

The Nation's Capitol pulsed with power. Its familiar monuments glowed eerily, standing constant vigil, as if they were guarding secrets hidden within the shadows of government. Some of these secrets were certainly known to Senator Homer Dobbs, who stood amid a group of captive admirers in the ballroom of the Watergate Hotel.

"In this town," Dobbs drawled in his Southern accent, "it's not who you know, it's what you know about who you know."

A scattering of laughter greeted the Senator's words. After all, this was Washington, DC. Information was not merely a tool here, it was a weapon. The quest for information in this very hotel had brought down a President decades before.

Dobbs was an eager freshman Congressman from Virginia that year, a youthful twenty-nine, lean and athletic. These days, after more than four decades in politics, Dobbs found himself wishing he were fifty pounds thinner and forty years younger. Yet, as his body had gained pounds, his influence had gained mass. His lazy southern accent and farm boy wit had served to create the illusion he was nothing more than a harmless Southern bureaucrat. By the time anyone realized Dobbs was not what he seemed, it was too late.

"You know the real reason the Ruskies fell on their communist asses?" Dobbs raised a martini glass and drained its contents. "Vodka!"

Dobbs loved making people laugh. It kept them off-guard. Especially women. There was that scandal once, when he was caught dallying with a lovely female lobbyist, but his wife Sarah, in the pragmatic fashion worthy of a member of The Daughters of the American Revolution, stood by him. He promised her that it would never happen again. And he vowed to himself he would never ever again be caught with his pants down. And he wasn't, although the sexual liaisons continued until his desire to stray outlived his libido. Even now he enjoyed the company of beautiful women and hired staff from a photo rather than a resume.

Staring at his now-empty glass, Dobbs turned toward Amanda Wells. Amanda, an intern in Dobbs' office, was a twenty-four year old redhead with ambition-filled green eyes. She was thrilled to be where she was, basking in the aura of the Senator's power. And Dobbs was grateful to have such a pleasing feminine form greet him each day.

"Fill the glass, will you, honey?" Dobbs said.

Amanda took the glass and made her way across the room, snaking through a group of cash-rich octogenarian donors chatting energetically with youthful political aides. She moved deliberately, as if the power emanating from the guests was flowing like lava that threatened to engulf her. As she caught snippets of conversation she was struck with the notion that life was simply a series of events in which one person barter with another. In this case, Dobbs was seeking to fund his campaign while those inclined to make a contribution required certain assurances that the Senator would vote the agenda they espoused.

"Another martini for the Senator," Amanda said flatly as she reached the bar.

The bartender, a muscle-bound, blonde gym rat, leaned across the bar, closing the distance between them. He leered at Amanda's body, covered tantalizingly by a black cocktail dress.

"Shaken, not stirred?" he asked, his eyes fixed on her cleavage.

Amanda had grown accustomed to unwanted attention. She knew her assets: beauty, intelligence, youth. And she knew what she lacked: power and money. Bartenders had neither. No barter possibilities here.

"Well, I'm not stirred," Amanda said. "But a martini should be."

She spoke with the hint of an accent, one which was barely there yet noticeable nonetheless. The bartender frowned, trying to place it. "Where are you from?"

Amanda despised that question, having been accused on more than one occasion of having an "affected" manner of speech. She couldn't help it if her father, an executive with Exxon, had moved dozens of times when she was growing up. Pre-school in Paris. Kindergarten in London. A year in Greece. Two in Dubai. By time she attended Wellesley College in Massachusetts -- where she was exposed to yet another distinct regional dialect -- she had been infused with the cadence and inflection of a dozen locales.

"I'm from here," she said quickly, flashing impatience.

The bartender picked up a martini glass and filled it with ice. "I'm Tommy. Tommy Carney. Who are you?"

"Amanda." She gazed across the room, hoping to discourage further conversation.

"I deejay sometimes at a club over in DC," Tommy persisted. "It's called Buzz. You ought to stop by sometime." He reached in his pocket and produced a card, holding it out to Amanda. "That's my cell. Call me and I'll make sure you have a good table."

Amanda nodded, took the card.

"And if you ever need a car," Tommy continued, "my father owns Carney Chevrolet. I can get you a good deal. Used, new, whatever you're looking for."

"Okay, thanks. I'll keep that in mind." Amanda managed a pained smile. "Can you hurry up with that martini? The Senator doesn't like to wait."

Tommy picked up a metal martini shaker. "You sure you don't want me to shake it?"

"Shaking a martini bruises the vodka," Amanda replied before turning away again.

Tommy shrugged then drifted toward an array of liquor bottles.

"Who said so?"

Amanda turned to see a tall man in his thirties step up to the bar. She prepared herself for another clumsy attempt to extract her phone number.

"Excuse me?"

"Who said so?" the man repeated.

"Who said so what?"

"Who said shaking a martini bruises the vodka?"

"The Senator. And if anyone knows about vodka, it's the Senator. He sure drinks enough of it."

The man laughed. "Harvey Chatham."

"Amanda Wells." She looked him over. Was he a potential donor? No, he didn't come across as particularly well-heeled. A lobbyist? Definitely not. Lobbyists had a palpable feel. Cold, hungry eyes. Custom made suits bought with the obscenely high fees their corporate clients paid them to curry favor with the Senator. But this man standing in front of her had kind, intelligent eyes. And as far as wardrobe, he was wearing the uniform of academia: blue blazer, blue shirt, khaki pants, club tie. He reminded her of a professor she had at Wellesley.

"You're not one of the usual suspects," Amanda said.

Harvey was amused. "What does that mean?"

"Well, I intern with Senator Dobbs and I've never seen you at one these little get-togethers before."

"Maybe you didn't notice me before."

"Maybe I didn't." She tilted her head, flicked her hair with a hand.

Harvey recognized the visual cues of attraction. But the fact that he had observed her signals rather than having experienced them emotionally represented the curse of his profession. Trained to discern the meaning in even slight nuances of human behavior, it was difficult to simply interact without feeling the need to take notes.

"Are you in politics?" she asked.

"No."

"Then you're very rich."

"No. Sorry."

"This is a political fund-raiser, Mr. Chatham. You're not in politics. And you're not rich. So how did you get invited?"

"Actually, I wasn't invited."

Amanda stifled a laugh. "You're a party crasher?"

"I'm meeting a colleague here."

Before he could elaborate, his cell phone rang. He slipped it from his jacket, checked the caller ID, then looked at Amanda. "Will you excuse me for a moment?"

Amanda read the concern on Harvey's face. "Is everything all right?"

"One of my patients," Harvey explained.

"You're a doctor?"

"Psychiatrist."

Amanda crossed her arms and took a half step backward.

Harvey recognized the involuntary reflex -- a protective posture women sometimes adopted when they realized they were talking to a shrink -- as if he had the ability to render them psychologically defenseless. But the truth was, while he could respond to a woman's issues during a session, interacting with them professionally and dispassionately, he was no better off than any man when it came to personal relationships. As a result, he often found himself entangled with women who should have spent time on his office couch rather than in his bed.

Harvey's phone rang again.

"You need to answer that?" Amanda asked.

Not wanting to end his flirtation with Amanda so abruptly, Harvey muted the ringer. "I'll call him back in a minute."

"I've never been in therapy," Amanda volunteered.

"Not everyone requires therapy. Although I think most people could benefit from it."

"You think I need therapy?" she asked, only half teasing.

"I don't know you well enough to make such a judgment. But if you ever feel like speaking with someone..." He produced a card and handed it to her, although his intention was not to gain another patient. The fact that he found her alluring was obvious.

Amanda now had two cards in her hand -- Harvey's and the bartender's. Harvey noted that fact and immediately felt foolish. He realized that by the end of the night she would probably have half a dozen.

Amanda, always observant, recognizing not only Harvey's discomfort but also the cause, made an effort to ease the awkwardness of the moment. She held up the other card. "The bartender. Hits on every female who walks by."

"Which could mean..." Harvey paused deliberately.

"Mean what?" Amanda asked.

"Well, if you look at the text, at the various studies, he could be a latent homosexual."

"No!" Amanda covered her mouth.

"In many cases, men with suppressed homosexual tendencies will overcompensate by seizing every opportunity to make it appear that they are attracted to women. Not only to convince those around them but also to convince themselves."

"So Tommy the bartender is gay?"

"Probably not."

"But you said..."

Harvey pointed at the two business cards in her hand. "Just trying to eliminate the competition."

Amanda laughed.

"I really do have to go," Harvey said.

Amanda nodded. "Your patient?"

"Unfortunately, one of the downsides of what I do --"

"Amanda, honey?"

Dobbs ambled up to Harvey and Amanda.

"Where's my martini?"

The bartender placed a martini on the bar. "Right here, Senator."

"Thank you, son." Dobbs picked up the martini, took a sip, cast a probing eye at Harvey. "I don't believe we've met. Senator Homer Dobbs."

"Harvey Chatham."

They shook hands. The Senator's strong grip caused Harvey to wince.

"Very nice to meet you, Senator."

But Harvey was not happy about the encounter. The number he had seen on his cellphone required a response as soon as possible.

“Chatham?” Dobbs repeated. “You related to the Chathams of Virginia?”

“Maybe we’re distant cousins,” Harvey managed.

“Blake Chatham. Good friend of mine. Matter of fact, I was down at his horse farm in Middleburg just last week.”

Harvey glanced involuntarily at the cell phone in his hand. The Senator noticed.

“Cell phones,” Dobbs growled. “The bane of a peaceful existence. They're nothing but a goddam electronic leash.”

“Mr. Chatham needs to stay in touch,” Amanda said. “He's a psychiatrist.”

“A psychiatrist?” Dobbs waved a scolding finger at Amanda. “Then you should refer to him as doctor, honey. Show some respect for his professional status.”

“Doctor Chatham just got a call from one of his patients.”

“At this hour?” Dobbs shook his head. “The deranged mind knows no time, I suppose.”

“So if you'll excuse me, Senator.”

“By all means. Comfort the poor, suffering bastard.”

Harvey faced Amanda. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you as well.”

As much as Harvey wanted to pursue her, to be further enchanted by that lilting accent of no discernible origin, the window of opportunity had been cut short by a number that flashed across the screen of his cell phone.

Harvey hurried out of the ballroom and waited to dial until he was halfway down a deserted hallway, well out of earshot of a curious coat check girl.

“Yeah?”

“Mr. Dresner. It's Doctor Chatham.”

“I killed her.”

“Mr. Dresner --”

“I loved her. I didn't want to kill her.”

“I'm sure you didn't,” Harvey soothed. “Can you meet me in my office? Say thirty minutes?”

“I had to kill her,” Dresner moaned. “Don't you understand?”

Harvey would try to understand. That was his job