your next assignment."