

SILENCED
NO MORE

DOUG HILL

Acknowledgment

As you read these pages, you'll find moments that were difficult for me to live through. The experiences I share are personal, and they reflect my perspective on what happened.

I hope you'll approach them with an open mind and allow yourself the time to process what I've written.

It is essential to read everything through to the end, as only then will the full picture make sense.



Dedication

Even though the content within is a series of events that occurred in my life, the reason for writing it is not about me.

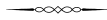
I have always believed that, eventually, the truth will rise to the surface and right the wrong. And when the truth was revealed to me, I felt compelled to share it. If not me, who will speak out and defend those who cannot defend themselves? They deserve justice just like everybody else, and only the truth can give justice the power to prevail.

I am no longer concerned about who will be offended or upset when I speak the truth, but I am deeply worried about the lives that will suffer, become fractured, and even be destroyed if I do not.



Preface

This isn't a story built on hard proof. If I had one irrefutable piece of evidence that could explain everything, I would have led with it. But what I have is something more unsettling: a series of experiences, signs, and gut-wrenching moments that left no room for denial. What unfolded over the course of those months changed me. It sharpened my intuition, forced me to see what I didn't want to believe, and eventually demanded that I tell the truth—even if no one else would.



I chose to present this in a chronological format because that's how I lived it—moment to moment, trying to make sense of things as they happened. This is not a work of fiction. There are no exaggerations here. No guesses. Just a series of events, as they occurred, however disturbing or inconceivable they may seem.

Whether people feel shame for what they did—or failed to do—is up to them. But the facts deserve, and will be, brought into the light. Nonetheless, to respect the privacy of others, I've withheld or renamed the identities of those involved. The downside is an overuse of “they” and “them,” which may make some sections harder to follow. But this story isn't about them—it's about what happened, how it unfolded, and why silence allowed it to fester and grow.



What struck me most was realizing why some people turned away. They got to go on enjoying their lives like nothing happened—like it didn't matter, like I didn't exist—all at my expense. It took so little for them to believe I was wrong—because accepting the truth would've required them to act. And action meant risk. So instead, I became the problem—the one who'd lost his sanity, the one to avoid, the one too damaged to be believed. But the truth is not dependent on how comfortable it makes people feel. And it never needed their permission to exist.



Prologue

The world we live in today is overrun with individuals of the worst caliber—void of empathy, consumed by selfish cravings, and willing to harm others to satisfy them. They refuse to face the consequences of their actions, choosing instead to twist the truth and, in some cases, attempt to rewrite history altogether.

They cycle endlessly through images of innocence, hiding behind facades of virtue or victimhood to escape accountability. Left to their own volition, they will never offer an apology, make amends, or strive to become better. Their malevolence will continue to inflict harm until they are stopped.

Exposure is necessary—to drag them into the light and let the world see who they truly are. Maybe then, these foul individuals will understand the high cost of being a monster and finally consider change.

What follows is not just a recount of events. It is a clarion call—a relentless commitment to truth, and a refusal to be silenced. These are the facts they tried to bury. And I am done letting them stay buried.



Introduction

My employer had been issuing heavy layoffs every year for three years and was now offering voluntary severance. Most of the people I knew in Atlanta had either gotten married, moved away, or had kids who consumed all their "friend" time. I could feel something shifting. It was time for a change—a new place, a new chapter. I felt like opportunity was knocking, and if I was going to do something bold, this was the time, while I still had some youth and spark left in me.

I had never seriously considered where else I might want to live, so I brought it up to someone I trusted—a close friend who had traveled quite a bit.

Rachael had been living in Hawaii for nearly two years. She suggested I move there so we could finally be close again and enjoy life in paradise together. She said it felt like the stars were aligning: their lease would be up in four months, and they needed to find a new rental anyway. If I came, we could get a house together, and I'd already have a place to stay.

Our friendship spanned two decades. We'd lived together before, and even after distance and time, we kept in touch—some weeks, we talked daily. We never seemed to get tired of talking. The conversation just kept flowing.

Still, the decision wasn't easy. Moving to Hawaii felt bigger than moving to another state. It would cost more, be harder, and the job market wasn't promising. I knew I'd have to live off my savings for a while.

I brought up my concerns, and she reassured me: the roof over my head was covered until I found work. I just needed to take care of my own personal needs.

I told her I had sensed something good in her since she moved there. One day, I realized it had been a long time since I'd heard her speak negatively about anyone. She didn't seem to get angry like she used to. It was like a wave of peace had washed over her. She said it must be the air—something about the island air just calmed her.

After thinking everything through, I decided to go for it. I had three months to get everything in order: clean out the house, pack and ship only the essentials, find a property manager, ship my car... everything else had to be sold or donated. A full purge of my belongings—and in a way, a gesture of faith in our friendship.

Rachael was going to find us a place to live. I reminded her—just in case—to keep my need for privacy and certain health needs in mind.

When I arrived in Hawaii, Rachael picked me up from the airport. I was so excited to see the new place. We pulled into the driveway and into the garage. I left most of my things in the trunk and headed inside.

From the outside, the house was beautiful—pristine landscaping with native Hawaiian flora. We entered through the kitchen, which was huge and modern. It opened up to a dining area and a large, grand family room.

She pointed me toward my room, just past the stairs. I walked a few feet and turned into a small, dark hallway. There were two doors. The one at the end was a bathroom—basic tub-shower combo, limited cabinet space. But I remember thinking the air was stale... and I thought I caught a whiff of something rotten. I moved on.

Then I opened the door to what was supposed to be my bedroom. My first thought: I must be in the wrong room. It was tiny—about 8x8 feet. I doubted I could fit both a bed and a desk. The closet was open, giving a few extra feet of space, but still.

And the heat. It hit me like a wall. I couldn't understand how the house had central air, yet this room was stifling. I looked for vents—there were none. The only air source was in the hallway.

I rejoined them upstairs to finish the tour. There was a large loft area with all their computers and gaming setups. A full bathroom. Down the hall were two large bedrooms—one set up with bunk-beds, a desk, and two dressers. The other was mostly empty but just as big. And then the master suite. A king bed, full entertainment center, dressers, nightstands, dual walk-in closets, a bathroom with a garden tub and glass shower, double sinks... Clearly, everyone had their needs met. Except me.

Our first outing was supposed to be fun: a trip to see the Fourth of July fireworks at the beach. This was only my second day there. Before it was even time to get ready, we were all watching the news in the living room, and Rachael began rattling off reminders to her kids about what to pack. One of them couldn't find a towel—maybe her favorite.

Rachael went to help look for it. Then, from the back of the house, she suddenly shouted for her daughter. Before the girl could respond, Rachael stormed back, furious, and demanded to know why she had to replace another roll of toilet paper. Her tone said it all—she already knew the answer. Her daughter stayed silent. Rachael went on and on, venting about the cost and frequency of it all. It was... intense.

It felt like a complete overreaction. But I let it slide. Maybe she was just having a day. Things happen.

Later, we all piled into the vehicle to go see the fireworks. I remember feeling like I was living a dream—going to see fireworks over the ocean in Hawaii. It was surreal. I tried to soak in that peaceful, paradise feeling. But Rachael broke the silence, bringing up the toilet paper again.

She went on for a few minutes. I stayed quiet, thinking she just needed to get it out. But when it kept going, I spoke up. I asked if maybe we could set it aside and enjoy the night. I reminded her that I was finally there, and how we never thought this would be reality.

She turned to her husband, then whipped around in the front seat to face me: "This may not work out between us."

It was only Day Two.

After twenty years of friendship, I was speechless. Who the hell was this person? The only thing running through my mind before panic took over was: Oh fuck. What have I done?

I didn't respond. I couldn't.

She turned back around without saying another word. And just like that, I shut down.

The rest of the night is a blur. That one sentence erased everything else.

When my car arrived by ship, I parked it in the driveway, but was told I needed to park in the guest lot down the street since I had "nowhere to be" every day and the garage was for two cars only. I saw other people parking along the curb, but was told the landlord didn't allow it.

I tried to settle in. I unpacked and shared some of my items with the household, hoping to make some extra space in my bedroom. A few months later, those items were returned to my door with excuses: they'd bought better ones, I was the only one using them, or they didn't match the decor. They were not interested in integrating me.

I asked repeatedly for a copy of the lease to help establish residency. Promise after promise went unfulfilled. Finally, I asked the landlord directly. That's when I found out I wasn't on the lease at all—Rachael had specifically requested I not be added. No explanation.

Three months in, her husband pulled me aside. He said things had changed since Rachael and I first made the plan, and while he appreciated that I was trying to find work, they needed me to start paying \$300 toward the rent. My home in Georgia still wasn't rented, and I had no income, but I agreed just to keep things smooth.

Two months later, Rachael said that talk wasn't what she and her husband had agreed on. Rent would now be \$600.

My room often reached 87 degrees during the day. On a good night, it might cool to 78. I had to keep the door open just to breathe, even with the constant noise from the kids and the blaring television. When the electric bill increased, they blamed me—for adjusting the thermostat and for leaving my computer on standby. They ignored the fact that Rachael was baking every night, using the oven for hours, and that all of them ran the dryer daily after coming back from the pool. None of that mattered. Without any discussion, they locked me out of the Nest controls. Just like that, they took away the only way I had to make the space bearable. My comfort didn't matter. They would decide it for me.

Any time I raised concerns about being treated unfairly, Rachael escalated. She'd lash out, get defensive, and almost always end with a threat to evict me. It was her way of keeping me quiet.

Nine months in, I got a job downtown. I thought we'd celebrate. Instead, I got another "talk" and was told my new rent was \$1,400. Full rent. They said it was fair and I should pay it now that I had income. Maybe even pay them back for when I didn't.

To me, the math didn't make sense. I had one tiny room. No privacy. No thermostat. No true access to shared spaces. But I paid it. Because I felt like I had no choice.

I was trapped. Financially. Emotionally. Mentally. The person I trusted most had vanished. And every day was another fight to make sense of what the hell had happened.

Eventually, I found a way out. I moved to Date Street and felt like I had just survived the worst betrayal of my life and relieved to be free from who I felt like was the Master of Disguise.



Although my situation had improved significantly, I could not shake off the thought that the closest person I knew was halfway around the world, which

made me feel worried and fearful. The isolation and doubt I felt during this time was overwhelming.

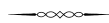
However, after a few months of settling in, I made friends with a few people living in the same apartment building. Chris and Sterling were among them. It was around the time when the pandemic started, and we formed a small group, exclusively limited our social interactions to each other, and "survived" the pandemic together.

Over the next couple of years, I came to regard some of my new friends as my new family. They restored my connection to the world with a sense of belonging and alleviated those feelings of isolation and doubt.

Three of them, in particular, gained my highest respect and loyalty. After sharing many authentic and honest conversations with them, I felt like I knew who they were at the "core," and I felt like they knew my "core" values. I valued them beyond measure.

To show my gratitude for each of their friendships, I often extended my help and generosity. I was always honest and transparent in my communications, defining who I am. I believe in living my life guided by selflessness, generosity, and sincerity.

For me, selflessness means putting the needs of others before my own, generosity means giving without expecting anything in return, and sincerity means being true to myself and to others. These principles are the foundation of my actions and a testament to what it means to be a friend.

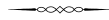


After the pandemic, Chris and I gradually realized that we shared many interests. We had comparable preferences in music, were both admirers of technology, enjoyed computers and video games, and had a similar sense of humor. Quite often, we found ourselves being the only ones in a group who could appreciate a certain joke or find it funny. Because of that connection, I associated with Chris more often than Sterling.

Chris and I would frequently get together because we found the video game "Dead by Daylight" ("DBD") highly entertaining. The game has a simple concept but a high excitement level, making it challenging to succeed. It involves five players, one of whom is a killer, and the other four are survivors who must work together to avoid being caught by the killer. The objective of the game is to escape from an enclosed area by completing various tasks that will open exit points without getting killed.

This game became more than just a source of entertainment for us. It was a way for us to bond, to challenge ourselves, and to have fun together.

But we were more than just gamer buddies. Throughout our friendship, there were times when we would share our past experiences, the things you only tell a close friend. Chris was not always the most dependable friend, nor the most mature at times, but I trusted him and valued his friendship.



At this point in my life, I experienced a deep sense of satisfaction. I felt fortunate to have formed friendships with genuine people. It had been a while since I felt truly joyful and contentment, and I was grateful that my journey led me to that path.

Sometimes, you meet people, and something clicks right away like you've known them for ages, and forging a friendship comes naturally. That's how I felt when I met Sterling and Chris. It was like the universe had aligned our paths to cross for a purpose. The moment I felt that connection, I believed our chance encounter would enrich each of us and open the doorway to becoming great friends for years to come.



I have no doubt the universe did intend for our paths to cross; that much is true. And the reason I was put on that path is apparent to me now, as I clearly see its intended good purpose was never about bringing anything beneficial to Chris, Sterling, or me.

An unforeseen design unfolded.

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— PART ONE —



Chapter One

APRIL 2022

BETWEEN THE BAR AND THE BED

Sterling came to me with the idea of celebrating Chris's birthday at a beach-side hotel but was unhappy with the high cost. So, I gave him the money to cover half of the expenses because I was always generous, considerate, and impartial in how I treated Chris and Sterling. On the day of the birthday, the three of us met up with two other friends for lunch. As a gift to Chris, I treated everyone and paid for the bill.

Later that evening, we gathered with another friend at a nearby bar to continue the celebration.

After a few rounds, someone commented that Chris had gone to use the bathroom but had not returned. I said I would check on him. When I found him on the side street between the bar and the hotel, he told me he didn't feel so great (from drinking) and asked me to take him to the hotel room to lie down. Sterling had the only room key, so I returned to the bar to retrieve it. I informed them about the situation and told them to call me when they were ready, and I would meet them in the lobby.

I returned to Chris, and we both went to the hotel room. I sat on the bed with a pillow behind me while Chris, taking off his shoes, plopped down on the other side. I turned on the TV and browsed channels while waiting for everyone else.

Suddenly, Chris rolled over, putting an arm and a leg over me and resting his head on my arm, seeming to fall asleep. Thinking he might have passed out, I remained motionless. But then, in the next moment, he began rubbing my crotch.

Chris didn't seem highly intoxicated, but I looked down at him to confirm. He looked up at me and gave a slight smile, and before there was time to react, my phone rang.

I quickly stood up to answer it and headed to the lobby to bring them to the room where we continued the birthday party.

Late that night, Sterling offered the hotel room to anyone who needed or wanted to stay because they needed to take their dog out. But since it was Chris's birthday, I declined and said I would take care of it and that they should enjoy the room, so I left to do so.

The following morning, I was up early, and on my way downstairs, I stopped to fetch their dog again. I needed a walk and a cigarette as the previous night started to replay in my head.

In the couple of years I had been friends with Chris, I had no indication that he was attracted to me. Therefore, I chalked it up to -- sometimes guys get horny and mess around; in the past, I've had friends that have done the same thing, so it wasn't unfamiliar to me.

I felt there was no need to bring it up and didn't think Chris would either. However, to my surprise, he messaged me about it, and I responded in jokingly manner, to chill any awkwardness. It wasn't discussed, and without skipping a beat, we kept playing our games and hanging out as usual.

One night, we were playing online and decided to take a break, so we met downstairs to hang out. He said he wanted to "smoke" and asked if we could go up to my place to do so while we listened to some music, so we did. I was prepping the "smoke" when he came up behind me from the bathroom and put his arms around me for a bear hug. I turned around, he kissed me, and we started "making out." We proceeded to "fool around," but that was as far as it went.

That is, until about a week later.

He messaged me, direct in his intentions, wanting to do it again.

I didn't turn him down.

In the back of my mind, I thought maybe this was my chance to understand what was happening between us—to talk about it and find some clarity instead of being swept along blindly. But we never discussed what we meant to each other, or what all it was.

I let the moment carry me, choosing to live in it rather than ruin it with questions.

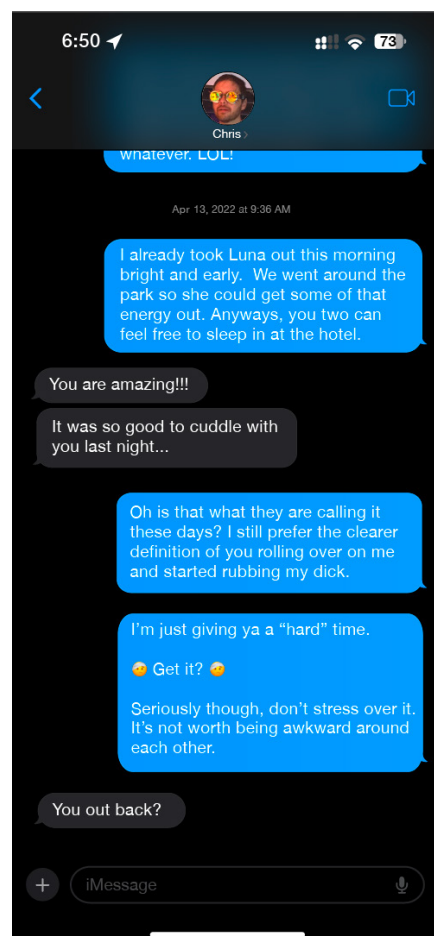


Figure 1: The morning after Chris's birthday party at the hotel, he sent this exchange, making light of the night before. I'd been surprised by how casually he initiated contact. Even though I joked back, it still left me uneasy. This exchange shows the strange mix of closeness and confusion. (Photo by author)

AN UNDERSTANDING

At this point, I knew there needed to be a conversation to vocalize intent and any expectations. I asked Chris if he would be open to talking about it, and he agreed to discuss it.

I have always been in tune with identifying my own emotions, knowing what is in my heart, and knowing what is realistic in my head. Still, I could be better at communicating with others for mutual understanding. Therefore, I was slightly nervous, but I had a few days to prepare what I was going to say.

He stopped by after work, and I prepared a meal to share as we conversed. The conversation began with what seemed to me the most pressing question. I told him I was somewhat confused because I had never sensed any attraction from him, and I needed to understand what expectations might be going through his head. Chris said he initiated what seemed natural to him and didn't imply any change in the situation between us. In his words, "It is what it is." He said life should be fun and not stressful about insignificant matters. If I understood him correctly, he expressed a philosophy of enjoying the present before it faded.

I was pleasantly surprised and intrigued because I shared a similar sentiment; being around him was easy, anchored in comfort, familiarity, and trust.

The next step was to address the elephant in the room. I explained to Chris that the nature of his relationship with Sterling was always a bit of a mystery to me. They would say one thing, but their actions would often completely contradict their words.

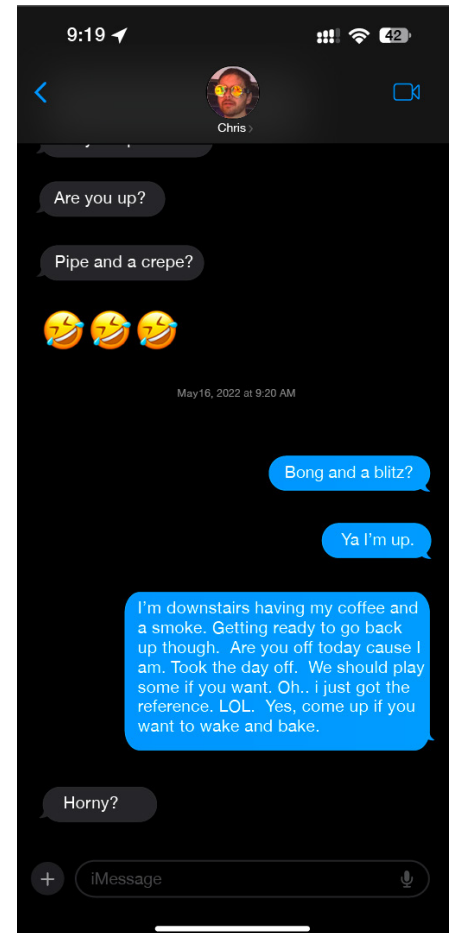


Figure 2: A message and a dialog written in a playful and suggestive tone. I had already agreed to involve myself and his deliberate pursuit of something casual between us existed. It reminds me of a time when things were light and carefree and how quickly it shifted. I didn't see his last message until I was already home and Chris was right behind me. (Photo by author)

I made it clear that it was his choice whether to discuss this with Sterling, emphasizing that their relationship dynamics were their own concern, not mine. I assured him that I harbored no expectations of their relationship ending. My sole desire was to maintain a close friendship, and I was confident in my ability not to let any casual encounters disrupt that.

He agreed with what I said and said he felt the same, and with that, I was relieved that it turned out not to be a stressful mess to have to deal with. I continued telling him I was fine with his choice to tell Sterling. I said I understood if he felt like being upfront and honest with Sterling because, in my opinion, it is the right thing to do. Trust is a necessary element of any relationship.

But then, oddly, he responded by saying he wasn't concerned about those aspects with Sterling. This raised a red flag for me, prompting me to seek reassurance that his intentions were genuine and that he had carefully considered his actions and would not suddenly develop a guilty conscience, leading to regret.

He reassured me, reminding me that he wasn't doing anything Sterling hadn't done previously.

He made a good point.

The prior year, Sterling and I were drunk really late one night and he propositioned me to get in the shower with him. Hardly anything happened, neither of us were in a condition that was going to amount to any real event. The shower scene lasted 10 minutes tops because I had to get out and get ready for work.

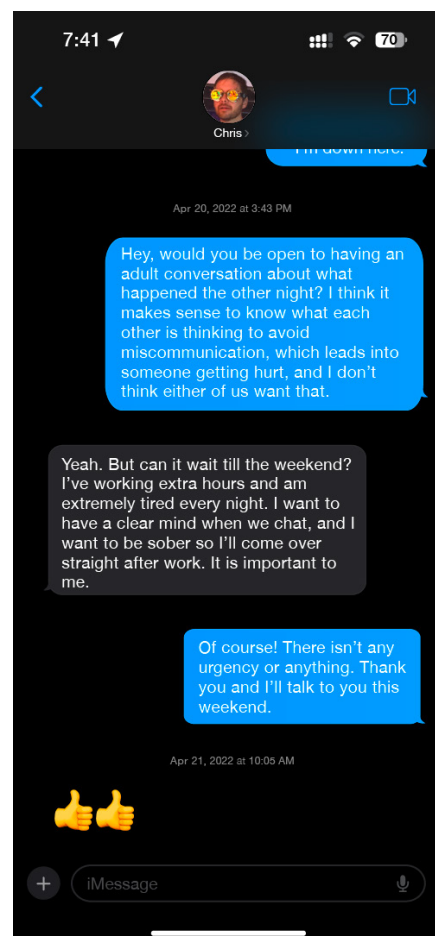


Figure 3: Chris's reply here stood out because of how mature and adult he sounded. He promised to come over sober, after a long shift, so we could have a clear, honest conversation. It was exactly what I needed to put my mind at ease. (Photo by author)

Nothing ever came of it other than Sterling telling Chris that I took advantage of him while he was drunk because my intention was to break them up. He claimed I was madly in love with him. A complete fabrication. He's never had any boundaries to the things he will say to hurt people. That's the Sterling pattern.

I felt it was necessary to mention the complications of having diabetes, specifically the erection problem, which is a significant contributor to the diminished sex drive.

It isn't embarrassing for me to openly talk about my sexual dysfunctions, but it is humiliating whenever I have to explain to someone face-to-face.

After repeatedly asking him if it would bother him and receiving consistent assurances that it wouldn't, I accepted his stance.

I had not made the decision to no longer date or cut off sexual activity altogether, so eventually, I had to address the condition. I told Chris it was an opportunity I would take advantage of by taking supplements and vigorous exercise, and I was very appreciative of his understanding.

Combating the condition requires overcoming not only physical challenges but training of the mind as well. I still had a lot of anxiety being around new people even though the pandemic isolation period was just about over, but I had no anxiety with him, so it was a good fit.

That was the beginning of my health transformation, from sedentary to a five-day workout commitment.

We both felt good about the conversation because it was not awkward; it was a mature milestone for both of us. I felt I could be open with Chris, and he could be open with me. We ended our talks on a positive note that day.

Later that night, we met outside on the sidewalk for a smoke. Chris appeared noticeably relaxed and content. He thanked me for being a mature and

understanding friend and said it meant a lot to him. I reassured him that I was, above all else, a great friend and that I recognized Sterling's family as his family. I let him know that, as his close friend, I was there to support and protect the things that matter most to him.

I understood how complicated defining the terms of a long-term relationship can be, and what was going on between us did not change how he felt about Sterling, and that I made no designs on changing it either.

The evening ended with a heartfelt conversation and a big hug.

Rather than repeat each “friends with benefits” memory, I think it’s best to summarize the whole of it. It didn’t happen every time we hung out—maybe six or seven times between when it started and the middle of June. Nothing happened that could be written into a steamy romance novel.

In fact, there was no sex.

We didn’t even try. The times we were together like that felt more like what teenagers might do on a first or second date.

And as for my intent—I didn’t want anything more than what we already had. That closeness—the late-night talks, the ease, the trust, the laughter that came without effort—it was enough. It felt rare.

Not romantic in the traditional sense, but connected in a way that felt safe.

I wasn’t chasing a relationship. I wasn’t chasing anything. I just felt something real in his presence, something that gave me joy in a world that rarely offers it.

There was chemistry—of course there was.

I think everyone around us felt it too.

But it wasn't some plan, not for me and not for him. It just happened. And when he crossed that line most people might call "from friendship to something more," I didn't see it that way.

To me, it felt like we moved from friendship to something deeper—something grounded in trust. I didn't resist, because it didn't feel like conquest. It felt like safety, but it was still defined as just a friendship to both of us.

Did I find him attractive? Of course. That's what happens when you trust someone, when you open up, when you let yourself be close. That kind of attraction grows naturally.

And that's all I ever wanted it to be—something meaningful. Something true.

I have no reason to hide the truth.

But what I'm about to share next had nothing to do with those moments. They aren't connected—except in one unbearable way: because of how I felt for Chris, he was important to me, and doing what I had to do afterward—facing the truth, speaking it, pressing forward because it was wrong and someone had to—cost me more than I can explain.

It tore something out of me.

And I don't know if that part of me is ever coming back.

Chapter Two
MAY 2022

BUSY BEE

Embarking on the journey of refinancing my house in Atlanta was a whirlwind of surprises. The sheer volume of information and paperwork demanded by the lender was staggering. It seemed like every day, a new document from my past was requested.

Meanwhile, my doctors were insistent on two outpatient surgeries, leaving me with little time to breathe. The surgeries, which were necessary for my health, and the subsequent recovery period swallowed up my spare time, leaving me feeling like I was drowning in responsibilities. However, I was determined not to let these challenges dampen my spirits or disrupt my plans.

During a phone conversation with my friend, Tim, he shared his newfound interest in an upcoming band.

Tim and I have been friends for thirteen years, and we met through another friend when I lived in Atlanta.

His excitement was palpable, as he couldn't stop talking about the band. He had been to several of their concerts, met them backstage, and was even invited to their house for dinner.

This revelation was a surprise, as he had never mentioned them before. He then shared the thrilling news that the band was performing in Los Angeles in June and invited me to join him.

I eagerly accepted, and we immediately began planning our adventure, filled with anticipation and excitement.

After much searching, I found a lovely loft department in West Hollywood that I rented. The decision to stay in West Hollywood was influenced by its vibrant atmosphere, proximity to the concert venue, and the availability of comfortable accommodations. I booked my flight and hired Sterling to stay at my place and keep my cat company.

I gave Chris and Sterling each a key to my apartment and pet-sitting instructions.

Following that, all my tasks were completed.

HALCYON

Back then, our routine was simple. After a long day, I'd log on and wait for Chris to join. Sometimes he beat me there. We didn't need a plan—just a game, a headset, and whatever nonsense the day had stirred up.

He'd send me video clips, memes, and commentary throughout the day—twenty, maybe thirty messages. It was part of the rhythm we had, and somehow, it never got old.

Sterling took some convincing, but once he started joining us, it turned into something even better. The three of us were ridiculous together. We'd spend hours talking trash, getting distracted mid-match, and laughing so hard it actually hurt. I'd wake up the next day with sore cheeks and a hoarse voice from laughing too much.

Nothing dramatic ever happened on those nights. No milestones, no big reveals. But those evenings felt golden—something easy and light in a world that rarely is.

Looking back, maybe that's what made it special.

We didn't have to try.

It just worked.

Chapter Three

JUNE 2022

LOS ANGELES

I landed in California before Tim and sorted out the essentials—like how to get to the loft we rented and figuring out parking details to pass along. By eleven that night, it struck me as strange that I hadn't heard from Tim. His flight was supposed to land between eight and nine, and it took me less than an hour to get to our place from the airport. Calls to him went straight to voicemail, which I chalked up to him either still being in the air or in a no-signal zone at the airport.

Starving and beat, I found a late-night pizza spot and grabbed a bite for us both, thinking Tim would appreciate it after his journey. After returning to the loft, I ended up dozing off in front of the TV. Waking up the next morning, I

was greeted by an icy chill in the loft—I'd left a window cracked open and had forgotten how chilly it gets at night on the mainland. More importantly, I woke up to find Tim still hadn't arrived. I called, but still no answer.

After getting my morning coffee in, I hit the city streets. LA's skyscraper architecture and diverse district cultures were captivating. I was initially overwhelmed by the vast choices of what to do but soon decided to just go with the flow. I spent the day wandering, taking pictures, and checking out stores and street vendors, fully immersing myself in the city vibes.

Tim's return call came that evening, explaining his frustration over his postponed flight due to a large-scale storm over the Midwest region. He thought airlines would resume normal flight restrictions, but he had just gotten word that flights would be canceled another day, which meant he wouldn't arrive until Thursday—and would have lost three days of vacation.

I kept myself occupied, nonetheless. One night, I went out to a few bars that were relatively close to where I was staying. The bars I attended were interestingly "themed," making them uniquely different. It was a similar "setup" in Atlanta, so the experience was nostalgic.

A friend of mine, who can see my real-time location, noticed that I was in Los Angeles and phoned me. She picked me up at the loft, and we went out to eat breakfast, have coffee, and catch up since it had been five years since we had seen each other.

The next day, Tim finally arrived late that afternoon. He was drained from all the travel issues and needed rest. So our evening plans were to only go out to dinner and start fresh the following morning.

After we both got some sleep, we made plans to go shopping at the Ovation Mall in Hollywood. We were looking for clothing for the upcoming concert, which was only two days away. I found a new outfit to wear but couldn't believe I dropped \$300 for a pair of jeans.

It just so happened that we were visiting during Hollywood's Gay Pride event. So we took advantage of the celebration happening in the streets of West

Hollywood—and wow, it was packed with people. The event location was centered around this one street in particular. On one side, it was back-to-back bars and clubs, one after the other, and on the other side of the street, same thing! The lines to get into these places were quite lengthy, but we managed to check out several spots and had a blast in the process.

When I woke up the next morning, Tim was gone. He had a full schedule of plans for the remainder of the trip with the band, and I didn't see him again until the night of the concert.

I arrived at the concert venue, gave them my name at the front concession, and was escorted to the VIP area where I met up with Tim. He introduced me to each of the band members. The staff brought us any drink we wanted. Meanwhile, the band members handed me a variety of their merch and signed their latest CD for me. Afterward, they were eager to autograph more merchandise with a short message to Chris.

When the concert was over, I expressed my gratitude for such a privileged evening and said goodnight to Tim. He and the band members were heading out on the town, so I assumed he wouldn't be sleeping anytime soon.

In fact, during the last two days of the trip, I only briefly saw him in the mornings before he'd leave to meet the guys. I had hoped the trip would have produced an iconic moment between Tim and me, for memory's sake, but nothing of the like surfaced. The trip was over so fast—there simply wasn't enough time.

Admittedly, my feelings were bruised. I made the assumption that Tim proposed the Los Angeles invitation with the primary purpose of spending time with each other, like in the old days. When he showed minimal interest in engaging in activities with me, I thought maybe he invited me just to cut the cost of the trip expenses. I had no plans of mentioning it to Tim because I wasn't angry, only disappointed and bummed.

The day after I arrived back in Honolulu, I ran into Chris outside in the common area. He was on the phone talking with his friend who used to live in the building. As I sat down on the bench across from him, I remembered I had not

given Chris the items I acquired in Los Angeles, so I motioned to him that I'd return shortly.

When I came back, Chris was no longer on the phone. He greeted me and began talking about his friend, the one he'd just been chatting with. The highlights of their past events filled him up with laughter, and as he told me stories of their times together, it made me laugh too.

He credited this person's positive influence in his life and expressed appreciation for their friendship. It was nice to hear anyone say that about a friend, and I told him so. Because I was still feeling a little disappointed with the overall experience of my trip, I told Chris that I was a little envious.

Chris looked at me with a puzzled yet concerned expression and said, "I consider you one of my best friends." I was touched and told him how much I appreciated hearing that. I also expressed how I considered him a best friend, how much I treasured the fun we had, and how important his friendship was to me. Then I placed the bag of autographed merchandise on the table for Chris. He was thrilled as he examined each item, and he gave me a hug and a thank you.

Later, I reflected on my feelings about the Los Angeles trip with Tim. I remembered that when he invited me, he specifically said he was planning a trip to see the band play in Los Angeles. That's when it hit me that I had been assessing the situation all wrong; I just really missed Tim and had different expectations—but he didn't slight me. It was me who had hoped for more time together, but the trip was about his band, and that's okay. Sometimes expectations need adjusting, and that's a lesson I carried forward.

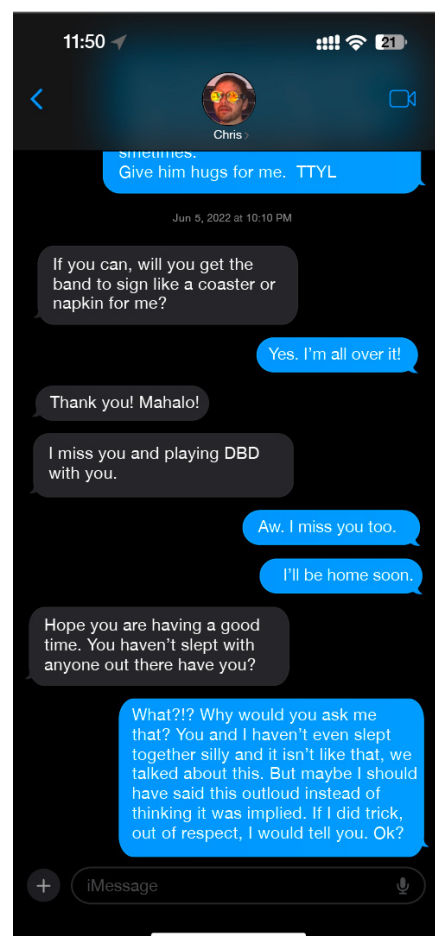


Figure 4: Chris showing his "attachment", which was hollow to begin with. Contrary to his question, there was commitments, no plans. He never discussed the reason for his question and I didn't press it, because I didn't know where to being asking the question "why" in this context. (Photo by author)

MEET BLUEBIRD

Chris and I were in the middle of one of our usual video game routines, chatting through our headsets as we played. The game always assigned four players to a team, and since Chris and I were already grouped together in a party, only two spots remained open for random players to fill. Sometimes, those players would also join our voice chat. On this particular night, one of them did. His gamer tag was BlueBird, but he told us to call him Evan.

I've always believed that responsible parents teach their kids not to share personal information when playing online. Kids often use fake names to protect themselves, which is smart, considering how easy it is for someone to dig up personal details and cause harm. BlueBird—also Evan---was no exception. Right away, I noticed his excitable, high-pitched, and energetic voice that kept changing in pitch, and I could tell he was young. He confirmed it during the game, telling us he was twelve, nearly thirteen.

It was during our third match that BlueBird began asking Chris and me some odd questions about puberty. The questions made me uncomfortable, and I stayed quiet while Chris laughed. Things like:

- *At what age did we grow hair on our balls?*
- *Did hair ever grow into our buttholes?*

Chris just kept laughing hysterically, while I tried to answer quickly—mostly to shut the conversation down—and I reminded BlueBird that these were questions he should be asking his parents, not us.

Later that night, Chris and I took a break from gaming and met downstairs in the common area for a smoke. He started telling me—and a neighbor who was sitting with us—how hilarious it was playing with BlueBird. Chris repeated some of BlueBird's questions, still laughing about them. The neighbor, like me, didn't really get the humor and seemed unsure of how to react. I just gave a small laugh and brushed off Chris's behavior, chalking it up to his usual awkwardness.

ROAD TRIP

One evening we were talking about my upcoming trip, and since everyone was already on the subject, someone brought up Las Vegas.

I sat and listened as they shared stories about their own visits to Vegas. It sounded so exciting and fun. One person talked about the dazzling lights and the sights you had to see. Another recalled the money they won—and lost. Then came the funny stories, the kind that only happen when you’ve had a little too much to drink.

We laughed so hard, the kind of laughter that fills a room and makes you forget whatever else is going on in your life.

Somewhere in the middle of that long, winding laugh session, the idea was tossed out: what if we all planned a trip to Vegas together next year?

Since I had never been, I immediately lit up. The thought of finally seeing what they were all talking about, being part of the next round of stories, was something I couldn’t resist. I was in.

I looked to Sterling and Chris, since they had been so many times before. They spoke about the city with a certain confidence, a rhythm in their stories that only came from experience. Naturally, I leaned into their excitement, trusting they would know the best places to go and what to avoid.

If anyone could guide us through the madness of Vegas, it was them.

By the end of the night, we had four solid commitments: me, Chris, Sterling, and one of our neighbors, who was planning to move to the mainland but promised to meet us there for the trip. It felt like something real was forming—a future adventure we’d all get to share.

PARENTAL GUIDANCE

Chris was at my place and wanted my guidance on an issue he was unsure about. He asked me if BlueBird’s parents might think it was weird if he invited

BlueBird to play some video games. Admittedly, it was a strange thing to ask, but it didn't raise any red flags. I understood his concern and the need for wanting to take precautions so the parents wouldn't get the wrong idea.

I told him it didn't seem likely that they would think it was weird because it's common for kids to play games online with adults. I shared a personal experience from my own gaming past, when I'd been playing with a good friend, and we'd teamed up with this boy who shared the same type of play-style. He was mature for a teenager—seventeen at the time. The three of us played this one game in particular for over a year.

When the game developers released an add-on for the game's content, my friend and I were anxious to try it out. The boy didn't have money to purchase it, so I offered to buy it for him since it was only fifteen bucks. I made sure he asked his father beforehand, and once we got the go-ahead, all three of us enjoyed the new content together.

I felt the experience I shared with Chris was relevant and fitting for his question. I thought Chris was asking for my opinion in the general sense, since my story provided a “rule of thumb”—the accepted social norm and the morally responsible thing to do.

Chris seemed to agree with what I said, and it would have been silly to question him about what he took away from it.

CHAMPAGNE TASTE, BEER BUDGET

One evening, it was just Sterling and me hanging out. It was a quiet night, the kind where conversations stretch easily into whatever direction they want to go. We ended up talking about the Vegas trip again, and Sterling brought up hotels.

He asked what kind of hotel I liked, where I thought we should stay. I told him honestly, I didn't really care all that much. I figured most hotels in Vegas were nice enough and that he probably had more experience with this kind of thing than I did.

Then Chris showed up, and the tone shifted a bit. Sterling seemed more energized, like he had a vision he was trying to pitch to both of us. He started talking about getting a grand hotel room, something really over-the-top. He said if all of us split the cost, it would come out cheaper. I was open-minded, so I asked what he had in mind.

He said we should get one of the suites with a private pool inside—you know, the kind with its own bar and entertainment system. Like having our own private party palace. I have to admit, it sounded fun on the surface, but I was already doing the math in my head.

“How much would that even cost?” I asked.

He shrugged like it was no big deal. “Probably around three to five thousand,” he said.

“Oh,” I replied, “you mean for the whole trip?”

“No,” he said, “per night.”

I think I actually laughed a little from the shock. I said something like, “I don’t think it’s necessary to spend all of my vacation money on a hotel room. That’s a lot, and honestly, I don’t think I’ll even be in the room that much.”

I brought up our friend who was planning to meet us there. She was retired, living on a fixed income. “Have you asked her what she thinks about this price point?”

He said no, but assured me she’d be fine with it. That was hard to believe. I raised an eyebrow but didn’t press it further.

Instead, I ended the conversation firmly, letting them know that I thought it was a ridiculous amount to spend on a room, no matter how flashy it was. It just wasn’t logical or economical.

I wasn’t trying to kill the vibe, but I wasn’t going to pretend it made sense either. Some ideas belong in brochures, not bank statements.

— PART TWO —



Chapter Four

JULY 2022

GAME SPEAK

I had not played games with Chris for several days due to an overwhelming project at work, but the weekend finally arrived, and I hopped online to join Chris's game and voice chat. When I initially connected, I glanced at the voice chat list of users and noticed BlueBird was one of them.

I am not entirely sure what caused the topic of our conversation to change drastically. At first, the talk was centered around the game we were actively playing. Then, it shifted drastically when Chris [CC] and BlueBird [BB] became excited, loud, and rambunctious. They were going back and forth, saying things sexual in nature and laughing hysterically.

Not once in my entire life have I ever heard anyone say such things in front of a kid or, even worse, to a kid. They kept repeating similar behavior.

I don't think it's necessary—or even possible—to list everything that was said. But the examples I remember, though not exact, are painfully close. They were seared into my mind and never left.

BB: OMG! He's after me! He's trying to fuck me!

BB: He's going to shove his big dick in my hole!

CC: It's going to hurt!

BB: I'm bleeding! My hole!

CC: Don't be a little bitch!

BB: He's raping me! My hole is destroyed! Help!

All the while, they both are engaged in non-stop laughter.

Another instance stuck in my mind.

Chris's character was bandaging, essentially "healing", BlueBird's character in the game. The animation sequence designed for this kind of character interaction is described as the wounded character being on their knees while the other one making hand motions, like patting or rubbing, around the injured character's shoulders and back.

Meanwhile, they are saying:

BB [*in a baby voice*]: Make me feel better. He broke my hole. Fix it.

CC: I'll rub it for you.

BB: Ooo you're touching me! Finger me!

Both: [*sexual sounding ooo's and aaa's and then moaning and laughing*]

Listening to the banter was appalling and disgusting, but I remained silent.

I didn't know what to say.

I disconnected from the game and voice chat to go outside and calm down. I was having a strong emotional reaction of dismay, shock, and some sense of outrage—it was morally reprehensible.

A million questions raced through my head—I didn't know how to make sense of what had happened. In the couple of years that I played games with Chris, he never behaved that way, not even close. I paced the sidewalk, contemplating how to discuss it with Chris.

A few nights later, I went walking with Sterling and Chris around the park. I felt it was as good a time as any to address Chris's behavior, so I asked him what possessed him to act like he did.

I expected him to deny everything, and I was rarely successful in breaching his stonewall tactics. Nonetheless, I felt like I brought a knife to a gunfight because I would have never guessed his response.

The first thing he said was that he was unaware that his behavior was inappropriate. I let out a dramatic exclamation in protest--I felt like everyone was simply born with that inner knowledge. Still, he stood his ground and claimed he did not know.

Then, to support his stance, he generalized the behavior to be mere "gamer talk."

Chris's attempt to downplay his behavior as "gamer talk" was insulting. Having no similar reference in all of my gaming years, I argued in disagreement. He laughed and told me I was old and not familiar with modern-day "gaming lingo."

At that moment, it dawned on me to question Chris about our twenty-minute conversation only a week ago.

I said to Chris that when he asked me for advice, he only mentioned asking BlueBird to play video games. If he had also disclosed that sexual language was going to dominate the dialog, my response would have been entirely different. I would have advised him that the boy's parents would absolutely be concerned.

However, I was stunned when he responded by telling me he never asked for my advice, and his bold-faced denial infuriated me, yet I remained calm.

I tried another approach.

I pulled up images of thirteen-year-old boys on my smartphone and showed Sterling and Chris. I told them the pictures were representations of just how

young a boy of that age is. I thought maybe Chris wasn't realizing or visualizing a real child on the other end of the headset.

He seemed unconcerned.

Then I asked him if he would behave that way if the boy were present, but he didn't respond.

I added to my statement that his mother certainly would not approve, but he said that he doubted she would care, which I found hard to believe.

I stated my case from another angle, trying to get Chris to acknowledge the behavior as wrong and that it shouldn't be repeated. I told him the fact that using sexual language with a child normalizes their behavior and makes them more vulnerable to predators and traffickers because they are less guarded.

I even said, what if the boy gets mad for any reason and decides to twist Chris's behavior into making it look like he is a sexual predator? He might even record things said and attempt to use them against him.

Chris remained unconcerned.

In my final argument that night, I declared that behaving inappropriately was not only morally wrong but also reckless and, more importantly, criminal—taking unnecessary risks for amusement, especially when the consequences are devastating, was beyond foolish.

Sterling jumped in from what seemed like a sudden realization. He said he finally understood the point of everything I was saying—that I was just trying to protect them and look out for their well-being.

At that moment, I wasn't even fully aware of how off-balance I had become. I was shocked. In my head, I was thinking, *What else could my intention possibly be? What the hell did he think I was trying to do all this time?*

I shoot back, "Of course!" Like that even needed to be said. Then I asked him what he thought my intentions were.

He didn't answer. Instead, he kept talking and brushed it all off as harmless. Just like Chris, he avoided admitting anything was wrong. Then he told me not to worry, that everything was under control. He even thanked me—for being such a good friend.

Meanwhile, my question hung in the air, completely ignored.

I wanted to press it. I wanted to challenge him, push back, and get an honest answer. But I couldn't. I went from being rattled from that last game session to wading knee-deep in the anxiety of discussing that session in a "talk." I had barely slept. I spent hours scripting out and carefully choosing my words so that they wouldn't come across as accusatory — I didn't want to ruin our friendship. And for what? The entire time, I was painfully explaining things that shouldn't have to be explained; they were considering my intent was laced with malice.

The conversation faded out, and as we finished our walk, I remained quiet, stricken with confusion, piecing together the final verdict on the outcome of the discussion. Right then and there, I unknowingly defaulted to the most comforting outcome, and left it unchallenged. I began to doubt my insight, knowledge, and experience and even considered the possibility that times had changed.

From the outside, it was ridiculous — to think the matter was settled, to believe it was over. But on the inside, it felt like certainty and relief that I survived it.

TOTAL DISREGARD

The very next time I joined Chris, he was already playing with BlueBird. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary or awkward at first. However, my fun lasted less than thirty minutes before the inappropriate behavior resurfaced. It was as if our previous discussion had never happened. I sat there in stunned silence, too shocked to respond. Summoning the courage to confront Chris the first time had taken so much out of me. His complete disregard for that conversation made me furious—and in that moment, I knew I needed to stay quiet to keep my emotions in check.

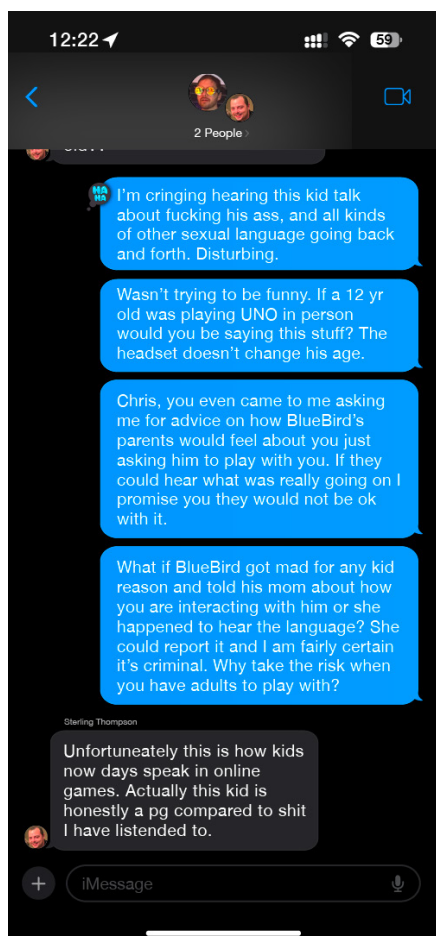


Figure 5: I tried to speak up when things crossed a line—when Chris's language with BlueBird made my stomach turn. But instead of hearing me out, they brushed it off as "just gamer talk." I felt sick, invisible, and completely alone in the room. (photo by author)

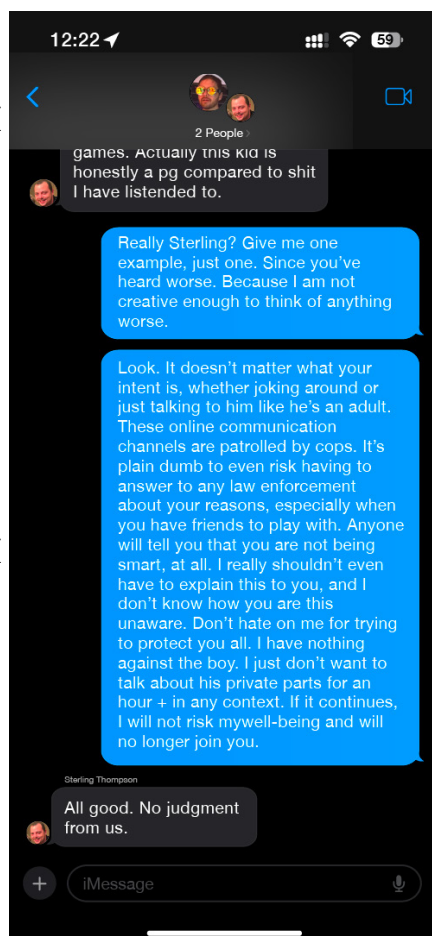


Figure 6: I was desperate to get through to them—to make them understand how serious this was. I wasn't accusing; I was pleading. But Sterling's reply—"No judgment from us"—felt like a pat on the head, not an acknowledgment. It was like screaming into a void. (photo by author)

But I couldn't.

dismissed myself from the game to go outside and smoke, but I had no intention of returning. Before I knew it, I was doing a reenactment of the previous conversation, only this time through messages. reopened my case with the same very valid points and felt foolish for expecting a different result.

From that day forward, BlueBird was always there every time I played with Chris. Hearing Chris's behavior in front of a kid like BlueBird went far beyond discomfort. It wasn't just crude language

or inappropriate jokes—it felt like a breach of something sacred, a crossing of boundaries that shouldn't even need to be explained.

The behavior wasn't always as extreme as it had been the first time, but it never fully disappeared. Conversations always seemed to circle back to topics of a sexual nature, lingering in one form or another.

There were moments when I spoke up, telling Chris to cut it out. But every time, he either ignored me or laughed it off, telling BlueBird that I was just

"too old" to understand how modern gamers talk. Chris always found a way to downplay his behavior, brushing aside my concerns as if they were a joke.

He never gave my words any merit, admitted to any of his countless lies, or showed me the slightest bit of respect. It was more than frustrating—it was enraging. Knowing what was happening was wrong, but being ignored, laughed off, lied to, and dismissed as if I were the problem—it made me feel powerless in the worst way.

The situation became more problematic when Chris began to hide his online status, especially when he was in a party chat with BlueBird. I suppose Chris didn't realize there were still ways to tell if he was online, which is how I discovered he was lying about his time interacting with BlueBird. I didn't need to be a genius to figure it out either.

If you have known Chris for more than a couple of weeks, then you are fully aware that if he is home, then it's extremely probable Chris is playing a video game. Therefore, when he says that he hasn't been playing video games for nearly a week, then it's a lie.

SONG OF THE BLUEBIRD

Throughout my work week, I would usually log into the game and play a round or two during my lunch hour. On several occasions, BlueBird would jump into my game and invite me to voice chat. His behavior was completely different than the previous times I played with him and Chris. He cursed from time to time, but not a single sexual remark or inappropriate comment was made.

The games I played with just BlueBird were enjoyable; he was helpful as a teammate, eager to share his knowledge, and would often sacrifice his own score accolades to prevent me from losing my own.

I could sense that BlueBird needed a friend—someone to talk to—because he was quick to share details of his life, especially the parts that weighed on him.

One day, he asked me to guess why his game name was “BlueBird.” Having almost no knowledge about him, I fumbled through a general but wrong answer about nature and birds. He began to explain.

He started by describing the dark side of his father: an alcoholic, unreliable, verbally abusive to his mother, and, from the way BlueBird spoke, likely emotionally abusive to the whole family.

He said that when he was younger, his dad lost his job, forcing the family to move, and during the move, he and his mother transported most of their belongings to the new place. His father stayed behind to finish cleaning up and gather the remaining items, including his pet bluebird.

It struck me as odd—bluebirds are typically wild birds, and it’s nearly impossible to keep one as a household pet, especially for a child. They need a constant diet of insects and worms and require specific care that would be tough to manage indoors. I suspected the “bluebird” he described was probably a parakeet—a common and manageable pet, often blue in color and roughly the same size as a small songbird.

Then, with anger lacing his voice, BlueBird told me that his father abandoned him, his brother, and his mother; they never saw him again. The tragic story ended with him describing how he and his mother had driven back to get his bluebird, only to find it had starved to death by the time they arrived.

In memory of his little companion, he adopted the username BlueBird.

I stumbled over what to say to him after hearing his heart-wrenching story. I was angry on his behalf—it’s unthinkable that people can be so vile, especially to their own child.

It sickened me.

I told him how sorry I was that he had to endure such a dreadful experience. I knew that healing from that kind of damage would take years, but I didn’t tell him that.

BlueBird always spoke of Chris every time I played with him. He'd talk about the funny things they said or memorable gaming moments they shared. One time, he told me how badly he missed Chris, and that *it was killing him* to have to wait until Chris got off work so they could play together.

I brushed it off at first—kids can be dramatic sometimes—and didn't respond.

But then he said it again.

This time, I gently suggested to BlueBird that it's important not to be too fixated on any one thing, that patience was key, and that I didn't know what time Chris finished work that day. I said that if Chris came home and wanted to play, I'd let him know. BlueBird surprised me by replying that Chris got off work at 8:30 PM. Curious, I asked how he knew. He told me that Chris had given him his work schedule, which he'd written down.

During those lunch breaks when I played online with BlueBird, I learned a few other things:

- He was home-schooled.
- He had a dog.
- He had a younger brother.
- His mom either had a live-in boyfriend or had remarried.

It struck me how quickly he'd let me into his world—like he was looking for a lifeline. And while I tried to be that for him in the game, I worried how deeply he might be depending on us both for connection, especially given everything he had shared.

The parallels between Chris and BlueBird's father, both alcoholics, were obvious indicators as to why BlueBird would be seeking acceptance from older figures as a means to fill the huge void of loss and abandonment.

He more than likely saw Chris as a mentor or surrogate figure who offered the attention and validation he craved. I clearly identified BlueBird's attachment to Chris, despite the inappropriate dynamics, and strongly suggested his need to find someone to care for him, even if that care was misguided.

NEW GAME, SAME CHARACTERS

I had already begun to feel the drift—Chris wasn't interested in doing anything with me anymore. His online status was always hidden, but I could still see BlueBird online, chatting in a party with some "anonymous" player. It wasn't hard to guess who that anonymous player was.

One afternoon, I decided to reach out. I messaged Chris to see if he wanted to hang out or game that evening. He replied, saying he'd already promised BlueBird they'd try out a new, free game together. I asked what game it was, thinking I could download it and join them. He told me the title, and I said I'd be ready after work.

That evening, I logged in, sent Chris a quick message, and he invited me into the party. The game loaded, and within minutes, I realized it wasn't really a game meant for older players. It had no story, no strategy—just a chaotic free-for-all where players tried to smack each other into environmental hazards. The kind of game designed for ten-year-olds who think chaos equals fun.

After a few rounds, a new level popped up. We were suddenly inside a cartoonish factory. Conveyor belts moved back and forth across the screen, making the floor unstable. From the ceiling, objects began dropping. It didn't take me long to realize what kind of factory this was supposed to be: a hot-dog factory. The objects falling from above were unmistakably hot-dog wieners.

And just like that, the behavior I had hoped was behind us came rushing back in full force. I won't repeat what Chris and BlueBird said—the implications were obvious given the shape of the projectiles, the way players picked them up, the innuendos that followed. I sat there, headset on, watching it all unfold, hoping it would stop. It didn't.

I didn't say a word. I just waited for the match to end, then said the game wasn't for me and quietly left the party. There was no point confronting it. I already knew that any discomfort I expressed would be brushed off or ignored entirely.

Same game, different level. Same players, same lines. Just another scene confirming what I already knew—whatever we had was fading, and maybe it never was what I thought to begin with.

A STORM WITHIN

Witnessing Chris and BlueBird's ongoing behavior triggered so many emotions that it felt impossible to focus on just one. My mind was pulled in every direction at once, trying to process the shock, anger, and what felt like a deep betrayal of our friendship.

My belief that Chris's behavior was inappropriate, especially in front of someone as impressionable as BlueBird, wasn't just an opinion—it was grounded in ethics, psychology, and social norms. Exposure to inappropriate language or behavior can seriously affect a young mind. At that age, kids are still developing their emotional regulation and moral frameworks, making them vulnerable to normalizing harmful attitudes and behaviors.

What was happening went beyond discomfort—it was unacceptable. I wasn't just a bystander; I felt a responsibility to stand up, to be the adult who did the right thing, even though it was overwhelming. I saw things I knew were wrong, but addressing them was far from simple.

I told Chris I couldn't handle the flood of emotions that playing with him brought on, and I needed to step away from joining him online. I thought this would make him realize how serious I was—that my decision would show him how deeply this was affecting me.

I was mistaken.

I believed our friendship meant something, that my voice mattered to him, but I was dead wrong.

His response? A single word: "okay." Then he walked away.

His reaction was a painful blow. It was hard to accept that someone I cared about could dismiss me so easily.

My mind felt like it was trapped in an electrical storm, jolted with confusion at every thought. The reality I was facing made no sense to me. I had never experienced anything like this.

The questions hammered at my mind:

- *Why didn't Chris understand why his behavior was wrong?*
- *Why couldn't he just stop with the inappropriate language?*
- *Why was he contacting BlueBird every single day?*
- *Why did he only play games that BlueBird played?*

The way he devalued our friendship so quickly hit me hard, flooding me with sadness and confusion. It felt like I was walking through a dense fog, but one thing stood out crystal clear:

Chris didn't give our friendship a second thought.

All he seemed to care about was continuing the behavior.

I didn't know what to make of the situation. My head was swimming in a sea of emotions that I was unable to sort through.

I had to take a step back.

SEEDS OF DISCONTENT

I had messaged Sterling during the day, just casual back and forth, and asked what he was doing after work. I suggested we play some spades, and he said sure. So I told him I'd text him that evening.

Later on, a neighbor stopped by my place to grab something for cooking. I let them know I was about to work out and that Sterling was coming over. They got a little excited, saying they wanted to watch me work out with the new Oculus 2 VR since I could cast it on the TV. I told them that was totally fine.

I texted Sterling and told him to come up whenever—I was mid-workout but would be done in about 30 minutes. He knocked not long after, came in with a drink, and joined our neighbor in the living room. Naturally, the topic drifted

back to the Vegas trip. Sterling started asking again where I wanted to stay, and I reminded him I was leaving it up to him, as long as it stayed within a reasonable budget.

I told them I really needed to get my workout in because I had already been on a five-day streak and just needed to push through 15 minutes to keep it going. They said okay and went back to chatting, swapping stories about Vegas—where they had stayed, what the casinos were like, funny moments from previous trips.

With my heart rate up and the cool-down cycle starting, I finally took off the VR headset and looked around. Sterling was gone. I asked my neighbor where he went, and they said he had suddenly stood up, said he didn't want to just sit there watching me exercise, and left in a huff, saying he had better things to do.

I was stunned. I had told him exactly what to expect. He was talking with someone the whole time. He could've waited a few more minutes if it bothered him so much.

Then there was a knock. Chris came in, looked annoyed, and without missing a beat said, "Why did you do that?"

I blinked. "Do what?"

"Invite Sterling over and just ignore him. That was rude and mean," he said.

I couldn't believe it. Sterling had already spun the narrative. I explained what happened, that I told him I was mid-workout, and he came in, talked with our friend, and everything seemed fine. He wasn't ignored.

But it was already clear. Sterling had done it again—twisted the moment, planted his seeds of discontent, and made sure I looked like the one at fault.

And Chris, right on cue, bought it.

BULLY

I found other activities to fill my time—I started some tech training courses, caught up on work, and tried out a few new video games. Chris and I were still

on speaking terms, and I replied a few times when he messaged me. But the silly things we used to laugh about didn't amuse me anymore, so I didn't initiate any conversations. I didn't know what to say.

Days passed without hearing from him until one afternoon, while taking a break from work in the common area, Chris showed up.

We exchanged a quick "hey," and he sat beside me.

I was caught off guard—not just by his presence, but by the fact that he sat down beside me like we hadn't spent weeks drifting apart, as if those weeks hadn't happened.

But from his expression, I sensed he was bothered, carrying a sadness or disappointment. Part of me stayed guarded while I asked if he was alright. Oddly, he started what seemed like a real conversation—something that was genuinely on his mind—and he was looking to me for advice, like I was still someone important to him, someone he could lean on. It left me disoriented. I didn't know what to make of it, but I listened.

"Well, you probably won't care," he replied, almost defeated.

I questioned why he would think that.

"Because it's about BlueBird," he said. "The last time I talked to him was on Monday, and I'm worried something might have happened to him."

I corrected Chris and told him, "That's not true; in fact, it is the other way around. I am concerned for BlueBird and hope nothing has happened. What makes you think something bad might have happened?"

Chris seemed genuinely worried and stressed about the situation. It caught me off guard because it was the first time I had ever seen him in an emotional state.

I tried to be supportive. "Well, maybe BlueBird is just busy with school or playing with his friends who live near him."

Chris said, "No, I don't think that is it."

I said, "Well, five days isn't that big of a deal. Sometimes people forget to return messages, but sometimes we all do it."

I could tell by the look on his face that he brushed my theories aside.

Then I wondered, "Do you talk to each other every day?"

He said, "Yeah."

I continued, "And then all of a sudden, for no reason that you can figure out, they just vanish?"

He nodded, and I told him that I knew exactly how he felt!

I wondered if Chris was able to see the parallels in our situations. "Yeah, it's really hard to have a best friend vanish from your life without any answer as to why. I know how you feel."

Chris never said a word about our friendship; the similarities between us clearly didn't register.

"I've called and left messages, and he hasn't returned any of them. The last time I talked to him, he was very emotional and angry. He was yelling all sorts of things; he was calling out my name, your name, Jess's, and Gabe's, too, but I have no idea what about. It was really strange, and then he just logged off."

I quickly responded to make sense of it, "My name? What in the world do I have to do with anything?"

Chris went on about his story: "I am pretty sure it has something to do with his stepdad. He is being bullied by him, and it is making him a mess. I've been trying to be there for him and let him know he can talk to me if he needs to, that when his mom and dad don't listen to him, he can always talk to me."

I asked, "How do you know his stepdad is bullying him?"

Chris said that BlueBird had told him about it on several accounts.

Immediately, alarms started going off in my head. I thought the best course of action was to offer a sensible and logical perspective.

I told Chris, "Well, you have to remember BlueBird is a young teenager who is injured badly from the abandonment of a parent and now is being asked to accept a replacement in which he had no say so in what so ever. It is absolutely likely that BlueBird rejects and resents this new parent figure. I think it would be odd if BlueBird spoke of his stepdad in a favorable light, knowing that he hasn't had time to process or heal from what his real dad did to him. So maybe from your perspective, it might sound like his stepdad is mean to him, but consider it from his position, too."

Chris listened intently, which made me think I was getting through to him so I continued, "Chris, to be upfront and candid with you. You really should not get involved on that level with BlueBird. It is obvious that he has latched onto you because of his mental state of mind and need to replace his dad with someone who cares for him, that is of his choosing. I don't know how you could not see it from that perspective as well. Because if you did, and you did actually care for BlueBird, you would take my advice and let them, as a family, work it out. The fact that you are doing the complete opposite and promising BlueBird your trusting and loyal friendship is simply reckless and the one who will be greatly damaged will be BlueBird."

Chris seemed shocked and questioned why I thought that of him.

Of course, I was shocked that he needed to ask me; I let out a chuckle because I felt ridiculous to have to say it out loud to him, "Chris, as far as I know, I became "your best friend" when you told me. That best friend position lasted only a month, and our years of friendship seem to hold even less value to you. The moment I tried to steer you from harm's way and explain to you something that shouldn't need to be explained, that your behavior was damaging to yourself and others, without question, you abandoned our friendship only because it was something you didn't want to hear. Not saying that our friendship is over, but it is evident to me, that you do not consider me as a best friend, if you ever did. We don't do anything together anymore, you don't text me like you used to anymore, and we don't listen to new music anymore; I have a list of good reasons that point to the "not a best friend" category. Sorry, but it's the truth."

Chris stood up and said, "I still think of you as a best friend," and then walked off.

I sat and watched as he carried himself out of sight and could tell from his slow pace and drooped posture that I had upset him and hurt his feelings. I wasn't angry, not really—just confused.

After everything he had put me through, after weeks of feeling dismissed and tossed aside like I didn't matter, it was strange that I felt guilty.

I knew my words were honest, and I had every right to say them. But seeing the weight of them land on him so visibly stirred something in me. I didn't want to be cruel. I just wanted to be heard. Yet somehow, I ended up looking like the one who kicked someone already down. And that left me sitting there, wondering how speaking the truth could feel so much like regret.

THE UNTHINKABLE

This was the moment I found myself grappling with a question I'd never thought I'd consider about Chris. It seemed impossible to even entertain the notion that someone like him could be involved in anything dark or harmful. Chris was the kind of person who everyone adored—his personality was magnetic, and he could light up a room just by stepping into it. Over the years, I'd watched as people's faces lit up the second they saw him; I'd never met anyone who had a single negative word to say about him. He was the quintessential "big kid," generous with compliments, kind to everyone he met. There was just no way he could hurt anyone or so I kept telling myself.

Yet here I was, face to face with behaviors and decisions that were anything but normal. In front of me were two sides of Chris, as distinct as night and day. There is no reality where it's "normal" for a 42-year-old man to talk to a 12-year-old in that way, to prioritize those interactions over time with close friends, to repeatedly choose the company of that child above anyone else, and then try to keep it hidden behind a veil of secrecy. He dodged every attempt to address it,

refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing, and seemed bent on avoiding even a whisper of conversation about it.

It wouldn't take a crystal ball for anyone to see that something was wrong with this picture. But what? And why? There had to be a reasonable explanation, something that would help it all make sense. I searched for answers, hoping to find something that would bring clarity.

Then, a memory surfaced—an intimate, private conversation Chris and I had shared a couple of years earlier, back when the pandemic was in full swing. I can't remember what sparked it, but we had ended up delving into some of our pasts, sharing secrets, the kinds of things you wouldn't share with just anyone. I think we had been talking about why some people exhibit such toxic behaviors, speculating on what might make people turn out that way. I had suggested that it often traced back to childhood, to being raised in broken homes or facing hardships at a young age.

It was only now that I realized just how significant that conversation had been.

Out of nowhere, Chris looked at me with an unexpectedly serious expression and shared that he had been harmed by his uncle when he was young. He added, almost as if to reassure both of us, that he'd "turned out okay."

I was stunned, flooded with empathy, yet without personal experience to fully understand what he'd gone through. I could only imagine the weight of that kind of pain. I told him that, yes, he really had come out okay, feeling a mixture of relief and gratitude that he'd somehow managed to carry on with that hidden burden.

I treaded carefully, unsure of what to say, and gently asked if talking about it was uncomfortable for him or if he needed someone to listen. Chris assured me it didn't bother him to speak about it, so I softly asked, *"How old were you when it happened?"*

Without hesitating, he replied, "Five."

The answer struck me hard. "Five?" I echoed, barely able to wrap my mind around it. My heart ached as I told him how deeply sorry I was that he'd had to

endure something so unimaginable at such a young age. Part of me had expected a different answer, maybe even hoped he'd say he was older. I knew things like this happened to young children, but hearing it from someone I cared about made the reality even more jarring.

It felt like I'd been hit by a truck.

I couldn't help but cry out, "Five?" in disbelief, telling him how deeply sorry I was that he'd gone through something so terrible.

It left me completely shaken.

For reasons I couldn't quite explain, I'd expected him to say he was older—maybe fifteen or seventeen. I knew, in theory, that things like this happened to young children, but it felt unreal to hear it firsthand from someone I cared about.

Without thinking, I found myself asking, "What did your uncle do to you?" The question slipped out before I could stop it, and as soon as I realized, I immediately told Chris not to answer, apologizing for speaking without thinking. But he calmly assured me it was okay to talk about it—that it didn't drag him back into that moment in his mind.

In the briefest, most direct way, he gave an answer that sent me rushing over to him, tears already welling up, as I hugged him tightly. My heart poured out for him, offering whatever comfort I could, though I knew I couldn't even begin to imagine his pain. He hugged me back firmly, then gently pulled away just enough to look me in the eyes, telling me not to cry anymore. He assured me it was in the past, that he had survived it unscathed, that it hadn't left any harm.

I gave him a small squeeze before stepping back, feeling a flicker of relief.

With no real understanding of this kind of experience, I assumed he was saying that because he was so young, he didn't remember it in detail.

I could only recall one or two memories from that age myself, so it made sense to me that this might protect him from any lasting impact. From what

he'd shared, I gathered that maybe there was no permanent damage because, perhaps, he'd been spared from remembering the full experience.

Something about my assumption didn't sit quite right. I'd only taken one psychology course in college, but even from that, I knew it was unlikely that anyone could escape an experience like that without lasting psychological impact. Still, without any real understanding of what a victim might feel or go through afterward, I didn't challenge my own thought process at the time.

Relieved, I said, "Well, thank God you don't remember any of it. That would be astronomically traumatic for any child to carry with them.

But he quickly corrected me. "I didn't say that," he replied. "I do remember it. I can see it in my mind if I choose to think about it."

I froze, paralyzed by his words.

I dropped to my knees, speechless, and looked at him, whispering, "Oh... my god." As the weight of it sank in, I stood up, overwhelmed with a fierce anger and hatred for his uncle that I hadn't felt before. The fury drove me to a line of questioning I couldn't hold back.

I asked if his uncle had ever paid for his crimes, if he was dead, or rotting away in a jail cell somewhere. *Was he still alive? Where did he live?* In that moment, I was ready to fight, to protect Chris somehow. I wasn't sure if I would actually have done anything, but at that moment, it felt as though I could have torn his uncle apart if given the chance.

The entire time, I was the only one overcome with emotion. Chris remained steady, even telling me, "My mom knew about it but didn't do anything." Hearing this, I was flooded with an intense, almost blinding rage. The depth of betrayal and injustice he'd endured was too much to process, and I couldn't comprehend how anyone—let alone his own mother—could ignore something so horrific. The anger I felt was overwhelming, a fury I didn't know I was capable of feeling.

From that moment, in just those thirty minutes, Chris became the single most important person in my life. My heart was immediately captured by a fierce and selfless devotion, one that made me want to pour everything good I had into

him. All I wanted was to ease his path, to make up for the love and care he had been denied. I felt it was my greatest privilege to protect and support him. In my eyes, he was owed a life filled with compassion, love, and safety.

I felt Chris was someone who knew suffering too well, someone who had never received the steady, unconditional love that should come from a parent. I had been lucky enough to have a mother who constantly let her sons feel the depth of her love, and I would have given anything to share that feeling with Chris. To me, he needed it more than anyone. He was one of the most special people in my life, and I didn't care if others misunderstood my devotion to him. Saying, "Yes, I loved Chris," didn't mean I saw him as anything more than a friend—the best of friends. People might think what they want, but I didn't need to explain it to anyone. They didn't have to understand.

From that day forward, I was always looking out for Chris, always considering his needs. Whether he wandered off or needed help fixing his door, his car, or his computer, I was there. I even did two years of his taxes in a single night to meet the deadline. In every small way, I tried to show him that he was thought of, valued, and cared for—reminding him of his worth to me every chance I got.

Since then, I was aware that, even though Chris believed he hadn't been affected by that experience, it was hard for me to accept. I couldn't imagine that something so traumatic wouldn't leave some mark, even if it wasn't visible. While I didn't fully know how that experience might have affected him, I chalked it up to possible reasons behind his struggles with alcohol and anxiety. But I never felt the need to dig further into it or educate myself on the topic—it was simply too painful and not a subject I'd ever choose to explore.

Remembering what Chris went through only reinforced my belief that he would never want anyone else to suffer that way. To me, it seemed impossible that he would cause that kind of harm to others, especially after being a victim himself. Yet, as time went on, I found myself caught in a web of conflicting thoughts. His repeated actions stirred an unsettling feeling, and I struggled to make sense of it all. I wanted to believe in him, to trust that he could never cross that line. But the more I saw, the harder it became to reconcile those beliefs with his behavior.

FACT OR FICTION

Then a concept—or maybe just a rumor—I'd heard somewhere surfaced in my mind. It was hazy and unsubstantiated, but I'd heard that sometimes, children who go through certain traumas might grow up with tendencies to repeat that harm. I had no facts to back it up, no solid evidence to rely on, but it was an idea I couldn't ignore. As with any problem I face, I knew the best way to handle it was by first educating myself. Relying on pure luck to make sense of something this serious wasn't an option.

Before I began my search, I figured this notion was probably just another myth or exaggerated rumor. I assumed there might be some truth to it, but only in rare cases. With my background as a data analyst, I started by looking for statistics and factual insights—something concrete to help me understand if there was any basis to it. But as I dug deeper, I realized there was no clear, straightforward answer.

Eventually, I found a disturbing statistic that shook me: **75%¹** of those who go on to harm others report having a history of being abused themselves at an early age. This statistic suggested a strong link between childhood trauma and later harmful behavior. Yet, it still didn't fully clarify how often victims go on to repeat those behaviors, as tracking such a number is plagued with challenges. Between unreported cases, ethical limitations, and factors like family support, mental health, and environment, it's nearly impossible to get a definitive answer.

As I continued reading, I thought about Chris's past. He had once told me that what he'd gone through didn't affect him, but I knew that couldn't be true. The more I read about the impact of childhood trauma—especially when it's inflicted by a family member—the more I realized that victims often cope by downplaying the experience. For children who experience trauma at a young age, denial and minimizing the harm are common survival tactics, ways to make sense of something too painful to confront.

I wanted badly for this idea—that victims of trauma might one day repeat it—to be nothing more than a baseless rumor. But the more I read, the more concerned

1 : Glasser M, Kolvin I, Campbell D, Glasser A, Leitch I, Farrelly S. Cycle of child sexual abuse: [Links between being a victim and becoming a perpetrator](#). British Journal of Psychiatry. 2001.

I became. Although many victims go on to live full lives without harming others, Chris's behavior made it difficult for me to ignore the possibility that something deeper was at play. My initial concerns were no longer just whispers in my mind; they were becoming hard truths I couldn't dismiss.

I felt an overwhelming need to have a real heart-to-heart talk with Chris. I wanted to share the troubling signs I'd uncovered and to voice my concerns. I didn't think Chris was lying when he'd told me he didn't realize he was crossing any lines; I believed he genuinely saw nothing wrong in his actions. But given his past, it was clear to me that his sense of boundaries had likely been blurred in ways he couldn't even recognize. I began to see this behavior as something resurfacing in Chris, triggered by his own unresolved pain. The more I thought about it, the more I felt a sense of urgency to talk to him.

But how does one even begin a conversation like this? There's no guide for talking to a close friend about behaviors that hint at something so deeply troubling without sounding accusatory. Adding to that, I was preparing to tell him that his actions were potentially harmful—not just to others, but to himself—and that he might not even understand why they were. I fully expected that he might react defensively or even with anger. If our roles were reversed, I'd be shocked and furious, but then I also would never exhibit those kinds of behaviors. Still, regardless of potential fallout, I was confident I could steer him back once he remembered that I was a true friend.

DEATH AND DEPARTURE

While in the common area, Chris mentioned that Sterling was packing and getting ready to spend some time with his birth mother in Washington because the doctors confirmed her health was not going to improve. I didn't want to interrupt Sterling while he was trying to depart, so I told Chris to give him my sympathies and to let me know if there was anything I could do.

I was unsure of Chris's relationship with her, so I asked him if he spoke to her regularly and if they were close. He said he had met her on several occasions, but they weren't close; he knew of her but didn't know her well.

Chris seemed conflicted and told me he felt like he should go to Washington too but didn't really want to because situations involving someone dying gave him a lot of anxiety.

Then he asked for my opinion.

I said if there were no complications with taking time off from work, then he should absolutely go and be emotionally supportive of Sterling. Chris agreed and said he felt that was the right thing to do.

Knowing how difficult it is to find a dog-sitter at such short notice, I offered to step in and help take care of Luna.

Despite the challenges of fitting in four walks a day and spending time with her at their place, I was willing to make sacrifices for my friends in their time of need. Chris expressed his gratitude with a hug, and I reassured him to call me if they needed anything.

I wished them strength, endurance, and a safe return.

Chapter Five
AUGUST 2022

RETURN TRIP

Taking care of Luna, while juggling work, felt like an endless cycle. Every time I got into the flow with my projects, Luna would need a walk. Evenings blurred into a routine of making dinner, eating quickly, and then squeezing in some time with her before the final walk at ten. The silver lining was the boost in my exercise routine, which I badly needed.

Chris and Sterling had been in Washington for four days, dealing with Sterling's mother's declining health. Luna, sweet as she was, began showing signs of agitation. She clearly missed her daddies. Chris was set to return in two days, and I reassured myself that her restlessness would soon ease.

On the day Chris was supposed to return, I checked my phone repeatedly, expecting a message with his flight details. Nothing. I sent a couple of texts, but by midnight, it became evident he wasn't coming. The silence left me in the dark, adjusting my plans to continue caring for Luna.

By the next evening, I reached out to Sterling, who informed me Chris had missed his flight but was now en route to Honolulu. Finally, later that night, Chris messaged me when he landed. I had just finished walking her around the park, so we headed up to Chris's place, where I reunited him with Luna, who was overjoyed to see him again.

We settled on his couch, and Chris began recounting his trip. His voice was heavy as he shared how Sterling's mom passed away in the next room from him. The experience, he admitted, left him deeply unsettled. I empathized, knowing all too well the suffocating anxiety that surrounds death.

I inquired about Sterling, and Chris said he seemed to be coping, though he had to stay back to handle the estate. He wouldn't be back for at least another week. I offered my help should he or Sterling need anything to lighten their load.

Chris looked visibly drained, and sensing his exhaustion, I prepared to leave. But before I could, he mentioned he had taken extra time off from work for the next week and wanted to know of my upcoming plans. He suggested we spend a day hiking and check out a few food trucks he'd been eager to try during my lunch break. The idea of a break from the routine was enticing. I agreed, feeling a spark of anticipation for the day ahead, before closing his door behind me.

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE?

I realized most people, including myself at first, only had a vague sense of what is child sexual abuse. A murky outline built from headlines and law shows.

But it's not vague. It's very real, and it's clearly defined.

Child sexual abuse is **any sexual activity with a child**—whether by direct physical contact or without it—**that is meant to sexually gratify the adult**. This includes touching, penetration, showing children pornography, encouraging them to behave sexually, exposing themselves to children, or talking to them in sexually explicit ways. It doesn't have to involve force. It doesn't even have to **involve touch**. And the damage is often done in silence, through manipulation and trust.

Legally, the definition varies slightly by jurisdiction¹, but across all major laws and child protection agencies, the core principle is the same:

Children cannot consent. Even if they don't say "no," even if they don't understand what's happening, **it is abuse**—because the power imbalance is exploitative by nature.

In many cases, the abuser uses grooming tactics—gradual efforts to lower a child's boundaries, build trust, and make inappropriate behavior seem normal or even affectionate. That grooming may include gifts, attention, or even building trust with the child's parents or guardians.

For anyone who thinks, "*But where's the line?*"—the answer is simple:

The moment an adult engages a child in anything sexual, the line is already far behind them.

1 : Reference [US Department Criminal Division - Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section](#)

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

The next day, I didn't hear anything from Chris. I could see he was online playing with BlueBird, but I gave him space to process whatever he had gone through in Washington.

The day after that, it was more of the same—he'd been online with BlueBird almost nonstop. Then, late that night, he messaged me and asked if I wanted to meet downstairs for a smoke.

We started talking, and I told him I was looking forward to spending some time together over the next few days, especially our upcoming hike. It had been so long since our last one, and I missed it.

That got me reminiscing about how things used to be between us—and how much I missed that. I brought it up, gently, nothing accusatory. Just honesty. Just missing my friend.

But instead of responding with the same warmth, he lashed out—accusing me of being selfish. How dare I, he said, bring up our friendship when he hadn't even processed his trip to Washington.

Then he twisted it further, reminding me that he was “with” Sterling and implying that I was trying to come between them. I had said nothing about that. Not a word.

I should have been outraged at how he distorted everything—how he shamed me just for wanting the closeness we used to share—but I wasn't. I just stood there. He asked if I was going back upstairs too. I said no, that I needed some time alone. He walked off without another word.

I stayed outside for a while, trying to understand how everything had gotten so warped. Why twist it? Why shame me for missing what we once had?

Later, he apologized for treating me like garbage. For a while, it even felt sincere.

A few days later, I ran into him outside. He asked if I still wanted to do lunch, and I said of course. With his vacation almost over, I told him to just message me the following day and I'd make arrangements to break away from work. I

wanted to believe this was his way of reconnecting—that maybe things weren’t as far gone as they felt.

But the message never came.

Instead, much later—long after our plans had faded into silence—I got another apology. He said he was sorry for not reaching out, that he’d forgotten. And even though the words sounded sincere, the pattern was becoming too familiar. Apologize. Repeat. Apologize again.

I didn’t know what to say.

What could I have said? It was clear he’d spent almost his entire vacation absorbed in interacting with BlueBird, showing no interest in spending time with friends. I didn’t know how to address it, but my urgency to talk to Chris grew. It felt like I was racing an invisible clock, desperate to reach him before his mindset became unreachable. I feared BlueBird was already too attached to Chris, and that fear left me feeling helpless.

That evening, I messaged Chris to see if he wanted to play online. I hoped that if I could just occupy his time, I might find an opening for the difficult conversation. Surprisingly, he agreed but said he needed thirty minutes. I told him to message me when ready. While waiting, I kept busy—doing laundry, vacuuming, tidying up—but when I checked my phone, there were no messages.

A couple of hours passed. I messaged him again—no reply. I checked online and saw he was still in a voice chat with BlueBird. I messaged, asking for an invite, but thirty minutes went by with no response. Frustration sank into my stomach like a stone. Another message—no reply. Then I noticed Chris had gone offline,

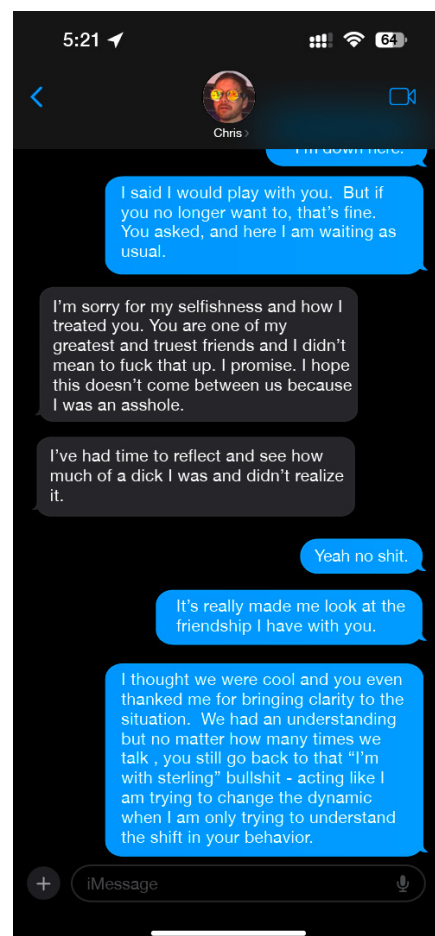


Figure 7: Chris apologized for how he’d treated me and called me one of his “greatest and truest friends.” His apology felt mature at first, but as I tried to talk to him about the shift in his behavior—and how it started to feel like that of a predator—his tone flipped back to deflection. No matter how many times we talked, he always circled back to “Sterling” or blamed me for the change. It made me realize that his apology was just a mask, and his behavior was starting to reveal a darker side I hadn’t wanted to see. (Photo by author)



Figure 8: After Chris got back from Spokane, we had plans for his vacation week—but he ghosted me completely. I couldn't make sense of the silence. This was me trying to stay calm, trying to be understanding... while quietly unraveling inside. (photo by author)

yet BlueBird remained in a chat with someone marked "anonymous." Clearly, Chris was hiding from me.

This pattern—avoidance, hiding, and unbelievable excuses—became common.

The following day, we had a friendly get-together in the common area. A neighbor, a close friend, was moving to the mainland, and it was one of the last chances to see them. It felt like the perfect moment to pull Chris aside. I messaged him early that evening, asking if he'd be there. He said he would. I mentioned I had something important to discuss and that I'd see him later.

I arrived slightly late but jumped into the activities. After a while, someone asked if I knew if Chris was coming. I said he'd confirmed earlier and sent him a reminder message, saying everyone missed him and our friend moving away was anxious to see him. But as the night wore on, there was no response. My gut told me he wouldn't show. It was disappointing, especially for our friend.

Later, I messaged Chris again, expressing how inconsiderate his absence was and how concerning his behavior had become. His response shocked me.

He pleaded with me not to be angry, saying I was his most trusted friend and assuring me he would seek professional help. Relief washed over me. It felt like a breakthrough I'd been desperate for.

I promised I wasn't angry and asked to meet him in the common area. I wanted to tell him in person that I wouldn't abandon him, that we'd face this struggle together. He agreed to meet in an hour.

I went down early, rehearsing what I needed to say. I wanted him to know I cared. But as the time passed, Chris didn't show. I gave him the benefit of the

doubt but messaged him nearly an hour later—no reply. Another hour passed. Still nothing.

By the time several hours had gone by, it was clear he wasn't coming. Considering how much time he'd been spending with BlueBird, dismissing friends, hiding his activity, and ignoring messages—it felt obsessive.

The urgency I felt intensified. The distance between us was growing, and I was losing confidence that he would listen. I messaged him again, saying it was urgent. No reply.

He was online, marked "anonymous," in a chat with BlueBird. I realized the only way to reach him was to join his chat. As soon as I did, I heard laughter, but it fell silent when my presence was announced. I didn't pretend. I said, "Oh, there you are, Chris. I've been looking for you all night." I told him I urgently needed to talk and asked if he could meet me for a few minutes. After some hesitation, he agreed to meet in thirty minutes.

I waited outside, wondering if Chris could truly be unaware of his behavior. Too many things didn't add up.

If it was all innocent, why hide it?

Why lie about his time with BlueBird? Why choose a connection so different from his own age group?

I stood there, waiting well past the agreed time, exhausted and defeated. Finally, I gave up and returned home, drained of hope and too weary to think.

The next morning, my phone chimed. It was a message from Chris. His words stunned me. There was anger in his tone, misplaced contempt as if trying to justify his actions. He made it clear that he would do what he wanted, regardless

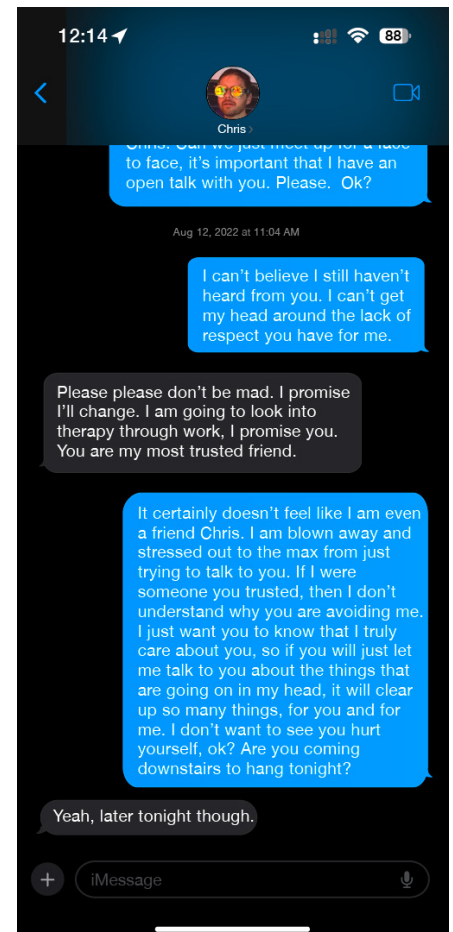


Figure 9: I was exhausted from chasing answers, just trying to feel seen by someone I thought was my closest friend. When he finally replied, it was with a promise to change and a mention of therapy. I wanted to believe him—but deep down, something didn't add up. (photo by author)

of anyone else. It felt like a crash I hadn't seen coming, a shocking realization of just how far things had gone.

Alarm bells were going off in my head. I set my emotions aside and asked about our hiking plans, hoping for a chance to talk. He dismissed it with a flippant remark.

I tried again, but he didn't respond.

Throughout the day, I waited, hoping he'd change his mind, but nothing came. He stayed online, connected to BlueBird.

The following day was more of the same. By evening, my denial faded, replaced by anxiety. I imagined what could be happening and felt powerless. I spiraled, my breathing ragged, heart racing, as if I was having a heart attack.

I messaged him again and again—email, text, Xbox—just so I could be sure he'd received at least one of them—telling him how much stress this was causing me.

I was practically begging. I told him his silence and avoidance were damaging me—not just emotionally, but physically.

My blood pressure was dangerously high. My resting heart rate was in a constant state of alarm. My body couldn't take much more of the stress his absence was causing.

I pleaded for him to talk to me, to understand how much this was hurting me.

But there was nothing.

No concern.

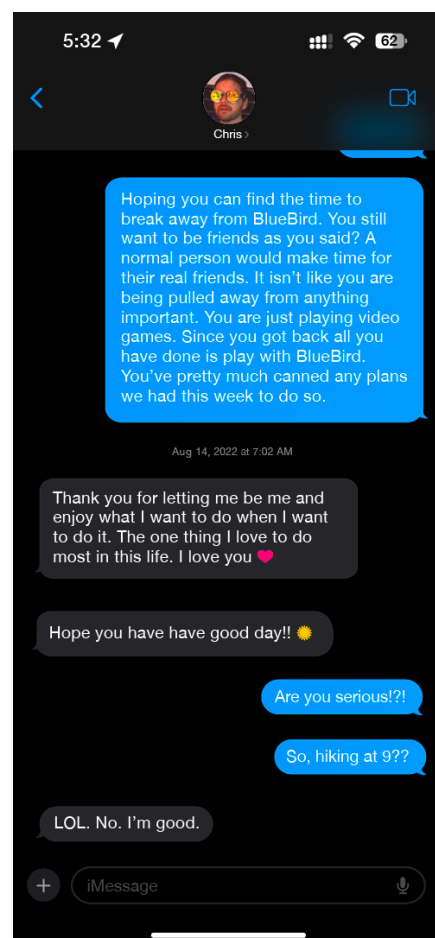


Figure 10: After making every effort to talk to Chris about all the canceled plans and his complete withdrawal into a world with BlueBird, his reply the next morning was chilling. “The one thing I love to do most in this life,” he wrote, referring to playing games with BlueBird, as if it was his top priority. That moment made me realize just how dedicated he was to that dynamic—more dedicated than to any friendship or commitment he had with me. It was a terrifying admission of the depth of his compulsion. (Photo by author)

No response.

Not a single reply.

One thing became clear—I needed help. I couldn't carry this alone and I had too many questions and not enough answers. It was time to educate myself.

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

WHAT IS GROOMING?

Grooming is when someone builds a relationship, trust, or emotional connection with someone—usually a child or vulnerable person—so they can later abuse or exploit them.¹

It often starts with kindness. The person may give **gifts, attention, or special treatment**. They make the victim feel important, liked, or understood.

But it's not innocent. The goal is to slowly break down boundaries. The groomer might:

- Try to isolate the person from others.
- Introduce touching or sexual talk.
- Make the victim feel like they are to blame.

Groomers also often gain the trust of the victim's family or community so no one suspects anything.²

Research shows that grooming is a deliberate and manipulative process aimed at gaining the trust of a child and those around them to facilitate abuse while avoiding detection. **The grooming process always ends with a crime being committed or external factors threaten the risk of exposure.**

IS GROOMING A CRIME?

Yes. Grooming is illegal in many places, especially when it targets children. Laws vary, but in many states and countries, it is a criminal offense to use communication or relationships to prepare a child for sexual abuse, even if physical abuse hasn't happened yet. Online grooming is also a crime.

1 : Reference [NSPCC](#)
2 : Reference [RAINN](#)

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

PSYCHOLOGICAL DAMAGE FROM GROOMING

The emotional toll grooming takes can last for years, even into adulthood, especially if they were never believed or supported¹. Victims often feel:

- Confused and betrayed, especially if they trusted the abuser.
- Guilty or ashamed, even though they did nothing wrong.
- Isolated or unable to trust others.
- Anxiety, depression, PTSD, or difficulty with future relationships.

STATISTICAL INSIGHTS ON LONG-TERM IMPACTS²:

- 3x more likely to suffer from depression
- 4x more likely to contemplate suicide
- 13x more likely to abuse alcohol
- 26x more likely to abuse drugs
- 40x more likely to be unable to form intimate and lasting relationships

Suicidal Behavior: Studies indicate that such survivors are 4.1 times more likely to contemplate suicide and 13 times more likely to attempt suicide compared to non-victims. ³

Substance Abuse: Victims may turn to drugs or alcohol as coping mechanisms, increasing the risk of addiction and related health issues.

Mental Health Disorders: Long-term psychological effects include depression, anxiety, PTSD, and difficulties in forming healthy relationships. These conditions can persist well into adulthood, affecting various aspects of a survivor's life.

1 : Reference: "Long Term Consequences" on [MOSAC](#)
2 : Reference "[What Is Grooming?](#) | [Praesidium](#)."
3 : Reference article on [Wikipedia](#)

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

This wasn't like a research project or some curious deep dive for knowledge. It was a perilous search, a frantic sifting through as much information as I could absorb day and night. I was extending myself in every direction, desperate for answers. But the truth was, I wasn't searching to confirm what I feared—I was searching for anything that could prove me wrong.

I wanted to find something, anything, that would contradict my instincts, that would tell me my fears were misguided. I was torn apart inside, ripped to shreds by pain and disbelief. I needed to be wrong more than anything. I needed the facts to tell me that the path I was being led down was nothing but a mistake of the mind. But the deeper I searched, the less hope I found.

Rather than searching for additional information to support my instincts, I started by looking for answers to the things that didn't make sense.

If there were flaws in my thinking, that's where I would find them.

That's where I would begin.

MISMATCHED PROFILES

Why didn't I see any red flags before we became friends? I think most of us have a fair amount of confidence in our ability to spot someone who might be a potential predator.

We imagine someone awkward, creepy, introverted—someone whose very presence makes your skin crawl. Popular media has cemented this image in our minds. Movies and television often portray sexual predators as visibly disturbed individuals: loners in trench coats, lurking near playgrounds, avoiding eye contact, speaking in unsettling tones, and giving off obvious red flags. They're cast as villains from the start, meant to make the audience uncomfortable the moment they appear on screen.

Chris was none of these things.

He was funny, a charmer, easy to be around. Everyone enjoyed his company. He lit up a room. Clearly, he didn't fit the profile I had in mind.

I never questioned where that ideal in my head came from—because I never had to.

Without much effort, I learned that most sexual predators do not stand out, that many blend in seamlessly.

The reality is they simply don't appear like the strange or reclusive¹—they could be a neighbor, a cousin, a member of your family, or even a husband. They are the ones we seem to naturally trust because they are nice in general, polite, and often do favors or volunteer to help.

They could be a school teacher, a minister, coach, or club leader. They commonly choose career paths that are often innately perceived as trusted. They can be executives and successful business owners and are not limited to employment within the blue collar jobs.

They can even be celebrities and be very attractive. Their appeal and likability are tools—they help them build trust not only with their victims but also with the adults around them.

Their ability to show up in all the right places, in all the right ways, and light up a room to keep everyone appeased is exactly what makes them so invisible—and **there is nothing** about the way they look that is different from anyone else.

UNEXPLAINED ADVANCES

For a long time, I couldn't understand why Chris made intimate advances toward me when, as I later learned, his preferences seemed to lie in an age group far younger than mine.

It wasn't a matter of misreading signals or imagining something that wasn't there. I hadn't initiated those moments—he had. And they weren't just one-off

1 : Rymanowicz, Kyle. "[Keeping Kids Safe: Characteristics of Child Sexual Offenders - Creating Safe Environments for Youth](#)." MSU Extension, August 17, 2021.

slips in judgment. There were enough of them to make it clear his actions were deliberate.

If he were simply driven by sex, then wouldn't at least one of those encounters have ended that way? But they didn't. Not once. And oddly, I never gave that much thought to it at the time. It just didn't seem like the point of it, not for him, not for me. Whatever we were doing didn't seem rooted in a desire for release—it felt like something else entirely.

I used to believe that arousal was binary—you were either attracted to adults, or you weren't. But the more I learned, the more I realized how naïve that belief was. It turns out, it's not uncommon for individuals with certain disorders to be able to respond to both, even if one is their true fixation.

I also discovered that when they have relations with someone in their age group, it can trigger their compulsion.

One of the things I came across that disturbed me deeply was the idea that some will "practice" on other adults before targeting someone younger¹. That they might test out grooming behaviors—excessive attention, flattery, calculated trust-building—with adults first. The thought made me uneasy.

When I looked back, I saw all of it: the barrage of texts, the constant attention, pretending to be mature, and the quiet reassurance that I mattered to him—that I was important to him.

*Had I been groomed?*²

I didn't feel like a victim—not in the traditional sense. I wasn't a child. I had enough life behind me to navigate twisted social dynamics and unexpected betrayals. Chris wasn't the first person to mislead me, to present a version of himself that turned out to be false. I was sound of mind, and I had willingly involved myself with him.

1 : Schippers, Eveline E., Wineke J. Smid, Larissa M. Hoogsteder, Caroline H.M. Planting, and Vivienne De Vogel. "Pedophilia Is Associated with Lower Sexual Interest in Adults: Meta-Analyses and a Systematic Review with Men Who Had Sexually Offended against Children." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 69 (March 2023)
2 : Skills for Health. "6 Stages of Grooming Adults and Teens: Spotting The Red Flags | Skills for Health," November 17, 2020.

But still, the idea that I might have been used as a rehearsal—that sits heavy. I can't know if it's true. And even if it is, it's buried in the past now. There's nothing I can do with that possibility except acknowledge it, accept that it might explain some things, and move forward. Not because I'm unaffected by it—but because I have to be.

THE CHECKLIST

As I dug through articles, psychology papers, testimonials—an endless chain of material—I kept finding these lists. Checklists. Each with their own wording, their own format, but all trying to identify signs of sexual abuse. Most were geared toward the most immediate and dangerous scenarios—protecting a child from someone with physical access to them, like a teacher, coach, or family member.

Even after all that I had been through and witnessed—even after all the things Chris had said—part of me still wanted to believe he didn't fully understand what he was doing or how much damage he could cause.

I thought that if I could gather something—something from a respected source—maybe I could hold it up and say, *"Read this! Your actions align with behaviors on this list. This is how it looks. This is why I have to be more than concerned, because look what this means! This isn't you! Talk to me, please."*

Maybe then he would see.

Maybe he would listen.

Maybe he would stop.

Maybe we could get the help he needed.

And if I could help Chris, then BlueBird would be safe too.

That was the truest hope in all of it—to **protect them both**.

The more I read, the more frustrated I became. None of the material fit the situation I was in. Even when a list came close, it always hinged on scenarios involving physical access—a teacher, a coach, a relative.

I kept thinking, *What about someone online? What about someone who hides behind a screen name, builds trust through games?*

Some signs repeated across sources, but I knew him well enough to know that if even one detail didn't align, he'd dismiss the entire thing.

So I searched and I searched. I tried every combination of terms, every possible phrasing that might return what I needed. I spent countless hours hoping to find something definitive.

But in the end, there was nothing.

No guide for "*What to look for if your friend is a predator using online games as access.*"

No checklist for "*How to know if someone you care about is grooming a child over the Internet.*"

As ridiculous as it sounds, I really believed something like that existed, somewhere. And it wasn't for me. I didn't need a checklist to solidify my belief. I knew before the research. Before the unraveling.

Looking back now, I see that I was also trying to avoid the pain of certainty. Trying to escape the role of accuser by handing the verdict to someone else.

To a webpage.

To a research paper.

To a checklist.

To anything that wasn't me.

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

THE CHECKLISTS

Finding help wasn't easy for me. Most of the resources I found didn't apply to my situation. Due to a lack of help from any one source, I had to piece together information from multiple places and figure out what advice to apply.

First, there was the identification. It wasn't so much that I needed to know for certain—Chris's behavior and the way he responded whenever I tried to talk to him were enough to convince me that something very wrong was happening. But then there was the part about finding support for myself. I needed a way to show someone else what was going on—something real and urgent that they couldn't brush aside. So I gathered up these "warning signs"¹ in a checklist format as my roadmap to make my case².

As one guide³ states: "Any one of these signs does not mean that a child is in danger. But if you see a few of these signs in someone you know, begin to ask questions." That felt like permission to trust my gut.

I went through the checklist⁴—and this is what I found:

- ☒ **Misses or ignores social cues about others' personal or sexual limits and boundaries?**

Yes. The gaming talk situation is a perfect example.

- ☒ **Often has a "special" child friend, maybe a different one from year to year?**

Yes. BlueBird is the most detailed reference. Other references include Chris talking about other "kids" he had played with in the past when I asked questions—long before I suspected anything.

1 : RAINN. "[Grooming: Know the Warning Signs](#)," July 10, 2020.
2 : Knutson, Casey. "[Five Warning Signs of a Sexual Predator to Watch For](#)." Knutson Casey, December 12, 2022
3 : Tabachnick, Joan. "[Let's Talk Guidebook](#)." Stop It Now!, 2020.
4 : Stop it Now! "[Behaviors to Watch Out for When Adults Are with Children](#)"

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- ☒ Spends most of their spare time with children and shows little interest in spending time with someone their own age?

Yes.

- ☒ Encourages silence and secrets in children?

Yes.

- ☒ Links sexuality and aggression in language or behavior, e.g., sexualized threats or insults like "whore" or "slut"?

Yes. The gaming talk situation is an example.

- ☐ Makes fun of children's body parts, describes children with sexual words like "hot" or "sexy," or talks again and again about the sexual activities of children or teens?

No.

- ☐ Masturbates so often that it gets in the way of important day-to-day activities?

Unknown, but would account for all the times he wouldn't show up, which were numerous.

- ☒ Has an interest in sexual fantasies involving children and seems unclear about what's appropriate with children?

Fantasies unknown. But yes, he was clearly confused about what was appropriate.

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- ☐ Looks at child sexual abuse material or downloads/views pornography and is not willing to show whether children are involved?

Unknown.

- ☐ Asks adult partners to dress or act like a child or teen during sexual activity?

No. The only reference I have is a time when someone used their washer and dryer and decided to sort their dried clothes, fold, and put them away. Sterling was overly upset about that, beyond the normal embarrassment of someone seeing your laundry — almost like it struck a different nerve. I felt like there was clearly something that they didn't want others to find in their clothing.

- ☒ Has been known to make poor decisions while misusing drugs or alcohol?

Yes, from time to time.

- ☒ Justifies behavior, defends poor choices or harmful acts, blames others, and refuses responsibility for behaviors?

Absolutely.

- ☒ Minimizes hurtful or harmful behaviors when confronted; denies harmfulness of actions or words despite a clear negative impact?

Yes. Most certainly.

- ☒ Buys a particular child or teen gifts, takes them on special adventures, or gives them money for no apparent reason?

Yes.

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- ☒ Insists on uninterrupted time alone with a child?

Yes.

- ☒ Talks excessively and/or secretively to a child/teen online?

Yes.

- ☒ Is overly interested in the sexuality of a particular child or teen, such as talking repeatedly about the child's developing body or interferes with normal teen dating?

Yes. Heard through Chris being so excited over BlueBird's cracking voice and how "gorgeous" it was when he heard it.

- ☒ Does not have any close adult friends or just a very few that are kept at a distance?

Yes.

- ☒ Makes fun of a child's body parts, calls a child sexual names such as "stud," "whore," or "slut"?

Yes. Sometimes I heard him tell BlueBird that he was fat and that he eats too much. Also used the language, "Dirty Whore"

- ☒ Encourages silence and secrets with a child?

Yes.

- ☐ Talks about sexual fantasies with children?

No.

I remember reading through that list and feeling like every question was an echo of something I'd seen or felt—even though I couldn't always find the words

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to say it out loud. Each item forced me to confront what I already knew but couldn't fully accept. That's the power of a checklist: it doesn't tell you what to think, but it reminds you that your instincts are worth listening to.

CONVERSATION CHECKLIST

And then there were the other steps I had to take in order to prepare myself for the “conversation.” What to say and how to say it were just the beginning of the obvious steps.

Learning.

I took the step of educating myself so I wouldn't fall into the trap of thinking, *Maybe the things I've witnessed are normal*. I needed to get rid of any doubt and define, in my own mind, not just what I felt, but what I had actually seen—the behaviors that had clearly crossed boundaries.

Begin a Journal.

Because of all the lying and gaslighting I experienced, I had to keep a kind of log book to keep myself oriented in the correct reality. I needed to be able to look back at what had actually happened and not what Chris tried to make me believe had happened.

Take Care of Yourself.

The guide suggests having support for your own feelings and concerns, acknowledging that the conversation—and the ongoing conversations that would follow—could be a difficult process for anyone, especially when it's with someone you care about. I failed to do this. I underestimated the real need for this suggestion, thinking I was strong enough to handle it alone. In the end, I paid the price for that oversight.

Find an Ally.

This step, they said, was a critical component to being able to do anything about what was happening. The guide made it sound so simple, like finding an ally

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was just a matter of asking. The truth was that the moment I spoke a word to anyone, hoping to gain support, was the moment I was exiled in their minds. Everyone around me responded like my concerns weren't warranted, even before they knew a shred of the story. They happily accepted any reason to discredit me. I found myself alone in this struggle and regretting that I had even asked for help.

Think about What to Say.

I did this with clarity. I approached the conversation with openness. I pointed out the boundaries that shouldn't be crossed. I wasn't accusatory of anything that hadn't already been done. I emphasized how much I cared for Chris and that I wasn't going to abandon him—I wanted to help.

Practice the Conversation.

I spent hours rehearsing the conversation with Chris. I role-played both myself and him in the session. But my role-play didn't include any dialogue for when the conversation goes south—no one had told me what to say when he shut down or walked away.

Choose a Time and a Place to Talk.

The guide doesn't mention what to do when the person simply runs from you and refuses to engage in any serious conversation. It doesn't mention what to do when you ask them to speak with you, they agree, and then never show up.

Looking back, I realize the checklist and steps gave me a structure to face the truth, but they didn't fully prepare me for the messy reality of what came next. I learned that no guidebook can account for every possibility—the way people will react, the way some will turn away, the loneliness that comes when you try to protect the vulnerable and no one else wants to see it. But at least I had something to hold on to, something grounding in simple and easy-to-understand organized lists.

REACH OUT

My nerves were on fire, every part of me stretched thin from stress, confusion, and heartache. I couldn't handle it anymore. I had tried to keep it in. I had tried to find a way to navigate it on my own, but I was unraveling fast. It was beyond me.

So I did something I rarely do. I reached out.

I messaged two of my closest friends, told them I was dealing with something serious, and asked for guidance. One of them—the one I held in the highest esteem—replied that they were free that afternoon and would meet me. I didn't plan out what I was going to say. I didn't rehearse. I wasn't even worried about whether they'd believe me. I was too far past the point of caring about that. I was just going to lay it out, like I always do: head-on and to the point.

I was already sitting outside in the common area, trying to dry my eyes, when they pulled up. I greeted them with a weary smile, and they sat across from me.

When they asked what was going on, I warned them: "This is going to be hard to hear."

They nodded.

And I began.

I explained as best as I could about the overwhelming shift in Chris's behavior. How all his time was being consumed by BlueBird. How the conversations had grown increasingly inappropriate. I mentioned the sexual language—not in graphic detail, but enough to show my concern—and how, when I raised it with Chris, he brushed me off like I was the one overreacting.

But what I didn't say—not out loud—was the quiet truth already sitting at the edge of my awareness. That I had come to believe something was deeply wrong. I had strong suspicions, stronger than I let on. But I wasn't ready to condemn. I wasn't ready to say it plainly: that I feared Chris was crossing a line no one comes back from.

I wanted to believe he could stop. That if I just found the right way to talk to him, to explain how serious this was, he'd hear me. That he'd get help. *That maybe Chris was just... reckless, not deliberate.*

So instead of telling my friend what I my inner voice was saying, I told them what I suspected with urgency. I gave them the information that alarmed me, hoping they'd help me figure out what to do next. Hoping they'd see what I saw—and maybe validate the part I was too scared to name.

There was a brief silence. Then my friend, calm and casual, asked, "How can you be sure he's twelve?"

"Because he said so," I replied. "And you can tell by his voice. His voice cracked. He sounded young."

No reply to that. Instead, they said, "You'll just have to let the police sort it out." That wasn't on my list of possible outcomes.

I blinked. Nodded slowly. "Umm, okay."

They continued, "The best thing for you is... don't get too close. When you see them, just say hello and go on about your day."

They stood, gave me a hug, and added, "Take care of yourself. Don't worry about things you can't control."

I smiled and thanked them. But inside, my mind was racing.

As I walked back to my apartment, a hundred questions screamed through my brain. *Were they saying I should go to the police? Or were they suggesting I wait until someone else does? And in the meantime, I'm just supposed to say a casual "hello" in passing—like I didn't witness anything?*

Did they really believe I could sit at the same table with everyone for the holidays, eating dinner with people who, to my eyes, were reckless with children's lives and had no remorse for their actions?

Did they really think I could wipe my memory clean and pretend none of this mattered?

I'm not someone who believes a tree makes no sound if it falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it. Harm doesn't vanish because we look away.

Why weren't they concerned for the boy?

Did they think Chris's behavior with this boy was in any way normal?

And Chris. He needed help. Intervention. Someone to stop him, pull him back before he did something that couldn't be undone. He didn't need enabling. He needed friends who were willing to do the hard thing.

Later that night, I tried to rationalize it all. *Maybe my friend just didn't know what to say.*

Truthfully, I'm not sure I would've had any better advice to give if someone came to me with the same story.

Maybe there was no "right" answer.

But even with that perspective, I regretted reaching out.

I had felt less confused before seeking help. Their response had left me emptier than when I was carrying it alone.

I just needed to feel like someone else saw what I saw--and, more importantly, **believed it mattered.**

PICKUP AND RETRIEVAL

One afternoon, just after lunch, I was outside smoking a cigarette on the sidewalk when I saw a car signal to turn into the parking lot.

It was Chris and Sterling.

Chris had apparently just picked Sterling up from the airport—he'd returned from the mainland after attending his mother's funeral. They pulled into the lot without a wave, without even a glance in my direction. I was three feet away, standing in plain sight, and neither of them acknowledged me. Not a nod, not a word, not a flicker of recognition.

It felt brutal because it was dehumanizing.

I wasn't a stranger.

I wasn't someone they barely knew.

I was someone who had loved them—who had survived the isolation of the pandemic alongside them, who mourned with them when our neighbor and friend died in the adjacent apartment, who watched their dog Luna with genuine care, and treated them not just like people—but like they were something special to me. And cried so many times over the past month, trying to make sense of what happened to our friendship and where did my friends go.

Chris had nothing left to say to me. And the clarity of that hit like a punch to the chest. My health continued to deteriorate, but worse than that—so did my hope.

All of this—every ounce of this mistreatment—stemmed from his need to pour everything he had into BlueBird.

Whatever was left unsaid had been replaced with actions too loud to ignore.

PETTY

Now it was nearly two weeks since I had seen or heard from Chris. Only a month ago, I had a friendship that brought me so much joy, to think of it as something real in my life now seemed distorted and delusional.

I was in the common area, sitting by myself, trying to sort out all the problems in my head, hoping I could reorient my reality and get a grip on my thoughts. I noticed a neighbor—someone I considered a friend—approaching, and I quickly tried to hold back my tears and wipe away the ones that had already broken through.

They sat down beside me, and we went through the usual "how are you" courtesies. I replied that I was doing okay, that everything was fine. But they raised an eyebrow and said they didn't believe me. I have one of those faces that

doesn't do well with lying—everything I feel shows up on it. So, I came clean, though I didn't want to tell the full, hard truth.

I kept the names out of it, but I started to generalize. I told them that I'd had a friendship that had recently unraveled. That someone I had trusted and cared for didn't seem to care to fix what was broken and had discarded the whole connection like it had never meant anything at all.

As I spoke, Sterling arrived and sat down next to me. I hesitated for just a moment, but I didn't stop talking. I figured I wasn't saying anything that was a secret—just pain I couldn't bottle up anymore.

After a minute or so, Sterling got up and walked away without saying a word. It must have clicked who I was talking about. My neighbor gave me a hug, offered a few words of encouragement, and mentioned they had something cooking in the oven. Then they, too, headed off.

Only moments later, Sterling returned—and Chris was with him.

Chris walked straight over and sat next to me. He pulled me into a hug and said, "I missed you."

I asked him, "Where have you been this whole time?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I was just upset and being petty about things."

"Petty?" I asked, stunned. "Petty about what?"

He brushed it off like it was nothing. "It's not important. I was just being dumb."

I felt drained, like I didn't have the strength to push for more answers.

But part of me was relieved.

He was back, and things felt okay again—for the moment. He started talking about some new music that had just come out and wanted to share it with me.

I let it all unfold.

We were back to laughing, joking, and carrying on like friends again.

But something in me had gone still.

After the weeks of silence—of being tossed aside—when he finally chose to speak, he reduced all of it to one word.

“Petty.”

That’s what it was to him.

To me, it was a brand smashed into my forehead.

Chapter Six

SEPTEMBER 2022

REASSURANCES

Chris and I had been messaging each other back and forth, so things seemed to be as normal as they could be. I found my own things to do in placement of playing games with Chris.

One weekend afternoon, I was sitting at the common area, when Chris and Sterling arrived. We exchanged some small talk and then Chris spoke up and looked at me.

He said, "Look, I know you've had some concerns and questions about my interactions with BlueBird, and I've been really inconsiderate and have ignored you, which was wrong of me."

Taken back by his mature attitude, I continued to listen.

"I want to let you know there is nothing to worry about and that I am very considerate of BlueBird and I know that he has some attachment to me because of his past with his father. But I do keep it in check with him so that he doesn't get confused on the reality of things. For instance, BlueBird had told me that he loved me one night and I had to gently admonish him for it, and explained why it was he shouldn't be using words like that. He said he understood and it never happened again."

I said, "Ok. Well that is good to know. I am glad you are actually being considerate of his well-being."

Chris continued, "And I made sure that his mother knew that I was sending him gift cards and that she was ok with it."

I reacted, "What?! Why are you sending him gift cards?"

Chris said, "Calm down. I get these \$5 gift cards from GameStop because I am on the Platinum Membership. They do not cost me anything so I just send them to him. I think it is just his mom that supports them financially, so I feel bad for him, it's the least I can do."

I said, "Oh ok. Sorry you scared me for a second with the whole buying him gifts bit. I'm glad his mom knows then. That's important."

He continued, "In fact, I am really cool with his mom. We talked on the phone and even FaceTimed with each other. Everything is completely transparent. So now you can see there is nothing to worry about. I've got it under control."

I said, "Ok then. And thank you. I am glad you are telling me this now, and I'm not sure why you didn't fill me in before; it would have really prevented a lot of this conflict between us."

He even went on to explain that sometimes the intensity of the games they played got him overly excited, and in those moments, he forgot to regulate himself. He said he didn't mean any harm—it was just that BlueBird came across as more mature than most boys his age, and that blurred the lines for him at

times. But he assured me that he was aware of it now and trying to be more careful.

Chris hugged me and said, "I know. That was my fault and I am sorry."

I felt a sense of relief, even though a lot of things were still questionable. I knew Chris hadn't truly earned my trust back, but I was desperate to stop questioning someone I once felt safe around. I needed just one day without spiraling, without wondering, without feeling like my world was tilting in ways I couldn't fix.

In some ways, things didn't seem so bad anymore. I had stopped asking Chris to hang out, and he had been ignoring me already, so there was a natural distance growing between us. I reasoned with myself that I didn't have undeniable proof, and maybe Chris simply related to young boys because of what happened to him—not in a sexual way, but because he was emotionally stunted, stuck at a development stage closer to their age.

In my mind, the pain was gone, and that was enough reason not to pursue the questions still lingering in the background. I needed peace more than I needed answers. I needed to breathe—even if it meant I would be holding my breath later.

UPDATED FRIENDS

After the conversation with Chris, where things seemed to settle and clarity was finally given, I felt like I had some damage control to do. I couldn't shake the thought of what I had said to the two friends I'd confided in just days earlier. It weighed on me—the possibility that I had unfairly colored their view of him during a moment of pain and confusion. I wasn't out to smear Chris, I never was. If anything, I was clinging to the idea that things could go back to how they were before everything got tangled.

So I reached out to both of them. It wasn't dramatic or emotional—just sincere. I let them know that Chris and I had talked things through and that it turned out to be a misunderstanding. I told them he had given me reasons to believe

him, and I chose to hold onto that. Trust is fragile, but it's also something I wasn't ready to throw away. Not yet. I still saw him as my friend, and I wanted them to see that too.

Both friends took in what I said seemingly without judgment. There was a sense of relief in their reactions—not just for me, but maybe because they didn't want to get caught in the middle of something messy either. They nodded, and we moved on. Nothing more was said, and I didn't press for anything deeper. It felt like enough at the time.

I left those conversations feeling lighter, like I had hit a reset button. Maybe not on everything, but at least on how things looked on the surface. In that moment, I wanted peace more than I wanted answers. And so I chose to believe what I needed to believe.

HOMETOWN TIES

I was talking with Chris and Sterling one night when they mentioned that an old friend had reached out and was coming to stay with them for a couple of weeks. They asked if I'd be interested in doing things with them while their friend was visiting, and I responded without hesitation that I would be delighted. I looked forward to meeting someone who had been a long-time part of their lives.

More than that, I felt a strange sort of relief. If this person had been in their lives long enough to just drop in like that, surely there was a deep connection. Maybe someone from their past could offer some perspective—maybe even notice what I had been noticing. I didn't say it aloud, but part of me hoped their friend might bring some much-needed objectivity, maybe even act as an anchor. A silent wish formed: please let this person be some sort of ally, someone who "knew" them.

Later that night, Chris invited me to walk around the park as he took his dog for a stroll. As we walked and talked, I began to pick up on something in his tone. He didn't seem especially thrilled about the upcoming visit. So, I asked.

He admitted that the space situation was going to be tight. That made sense—it was a studio apartment shared by two people already. I told him that if it got

too cramped, he could stay at my place or just come up to relax and play games whenever he wanted. I wanted to make things easier for them if I could.

Then I asked—perhaps overstepping—if everything was alright with their friend. The way he mentioned their sudden arrival made it seem like something might be wrong.

He shared that the friend had been going through marital issues and that was likely why they were visiting. Apparently, the friend was also disgruntled about having to return to work after a long stretch of relying on their spouse's income. It sounded like a tough spot.

I didn't know anything about this person, so there wasn't much I could say that would be useful. But I offered a bit of optimism by saying it would all work out. I hoped it would be...for both our sakes.

ESCAPE ARTIST

One afternoon, a couple of neighbors popped by with this little cardboard box and asked me if I was missing a cat. I said no and opened my door further, revealing my cat doing figure-eights around my legs. They gave a disappointing sigh and wondered if I knew of anyone else on our floor who owned a cat.

The only people I was familiar with were the couple living on the left side of my apartment, and they had never mentioned anything about owning a pet. The neighbor from the far side of the hall starts telling me how she found a cat on the ledge outside of her window and brought it inside to keep it safe. Being that we lived on the thirty-sixth floor, this was quite a frightening story.

She pulled back the towel that was covering the cardboard box, opening it to show me her rescue. I looked in and gasped because it was no cat; it was a very tiny kitten, less than six months old. To think its life was just one gust away from being cut short was heart-wrenching.

After discussing what we knew of our other neighbors, we were able to deduce that the kitten must belong to the girl living on the right side of me. I told the

two saviors that I traded phone numbers with her when she moved in. The two ladies confessed they were ill-equipped for cat care but were relieved as I offered to be the kitten-sitter and track down the owner.

I reached out to my neighbor and told her the lady at the end of the hall saved her kitten; she was overwhelmed with joy. She picked up her little escape artist later that evening after finishing her shift at work. I was so thankful the entire situation didn't end tragically.

DON'T LOOK

After a very short period, Chris started asking me to play games with him online again. Reluctantly, I went against my better judgment. I didn't fully grasp the price I might pay if I rolled the dice and tested the waters again.

The first time we played together, surprisingly, everything was fine. But by the second or third time, Chris started presenting more and more evidence that validated my instincts, and it was wrecking my world. He was making it extremely difficult for me to trust his reassurances. It wasn't suspicion or paranoia that caused the problem. It was the lying—bold-faced lying.

At first, he would end our hangouts saying he was tired and heading to bed. Yet, an hour or two later, I would sign on and there he would be: online, playing with BlueBird. Then there were the times he'd invite me to do something, only to either not show up or come up with some excuse. And sure enough, I'd see him online with BlueBird instead.

I reasoned with myself that maybe he just didn't want to get my suspicions stirred up again. Maybe he thought minimizing the visible time he spent with BlueBird would keep the peace. So, I confronted him calmly and without accusation.

"You know, after we talked and you gave me the reassurances I needed, I believed you. But when you lie about being offline just to spend time with BlueBird, it doesn't protect anything—it just destroys whatever trust we have left."

But instead of seeing the simple solution, he shot back, "What are you talking about... lying about what?"

That old, familiar chill ran through me. I could smell the nightmare returning. I didn't push further — not because I believed him, but because I already knew the truth.

JEALOUS

Sterling asked me if I wanted to go with him while he walked the dog around the neighborhood. I agreed and met him downstairs.

All the while we were walking, I couldn't shake the notion that Sterling had to have noticed something off—he lived with Chris, after all. There was no way he hadn't seen the signs. Maybe he was in denial, or maybe he didn't know how to confront it. But to me, something had shifted, and the shift wasn't small.

About halfway around the park, I eased into it. I started cautiously, framing my concern like a question.

"Don't you think it's odd that Chris spends so much time with someone so much younger than him? I mean, he has friends his own age but doesn't seem to care about them anymore."

Sterling let out a sigh before replying. "Not really. It's pretty common."

There was a beat of silence while I gathered my next thought. Then he said, "Wait, I thought we were past this."

I lied. "We are. It's just... don't you think it's reckless? I mean, it could get both of you into serious trouble. This isn't just about him—it's your relationship, too."

He shrugged. "No. Why should I be concerned?" Then, as if I was the irrational one: "Doug, he's just someone Chris has fun gaming with. Is he not allowed to have other friends besides you?"

That stung. "That's not the point."

"Look," Sterling said, half-exasperated, "if you want to hang out with Chris, then why don't you ask him to do something besides playing games? Like go to a movie or hiking or something."

I was frustrated. "Don't you think I've tried that?"

"Chris is just doing what he enjoys," Sterling said flatly. "I don't know what else to tell you."

I fell silent. And then, as if something clicked for him, Sterling said, "I get it. I see what's going on. You're just jealous. Jealous of his friendship with BlueBird. Now it makes sense."

I blinked. "What?! How could anyone be jealous of a 13-year-old kid? That doesn't make sense."

But even as I said it, something in me began to splinter. I wasn't jealous of a kid—I knew that much. What I felt was more like dread, like I was the only one who saw the danger and everyone else was shrugging it off. And now, instead of listening to me, Sterling was rewriting the story. Framing me as petty. Possessive. Maybe even unstable. It wasn't just hurtful—it was terrifying. Because if he could twist it that easily, then Chris would believe him. And once that narrative took hold, anything I said would be filtered through it. Dismissed. Invalidated.

Just then, we turned the final corner and saw our building ahead. Chris stood outside, smoking.

"Hey," he called down casually.

Without skipping a beat, Sterling shouted, "He is just jealous, that's all. That's why he's been acting weird."

It felt like a slap. Like I'd been framed in real-time.

"No," I said quickly. "That's not it at all. I'm not jealous. That's ridiculous. Sure, I miss hanging out with Chris—but that's not jealousy."

Chris flicked the cigarette and walked off. "You all figure it out. I'm done."

GROSS

Late one night, Chris, Sterling, and I took Luna for a walk around the park. However, during the majority of our stroll, Chris was preoccupied with his phone, reading and writing messages. Every so often, he would speak a word or two out loud to his phone as if he were speaking directly to the other person, followed occasionally by a burst of laughter. Clearly, he was in his own little world and having a great time.

As we were finishing the last leg of the walk, Chris put his phone away and began to talk about BlueBird yet again. He was all smiles and started describing the qualities he liked about BlueBird. "BlueBird is absolutely amazing! I am so happy I met him," he said. "I feel like he's the most incredible person I've ever known."

My heart skipped a beat as I turned to look at Chris.

It was as if he was on cloud nine.

I had never heard nor imagined I would ever hear a grown man casually express such adoration and fondness for an unrelated child they had only recently met, and the worst part was that it was someone I cared about who said it.

Sterling quickly noticed the look of astonishment on my face and slapped Chris on the shoulder, saying, "Gross! Cut it out." Chris didn't react or mention BlueBird again for the rest of the walk.

SPADES

I was spending more time hanging out with Sterling, mostly because Chris had stopped even trying to hide his behavior. It was too painful to keep looking at it, and it was breaking down the last wall of trust I had left.

After work, Sterling would come over, and we'd play Spades as a team. We didn't work well together, and we rarely won, mainly because it was only a distraction for me. I couldn't focus on the cards and would throw down the wrong one many times.

Sterling had been there the day Chris made his assurances—that there was no reason for concern over BlueBird. Since then, given how obvious it had become that something was off, I figured Sterling must have noticed it too. He even gave me some confirmation during a dog walk around the park, when he lightly slapped Chris on the shoulder and admonished him.

It gave me a little hope. Maybe he was just as confused about how to handle it. Maybe together we could get Chris to listen. I just needed Sterling to be on the same page.

One night, after losing several games in a row, we decided to throw in the towel. Out of nowhere, Sterling said he thought Chris was in love with someone else.

I immediately lit up. "Thank God you see it too! Finally!"

But when I looked at him, he had this distant, disconnected look on his face.

He asked, "What do you mean? Do you know who it is?"

I blinked, confused. "How do you not? You, out of anyone, are the one most aware of his activities—you live with him! Who does he spend all his free time with? Who does he talk about constantly? BlueBird! Who else?"

I paused, searching for any recognition in his expression.

"Wait," I said. "Who do you think it is?"

A sudden worry crept in. Surely he didn't think it was me. After everything that had happened, after how little time Chris and I spent together now, there was no way he could possibly think that.

He said, "Gabe."

I just stared at him, stunned. "Gabe?"

It made absolutely no sense. None. In the beginning, we all used to play games with Gabe online, but by the time I stopped gaming, Gabe was hardly ever around. And Chris and Gabe never interacted the way Chris does with BlueBird. Not even close.

"What makes you think it's Gabe?" I asked, trying to understand.

I couldn't believe how oblivious Sterling was. It was almost impossible to be this blind to what was happening right in front of us. I questioned in my head: *How can he not see this? He's even pointed out before that Chris talks too much about BlueBird.*

None of it made sense. Sterling made no sense.

I looked at him like he had completely lost his mind, wondering if years of drinking had rotted his brain and left him with some kind of alcoholic stage-three dementia.

Still trying to get to the bottom of it, I asked, "What made you think he's cheating on you to begin with? What triggered your suspicion?"

He said, "Oh, the shift in his lifelong plans. Like, just changing plans that we had already decided."

Again, it made no sense. "Really? How does that translate to 'he's in love with someone else'?" I asked, genuinely trying to understand.

He nodded, and that was the end of the conversation.

I realized then: either Sterling couldn't see what was happening with Chris, refused to see it, or was pretending it wasn't happening. Any hope I had that Sterling might help faded—and the realization that I would be alone in confronting things fully set in.

DETOUR ATTEMPT

One evening, Sterling and I were chatting casually when the topic of the Vegas trip came up again. That's when he suddenly threw out, "You know, it might actually make more sense if you just met us there instead of flying out together."

I paused.

That was never the plan.

Traveling together was half the fun—or so I thought. I reminded him that the idea was for all of us to fly out together, to make a trip of it as friends. I outright asked, “Why?” But he kept pushing the idea that I should just meet them there. He said something like, “We might be flying out on a different date and didn’t think you would be able to get the time off from work.”

I asked, “Why not?” He stuttered to answer.

As the conversation went on, it felt more like he was trying to push me out of the group travel plans—not completely, but enough to keep me separate. The tone shifted. It wasn’t just a suggestion—it was persistent, like he really wanted me to change my plans.

I asked him flat out, “Where are you all going to first?” He got a little cagey and said, “To see an old friend.”

“Who?”

“You don’t know them; we never talked about them before.” But he didn’t even offer up a name.

I provided a quick solution: “No need to change plans. I can just fly with you all and stay in the hotel room while you visit your friend. No big.”

He paused for a while, then said, “Well... um... no.”

I cut him off. “Just make it work, stop being so complicated. I’m flexible and easygoing. Let me know the price and I’ll pay you for it.”

I walked off and headed home, thinking how this trip was starting to make me uncomfortable—because of how hard he pushed for me not to travel with them.

It felt off.

It was another instance of Sterling trying to reroute the plans, and it chipped away at my trust. By that point, I was beginning to wonder if there was something—or someone—they didn’t want me to be included in. But what?

LUCKY STRIKE

Chris messaged me one afternoon, asking if I wanted to join him and his friend from the mainland for drinks and some fun around town. I was looking forward to it. I didn't get out much those days, and the idea of meeting someone important enough in Chris's life felt like a small honor.

We met up and found parking near a place called Lucky Strike. It's this massive multi-level bowling alley-slash-arcade with a full restaurant and a sports bar wrapped around it. It's the kind of place that wants to be everything at once: dinner, drinks, games, noise, neon.

Before going in, the three of us stood outside the car for a bit. Chris and his friend were trading stories and laughing, picking up right where they must have left off. It was easy to tell they had a good history—the rhythm of their jokes, the comfort in their pauses. I liked his friend right away.

They had a direct, grounded energy—the kind of person who doesn't need to perform for anyone. A solid personality. I tend to get along best with that type—people who have discovered their own individual identity. There was a steadiness in the way they carried their self, and a blunt, straightforward approach in how they spoke—a familiar, shared quality I appreciated.

We went inside, grabbed drinks, and bounced from game to game. We raced motorcycles, lost too many quarters trying to push others off the edge of those coin-pusher machines, and I humiliated myself with my '80s Pac-Man skills. But it felt good to laugh. The kind of good that reminds you you're still capable of feeling what joy is supposed to be. For a few hours, I wasn't worried about all the things lingering in my mind. I just let go. It was much-needed relief.

A few days later, I was downstairs having a smoke before work when I saw Chris pacing out front, phone in hand, visibly stressed. I asked what was wrong.

His tone was sharp, practically shouting. His friend had taken his car to grab a few things at the store and hadn't returned. Chris had to be at work in thirty minutes and was starting to panic. He kept dialing and texting—clearly in heightened anxiety.

I tried to calm him down. I said, "Hey, no worries, you can—"

"WHAT?" he snapped.

I blinked, taken aback. It wasn't worth calling out his behavior or escalating the situation. I let it roll off. I told him he could take my car if he needed it. Just as the words left my mouth, his friend pulled up. They barely had time to grab their bags before Chris jumped in and drove off without a word.

I stood there for a second and watched the dust settle. His friend and I exchanged a shrug—a quiet, mutual recognition that neither of us fully understood why he was so tense.

It struck me how disproportionate his reaction had been. I rarely saw Chris upset over anything, let alone something that minor. It wasn't like he was stranded. And it certainly wasn't unfamiliar for him to be the one making others wait. I thought about all the times I'd adjusted my schedule, shrugged off his delays, and put up with his complete absences. He would flip if I acted that way each time.

Later that day, he messaged me and said he'd take me up on the offer to use my car next time—no mention of his behavior. No apology. Just a practical follow-up to a moment that had left me rattled.

I hoped he had apologized to his friend.

A few months ago, that kind of sharpness from him would have been rare, but now it was becoming routine. The line between closeness and comfort had started to blur, and with it, so had his respect for me.

A SLICE OF SOMETHING OFF

That time of year always came with a flurry of birthday planning. Our little social circle had a string of them lined up, and we figured it was best to split the work. I offered to take care of the cake for one of the events—specifically for a friend I cared a lot about.

There was this specialty shop tucked downtown that made the most divine cakes. They used fresh fruit—raspberries, strawberries, blackberries—but what set them apart was how little sugar they used. Just enough to keep the sweetness honest, without overdoing it. It let the fruit speak for itself. You didn't feel weighed down after eating it.

It was delicate. Different.

The first gathering took place in the common area of our building. Everyone showed up. The energy was warm and playful—we ran through the usual party games, sang our off-key birthday tunes, and made a little noise. Nothing over the top, but just enough to feel like a real celebration.

Later that night, I invited everyone up to my place for part two—more birthday wishes, more cake. We played a few more games, but as midnight crept in, I had to shut it down. Building curfews. Noise policies. All that adult stuff.

Everyone said their goodnight and filtered out—everyone except Chris and his friend visiting from back home. The three of us lingered, chatting over the last sips of our drinks. There was some teasing about how often Chris had been hanging out at my place.

I laughed it off. "It's not because of me," I said. "He just comes up to play games—gives you all a chance to spread out."

Then his friend shifted gears. "Hey," they asked Chris, "what was going on with you last night?"

Chris blinked, caught off guard. "Me? What do you mean?"

"Well, you were gaming really late," his friend said. "And I woke up at one point and heard you on the headset saying some... pretty wild stuff. Naughty stuff."

Then came the pause. "And you said something like, 'Don't let your mom know,' or 'Don't tell your mom.' It was weird. Who were you talking to?"

And there it was. Confirmation that I hadn't imagined things. I jumped in immediately, "See? That's what I'm saying."

But Chris just brushed it off with a laugh. “Who knows? Your guess is as good as mine.”

That was it.

No explanation.

Just another deflection.

Chris always knew how to toss sand over something and make it disappear—at least for the moment.

EXPLICIT AND ILLICIT

I had just returned from the store and stopped at the common area for a smoke. As I was getting ready to head up to my apartment, a neighbor approached. We greeted each other with some small talk. Then they asked if they could ask me something personal and keep it confidential. Intrigued, I agreed.

They told me they were concerned about my friendship with Chris, as they had not seen us hanging out like we used to. Discussing Chris was a delicate situation for me, and at the time, I wasn't prepared to divulge the full list of circumstances with Chris. Their perception had merit, therefore, I admitted that while my friendship with Chris still existed, it had indeed seen better days, albeit without going into specifics.

Seeming disheartened by the news, they offered words of encouragement, suggesting that good friendships have a way of mending over time. I appreciated the sentiment.

Yet, I wondered why there was a request for discretion since there was no need for it, so I asked. After a brief pause, they elaborated on their concern, telling me about a recent event they witnessed at Chris's apartment.

They said they were over there to play cards with Sterling and others, and when they arrived, Chris was playing his video games online with kids because there was a moment when Chris took off the headset and the party chat was coming

out of the speakers. When Chris finished eating, he put his headset on and resumed playing.

Moments later, Chris started saying inappropriate things, and they clarified they were unfit because they were sure he was still playing with the same children as before since it was the same game and he had just told them that he would return momentarily.

I asked for examples to understand where they were coming from. They said Chris repeatedly laughed and said, "I'll suck you so hard," and "I'm gonna suck you so hard." as well as other versions along the same line.

They continued to say that they were not the only ones who were taken aback by Chris's behavior as it escalated in frequency and became more graphic. Sterling must have noticed the vibe immediately change in the room and took Chris out in the hallway. When they came back in, Chris resumed his video game, but the uncomfortable behavior ceased.

They asked me if I knew of anything going on with Chris that could explain what was happening, but I said I had also noticed some odd behavior from him lately and dismissed it as not really knowing who Chris was after all.

Meanwhile, in the back of my mind, I wanted to say, "You're lucky that is the only thing you've had to endure hearing." However, I didn't dare mention anything—they already seemed disturbed enough by what they witnessed.

Chapter Seven

OCTOBER 2022

OBSESSION UNVEILED

When their friend left for the mainland, so did the last of the respect Chris had for me.

I'd like to say it started with him using my car. I had no problem loaning it to him—I offered, after all. But when he no longer needed it, I assumed he'd return my keys. When that didn't happen, I wasn't upset or anything. I simply messaged him to let him know I had an upcoming doctor appointment and to drop the keys off when he was free. He was definitely around. I saw him online often, gaming with BlueBird.

Nearly a week had passed since his friend left, and now I was two days from the appointment. Still nothing from Chris, other than a lazy "ok" in response to my message. I reminded him again. Finally, the day before the appointment, I told him I was heading to his place to get the keys. I walk in, he's on his headset, mid-game, and just points to the table and says in a dumbed-down voice, "Sawry." I grabbed the keys and left.

The next morning, I was running late because a morning meeting spilled over. I messaged the doctor to say I was on my way, then headed to the car. When I started the engine, the gas light came on—barely enough fuel to reach the nearest station.

Then the pattern became more frequent.

Chris would message me: "Wanna hang out?" "Wanna go for a walk?" "Wanna game tonight?"

I'd say yes—every time.

Then silence.

I'd wait, thinking maybe he got caught up. Minutes passed. Then hours. Sometimes, whole days.

I'd check my phone. Nothing. Check our shared location—he was home. Check his online status—he was with BlueBird.

I'd send a message. No reply.

Then two days later, he'd message again like none of it had happened: "Wanna hang out?" And I'd say yes. Again. And again, nothing.

Each time, I asked myself:

Did I imagine the invite?

Did I misunderstand?

Am I making this harder than it needs to be?

But no. The messages were there. The pattern was real.

He just didn't care.

This started happening 2-3 times a week. I finally asked him what stopped him from just sending a text. Just basic courtesy. Why disappear like that?

He always said the same thing—that he forgot.

Even when he'd just spoken to me 15 minutes prior, he'd claim he had no memory of it.

Obvious lies.

Classic gaslighting.

We barely played games together anymore. And if we did, he would exit the voice chat and the game the moment BlueBird logged in—usually without a single word.

Like I wasn't even there.

He still came to my place occasionally, but regardless of how long he stayed, once that notification tone went off, he'd make some excuse and leave.

Every time.

It didn't matter what we were doing.

His entire routine revolved around BlueBird: wake up, contact BlueBird, go to work, chat with BlueBird, come home and log on with BlueBird. I knew because my gut told me something was wrong, and I began monitoring his online activity. More than once, he lied about what he was doing. I didn't confront him right away. I waited until I was ready.

When I finally did confront him, I told him I believed his assurances that nothing was going on. But I didn't understand the lies and secrecy. It only made it look like I couldn't trust him. As expected, he denied everything. Gaslighted me. He never admitted to a single thing, and honestly, I was too worn down to press him further.

After that, Chris made sure to shut me out completely. He hid his online status nearly all the time. He switched to a third-party voice chat app and created a private room, only accessible by invitation. *I never got one.*

Then, one day, BlueBird unfriended me. No warning. No interaction. I hadn't spoken to him in weeks. I'm certain Chris pushed him to do it. BlueBird didn't seem the type to care about curating his friends list; he had over 500 people on there.

What Chris was doing looked more than obsessive. It consumed him. Like he had taken something that rewired his entire identity. Whatever part of my friend remained, I couldn't find it.

He was gone.

I was left with no advice, no plan, and no one to turn to. I didn't know what to do.

HOUDINI

One early evening, I was returning to my apartment from the common area; I opened my door and heard an unfamiliar "meow." I was shocked when I looked down at my feet and saw my neighbor's kitten, again. I picked him up and let him crawl around on my shoulders to satiate his need for affection and attention.

My cat, Klahan, came out of the bedroom and approached me. The closer Klahan got, the more I could visually sense his agitation. He jumped onto the back of the chair and saw the kitten giving me love, and he didn't hesitate to express his feelings by puffing up and hissing.

Then, my phone started ringing, and I struggled to answer it while keeping the peace between the two cats. It was Sterling calling. He asked me if I could bring him some ice when I made my next trip down to the smoking area. I told him it would be a while as I explained my situation. He offered assistance, and I accepted without hesitation.

Sterling arrived, and we put our heads together to answer how the kitten got into my apartment because all my windows were closed. We pulled out all the appliances and searched the entire wall for an opening. Unable to find a logical explanation, I decided it was best I inform my neighbor again. The little kitten was all over me while I located my neighbor's number, so I pushed the speaker button to be hands-free while I spoke to her.

She was just as bewildered as we were about how this happened but said she couldn't come home until late that evening. However, as an alternative, she said she would call two friends to take care of the little Houdini. If I didn't want to wait, she disclosed that she never locks her door, and I could just put the kitten back in her apartment.

I wasn't comfortable with going into someone's home without them present, so I chose to wait for her friends to show up. Sterling and I agreed it was the best course of action because there was the likelihood the kitten would try to escape again and may not survive another risky stunt.

DESPERATE TIMES

By the time this moment rolled around, everything in my world had already slipped well past the edge of manageable. I was scrambling—grasping for any foothold in a situation that seemed determined to collapse no matter what I did. I felt powerless, unheard, and pushed so far outside of reason that I did something I'm not proud of.

In that haze of confusion and desperation, I came up with an idea that, even then, felt absurd. I told myself that maybe if I could win Sterling's attention—maybe even his affection—I might find a way to reach Chris through him. Logically, it made sense, but it doesn't work in real life situations. Sterling seemed to be the only person Chris listened to, and I was willing to try almost anything to pull him back from the edge he was teetering on.

So one night when Sterling came upstairs to play a game of Spades, I let that reckless idea take the wheel. I flirted—awkwardly, embarrassingly. I'm not

exactly smooth under normal circumstances, let alone when trying to play a role that didn't fit. I made a few suggestive comments, subtle enough that I could pretend I wasn't doing it if he called me on it. But he didn't. He just sat there, either completely unaware or carefully dodging it.

I didn't push further while he was there. But later that night, after he left, I doubled down. I sent a few texts that went unanswered.

And then came the shame. That sinking realization that I'd tried to manipulate someone using something that was never real.

I hadn't wanted him—I just wanted something from him. And when it didn't work, I felt shame.

The next day, I sent an apology. I told him I was drunk, asked him to forget it happened, and hoped he would. Not because I was afraid of what it said about me, but because it was so far from who I wanted to be and because I could see how it could have easily made things much worse.

I won't hide it, no reason to. I'd rather own it than let it be twisted into something it wasn't.

THE OBSTACLE

Sterling was at my apartment one afternoon, wanting to talk about the Las Vegas trip. He seemed tense and hesitant, like he was working up the nerve to bring something up. I asked him what was on his mind and told him to just say it. He muttered for a bit and then finally came out with it.

He said that since I was planning to go, he felt uncomfortable inviting his other friends from Washington. I assumed it was about accommodations or maybe cost—something logistical. But instead, he said he was worried about me and Kelly not getting along and ruining the trip for everyone. That caught me completely off guard.

He went on to say that Kelly traditionally always joins them for Vegas, but now that I was going, he'd have to rescind her invitation, and she'd be upset. He

blamed me for putting him in that position and asked me to help him figure out how to tell her without making her mad.

"What?" I was stunned.

The only history I had with Kelly was from a few years earlier, when she visited Chris and Sterling in Hawaii. They had invited me out to dinner with her, and I hosted a game night afterward so she could meet other people in the friend group.

We never really had a full conversation—she was there to see Chris and Sterling, not to make a new friend in me—but she was perfectly pleasant. Later, we all played cards one night, and that was it.

I never got her number. We weren't friends on social media. I hadn't spoken with her beyond the handful of times we were all hanging out. If there was any dislike between us, it was news to me.

Chris would FaceTime her now and then, and whenever I was around, I'd wave and say hi. It was always civil, and there was no sign of tension.

So I asked Sterling directly: what made him think Kelly and I would argue?

He had no answer beyond vague impressions and how Kelly had "expressed concerns" to Chris—except that when I mentioned seeing her on FaceTime a few weeks earlier, she seemed fine.

Then Sterling said Kelly "didn't know me well enough to speak her mind to my face."

So I told him not to worry about it anymore. I said there was no need to tell Kelly anything—because I wasn't going. I told him he had managed to complicate every discussion about this trip and take all the joy out of it.

And I meant it.

I wasn't going to risk my money or my time on a vacation that already felt like a burden before it even began.

A few days later, I brought it up with Chris and asked him why he never told me Kelly disliked me.

He looked confused.

He said he didn't know she did and asked why I thought that. When I told him what Sterling said, he had no explanation.

He didn't act surprised.

He didn't act concerned.

When I told him I was no longer planning to go, he didn't say much at all.

UNPACKING THE EXCUSES

As the Vegas trip approached, the whole plan began to unravel—not because of scheduling conflicts or cost, but because of Sterling. It became clearer with each passing conversation that he was trying to get me to back out, or at the very least, show up separately. At first, I thought I was overthinking it, but the pattern was undeniable.

Sterling came up with excuse after excuse for why I should fly out on my own, despite the original plan being a group trip. He said things like, “You might not be able to get the time off,” and, “We haven't booked anything yet, so it might just make more sense logistically.” But when I told him I had the time approved and could book right away, he didn't seem relieved or excited—he seemed uncomfortable. He stuttered when I asked him why I couldn't just come with them as planned. There was no good answer, just more pressure to meet them there instead.

Then came the bizarre hotel suggestion. Sterling floated the idea of a luxury suite—the kind with a pool, bar, and entertainment system. When I asked how much, he casually dropped a number: three to five thousand dollars. Not for the trip. Per night. It was so absurd that I couldn't tell if he was serious or if it was another tactic to make me bow out. Either way, I wasn't playing along.

The moment I committed to going, the vibe changed. Sterling lost the buzz he had when we first started talking about the trip. Chris didn't say much either, which felt unusual. If anything, it seemed like they were now stuck figuring out how to manage my presence.

Looking back, it felt orchestrated. Like something was already planned behind closed doors, and my insistence on going disrupted it.

I don't have solid proof of what that something was, but there were breadcrumbs—small, offhand things that didn't sit right.

A few times while we were gaming, Chris made a point to mention the time difference where BlueBird lived. BlueBird would say something like, "I have to get ready for school," and Chris would quickly calculate what time it was there, repeating it out loud. It wasn't casual interest; it was almost like he was trying to figure out his location, rather his time zone.

At the time, I didn't think much of it, but now it lingers in my memory like a warning I didn't know how to read.

I don't know if they knew exactly where BlueBird lived, but if they did, and if this trip was a cover to go there, it would explain everything: the excuses, the hotel cost meant to exclude me, the insistence I travel alone, the cold shift once I refused.

Something was planned.

And I wasn't meant to be there.

DISCOVERY OF LIES

I had refrained from contacting Chris for a while. Occasionally, he'd message me asking to play a game. Sometimes it was with BlueBird, other times it was just a bait-and-switch where he'd vanish mid-conversation and leave me in this irritating holding pattern, wondering if I should reach out or just accept that I'd been ghosted again.

But through it all, there was no progress. No conversation about what had happened. No accountability. He would never let me say, "It doesn't have to be this way." He acted like none of it had ever occurred, like he hadn't said the things he said. He kept evading confrontation, kept up the inappropriate behavior, and kept hiding how he was spending his time.

Then one day, I turned on my Xbox and it prompted me to log in. That's when I saw it—Chris's login was still saved on my system from when he played games at my place. Given the web of lies and the fact that a minor was involved, I felt justified in accessing his account. I

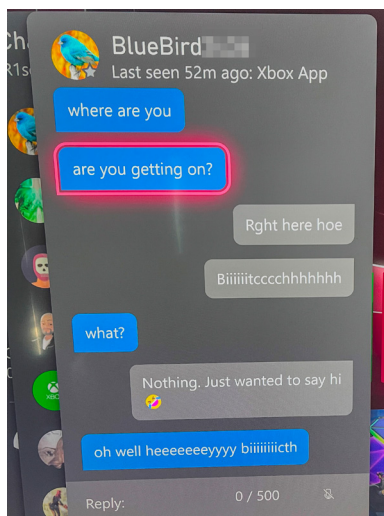


Figure 11: *He used constant, over-the-top greetings to reinforce a fun, exclusive friendship. Groomers mask manipulation under layers of charm—making their attention feel like a reward. (Photo by author)*

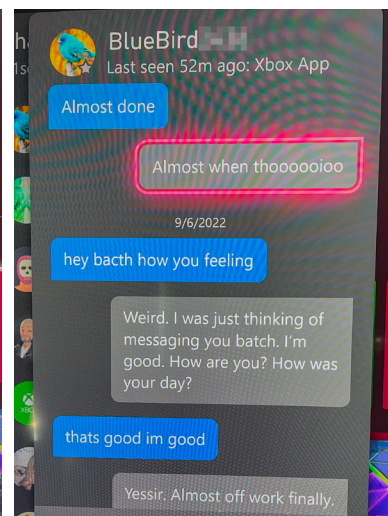


Figure 12: *Even mundane check-ins were met with high-energy responses. Groomers often overcompensate with flattery and enthusiasm to ensure their target feels emotionally prioritized and more connected to them than anyone else. (Photo by author)*

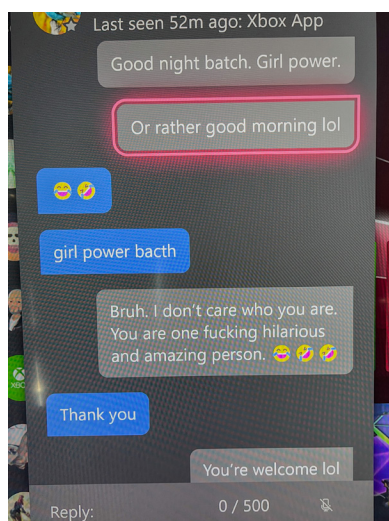


Figure 13: *Chris laid the groundwork for emotional dependency by showering BlueBird with flattery and exaggerated praise—building trust and a sense of special connection that groomers often rely on. (Photo by author)*



Figure 14: *Chris kept the “girl power” inside joke alive, repeating it across multiple chats as a shared ritual. These private references strengthen loyalty and make the connection feel more intimate and “theirs alone.” (Photo by author)*

needed to know what I was up against.

My stomach was in knots as I clicked through the messages. I scrolled all the way to the beginning of his thread with BlueBird.

Chris initiated it. Something simple like, “Hey there. How you doing. Can we play together sometime?” And BlueBird replied, “Sure.”

The next morning: “Hey buddy. Just wanted to see how you are doing today.”

Then another: “Hey hope you are having a great sunshine day, you deserve it.”

For the first few days, it was small talk. Harmless enough if you didn’t know what was coming. But then came the jokes, the playful banter, the consistent, almost obsessive daily contact. Multiple times a day.

Praise.

Adoration bombs.

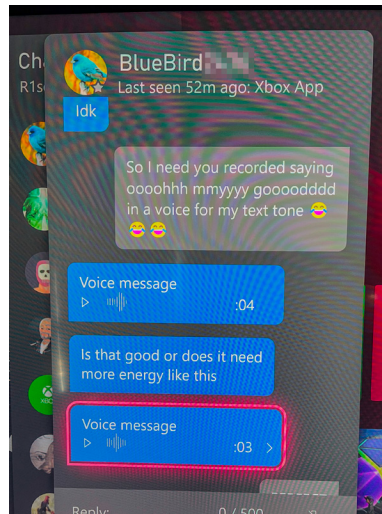


Figure 16: A request that makes light of and idolizes the cracking voice common during puberty. Chris would often get unusually excited about hearing that voice change, highlighting a grooming technique of focusing on the child’s developing physicality to build emotional dependency and desensitize boundaries. (Photo by author)

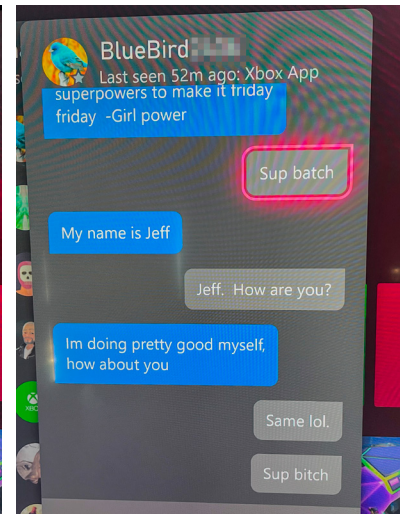


Figure 15: BlueBird had been using a fake name for safety—but here, he reveals his real name. Whether he felt safe or was subtly pushed, groomers often chip away at protective boundaries until personal details are freely given. (Photo by author)



Figure 18: Even after I asked for the inappropriate behavior to stop, Chris continued validating the mockery. Groomers often dismiss boundaries and align with the aggressor to deepen their influence and isolate voices of reason. (Photo by author)

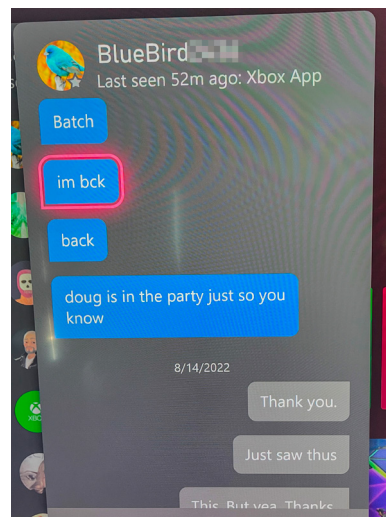


Figure 17: At this point, my presence had become something to tiptoe around. Chris and BlueBird were so used to excluding me, they treated me like a liability—not a friend. (Photo by author)

Chris was lifting BlueBird up like a hero, showering him with compliments, acting like he had found the most fascinating person on Earth.

Each day around the time he usually got ready for work, Chris would check in on BlueBird. One day, BlueBird vented about problems at home—minor annoyances, nothing shocking. Chris jumped in with consoling words and then offered himself up as a safe space. “You can

talk to me about anything. Anytime.”

Then the tone shifted. The banter between them sped up. The sexual language started surfacing—repeated, mirrored, exchanged between them in ways I had heard before in voice chat. Masked as “game talk” but unmistakably inappropriate.

And then, they started talking about me. Secretly. Chris would tell BlueBird things like, “I’ll tell you later.” He told him not to invite me, to ignore me—probably because I was the only adult in the room

calling out what I saw.

The only one saying, “This isn’t okay.”

They mocked me. Formed some kind of secret alliance. They had signals to warn when entered the room, likely so they could switch gears and hide the sex talk.

Between the chats were those same grotesque messages. Every time I reread them, it hit me like a wave of nausea. The disbelief that a grown

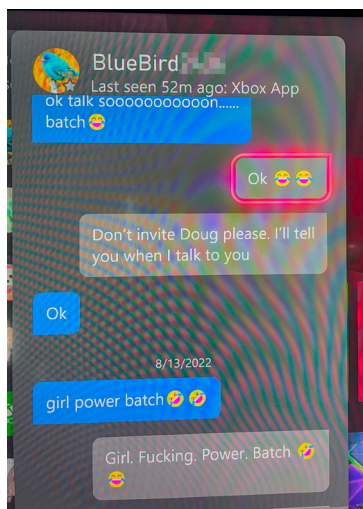


Figure 22: This message exposed the growing secrecy. Chris began orchestrating game sessions behind my back—giving BlueBird the role of gatekeeper while gradually erasing me from the dynamic. (Photo by author)

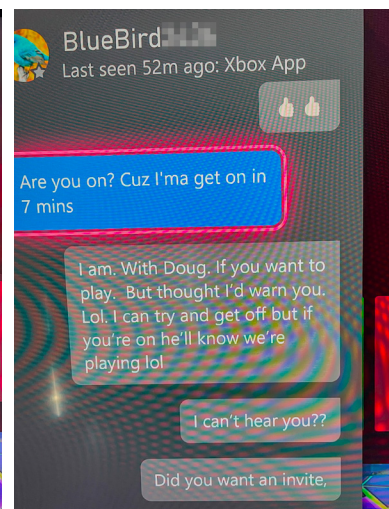


Figure 21: Chris warns BlueBird about me being in the party, as if my presence required caution. Groomers create these private alliances to build loyalty through secrecy—painting others as threats to that bond. (Photo by author)

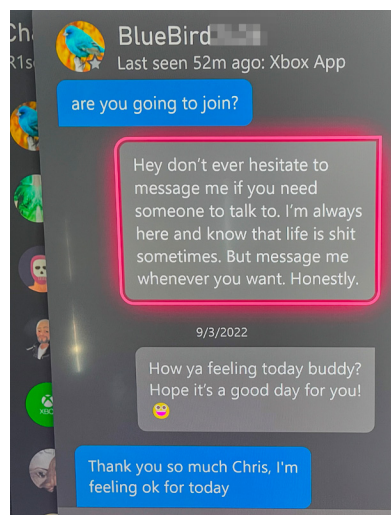


Figure 20: This is how grooming hides in plain sight: words of comfort and safety, used to win trust and emotional access—while the real intentions stay concealed. (Photo by author)

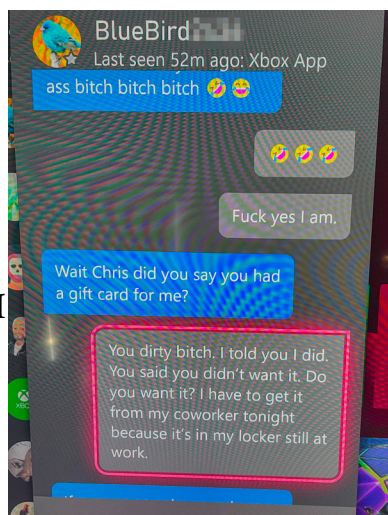


Figure 19: Just weeks after meeting BlueBird, Chris was already offering him a gift card—without a word about parental permission, despite previously claiming he would never do that. Groomers often break their own “rules” when they think no one’s watching. (Photo by author)

man could speak this way to a minor never dulled.

What really unsettled me, though, were the deleted messages. Several were missing from BlueBird's side. No context. No visible clues. They could have been text or images. Either way, it struck me as suspicious.

People rarely delete images unless they were sent in error, but there were no follow-ups to correct anything. Emotional deletions? Maybe. But even that seemed off for a thirteen-year-old.

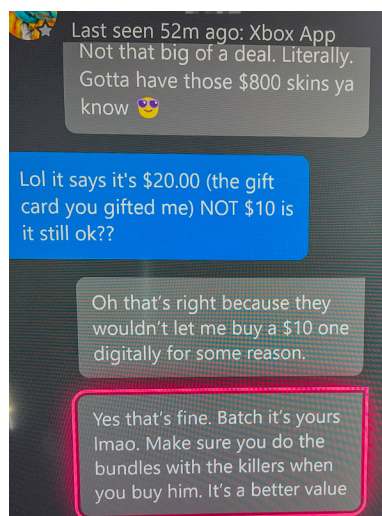


Figure 24: Chris downplayed the size of his gift by claiming he couldn't buy a smaller amount—framing a \$20 gift as accidental. Groomers often mask deliberate generosity behind excuses, so it feels less suspicious and more “normal.” (Photo by author)

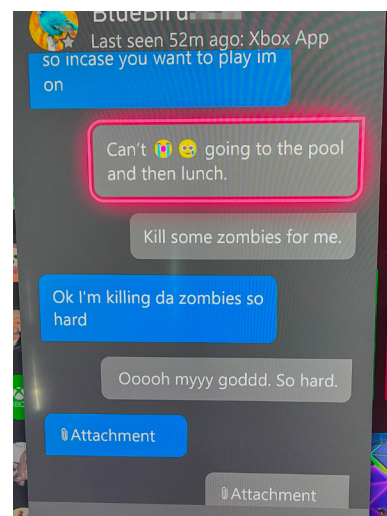


Figure 23: Chris inserted sexual innuendo into casual chat, framing it as humor. Groomers often start with suggestive comments like this to test boundaries and desensitize their target gradually. (Photo by author)

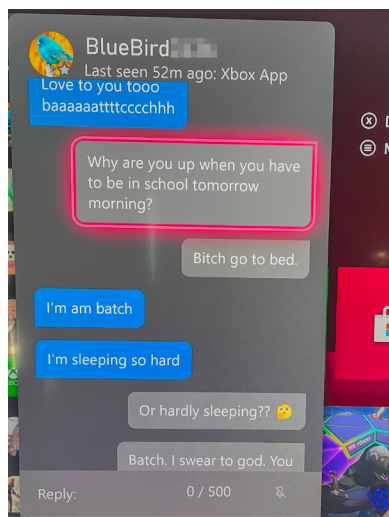


Figure 25: Chris layered sexual undertones into innocent phrases, then masked them with humor. Groomers often push boundaries through playful wordplay—just enough to suggest, not enough to get caught. (Photo by author)

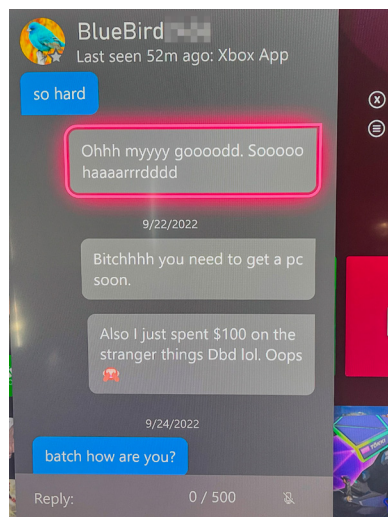


Figure 26: Chris exaggerated BlueBird's casual phrase into something overtly suggestive. Groomers often test boundaries with sexualized mimicry, hiding behind humor to make escalating language feel normal. Notice the language escalates as more direct and more sexual in the telling. (Photo by author)

And then came the worst part: **the lies.**

Flat-out contradictions to things Chris had told me in order to ease my concerns.

Every hope I clung to—that Chris wasn't becoming a predator—was obliterated.

The question, “Is this really happening?” had been answered.

Because these weren't just misinterpretations or foggy memories. Chris **intentionally**

fabricated stories—crafted false narratives for the **specific purpose of deceiving me.**

He didn't forget the details.

He invented them.

That level of manipulation isn't something that can be explained away or brushed off as harmless.

It was deliberate. And no one with even an ounce of sense could interpret what I saw as innocent.

It was the red mother flag of them all.

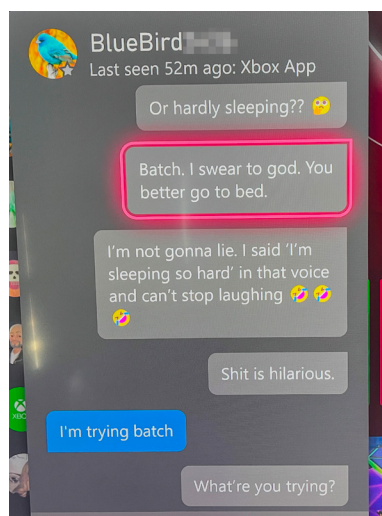


Figure 27: Chris praised the sexualized joke as hilarious and encouraged more, reinforcing the idea that suggestive talk was not just acceptable—but fun. Groomers often validate and escalate, turning discomfort into comedy to gain control. (Photo by author)

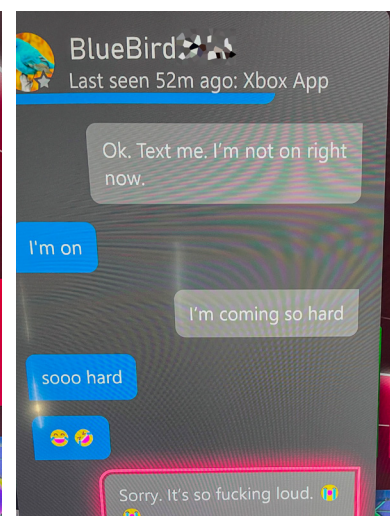


Figure 28: After a clearly explicit comment from BlueBird, Chris didn't correct or even acknowledge it—he just kept talking like it was normal. Groomers allow the most inappropriate boundaries to dissolve silently, treating harmful language like casual banter. (Photo by author)

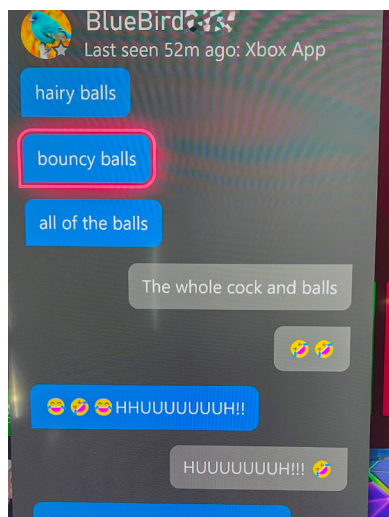


Figure 29: By echoing and laughing at explicit language from a minor, Chris erased all boundaries. Groomers escalate step-by-step until the unthinkable becomes normalized—and they do it by acting like it's all just a joke. (Photo by author)

The first lie was about the gift cards. Chris said he gave BlueBird gift cards as casual, innocent tokens. They were not even from his GameStop membership. But the messages showed something different. Three cards in total. And I could see the credit card transactions from the different redeem codes each time. BlueBird even questioned him once, confused why the card had \$20 when Chris said it would be \$10. Chris lied, saying the cards only activated with a \$20 load—which isn't true. He was covering up why he was giving more. The first transaction was in mid-August—only four weeks after they met. Not a single mention of BlueBird's mother.

The second lie was about the word "love." Chris had once told me he felt uncomfortable when BlueBird used

the phrase “Good night, love you” and that he admonished him and corrected the matter.

But the message log told a different story.

They said it constantly.

There was never any indication of discomfort or correction.

I was overwhelmed—terrified, enraged, heartbroken.

I could feel my blood boiling.

I wanted to scream.

I wanted to cry.

But I knew that none of that would stop what was happening. It was time to confront Chris. The urgency was **undeniable**.

I started scripting the conversation in my head.

I knew there would be gaslighting. Deflection. Maybe even the silent treatment. So, I took pictures. I wanted the proof in front of me.

If he tried to twist it all again, I’d have the receipts.

No more illusions.

No more waiting.

The truth was out.

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

TREATMENT

Is there help available?

Yes. There is.

And I believe that with my whole heart.

This insert isn't about punishment or despair. It's about hope—the kind of hope that science and human resilience can offer. No one is born without the ability to care. That ability can be dulled, buried, or warped by trauma, neglect, or abuse. But even then, **it doesn't vanish**. The brain doesn't throw empathy away; **it reroutes it**. And with the right intervention, it can find its way back.

Science has come a long way in the past decade, it now shows us that the human brain is incredibly plastic. That means it can change—not just in childhood, but throughout life. When someone repeatedly pairs emotion with an action, **those two things get wired together**. That's basic neuroscience. It's called Hebbian learning: neurons that fire together, wire together. If a child grows up learning that manipulation, deception, or domination get them love or attention, then those actions become emotionally reinforced. The neural networks that form begin to associate harm with reward.

But here's the miracle: the same process that created those patterns **can also unmake them**.

Therapy, particularly trauma-informed therapy, has shown promising results in helping people rewire these emotional-action loops. Empathy isn't a lost cause; **it's a muscle**. With time, effort, and support, it can grow again. And the more someone practices recognizing others' feelings, responding with compassion, and forming honest connections, the more those networks begin to strengthen.

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

Brain scans have shown that empathy can return and even grow stronger with regular practice and **compassion-based therapy**¹.

The idea that therapy can change brain structure and function is well-supported by modern psychology. Therapeutic modalities like cognitive-behavioral therapy and mindfulness interventions leverage neuroplasticity to form new emotional pathways and **reduce destructive ones**.²

Some of the most fascinating research involves the brain's mirror neuron system—specialized neurons that help us instinctively understand and resonate with others' experiences. These neurons are fundamental to developing empathy, and studies suggest their activation can be influenced by role-playing, emotional engagement, and consistent perspective-taking.³

Even more encouraging are studies that show empathy can be "rewired" intentionally. Neuroscience-based strategies show that with regular engagement, the **empathetic pathways can regain strength over time**.⁴

I know Chris wasn't born this way. Something broke in him early—something shut down. Maybe it was pain. Maybe it was fear. Maybe it was the betrayal of his mother. Whatever it was, it rewired him.

But I believe that wiring can be changed. Maybe not completely. Maybe not easily. But enough. Enough to stop hurting people. Enough to feel again. To truly understand what friendship, trust, and love are. Enough to calm the anxiety that's always just beneath the surface.

So yes—**there is help**. There is treatment. **There is hope and it's real**.

But the first step was getting him to talk to me, and the next step had to be **him choosing it**.

1 : Greene, Nathan. "[Neuroplasticity and Childhood Trauma: Effects, Healing, and EMDR](#)." PsychCentral, May 9, 2022.
2 : Owens, Hannah. "[This Is What Happens to Your Brain When You Do Therapy](#)." Verywell Mind, May 26, 2024.
3 : Wikipedia. "[Mirror Neuron](#)."
4 : Ceruto, Sydney. "[Empathetic-Brain-Rewiring](#)." Mindlab Neuroscience.

THE FIRST DOOR CLOSED

With the proof in hand, I still didn't know how to approach the situation. I wracked my brain trying to understand how I hadn't seen it before. It felt like it happened out of the blue—and fast.

Knowing how jealous Sterling could be, I figured he must value his relationship highly and wouldn't want to lose it. What was happening was a direct threat to that world of his. So, after a few days of trying to get my head around it, I messaged Sterling. I told him I needed to see him immediately and that it was highly urgent.

He had been there that day Chris made all his grand proclamations of assurance. I thought maybe he would feel the same way I did. Maybe together, we could figure this out.

Sterling and I didn't have the best history when it came to trust. But I was out of options. I had to move forward. He said he would come by after work that evening, after he'd had dinner and a nap. So I waited—pacing the floors, going in circles, trying to figure out the right approach.

By the time he got there, a world of dread and anxiety had already filled me to capacity. I was a wreck—crying, shaking. I cast Chris's messages onto the TV screen and read aloud the mortifying sections.

Sterling sat silently the entire time.

Not in shock. Just blank.

Void of expression.

Unconcerned.

When I finished explaining everything, I asked him—pleaded, really—what we needed to do about the situation.

I was unprepared for the reaction. I expected him to be horrified, maybe angry, maybe even take charge. But nothing could have prepared me for what he said:

"You just need to calm down. Chill and relax. Chris just enjoys playing games with BlueBird. He's just a '*special friend*'."

I can't remember what I said after that. I think my brain shut off. I couldn't process how he could be so calm. If the roles were reversed, I would have been anything but.

As he started to leave, I stopped him. "Wait. What is the plan?"

Sterling said, "Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it."

I was completely puzzled. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll let you know what happens. Ok?"

I was out of sorts, not thinking straight. The guilt, the confusion—it was all jumbled together. I blurted, "Oh! In the meantime, should I tell Chris that I logged into his account and apologize?"

Even now, I can't fully explain why that thought crossed my mind. Why would I be the one apologizing? It was like my sense of right and wrong had been flipped upside down. I think some part of me still wanted to believe that if I showed humility, maybe things could go back to normal. Maybe I could keep the ground from splitting open beneath me.

Sterling replied, "Nah, I wouldn't mention it."

Then he left.

And I felt sick. Deathly ill. I couldn't figure out what had just happened.

PRIDE

I had already accepted the invite: Chris wanted me to meet him at the company sponsor booths for Gay Pride. He had volunteered to promote his employer at the event by networking, answering questions, talking about services, and handing out swag. He asked me to meet him later in the afternoon as things

were winding down because he and his colleagues planned to head to a nearby bar to celebrate Pride weekend.

I met up with him just as the booth cleanup was wrapping up. Once things were packed and put away, we all made our way to the bar. I mingled with a few of his coworkers, learning bits and pieces about them. The weather was unusually hot and humid for that time of year, and drinks were flowing fast to keep everyone cool and in good spirits. Music was pumping, people were laughing, and I found myself pulled in and out of the dance floor depending on the vibe of the song. It was one of those rare nights where you actually feel the joy in the room.

But things are always great fun until they aren't. One of Chris's coworkers drank too much and crossed the line into dangerously drunk. Chris and I were with her on a side street, mid-conversation, when she suddenly shifted from functioning to barely coherent and unable to stand. We stayed with her until we could track down her core group of friends to take over. That moment sobered everyone up, literally and figuratively, but it didn't ruin the night.

I went home around nine. Chris came by about an hour later, and the two of us decided to keep the night going. We turned up the music and made fresh drinks. We had this thing between us—a shared love of music and memory. A song would come on and trigger a story, a moment, or some ridiculous joke. We stayed up until almost sunrise, dancing in the apartment, laughing, playing old music videos and dumb clips online. There were no heavy talks, no mentions of BlueBird, no distractions. It was just us and joy.

I had forgotten that nights like that even existed. I had wiped them from my mind because, somewhere along the way, I became convinced they were gone for good. After everything we'd been through—the stress, the tension, the months of confusion and disappointment—I thought the connection between us was dead. But not that night. That night, it was alive. More than alive. It was blazing.

Something inside me whispered, "Don't give up." And I listened. I saw the version of Chris I had loved and missed, right there in front of me. He was still in there. I didn't let myself dream that things would go back to how they once

were. I knew that chapter had ended. But if there was a chance to reach him, to pull him back before he was too far gone, I was willing to pay whatever it cost.

Somewhere in the middle of our laughter, as the sun threatened the horizon, I remember looking at him and thinking,

Please, stop running from me. Can't you feel how much I care? How hard I've tried to save you—even when it's cost me everything?

I didn't say it out loud.

I didn't have to.

I just hoped, maybe somehow, he could feel it.

HALLOWEEN

Chris and Sterling were trying to find something fun to do for Halloween. Chris mentioned he wanted to see costumes and people in the holiday spirit. I knew exactly what he meant—people-watching is the best when everyone's dressed up and letting loose.

One night, Sterling asked if I would host a Halloween party at my apartment. I didn't want to. I told him he could use the space if he wanted, but I just didn't have the energy to prepare, host, and clean up. He was persistent, so I asked, half-jokingly, what I'd get in return.

"A hug?" I suggested.

Without missing a beat, he said, "You get to have friends."

I just walked off, muttering, "Asshole," and went home.

The next day, I found this incredible Halloween concert event—live music, wild costumes, drag queens, a full-on celebration. It was exactly the kind of thing Chris had said he wanted. In an effort to smooth things over and keep the peace, I messaged both of them and offered to buy tickets for all of us. I figured it could be a reset.

Several hours passed before I got a response. Sterling finally replied: “Not my thing.”

Then came Chris’s: “Nah. I’m good.”

I tried to persuade Chris, hyping up the event, all the excitement. It was everything he claimed to want. But he wasn’t interested. He said they had other plans—a party at a friend’s house. When I asked which friend, he brushed it off, said it was someone I didn’t know, someone he barely talked about.

Fine. I wasn’t going to let their rejection ruin my night. I bought my ticket and reached out to others to see if anyone wanted to join me. Eventually, a friend agreed to come.

On Halloween night, I arrived at the venue and waited for my friend. They were running late, so I went in alone. The place was electric. Laser lights cut across the floor, people in every imaginable costume danced under the pulse of music. It was everything I’d hoped for.

I kept trying to reach my friend, but no luck. While I was texting, a group of girls came over and struck up a conversation. Before I knew it, we were dancing together like we’d known each other for years. It was magic. I had the time of my life. I couldn’t wait to tell Chris.

On the cab ride home, I messaged him, shared pictures, trying to capture how amazing it was. All I got back were two thumbs-up emojis.

Still, I figured I’d tell him in person soon. I asked about the party he said they were going to. He told me they didn’t go after all. I told him that was a shame—he really would’ve enjoyed the concert with me.

The cab pulled up to my building. I stepped out and saw a friend of mine smoking outside. I joined them, chatting casually. Then, Chris and Sterling came walking out of the building. They were talking in hushed tones, and when they noticed me, they stopped briefly.

They barely said a word. As they started to walk away, I called out, “Wait... I’ll come with you.”

Sterling turned and shouted back, “No, we’re having a private conversation.”

It was odd. They were acting strangely. But I respected their space and didn’t press it.

Still, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t right.

The next day, I was pressing Chris about why he didn’t want to go, because it was exactly the kind of thing he said he loved. I asked him again—genuinely confused—why he chose not to. That’s when he snapped.

“Goddammit. I just didn’t want to go. I don’t do things I don’t want to do. Ok!”

It shut me down.

There was no room for conversation after that.

Chapter Eight
NOVEMBER 2022

RETROSPECT

One night, Chris messaged me and asked if I wanted to join him in the common area for a smoke. I said sure and left my apartment. As I walked through the parking lot, headed toward the common area, I heard someone talking. I got closer to the smoking section and realized it was Chris. He was talking to himself. Before he saw me coming, I distinctly heard him say, "Maybe I am just evil."

I stepped past the last set of parked cars and made myself visible. I asked who he was talking to. He said, "No one."

I didn't mention what I heard. I just let it slide.

We sat down and started talking. At one point, he asked, "What was your favorite time?" I wasn't sure what he meant. I asked him to clarify, and he repeated, "What was your favorite time with us, me and you? A memory."

The way he said it—in past tense—immediately struck me. I answered the best I could, saying I didn't really have a single favorite. I preferred to believe the best times hadn't happened yet. I shared a random memory that came to mind, nothing special.

Then I asked him the same question. But I was so caught up in the way he phrased his question that I completely missed his answer. I'm not even sure he gave one.

I wanted to ask him about the past tense. Why did he talk like our friendship was already over? And if it was, *why did he still invite me to hang out like nothing had changed?*

But mostly, I wanted to ask why he thought he was evil. *What had he done—or was planning to do—that made him say that out loud?*

Was he referring to something he did to me? To BlueBird?

Or was it something he carried around in general?

But I didn't ask.

I didn't ask any of it.

RACINE

Sterling came to my apartment to get ice, a diet coke, or vodka, the prime reason he visited the 36th floor. When he arrived, I told him to help himself with what he needed in the kitchen.

In the midst of fixing his drink, he stopped and, out of nowhere, said, **"I will not go through another Racine. I have put up with too much to deal with that ever again."**

Immediately, I realized the real purpose of his visit.

What I know of “Racine”:

Chris mentioned the name Racine only a handful of times to me, and he didn’t give many details about the person or the situation. He told me that there was a period in which he was not in a relationship with Sterling, that they had separated.

The reason for their separation and for how long was not mentioned.

During this period, Chris was in a relationship with a guy named Racine, and they lived together in an apartment. He didn’t say if Sterling also lived there as well, but he did disclose that he had sexual relations with Sterling during this period. That doesn’t necessarily suggest infidelity towards Racine, as Chris did not clarify the nature of their relationship – whether it was an open arrangement or not.

A highly notable incident occurred during his time with Racine; Chris returned home one day to find Racine unconscious and made an urgent call to emergency services because Racine had overdosed. He didn’t mention if the overdose was from prescription medications, nor did he say if it was intentional or the conditions prompting the event.

I don’t know if this is what ended his relationship with Racine or if they continued to date afterward. His lack of mention of any subsequent support for Racine through recovery suggests to me that their connection might not have been profoundly deep.

Typically, helping someone through such a recovery is challenging and prolonged. I believe Chris would have mentioned it if he had undertaken such a responsibility. He did express, however, that the incident was deeply traumatic and terrifying for him.

That's it. That's the extent of what I knew of Racine.

Sterling undoubtedly knew that Chris was now spending all his free time with someone else and that someone wasn’t me. The days of Chris hanging out at my place a couple of times a week ended long ago. Moreover, Sterling had seen firsthand the recent string of arguments between Chris and me. It was

impossible for him not to be clued into the strained state of my friendship with Chris.

What was provoking these wild and erratic thoughts was beyond my comprehension. So, I asked.

He ignored my question and opened the door to leave, pausing only long enough to look back and tell me, **“It’s never going to happen.”**

— PART THREE —



Chapter Nine

DECEMBER 2022

ABLAZE

December 18, 2022—the day flames touched my life in a way I’ll never forget. It was the day apartment #3603 caught fire. It was a Sunday, and I woke up early, around 06:30. I made myself a coffee and took it down to the resident common area to sit for a while. Afterward, I returned to my apartment, made breakfast, and poured another cup. I logged onto my computer to catch up on some work and finished eating. It was close to 11:30 when I felt full and decided to lie on the couch and watch TV. As a diabetic, I often fall asleep after consuming carbohydrates; that day was no different.

I was sleeping and heard my phone ringing, but it seemed part of a dream, so I ignored it and tried to continue napping. When it didn't stop, I became awake enough to not only hear my phone ringing but also hear the fire alarm.

There was no need to pause and evaluate if it was a drill—the smell of smoke hit me the moment I stood up.

Panic and fear gripped me as I snatched the important items in sight. I knew I wouldn't have time to find the cat carrier, so I put my cat over my shoulder and began descending the stairs from the 36th floor.

A few levels down, we encountered many tenants and their pets. I struggled to keep my cat calm amid barking dogs and the tense, crowded atmosphere. My phone continued ringing, but my hands were too full to answer.

Around the 12th floor, my cat became frantic, trying to jump from my arms. I exited the stairwell, crossed the hallway, and entered the opposite stairwell. It was quieter and nearly empty.

We finally exited the building, and I took my cat around the back to avoid the crowd. I didn't know how much longer I could control him. Then it hit me—I could put him in my car. He'd be safe there until I could get a handle on the situation.

As I made my way to the street, I heard someone call my name. Two friends who also lived in the building spotted me and waved me over. The first thing they asked was whether I had spoken to Sterling. I said no, but I showed them that my phone had been ringing nonstop—and sure enough, it was him calling again.

I answered, and Sterling said he was relieved I made it out. He was just checking on me. I told him where I was standing and ended the call.

My friends began telling me how concerned Sterling had been. They said he was frantic about whether I'd gotten out in time and that they even considered notifying the EMTs. They'd run into him while exiting the building, and he was calling me repeatedly, asking if they had seen me. They added that he seemed on the verge of a breakdown but wouldn't stop calling, even after they reminded

him that many people were still exiting and I might just be unable to answer while carrying my cat.

I kept it to myself, but their account left me *puzzled*. The concern they described didn't match the version of Sterling I knew in recent weeks. Still, I appreciated the effort they seemed to believe he was making.

Glass burst from windows above. When I could safely look up again, flames slapped the side of the building, leaving black scorch marks. I feared the worst. It would be another four hours before I could return to see the damage. The waiting was agonizing, filled with anxious thoughts of what I might find. The uncertainty was almost unbearable. *Would I ever return to a normal life?*

Eventually, a firefighter escorted me up the elevator. I asked what to expect, and he told me the damage wasn't too bad. I exhaled in relief. When I asked if they knew the cause, he said it appeared to have started near the bed and an electrical outlet, but it remained undetermined. Still, his words gave me a small thread of hope.

I opened my door and felt lucky. There were no signs of fire breaking through the walls, though char clung to the light fixtures. **That was the last of the good news for a while.**

While I believe it's important to talk about my state of mind and the details of the stress, I'll lean toward brevity and share only the key events. My life had already been flipped upside down several times in the previous months, and I didn't think things could get worse.

I was wrong.

Although I was grateful the fire didn't destroy everything I owned, I didn't completely dodge a bullet—even if it felt like I had at first. As I stepped across the hardwood floor, water seeped up between the boards—nearly every inch was saturated.

The water heater had melted, leaving me with no running water. Smoke, burnt wiring, and charred wood lingered in the air, soaking into every piece of furniture, every article of clothing, every part of my life.

A restoration team arrived a couple of days later to assess the water damage and send a report to my landlord. I assumed that once they reviewed it, the property management company would arrange a temporary displacement location. But two days later, building staff called to ask what water sources I had turned on. Water was dripping into the ceiling of the apartment below mine. I told them none—I had no running water at all. *(Later, I learned the cold water had been restored, but no one told me.)*

The landlord called the next day, not to relocate me but to say they were holding me responsible for the damage to the unit below and the flooring in mine. The restoration team had made no note of floor damage. Four days after the fire, the hardwood began to buckle. The boards warped, split, and splintered as they absorbed more and more water.

The landlord made no allowances for the conditions I was forced to live in and still demanded full rent.

Meanwhile, my employment contract was set to expire at the end of the year. I had interviewed for a new role within the company, but they were still undecided. This was the financial industry's busiest time—year-end compliance audits and tax season preparation. Everyone was working extra hours. I worked from home, but my apartment was uninhabitable.

There was no way I could take time off, especially when a job offer was still in play. It was the only prospect I had.

The issue with Chris persisted, though at this point, I tried to push it aside. There were more immediate fires—literally and figuratively. Still, his coldness cut through everything. He barely hid his contempt anymore, and each interaction felt colder than the last.

I struggled to accept all the negative circumstances I was facing. **2023 was riddled with terrible memories, overpowering the good ones.** They felt like fragments from someone else's life—so distant, I sometimes wondered if they ever happened at all.

— PART FOUR —



Chapter Ten

JANUARY 2023

WOODWORKING

The floors in the apartment expanded in almost every direction, and the buckle in the center of the room was at least a foot and a half tall. The pressure between the boards approached the breaking point, and I was forced to remove what I could to alleviate the stress.

The situation with the floors became a huge threat and danger. I had been diabetic for such a long time that it had permanently damaged my legs due to the lack of circulation; wounds took five times as long to heal, making me

susceptible to infection and possibly leading to amputation. The problem became my immediate priority.

I called and emailed the landlord several times, but there was no response. In the meantime, the property management company scheduled numerous appointments for the restoration evaluations and the insurance claims adjuster. Yet, there was no indication of when repairs would begin. I had no choice but to make adjustments to the floorboards and reduce the risk of injury.

I researched various solutions and decided on the most sensible one, but it required tools that I would need to buy. My brother lays tile and installs flooring professionally, so I called him for a consultation. He advised me with useful tips, mentioned some other miscellaneous items, and told me he was confident I could get the job done.

While at the store picking up the things I needed, I decided to hold off on buying the power tools after I saw how expensive they were. I figured I could use the hand tools and get the job done; it would require more elbow grease but save me a big chunk of cash.

IN A FEW

I worked nearly nonstop for three days, reducing the width of the boards with sandpaper and a planer so they would lay flat. My progress was slow, and at the rate I was going, I calculated the finished job would take over a month. I didn't have that long; if the boards dried in their warped state, then they would remain that way permanently and unusable, so I contemplated my options and started to research prices online before heading to the store.

That morning, Chris messaged me and asked if he could come over, smoke, and hang out briefly. I agreed but warned him about the condition of my floors. He said he was walking his dog around the park but would come over **“in a few.”** I told him that wasn't a problem.

I continued to do my price checking on the computer and determined the stores with the best deals. Two of the three stores were mandatory, and the third one

carried specific uncommon items that I hoped I could just find at the other two stores. I wanted to get the tools and items and be back home while it was still daylight. The apartment had very poor lighting, so it wasn't easy to see after the sun had gone down.

Two hours had passed since I heard from Chris, which was no surprise. I had come to expect it every time he asked me to do something with him. Chris's inconsideration and disrespect were commonplace; I questioned and often thought it was intentional. While waiting for him, I cleaned myself up with a washcloth and freshened up a bit, changed clothes, and gathered the stuff I needed to take with me.

I messaged Chris to find out if he was on his way to my place, but as usual, I did not receive a reply. I didn't need to look online to see what he was doing; I already knew because this scenario had happened more times than I could count. But instead of getting irritated, I just said the hell with his rudeness and went on about my shopping.

I returned home and still hadn't heard from Chris, so I messaged him. I made a snide remark about how he can't even remember something five minutes after he says it because he is so obsessed and absorbed into BlueBird.

Chris claimed to be completely unaware that the majority of his time and actions are centered around one thing, rather, one person. I did not see how that was possible because he demonstrated the behavior so frequently. Without any exaggeration, 70% of my interactions over the past months with Chris played out in the same fashion.

Most people apologize when they tell someone something and do not follow through, but not Chris. I suppose he was out of believable excuses, so why bother? Chris challenged me instead of just saying he was sorry. As usual, he tried to turn the situation back on me, saying that I was the problem because I misunderstood him when he said, "It will be a few." It was angering how many times Chris would gaslight me, but this time, he was attempting to make me question my interpretation of a widely used common phrase. He would

do anything to lead me into confusion and self-doubt so that he could deflect responsibility.

He felt the need to worsen the situation by telling me that I was taking out my frustrations from my problems on him, and he felt that was unfair. Then, he dared to lecture me on how to treat friends by telling me to be more self-aware.

It was the first time I realized he wasn't just forgetting me. He was trying to erase me.

Before the conversation ended, he told me, with a supercilious attitude, to let him know if I needed help packing. He had not asked me if I needed any help up until that point, so his remark implied he was willing to assist me in hastening my relocation to be rid of me.

TRIAGE

After that last altercation with Chris, I was irate—shaking, actually. The kind of frustration that lives in your bones when every thread in your life feels tangled and you're the one holding the scissors, afraid to cut. My mind was overcrowded with critical issues pressing in from all sides. But I knew that if I was going to survive it—truly survive it—I had to triage my situation like an ER doctor: stabilize the most urgent crises, stop the emotional bleeding, and preserve whatever mental clarity I still had left.

I sat still and quieted the noise in my head. This wasn't a time for crying or bargaining or lashing out.

This was a time for strategy.

I had to prioritize myself for once, and that meant laying the cards on the table, no matter how much they hurt to look at. I trusted my instincts and forced myself to spell out what I knew to be true:

Chris and I—whatever friendship we might've had—**were done.**

I had clung to the idea of salvaging something from the wreckage, but that was just **grief dressed up as hope**.

It was a pipe dream, and the sooner I admitted that, the sooner I could breathe again.

I had overextended myself. I had pushed through pain, both physical and emotional, jeopardizing my health to be there for someone who, at best, tolerated me and, at worst, used me.

That pattern had to stop.

Chris was untruthful.

He lied with ease and precision, looking me dead in the eye as he denied things I had proof of.

He never flinched, just layered one lie on top of another until it became a web so thick it blocked out the sun. That kind of lying wasn't random—it was a reflex.

There was no foundation of trust.

None.

And without it, no relationship, friendship, or alliance could be sustained. Everything crumbled on that foundationless ground.

Worse, Chris seemed unstable—**truly unstable**. The gaslighting had become erratic, paired with sudden claims of memory loss. It was as if he couldn't keep up with the lies he'd told. His world was spinning, and I was standing in the eye of the storm, hoping for calm that would never come.

I had waited.

I had hoped.

I had pleaded in subtle ways, praying he would just... wake up.

But it felt like I showed up too late in his life. The damage was done, his ways were cemented, and I didn't have the tools to chisel through it.

If I ever held any influence with him, **it was gone.**

He no longer showed restraint or concern for consequences. He crossed lines like they weren't even there. And that meant I couldn't predict him anymore—and I couldn't trust him.

And then there was BlueBird.

A kid.

Someone who had no idea how much danger he might be in. And the worst part? There was no one else standing between him and whatever was happening. I was it.

I had to be clear-eyed. **I had to act.**

So I did the hardest thing of all: I let go of the fantasy that Chris could be saved by friendship.

It was time to be the adult in the room—the only one apparently willing to be.

PAVED ROAD

I had already accepted what my instincts had screamed at me for months: that something was very wrong with how Chris behaved around BlueBird. From the moment he tried to brush off their in-game behavior as “normal gamer talk,” I knew better. He wasn't trying to convince me—it was himself he needed to keep fooled.

But the charade had gone on long enough. If there was any hope of reaching him, he had to first admit to what he was doing. And since he refused to do that willingly, I set out to force the truth into the open.

It wasn't a desire for revenge.

It wasn't spite.

I had already mourned the loss of who I thought he was. What was left was a determination to stop him before more damage was done. I needed to do

something. Anything. And the only cards I had left were ones **I learned from them.**

I laid out a plan.

My message to Chris and Sterling needed to sound credible and unwavering. I referenced one of their disturbingly salacious gaming sessions and told them that, upon further reflection, I could no longer view it as harmless. I said I had recorded it, and that I'd reached out to authorities who confirmed that such conduct—using avatars to simulate sex acts, especially paired with explicit language from an adult directed at a minor—carried the same weight as showing that minor pornography.

I told them the person I contacted asked for details on the individuals involved, and because of their dishonesty and my growing alarm, I had complied.

I wasn't going to be mistaken as complicit.

In reality, **there was no video**, and no conversation with law enforcement. I had no idea whether my legal claim held water. But what mattered was forcing their masks off. If their behavior was truly innocent, they would remain composed.

But guilt has a way of showing up before the brain can contain it.

Before sending that message, I wrote another—to BlueBird. I had no template for this kind of letter. No guidebook on how to tell a child that someone they trusted was not safe. I just wrote from my heart.

“Hey there! I know this might come as a surprise, but I really feel like I need to talk to you about what’s been happening with Chris. I understand that what I’m about to share might be hard for you to hear, especially

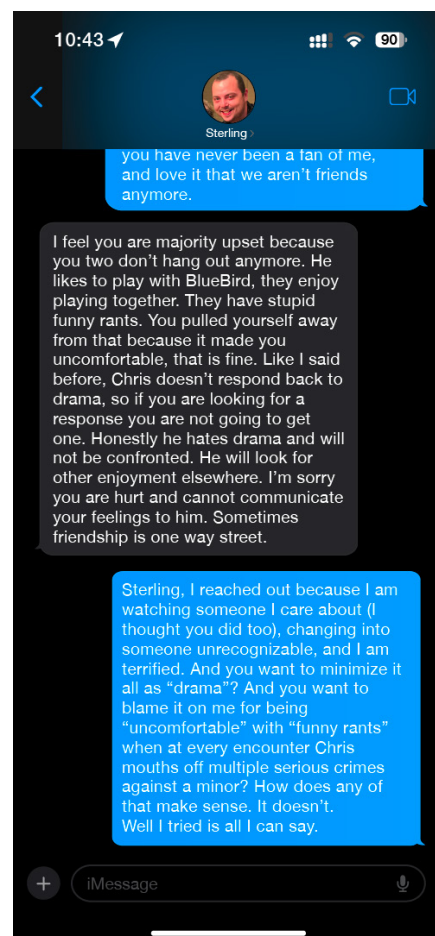


Figure 30: Sterling brushed it all off as “drama,” blaming me for being uncomfortable and acting like the issue was just that Chris and I didn’t hang out anymore. But I wasn’t reaching out for attention—I was trying to stop something I believed could lead to real harm. I wasn’t upset over lost hangouts. I was scared... and watching someone I cared about become unrecognizable. (photo by author)

at your age, but I think it's important for us to have this conversation. I haven't said anything before because I believe you should be carefree right now, enjoying life without any adult worries. Trust me, growing up can wait - it's actually the best time in most people's lives.

I know that Chris has told you that I am not a good person or someone you can trust, but I hope you think for yourself and make your own decision about me based on what you've seen and not what Chris has told you. I can imagine you have had a good time playing games with Chris and got the impression he is important to you, like a best buddy. That's why I know you are not going to understand or like what I am about to tell you, but it is important for you to consider I am telling you the truth.

I was friends with Chris for a long while, and if anyone is qualified to rate how good of a friend he is, it's me. And I hate to tell you this, but he isn't the good friend you think he is. For complicated reasons, he pretends to be a friend, but his intentions are selfish, and he won't be there for you when you need him the most. I am trying to get Chris the help he needs, but until that happens, you should stop communicating with him. He will try to twist things around and tell you I am crazy, but the reality is that no adult man should be a buddy. Only good adults have buddies around the same age as they are.

I want you to know you have done nothing wrong, and if you are confused about what I have said or why I am saying it, please let your mom read my message, and I will be happy to explain everything to her.

Please don't give out any of your private information to Chris, and if you have already, let your mom know. Don't be afraid to tell her either; she will just keep you safe, and you won't be in any trouble because it isn't your fault.

Again, I am sorry. You don't need another bad experience at your age; I am trying to save you from one now. I hope you make the right decision."

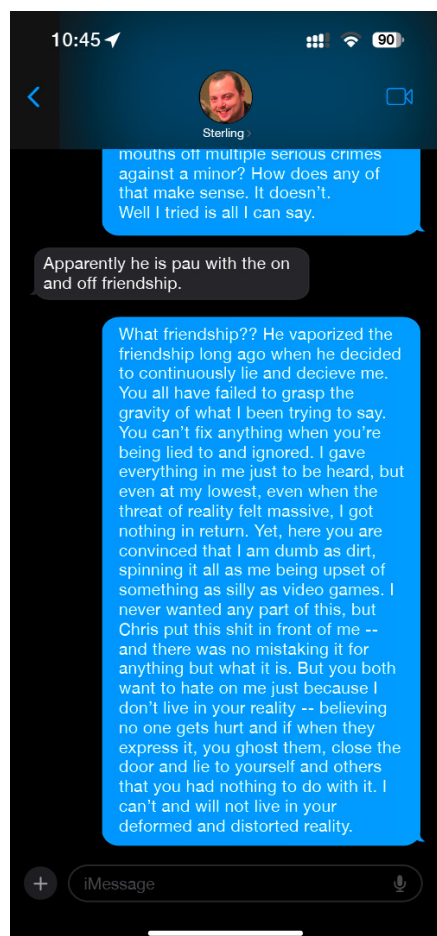


Figure 31: When Sterling said Chris was “pau” with the friendship, I snapped. What friendship? I had already been abandoned, lied to, ignored. I wasn’t grieving a lost connection—I was standing in the ruins of something they’d already burned down. And they still didn’t get it. They thought I was mad about video games. But I wasn’t mad. I was terrified... and they were too far gone to see the difference. (photo by author)

I sent both messages within minutes of each other. My hope was that BlueBird would show the letter to his mother. That someone would read it and understand. Even if I was blocked by them both, if it meant Chris couldn’t access him anymore, I would call that a win.

Sterling called me almost instantly. He didn’t get a full sentence out before I heard Chris shouting in the background that BlueBird had blocked him. Sterling hung up, but a torrent of furious messages followed.

All caps.

Demanding to see the video.

Cursing me.

Then a sudden tone shift: he coldly informed me that Chris was done with our friendship.

As if that hadn’t already ended long ago.

I knew the real reason for the tantrum. Chris had spent six months grooming BlueBird. My interference, my refusal to play dumb anymore, was the final straw. He couldn’t face me again, not without acknowledging what he had become. That was the last time he ever spoke to me.

I never saw or heard from Chris again. He disappeared without a word.

My plan worked.

But I wasn’t triumphant.

There was no celebration.

No closure.

Just a quiet devastation.

I gave everything—my energy, my sanity, my heart—to save someone who didn't want to be saved.

And it didn't amount to a grain of sand.

He will never know how much I truly cared for him. He will never realize how sacred our friendship was to me. Or how deeply I wanted to see him free from the darkness he carries.

He thinks what his uncle and mother did to him left no mark, **but it did**.

It broke him.

Irrevocably.

And now, no matter how much love or loyalty he receives, it slips past him like water through his hands.

That kind of damage—**done in childhood and left untreated**—is a tragedy more brutal than death. Because the person is left alive, haunted, never able to connect or feel safe.

He had so much potential.

But he chose a road paved in shadows. And I couldn't follow him down it anymore.

DISAPPROVAL

I was done with going back and forth through text messages and still had work to do on the floors, but I decided to take a break and step away from the chaos. I went downstairs to have a cigarette in front of the building and noticed my trusted friend was there, too.

Even though I felt relief from doing what needed to be done, my flustered demeanor had not dissipated entirely and was noticed. My friend asked me what was going on. I told them I could not endure the duress from so many

sources any longer, and the situation with Chris and Sterling had not improved; it was only getting worse. Then, I talked a little about the message I sent them, their immediate reaction, and, subsequently, the warning I sent to BlueBird. I explained that I did what I had to do because Chris was behaving erratically, gaslighting almost every time he spoke, and bold-faced lying even with the truth right before his eyes. There was nothing more I could do; I couldn't trust that Chris would eventually set boundaries as to how far he would go, and there was no way his intentions were amiable.

For some reason, I distinctly remember that I was bent over when the next thing happened; I can't remember if I was tying a shoe, stretching to touch my toes, or something else. Not that it is important, though. It's just a memory that is stuck in my head when I recall this event, probably because of the trauma induced.

Now, my friend, the most stable, sensible, caring, dependable friend, said to me, **"I wish you had not done that."**

I, for the life in me, do not remember what I said in response, but I have no memory of me saying anything, and maybe I didn't. But I do remember my inside voice letting loose a deafening crescendo from the center of my core, shouting, **"WHAT!?!"**

I do not even know if it came out of my mouth, nor do I remember anything being said afterward. The next thing I remembered was that I was standing in my apartment, stunned.

What my "friend" told me was the most bizarre and unfitting response. My head was working at full capacity as I considered thousands of explanations as to why they said that, but nothing made sense. I thought about the possibility that I had misheard what was said, but I replayed it many times in my head and heard it correctly.

I was at a loss.

They knew about my struggle with Chris and Sterling, but I tried to talk about it as little as possible; still, they were aware. Even more difficult was trying to

think of reasons not to make attempts to warn BlueBird, and there was nothing in my imagination that seemed viable.

Naturally, I was very upset and unnerved as I tried to make sense of this newfound sense of disorder. I struggled to piece together what clues I had missed that would have altered my friend's perception of events.

Did they think I was making the whole thing up, and what motivation did they think I had to do so?

Why would they think I would do anything mean or malicious, even to Chris or Sterling?

I knew I hadn't ever demonstrated acts that would be even close to being considered as "unkind."

Additionally, I repeatedly showed my good and considerate nature to all of my friends for years. Hence, it didn't make sense to me how they thought I could **turn into a villain overnight**. The more I thought about it, the more upset I became.

I really wanted to challenge their ugly comment; I knew for certain that if it were their grandson on the other end of that headset, I would be getting high praise instead of a misaligned admonishment.

However, I resisted the urge when I remembered my survival plan; I needed to conquer one issue at a time, not take on new ones.

ESCALATE

Later that evening, I stepped outside to the smoking section before picking up work on the floors again. I needed a moment to breathe, to reset. Sterling appeared and stood nearby, silent. He looked worn out—not tired in the usual sense, but like someone who had been under immense pressure.

There was a tension in his posture and a certain dishevelment that hinted at chaos behind the scenes. I could feel the intensity coming off him. He looked like he wanted to lash out, but he kept it in.

I assumed the reason for his condition was because he had been busy destroying anything that could be considered incriminating. I had let them believe that some sort of investigation was underway. Whether they truly bought it or not, Sterling was clearly scrambling.

Back inside my apartment, I checked on the situation with BlueBird, hoping—however naively—that some shred of distance had remained. But Chris had already reeled him back in. BlueBird had unblocked him, and they were associating again as if nothing had happened.

I never had much hope that my warning would make a real difference. Chris had already worked to smear my name, and BlueBird was so entangled in the cycle of emotional dependency that he would do whatever it took to stay in Chris's favor. It was heartbreaking to watch, but breaking through that kind of psychological entrapment was beyond anything I had the power to do. **Still, I tried.**

I hadn't spoken to BlueBird directly in over a month. Anytime we crossed paths online, Chris was always there too. There was no private space to speak with him, and even if there had been, I had no reason to believe he would listen.

Later that night, I reached out again, hoping they might have cooled off and were ready to speak honestly now that the truth was out. But no—I was met with the same hostility. Sterling responded, making it very clear: they weren't afraid of my "threats" and had no intention of discussing anything further with me.

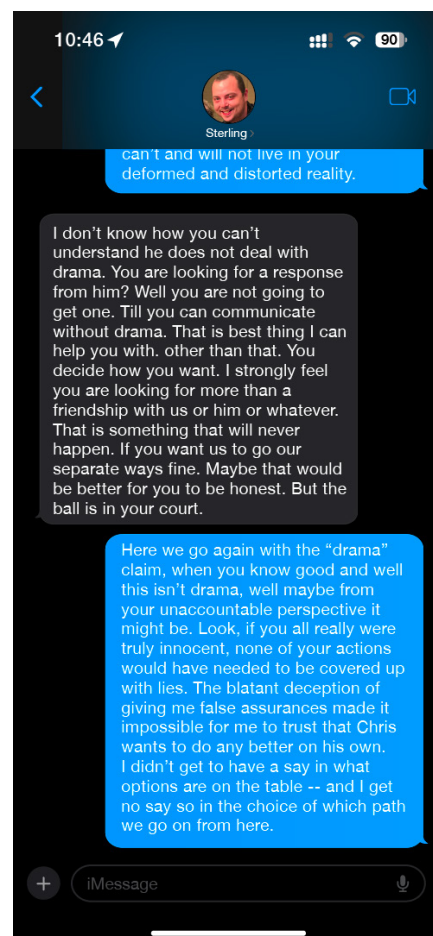


Figure 32: They kept calling it “drama” as if that word could erase everything. Sterling insisted I wanted more than friendship, like that was the only explanation for why I cared so deeply. But the truth was, I didn’t get a choice. Chris lied. They covered for him. And when I asked for clarity, they painted me as unstable. I wasn’t chasing attention—I was chasing honesty in a house built on deception. (photo by author)

I couldn't wrap my head around it. Did they not understand that I was obligated to speak out? That I couldn't just ignore what I had seen? It was far too late for that. If secrecy had been the priority, then they shouldn't have behaved so brazenly. I was the one speaking up, but I wasn't the only one who had noticed Chris's behavior. From everything I had seen and read, Chris clearly didn't understand what appropriate behavior around children even looked like. And that terrified me.

I told them both that there were only two possible ways forward—and I wasn't the one who got to pick them:

One: They could be forthcoming. We could talk, just the three of us, and figure things out privately. I would be completely confidential, supportive, and stand by them through the process.

Two: I would have no choice but to speak out. I couldn't stay silent when minors were involved.

Neither choice was easy. But between the two, it was obvious which one was worse. Sterling was the only one doing the talking. Chris stayed eerily quiet. But it wasn't a passive silence—he was seething. I could feel the hate in the air around him. His silence wasn't uncertainty; it was rage. He looked like a fiend starving for a fix, and BlueBird was his drug.

There was a time he used to message me constantly, eager to hang out, ending every night with "love you." But now, all that remained was contempt. I had already lost him. The only thing left to lose was the weight on my conscience.

Everything had escalated so far beyond anything I could have imagined. I kept trying to find some thread of reason, something they might care about enough to make them pause. Desperate, I went for broke: I told Sterling I would notify Chris's employer.

Maybe that would jolt them into reconsidering.

It didn't.

Sterling brushed it off every time I brought it up.

But that was the thing—it wasn't even about making them reconsider. I had already taken it to the top. It didn't matter how far I escalated the situation; silence was still all I got in return.

And that silence said everything.

I knew the cost of speaking up—our social circle would implode, bridges would burn, and whatever remained of Chris would be gone for good.

But doing nothing felt like complicity.

With the fire damage, the threatened lawsuit from my landlord, and landing an employment position, I was already underwater. I didn't have the strength to play along anymore.

The truth was out—and pretending otherwise was a weight I couldn't carry one more day.

That was what stunned me the most—how unconcerned they were, how little regard they had for the fact that I knew their secret.

Sterling even taunted me to go ahead and tell everyone.

So I did what I had to do. I had said what needed to be said. There was nothing more I could do. I turned off my phone and went to bed, letting the cards fall where they would.

PLAUSIBLE DENIABILITY

The next morning, I woke up early, just as the sun was rising. I grabbed my coffee and went downstairs to the common area. Because of the time difference, I usually called my mother early in the morning, and that day was no exception. When she didn't answer, I checked her location on my phone—just to make sure she wasn't out with one of my brothers. **That's when I noticed Chris's location.**

I had shared my location with Chris after we became friends, mostly due to my health issues. I figured if something ever happened to me, someone close would

be able to find me. Chris shared his location with me too, maybe for a reason, or maybe for none at all. At the time, I took it as a sign of mutual trust.

That trust went deep. I had given him passwords to my computer and access to personal information—insurance, real estate, business—because he was good with computers and I believed he could help my family retrieve what they needed and manage my affairs if anything ever happened to me.

I didn't think much of it until that morning.

And when I did, I felt sick.

I felt violated.

It made me angry at him, but also furious at myself. *How had I not seen this coming? How had I put so much faith in someone who, looking back, was never really my friend at all?*

I changed every password, but there was no way to know what information had already been seen or misused.

The damage could've already been done.

Chris's location showed him in the middle of a field, off a dirt or gravel road in a place called Royal Kunia—right in the middle of the island. It was strange. Not just because of where he was, but also the time.

It was barely 7:00 a.m.

I reasoned maybe he just went somewhere quiet to think.

But after lunch, his location hadn't changed. He was still there. Sitting in a car for hours like that didn't make sense. And though I

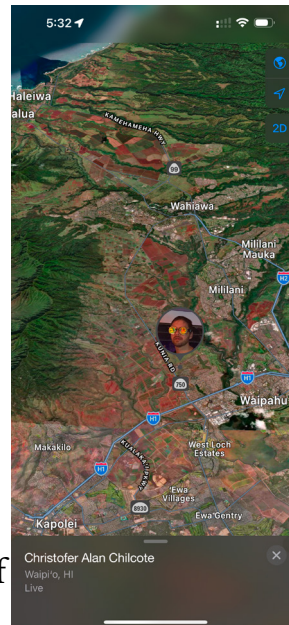


Figure 34: The irony wasn't lost on me—after all the silence and avoidance, this was how I found him. Not by a call or message, but by a stolen phone pinging across the island. I stared at this map, watching a digital ghost drift through places I knew, unsure if I was tracking a person... or the last proof he ever existed in my life. (photo by author)

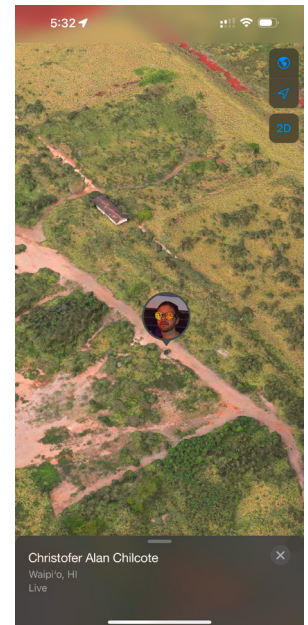


Figure 33: There it was. His phone—abandoned near what looked like a forgotten building in the middle of nowhere. A place as isolated as he had become. I zoomed in hoping for answers, for something... but all I got was a screen full of brush and silence. (photo by author)

didn't want to feed into any worst-case scenarios, a thought crept in: *What if he was planning to harm himself?* I messaged him, told him I was here, that I wanted to help.

Three hours later—nothing.

No reply.

That's when I reached out to Sterling. I told him I was concerned, worried something bad might have happened. As usual, he brushed it off with sarcasm, using wit to hide from reality. He told me Chris had left his phone in a friend's car.

But I wasn't buying it.

I pulled up satellite imagery of the location. It was a field, a road, maybe a few bushes—not a single house or structure in sight.

Unless this so-called friend lived in a tree, Sterling was lying. **Again.**

By that point, I'd grown used to the fact that truth was optional in their world. You couldn't talk to either of them without getting served a side dish of lies. And calling them out? Pointless. The time for trying to instill honesty had long passed.

So, I thought about it. *If Chris didn't leave his phone in a car, what was he doing?* One possibility made a sick kind of sense: he let the phone be taken. Or made it seem like it was stolen. That way, if anything ever came to light, he could claim someone else had used it—planted whatever incriminating material was on there. It's the oldest trick in the book.

I've seen it on every crime show from *CSI* to *Law & Order*.

Deny ownership of the evidence.

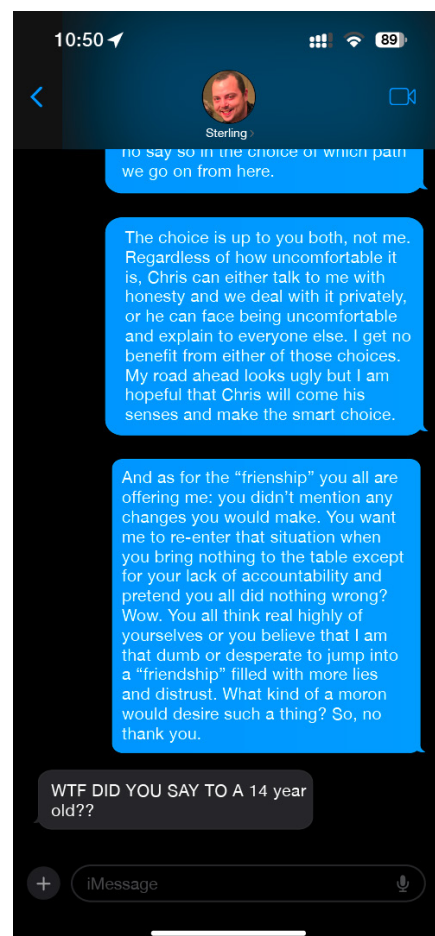


Figure 35: *By this point, I had stopped begging. I gave them a choice: deal with this privately with honesty, or face the consequences of silence. I wasn't bluffing—I had nothing left to lose. But instead of acknowledging anything I said, Sterling snapped back with a sudden, furious question—accusing me now. As if I were the one crossing a line. It was projection, panic, and gaslighting all at once. (photo by author)*

Claim no possession, no knowledge.

But what they didn't understand is that none of that works. Every photo, every message, every file on a smartphone has metadata—timestamps, source origins, audit logs.

If they wanted plausible deniability, they'd have needed more than a sob story. They'd have needed a magnet and a drill.

Sterling messaged me later that evening, but I didn't see it until hours later. More jabs, more venom, more misdirection. I tried, truly, to reason with him. I wanted him to see sense, to stop the downward spiral.

But he didn't want sense.

He didn't want peace.

He only wanted control—and the power to cause pain.

That night, it hit me hard. I wasn't given a say. I didn't get to vote on how this would end. They picked the road we'd all walk down, and I had no choice but to follow—or be left behind. There are no words strong enough to explain the frustration, the anger, the utter heartbreak I felt.

One of the very last messages I received from Sterling forced me to reconsider everything. It suggested that what had happened with BlueBird wasn't the first time—something I hadn't even considered until then.

Up to that point, I thought I had stumbled upon a single horrifying situation. But after reading that message, it became clear there were other incidents, hidden beneath the surface the entire time.

That was the last time they spoke to me.

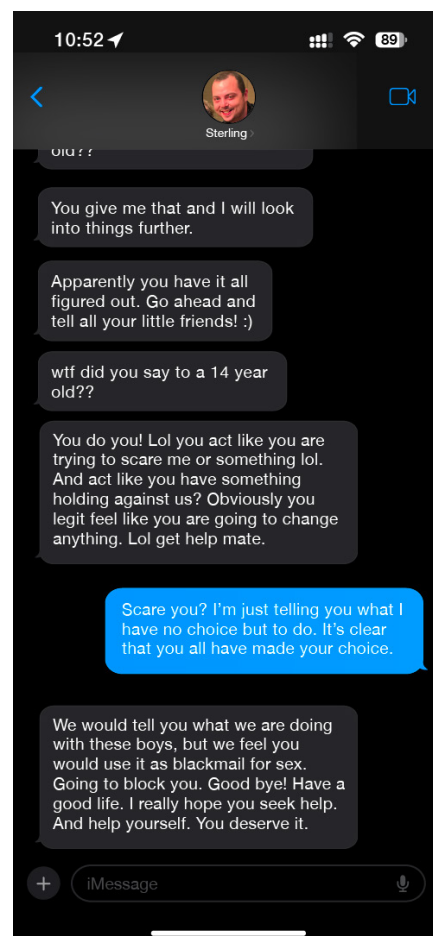


Figure 36: When they realized I wasn't backing down, the mockery turned vicious. Sterling lashed out with baseless, disgusting accusations—projecting guilt and deflecting blame in one final swing. They acted like I was the threat. Like I was the manipulator. But I wasn't trying to destroy anyone. I just wanted them to stop. To see what they were doing. Instead, they chose the lie... and slammed the door shut behind it. (photo by author)

WORSE THAN THE WORST

I regret ever thinking that things couldn't get any worse than they were at the time. Now, I no longer use that language when things are going rough, having learned a very valuable lesson. Things can always get worse.

Unbelievably, I had an accident and broke my shoulder in four fractures, which could not have happened at a worse time. Without question, this complicated almost everything—well, maybe everything.

Going into this injury recovery, I was blind to the foreseeable future and was not too smart about how long the healing would take before I would be back to normal. I seriously thought in three months, my shoulder would return to how it was before the accident.

I feel like I am like most people and unable to relate to health issues, specifically pain levels, impairments, and how it changes a person's life. No one can really relate to what other people are going through until it is experienced.

In no fault of our own, we often fall very short of grasping the basic level of another's suffering. I am included in that group, and this was my first time breaking anything.

I doubt that I can find the words to describe the agony, but maybe sharing my experiences can depict a glimmer of what it was really like.

I quickly realized there were many things I took for granted when I was no longer capable of doing them. To put the situation into perspective, here are some things I could no longer do by myself and how they impacted me.

Shirts—The two weeks, I wore the same shirt, a pullover, and shorts I had on the day of the accident because I couldn't get out of them. Even if I did manage to get out of them, how was I going to put clean clothes on? I owned very few button-up shirts, but I made quick use of the ones I had since raising my arm was not going to happen. I couldn't button them up completely or get both arms through the sleeves, but it was better than nothing.

Socks—If the sock had to be pulled up, then I didn't bother with it. It was a test of my patience to wrangle the opening on a tiny bootie sock around my toes securely so I could pull the rest of it over my foot.

Zippers—Discovering the mechanics of a simple zipper was the first impairment I recognized, and what's worse, I only owned a single pair of shorts without a zipper.

Bathing—All I had was ice-cold water to bathe in. Even if I didn't have a broken shoulder, the process would still have been horribly uncomfortable. Without a working arm and the onset of intense pain every time I moved my torso, I would have had to endure thirty minutes or more in that freezing shower. Instead, I had to resort to wiping myself down as best I could with a cloth.

Food—I had a decent amount of food stocked away, but my cabinets might as well have been barren. Opening jars or using a can-opener was not possible. Before the accident, I had purchased the ingredients to make a beef stew. I thought I could just make that, and it would last me a few days, but I was unable to cut up the vegetables. I couldn't drive either, and I didn't have the spare money to order delivery every day. For a while, I survived on pasta sprinkled with salt and pepper, but I had to omit the sauce because it was tightly sealed in a jar. There weren't many options on the menu I would be capable of preparing. I had no choice but to turn to junk food, microwaveable finger foods, chips, and crackers.

Work—I ended up getting hired for the position I applied for. The company was gracious enough to make allowances for me during the fire, and I was very thankful for the employment, so I wasn't about to push it because of my injury. I had not accrued any vacation time or sick leave to use. There isn't a single task under my job function that doesn't require the use of a mouse and keyboard. At the busiest financial time of the year, my plate was full. I worked every day as best as I could. I am right-handed, and that is where my shoulder was broken, too. Because I could not extend my arm, the only remaining option to keep up with my projects was to use the mouse and keyboard while standing up.

In the first couple of weeks of the injury, the pain became an intruder in my every moment. The slightest movement of my arm would send an instant excruciating response. The medications prescribed for the pain did very little because the pain was so intense.

Usually, when I don't feel good, I like to sleep it off until it's gone, but that was not going to be a solution I could apply to this problem. Laying down generated the worst pain because there wasn't a position in which the pain would subside, and the body's gravity would apply enough force to cause more pain. Sitting up was the only viable option, and even then, there was no real relief. Essentially, the recovery stage started with getting little rest, at most an hour or two a day, and that occurred when the body and the mind are beyond exhausted and are forced to pass out. After about ten days and only five hours of sleep, my mind started to unravel, and absolute desperation began to take over. When I was finally at my wit's end, I remember standing in the middle of my apartment, crying in despair and begging to have my arm removed. I would have literally done anything to sleep, and I mean anything.

My mind and body finally gave out, and I collapsed for four or five hours. That rest was enough for my mind to regain some clarity. Sleep deprivation was the biggest problem I faced immediately after the injury, but it was just one of many challenges that would test my will to survive.

For the first week or so, I confined myself to my apartment in misery. One of my friends told me that I could use their shower, that they would just give me a key, and I could use their bathroom when needed. It was an incredibly nice gesture, and even though I was not able to actually bathe myself at the time, I was still very grateful.

Additionally, my other good friend came by on my birthday to drop off some take-out food they had ordered; I was delighted because all I had been eating was junk food.

I was starved for a hot meal.

Chapter Eleven

FEBRUARY 2023

STRANGE BEHAVIOR

I noticed an eerie quietness that settled around me. It wasn't just the silence of words unspoken, but a silence that felt like absence—an absence of concern, of presence, of care. I'm not one to expect a constant outpouring of attention, but this felt different, off in a way that gnawed at the edges of my mind. My immediate friends, who once seemed to care deeply about my well-being, now appeared distant, almost as if they were avoiding me.

Every day was a battle. The simplest task, writing a short email with only my left arm while standing up at my desk, seemed insurmountable. However, I faced the reality of knowing that meaningful progress meant programming two pages of code.

My landlord kept reminding me that I had to move within a month, but I was physically incapable of packing my belongings. I couldn't even fold a flat cardboard into a box, let alone fill it. The sheer number of critical issues piling up around me left me paralyzed with indecision. I was drowning in tasks and overwhelmed with the urgency of it all. Yet, I couldn't articulate what kind of help I needed. Reaching out for help was just another task I couldn't complete.

Time was the very thing that would alleviate the mound of pressure, but it was impossible to acquire more. The little bit of it that was left was slipping away faster than I could manage.

Despite my obvious struggles, the help I did receive seemed minimal. I appreciated the nutritious meal, but it came without any words or reassurances of further support, and the key for shower access that was offered never materialized.

THE BOTTOM IN SIGHT

The feeling of isolation had become difficult to ignore, and with the very things I was capable of doing, distracting myself was rarely successful. Previously, I believed my state of denial was occasional, but I began to suspect denial came to visit me a long time ago and never left. It became a constant companion and shook my sensibility.

With so many aspects of my reality twisted, I attempted to regain some control by taking inventory of all the things I was certain were true. I was absolutely positive Chris and I were friends, good friends. I knew I couldn't have possibly imagined our friendship. We spent so much time together over the past few years and did so many things together that it wasn't possible for Chris to be so detached and completely disregard all those memories we once shared. I was confident that deep down, he didn't want things to be the way they were.

Despite everything, I wasn't ready to give up on the idea that he must have cared and that our friendship couldn't have meant nothing. I truly believed it wasn't possible for anyone—especially Chris—to completely lack compassion for me

and my circumstance. The thought that someone I trusted and had been so close to could walk away without a shred of empathy felt inhuman and impossible.

In that moment, I reached another breaking point and was willing to abandon my pride and ignore my hurt. The longing to have some semblance of my life returned and the desperation to be shown a thread of decency drove me to another vulnerable act, regardless if it meant risking further pain. I found myself writing Chris a text message, laying bare the condition I was in and just how dire my situation had become. I pleaded to him for help and clung to a fragile hope that maybe, just maybe, he would remember I had always been a good friend to him.

All that I received in return was silence. It was more than just a lack of response; it was a chilling revelation of who he really is. The person that I once trusted and cared for vanished, replaced by some sociopathic stranger. His unwillingness to speak was more than just shame; he knows his behavior is cruel, but he simply doesn't care. The depth of his detachment frightened me. Realizing that someone can cause so much hurt and suffering and feel absolutely nothing when they question why they were intentionally misled and abused was deeply unsettling.

READING INTO THINGS

I hadn't seen or heard much from my once-good friend, the one who said they "wished I hadn't done that." (*which we never talked about*).

One evening, I encountered them, and during a brief moment of privacy, I mentioned that I sensed our friendship had changed. Because their friendship meant a lot to me, I couldn't just put it aside.

Despite everything else going on in my life, I prioritized trying to understand the wedge that had formed between us. We had always been able to speak openly and honestly with each other—I didn't see why that moment should be any different.

They dismissed my concern and assured me that nothing had changed. I stood there, unable to grasp their unwillingness to clear the air. Why lie? Why pretend, especially when I was offering a chance to work through it? I trusted my intuition more than I trusted their denial. The change in our dynamic was obvious: our communication had diminished, and the deeper conversations that once bonded us were replaced by shallow exchanges. When I opened up, they seemed disengaged, uninterested. *That wasn't how our friendship used to be.*

A few nights later, I went downstairs for a smoke. On my way, I thought I'd check if they wanted to join me—something we had done countless times before. When I asked, they said no.

It might seem like a small thing, but it was the first time they had ever declined.

That alone said a lot.

Standing outside, cigarette in hand, I couldn't shake the uneasy feeling. I thought about everything that had been said, and more importantly, everything that hadn't. I ended up sending them a message, telling them I knew something was off between us and asking if we could talk about it.

They replied almost immediately, but their words caught me off guard: **"You're reading into things."** It landed like a blow to the chest. They knew how much it hurt me to be gaslit by Chris and Sterling, and now they were doing the same thing.

But that's what made it so telling—it wasn't just a dismissal. It was a reference. A suggestion that I had misread everything about Chris too. A layered denial that undermined both what I saw in them and what I'd witnessed before.

And I wondered—did they ever stop to consider that maybe I wasn't wrong? That maybe my intuition, the same one they dismissed, had caught something real? We aren't friends today. That alone proves I wasn't imagining things.

The cracks were **real**.

I saw them long before they were willing to admit they existed.

The proof was in the pudding.

Looking back now, I wasn't reading into things. I was just the only one willing to **face what was already happening.**

INTEGRITY

It had been three weeks since my last proper shower. The constant sensation of grime clung to me, no matter how often I used a washcloth. I could still feel the stubborn layer of sweat, dirt, and oils that wouldn't go away. I had become painfully aware of my own scent, amplifying my frustration, irritation, and sense of helplessness.

But instead of giving in to defeat and accepting that the situation was out of my control, I decided to take action. I messaged my friend—the one who had once offered me a key to their apartment. I wasn't interested in pressing them for the key—I only needed something simple: a shower.

As some background, this friend and I had a history of open and honest communication. Through those dialogues, I had shared parts of my life that were deeply private and intimate. I remember a couple of heartfelt conversations where we both expressed appreciation for each other. Our openness wasn't just preferred—it was encouraged. They prided themselves on authenticity and often declared that they “wrote the book on integrity.”

In my message, I felt the need to be humble, as if I had to justify my request. I explained that it had been weeks since I had a proper cleaning. I apologized for bothering them and promised to clean up after myself, leaving no trace of my presence.

While waiting for their reply, I didn't question why there was a sense of dread growing in my stomach. I wasn't worried they'd say “no”—so where was that feeling coming from? Deep down, my subconscious seemed to know what I was unwilling to admit: we were no longer close friends. The truth was, I shouldn't have needed to ask a good friend for help like this, and I definitely shouldn't have felt awkward about it.

I messaged them on a Tuesday, and by the end of the day, they replied. They said their next day off was Monday, and I could come by then. After everything I'd done for them over the years, and knowing how much consideration they had shown to complete strangers, I wanted to point out the obvious fracture in our relationship. But instead, I responded with a simple "ok."

It hurt more than I expected. They knew I had been struggling for weeks without a proper shower, and yet they couldn't spare even thirty minutes for the next six days. Not even for someone they once called a good friend. I sat at my desk for a few minutes, trying to let it go, but something in me felt compelled to say more.

Against my better judgment, I asked them what had changed between us. I told them if I had done something wrong, they could at least let me know so I could apologize and make amends.

Like my other friend, they sidestepped the question and insisted I hadn't done anything to offend them. I didn't press further—it was clear they weren't interested in addressing it.

The following Monday, they messaged me to say they would leave their door unlocked for me. I replied that I would head over and mentioned that it would be nice to see them. But then they responded, saying they wouldn't be there—they had to make an important phone call. It felt like they would come up with any excuse to avoid seeing me.

I couldn't help but think, how could they not see their own actions?

Offering the key, refusing to deliver it, and then avoiding any discussion about the shift in our friendship—it made me question what exactly was written in their so-called "book of integrity." It seemed like it should be a *#1 New York Times bestseller*—**the best mystery novel ever written.**

AN UNEXPECTED HUMANITARIAN

A neighbor wanted to borrow something and messaged me to ask if they could come up and grab it. I was a little hesitant, not because I cared about the item they needed, but because my apartment was in shambles. There was only so much I could do for cleaning, and the condition of my place was just short of what I consider to be as nasty. I handed out my disclaimers and warnings to them before they arrived.

I wouldn't say we were close friends; in fact, we didn't really get along so well. There had been a few instances that led to tiffs, such as disagreements over noise levels and shared spaces, with a couple of those moments ending with me walking away in frustration. However, in general, I had no real dislike for them.

When I opened the door, they gasped at the sight of me. They said they had heard about my accident, but no one had told them how severe it was. They were appalled when they took a look at my living conditions, which was extremely embarrassing, and then headed straight for the kitchen to tackle the mound of dirty dishes. My humble acceptance of the help had no bounds on how much I appreciated them.

They worked tirelessly for a few hours and promised to return to continue because it was clear to them that I was not capable. Shocked at the state of affairs, they questioned why none of my friends were assisting me. I said I didn't know and added that I had not actually requested their aid. They looked at me and said, "True friends are there for you without asking." They were right, and that statement resonated with me.

True to their word, they returned several times to help me pack, clean, and have a decent meal. They even insisted that I get in their shower so they could wash me off, and even though it was an embarrassing moment for me, I put aside my shyness because I was fairly certain I looked and smelled like a homeless person.

I wholeheartedly believe that without their help, my situation could have been unthinkable worse than it was. All the little annoyances I saw in them faded once I realized what a decent and kind person they are. I made sure they were

well aware of how grateful I was for their aid. To them, they said they were just being “human,” but to me, it was like an angel descended from the heavens.

— PART FIVE —



Chapter Twelve

MARCH 2023

RELOCATION

Miraculously, I managed to vacate that godforsaken apartment, packed up everything I owned with one arm, and moved into my new place. The entire day was consumed with the move itself. So, when all the boxes were unloaded, I could finally breathe. I felt a huge sense of relief from knowing I was away from that awful place and did not have to return. At the same time, I was exhausted, mentally and physically drained.

Right after the movers had me sign the invoices and I sent them on their way, I pulled out a couple of blankets and a pillow from my boxes and dropped the

hard tile floor. It didn't matter if it was comfortable; I had no problem falling into a deep sleep.

RETURNED STATION

While playing a video game online, I received a message from an old gaming buddy that Chris and I used to team up with regularly. He'd been deployed to Korea for a military assignment, and although he initially thought he'd be able to keep playing with us after setting up a connection, it didn't pan out the way he had hoped. I had nearly stopped playing that game myself right around the time he left, and after he arrived overseas, we only spoke once or twice. It had been several months since I last heard from him.

I'm guessing his tour of duty had just ended and he was back home, because suddenly there he was—online again. He messaged me to catch up, asking what I was playing these days and what I'd been up to since he left. I told him about a couple of new games I bounced between and gave him the short version of my current situation.

He got a little nostalgic, reminiscing about the fun we all had the year prior—me, him, and Chris. We had a great rhythm back then.

It hurt a little to have to break the news that Chris and I were no longer friends. Even just saying it aloud to someone else made it feel more final. I didn't go into all the details, just enough to give him an idea.

No reason to relive the whole painful saga.

What surprised me was that he didn't seem shocked. In fact, he told me he had also grown very uncomfortable with Chris and BlueBird's behavior.

He had apparently spoken up about it, and, predictably, Chris didn't take kindly to that. He was cast out—excluded and ignored—just like me.

That's when it clicked: anyone who had a complaint or felt uncomfortable about the sexual references or the language was immediately discarded.

Chris wasn't going to allow anyone to be a voice of reason or a mirror reflecting his inappropriate behavior.

It was a tactic—whether conscious or not—to isolate the victim.

Because if no one around you is willing to speak up, you can convince yourself and someone who doesn't know any better, that there's no problem at all.

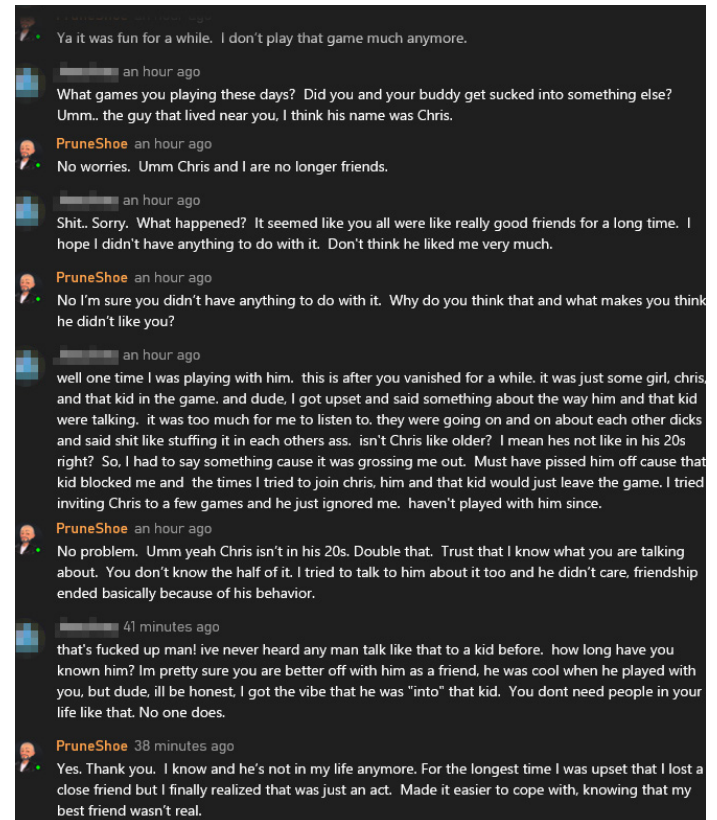


Figure 37: A conversation with someone that Chris and I used to play with. He got stationed overseas and was gone for a long while. I had already withdrawn from gaming with Chris. His impression matched mine. (Photo by author)

Chapter Thirteen
APRIL 2023

DYING LIGHT

My immediate surroundings were a thousand times better than what they were before. The reduction in stress and anxiety was such a relief. Not having to dread running into Chris or Sterling was heaven to me. Every time I encountered them, my mind would become flooded with questions they were never willing to answer, and then my thoughts would get focused on all the negative aspects of the reality Chris and Sterling constructed.

A lot had changed for the better, and I wanted to be appreciative and thankful for the place I was in. And I was grateful, but I knew my actions didn't reflect such gratitude. I started having dark thoughts that circled hopelessness; the

abrupt separation turned into isolation, and I could feel the depression eating away at my ability to see the good in each day.

I didn't want to die. Not even close. I wasn't suicidal, and I never have been. That kind of act would devastate the people who love me most, and that truth has always anchored me. My mother, my brothers, the real friends I have back home—their love runs deep. I could never do something that would hurt them like that. But I needed to say it aloud—I needed to say the words that captured just how lost I felt inside.

So I reached out. To two people I used to call good friends. Even to Chris. I asked each of them separately, in different ways but all with the same painful core: “You really just don't care if I were dead? Wouldn't even remember a thing about me? It's like I never existed at all. And I want to know why.”

I wasn't asking for pity. I wasn't playing a game. I was reaching for something—anything—to remind me I wasn't invisible. I wanted to believe I mattered, even if it was only in some small, forgotten way.

What scared me most wasn't death. It was the idea that I had been erased. That I had given so much of myself—my time, my loyalty, my love—only to be wiped clean from memory like a mistake people wished they'd never made.

I wasn't seeking to be taken back. I didn't want apologies. I just wanted to understand how people who had once called me a friend could now show the same concern for me that they would for a broken lamp or a lost pair of shoes.

And underneath it all was a fear I didn't know how to live with: I had completely lost my ability to trust. Every time someone tried to talk to me or befriend me, my mind defaulted to suspicion. What were they after? What trick were they pulling? What words were they saying that had some hidden meaning or trap behind them?

It was exhausting.

I didn't want to live in a world where love was only a prelude to betrayal. I didn't want to keep searching people's faces for signs they might hurt me too. I wanted to believe again—not just in others, but in myself. But belief requires

some sliver of light, and mine was fading. That's what this moment was. The dying light.

I wasn't dying. But something inside me was. And I didn't know if it would ever come back.

When the responses came—if you can even call them that—they pushed me deeper into that shadow. One of them said nothing. Just silence, like my message had been tossed into a void that didn't care to echo back. Chris, true to his pattern, didn't reply either. Instead, he blocked the very channel I used to reach him, as if erasing the message would erase me along with it.

But the harshest came from the one I least expected. They wrote back with words I will never forget: "If you have chosen to take your own life. Rest in peace."

That sentence didn't just sting—it sliced. I reread it multiple times, not because I didn't understand it, but because I couldn't believe it. There was no confusion in what I had said. I had not expressed a desire to end my life. I was trying to convey how deeply wounded I felt, how lost I had become. But those words told me they either didn't hear me at all, or worse, **they did—and didn't care.**

That moment was one of the darkest in my life. Not because I was abandoned, but because when I screamed into the void, it screamed back with cruelty, indifference, or nothing at all.

Honestly, I don't know how I coped. I didn't have a plan. I didn't have a process. I was just torn up and drowning in the quiet.

And then, my angel appeared. My old neighbor—the one who had once shown me kindness when I needed it most—called and asked if she could come see me. It was the first time we had seen each other since I moved. When she arrived, I opened up about everything that had happened. We sat and talked for a long time, and I felt, for a moment, less alone.

After she left my place, she happened to run into one of the "friends" I had messaged. In conversation, she mentioned that she had just come from seeing me. That's when they suddenly asked, "Is he going to be okay?"

She didn't answer right away. Instead, she told them, "If you're really concerned, you should call him yourself."

Their response? "Please don't tell him I asked."

That detail came back to me later that evening when my angel called again.

She said I needed to know—not to wound me further, but so I could **let go of hope** for someone who didn't deserve it.

Because what kind of person shows concern only when they think no one is watching?

Who treats compassion like it's a secret that can never be traced back to them?

It was like it was a **crime to care**.

And for some of them, it wasn't even about me. It was about the performance of empathy—asking just enough to look like they gave a damn, but not enough to actually do something. Not enough to be known for it. Just enough to preserve their image, in case someone else was keeping score.

That was never care. That was self-preservation masquerading as compassion.

And I deserved better than that.

WILTED OLIVE BRANCH

Often, I found myself swimming in a sea of denial, believing my friend, Chris, still existed. Deep down, I still had this tiny bit of hope that Chris would come to his senses. Wholeheartedly, I didn't think it was possible for any human, especially one I befriended, to sever all communication and not extend a drop of effort to build a bridge.

One day, I received a notification on my phone; it was a reminder that Chris's birthday was near. I considered that perhaps enough time had passed to allow him a moment of clarity, a chance to reflect on what happened from a sensible perspective. So, with a card and a letter, I made myself vulnerable—again—in a desperate attempt to make sense of the senseless, to find peace in the chaos,

and to construct a bridge from the wreckage of betrayal toward some kind of understanding. Toward closure. Despite the internal pain and buried anger, the letter was calm, neutral, and sincere—an olive branch without thorns.

I hoped he would see, through reflection, the destruction and chaos his behavior had caused. I hoped he would reconsider his approach, recognize that I was only ever trying to help him out of the dark pit of anxiety and shame he lived in. There is a better way, I tried to tell him. A different life is possible. One that doesn't devour you from the inside out.

But there was no response. Not a word. Not a whisper. Just the same old silence that screamed louder than anything else ever could. And I felt like a fool.

I already knew who Chris was: cold, selfish, disconnected, and unconcerned. I don't know why I tested the waters again. Hope is a double-edged sword, and I was holding it by the blade. Maybe the truth was, I dreaded the alternative path so much more. That path meant acknowledging the friendship was over. Not damaged. Not fractured. Gone. I didn't know where that road began, much less how to travel it.

Still, despite the disappointment, there was a strange, quiet liberation. His silence was the pivot I needed. It marked the beginning of acceptance. Not the kind you welcome with open arms, but the kind that slowly rearranges your entire world whether you're ready or not.

The friend I thought I had? He never existed. He was either an act, a role being played, or someone long gone. And had I reached that understanding a year earlier, maybe I would've saved myself months of torment. But even then, I couldn't have predicted the grief that came with burying someone who was still very much alive.

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

LACK OF EMPATHY

I never really gave much consideration to what it *actually* means when someone lacks empathy. Sure, I understood the definition—someone who doesn’t feel compassion or connection to the emotions of others.

But that’s a surface understanding.

To truly *grasp* what it looks like, what it feels like, to stand in front of a person so void of empathy... most of us can’t relate. It’s a hollow place our minds don’t want to go.

During all my struggles, I kept clinging to the idea:

“Chris wouldn’t do that.” — “He’s not that cold.” — “He’s not that evil.”

I kept thinking that somewhere inside, he had a heart—that there was still some glimmer of recognition for human pain and suffering. I kept searching for it. Waiting for it. Hoping to see something—*anything*—that proved there was still a trace of light in him. But I ended up with nothing. Just empty hands and silence.



Figure 38: This photo of the Georgia couple later convicted of horrific abuse against their adopted sons shows how appearances can be deeply misleading. On the surface, it portrays a picture-perfect, loving family—rainbow shirts, smiling faces, unity. But behind this carefully crafted image was a hidden world of exploitation and abuse. This is a chilling reminder that predators often mask themselves in wholesomeness, using charm and presentation to disarm suspicion. (photo by ABC News)

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

The truth is, we can't really define what it means to be devoid of empathy. How do you describe the absence of something you've never lost? It's like trying to imagine a color your eyes have never seen.

Then one day, a friend told me about a gay couple in Atlanta. Normal guys on the outside—regular jobs, well-dressed, respected. They were even considered pillars of the LGBTQ community. I didn't know them personally, but I had heard about some of the volunteer work they'd organized—things that made them seem like role models, even beyond the gay community.

That illusion shattered in an instant.

They were arrested for child sexual abuse. My friend only had pieces of the story, so I went searching on my own. I found the [articles](#). I read the charges. And somewhere halfway through, I had to stop reading to catch my breath.

This couple—just a front, apparently—had adopted two young boys, around 10 or 11 years old. Then they rented each of the boys like toys to men for a thousand dollars for a visit to sexually abuse the two children. Video content was advertised on the dark private channels of social media. One report said this activity carried on five to twenty times a week, often multiple times a day for **two years**.

I won't repeat what else I read in those [articles](#). *I can't*. But if you need to understand what it means for someone to be without empathy—to *truly* feel that concept—read the part where the reporter describes what was captured on video, and what one of the “fathers” said to his “son” about how to control the pain while the abuse was happening.



Figure 39: These are the mugshots of the Georgia couple whose carefully curated image of a loving, wholesome family collapsed under the weight of their crimes. Behind closed doors, they inflicted unimaginable harm on the two boys they adopted. This image is a chilling reminder: predators don't always look like monsters—they often look like neighbors, role models, even heroes, until the truth comes out. (photos by Walton County Sheriff's Dept)

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

That's what it means to be empty inside. That's what it means when there's no conscience, no remorse, no love.

It's important to understand the horrors some people are capable of—especially those who prey on children. If it leaves a scar in your mind, *good*.

That scar means **you'll remember**.

And this is not something the world can afford to forget.

Chris and Sterling have continued to show no remorse, no guilt, and no empathy. **Ask yourself, can you really give them the benefit of the doubt on how dark and deep their desires go?**

Chapter Fourteen

MAY 2023

THE FIRST TIME

I made a conscious effort to stop thinking about the memories associated with my time on Date Street. This helped me avoid the negative impact those memories had on me. By using the “out of sight, out of mind” approach, I prevented myself from getting stuck in a negative mindset that would sometimes take me hours to shake off.

I contacted two friends I had not seen or spoken to in several months and made plans to visit. They are very down-to-earth, good people who have always welcomed me as if I were a part of their “extended” family. A few years ago, they went on a weekend camping trip with Chris, and Chris brought me along, which

is how I knew them. Doing things with them was one of the highlights of my friendship with Chris.

Since they were still close friends with Chris, I speculated that Chris gave them a reason why he and I were not friends anymore. Whether that reason was an unimaginable lie or some fabricated excuse to avoid the truth remained unseen. I dreaded having to respond to any of the three, so my plans were not to mention Chris.

Anxiety aside, I drove to their place one evening after work and was warmly greeted and invited in. My uneasy feeling quickly dissipated once we began talking, and even more so when we started eating their mother's delicious homemade lumpia

After a couple of shots, we were outside smoking and making small talk. They asked me what was happening in my world since we last spoke. I began telling them about the series of horrible events I experienced during the first part of the year, and I intentionally left out the king of nightmare events involving Chris.

As I was elaborating on some of the details, they asked me to pause while they were in disbelief that Chris hadn't mentioned anything. They added that they hadn't heard anything about me in quite a long time. I stated that my friendship with Chris ended abruptly at the beginning of the year, and they naturally wanted to know why.

Although, I didn't want to say anything about it, I felt any response to brush it off with things like a "simple argument" wouldn't be realistic enough considering they knew what good friends, Chris and I used to be. And I certainly wasn't going to lie to them, leaving me with no choice but to speak the truth.

I stumbled to summarize the hundred events in mind and thought it might be easier to explain if I showed them some of the dialog between Chris and me. I pulled out my phone and began looking through the messages to locate the dialog I had in mind.

After a minute or two, I could not find what I wanted. The stress from my confusion became apparent as I rapidly scrolled back and forth through a year of

texts. Instead, to save face, I quickly found one of the messages Chris sent to the boy, pointing out the highly inappropriate language.

As I told them briefly about several events relating to Chris's abnormal behavior, I sensed they were retreating into shock and disbelief, the typical and expected reaction. So, I emphasized how seriously I had considered my concerns and how much time I invested into vetting my thoughts and conclusions.

They told me they wholeheartedly knew I was telling the truth because no one would make these severe and socially damaging allegations against anyone unless it were the truth.

I was blown away with relief. **Finally**, someone had the good sense to recognize me for who I am. Of course I would not do such a thing, especially about a very close friend that I cared about a great deal.

On and off for the next few hours, I told them more of what had transpired for the past year. I stressed the amount of effort and energy I gave to turning the situation towards a positive outcome, but ultimately, I failed to do so.

I tried everything to get Chris to talk to me, but no matter how much I told him how deeply I cared for him, there was no leverage too great that would persuade him to reason and listen to me. I had to say to them, at the end of it all, my conclusion was Chris was going to continue grooming boys because it compels him; he believes he is doing nothing wrong, rejects questioning and confrontation, and shows no sign of self-restraint.

I failed to mention the **amount of lies Chris** would throw to protect himself, but I think they began to sense that on their own.

I could tell they were deeply disturbed, just as I was, and they told me they intended to speak to Chris. I had a strong urge to tell them it would not be a good idea, but they have the right to interact in their own way with friends, so I refrained.

After three hours of me divulging the various events I could remember, we were both simply drained, and we both felt enough had been said. We hugged, and I headed home, feeling upset over my inability to control my emotions.

I hate remembering the past year of my life; reliving any part of it brings back a big part of the pain I experienced when it happened. I wanted to wipe it entirely from my memory.

Then, I reflected that maybe that is why this was the first time I had attempted to really tell anyone the **full** story, and it was clear to me I was unprepared.

In hindsight, I did not tell these events cohesively or in chronological order. I was distraught and emotional from recounting so many painful memories.

Chapter Fifteen
JUNE 2023

A CHANGE OF BELIEF

A month had passed since I confided in a friend about Chris, trusting them enough to share what I had experienced. I hadn't followed up with them, mostly because I feared what I might have caused. Still, the silence wore on me, and I felt guilty for dropping something so heavy into their lap without offering support afterward.

So I reached out, offering a lifeline—not to push, just to say I was here if they needed to talk it out or make sense of things.

Part of me hoped they hadn't talked to Chris at all.

The other part feared they had, and they were hit with the painfully gaslit lies and deception.

And then, a few days later, they responded. The message was short, polite, and brutal in its simplicity. "Yes, they had spoken with him. And yes, they believed what he told them—that his interactions with BlueBird were innocent."

I stared at the message, stunned, like someone had knocked the wind out of me. I couldn't even formulate a reply because I didn't trust myself not to explode. I knew the questions that wanted to fly out of my mouth:

"What are you talking about?"

"You told me that you believed me because no one makes this stuff up."

"Did you not hear what I told you that night about all the lying and gaslighting?"

"Did you think he was just going to offer it up on a platter for you in one sitting, when he didn't crack in the six months that I tried to get through to him?"

"What about the images I showed you between Chris and BlueBird? Those point out criminal, felony-class crimes."

"Did you demand he speak to those and not wipe it with the excuse of 'gamer talk'?"

"And did it not occur to you that a kid is involved in this?"

"That none of this is just about two adults having a spat?"

How is it that no one seems to think about the minor who was at the center of it all?

I restrained my inner outbursts. I didn't want to be combative or argue. I tried to resist positioning them into a "pick sides" situation, because this was anything but.

However, the built-up anger from being doubted by so many people I once trusted worked against me. I was ready to put an end to Chris's lies. I combed through text messages to provide the evidence to do so, but once again, I could not find a single one.

Still seeking clarity, I asked them directly: why did they believe him? There was no answer.

No explanation.

Just a suggestion that I should move on.

And that's when it hit me with the full weight of irony. I was the only one in this whole mess who didn't have kids. No children, no grandchildren. Yet I was the only one who seemed to care enough to do something. To protect a child. To speak up when something was clearly wrong. It was unreal.

The very people who should have understood the stakes—who should have had a visceral reaction to the danger a child might be in—looked the other way. They minimized it.

They swallowed the lie because it was easier than dealing with the truth.

I didn't have to imagine what it would be like if it were my son or grandson in BlueBird's place. I didn't need a direct line to feel a human responsibility to act.

But they did.

And they chose silence.

In haste and without thinking, I replied with multiple and genuine declarations to support my claims, hoping they would apply some skepticism to whatever Chris told them. Then, suddenly, I realized I was going down an argumentative path, so I stopped, apologized, and expressed my sincere gratitude for listening to me the night I visited.

For the next couple of hours, I didn't move. I couldn't. It was as if something inside me had short-circuited—my body disconnected from command, my mind trapped in an endless loop trying to make sense of something that defied logic.

I kept seeing that night I visited them—how shaken I was, how urgently I tried to get the words out.

I hadn't gone there with a plan.

I was in a state of collapse, and I let them see it all.

The fear.

The panic.

The raw, unrehearsed truth.

To think they walked away believing it was some kind of act... it hit with such force that my system just shut down. The shock wasn't just emotional—it was physiological. My brain couldn't process how something that real, that unfiltered, could be seen as anything but genuine.

It wasn't grief I felt.

It was dissonance—like my entire reality had fractured.

And in that silence, I realized something devastating: I was no longer living in the world I thought I knew. The magnitude of how mishapen it truly was remained unknown, and that terrified me.

This new world didn't run on truth or integrity. In this one, distortion reigned.

Comfort came in lies.

And the more you screamed the truth, the less anyone wanted to hear it.

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

THE RULE THAT SHOULD NEVER BREAK

There is something in me—something I was never taught—that knows when someone sounds the alarm and cries out, “*There is a predator in our midst,*” you don’t go to the accused and ask, “*Are you a predator?*”

- You don’t pacify.
- You don’t play neutral.
- You don’t treat it like a misunderstanding.
- You don’t act like both sides deserve equal weight.

Because no one—no decent, grounded person—makes that kind of accusation lightly. Not for revenge. Not for drama. Not for attention. Speaking those words comes at a cost. It risks friendships, safety, and being shunned. So when someone dares to say it out loud, it should *mean* something.

There is a rule—a core truth—that should never be up for debate:

You always err on the side of protecting a child.

No matter what.

That’s not just a good idea—it’s the rule. And breaking that rule is what has allowed so much harm to go unchallenged for so long.

Because if you’re wrong for being too careful, the worst that happens is discomfort and awkwardness. But you can stand by your choice, knowing you acted responsibly for a cause that shouldn’t need justification. Anyone who truly cares about protecting children will eventually thank you for doing the right thing.

If the accused is innocent, they may be offended at first—but in time, they should be able to reflect on the behaviors that led to suspicion. And most importantly,

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

their defense should **never be left in silence**, never handed to one person to carry as judge, jury, and verdict.

Transparency is what protects the innocent.

Silence protects no one.

So no—I don't think I imagined this belief.

I think it's built into me.

Maybe it's moral instinct.

Maybe it's survival.

But I know this: when someone rings the alarm, the first response should never be to doubt them into silence. It should be to *listen*. To *observe*.

And to **remember what side you're supposed to be on.**

THIS IS NOT THAT

In very rare real-life examples, there are people who have used accusations like these as weapons—to get even, to destroy someone, or to gain control in a situation they couldn't otherwise manage. And I've seen how devastating false accusations can be. I don't take that lightly. I know the difference between sounding an alarm and starting a fire.

But this is not that.

This wasn't born from resentment or rejection. It wasn't revenge. This was about someone I once called my best friend. Someone I trusted, admired, and cared about deeply. And because of that, I didn't want this to be real. I gave more benefit of the doubt than I probably should have. I held on longer than most people would.

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

But friendship isn't blind loyalty. And silence, when there's a possibility of harm to a child, isn't kindness.

It's complicity.

And what made it even clearer—what stripped away any lingering doubt—was the effort they put into hiding it.

If this were an innocent misunderstanding, why go to such extremes to cover it up?

Why erase conversations?

Why isolate me?

Why launch a quiet war against me behind the scenes?

People don't wage that kind of campaign unless they're protecting something that **can't** withstand the light.

So I spoke—not because I hated him, but because I couldn't look the other way. What I saw, what I heard, what I felt in my gut... it demanded action. And the effort they used to bury it demanded that I step up. I couldn't live with myself if I let the fear of being misunderstood outweigh the duty to say something.

This wasn't easy.

It still isn't.

But I know the weight of the words I've written.

And I stand by them.



Less than 5%
of child sexual
abuse claims
are false or
fabricated

ROCK BOTTOM

Finding the right words to capture the turmoil in my mind felt like grasping at shadows. How do you describe the feeling of what it's like when your world twists into something foreign and uncharted?

Friends who I thought knew me, who I believed were wise and grounded, suddenly saw me as nothing but a fabricator of lies. For years, my actions painted a picture of kindness, decency, and altruism. Yet, it painfully confused me how quickly those perceptions were easily discarded, how swiftly people concluded that I had morphed into a crazed villain, betraying my character overnight. They exited my life, kept the reason a secret, said nothing of goodbye, and wished they would never hear from me again so they could discard me and then forget me.

Although I had moved, I still felt like I was living under the same heavy gray cloud, even on the sunniest days. I started waking up each day with a weight pressing down on my chest, trying to keep me from repeating the same daily routine. I was doing the bare minimum to keep up with work projects and responsibilities. It felt like everything was through a fog. Small tasks seemed monumental. Day after day, month after month, it was like I was in a glass box, watching the world go by but feeling utterly disconnected.

...respect and ... experience and research ... how people ...
'bystanders' who fail to protect others from harm, including children who are being abused. Make no mistake in the predators intention, **the grooming process does not end until a crime is committed or the offender feels threatened of exposure by an external party**. As difficult as it may be to accept, there are many genuine, compelling reasons that it can be challenging for adults to take protective action. but none of which

— Winters G. *The Sexual Grooming Scale*. Taylor & Francis

A SEISMIC EVENT

I had forgotten about the trip to Las Vegas—the one I backed out of. But when I learned the trip had ended, anxiety and dread started to settle in around me like a thick, unshakable fog.

I went online to see what I could find. I didn't know what I was even looking for—maybe just a breadcrumb, some evidence of what had unfolded. I checked the profiles of BlueBird and Chris and saw that they were online and playing together.

Oddly, I felt a flicker of relief. I didn't understand why, but it was there. Maybe it was because, as far as I could tell, nothing catastrophic had happened. Yet.

A few days later, though, that low but persistent ping from my instincts returned. I went back online, and what I discovered stunned me. Chris and BlueBird were no longer friends.

I couldn't tell who had blocked whom, but someone had cut the other off completely. It wasn't just a cooling of their connection; it was an abrupt severance.

I didn't have proof or a narrative, but my gut twisted.

Something happened. Something big.

I thought maybe it was temporary, that they'd reconcile. So I checked the next day. The block was still there. But something else caught my attention, and this time, it felt like the floor dropped out from under me.

BlueBird's online friend count had always been **578**. Now, it was **14**.

That wasn't an accident.

The act of removing a friend on that platform is no simple bulk action. You have to go profile by profile. Click, unfriend, confirm. Over and over. It takes about 15 to 18 seconds per friend, and BlueBird had removed 564 of them.

That's nearly three hours of deliberate action.

But it wasn't just the time that stood out—it was the intent. This wasn't a case of someone being mad at one person and lashing out. It was a complete purge, a scorched-earth reset that spared only a few. Likely, those few were classmates or people from his real life that he still needed to stay in touch with, maybe for school or some sense of normalcy.

To go through that process in one sitting meant that BlueBird wasn't just angry—he was overwhelmed, probably devastated. Something had shaken his entire perception of trust and safety online. You don't do something like that unless you feel betrayed, invaded, or deeply unsafe. Whatever happened, it pushed him to eliminate nearly every connection he had. And that kind of action only comes from someone who no longer knows who they can trust at all.

I tried to piece it together. Maybe Chris had tried to meet him in person. Maybe he said something, or did something, that crossed a line. Maybe BlueBird remembered the message I had sent him—the one with the warnings. Maybe he realized it wasn't me he needed to fear after all.

But I doubted it. Chris had poisoned the well so thoroughly, and BlueBird had idolized him with such speed and intensity, I wasn't sure anything I said ever stood a chance.

To me, it was clear that his attachment to Chris stemmed from a deeper need—he was looking for a friend, maybe even a surrogate for the father figure

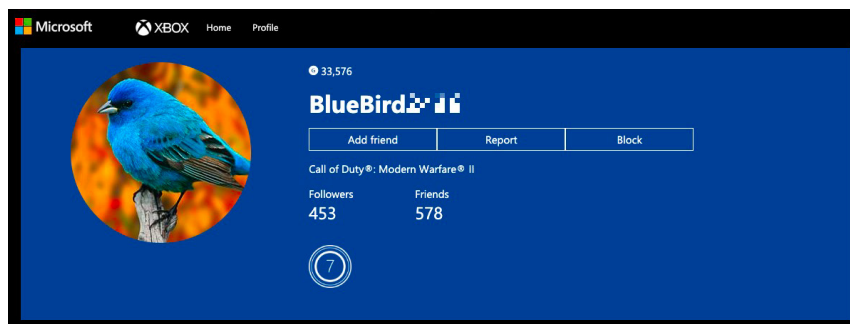


Figure 41: BEFORE: Screenshot of user's Microsoft Xbox profile page. Specifically showing the number of user's friends. (screenshot by author)

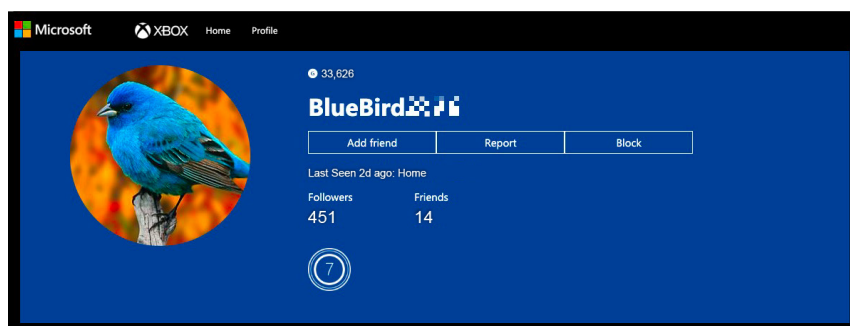


Figure 40: AFTER: Screenshot of user's Microsoft Xbox profile page. Specifically showing the number of user's friends. (screenshot by author)

he had lost to alcoholism. And unfortunately, he chose Chris, who stepped into that role under malevolent pretenses.

Still, I couldn't shake the thought: if something terrible happened in Las Vegas, if Chris crossed a line that couldn't

be uncrossed, I would live with the guilt of not having stopped it. And yet, no matter when I might have acted, I don't believe the outcome would have changed. BlueBird would have never believed me.

He was too dazzled by the illusion.

The only thing I knew for sure was this: something seismic happened. Something so violent it made BlueBird obliterate almost every connection he had.

And Chris? He changed his online status to always appear offline. A coward's move. The defining trait of someone who has something to hide.

Sometimes I wish I had played the game longer—kept my silence, gathered irrefutable proof, and had them arrested with no escape. I wasted so much of myself believing there was still some humanity left in Chris or Sterling. There wasn't. That chance is gone now, and the only thing left that could possibly stop them is accountability.

Not growth.

Not remorse.

Just incarceration.

Because this doesn't stop until someone makes it stop.

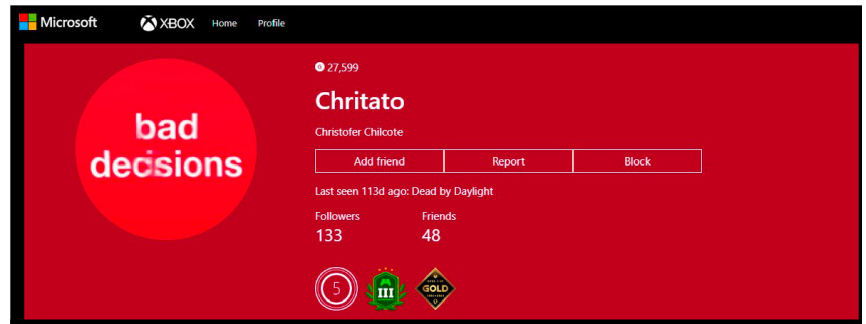


Figure 42: Screenshot was taken 113 days after he put his profile into a "hidden" state which was some time between he returned from Las Vegas and the blocked separation. He still played games online but it would not display his online status or current game title being played. (screenshot by author)

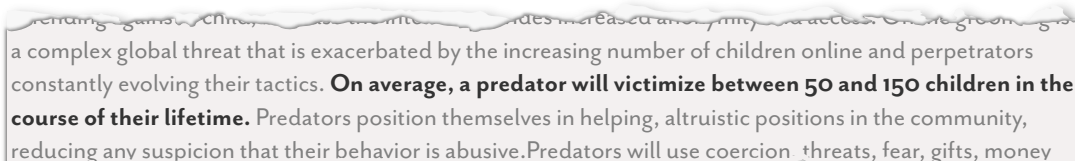
Now that I look back on everything—the string of excuses Sterling gave to change the travel plans, the insistence that I not fly out with them, the tension about who was invited and when, the sudden cold behavior, the lack of clarity around their return—my gut screams that it was all tied to something bigger.

I can't prove it, but the pattern is there.

The trip felt staged, or at least coordinated behind my back. Sterling went to great lengths to exclude me, and Chris deciphering BlueBird's timezone like it mattered for more than just a game. All those strange choices, the secrecy, the redirection—it wasn't random.

And then, days after their return, BlueBird unfriended 564 people.

There is no universe where those things are completely unrelated.

A quote on a torn paper background. The text reads: "a complex global threat that is exacerbated by the increasing number of children online and perpetrators constantly evolving their tactics. **On average, a predator will victimize between 50 and 150 children in the course of their lifetime.** Predators position themselves in helping, altruistic positions in the community, reducing any suspicion that their behavior is abusive. Predators will use coercion, threats, fear, gifts, money

— Walker T. *Realities of Child Abuse*. Children's Justice Center

I may never know exactly what happened, but I know with every fiber of my being that it was connected. My instincts have rarely been wrong. And this time, they're screaming the truth: Something happened in Las Vegas that triggered a collapse.

Whatever it was, BlueBird didn't just pull away from Chris.

He pulled away from nearly everyone.

That kind of emotional earthquake doesn't happen without a fault line being ruptured.

And all signs point back to them.

INVENTORY

I knew there were sufficient conversations exchanged to validate my accusations about Chris and Sterling, but I needed to gather all the relevant text messages and take screenshots. Then, when the time came, I would be ready to speak about the events that took place and give context to the text messages.

Instead of rapidly scrolling through my messages, I began reading the conversation with Chris for the past year or so. As I read through them, I quickly noticed there were gaps in the dialog, as if two people were writing messages but not to each other because one message didn't align in context with the previous message.

After reading everything to the end, I confirmed the most significant messages, which I had been unable to locate, were indeed gone.

There was no mention of anything ever being said about Chris's inappropriate behavior.

Any message related to any of the "fooling around" with Chris was also gone.

In fact, I'd estimate that nearly a third of the messages I had with Chris over the past year were deleted. It was evident that messages were removed meticulously, targeting the appropriate ones to silence me.

Why not delete all?

Why target messages?

Why did they delete the "fooling around" messages?

That's when the eerie realization set in. I scoured the messages again, trying to find even a single reference to the concerns I knew I had voiced. But there was nothing.

That's not possible.

There's no way I went an entire year, during that time—those months of slowly unraveling confusion and rising concern—without ever once referencing Chris's behavior in a text. Not even a hint, a question, a moment of doubt? It

was implausible. It simply didn't make sense unless someone had deliberately combed through the threads to erase any evidence that could expose them.

It would have taken hours to go through all my messages and remove each one, I was greatly confused at this discovery. They couldn't have had access to my phone for that amount of time, and they couldn't have entered my apartment without my knowledge because I was at home all the time. The broken shoulder immobilized me. I couldn't make sense of how they did it.

I accessed my cellular account online and reviewed my usage log for the past year. Immediately, I was shocked to see there were only a couple handfuls of messages were sent to Chris each month, which is absolutely incorrect.

I contacted my carrier's customer service and spoke to a representative about the matter. I asked if it was even possible for an employee to alter a customer's account in such a way. They confirmed it was possible if the employee had the customer's login information, but they would also need authorization. After telling them my concerns, they put me on hold while they investigated.

When they returned, they were able to determine there had been some suspicious activity on my account using Sterling's employee number, but they were unable to identify the specific activities performed on my account.

I was very upset and asked how a company could allow this behavior and questioned the legality of such acts. They affirmed it was definitely a federal crime to alter phone records, and they would begin an official investigation into the matter.

Still, it would take up to thirty days to learn anything more.

What hit me hardest wasn't just the missing messages—it was the shame that followed. I knew what they were. I had seen the signs. And yet, I still hadn't wrapped my head around the fact that someone capable of what I had seen might also be capable of anything.

I kept thinking like a friend.

A friend who believed there were still lines they wouldn't cross.

But the truth was—they didn't have lines.

They didn't have empathy.

Realizing that shook me all over again. It was like a second betrayal crashing over me, forcing me to relive every moment I once believed was rooted in friendship, and seeing it now through a predator's eyes.

And when I reflected on everything—how no one had helped me after the fire, how I lived in filth with no water and no support, how some even suggested I use a public beach shower like it was a reasonable solution for a person with a broken shoulder—it all added to the betrayal.

My renters insurance had just expired, and I hadn't yet found a new provider, not because I was careless, but because I had been drowning in the stress and emotional chaos caused by Chris.

I was surrounded by people who either didn't notice, didn't care, or didn't think I mattered enough to truly help.

And that reality was just as jarring as the missing messages themselves.

Chapter Sixteen
JULY 2023

ANOTHER WITNESS, ANOTHER EXILE

There was someone Chris and I used to game with online. I wouldn't say we were close, but we played together regularly for a stretch, and they was always kind, sharp, and spoke their mind. I respected that about them. They never tiptoed around things just to keep the peace.

One day, I them her online and thought I'd try to rekindle our connection since it had been ages since we last played together. I jumped into their voice chat, but immediately noticed a couple of anonymous users in the channel.

On that platform, anonymous users typically meant someone had blocked you or set their profile to be hidden from all except their friends. A few seconds later, I was removed from the party chat.

Since it's not exactly good etiquette to drop into someone's chat uninvited, I sent them a message to apologize for being so hasty.

They responded kindly, saying it wasn't a big deal—they were disbanding the party anyway.

I replied, "That's good. I didn't want to stir up anything in case you were playing with Chris," since he happened to be online and in the same game at that moment.

They quickly clarified that they hadn't played with Chris in a long time.

I told them I was sorry to hear that. I remembered how much they used to enjoy gaming together. He always seemed genuinely happy when they joined our sessions. They agreed, saying they had loved playing with him too.

Then they asked where I had disappeared to—that one day it just seemed like I was gone and no one knew what happened.

So I explained the situation with Chris.

They told me that one of the last times they played with Chris and BlueBird, the language being used was just too offensive for them to ignore. They spoke up about it. Shortly after, BlueBird blocked them, and Chris never invited them to play again. They figured that must have been the reason they were exiled.

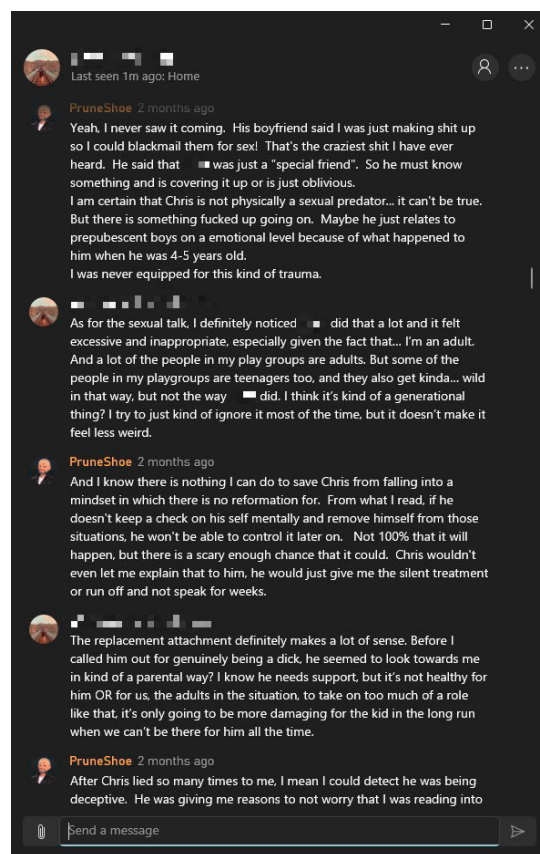


Figure 43: Months after I had to leave, I finally spoke to someone who used to play with us. Someone who had also noticed the same unsettling things. It felt like validation after all the gaslighting. I wasn't imagining it—Chris had changed, and not just with me. I'd tried to save him, to reason with him, but I was never prepared for the kind of trauma I was witnessing unfold. (photo by author)

No argument, no warning—just gone.

Their only offense was being honest about what they saw. The same as mine.

It was just another small fracture in a growing web of red flags—another person who noticed, another person removed, another example of him isolating the victim.

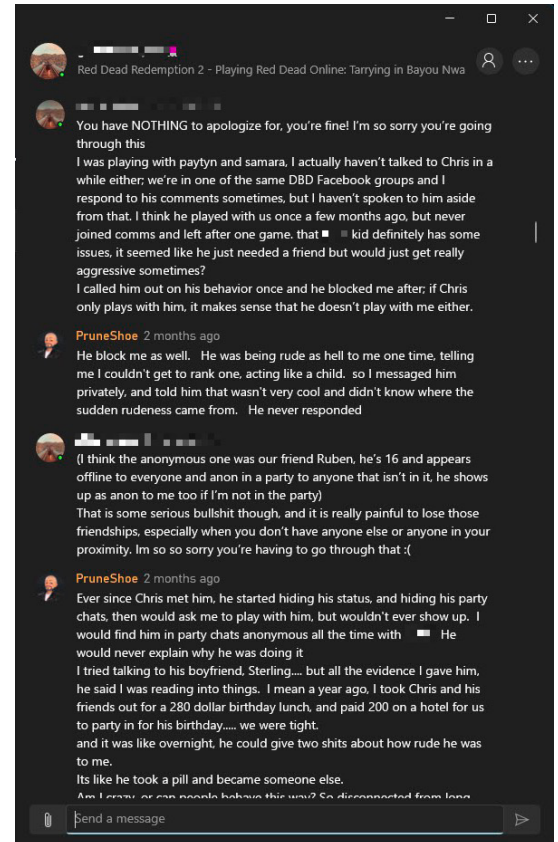


Figure 44: Reading this was like confirmation of every wound I'd tried to ignore. I wasn't the only one who felt erased, ghosted, confused. The shift in Chris had been so sharp, so total—it was like he'd taken a pill and turned into someone else. I kept asking myself: Am I crazy? Or can people really change like that? The silence, the hidden chats, the anonymous logins... it all made sense now. It just came too late. (photo by author)

Chapter Seventeen

AUGUST 2023

FALSE POSITIVE

Over a month had passed since I submitted a complaint to my carrier regarding the disappearance of messages from my account, and yet I had not heard back from their investigation team. Deciding not to wait any longer, I reached out to them myself.

During the conversation, the investigator informed me that after thoroughly reviewing my account history, they found no signs of unauthorized access or tampering. His findings were a stark contrast to what the customer service representative had previously claimed, leaving me puzzled.

I questioned why the agent initially told me there was suspicious activity on my account, but the investigator couldn't provide any clarity on the matter. I further pressed for an explanation on how my messages could have vanished and why my account's text log report was missing numerous entries. He explained that due to legal requirements for message retention, data transactions (text messages) can't be deleted from the carrier's end. Moreover, he clarified that messages sent via iMessage, which utilizes Apple's servers, do not pass through my carrier's network and thus wouldn't appear in my carrier's account log; only SMS messages would.

Realizing the truth in his explanation, I felt foolish for not recalling these facts, especially given my previous experience working in my carrier's call routing department.

Still, I was at a loss. It didn't seem possible for Chris and Sterling to have removed all those texts from my phone, **but they somehow did.**

CALCULATED ERASURE

Pondering how they managed to erase my messages left me with few realistic theories. So I shifted my energy to trying to recover them.

I had always assumed that my regular cloud backups would protect me. I figured I could simply restore a version of my phone from before the deletion. But that wasn't possible—only the most recent backup was available. Everything else was gone.

Not willing to give up, I turned to my iMac. Since it synced with my phone, I thought maybe the messages would still exist there. But they didn't. Anything deleted on one device was automatically wiped from the other—something I had forgotten I had enabled.

Then I remembered that behind every message, the computer keeps a hidden log—a record that should remain even if the message is deleted. With renewed hope, I went hunting through those system files.

But those logs were gone too.

Not just missing—selectively deleted. And yet, oddly, in a few places, the messages still existed even though their logs didn't. It didn't make sense. If the system was working properly, that shouldn't be possible.

That's when it hit me.

Someone had tampered with my iMac.

There were no system warnings. No sync errors. Nothing that should've flagged the kind of gaps I was finding. And those gaps just happened to align with the exact period Chris and Sterling were posing as trusted friends.

Then I remembered: my iMac also creates routine system backups. If I could find one made *after* the messages were received but *before* they were deleted, I might recover them. I searched through hundreds of backups for weeks—but none had what I was looking for. Either they were made too early, or the conversations had already been wiped by the time the backup occurred.

At first, I was shocked by their ability to pull it off. But then I Googled it—and realized how easy it actually was. A few simple steps anyone could follow. With access to my computer and Chris's phone for reference, they could've searched for key phrases and deleted every trace of those conversations. It would have taken hours—**but it was absolutely doable.**

Chris had the passwords to my computer. They both had keys to my apartment.

That realization gave me answers to the most critical questions:

Why they did it: to erase any evidence of their behavior.

How they did it: by using my iMac, not remotely, but directly.

When it happened: while they were still pretending to be my friends.

They had been in my apartment more times than I realized—while smiling to my face, they were sabotaging the truth.

Their deception wasn't impulsive. **It was premeditated.** Precise. Calculated.

And how telling that is.

To go that far—to pretend to be a trusted friend while simultaneously erasing me and my voice—it revealed just how serious the truth really was. It showed the lengths they were willing to go to keep it hidden. That they saw no boundary too sacred to cross.

It was time to accept: they would stop at nothing.

As I sat with the full weight of that truth, a darker possibility emerged.

What if they didn't just delete messages—what if they sent some in my name?

With full access to my apartment and my devices, they could have easily composed and sent messages from my phone or computer, addressed to themselves, and then deleted all trace of it.

It would explain how quickly some people turned against me, without asking a single question.

The shift was too sharp, too sudden.

It was as if someone had seen something—something that painted me as the problem. And if that's what happened, then they didn't just erase my words.

They re-purposed them.

Used my voice like a weapon to destroy my credibility before I ever had a chance to speak.

— PART SIX —



Chapter Eighteen

SEPTEMBER 2023

20/30

It was an overwhelming experience, grappling with the weight of numerous unsettling revelations. The shock of their deceit amplified the sheer magnitude of this challenge. My mind was a whirlwind of thoughts and questions, desperately seeking clarity.

There was no way to answer these questions with absolute certainty, so I found myself retracing the events of the past. Most notably, Chris pretended to be my good friend. He knew how much our friendship meant to me, yet he lied and deceived me—intentionally, repeatedly, and without a shred of concern for how cruel and hurtful it was.

In the future, I wanted to protect myself from being tricked again, so I began to examine my own blind spots.

Am I too trusting?

Am I too gullible?

Were there signs that Chris was not a friend?

What kept me from seeing his true nature?

Even after my gut instinct had already warned me, why did I still try to help him like he was someone I could rely on?

Why was I so foolishly naive to his tricks?

I knew that if I didn't want to live in an endless loop of these questions, I had to be honest with myself.

And the truth was: **there were red flags.**

I had seen them. I had even brought up my concerns to Chris directly. More than once, I told him that our friendship didn't feel the same, that it felt like he had stopped seeing me as a friend altogether.

His replies were rehearsed. He'd say I was self-sabotaging, that I was overthinking things, or he'd deflect with words like, "I adore you." And as much as I wanted to believe those words, his actions made a mockery of them.

Looking back, I realized I chose to ignore those red flags. But that wasn't enough of an answer. I had to understand why I ignored them.

I think part of it stems from what happened with Rachael—a friend of twenty years, someone I trusted with everything, who turned out to be someone completely different underneath. That kind of betrayal leaves a scar you don't want reopened. I couldn't emotionally afford for it to happen again. I wasn't ready to believe that another friend could be hiding something even worse.

And Chris's betrayal was worse.

He made Rachael look like Mary Poppins in comparison.

The reason behind his duplicity wasn't petty or personal. It was terrifying. That fear alone made it easier to believe a lie than to face a horrifying truth. I clung to the illusion because the truth would have shattered me.

So I didn't notice the red flags until they were stacked too high to ignore. I couldn't see them because I didn't want to see them.

Eventually, I started to ask myself when the deception began.

How long had they been stringing me along while I extended my trust so freely?

And it became clear: Chris had been placating me deliberately, feeding me lies to buy himself time.

Time to move freely.

Time to quietly erase the evidence I had.

That realization marked a turning point.

From that moment on, **my view of Chris and Sterling changed entirely.**

Any benefit of the doubt I once gave them evaporated. I could no longer assume there was a line they wouldn't cross.

Because by then, they had already crossed every one that mattered.

DEFINING HELP

The person who had helped me significantly with the physical challenges I endured during the final months at my old residence called me and asked for a favor. I was certain that my pain and suffering would have been so much worse without their help, so I was prepared to agree to anything they asked of me.

They planned to vacate their apartment and needed my help renting and driving the moving van to the North Shore, so on that day, I arrived as instructed. I had a slight onset of anxiety, hoping I did not run into Chris or Sterling while I was there, but it wasn't going to take more than an hour, so I didn't get worked up.

After parking, it wasn't long before I encountered one of my old friends, whom I once highly respected, confided in on numerous occasions, and regarded as intelligent and pragmatic. Even though we amicably exchanged small talk, I could still sense them projecting a disappointed energy towards me. All of my previous attempts to understand where their feelings originated from by opening up a dialogue were ignored, so the uncomfortable awkwardness persisted.

While I was waiting for the final items to be loaded into the van, I walked over to the sidewalk to smoke a cigarette. Along came another former friend of mine, and we, too, exchanged friendly small talk.

Then, they proceeded to tell me about an experience they once had. They said they once had a really strong connection with someone they considered a close friend, and at one point, the friendship turned sexual.

However, after that, the friendship ended, and the other person ceased communication. They expressed how hurtful and sad the experience was but ultimately let go of the animosity by accepting that those situations just sometimes happen.

That is when I realized that they believed I made claims about Chris and Sterling because I was angry over a friendship that turned sour when it went beyond more than just friends. Obviously, they were trying to relate to me by sharing what they believed to be a similar experience.

I had stated the bottom-line truth to them a couple of times before, and each time, it was disregarded, as if they already knew the truth with absolute certainty.

I had already resigned from the task of defending my character.

Still, I badly wanted to lash out and tell them that if they truly wanted to be of assistance, then they could start by telling me why they were so convinced they had a clue about my reasons for speaking out about Chris and Sterling, especially when they never even asked me. However, I could see they were only trying to be helpful, so I muzzled my frustration and annoyance.

The moving van was loaded, so I hugged them and wished them well.

20/20

Utilizing my new Chris and Sterling perspective, I continued to consider the past events. Knowing they had been plotting against me while pretending to be friends shifted the way I perceived those past events.

As I reevaluated my memories, Chris and Sterling's behaviors and conversations—once foggy—began to make sense. I posed the unanswered questions that had lingered unexplained for quite some time.

Like, why didn't Chris ever come forward and admit that I had good reason to question his behavior, even as the evidence piled higher and higher?

No matter how solid or threatening my leverage escalated to, he remained unchallenged and unconcerned. At the beginning, he even admitted that he had a problem requiring psychiatric therapy, only to later arrogantly deny ever saying it. Chris was never going to open up or allow himself to be confronted, because he knew any credibility I had was already defused.

Sterling, on the other hand, had once admonished Chris when Chris would express a bloated fondness for BlueBird, recognizing it as inappropriate, just as I did. He even called it "creepy" and "gross." But when I tried to talk to Sterling about it, he pretended not to understand what I was talking about. Eventually, he stopped correcting Chris altogether—likely around the time he buried the evidence.

Even though I couldn't step inside their minds, I needed to understand the extent of their deceit. So I asked myself:

If I were trying to silence someone who knew I was guilty of acts with socially destructive and severe consequences, what would I do?

First, I would deny all allegations. That alone would create a "your word against mine" standoff. Then, I'd look for any evidence that might prove them right—and destroy it. I'd have to stay calm, pretend to be their friend, and use my access and trust as leverage.

That's exactly what they did to me.

But there were risks. We shared a social circle and lived in the same building. At some point, the lies would wear thin.

So what if they decided the ultimate solution was to remove me permanently from the equation?

At that moment, my eyes were wide open.

I didn't need confirmation because I doubted myself—I needed it because **everything finally made sense.**

I submitted an incident request to the Honolulu County Fire Department to find out the official cause of the fire that forced me to move. Back then, people assumed it was a faulty electrical switch or that bedding had ignited from a nearby outlet, but neither rumor had ever been confirmed.

To my surprise, the fire inspector called me directly just four days later. He didn't ask why I wanted the report—he just gave me the facts. The official cause of the fire was listed as "incendiary." When I asked for clarification, he explained that it meant the fire had been intentionally set to cause destruction. He said the case was still open. No arrests had been made.

Still, I needed more than just a word. I needed to understand why someone would do this. The fire being intentional was confirmation of foul play, but *what kind of person sets a fire—and for what reason?*

I turned to data from the Department of Justice, studying motives for arson:

Vandalism – Typically targeting abandoned buildings with no specific victim in mind. *Not applicable.*

Excitement/Pyromania – Usually a single fire without accelerants. *Didn't fit.*

Fraud – Requires full destruction for significant insurance payout. The unit was government-leased to a military tenant. *Doesn't add up.*

Crime Concealment – Used to destroy evidence of another crime. *No such crime had occurred in that unit.*

Revenge – The most common motive. These arsonists act out of animosity, often to force a victim out or exert fear. *Revenge fit like a glove.*

Supporting the Motive:

Chris wasn't going to stop grooming BlueBird. They knew I wasn't going to let it go.

It was only a matter of time before their lies would unravel and expose the truth. All it takes is one lie to be called out, and then the question becomes, "*Why are you lying, what are you hiding?*"

The Motive: The legal and social consequences of their behavior were severe. They had everything to lose if I stayed in the picture. Then there is intense jealousy Sterling help in contempt for me—multiplied by his paranoia and multiple attempts to smear my character.

The Means: The suspect would have had access to the building—an employee, resident, or an agent. Sterling knew my neighbor didn't lock her doors—he was there when she said it on the phone.

No forced entry would be necessary.

A lighter to the bedding was all it would take.

The Opportunity: The neighbor was out of town for the holidays—visiting family in Texas. A young girl in her early twenties?

It was an easy guess.

Or maybe Sterling learned it through casual conversation. He could have stopped by with a made-up story—perhaps claiming he needed a dog sitter—and struck up a friendly chat. Details about her vacation plans wouldn't have been

Identifying Arson Motives

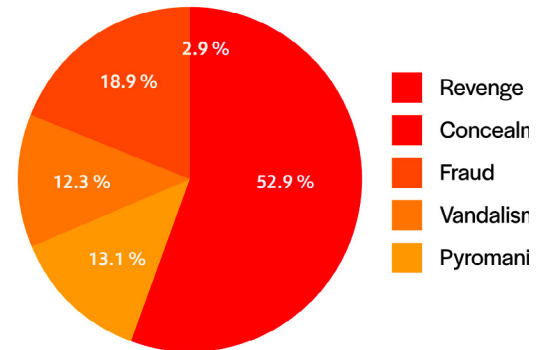
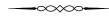


Figure 45: This chart shows that revenge is the most common motive in arson cases. Seeing this data helped me understand that my suspicion about Sterling's motives wasn't unfounded—and that the fire set next door wasn't random..

(source: "Identifying Arson Motives." Office of Justice Programs. NJC Number: 84265. Volume 32. Issue 4. June 1982)

hard to extract, especially for someone skilled at pretending to care just long enough to get what he needed.



Other Clues:

Chris stopped acting like a friend long before the fire. It wasn't just distance—it was detachment, like he was quietly waiting something out. *Like he knew what was coming.*

Not long before the fire, Chris struck up a sentimental conversation. He talked about our friendship in the past tense, reflecting on the best moments—as if it was already over. But it hadn't ended. Not yet. *It felt like a eulogy before a death.*

Sterling, on the other hand, said I'd have no place in their lives going forward. He didn't say it in anger. He said it like it was a decision already made. It didn't sound like a goodbye. *It sounded like a sentence.*

And yet they both continued to pose as friends, maintaining a false front for everyone else. That illusion protected them. With no suspicion, there would be no one to ask questions or point a finger at them. They remained hidden behind their mask.

But someone did see Sterling on my floor just days before the fire. He didn't know anyone who lived above the 22nd floor.

So why was he up there?

Was he scoping out the soon-to-be crime scene?

Checking if the neighbor was out of town?

And she was. The neighbor—a young woman in her early twenties—was away for the holidays, visiting family in Texas.

Sterling knew she didn't lock her door.

He heard her say it.

He wouldn't need to force entry.

A quick conversation, a fake request to watch his dog, a bit of charm—getting the details would've been easy.

What's harder to explain is their behavior after the fire. For two people who claimed to care, they offered nothing a friend would offer. No comfort. No check-ins. No help. Well, except for picking up boxes to help me pack. That was their one eager contribution.

Odd, isn't it? They didn't know the extent of the damage yet, but they were ready to help me move out—almost too ready. They were even encouraging me to just look for another place to live, as if it were the obvious next step.

Then came their excuses.

They said it was too hard to see the apartment after the fire—as if the damage itself disturbed them more than what I was going through. It reminded me of the way people avoid certain places or sensations that stir up something uncomfortable inside them. But this didn't feel like emotional overwhelm.

Their distance felt more like guilt than grief.

Arson is a quiet crime. Secretive. No confrontation. Just destruction.

It fits both Sterling's and Chris's passive-aggressive style. **Do the damage, disappear, and pretend it never happened.**

But the biggest giveaway wasn't what they did after—it was what Sterling did during.

He called me 17 times in a matter of minutes when the fire alarm went off. **Seventeen.** And by my calculations, the calls began minutes after the fire alarm sounded.

How does someone get out so fast—with their dog, with their belongings—and still have time to make that many calls while the building is being evacuated?

And why me? Why pick me as the one to call? What about the other friends in the building? What prompted him to pick me, out of all of the other friends in the building, to be the center of his concern?

Sure, the fire alarm was going off, but it didn't send out notifications to everyone's phone that it was on the 36th floor.

The only explanation that made sense was this—**he already knew where the fire was.**

He already knew which unit. And he knew it would affect me. That's why I was the one he called. Not the others. Not out of concern, but because I was *the variable he couldn't control*.

The one who might ask questions. The one who was about to put the last puzzle piece into its place.

At first glance, it might seem like concern. But concern doesn't evaporate overnight. And Sterling's actions after the fire proved it wasn't about me at all.

Less than a month later, when I had hit rock bottom—when my shoulder was broken, when I was starving and sleep-deprived and barely surviving—he looked me in the eyes several times.

And yet, he said nothing.

No humanity.

No compassion.

Just cold silence from someone who had once acted like they cared.

You don't go from calling someone 17 times in a panic to treating them like they don't exist—*unless that panic wasn't about them to begin with*.

And there were witnesses.

People who saw how he treated me. People who knew how far I'd fallen. No one could look at that and believe he ever truly cared.

That level of panic, followed by that level of cruelty—it wasn't care.

It was fear. **Fear for himself.**

And others saw it, too. There were witnesses—people who watched him ignore me and walk past me as if I didn't exist, even when I was visibly broken and in need. Their silence afterward only confirmed what I already knew:

His panic wasn't for me. **It never was.**

And finally, the timing.

The fire happened right before everything was about to come to a head. I was on the verge of calling them out publicly. I had put the pieces together, and only one question remained unanswered—*was their behavior going to stop?*

Then—poof. I was forced to leave.

Abandoned. Dismantled. Disoriented. Silenced.

With me gone, they were free to rewrite history.

I don't believe in coincidences. Certainly not coincidences of that magnitude which granted them so much favor--and silenced me--**they had everything to gain from that fire.**

Solving that crime didn't require a master detective or a crystal ball. It only required me to stop giving them the benefit of the doubt. When my neighbor's out of town status landed upon their ears, the opportunity knocked, they answered.

It doesn't matter what you know. It's what you can prove. I had no evidence tying Chris or Sterling to the fire. But my reasoning was sound.

I often reflect on the entire chain of events and marvel at how capable they were. How they used my kindness. Groomed a kid in plain sight. Set the building on fire. And then gaslit me into madness.

Predators are masters of illusion. Documentaries can only explain so much. Until you witness it firsthand, you have no idea what they're capable of.

And yet somehow, I walked out of that fire alive.

And I remember **everything.**



Wipe away any disbelief by requesting information.

(To obtain a fire inspector's report in Honolulu County): Public records can be requested through the [Honolulu Fire Department's Fire Prevention Bureau](#).

An online form is submitted and someone will contact you. Inquire about the fire for property:

2525 Date Street, Unit 3603
on December 18, 2022.

Note: documented reports may be mailed or emailed depending on request type.

Chapter Nineteen

OCTOBER 2023

EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON

Office renovations were close to completion, and thus, the company began making preparations for everyone to return to their desks, conference rooms, and ergonomic chairs. I felt the transition was more of a bother, having to get dressed and drive down the road just to do the same thing I could do at home, and faster since I didn't have to fend off question after question from colleagues. But I understood the need for business sometimes to be conducted in person, so I just ignored the unaccustomed feeling and embraced it as new and interesting.

Within the first week, I started to like getting dressed up and going into the office; putting on professional clothes gave me a sense of empowerment and self-assuredness.

My primary job function for the company involves structuring financial data to support the company leadership's business acumen; sometimes, the information applies to a current status, and sometimes, I forecast likely future positions based on it. However, I have a long and diverse technical career history, and people often come to me with their software and computer troubles.

One day, a woman from the accounting department called me with a technical blunder and requested that I come to her desk and look at the problem. She was telling me that she was having difficulties finding files she was currently working on because she was having to navigate through countless files and folders that were no longer needed.

So she decided to do some housekeeping on her computer and got rid of all those unwanted items. Then, she said, about a week later, some of her important current project files were missing, and she realized she must have accidentally deleted them.

I sat down at her computer to assist. I opened up the "trash can" on her desktop because that is where all deleted items go and can be restored. She sighed and told me she had already thought about restoring the files from the trash can, but she emptied the "trash can" on the day she did her cleanup.

She inquired if any backups existed, but I explained the company only allocates backups for servers, not employee workstations.

She was clearly upset that she had lost hours of work put into those files. As I was going through her system to find any method to help her, she told me she had watched a crime television show that suggested files, even after the "trash can" was emptied, are not really gone for good. She wanted to know if that was true.

I confirmed that it is true, but unfortunately, because company data contains so much PII (personal identification information), they have programming in place that permanently removes all the "emptied trash can" items.

Nonetheless, I was able to solve her problem partially and returned to my desk when the light bulb turned on in my head.

I wondered why I hadn't thought of that concept.

TECH CAMP

I dedicated entire weekends to exploring the possibility of recovering the deleted backup files on my system. Yet, I was worried it would be too late because I had continued using that computer after the deletion. The good news was that I stopped using that machine in June because I needed to replace it due to software compatibility issues.

Before I explain what happened next, I think it's important to offer a brief technical overview of how file deletion and recovery actually works. Without it, some might think I'm claiming to perform sorcery or invoking some *deus ex machina* to save the day and make my story convenient fiction.

It wasn't that.

It was a grueling, deeply technical process—but not impossible.

Here's a simplified way to understand file storage, deletion, and recovery:

Data is stored on hard drives using spinning disks divided into concentric rings called tracks. Each track is divided into sectors, and those sectors into clusters. The operating system keeps track of all this using something called a file system.

Imagine a library. The hard drive is the library, the shelves are the tracks, and the books are the files. The library catalog—your file system—keeps track of what book is on what shelf. When you delete a file, it's like removing the card from the catalog. The book is still on the shelf, but no one knows it's there unless they go looking. When you empty the trash, the catalog marks that shelf space as available for a new book—but again, the original book hasn't physically been thrown out yet.

Recovery is like being a specialist librarian with the uncanny ability to see the ghost of that removed card, and knowing just where to

look for the book—even if the shelf has a new label on it. But if a new book was already put in that spot, the old one is gone forever.

So for me to recover anything, I had to overcome several massive obstacles:

- I had to relearn a skill-set I hadn't used in over ten years.
- Disk storage technologies have evolved significantly since I last worked in that space.
- My backup system created daily full-disk backups going all the way back to 2018. Each of these backup files was huge, requiring hours of processing just to mount and examine them.
- I had to drill into the backup contents, which contained millions of files—including deleted ones. Since deleted files lose their identifying information (like file name, date, etc.), it meant I had to rely on my memory of the conversations and search by specific keywords within the raw data.
- Even if I found something promising, there was no guarantee the files would still be there, intact, or uncorrupted.

And despite all this, **I succeeded.**

The messages you've seen as screenshots in this story came from those recovery efforts. But it wasn't perfect—several message files were corrupted, some couldn't be located, and others had already been overwritten. There was no tidy, single file to restore. Each message was stored as its own file. I had to crawl through hundreds of thousands of data fragments, trying to reassemble pieces like a digital archaeologist.

There was no doubt in my mind that my friends had been fed a pack of lies. I was clueless on what kind of a lie would it take for my once good friends to not even speak to me. It had to be something outrageous but why would anyone believe such a thing about me.

My only conclusion was that there had to be something they believed to be undeniable--a forgery?

A message sent in my name to one of them.

They had my password and a key to my place to easily send message(s) **from my computer** and delete them before they were discovered and before they were backed up on the system.

No one ever came forward or showed enough integrity to offer me a single clue as to why they turned on me even when I begged them. They remained unconcerned even after they were told minors were involved. Comfort was a their priority above all else, proven when they accepted the first lie that painted me as the villain.

It is strange how people need no proof to believe a lie, but demand endless proof to accept the truth.

I was not able to recover or discover any messages that would count as a forgery. I am sure the message would have been deleted as soon as it was sent which may have kept it from even making it to backups. And if it did get backed up, finding it is nearly impossible without a unique word or some exact content in the message to filter down the returned results.

It took me months of nights and weekends to get through to go through all the message data. But in the end, I had just enough. Enough to prove what had happened.

Enough to show the truth.

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

DIRECT ADDRESS

I knew that what I had heard and seen Chris say to BlueBird was morally wrong, but I couldn't shake the idea that I was fairly certain saying things like he did to a minor was a crime. My reasoning was based on the way it was said, by explicitly saying it to the minor in such a way that it was aimed—using the word “you”. I did some research on federal and state laws as well as real court cases to validate my notion that it was criminal, and discovered what I was referring to is called Direct Address.

WHAT CONSTITUTES DIRECT ADDRESS?

I'll be direct. When an adult engages a minor in sexual conversation—no matter how brief, no matter how cleverly disguised—it isn't just “inappropriate.”

It's a crime.

Language when used in the presence of a minor and directed to a minor (by the use of “you”) in the full form of -- **“I want to [sexual act] you so hard”** is a prosecutable felony under multiple legal frameworks.

The statement isn't vague, it uses:

- Explicit Language
- Second-person address (“you”)
- Could also signal aggression or intensity

It is read as a direct proposition for a sexual act.

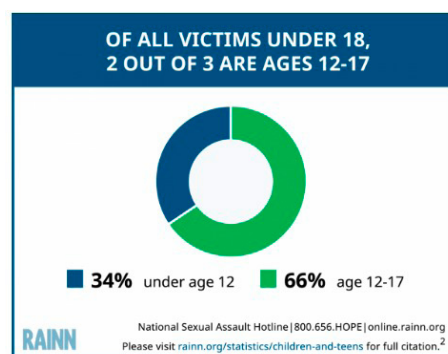


Figure 46: Most child sexual abuse happens during the vulnerable tween and teen years—when kids are old enough to be trusted but too young to see the danger. This is when predators strike hardest. (Photo by RAINN.org)

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

Direct address massively increases the seriousness because:

- It removes any ambiguity (“*Were they even speaking to the minor?*”—Now there is no doubt.)
- It shows clear, targeted **intent**.
- It helps prove **mens rea** (“guilty mind”) - essential for criminal cases.

REPEATED BEHAVIOR

Repeated instances changes the prosecutorial landscape entirely. One message can be prosecuted, but repeated messages over time turns this behavior from a serious crime into what is called a pattern of predatory behavior, and it is treated with severe weight.

That repetition will be used by prosecutors to argue: *“This was not a moment of bad judgment. This was strategy. He built trust. He normalized sexual content. And he escalated it intentionally.”*

And Chris was told it was wrong—repeatedly.

FINAL WRAPPER

The final wrapper is the followup messages—

“I’m [climaxing] so hard right now.” Clearly announcing arousal and sexual gratification. This is the game changer, there are plenty of cases in which federal convictions and prison sentences occur under these conditions, often with no physical contact ever happening.



Figure 47: These numbers are not rare—they’re staggering. Childhood sexual abuse affects 1 in 3 girls and 1 in 5 boys, often long before they have the words to explain it. Awareness is the first line of protection. (Photo by RAINN.org)

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

Here is what happens legally when the following are said or sent to a minor:

“I want to [sexual act] you so hard.”

Then follows up with:

“I’m [climaxing] so hard right now.”

1. The second message confirms that the offender is climaxing in the moment and tells:
 - The conversation with the minor was used for sexual self gratification - whether the minor knew it or not.
 - The intent wasn’t just flirty or fantasy—it was to sexually involve the child, even if only verbally
2. It fulfills the key element of sexual exploitation statutes because the adult in the room:
 - Used the minor for arousal
 - Describing the minor in a sexual event, digitally counts
 - Often doing so in a way that the courts will definitely see as mental sexual abuse—**because it is!**
3. It isn’t just a message—it’s a sexual act in itself
 - Both federal and state laws say if an adult masturbates during a live chat with a minor or describes it happening as part of the exchange, that act can legally be considered:
 - Sexual exploitation
 - Lewd exhibition
 - Possibly distribution of harmful material to a minor.

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

FEDERAL LAW

Under federal law, specifically [18 U.S. Code § 2422\(b\)](#), it is illegal for any person to use a means of interstate commerce (like the Internet or a phone) to knowingly persuade, induce, entice, or coerce a minor to engage in any sexual activity that would be illegal under federal or state law.

The punishment?

- A **mandatory minimum of 10 years** in federal prison.
- Mandatory registration as a sex offender for life.

— That’s not a recommendation. **That’s the baseline.**

The important takeaway is this happens:

- Even if the act never occurs.
- Even if there’s no physical meeting.
- Even if the child on the other end was fictional.

The crime is in the **intent** and the **effort**.

Even one message can trigger this felony.

HAWAI’I LAW

Hawai’i Revised Statutes ([HRS](#)) [§ 707-757](#) – Electronic Enticement of a Child in the Second Degree (Class C Felony)

A person commits the offense of electronic enticement of a child in the second degree if the person **uses a computer, electronic device, or any means of electronic communication to intentionally communicate with a minor** (or someone believed to be a minor) **with the intent to commit a sexual offense.**

The punishment?

- Sentencing: 5 years imprisonment.

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

- Lifetime registration as a sex offender.

Again, the crime is in the **intent**.

- No physical contact is necessary.
- Even, proposing a sexual act through words alone—no meeting, no contact—is enough for arrest and prosecution.

REAL CASE EXAMPLE

To drive this home, use [United States v. Brian J. Doyle \(2006\)](#) who was the former Deputy Press Secretary as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Doyle entered an online chat with someone he believed was a 14-year-old girl, who turned out to be an undercover sheriff's deputy. He sent explicit messages for his arousal and then asked the minor to get a webcam.

- No real minor was involved.
- No physical crime took place.
- Only one explicit brief online conversation took place.

And yet, **the law didn't blink**.

Why? Because the intent was clear. The messages were explicit. The target, even if fictional, was portrayed as a child.

And that was enough. Sentence:

- 5 years in prison
- 10 years probation
- Lifetime sex offender registration required
- Internet usage monitored
- No unsupervised contact with minors

If there had been a real minor involved, there would have been additional charges like attempted sexual assault, leading to full prison time with no probation.

Chapter Twenty

NOVEMBER 2023

THE BRINK OF

My job has busy periods throughout the year, and with the year-end approaching, I was preparing for the hefty workload ahead. Even during the slowest times, I still struggle to work only a straight forty-hour week.

I had not been overextending myself, so I couldn't explain the sudden onset of heavy fatigue one morning while climbing a flight of stairs in the parking deck. The amount of energy it took to reach the next floor was extraordinary and worrisome. I hoped it would pass and distracted myself with tasks at my desk, but by midday, the dizziness set in, and I knew something was wrong.

Standing up from my chair nearly made me collapse. I sat back down, took some deep breaths, and convinced myself I must have caught something contagious. I let my coworkers know I was heading home and hoped a bit of rest would resolve the issue.

On the drive home, I realized I hadn't eaten anything all day. It was past noon. I felt relieved, believing the fatigue was just low blood sugar. At home, I checked my glucose levels, but the numbers didn't confirm my suspicion. Still, I figured some food and rest would do the trick.

But when I woke up after sunset, things were worse. I was groggy, weak, and heavy with an exhaustion that felt unnatural. I pushed through the night, trying to sleep in short shifts.

The next morning brought new symptoms: neck and shoulder pain, complete loss of strength, and an overwhelming sense of fragility. I tested for COVID, but the results were negative.

Too weak to go to work, I drank water and ate chicken noodle soup. By afternoon, I was shivering beneath layers of blankets despite not having a fever—actually, my body temperature was low.

Then the migraine came.

The worst I'd ever had.

I knew I needed help, but I was too far gone to drive myself, and I had no one I could call that was close by and able to assist.

Trapped in a fog of confusion, I couldn't decide what to do. I knew I needed a doctor, but I kept rationalizing that an ambulance was for someone in worse shape.

The next thing I remember, I woke up in an ambulance headed to the hospital.

I would spend the next week in critical care.

The diagnosis came fast: *sepsis*. A life-threatening response to infection that can lead to organ failure and death if not treated immediately. I was told I had

entered septic shock. No high grade fever, instead, a low-grade one. No cut or injury I could remember. Yet the infection had invaded my bloodstream and was well on its way to ending my life.

By the third day, my symptoms began to subside. By the fourth, my mind was clearer. And what I thought about most was how, after more than a decade in Hawaii, I was in a hospital, alone,

That realization hit hard.

I didn't come to Hawaii to die in isolation. I envisioned the end of my life being spent in joy, surrounded by natural beauty and good company. I didn't think that was too much to ask. I had been honest, kind, supportive—never afraid to apologize or speak the truth. I had extended friendship after friendship, even when it left me hurt.

And yet, I had no one.

I knew why. It's because I always speak up. I cannot ignore abuse. I cannot pretend not to see suffering. I will not play dumb to cruelty. And if that makes people uncomfortable, so be it.

I'd rather be alone than stay silent and complicit.

In that hospital bed, I also thought of BlueBird. I had let my care for Chris blind me. I was trying to save them both, but in doing so, I gave Chris far too many chances. Even when I was sure he wouldn't change, I waited. I hesitated. I hoped.

I reported to authorities what I could. I filed complaints for internet crimes. I did what our limited systems in the U.S. allow, which, compared to places like the UK, is frustratingly little. But the biggest problem isn't the legal system.

It's people.

People don't want to see it. People don't want to believe those around us could be capable of harming children. So they turn away. They shrug it off. They deny.

And I saw it up close—"good" people doing nothing when I repeatedly sounded the alarm.

I don't know what happened to BlueBird. I worry. I want to reach out, but I know I'm not qualified, and it's not my place.

Still, if I ever come face-to-face with him—or with his parents—there is one question they will have, whether spoken or not:

"Did you do everything you could to keep him safe?"

And I have to be able to say **yes**.

Because I did.

I gave everything I had.

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

THERE IS NO NEUTRAL

Did you know there were over **22 million new images** of child pornography uploaded to the web—**just this past year**? That’s a 5,000% increase in only five years¹.

Five. Thousand. Percent.

This is no longer a dark corner of the Internet. It is the **fastest-growing international crime network** the world has ever seen. It has already **surpassed the illegal arms trade**, and it’s on track to outpace the **drug trade** within the next **three to five years**.

You want to know why?

Because **you can sell a bag of cocaine one time**.

But a child—the most **precious, innocent** child—you can **sell five to ten times a day**. And you can keep selling that child for **nearly ten years straight**.

That is the **horrifying truth**.

And yet, every day, **ordinary people** don’t want to hear it. They don’t want to know. They pretend it isn’t real.

Because it’s **too ugly**. Too disturbing. **Too dark for polite conversation**.



Figure 48: *Every 9 minutes, another child’s nightmare is confirmed. The crisis is real, constant, and far too close. We can’t afford to look away. (photo by RAINN.org)*

1 : [Sound of Freedom](#). Drama. Angel Studios, May 2023.

KNOWLEDGE INSERT

Meanwhile, over **300,000 children** are being pulled into that hell—**trafficked into the sex trade**. Another **550,000** were **sexually abused** just in the past year—and **that’s only the reported cases**.¹

Experts estimate that **88%² of child sexual abuse goes unreported**. That means the real number could be over **4.5 million children—each year**. And that number is **still growing**.

There is **no reality** in which someone can claim to be against child sexual abuse while choosing to stay silent, uninvolved, or “**neutral**” when called to act.

Because **silence promotes it. Inaction enables it.**

And the truth is: **most people aren’t truly against it**—they just want to **believe** they’re good, decent people. Saying *you’re against it* is easy. But **doing nothing** is what allows it to spread.

In this war, **there is no neutral.**

Most won’t care until it reaches **their backyard**—their neighborhood, their home, **their child**. And lucky for them, **they won’t have to wait much longer.**

This war—the one being fought in **silence**, in **shadows**, behind **closed doors**—is already **slipping from our hands**.

We are losing.

Trust me—if everyone keeps doing nothing, Keeps looking the other way, Keeps hoping **someone else** will handle it —

That pain, that darkness, is going to **spread like wildfire**. And one day, it will reach **you**—no matter who you are.

And when it does, it’ll be a **nightmare you’ll never wake up from.**

1 : Safe House Project. “[Child Trafficking - Every 2 Minutes a Child Is Sold](#),” April 4, 2024.
2 : Indiana Center for Prevention of Youth Abuse & Suicide. “[Child Abuse Statistics](#)” December 12, 2021.

Chapter Twenty-One

DECEMBER 2023

SAYING YES

After a long recovery from the health issues I'd faced, I reached a point where silence no longer felt like an option. It was time to speak out. I committed to telling my story, to laying out the truth—no matter how long it took to gather the evidence or how painful it was to put it into words. I vowed that when I finally said, “Yes, I did everything I could,” I would mean it with every ounce of my being.

I started by defining what “Yes” meant to me:

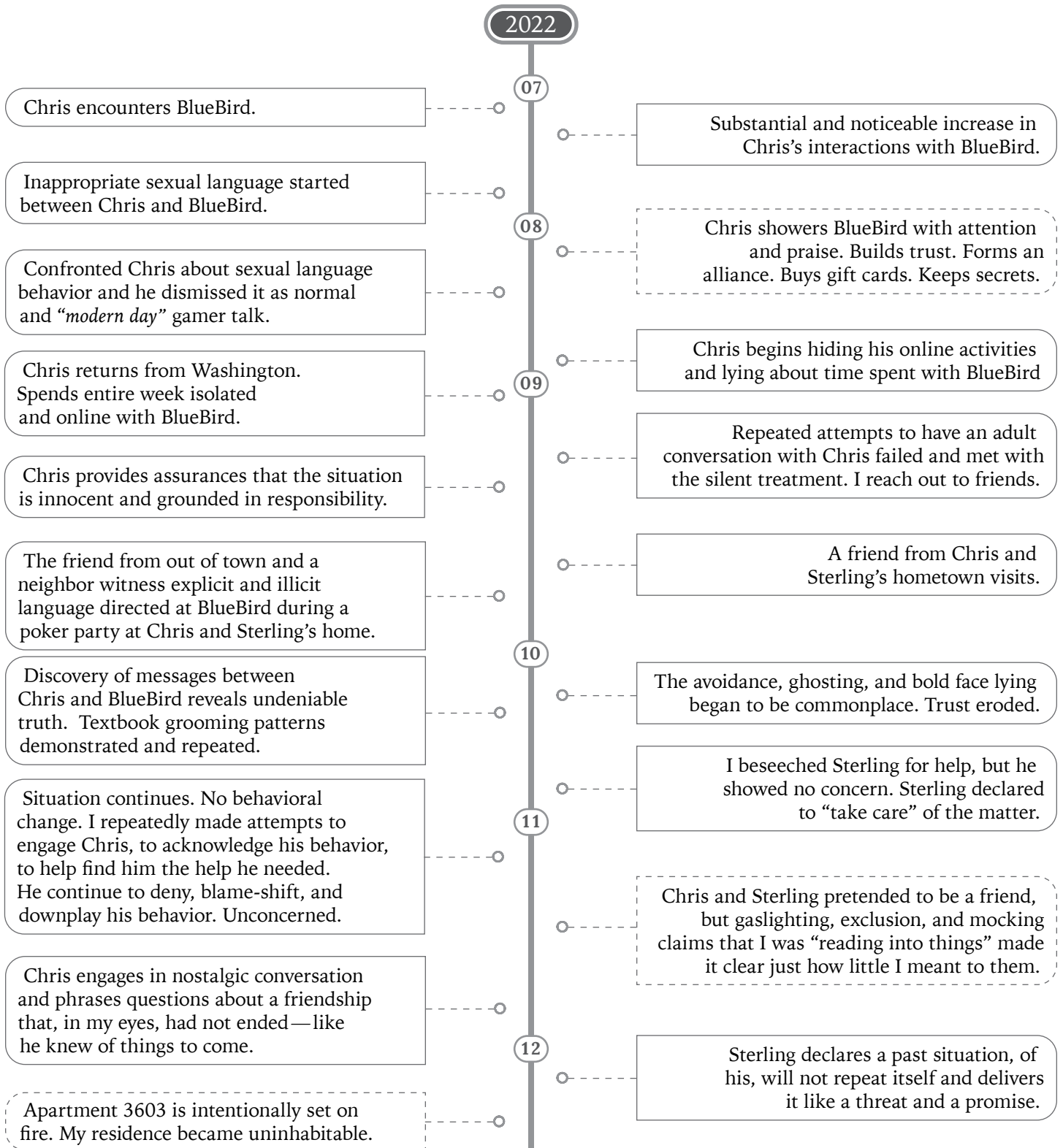
- I would recover as many deleted conversations as possible—enough to support my story.
- I would write a detailed account of the events I had experienced.
- I would take my statement and provide it as testimony to both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Honolulu Police Department’s Criminal Division.
- I would provide the message transcripts and log files containing the meta data to the authorities.
- I would share my story directly with the person or people who had been lied to and deceived.
- I would post my story online and push its contents to the top of search results, so that anyone looking for their name would find the truth.
- I would submit my story, over and over, to child sexual abuse organizations to make sure it didn’t slip through the cracks.

Saying “Yes” meant I would no longer live in the shadows. I would do everything in my power to bring the truth to light—no matter how long it took, no matter how many times I had to repeat myself. I wouldn’t let silence be a path to walk on anymore.

At the end of everything, **I will not let the lies win.**

T I M E L I N E

- Event I witnessed or participated in
 Event uncovered or was informed of afterward



2023

01

I called out their lies and forced their hand with claims of a incriminating video of Chris's behavior.

I informed my friend of my actions and shocked by their disapproval.

The campaign smear to ruin my credibility probably started much earlier on.

I sustained an injury—four fractures down my arm from the shoulder.

Relocated.

Someone asked me to tell my story. I was unable to provide evidence because I could not locate specific messages.

I conducted a full inventory of messages and determined there was deliberate tampering. Deduced they were only posing as friends way before the final "fight."

I figured out a way to recover some of the deleted messages.

Began documenting every detail I could remember; to tell my story. The truth.

Chris's turned openly antagonistic—blatant lies and subtle provocations used to punish my disapproval of his behavior. I recognized he was fully lost to compulsion, and any hope for resolution vanished.

I sent BlueBird a message warning him of Chris's intent.

Tampering of my devices and messages most likely began long before this point.

Eviction. Notice to vacate the property.

The trip to Las Vegas and to visit BlueBird.

BlueBird unfriends 500+ individuals and blocks Chris.

Began investigating and documenting the answers to "when" and "how."

Honolulu Fire Department confirms the fire was started intentionally; incendiary.

Began recovering the deleted data.

12

— AFTERWORD —



Author's Note

WHAT FOLLOWS

The following sections provide additional context, clarification, and insights I couldn't fully explore within the core narrative. Some parts are personal reflections, others are statements to intent, and some are resources or cautions I feel compelled to include.

This is the truth after the telling...

FOR THE RECORD

This memoir served as the foundation for building my formal statement to law enforcement. A finalized version of that statement will be submitted to the appropriate authorities, and it will include the **full names** and **contact details** of all individuals referenced throughout this story.

Within that statement, I will also provide my perspective on the role each person played—whether through direct actions, inactions, or choices made after being informed of potential harm to a child. These perspectives are drawn from either my firsthand experience or from information shared with me directly.

I understand that not everyone had the same information I did, and that miscommunications, lies, or assumptions may have influenced decisions. If any individual believes my account of their involvement is inaccurate, they are **welcome to speak with me directly** or wait and clarify their role to the proper authorities.

What matters most is that they take responsibility for explaining their silence after being told a child’s well-being might be at risk. It’s critical that they speak up about what they know—not only to bring clarity, but to help authorities identify any lies that may have been told to mislead or obstruct. Trained interrogators rely on patterns, contradictions, and omissions to break through deception. The more complete and accurate the picture, the easier it becomes to **expose falsehoods and get to the truth**.

If this memoir was sent directly to you, then it was a courtesy, a chance to step forward on your own (if applicable) or **be prepared to explain your silence when the next time you will be asked to speak may be under oath**.

THE FACE OF DARKNESS

There are several unanswered questions that might have seemed important to touch on during the core narrative, but since they have no clear explanation, I felt it best to still address them—just separately.

What’s my take on Sterling’s role in all of this?

Believing Sterling wasn’t directly involved in this behavior was the primary reason I went to him for help after I realized Chris had fabricated false assurances. I figured Sterling really cared for Chris—and that was why he had always seemed so jealous of me. I thought that once I told him what was happening, he would want to act, just as I had. *Love and care don’t exist in any world where you would allow the person you care for to harm themselves and others.*

My intuition leans strongly toward the belief that Sterling isn’t “into” young boys. I’ve never witnessed anything to suggest otherwise. In fact, when he talked about guys he found attractive—using words like “hot” or “sexy”—the men he pointed out were clearly adults, usually in their mid-20s to late 30s. I don’t recall a single instance where he commented on anyone underage.

But there was one moment—*just one*—that gave me pause.

It was late one night, sometime between July and September of 2022. I was in the common area when Sterling came down for a smoke and to hang out. We had both been drinking. I don’t remember exactly what led to the conversation, but I think I had just come back from the bars and might’ve been telling him about some of the guys I met. That’s probably how we landed on the topic of attraction—what we’re into, our “types,” that kind of talk.

Rather than try to describe mine, I pulled up a few pictures online to show him visually what I meant. After a few examples, the conversation shifted. I remember him asking if I was “into anything,” and I think I answered quickly and plainly. I’m not. I know I’m pretty vanilla.

I don't think I asked him the same question, but he suddenly swiveled his iPad toward me and said, "*What about this? You into this sort of thing?*"

What I saw made me hesitate. I didn't act shocked, but internally, *I was*. It took a few seconds to process what I was looking at. On the screen was a man—probably in his twenties or early thirties—dressed in black leather, sleeveless, holding what looked like a riding crop. At his feet were maybe four to eight naked young males, lying facedown with their arms tied behind their backs. One of them had a red gag tied around his mouth. Maybe more of them did—I only had about five seconds before Sterling turned the screen back toward himself.

I couldn't say for sure whether the guys were minors. One or two might've been as young as fifteen, but they also could've been in their early twenties. *I didn't have enough time—or clarity—to know for certain.*

Trying to break the tension, I asked, "*Which one are you?*"

He looked confused. "*Huh?*"

I clarified, "*Just curious which role you see yourself in—are you the dominant or the submissive?*"

He just said, "*Oh,*" and then gave no answer. He went back to playing his poker game.

And that was it. The *only moment—however vague—that ever hinted at something outside the norm*. But even then, *it felt like a stretch*. There was nothing overtly criminal in that image, just *unsettling*. And even now, *I don't know what to make of it*.



Since Sterling doesn't appear to have any traits or show any interest in BlueBird that align with an offender's patterns, the question still remains: **how does he fit into the mix?**

Firsthand experience has shown that Chris is more than unwilling to admit a single action of his is inappropriate. *Everything he does is cloaked in the claim of innocence*. So if he can't even acknowledge the truth when directly confronted,

how did Sterling discover it? It's highly unlikely Chris ever offered up his secret voluntarily. Even under pressure, his pattern is to deny, deflect, and disguise.

Maybe, in their early years, they were bonded by something that felt like love or loyalty. Maybe Sterling saw the signs but didn't want to break out of the illusion. Maybe their connection grew into a co-dependence that neither could escape. It's even plausible that no explicit conversation ever happened between them. That would explain why Sterling once told me, "*Chris will never be confronted about it.*" At the time, it felt like avoidance. *Now it feels like a quiet truth—one he already made peace with long ago.*

But one thing is certain: Sterling knows. He found out. And he chose to let it continue.

Everyone who knows them has picked up on it—they're not a typical loving couple. That illusion has long since shattered. They're entrenched in what people often call a "*situationship*"—a dynamic where both parties gain something personal from staying in it. *And that's what makes it all the more dangerous.*

Chris's benefits are clearer. On the surface, Sterling provides a cover. He turns a blind eye while Chris does what he wants, with whoever he wants.

But Sterling? *His benefits run deeper, and they're more cunning.*

Let's start with the financial ones.

In the first year or two of knowing them, Chris asked me for help with his finances. He was concerned about the steady drain on his income and asked for my discretion, insisting I not mention a word of our budgeting efforts to Sterling. He never explained why. I agreed, and we sat down to review the basics: income versus expenses.

Chris earned an average middle-class salary, so the issue had to be on the spending side. As we went through each item, I noticed a pattern. Rent and utilities were comparable to my own, but when I asked about how they split bills, he told me he covered everything—except electricity, which Sterling paid, roughly \$280 a month. That imbalance struck me as odd. *Most couples split bills 50/50.*

Then we got to the phone bill. Chris started rattling off several \$50 charges. I asked for the total, confused why he listed them separately. Turns out, he had six extra lines on his account—all belonging to Sterling’s family. Chris worked for the phone provider and got a discount, so Sterling added his relatives under Chris’s plan. When I asked if they reimbursed Chris for their share, he said no.

The phone expenses alone were nearly \$500 a month. I flagged it as a major area to cut, especially given his financial stress. *Sterling’s family had jobs. They could pay for their own lines.* Chris waved it off as “no big deal.”

By the time we finished, his budget showed a deficit of over \$600 a month. Still, he refused to trim the phone bill, no matter how much I suggested it. And Chris isn’t dumb. He knew what that money drain meant. *There had to be another reason he was willing to shoulder the cost.*

In this arrangement, one person’s expenses neared \$3,000 a month, while the other floated by with roughly \$300. **That’s not love. That’s imbalance.**

And the one who benefits is clear.

Another time, Chris told me he had owed taxes the past couple of years and wanted help reviewing his filings. He blamed it on a \$14,000 withdrawal from his retirement to bail Sterling out of a financial crisis. I cared about Chris, and though I’m not a CPA, I’ve been self-employed, owned real estate, and handled my own taxes since I was 16. I told him I had a minor degree in accounting and extensive experience with complex tax returns—but I made it clear I wasn’t a licensed accountant. Still, I offered to take a look and try to help him find any legitimate savings.

He handed me everything: his current tax documents and the prior year's return. I grueled over both, studying the 1099-R for the retirement distribution. What I found was that Chris had elected not to withhold taxes at the time of the withdrawal—a common but dangerous decision when you don’t have the funds set aside to cover the tax bill later. That withdrawal alone guaranteed he would owe at least \$7,000, and there was no way around that. But I kept looking for anything I could salvage.

I stayed up for two full days. I combed through every IRS rule, every deduction and credit he might qualify for. I restructured his Schedule C, combed through his itemizations, and amended his prior year return as well. When I finished, I saved him nearly \$1,000. I printed everything, sealed the envelopes, and handed them to him ready for mailing.

A week later, we swung by his place to pick up his wallet and keys, and I noticed both envelopes still sitting unopened on the table. The deadline had passed. I asked why he hadn't mailed them. He looked at me, completely serious, and said, "*Oh! I did mail them, but the post office sent them back because I didn't address the envelope right. My dumb ass put my name and address in the middle of the envelope.*"

I was stunned. *It made no sense.* But Chris was already grabbing his keys and rushing us out the door.

A couple of weeks later, I was in the common area talking to a friend and mentioned how baffled I was by the whole tax situation. They told me that one evening, Chris and Sterling were chatting together in that very space, and when the topic of taxes came up, Chris laughed and said, "*He doesn't know a fucking thing about taxes,*" and they both laughed.

That's what I got for helping.

Still, the point of the story isn't about me. *It's about what it reveals.*

Sterling had driven himself into financial ruin, and Chris paid the price—literally. *Not just with his retirement fund, but with his dignity. With his peace of mind. With his stability.*

And that's just what I witnessed in the past few years. *There's no telling how far back it goes.*

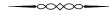
Sterling's benefits are layered: **financial, emotional, and most of all, functional.** He built a system around Chris's compulsions, and he keeps it running.

Not by force, but by design.

By holding the cards.

By keeping the secret.

He may not be the one committing the acts. But he has everything to gain by keeping the one who does close—and silent.



Over time, it became clear to me that **money wasn't the real prize for Sterling**. It was just a means to an end.

His true fixation was on **control**—controlling Chris, controlling the narrative, and controlling the cast of characters who floated in and out of their world.

From where I stood, it seemed like Sterling didn't need to be the star of the show *as long as he got to write the script*.

It would be easy to think that maybe Sterling didn't understand what Chris was doing, or that he was in some kind of willful denial.

But that doesn't hold up against reality.

There's no mistaking the look of someone who has witnessed truth firsthand and chosen silence anyway. And silence was exactly what Sterling weaponized.

He saw me break down. He watched me crumble. *There was no shock in his face. No concern.*

Just calculation.

If he truly thought Chris was innocent, he would have had questions—not just for Chris, but for me. Instead, he avoided everything that might disrupt the construct he benefited from.

Sterling had already said it: *“Chris will never be confronted about it.”*

At the time, I thought it was a deflection.

Now I think it was a confession.

It's not hard to imagine why he wouldn't want that confrontation to happen.

Chris is deeply compulsive. That much is clear.

I remember asking him once, out of sheer disbelief, how he could allow himself to be used, to suffer, to bankroll a partner who openly admitted he didn't want to work or contribute.

I said, "*How can you respect someone who would watch you work yourself to death while they sit on a throne?*" Chris looked at me, completely serious, and replied, "*Why would I not?*"

I didn't get it at the time, *but now I do.*

That wasn't a statement of love.

That was the voice of someone who would give anything—even to his own ruin and demise—just to keep feeding a compulsion.

And Sterling? *He knew it.*

He knew that Chris would sacrifice everything to keep his secret world alive.

And rather than help him out of that, **Sterling found a way to mold it into something he could benefit from.**

Sterling isn't driven by lust or by greed alone. *He's driven by power.*

The kind of power that doesn't need a spotlight.

The kind that whispers in ears and pulls strings quietly from the shadows.

And Chris—with his compulsions, his guilt, his desperation to be loved no matter the cost—was the perfect puppet.

Sterling didn't have to lay a finger on anyone to be dangerous.

All he had to do was keep Chris dependent, isolated, and tethered to the silence.

Even their assumed detour to visit BlueBird paints the picture.

Sterling was the one arranging the flights. He was the one removing me from the equation. Maybe he didn't walk into the room with Chris. Maybe he stayed behind in the hotel. *But that doesn't matter.*

He knew what was happening. And he chose to facilitate it.

Because control isn't just about where your feet are.

It's about the choices you make—and the ones you make for others.

The benefits for Sterling weren't just financial. *They were structural. Strategic. And sickeningly effective.* He controlled the flow of money, the flow of information, and the fragile world Chris built to keep his compulsions alive.

He didn't need to be the offender.

He just had to keep the offender protected long enough to keep reaping the rewards.

TRACING THE PAST

This is the hardest section I've had to write. I have to be honest and admit I wrote this section a hundred times in my mind and put it to paper more times than I can count.

I gave serious consideration to just ending my story and omitting this section entirely.

It's not about a lack of integrity—it's the opposite.

It's because even though I don't know everyone involved, I still very much care about them as if I did—their lives, their world, their joy, their hardships.

Writing this part scared me, confused me, and riddled me with hesitation, because I don't want to cause any damage to anyone when all I'm trying to do is stop it.

Everything I've written so far isn't just a story—it's a hard telling of hard truths. And saying what is alive in my instinct and intuition may very well ripple in ways I can't control. It is a reckoning.

I've come to understand that it isn't possible to shield everyone from damage—if I could, I would. And if I chose to omit this section, it wouldn't be because of doubt, but out of fear.

And that would mean I'd be protecting my comfort at someone else's expense—while their story never had a chance to be heard, and no chance to heal.

That is not at all who I am.

I did not write this out of hate.

I did not write this to punish.

I wrote this because someone might still be living in the aftershock of something that's never been acknowledged.

The responsibility was weighed, and I'm the type of person who would rather take the heat than leave someone in the dark—*alone*.

I'm not stating facts. I have no hard proof. What I have is intuition, lived experience, contradictions, and a trail of behavior that made me face the *unthinkable*.

When tracing the past, especially behaviors that fit predatory patterns, one thing becomes clear: **these patterns don't begin in adulthood.**

Research shows that inappropriate sexual compulsions often emerge between the ages of 17 and 20, but can take anywhere from a year to twenty years before a person loses control and offends.¹

Most abuse isn't committed by strangers—it's committed by someone the victim knows and trusts. **Over 90% of child sexual abuse cases are perpetrated by a family member, relative, or someone close to the child.**

Chris once told me about his past.

I had asked how he and Sterling met—just casual curiosity, wanting to learn more about someone I thought was a close friend.

He told me that at one point, he had lived with Sterling's sister and was taking care of her son.

What stuck with me was the way he described their relationship. Chris didn't say he was just babysitting or helping out.

He spoke about the boy looking up to him.

That they were close.

That he was "*like a big brother*" to him.

There was a warmth to it, a sense of pride in how much this boy adored him.

At the time, it seemed innocent.

It gave me the impression that Chris reveled in connection with others.

1 : Brineman, J. M. **Sexual Predation Characteristics**. EBSCO Research Starters.

But now, knowing what I know about Chris and grooming patterns, *I see it differently.*

That kind of language—the trusted adult, the mentor figure, the bond of admiration—is common in predatory dynamics.

It creates the illusion of safety and affection, but in reality, it lays the groundwork for emotional dependency and control.

It's not love.

If it were, then I would have witnessed an entirely different behavior from Chris in the years that followed.

Instead, it was manipulation disguised as care.

At the time, I'm fairly certain the boy was in his prepubescent stage, which is another flag. The ages of 7 to 13 are among the most vulnerable, with the highest abuse rates. **Predators gravitate toward them.**

In the hundreds of hours we played games and chatted online, I noticed Chris almost always had his online status set to “*hidden.*”

I'd ask why.

His answers were oddly specific—he said he was hiding from the nephew.

He told me the nephew was clingy. Needy. That he made Chris feel awkward.

Once, he said the kid just jumped into voice chats without asking, and that annoyed him.

But despite all those claims, *never once* did the nephew actually join our chats.

Not a single time, in all those hundreds of hours.

That absence alone said more than his excuses ever could.

It didn't make sense.

Chris often played with teenagers.

He was comfortable there. *Too comfortable.*

But this nephew, who he once said he was close to, was the one person he apparently didn't want around.

And yet—I never once saw this nephew.

Not in a chat. Not in a game.

I started to think maybe this nephew didn't even exist. But the way Chris talked about him... *it felt real.*

Real enough to question why Chris needed to hide from him most of the time.

But I realize this may not seem significant at first glance. If you weren't there to hear it for yourself or to witness how consistently this pattern repeated, you might miss what made it matter.

That's why I want to slow down here—to explain why the absence of the nephew, both in presence and in mention, was so alarming.

The silence around him wasn't a gap in memory—it felt deliberate.

For someone supposedly important in their lives, Sterling never once mentioned his nephew. Not in passing, not in context, not even when it would've made perfect sense to do so. It was like he had been erased.

Chris, on the other hand, only described him once—and in glowing terms. He spoke of a close bond, someone who admired him deeply.

But after that, it was all avoidance.

His online status was almost always hidden.

He'd claim the nephew was clingy, or awkward, or crossed boundaries by jumping into chats without asking.

But the strangest part?

In all our hundreds of hours online, the nephew never once showed up.

Not in voice. Not in text. Not even by accident.

That absence wasn't just strange—it was pointed.

The avoidance wasn't to protect himself from annoyance; it reads more like an effort to control or suppress access, visibility, and questions. *Like if the nephew were allowed in the same space, I might see something. Hear something. Sense something.*

When you add it all up—the intensity of Chris's avoidance, the lack of any actual interactions, and Sterling's complete erasure of the nephew—it stops looking like coincidence and starts looking like a conscious cover-up.

The kind where silence isn't about keeping peace—it's about protecting a secret.

And then came the theories.

Because if Chris would never admit what he's doing now, he certainly wouldn't confess what happened back then.

So how did Sterling find out?

Maybe he walked in on something.

Maybe the nephew told him.

Either way, **I believe that moment is where it all shifted.**

Sterling had knowledge.

And that knowledge became power.

A secret that, when buried, gave Sterling leverage.

It may have been the moment their “*situationship*” began—when Sterling saw the opportunity to take control and manipulate the situation in his favor—and no one else's.

He's doing it now, and it isn't a “*reach*” to suggest he did it back then too.

There's one more piece I've never been able to let go of.

Sterling's father took his own life just before I met him and Chris.

When Sterling told me, he described it as unexpected.

No signs, no note, no warning.

But then he asked me to research something—whether life insurance would pay out in the case of suicide, if the death was because of medication.

The request seemed random at the time.

He said the only possible explanation the family could come up with was that his father had recently started taking antidepressants.

He didn't mention which kind, or what they were prescribed for—just that it was new.

He wondered whether there were any loopholes in the suicide clause that might allow for a payout if the death could be attributed to an adverse reaction or a mental side effect of the medication.

That in itself is not far-fetched.

Medications, especially those affecting brain chemistry, can cause unpredictable shifts in mental state. And while I don't know the specifics, *I don't want to ignore* the fact that this could have been the tragic and sole reason behind his father's death.

But knowing Sterling the way I do now—how self-serving, manipulative, and greed-driven he's shown himself to be—I **can't ignore another possibility.**

Maybe he wasn't looking for emotional closure.

Maybe he was just looking for a way to beat the system.

Maybe the whole story about the antidepressants was his way of testing if there was a chance for a payout, spinning the facts to serve his angle.

And yet, another possibility lingers:

What if Sterling's dad was the one person the nephew finally confided in?

What if he heard something so devastating it couldn't be carried in silence?

Something that made sense of the suddenness, the weight behind the absence of any goodbye.

Something so dark it collapsed the man from the inside out.

I don't say this lightly.

But after everything I've seen, *I've learned not to take anything from Sterling at face value*—not even the death of his own father.

I don't know. I may never know.

But that's the weight *I carry*.

And that's why I'm saying this now.

Not because I want to accuse, or destroy, or speculate wildly.

But because if someone out there has lived through this, and they see their story echoed here, I want them to know:

Someone else noticed the silence.

Someone else saw the pattern.

And someone else is finally speaking.

AWARENESS TACTICS

I don't need to convince anyone of what happened to me, what I experienced. *I already lived it.* I'm writing this part for those who won't look away, who believe the truth is more important than their comfort—especially when it involves those who aren't yet capable of defending themselves. And even more so, I'm writing for the **protectors of the vulnerable**: the ones searching for a friend, a father figure, anything to repair what's already been broken in them.

Those are the ones in the most danger.

If my story alone isn't enough to convince you, then *I respect you for seeking the truth for yourself*—not the one handed to you, but the one buried beneath the noise.

I peeled back the layers without knowing I needed to prepare. I assumed my voice was enough. I thought my connection to them—my history—would matter. *I was wrong.*

That mistake left me confused, disoriented, and doubting things I had once been certain of.

Before you speak, steady yourself. *Courage isn't just helpful—it's what keeps you from crumbling when what is said starts twisting around you.*

This is psychological warfare.

And when you begin to question what you've seen or heard, remember: *this may be your first serious, inquisitive conversation with a master manipulator.* In my case, it wasn't just one. It was two. And walking into that alone is, without exaggeration, a kind of suicide.

A real warning, from lived experience.

When the charm kicks in, when things begin to sound rehearsed, your questions aren't addressed, and the story seems just barely plausible--you'll remember this section. **You'll remember I told you it was coming.**

Here are some tactics to remember:

The One-Word Verdict – “*He’s crazy.*” It’s meant to be a conversation ender, not a truth. But people rarely push past it. It’s fast, vague, and it sticks—because once someone plants the idea that you’re unstable, everything you say after that gets filtered through suspicion. They know that.

Double Down Verdict – “*He’s obsessed, he’s psychotic*” When “crazy” doesn’t get the desired reaction, they will reinforce and double down the escalation using other terms to plant the unstable seed hoping for your hasty verdict to close the conversation.

False Accusation by Shock Value – “*He tried to get us to sleep with him at the same time.*”—It’s not just a lie, it’s a lie so outlandish it’s designed to hijack attention and short-circuit the listener’s ability to reason. That **shock value** clouds the truth with disgust or confusion.

Stigma as a Silencer – “*He uses hardcore drugs.*” Even if it’s entirely false, the accusation itself plants doubt. People don’t ask for proof when they hear something that conveniently explains away someone’s pain or anger.

Projection via Obsession – “*He was obsessed with Chris/Sterling.*” When someone’s own behavior is questionable, they flip the narrative and say you were obsessed. That way, your concern, your care, your truth—it all looks like fixation instead of insight.

Weaponized Vulnerability – “*We were scared.*” They claim fear so they don’t have to provide facts. If they felt scared, that’s enough justification in most people’s eyes to never explain more. It’s emotional manipulation disguised as victimhood.

Preemptive Innocence – They’ll tell you a half-truth first, so when the full truth hits later, you’ll doubt it. *It’s calculated.* Don’t mistake it for honesty.

Block Barricade – Take note of their attempts to persuade you or anyone else to end it with a block and banishment. They will twist the true intention of why block buttons even exist—to stop someone from bombarding with unwanted messages. Their real intent aims at stopping all communication between more

than just their victims but to the people surrounding them. Always in any such request they make, ask yourself: *Who stands the most to gain from blocking someone else?*

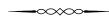
Character Smear – If someone needs to assassinate someone’s character to preserve their own, **ask yourself why.**

The Shifted Blame – They’ll play the victim *before anyone even calls them out.* That way, when they are confronted, it looks like retaliation.

Inconsistency Shield – They’ll act flaky or chaotic on purpose. That way, when they’re caught, they can say, “*You know me, I’m just forgetful*”—but it’s strategic. *Confusion is their defense.*

Selective Memory – They’ll remember just enough to look honest, but leave out the parts that show intention. It’s not forgetfulness. *It’s omission with purpose.*

The Emotional Exit Strategy – “*I just felt attacked... I can’t talk about it... I need to move on*”. It sounds gentle. Reasonable. Even mature. But it’s often a tactic—used when they’ve run out of lies that can be defended. They retreat into vague emotion so you can’t challenge them without looking cruel. But ask yourself—if someone truly was attacked, why do they go silent instead of seeking support? **Why do they avoid the people asking questions instead of confronting the person who supposedly hurt them?**



They don’t need you to believe every lie.

Just one.

One lie that makes you roll your eyes and move on instead of asking real questions.

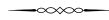
That’s all it takes.

That’s how it works.

UNSPOKEN TRUTHS

There are some truths that are undeniable no matter what is said and they don't require words. Actions are where you can really tell truth from fiction.

Chris avoided me at every turn. Still does. He won't even look me in the eye. *Only shame* can make someone behave as if eye contact might cause them to shatter. No argument between two so-called “close” friends justifies an immediate **surgical split**, full avoidance, and an intense refusal—or *inability*—to even glance at the other person. That kind of behavior **isn't normal**. Even people who despise each other can usually look one another in the eye, even if just to glare.



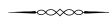
In Hawai'i, filing a false police report is a serious offense. Depending on the circumstances, it can be charged as a misdemeanor or even a felony. When the subject involves child sexual abuse, *I believe it crosses that threshold*. Penalties include up to \$10,000 in fines, up to five years in prison, and a permanent criminal record. If I were to make false claims knowingly, I would lose my job immediately—my entire career in the financial sector would collapse. The loss of income would trigger a vicious cycle: foreclosure, eviction, and unemployment. It would be the end of my stability—*personally, professionally, and financially*.

No one puts themselves on that kind of path unless they're telling the truth.

And for what?

That's the part I keep circling back to. What reason would I have to do all this if it weren't real? It's laughable to think this was ever about a *friend breakup* or a *personal falling out*.

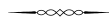
No quarrel justifies what I've endured—what **I'm still choosing to confront**. That idea alone shows how far people are willing to look the other way rather than look directly at what's in front of them.



When I give my statement to the police and tell my story, I will willingly submit to a polygraph test, which has a 85%-98% *accuracy rate*. The body doesn't lie—*biometrics will reveal whether someone is telling a lie*. The system can't force anyone to take it, but they can and often do request it.

I already know *they won't go near one*. They seem *incapable of telling the truth*.

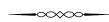
However if there were a universe in which one of them were to agree to take the test, *I would pay top dollar to witness it*. The machine would vibrate and shift so much that it would *tip the radar for seismic activity*.



Everything they've done to discredit me has failed. They tried to silence me, to strip away my credibility, to paint me as unstable. But they overlooked one thing: my loyalty to the truth has *never* wavered—not to save face, not to gain sympathy, and not even to be believed. *I needed to be right with myself*.

They tampered with messages. They erased entire conversations. They spun outrageous lies and convinced others to block me. But all those actions—meant to isolate and erase me—*have become evidence instead*.

Their cover-up tells me one thing: *the truth they're hiding must be terrible*.



There's something else—something I've learned the hard way and maybe the most important of all the awareness tactics I've mentioned.

The truth always comes with texture: *details, sequence, emotion, sensory recall*. But a lie? *It's brittle*.

When you push gently with, "*Can you give me an example? Just one time, a specific moment—you remember it, right?*"—**that's when it shatters**.

The liar either stammers, gets defensive, or vaguely circles back to generalizations. They don't have a memory, because *nothing ever happened*. Just the *script* they hoped would work.

When you feel someone gives you a lie, the easiest way to break it down is simple: **ask for one story.**

One example. A memory.

Say it kindly, like you're just trying to understand.

Because if it's true, they'll have a moment *etched* in their mind—they'll tell it without effort.

But if it's false?

Watch them freeze.

Watch the gears try to spin a story that doesn't exist. They'll either get defensive, change the subject, or lean on vagueness and *empty phrasing*. And right then, **you'll know.**

Because truth lives in memories.

Lies live in performance.

And when you ask for the memory, the lie stops breathing.

WARNINGS I WISHED I'D HEARD

Because I didn't know what to look for. And when I finally did, I still didn't know how to act fast enough.

I've replayed it in my mind more times than I can count—what I saw, what I felt, and what I failed to act on soon enough. There's a difference between fault and regret, but they sit beside each other in the dark. I don't blame myself for what happened—I *didn't cause it*. But I carry the ache of what I didn't stop. These are the warnings I wish someone had given me. Not to excuse myself, but because maybe if someone reading this hears them early enough, they won't have to live with the questions I do.

When your gut whispers, stop waiting for it to scream.

I kept waiting for undeniable proof. Something louder, more obvious, more damning. But I knew something was wrong long before I admitted it to anyone.

I wish I'd treated that knowing as enough.

People won't always believe you. Say it anyway.

The first time I did speak out, I turned to one of the people I trusted most—Auntie. But *what proof did I have?* None. Just a feeling. A deep, unsettled sense that something was wrong. And what could I possibly advise anyone? Do you say something when you have nothing but intuition? Or wait until there's proof—and risk it being too late? *I still don't know the answer.*

And maybe that's why some people, when told something like what I shared, choose silence. Maybe they had already been lied to. Maybe they just didn't want to get involved. But **silence in the face of a warning—even an imperfect one—is not neutral.**

It gives room for the wrong things to grow.

Predators don't look like monsters until it's too late.

They look like someone you love. Someone who was good to you. That's the part no one tells you: how confusing it is to suspect someone you cared for, someone who once made you feel safe, could be capable of something unforgivable.

You can do everything right and still be too late.

I tried to get through. I tried to ask the hard questions. I tried to protect the truth and the people in it. But sometimes the damage has already begun before you even realize you're in a position to stop it.

You won't always have the strength people expect of you.

I didn't stay silent because I didn't care. I stayed silent for a time because I was already broken. Not by the person I suspected—but by the people I trusted. One by one, the friends I counted on either turned away or turned on me. It's hard to raise your voice when your own support system has gone quiet.

I wasn't just trying to navigate a terrifying suspicion—I was doing it with no one left beside me.

NOT THE ONLY ONE

One thing I've come to understand, *painfully* and *clearly*, is that I cannot be the only one.

This wasn't a moment. It was a **pattern**. A trail. A slow-motion wreck that left pieces of people scattered behind them. I've watched it happen more than once. And while I didn't always know what I was seeing at the time, **I know now**.

There are paw prints in the dirt, barely visible to the untrained eye, but unmistakable to those who've walked this path. **They left a trail**. And that trail didn't begin with me, and it didn't end with me either.

I'm writing this for anyone else who *saw something, felt something, sensed something*—but didn't know how to speak it. Maybe you were afraid no one would believe you. Maybe you told someone and they made you feel *foolish*. Maybe you had no proof, just *instincts* and a *sick feeling* you couldn't shake.

I get it. I lived it.

Sometimes, it only takes one voice. One person willing to say, "*This happened. I saw it. I felt it. It's real.*" And when that happens, the silence starts to crack. The weight others have been carrying in the dark suddenly becomes lighter because they're **no longer alone**. And that's when the truth finally crawls out from the shadows, dragging the broken pieces with it.

If you're out there and you've been quiet, *you don't have to be forever*. There's room for your voice now. And if you choose to speak, know this:

I will not abandon you.

I will hear you.

I will stand by you.

THE IMPACT OF SILENCE

I once believed that authenticity was enough. That being open, honest, and loyal would naturally invite the same in return. I lived by that principle, and for years, I extended that truth to my circle of friends. I showed up for them, without condition. I gave my time, my car, my energy, my trust, my heart. I celebrated their birthdays, hosted their holidays, lent what I had when they were in need, and became their anchor when they needed support.

I never once imagined that all of that could be erased by silence, indifference, or a well-told lie.

But it was.

When I was at my lowest, reeling from betrayal and abuse, what shocked me most wasn't the cruelty of those who hurt me—it was the absence of everyone else. Not one friend stepped forward to say, "I see you." Not one offered their hand to help me up from the wreckage.

I never asked anyone to fix what happened or solve the unthinkable; I only needed someone to show that I mattered. That my suffering wasn't invisible.

Their silence did more damage than the betrayal itself.

If even one of them had paused before accepting the lies and asked themselves whether it sounded like me, things might have turned out differently. If just one had spoken up, had shared what they were told when I begged for the truth, it might have been enough to make the predators feel exposed—enough to make them hesitate. And just a hesitation might have spared one boy from being groomed.

Wasn't one boy worth that?

If even one friend had set aside a fraction of their comfort to hear me out, to let me respond to the claims being made behind my back, I could have proven the lies.

The web of deceit could have unraveled so much sooner. Maybe years sooner. Maybe in time for law enforcement to act before more harm was done.

But no one did.

I'm not writing this memoir in hopes of winning back their loyalty. That window closed long ago. I no longer need an ally—not now. The moments when I needed one have long since passed.

This is not a cry for an apology. This memoir is not for my benefit.

It is for truth.

If any of them read these pages and finally see what they refused to see before, then let this be my parting gift: a second chance.

A second chance to finally speak up, to choose courage over comfort, to ensure that their silence never becomes someone else's suffering—and maybe, in doing so, begin to cleanse the stain they allowed to settle on their own soul.

The part of them that knew better and still chose silence.

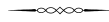
FINAL REFLECTION

This section isn't here to make peace with what I wish I'd done differently. I may never find peace with that. But if these words reach someone just a little sooner than my instinct reached me—then maybe they'll speak when I didn't, act when I waited, and save someone who still has time.

But that's the part that haunts me most.

I never had that time. Chris moved with lightning speed. Gifts were already being given within weeks. BlueBird was already deep inside a world Chris built for him before I even found the words for what I was seeing.

By the time I tried to speak, the **door was already closing**. And by the time I knew I had to speak, **it was sealed shut**.



If I need a defense, then let it be this:

No one should ever be put in the position of deciding when to speak out against someone they love—especially when the only thing you've ever truly wanted for them is healing. I didn't want to destroy anyone. I wanted to believe there was still something good left to save.

But hope alone doesn't protect people.

And silence, even the most well-intentioned kind, **only protects the wrong side**.

FINAL WORD

The truth is, hating afflicted people like Chris won't stop what's happening. This quiet plague—this sickness that hides behind smiles and silence—is spreading too fast, too cleverly, to be solved through anger alone. He wasn't born this way. Whatever warped him took root over time, and I can only imagine the fear, shame, and pain that must live inside him.

My heart, even now, still wants **healing for him**.

But when that healing never comes—when the fear of being hated keeps someone from facing what they've become—then the damage grows. I am a witness to that. I am the evidence of what happens when treatment never starts.

None of this excuses his choices. There comes a point where the compulsion doesn't just whisper—it consumes. And when that point is reached, society must step in. The first priority is to keep others safe.

If that means isolation, then so be it.

But even then, I still hope there's a moment ahead where he finally wants help and seeks it.

We won't end this by pretending it doesn't exist. We won't fix it by burying the signs or dismissing the warnings.

The only way through is with our eyes open, our voices steady, and our hearts intact.

This fight requires **more** than outrage.

It requires **endurance**.

And **love**.

And a **refusal** to let silence win.

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