Washington State University

Chronic:

A Short Story

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Advisor Signature Approval Page

As thesis advisor for Shana Huang, I have read this paper and find it satisfactory.

Signature: 

Date: 3/22/24

Précis

Learning about rhetoric and its role in our daily lives opened my eyes to the minute details of the media we consume and the way we communicate with one another. In our digital age, rhetoric takes on very unique forms, and after reading several fictional stories that utilize rhetoric to speak to themes and events in our world today, I was inspired to write my own story using a similar ideology. For my creative project, I wanted to write a short story centered around social media culture, questioning the way internet users appropriate technology for their own goals. More specifically, I wanted to satirize the roles of social media influencers in internet culture and the attitudes that arise when one is "canceled" or ousted due to a controversy. Keeping with the theme, I also wanted my story to explore the weaponization of social media, AI, and the internet, reflecting the new types of "threats" that only began to rise recently with these new technologies.

My short story, "Chronic," takes place over several days, following a series of strange Instagram messages the unnamed protagonist receives from a user only known as **"xXAwaritz9."** These messages contained photos of the protagonist's street, car, and apartment. Frightened, the protagonist, a renowned social media influencer, takes to Instagram to talk about her plight on a livestream, where hundreds of fans rally together to start a fundraiser for her to hire a private investigator. Unbeknownst to her followers, she has already hired a private investigator and is close to finding the true identity of **xXAwaritz9.** Days later, a series of new messages from **xXAwaritz9** threaten to out the protagonist for stealing the funds she had raised for a terminally ill fan unless she came clean herself. Choosing to stay silent, the protagonist finds herself comfortable in the safety of her apartment. Until one knock on her apartment door.

I initially approached my creative project by planning out the plot ahead of time. Afterward, I began writing my story. However, my story did not reflect my initial goals for the project, and I ended up scrapping it in favor of what would become "Chronic." To write "Chronic," I simply began typing out the story, letting it form by itself from there. Rather than outlining or plotting it, I continued writing over several days, ending the story naturally. By doing so, I discovered that the end product had a stronger flow and sense of direction as opposed to my initial story. Writing "Chronic" also taught me that the genres of satire and thriller are rather complex and difficult to write, as satire requires subtle characterization with a clear link to reality while thriller relies on a strong sequencing of events.

In the future, avenues others might take include writing short stories or longer pieces of fiction that speak to different aspects of internet culture. Much like the way I was inspired by *Yellowface,* a novel I had read that dealt with social media discourse and cancel culture in the literary community, others might be inspired by a variety of different themes related to the way we use technology and the internet. For instance, the rise of AI has sparked fears that realistic AI-generated video footage might indict individuals of crimes they never committed— a topic that I can see becoming a thriller novel. Moving forward, I also want to continue writing short stories that deal with different aspects of social media culture, perhaps even compiling these stories into an anthology in the future.

Table of Contents

Introduction

A man foams at the mouth for the latest brand-name jacket. A woman pries a pair of skinny jeans from the hands of a corpse. The throes of consumerism turn a retail store into a warzone, placing workers on the front lines.

When I first read Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's short story, "Friday Black," I was floored. The story itself was bizarre and hysterical, yet as I read it, I was struck by how real it, in a sense, was. Before reading "Friday Black" in my English 460 course, The Scope of Rhetoric, I didn't have much experience with satire. However, after discussing and analyzing the story, I was fascinated with how an author could use rhetoric in a piece of satirical fiction to illustrate a real societal issue.

"Friday Black" was one of the stories that spurred my initial decision to research how rhetoric in literature influences societal perceptions for my thesis. While the piece is satirical and certainly fantastical, its strangely astute descriptions of Black Friday and the phenomena surrounding it mirror footage of the real event in a disturbing way.

In "Friday Black," the protagonist, Emmanuel, witnesses "maybe eighty people rush through the gate, clawing and stampeding. Pushing racks and bodies aside" (Adjei-Brenyah). He goes on to state that the shoppers, whom he calls "Friday heads," rush into the store with "less fear and more hunger" (Adjei-Brenyah, "Friday Black"). While the short story dials up the events of Black Friday, it is still able to echo the fervor of shoppers captured on hundreds of videos throughout the internet.

The disturbingly comical accuracy of "Friday Black" fascinated me, and I wanted to explore how other stories might employ rhetorical strategies to influence societal perceptions on various social themes and topics. This initial goal eventually blossomed into a creative project,

and as such, my thesis became a short story where I attempted to take these rhetorical elements to reflect on a specific societal topic.

For my short story, "Chronic," I chose to center the plot around social media, specifically the way it is both used and perceived in our world today. I was inspired to do so after reading R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface,* a satirical thriller where a young woman steals her Chinese friend's manuscript after her death to sell it under her own name. Kuang's novel draws heavily from present-day social media culture, particularly in the atmosphere that surrounds literature on apps such as Instagram and X (formerly Twitter). In the novel, protagonist June Hayward views comments about herself stating things like "WTF!!! SEND HER ASS TO JAIL!" and "Die, bitch" after the truth about what she did was leaked (Kuang 136-137).

These depictions of comments on social media, coupled with Kuang's "unlikable protagonist" led to my decision to write a social-media-based short thriller featuring an "unlikeable protagonist." My final decision to do so came after seeing more news online about "canceled" social media influencers and exposés about the things that some have done. I coupled this with the news I had seen online about realistic AI videos to create a story steeped in present-day events and politics.

By writing "Chronic," I aimed to use the genres of satire and thriller to convey a narrative that is reflective of social media and its role in our world. The genres of satire and thriller are both still rather new to me, as I haven't had too much experience with reading them. This project was the first time I had written a story in this realm, and I was definitely influenced by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah and R.F. Kuang. Furthermore, the employment of an "unlikeable protagonist" was also new to me, and as such, I pushed my boundaries and writing style when crafting "Chronic." As this is my first time writing a story with a deliberately "unlikeable

protagonist," I took inspiration from novels like R.F. Kuang's *Yellowface* and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* to shape my character's attitude. Because of this, my work is similar to these authors' stories on a base level. However, my short story differs greatly in its overall plot and theme.

Creative Project

For my thesis, I chose to complete a creative project in the form of a short story titled "Chronic." My story is a satirical thriller that revolves around social media and the ways in which modern technology is appropriated.

Methodology

I began writing my short story by brainstorming ideas for an overarching plot. During this time, I found myself consistently browsing Instagram. Time and time again, I'd watch reels of people playing with their dogs, going swimming, or doing other everyday activities, only to open the comment sections to hundreds of strangely disturbing (and often unrelated) comments. Many of these included things such as threats and racial slurs, and it was then that I decided to write a short story unpacking this issue.

Initially, my story involved a morally gray protagonist who would track down these commenters through their IP addresses and "target" them. I planned for the story to unravel as readers got deeper, building up to the big reveal that the protagonist was a serial killer. But after working through the first few pages of the story, I decided to scrap the idea.

This decision came after I reflected more on the story's context. When writing the initial pages, I felt a lack of passion for the story, and the plot seemed to lack substance. It was then that

I began to see news of more advanced and realistic AI-generated images online. Inspired by this, I began to write a new short story, which eventually became "Chronic." At this time, I was reading Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation,* which prompted me to switch my protagonist from a "morally gray" character to an "unlikable protagonist."

The selfish, apathetic nature of an "unlikeable protagonist" was something I sought to emulate in "Chronic," and one particular trait of this stood out to me while I was reading *My Year of Rest and Relaxation.* During a moment with her friend, the protagonist states that she told her "'don't be a spaz'" when "her mother's cancer spread to her brain" (Moshfegh 17). The underlying annoyance carried in the protagonist's tone was something I attempted to subtly utilize in "Chronic" through my own protagonist's actions and demeanor.

This was accomplished through indirect characterization, which I primarily used to illustrate my protagonist's true nature. According to an article from MasterClass, "adding indirect characterization to your writing is a powerful way to convey those unspoken thoughts and traits that convey the true essence of a person" ("Writing 101"). The article also states that indirect characterization also provides readers "with the opportunity to draw their own conclusions and make their own discoveries, for an overall more satisfying and intriguing reading experience" ("Writing 101").

Indirect characterization is especially hammered into my story during its flashback scene. The actions of the protagonist during this moment highlight who she truly is as a person when she engages with a young fan that she is holding a fundraiser for. During her interactions with her fan, who is terminally ill, the protagonist states: "I cock my head and force a smile" and "I nod, trying not to roll my eyes instinctively" (Huang 20). These moments emphasize the protagonist's lack of enthusiasm and apathetic attitude toward her fans.

Because of the story's foundation in social media, I decided to highlight social media devices by setting them apart from the rest of the text through font, color, size, and placement changes. Comments and messages through Instagram were centered in my story to emulate the feeling of reading them on a screen. For comments in particular, I changed the font to Arial to make the text more modern and "digital," much like the way Kuang depicts social media comments in *Yellowface.*

I attempted to start writing "Chronic" by outlining the story and setting up a series of events to follow. However, as someone who has always primarily written a story as it progresses, I found this to be ineffective. Because of this, I decided to simply start writing and see where the story would take me. This writing method or tradition is known as pantsing. According to Robert Lee Brewer's article for Writer's Digest, "a pantser is a term most commonly applied to fiction writers, especially novelists, who write their stories 'by the seat of their pants'" ("What Is a Pantser in Writing?").

Writing "Chronic" pushed me to try new elements in fiction, and in doing so, I learned more about the "unlikeable protagonist" and the genres of satire and thriller. This process taught me how different literary devices could convey messages about the real world and the ways in which rhetoric presents itself in such stories.

Results and Discussion

Through my creative project, I learned many new things about myself as a writer. More specifically, I found that certain genres were harder for me to write, especially as I had never previously worked with satire and thriller. To ground my story in the thriller genre, I had to pay careful attention to pacing. Coupled with the fact that short stories are limited to a certain

number of words and pages, I was faced with a serious dilemma when writing "Chronic." Because of this, I found myself writing in more of the thriller elements during the beginning and end of the story, composing the scenes in the middle with more background.

While writing "Chronic," I discovered that the most difficult aspect of doing so was filling the story with satire. Outside of *Yellowface* and "Friday Black," I hadn't read any other pieces of satirical fiction, so writing my own was a new venture.

For "Chronic," much of the satire was imbued in the way my protagonist behaved during her livestreams. The fake kindness and tears that she portrayed onscreen were inspired by the many videos and articles I have seen about "YouTube apology videos," where social media influencers and celebrities publicly apologize for wrongdoing or scandal. More specifically, my protagonist is a caricature of these tropes. I attempted to show this through her thoughts and actions during her March 26 Livestream:

> "I smile wide and wave both hands at the screen. Almost immediately, the viewers pour in. I watch smugly as the numbers tick up in the corner, faster and faster. *As always,* I think to myself.
>
> Clasping my hands over my chest, I stare at the camera, watching myself pout from the screen. The live version of myself on the screen juts her lips toward the camera with a simper. Her eyebrows are raised and her eyes are wide and doe-like. *Perfect,* I think.
>
> I let out a small sigh, then begin.
>
> 'As you guys know, three days ago, I received a series of threatening photos and messages from another user on Insta.'
>
> My lips quiver, and I feel the tears begin to well up in my eyes.

‘And frankly, I still feel really, *really* unsafe.’

I stare at the camera, letting the tears roll down my cheeks. I wait for a few seconds before wiping them away, glancing at the comments out of the corner of my eyes.” (Huang 16)

By depicting my protagonist in such a manner, I was able to use indirect characterization to give my readers an idea of her true nature. Furthermore, by using dialogue that purposely emulates the way some influencers have spoken in their YouTube apology videos, I was able to play on real-world events, creating a satirical moment that linked my story to social media culture. This in turn allowed me as the author to subtly illustrate the way social media is used (or misused) and how we perceive and interact with others online.

Similarly, in a later scene, I use satire to comment on the way individuals might weaponize technology. This moment questions the believability of images in the age of the internet and AI, emphasizing how crucial context and research are for the things we view on social media:

“ David sighs. ‘Did you actually take any time to carefully look at those images? They’re all either pulled from the internet or AI-generated.’

My phone buzzes, and I swipe open a series of text messages from David. The first message is a photo of the street sign near my apartment that **xXAwaritz9** sent me, except this time, it’s in a collection of images from Google, all of which depict the sign and neighborhood from different angles.

The second message from David shows **xXAwaritz9’s** profile photo on Instagram next to my unit’s original listing on Zillow, which contains the exact same photo.

I stare at David’s messages, feeling my cheeks grow hot in embarrassment.

Scrolling down, I see the two photos **xXAwaritz9** sent me from the inside of my car and bedroom, but now, certain parts of each photo are circled in red.

'You see the last two photos? Each section I circled is a part that doesn't look natural. I mean, you can literally see that your teddy bear has an extra arm,' David says.

I squint and look closer at the image, noticing the extra nub protruding from my teddy bear's right arm.

'Oh.'" (Huang 23-24)

The protagonist's confusion in this scene is representative of how misinformation is spread on the internet. Her interactions with the photos she received are indicative of how some users on platforms such as Instagram and X might attempt to threaten or blackmail others. However, her belief in the real nature of the photos illustrates our current internet culture, where many come to conclusions about a certain subject without doing further research. The photos of my protagonist's apartment unit number being on Zillow, and the nearby street sign showing up on Google Images, drive home the idea of how much personal information is available on the web, and how easy such information is to access.

With the first draft of my short story finished, my next steps involve editing and revising the piece. To ensure that "Chronic" is publishable, I plan to have others read my story and provide feedback on its strengths and weaknesses. Then, I will work on line editing, copyediting, and proofreading for my story.

Conclusions

Since childhood, storytelling has been a major aspect of my life. Book series like Junie B. Jones and Magic Tree House sparked my initial fascination with reading. This in turn prompted

me to begin writing, and when I was six, I wrote my first story. From that moment on, writing has been an integral part of my own story, but it wasn't until college that I grew to truly understand myself as a writer.

Various events in my life have greatly impacted what I write about and how I write. For years, the majority of my writing fell in the realm of fantasy. Stories of magical phoenixes and chosen heroes graced my mind, spilling out onto sheets of lined paper in my college-ruled notebooks. It wasn't until high school that I began reading realistic fiction, a genre that I felt resonated with me on a deeper level.

In college, I started to explore realistic fiction in my writing, which in turn led me to read even more novels in the genre. This led me to examine how literature is reflective of our real world and how authors use rhetoric in their stories to comment on certain subjects.

By writing my own short story with this idea in mind, I discovered that storytelling often involves many indirect (and sometimes unintended) nods to real life. Because of this, I realized that rhetoric is inherently imbued in the stories we convey, and that fiction truly does mirror reality. Moving forward, I hope to refine "Chronic" as a whole, adding more moments taken from real events on the internet to further reinforce my story's theme.

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Chronic

By Shana Huang

Friday, March 23. 5:37 AM

I see the first message as I'm brushing my teeth.

My phone's screen lights up, and a rectangular notification appears at the top.

xXAwaritz9 wants to send you a message.

I click the power button on the side of my phone, turning it off. There's no point in interacting with fans when your inbox is consistently loaded with hundreds of new messages each day.

I continue brushing my teeth.

As I lean over the sink to spit, my phone's screen turns on again.

xXAwaritz9 wants to send you a message.

I frown.

Reaching for my phone, I click on the notification, ready to hit the Block option. But for a split second, I glance at the account's profile photo, and I freeze.

The image is dark and slightly blurry but centered perfectly in it is a photo of my apartment's front door.

312

My unit number stares back at me from the little circle atop my screen. I blink a few times as if thinking that'll do anything, but the number remains the same.

Squinting, I bring the phone closer to my face.

The three numbers are mounted atop a gray rectangular door, identical to the front door of my apartment. Blue-gray carpet runs along the bottom of the photo on all sides, matching the outdated 80s-esque flooring of my apartment building.

My phone buzzes again.

xXAwaritz9 wants to send you a message.

My hands begin to shake. Without thinking, I hit Accept.

My messages open up on Instagram, and I see three photos sent from **xXAwaritz9.** I recognize the first photo as a street sign about a block away from my apartment building, and my heart begins to pound.

I scroll down.

I drop my toothbrush in shock. Its bristles slam against the sink's faucet, splattering white foam across it.

I stare at the second photo. A miniature succulent hangs from the mirror of a car, nestled in a small knitted purple basket. The photo is taken from the backseat, and I recognize the green tissue box that sits atop the car's center console.

Because I put it there a week ago.

I let out a quivering breath.

Then, I swipe up.

The photo is dark and slightly blurred, but I can make out the outline of my bedroom. My purple teddy bear sits on the corner of my dresser, and I can see my puffer jacket through the barely-open door of my closet.

In the center of the photo is my full-size bed, perfectly made with two fluffy white pillows and a thick, floral-print comforter.

Except…

I lift my phone closer to my face and expand the image.

And I scream.

The top of a head peeks out from under the comforter, complete with a set of piercingly wide eyes that stare directly at the camera. Below the photo, three ellipses pop up and my breath catches.

When I read the message, my heart sinks.

I'm always watching.

Monday, March 26. 2:28 PM

I position my phone directly in the center of the ring light and swipe over to Instagram Live. I glance back at my open bedroom door, trying to shake off a feeling of unease. My finger hovers over the red "Start" button, but before I begin my live, I cave in.

I go around my apartment once again, making sure that all of the blinds are shut and that every window and door is locked. I look over at the whiteboard next to the front door and add another tally.

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Sixth time today.

I toss the marker back toward the whiteboard with a sigh, watching as it magnetically sticks to its glossy white surface. Shaking out the uncertainty, I beeline for my room, locking the bedroom door behind me.

The desk chair shifts across the floor with a soft thud as I pull it back. Turning on my phone, I flip the camera toward me and smile.

This time, I've made sure to put on Delicious Red, a glossy shade of cherry that my viewers have always preferred.

With a grin, I lean toward the camera and tilt my head to one side.

Then, I click **Live**.

3…

2…

1…

"Hey, guys!!!"

I smile wide and wave both hands at the screen. Almost immediately, the viewers pour in. I watch smugly as the numbers tick up in the corner, faster and faster. *As always,* I think to myself.

Clasping my hands over my chest, I stare at the camera, watching myself pout from the screen. The live version of myself on the screen juts her lips toward the camera with a simper. Her eyebrows are raised and her eyes are wide and doe-like. *Perfect,* I think.

I let out a small sigh, then begin.

"As you guys know, three days ago, I received a series of threatening photos and messages from another user on Insta."

My lips quiver, and I feel the tears begin to well up in my eyes.

"And frankly, I still feel really, *really* unsafe."

I stare at the camera, letting the tears roll down my cheeks. I wait for a few seconds before wiping them away, glancing at the comments out of the corner of my eyes.

Girl that's awful!

Uggh what a creep

CALL DA POLICE GURLLL

imma cap dat boi

follow me back plzzzzz

wutttttttt

I know a PI u can hire, dm me!

so sry girly

Nodding, I manage a small chuckle.

"Thank you for all of the encouraging words, guys. I really appreciate your support."

I pause for a moment before continuing.

"As you guys know, I'm hoping to hire someone who can help me dig into who this creep is. Unfortunately, these services are expensive, and I just can't afford them at the moment."

I watch as the comments begin pouring in faster, moving up one by one in a frantic mass.

I'll donate girly! Your safety is important

guys lets do a fundraiser

ill help!

I start to grin, but I stop myself.

Stick to the script, I tell myself.

A text message pops across the top of my screen.

From David Corman: We're getting close, not too long and we should be able to ID this guy.

Thank God.

I swipe up to make the message disappear and continue my livestream.

But before I speak, a sudden reassuring thought flashes across my mind.

Thank God no one saw that.

Wednesday, March 28. 7:39 PM

Bet you're loving those $$$.

It's been days since **xXAwaritz9** last sent anything, but I'm not surprised when the message pops up on Instagram.

I grit my teeth, trying to restrain myself.

I think back to my last conversation with David, and how he reassured me that they were getting "so *so* close to finding that creep."

Luckily for him, I had enough grace to give his team one last day before I booted them off the case. My fingers hover over the keyboard as a slew of responses bounce around in my mind.

But then I remember the last thing David told me: "Whatever you do, don't respond to this guy."

With a sigh, I swipe away from Instagram. But as the app closes, another message pops up.

Do you love those $$$ as much as the ones you stole from Karina?

I freeze.

My heart begins to pound, and without thinking I type out a response: *What the hell are you on about?*

I watch the screen. After a few seconds, three ellipses pop up and a new message appears.

You know exactly what I'm talking about.

I toss my phone onto the bed and brace myself against my desk, trying to ward off a nauseating feeling that's slowly creeping in. I think back to that fundraiser from a year ago, and the image of a little girl with chestnut brown hair flashes across my mind.

Karina.

Thursday, March 23. 12:00 PM. *One year ago.*

"Ding ding ding! And that's it, thank you all so much for donating!"

I lift my phone to my face with a smile. "I'm so thankful to all of you guys for attending this livestream and raising money for Karina's treatment, this means so so *so* much, and your generosity will not go unappreciated!"

I turn around and beckon toward the little girl behind me. Karina steps forward with a grin and waves. "Thank you, guys!"

With that, I end my Instagram Live and turn off my phone.

Karina leaps at me and pulls me into a hug. "Thank you so much, I can't believe we were able to raise all that money from your livestream!"

I give her a pat on the head and smile tightly. "Of course."

My studio door opens, and I turn to see Karina's mother, Marissa, walk in.

"I heard you guys wrap it up in here," she says. "How did it all go?" Marissa clasps her hands below her chin and looks at me uncertainly.

Karina dashes towards her mother and takes her hand. "Mom, we raised a million bucks!"

Marissa gasps. "What? That's not…" Her voice trails off and she looks at me for confirmation. "Is that true? One million dollars?"

I nod, trying not to roll my eyes instinctively. "Yep! My viewers truly sympathized with your guys' situation and wanted to help out in any way possible."

"I— I don't know what to say…" Marissa places a hand on her forehead in disbelief and begins to sob. "Th— thank you so much."

I cock my head and force a smile. "Of course! I'm *so* glad you reached out."

So glad.

Wednesday, March 28. 8:02 PM

You're a monster.

I scoff. The message glares at me from the screen and I type back: *Says the creep that broke into my car and my apartment and is fkn threatening me*

Almost instantly, **xXAwaritz9** replies.

Tell the truth or I will.

My heart pounds and my fingers fly across the keyboard: *I told you like everyone else knows, that money was stolen!*

…

…

…

Liar.

My fingers curl around my phone and I resist the urge to smash it against my desk. I toss it onto my bed and sink into my chair, trying to decide what to do next.

Then, the screen lights up.

Tentatively, I walk over to my bed and grab my phone, clicking on the notification.

My heart drops.

Screenshots of various bank account transactions from last March flood my phone, and I watch as one photo appears after the other, detailing various amounts of money being transferred to my account.

And in each screenshot, "Karina's Fund" is listed at the very top.

Shit shit shit.

Mortified, I stare at the screen as **xXAwaritz9** begins typing again.

You have half an hour.

...

I'm always watching.

Wednesday, March 28. 8:19 PM

"DAVID TELL ME WHAT TO DO!"

My voice explodes out of my lungs in a quivering shriek. I sink into my bed, burying my face into a pillow as tears stream down my cheeks.

The phone is silent for a few seconds, but then David speaks. "Don't do anything. This guy's trying to force your hand, but he has no proof. For all anyone knows, those documents were falsified."

"H– how are— are we supposed to get people to believe that?" I ask between sobs.

"Because those photos he sent you on Friday were."

I freeze. "What?"

David sighs. "Did you actually take any time to carefully look at those images? They're all either pulled from the internet or AI-generated."

My phone buzzes, and I swipe open a series of text messages from David. The first message is a photo of the street sign near my apartment that **xXAwaritz9** sent me, except this time, it's in a collection of images from Google, all of which depict the sign and neighborhood from different angles.

The second message from David shows **xXAwaritz9's** profile photo on Instagram next to my unit's original listing on Zillow, which contains the exact same photo.

I stare at David's messages, feeling my cheeks grow hot in embarrassment.

Scrolling down, I see the two photos **xXAwaritz9** sent me from the inside of my car and bedroom, but now, certain parts of each photo are circled in red.

"You see the last two photos? Each section I circled is a part that doesn't look natural. I mean, you can literally see that your teddy bear has an extra arm," David says.

I squint and look closer at the image, noticing the extra nub protruding from my teddy bear's right arm.

"Oh."

David sighs. "Listen, just…don't do anything okay? Like I said, we're getting close and this guy can't prove those screenshots are real."

"But…but how was he even able to get them?" I ask, biting my lip.

"It doesn't matter," David replies. "We'll dig into that, but in the meantime, we have the evidence to say this guy is capable of falsifying images. If he does leak those transactions, all you need to do is release a statement refuting those allegations. My team's already written it up for you." My phone buzzes, and I see a new text from David. I take a screenshot of the statement and save it to my camera roll. "Pair that with the photos he sent you, and he's got nothing," David says.

"Alright," I say.

"Don't worry about this, okay? We have it under control." With that, David hangs up and my apartment falls silent.

I look at the corner of my phone. 8:28 PM. My palms begin to sweat, and I feel a sense of nausea settling in.

8:32 PM

My finger hovers over the Post button on Instagram, but I pause, reminding myself to wait until **xXAwaritz9** posts first.

Five minutes pass. Then ten minutes. Then fifteen.

I scroll back to my messages, feeling a sense of relief and confusion. Then, my phone begins to ring.

David's voice sounds out from the speaker frantically. "Get inside your bedroom. Lock the door, police are already on the—"

His voice cuts out, and the call ends.

"David? David, what are you talking about? What's going on?"

Just then, a single slam echoes from my front door. I scream and swivel around, my heart racing. Carefully, I make my way to the door. I press my ear against it, but there's no sound. Timidly, I lift myself up and muster enough courage to look out the peephole.

On the other side, pressed against the glass, a single brown eyeball stares back at me.

My phone buzzes.

I'm always watching.