

JAMES GORDON &
REBECCA DOLL

THE PRESIDENT'S
DAUGHTER

A Madison Drinker Novel

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A Sedgwick Manhattan Book

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The President’s Daughter

Sedgwick Manhattan

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Dedication

“To my biological family, thank you for making
Madison so real to me.”

- Rebecca Doll

“To Hath, with many thanks.”

- James Gordon

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Many thanks to our many friends and partners who bore with us during the creation of this project. Most especially to Miranda and Stephanie, who dealt with many things, done and undone, so that this manuscript could see the light of day.

Washington DC 9:38 pm EDT

Continental Self-Park Auxiliary Lot

1st Block of New York Avenue NE

Friday, Oct 8

Trapped behind a FedEx step van less than a hundred yards from her destination, Madison Drinker considered that while she likely wasn't the only woman in the city on her way to meet a dangerous man who was going to hurt her, the others probably weren't in nearly as much of a hurry to arrive. Where New York Avenue crossed Florida, the dregs of the city's late rush hour, club bound limousines, shiny late-model rideshare cars, and restock trucks all blended around her in the sickly sodium vapor light.

Seeking a gap to make her final turn, Mad drummed her nails on the leather of the Audi's wheel impatiently and glanced toward her companion lost in shadow, streetlight catching a silver pentagram necklace laying against her breast. When the step van finally moved, the cars beside her also pulled forward, a fifteen ton Vulcan concrete truck just behind them.

Madison snapped "Hold on," stabbed the gas, sliced diagonally in front of the giant mixer with a precise and savage twist of the wheel that would have done credit to seven time Grand Prix world champion Michael Schumacher before he dashed his braincase against an off-piste ski hazard. The seatbelt dug tight into her shoulder and the suspension complained as the tire kissed the edge of the curb beside the grimy plastic A-frame sign for \$18 flat rate evening parking.

By the time Amy blurted out "What the fuck, Mad?" they were crunching over the gravel of the parking lot, safe and slowing as they rocked over the potholes. Amy's eyes were wide beneath the black eyeliner, mouth open to show lipstick several shades too red.

"That's why you make me do the driving downtown." The surge of adrenaline from her maneuver was catching up now, a flush of excitement that was a prologue to the pain that drew her like a migratory bird, need instinctive as it was implacable.

"You coulda gotten both of us kilt," said Amy with her slight drawl, breathing again. She'd never have pulled that move herself, but whatever crazy shit Mad did, she got away with it and she softened her complaint to a joke. "You can be replaced by an app, y'know." Amy tapped the screen of her phone with a black lacquered nail for emphasis.

"No phones in the club, biyotch," said Mad. They were being waved into a space beside a black Imprezza with aftermarket rims. Someone else going to a club tonight, though not the one Mad and Amy were headed toward.

Whatever snappy retort Amy tossed back was lost as Mad dragged her toybag and coat from the car, stepped up to meet the attendant, and pulled cash from her clutch. She watched his legerdemain as he folded her twenty into a thick roll, held tight by blackened rubber bands, the same motion producing two singles which she pressed back into his gnarled fingers. His skin was dark, high cheekbone marred by the jagged canyon scar of a savage machete cleft, a visual representation of violence that played into her anxious arousal. His eyes were remote, murky panes of unspeakable loss and time, witness to suffering so great it seemed to shame her traumas into prosaic deficiency. A living ghost, the thing that she became without a constant drip of adrenaline and dopamine to fire her primal brain. She wondered if he could taste the food that crossed his lips or the bitter bite of the beers he downed with co-workers in the rusted white metal kiosk next to the entry gate. Those eyes admitted no kinship. She could not tell if he really saw her at all, a short western girl bobbing in five inch boot heels, utilitarian canvas rucksack grey against black faux leather from Armani Exchange.

The scarred man turned his attention to a late model SUV, waving his arms towards the empty spot next to them calling out a word in some occult language. She thought he might be Chadian or South Sudanese. If Alex had been here he would have known.

Amy was giggling. "The guys here always yell that...most people probably think it means 'park here' but if the world has justice I bet it means 'I fucked your mom.'"

Mad was too wired to laugh, managed a forced grin for her friend's sake. In flat Doc Martens and leggings printed with jaunty day of the dead skeletons Amy still had four inches on Mad. She bounded off with a puppy exuberance Mad could not remember having ever possessed, shaved half of her retreating head shiny in the same monochromatic light that darkened the machete scar.

Mad folded a gabardine trench coat over the arm that held her clutch like a protective barrier against the world. Designer labels were a shield to her. They might not provide complete armor against judgment and disdain, but if you dressed well enough normal people...the mundane...found it hard to write you off entirely and you could still feel snidely superior to the ones who did.

"Once more into the breach, dear friends..." she muttered aloud to nobody. Her father's sardonic witticisms came to her automatically, and she'd quote them

absentmindedly for self-motivation as a preacher might quote scripture. The last time she'd heard Justin Drinker say that was the morning of the sentencing hearing.

Mad set off to make up the distance she had lost, confident, quick, soles planted expertly on patches where the gravel had been packed flat and hard by traffic. She caught up with Amy at the entrance to the lot, a gate in double height chain link where torn strands of a now illegible vinyl mesh advertising banner waved in unison like the tentacles of some obscene anemone.

"You know Spencer parks at that covered lot and you don't have to walk through gravel and there's no traffic. An' Kim would probably let us park in the lot next to the Club," said Amy, gesturing at 'Don't Walk' light and the river of rideshare cars, old taxis and rusted panel vans that blocked their progress.

"That lot's like twenty and the Club parking is supposed to be for handicapped, staff, and presenters," said Mad.

"I'm 101 night staff and you're..."

"...Just being a spectacle doesn't make me an actual presenter, and tonight is open play not 101. Also I don't know if you noticed but the security camera back there got torn down weeks ago which means somebody was targeting that lot to break into cars. I don't need the paperwork if somebody busts my window and takes a registered handgun."

"Guess somebody thought people that go to Eivassa park there. Anyway, y'all almost count as staff," said Amy softly. Her voice was silky with traces of Carolina which got stronger when she drank or on the rare occasions she was angry.

At the foot of the McDonalds sign across New York Avenue, a man with a dried apricot face clutched a piece of cardboard torn from the box for a child's swimming pool. On the brown side, in heavy magic marker was written: "Homeless Vet, Please Help." Madison stopped to claw out a single, while Amy continued a few paces, turned, saw her closing the bag and clucked, "Mad."

The homeless vet intoned "God Bless you...God bless," in a rough benediction as he backed away from the glow of the golden arches toward the murky light of Big Ben Liquors at the corner of North Capitol.

"He's just going to go buy booze, you know," said Amy.

"What t'fuck d'you expect him to do on a Friday night?" said Mad. "It's not like he has cover for a club."

"I just don't know if you should encourage that."

"As an alcoholic, I recognize another soul in need. Sometimes you are so fucking whitebread you scare me, Amy."

"Hey...low blow." There was an edge of real hurt in Amy's response.

Nice way to treat somebody who worships you, Maddie.

Her former therapist had called that voice in her head “negative self talk” but Mad tended to call it her “inner bitch.” It would be less annoying if it wasn’t usually right.

“Sorry lady,” said Mad. “I need to get the shit beaten out of me.”

“Naw mibad, I shouldn’t get on you.” In Amy’s dismissal, Mad could hear the wistful, almost patronizing, edge that came too often when she hurt the people she cared for. “Bad week?” Amy could be counted on to try and give a polite out.

Before hipsters had homesteaded here, brought in Harris Teeter to buy groceries, The sophisticated sounding NoMa/Galludet University Metro station had still been called plain old New York Avenue Metro, land of cheap real estate for megacubs. Eivassa was the sole survivor. If the avocado toast crowd saw anything ironic in killing what had made the place trendy enough to attract them in the first place Mad didn’t see any downcast eyes or sense of shame if you saw them in the afternoon while they were picking up their miniature schnauzers from Pet Express.

“I dunno. I’m restless. I need to be hurt. Prolly it’s work,” Mad lied, speaking up as they got closer to the sound the club pumped out. It was never work. “We’ve got a meeting with a new client tomorrow and Alex gives off feral fear pheromones when he’s scared.”

“‘Feral Fear Pheromones’ is my new 70’s punk tribute band,” said Amy. “Anyway, I thought the implacable Brit wasn’t scared of anything.”

“Last time he got worked up about a client was back during the election. That put us on a very senior incumbent in your home state’s fourteenth district who had not one but two different illegitimate children he was paying to keep secret.”

“So something big?”

“Someone big,” agreed Mad. “Alex doesn’t get scared about money. The client’s just a middleman so that’s not what’s scaring him. Must be some big fish. Maybe Congress, maybe Executive Branch. And to steal a line if Alex ain’t calm, ain’t nobody calm...you remember the IT guy, Jeremy? He jabbers *more* when he’s nervous.”

“How do you jabber more than constantly?” asked Amy. “So you got a new case? That’s exciting...thooo...tomorrow? Not Monday?”

“Yeah, client meeting Saturday afternoon. Put enough money on the table, and we work on your schedule. Shame it’s not Sunday, I’m solid on fornication, gluttony, avarice, but I’m pretty slack about working on the Sabbath.”

They paused talking as the din of outdoor speakers cranking a barely recognizable EDM mix of Terrana Kudger’s *Endemic Lies* became too loud to hear without screaming. Mad’s bootheels ground on asphalt as they stepped into First Street to avoid the six deep line that stretched to the end of the block, skirting a white

Hummer limo and a parked DC Cruiser, A beefy tattooed bouncer in the club line waved for them to go to the back and looked like he might break out from the rope and get confrontational. Mad caught the eye of the cop, pointed to show they were walking through and he scowled but held up a hand to the bouncer and waved them on.

Past the waves of sound cranking from the entrance, Mad resumed. "Annnd...also you know we don't actually call them 'cases,' right?"

Amy picked up the thread when they'd gotten around the corner from the sound. "You're a real live licensed detective, you *should* have cases."

"DC may have been stupid enough to give me a PI license, but oppo is about digging up political dirt, not solving crimes. Last time we took an actual criminal investigation, I was still dating Alex."

"Nah, you should totally be like Sherlock."

"And what? You want me to give our cases names and have you blog about them?"

"Exactly!" said Amy cheerfully.

"Okay, you got 'The Man with the Golden Cock,' 'The Matter of the Perforated Condom,' and the 'Mysterious Case of the Missing Period.' That's a fucking trilogy for you. Happy?"

"Rapturous," said Amy "you've made my literary career. Are obscenity trials still a thing?"

Washington DC 9:49 pm EDT

Federal Customs Warehouse

1st Block of M St. NE, NoMa District

Friday, Oct 8

Around the time Mad graduated high school and her father started serving time in federal lockup, some anonymous government property manager made the decision to auction a customs warehouse in the industrial wasteland north of Union Station, a few blocks from what was once called “Pigtown.” He...almost certainly he...was probably near retirement age now and Mad wondered what he’d think to know the desolate property had become a lively kink club full of fetishists tying each other up, spanking, flogging caning and occasionally fucking, three nights a week. Possibly he’d think nothing of it at all. There were no shortage of Feds and contractors among the membership.

The front of the customs house was a dock where trucks had once unloaded. Today it was the “pit” where blood play and fire were consigned. Club-goers entered through a Formica and steel foyer in the green and beige flecked tones of a downscale 1960s department store. Eivassa had its doormen in suits with earpieces, valets in stenciled polo shirts with radios. Here a single big man sat on a tiny folding chair beside a card table collecting money for admission to walk up the steel tread stairs to the vestibule, a locker room where customs workers used to leave their belongings before taking their place on the inspection floor.

It was one thing to dress up in leather and go to some fetish themed dance party, another thing entirely to be vetted into an actual, honest to god, BDSM club where you were expected to turn out a real scene not just pose and look pretty. With a max capacity of 210, Mad had only once or twice seen the place near full. Thresher, a tattooed city bus wearing a leather vest, spoke from his metal chair. “Ame, Mad...twenty apiece.”

Thresher didn’t work at the club, but then neither did anybody else except the owner. There was no money in running a fetish club, and everything from door to sound and lighting were run by trusted volunteers who worked as ‘staff’ for discounted admission and the valuable perk of free parking in the narrow lot beside the building.

Amy tried to pull a credit card out of a well worn Chocokat wallet but Mad wrapped fingers around her wrist, working the latch on a clutch with the other hand.

"I was gonna cover for us since you drove me," said Amy.

"You're a student, I work," said Mad, holding her arm out to Thresher. "Why twenty Thresh? I'm a member, so's Ame? M'I expired or something?"

"Nah, it's twennyfive now if you're not members. Special event pricing tonight... uhh... *Knotwork* with Don Grambling" Thresh pressed the fleur-de-lis club stamp onto Mad, giant hands scarred from heat and rope ogreish over her slender white wrist. When he bent to roll the stamp on his pad again his upper body rolled like a massive vessel in a storm.

Amy leaned against the pitted aluminum banister, extending her wrist for Thresher. "Since when is Don tying people up a special event?" she asked, making a rude noise. At Eivassa they would already have been hustled inside, but here there was no one behind them to thwart Amy's southern tendency to turn any transaction into an extended conversation.

"He's doing the whole party promoter thing now," said Thresher, as he applied the stamp. For a big man, Thresher had a high pitched voice, and he often sounded reflective. "So tonight is an official event called *Knotwork* and he has an invite list and puts out flyers and all. Like *Dark Lair* and all."

"Yea well the biweekly and monthly events like *Lair* and *T and B* may have a promoter up front, but they're axe-ually social groups too," said Amy. "You wanna tell me how this is not just Don bein' a diva and tying people up like he does every other night we're open?"

"Don has always been important in the rope world," said Thresher with mock gravitas. "In his head."

Thresh, thought Mad, was more ironic than you'd expect for a heavily inked giant, known for having once done time in lockup. Mad was inclined to push Amy up the stairs and save him from further interrogation but curiosity got the better of her and she turned with one hand on her younger friend's shoulder. "Wasn't it Don who had a queen-sized aneurysm about someone posting a single picture of him to *FetFo* last year, cause he has a clearance? Headlining parties doesn't exactly make him mister low profile."

"Oh, there's news about that," said Thresher. "Back when he started negotiating to run his own promo nights...sometime first week of last month, Don told Kim he's gonna retire from his day job at the end of this month and is going to work as a rigger full time, which means he either came into some money or is delusional about how much a middling-good rope top stands to make. He was here two hours early trying to make Kim set up black lights even before I got in. She can't do that kinda work with her back. He's a fucking pain in the ass but he's bought about five hundred

bucks of handmade black light reactive rope from me in the last two weeks so I smiled and put his damn lights up.”

“Black light reactive,” said Amy. “Seriously?”

“I know, right? But it’s been a big seller. I’ve got it up online too.” Thresher handmade natural fiber rope, self-employed which Mad considered made sense given the odds of acquiring legitimate work as a blue-collar ex-con were low. “With that new light kit, he thinks he’s Lew Rubens. I gotta admit it looks good in pictures, but honestly, I wouldn’t be caught dead using the shit. I stick to natural hand-dyed lots.”

“What’s Don do?” asked Amy. “Or what was he doing before he retired to make himself our new rope guru. Cause...you know, the rope world most definitely needs another second-rate prima donna.”

“Fuck if I know,” said Thresher. “Didn’t you date him a long time back Maddie?”

Mad rolled her eyes. Thresh had been around longer than just about anyone and sometimes had an inconveniently good memory. “Literally years ago, when I was first came back to the scene after things with Alex, we had a couple of club dates. He made a big deal of being an ex-marine. Back then he was some kind of security consultant, some company that did work on WMDs, trafficking, that sort of thing.”

“Real Marines? Or the bullshit stories like Sir Ian was telling before he got his ass kicked out of the scene?” asked Amy.

“I think he’s one of those guys who was in right out of school to prove something but didn’t like it so got out first chance. He was trying to impress me at the time. I was getting into rough body play and I wanted him to beat me up because he’s jacked, but I was already wanting more game than his goody-goody ass could put up. I got back into things here,” Mad looked at Amy significantly, “around the time I finally qualified for my PI license and I think that intimidated him.”

“He really have a clearance?” Thresher asked. “I remember he used to be a pain in the ass about people taking pictures.”

“I gotta be honest. I think he’s kinda a twatwaffle, but he didn’t set off any red flags when he talked to me,” said Mad. “Mighta puffed it up, but there’s no shortage of national security people in the DC scene. I mean Walter is supposed to be a spook of some sort.”

“Tell us how you really feel,” laughed Thresher. He didn’t often express opinions about people, and he lowered his voice as he spoke “Problem is Don thinks he’s smarter than everybody else, cuts on the other riggers constantly. If they’re safety conscious they’re not creative. If they got style, they’re reckless. He only doesn’t cut on me because I don’t have a big following and I gave him a lot of free rope. He’s really made this club toxic for other riggers, a lot of them just prefer to go to

Baltimore, or private parties. I don't think Kim should have let him be a headliner, but she's desperate."

"Yeah, W-T-F, is every night going to be a special event now?" asked Amy.

"Truth?" asked Thresher. "Yeah. It's a way to raise admission without raising admission. The city has their nose up Kim's ass about fire suppression. She's trying not to lose this place but she doesn't have the money."

"Assholes," said Amy in her most polite drawl. "Maddie, can you fix it?"

Mad shook her head and curled her lip. "Alex might could pull a string somewhere if it was Feds or Metro Popo, but we got nothing at the City planning level."

"I hate t'say it cause I love her, but Kim's gawn have to move sooner or later, now that this neighborhood's all trendy," said Amy. "They're killing *Eivassa* too, by inches, I saw an article in the *City Paper*, they just have lawyers and can fight back more. They're talking about turning that old arena where everybody parks into some sporting goods store."

"They're gonna bulldoze this wreck, put up a twenty story tower with a dog park in the middle," Thresher agreed. "Soon. Kim needs a new place, but Steve hasn't found anything and there's a ton of money wrapped up in here."

"Okay kids," Mad pushed at Amy's shoulder a little. "We gotta get into the club. Thresh, d'you know if Walter's here yet?"

"Of course you'd be looking for the dangerous one," grinned Thresher. "He's that new guy, looks real straight, kinda tough, got a reputation already, right? Came in with Elektra 'bout...ten, twenty minutes ago. Kim can tell you where they are."

"I didn't know you had a date already planned," said Amy.

"Trying to keep my SAMs Club Card up to date," said Mad.

"What does SAM's Club have to do with it?" asked Thresher, voice higher trying to figure out if he was missing an in-joke."

"It's just us being asshats," said Amy, laying a hand on his shoulder to soothe him. "Smart Assed Masochists Club."

"Well Ame," said Thresher, "you got smart-assed down, but you're gonna have to work to beat 'Lek and Mad on masochism."

"Kim was going to get T-shirts for us," said Mad.

"Seriously she prints them, I'll buy one, 'ticularly if she makes a baby doll. Could be a fundraiser." Amy leaned back by Mad to throw an enthusiastic parting hug around Thresher, with Mad following suit more sedately.

At the top of the stairs the scent of must, leather, and rubber rolled over Mad like a wave at the beach, a mixture of the comfort of coming home with arousal. The

vestibule was lined with lockers where the Customs staff had stowed lunchbags and coats. Stripped of doors they bristled with turned wood flogger handles, electrical cords, and coils of rope. Against the bases was a lumpy row of soft-sided duffels, wheeled suitcases, and rolling tool chests containing implements designed to do careful, measured, harm.

Amy, continued to chatter as she looked over the flyer rack beside the door. "So...I'm mostly doin' topsey stuff tonight I think. Tying up Spencer's balls at least. Spence is supposed to give me a ride home so you don't have to make the run out to Virginia both ways. Guess I'm not being much of a SAM, though I might get Sair or 'Lek to throw some needles in me if they aren't too busy. I gawn get a corner torn off my card?"

The top of the rack intended for time cards held professionally printed trifold pamphlets for the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom and glossy professional shots of intricately bound and female-bodied fetish models advertising photographers or rope clinics, but Amy barely glanced at these as she bent down.

"Nah," said Mad. "Tolstoy said, 'All sadists are alike, every masochist is masochistic in their own way.' That's an exact quote, I read it in my first year lit class. We gotta stick together right?"

Kneeling, Amy rummaged the bottom rows where hand-cut slips of Day-Glo paper promoted Thresher Natural Fiber and Kink-themed EDM events. Above her head Mad checked the time. Beside the entry stair an ancient grey Stromberg punch clock still ticked off the minutes. Kim had never gotten a key to it so the time was ten minutes off in winter, and an hour ten in summer, a fact Mad knew by heart. "So do I know this Walter? Why does Thresh think he's dangerous. I mean other than being somebody you'd play with."

"You already know everything that's going on," said Mad waving her hand at the rack, then raising her voice to continue as she turned and walked towards the coat rack at the back of the room. "But you always look."

"Since they made me the 101 Coordinator I'm supposed to know if anything new is scheduled. Also that was you, changing the subject."

"You've seen Walter," Mad worked her coat onto a hanger, and swung her bag into an empty spot beneath the lockers on the wall nearby. "He was the guy with 'Lek last *Lair*. Tall, like more than six feet, bald on top, late forties or early fifties kind of a long face like a tougher version of Matt McConaughey, hard but not bulked out."

"Ohhh...that guy," said Amy. "I got the fear of anybody who attracts you and 'Lek both. I haven't seen him here much, he can't be a regular scene person."

"He stalked 'Lek through the Club forum on *FetFo*. Dunno who sponsored him originally," said Mad. "I've only seen him around the last few weeks, I thought he mighta come in through a 101 Nite?"

"If he was one of my noobs I'd remember him. Somebody must have sponsored him to come in without going through 101." Amy had finished inspecting fliers and walked back to face Mad. "Why does Thresh think he's dangerous other than being willing to play with your double black diamond ass?"

"What does it matter to you?" Maybe it was just a reaction to feeling trapped against the coat racks but she felt a flare of defiant resentment at Amy giving her the third degree.

It's a miracle there's anyone who gives the faintest fuck about your well-being. It's not like you deserve it.

Madison gave a silent, sarcastic, "yay" that her inner bitch was back to speed but felt the fight bleed right back out of her. "Sorry. He's not afraid to be mean, tough, knows martial arts for real."

"And the spook thing? That's legit?" asked Amy.

"You never know for sure. Somebody makes out they're James Bond, turns out they're an Analyst at the Agency whose only shooting is three pointers into the office trashcan, but hits Gold's Gym a lot. But he has that look Alex does, like he's seen some shit. I couldn't tell you if he's Fed or some sort of private sector. 'Lek believes him enough to let him fuck with her head. Says he a certifiable sociopath."

"So is every other emo Cumberbatch wannabe Dom," said Amy with an eye roll.

Mad gave up the laugh this time. "You gotta admit, 'Lek sets the bar kinda high on sociopathy. Between working in the ER and the fucked up shit she's actually done, I'll spot her this one."

"How's she gonna feel about you playing with him?" asked Amy, eyes narrowing.

"It was her idea," said Mad. She'd not moved from where she stood, body still rigid. The resentment was trickling back. Her natural tendency to oppose and defy. "You my mom tonight?"

"Better than the one you got," said Amy. Her voice fell as she stepped closer to Mad, taking note of the sound of someone coming up the stair from the foyer. "I love you Maddie, and I don't want you to get yourself in trouble with a friend. Was the idea of you fucking him 'Lek being real or just showing how big an emotional masochist she can be by suggesting something she'd hate? How close are they?"

Amy's magic power was that when her voice fell deep and slow it produced a calm in Mad, who forced herself to move and breathe, relax from standing like a statue, kneel beside her own bag and push it further into one of the cubbies just to have

something to do. “He sends her threatening and abusive texts about what he’s gonna do to her, which is pretty much dating for ‘Lek. I mean it might be part of some private game between them to torture her, but she seemed casual about it.” Mad stood back up and narrowed her eyes. “Also, who said we were going to fuck?”

“Mad...” Amy gave a schoolmarm look with lowered face and raised eyebrows. “I don’t wanna say you’re a slut but... you, in fact, got ‘Club Slut’ printed on an actual real life t-shirt you wore at Winterfest last year.”

“Fair,” said Mad, her heart turning over a little in her chest. She was the older, wiser, worldlier, but she felt a sort of shameful comfort when Amy treated her like a child. “*I think* ‘Lek’s for real okay with it. Problem with being the two hardcore cis edge-players in a kinda small scene, we share a demographic. I think she’s not threatened by me because she knows I’m neurochemically incapable of loving anyone.”

“There have been exceptions to that.”

Mad shook her head, quick and defiant. “Not for real. I just thought so at the time. It burns out.”

Amy changed the subject. “Am I gonna see you like ever this month? Maybe brunch Sunday?” Mad never knew if Amy could sense her tension or just had a good gauge of how hard to push.

“I’ve got to go to my mother’s.” If Amy’s skill was in reading her face, Mad wore the look of a kid who had just been told to go to the principal’s office.

Amy leaned forward and hugged her. “Awww... I knew there was something other than a new client. Y’allays a mess before you see them. Can’t you just blow it off for once?”

“It’s a thing in my world.” She sagged into the hug, then gave Amy a gentle push. “Go play, I gotta make myself presentable so Walter can ruin my makeup and wreck me. I’ll give you a hug before I go unless you’ve got somebody tied up. We’ll do something this week, I promise.”

When Amy had gone the room was empty except for a heavysset rigger in a bowling shirt excavating through hanks of mid-grade rope in a green canvas bag.

Holding up her coat as a shield, and making as if she was looking for something in the pockets, she palmed a flask bearing the airbrushed image of a sultry woman with a martini glass. Cropped from some 1950s magazine ad, a faux typewriter font overlaid on white strips of torn paper declared “pain makes you stronger. tears make you braver. alcohol makes you do that shit again.”

The rigger finally grunted and pulled out a single leather flogger. He didn't seem young or athletic enough to be an adherent of Don Grambling's one true way of rope. He got to his feet heavily, back to her, and walked into the club.

Quickly, still holding the coat up she took a long swallow. Smirking and muttering "Mischief managed," she slid the flask back into a deep pocket and hung the coat on the rack.

10:04 pm EDT

It was rare that an effusively friendly man did not want to make Mad shrink down on her barstool and vanish. Short and bald with a nasal Bawlmarese accent, Steve Bettio had a tendency to put his arm around pretty girls when he talked. Add the fact he shared the profession of realtor with the personage she would never call "stepfather" and Mad ought to loathe Steve on sight.

What rescued Steve for Mad was his genuinely unselfconscious love of people. He'd been one of the few men who had offered her help and support when she first came to the scene without the manifest intent of angling into her pants.

Not that it's hard to get into your pants

A little hypersexuality went a long way. At what passed for 101 nearly a decade gone she thought she'd found El Dorado, the promised city where sex was not linked with guilt and shame. Leading negotiation with "sex is on the table" had been an easy hook for the new girl to get high visibility play dates.

El Dorado was a lie. Despite her detailed advance warnings when she did not respond to their deposit of organic material by declaring love and the desire to enter into bonds of everlasting slavery scene boys from eighteen to sixty two would moon after her or ragequit, and she'd left a trail of winsome puppy dogs and lethal enemies in her wake.

Steve had stayed a friend to her, even called out, or soothed, some of her jilted paramours. When others called her a "user" or "climber" he'd laughed and said they were "just bent outta shape because they'd been playing outta their league," and rolled his eyes in a way that made her feel a little less like shit, had invited her to camp with his group at Festival of Kink and made her a part of his ragtag band of edgeplayers and professional cynics.

Steve had his arm around her now, while she sipped on a Diet Red Bull at the bar.

"How bad is it?" she asked.

"Not good," he said, bringing his lips near her ear, almost a whisper. Kim was a dozen feet away restocking the drink fridge as they leaned on the counter.

Part of her affection might also be that Steve was smart. If he did not have her learning in cinema and the human mind, he did have a J.D. and the kind of street smarts that came from growing up around real Mafiosi.

“Shit. Five...Ten K?”

“I don’t want people to panic, but I’ll tell you straight because you aren’t a quitter. Fact is, it’s worst than that. It’s gonna be close to thirty K total.”

“When?” asked Mad

Steve kept his voice down, one eye on Kim.

“They’ll close us first January if the work’s not done. I’ve got a contractor who can schedule for December if we pay 5K down by Friday November fifth. But it’s gonna be another 22 the month after, and I just don’t see that kind of money. I sure don’t wanna take money and find we can’t follow through.”

Maybe because he too was short, though he still topped Mad, Steve had never treated her as anything other than an equal. Then again it might be that after thirty-four years in the region he had her father’s tendency to assume that only Beltway insiders really understood the world.

“Election year work was good to us,” said Mad. “Alex is finally paying me more than even I can drink through.”

Steve gave her shoulder a cautionary squeeze. “You’ve got a new loft we both know you can’t afford and shouldn’t have gotten. I still feel guilty about showing it to you.” It was a running joke between them that worked for Mad because it was raw and true.

“Put me down for two, three if you really need it. Maybe more later. There’s a new client, money’s good enough it has Alex running scared. And if that doesn’t work, I can always peddle my ass out on the street like back in the day.”

“I call bullshit, you never peddled your ass on the street.” Steve was grinning.

A lot of men were fascinated by the fact she’d done sex work, but their ideas were so romanticized or confused she refused to talk about it. Steve seemed to know his way around the realities of sex work, always talked about it as if it was just another job. “Bastard.” Mad forced a laugh to show she’d taken it okay. “I had a roommate that did, and I got close a couple times.”

“What’s this new client? I thought your boss...ex...whatever...wasn’t the touchy feely type.” Steve relaxed the arm around her and settled back against the bar “Wasn’t he held hostage once by terrorists or is that just a story?”

“It was real...there’s even a Wikipedia article. One of the guys with him got beheaded. If something has him jumpy, there’s a reason.”

Alex was not the person she wanted on her mind right now. Neither was whatever scary job he'd shaken out of the trees. She put the ball back in his court. "So no chance of getting the exception?"

"I've run out of cocks to suck. The planning guy is one of these ramrod straight evangelicals with a downtown church, the kind that believe things like 'drinking' and 'deafness' are literal demons you can drive out."

"So a month, November fifth? Guy Fawkes Day...that's funny. The day it all blows up."

"I never can figure out how you know shit like that off the top of your head," Steve had a big grin on his face. "I only know that's a holiday because Spencer celebrated it last year as 'Gay Fucks Day,' and burned President Foster in effigy in the parking lot. With two from you we can make the five, I've got a grand of my own, and Don's said he'd put down a thousand, maybe more." He gestured to the big trusses at the center of the club where an exorbitantly lithe girl was being suspended from rope that pulsed pink in blacklight. "Surprised to see you in here on all rope night."

"I didn't know it was a thing, thought it was just open play. I've got a date with Walter."

"New guy? Came in about a month ago, beefy type?"

"Yeah, that's him, you know anything about him? What he likes?"

"I only talked with him once, I was hitting 'Lek up about coordinating medical for Winterfest and FoK this spring. He seemed alright. Down to earth. Course he was with 'Lek so I assume that means he's some kind of old school sadist."

"Yeah, 'Lek and I share a type."

"Yeah...that's gonna be interesting. You hear Sebastian's coming back to town? Going to start back up at Henry Lee spring semester. They only sent him away so that seat could open up, been confirmed as Kasparian Professor of Sociology and Psychology. I've already started hearing complaints."

10:22 pm EDT

"Elektra said you were a serious player. What do you want?" Walter had a long jaw and close cut hair. There wasn't much of the polished Fed about him. He was athletic in the haggard way Mad had seen with mercenaries and drug runners when she'd worked in LA.

They sat at one of the banquet rounds that Kim had bought secondhand and placed near the bar. Without their hotel tablecloths the rounds were ugly, scarred particle board inside a dented aluminum rim.

Walter's hands were flat on the table. He had made no move to touch her and that made her move closer to him to give her answer. "Just what every girl wants. Hit me, beat me, rape me, convince me you're going to fucking kill me."

"That's not exactly helpful," he said. His voice was monotonous. Walter didn't talk very much and his tone never changed, which could be threatening in the right light. She didn't like him and that alone made her cunt clench in anticipation. "I've had a shitty week and I'm not in the mood for games."

"Okay so, I like rough body play. I'm not so into being hit with toys, it's less personal. Punching. Kicking. I mean you know how to do that safely?"

"I've been to a few classes," said Walter.

"Yeah when I met you at *Lair*, Elektra introduced you by saying 'I found a guy who will kick my cunt hard enough.'"

"That's was our first date," he said, slight break from his careful detachment.

That encouraged Mad. "I'm like everybody else..." She stopped abruptly. She seemed intent on telling him that lie.

Maybe because you want to believe it so badly yourself.

She shook off her inner commentary, breathed to go on "...I like thuddy more than sting, but I also don't like getting what I like. I mean...that's really what I'm saying, is that it's about *you*. I'm driven to please. If it starts to feel like you're trying to please me, I get nothing out of it." Her words tumbled out, sounded like the hysterical girl in a rom-com.

"Sex, touch, limits?" If he cared about her breathless sincerity he didn't show it and that impassiveness stirred her anxiety into arousal. It felt good to be waves breaking on a rock.

She ached to impress him. That she was up for anything, had low limits, the perfect masochist, smart, and funny too. "Club rules say anything that goes inside has to be covered so, gloves for toys, condom if you fuck me. Limits? I work for a dick I used to date and my insurance plan bites ass, so try not to put me in the hospital on purpose."

"Safewords?" He asked.

She looked at his face. His words and manner were remote, but his eyes were not like hers. She imagined she could see a dancing light, an unhealthy hunger, in them.

"I don't use safewords much, but if I'm in a position where I think I'm gonna rack up an ER trip I'll tap out." This was supposed to be a negotiation between two consenting adults, the most important first step of any BDSM play between strangers. Instead, she felt herself circling the drain, taking some pride in how long she could stay afloat before being sucked down into him. No, not into him. She barely knew

him. She was swirling toward the black hole of her own masochism, he was just a type to her, a body with hands and a cock. She did not want to know him too well.

"You don't use safewords?" His tone had scorn in it, dismissal. If he had been breathlessly hanging on her every word, clearly into her, she'd have gone cold. Now her lips quivered, mouth open, breath coming faster. She wanted to dash herself against him again and again until she was split open, all the secrets inside her exposed.

"I know some people don't use them because they don't know they have limits. I tap out for physical stuff. If my ankle is being torqued in a dangerous way it's not intuitive to think 'red.' Past that safewords are to get you out of a bad mental space when things go pear shaped in your head and you can't stand it. Which is where I need to be pushed. But, give me an easy ticket out and I'll never go there."

"It worries me when girls say they don't use safewords." He leaned back and pushed at the table in a way that made it clear he was willing to get up and walk away and that only sucked her further down. "I'm expecting you to know your own limits."

"Yeah...yeah... I'm not like that. I played the 'try and make me red game' with boy doms when I first came into the scene and it sucked. I *know* you can hurt me enough to make me tap out. I'm looking to be pushed to where I don't want to go. To honestly hate myself for it." She paused when he didn't say anything in response. "Lek says that you're okay with that. Most men aren't." She was doing what she usually did in awkward situations. Filling them with words.

He let the silence hang longer before responding. "I like self-hate. Elektra told you I'm a sociopath."

"Sociopathy?" She batted her eyes prettily. "A lot of people *say* that these days." He'd had her on the hook and she felt it. Baiting him in return was an unwise thing to do, but this moment in negotiation or seduction always came. Her first move was to cut her beating heart out and throw it on the table, stick pins in it, to prove herself. At some point the cold cynic in her began to fear that she'd been had, wanted the man to qualify to her.

"It fits. My day job is doing bad things to good people. I threaten them, hurt them, ruin their lives."

She felt her heart sink that she'd gotten a reaction from him at all. She tried to manage it, realized she was too worked up. Her instinct was to unsheathe claws and cut him to ribbons for deigning to respond.

"Sooo...you're a lawyer?" she smirked. Seeing him willing to walk away cut deep into her pride, made it easy to see if she could drive him off because that hurt less than being abandoned. "I get it. You don't want someone getting into a bad

headspace and later saying it was non-consensual, getting you kicked out of here. I understand what I'm asking for and I won't hold it against you in the aftermath." She tried to fight down the claws but could not help adding. "Of course a lot of tops aren't okay with making a girl feel really violated, putting her in a bad headspace. They want it to be all 'I love you Sir,' and fluffy bunnies."

"I want to understand your limits," he waved his hand around. "I was told me about this place, but I didn't believe it till I got dragged out here. It's proven a very convenient place to find fresh prey."

She'd heard words like 'sociopath' and 'prey' thrown around by plenty of would be badass doms. She was venomous, wanted to make him prove that he was worth the anxiety and pain. Wanted to scare him away and might. The male dominant, Spencer had once told her, was a skittish beast, easily frightened to bolting at the suggestion of a backbone or aggression.

"Prey?" she said. "That sounds kind of dramatic."

"It's how I think of it." He grew a little stiffer, but it wasn't drawing away. He was trying to find words to explain himself. In the end he didn't bother, continued with his questions, which was almost certainly the right response to her adolescent taunts.

"Knives?" He asked.

"Unsurprisingly, blades get me wet." That was the alcohol talking.

He gave a slight laugh. "How do you feel about guns?"

"You can't bring them into the club. Mine's in the glovebox." She was showing off that she was not only unafraid of guns but the kind of girl who owned a gun herself.

"Glovebox? Are you Canadian or something?"

He was pushing back, measured force for measured force. That was good. She'd almost shut down on him, and this was rekindling the elusive flicker of desire. She wanted to want him. She tried to envision his muscular shoulders and taut forearms taking control of her, manipulating her. "I pick shit up from my boss."

"The Brit asshole?" he asked.

"You know Alex?" It was a small world, but Alex preferred to keep his violence in the bedroom, had never been willing to put a toe in the kink scene.

"Elektra mentioned him. Blood?" he asked.

Mad scowled briefly. People in the scene didn't give out personal details like real names, employers. Sure 'Lek knew she didn't really care, and if she brought it up, Elektra would say it was an open secret, that Mad was not the typical kinkster. That was the truth, so it shouldn't bother her but something about it rubbed her wrong. Maybe it was just the black mood that was closing on her, making her take everything badly. "I do a fair amount of bloodplay. I like my own and other people's."

“Well, I wasn’t planning on cutting but...it can happen by accident. Anything you’ve...picked up...I should know about?” A shitty twist on her own words that reduced her to a disease-plagued whore. She was dropping towards the hole again now, feeling a slight flush in her cheeks. He finally moved, wrapped his hard hand around her arm. She hadn’t invited the touch. They weren’t finished negotiating. It was presumptuous and controlling and her slide down accelerated.

“As far as I know I’m negative on everything, but I haven’t been tested for a couple of months so...you know. Safer-er.”

“How about marks?” he asked.

Well stupid girl. He’s passed your tests. This is the point where you go all in or go home.

The tension in her gut was building so that the cheeks of her ass clenched on the chair as she leaned into him. “Fuck my shit up.”

11:02 pm EDT

She sat on the mat naked, body soaked with sweat, hair matted to her throat and back. He handed her a bottle of cold water, generic plastic so thin it crinkled like the cellophane from a pack of cigarettes as she rolled it along the side of her neck to cool herself.

“I left my card at the bar for a tab if you need more water,” he said.

Most of the men Madison had been with weren’t good at the hands-on cross between fighting and delivering a beat-down that fell under the generic term “rough body play.” If they knew the skills, how to kick with the top of the boot or the side, how to hit hard without striking joints or doing nerve damage they were still reluctant to use much force or hurt a pretty girl. Their wrestling felt like paired-off sparring at the dojo, not like she was the victim. Then there were a few who got amped up to prove themselves and went so hard and fast she had to tap out before her mind could slip into it.

In the kink world everything was “play.” Floggers, canes, or sexual aids were “toys.” It made fetish sound innocent, lighthearted, and fun. Spencer once told her it was different in gay leather circles. You “worked” a bottom with your “tools.” Gay men had spent more than half a century carving out spaces for themselves and one of the few benefits of being outlaw from the start was that it lowered the threshold for making “normals” feel safe.

When mainstream cisgender, heterosexual organizers tried to take BDSM outside the grungy city clubs where people like Steve Bettio had learned to play in the 90s,

they'd found a golden formula, but it came with a cost. Stroke the lowest common denominator.

Be safe, emphasize play that did not approach the boundaries of safety or consent. Mad couldn't blame them, really. Nobody would rent space if they knew the self destructive fantasies that arced like an exposed electric wire through her mind or Elektra's. Invoke the formula of bedroom slap and tickle and you could turn the people who liked their husband's silk ties around the wrist or over the knee spanking, could sell a landlord or a hotel sales manager on the idea that this was harmless *play*.

Ten feet away, the heavyset top from the bag room had set his bottom up so he could flog her while watching Mad's scene with Walter. His gaze was intrusive and the shame of his seeing her stoked the pleasure she derived from earned attention. It must have been theatrical. Tiny girl, body still trim by the grace of dim light, beaten to screaming, her final orgasm, face slammed into the mat, hair twisted in his hand as Walter finger fucked her across his knee.

The girl with the rigger was a stocky brunette with frizzy hair done up in pony tails. He teased at her ass rhythmically with a flogger. Her body language said she was blissed out, "flying." The kind of unthreatening BDSM that didn't scare the 'nillas. An extension of the "runners' high," of the 1970s craze, the idea that a little pain could stir up endorphins and create a positive feeling. Dominance and submission blurred into fitness and wellness with kink just another harmless enthusiasm not far off reiki or hot stone massage.

She flashed the Dom a smile and made eye contact. He'd been watching her intently and she was driven to reward him for his attention. He missed his swing and the brunette bucked a little, turned her head to snap in irritation, settled down as he restored the pattern of her bliss.

Bliss was not why Mad came here. She needed to be hurt physically, emotionally, or both. She'd wished, would have prayed if she thought there was anything left to pray to, that it could be something so simple as getting endorphins coursing through her body. She could do an hour on the elliptical for that. Somewhere in her past, pain, violation, shame, humiliation and fear had come to anchor the core of her sexual response. She remembered the events themselves, sometimes could think of little else, but still struggled with piecing together the jigsaw of how they'd conspired to create her fucked up psyche.

Physically, Walter had been good. He had a focused sensuality, seemed to feel heat, arching out of her body as he held her...hit her. She had a few fighting tricks of her own but between his superior size and strength, and some obvious training, they didn't work on him. His casual dismissal of her resistance did not require so much

force that she needed to tap out. When a man could handle her as if he had the right to her body it ramped down her urge to fight and drove the need to yield to him by suffering.

Walter shaped her flesh with his hands. The primal desire to inflict pain seldom aligned with discipline, but she could feel he had reserve. He traded the brutality that could have forced her into physical surrender for an insurgent push into her psyche, intimate shared violence with his breath, and mouth on her, eyes pitiless, piercing her in a way which made his eventual violation of her body that much more intense. His casual penetration, gloved fingers disregarding resistance, ripped a response from the root of her. She'd cum in a way she never would from some man trying to 'pleasure' her.

"We did get some blood," he said. Her lip had split. She hadn't felt it at the time, but now she could remember tasting copper when her face was against the mat, must have caught the seam where the pads joined. She'd led with some Krav Maga moves to test his resolve and he'd shown her he was in control. Her head was fuzzy and not from the tiny amount of alcohol in the flask. He'd choked her off and on for most of the time that she was cumming.

"Yeah, I'll have some spots too. My capillaries don't like not getting air as much as I do." It was a bluff joke. He had her in his hand. She flipped her hair to show that she was unconcerned. She was that girl who could be cool five minutes after losing her shit as he demolished her.

Senior year behind the Aquatic Center, she'd rise while some boy was still red-faced, trying to zip himself, light a cigarette then offer him one. She'd fallen into smoking less because she liked it than to show that she was super cool with whatever some boy had just done, to create distance between them after it was over. The salt and bitter taste of semen on the back of her throat forever mixed with the smell of dank chlorine and cheap nicotine. Inside, then as now, her emotions had been scattered to the winds.

"You held up," he said.

His words jerked her back to the present. When she was stressed her thoughts would wander, "time slipping," as she thought of it, taken from some science fiction book she'd read. Intrusive, too powerful to easily dismiss.

Just another proof that you're unwell and always will be.

He was sitting back on his heels. Despite the sweat fluorescing softly in the glow from Don's rigging lights, he did not look spent.

She'd edged into the darkness, but despite the violent orgasm she had not gone down completely. There had been too much of her higher mind awake. It could be that he was new, that she was sober, that the club was quieter than usual.

Probably it was none of that.

"You beat the shit out of me as advertised." He was still in trousers, though barefoot for the mats and the fact he hadn't fucked her was probably why her mind had not gone down the rabbit hole with her body.

He doesn't want to fuck you. How hard is that to understand? If you want him to even play with you you'd better pretend to be cool with it.

There were a lot of good reasons. He didn't seem the kind to get hung up on whether she was actually cool with sex when she'd put it out there. She knew from experience a lot of middle aged guys played hard with violence because they couldn't get it up at all or needed something specific to get hard. Maybe when she was middle aged...if she wasn't already at thirty-two...the destroying storm that was her own sex drive would finally leave her the fuck alone.

He doesn't want to fuck you. Really, how hard is that to understand?

As usual the worst half of her was right. Whatever the reason she'd best be cool with it. She posed on the mat. Childhood modeling came with some useful instincts. You sat, squatted or leaned prettily without having to think about it, and men looked even when you were a sweating mess with petechiae spreading around your eyes.

"Any after-action comments?" he asked.

"When you were slapping me right after you did the kicking, if you'd kept going I probably would have started to cry."

"You wanted to cry." It wasn't quite a question.

"I thought you might like tears. I'm literally unable to cry under normal circumstances, but if I'm hit in the face I sometimes can get going. Once it does, it's frustrating if it stops. I mean, totally not telling you what to do, just data points."

"What happens if I don't stop?" he asked.

"My ability to cry got broken around my Junior year in High School," she said. "When I manage it will go on for a little while, then dry heaves that feel like shit. I cum really easily at that point, and it's kind of...traumatic. It feels abusive." He didn't speak and she added, "I'm okay with that."

He'd towed the sweat from his face but his body was still wet with it. He wrapped the towel over his shoulders and stood up.

She felt slightly sick to her stomach. Was this it? For all the fear that had twisted her up on the way here it had not been that bad. No different than dozens of other scenes. She felt disappointment rising. "You want to go again?" he asked

She got up on her knees. She'd gotten hurt and cum, but the elastic band of anxiety still knotted through her gut like an aging fan belt stretching through an overheated engine.

"Yeah," she said, more eagerly than she should, crouching in expectation of his assault.

Washington DC 8:32 am EDT

Barrister Building

600 Block of F St. NW

Saturday, Oct 9

In movies people came to from a night of blackout drinking late in the morning, groggy with a token hangover after having slept it off. Mad could only wish her life worked like that.

For a few hours, she'd laid curled up, blissfully nestled in the warm arms of oblivion and a grey CK comforter.

Around eight in the morning, after the worst toxins were leached from her bloodstream, the need to piss drove the fucked up mass of grey matter in her head to life. Always, even before her eyes had opened, came the electric jolt of realization that she did not remember how she had gotten to bed, the overture which preceded the exhilarating main act of piecing her torn memories back together.

Her bed appeared to float in space, which was not far from the truth. She stared up at the cavernous walls of the loft stretching away above and below her, oversized posters out of focus. Sweat-soaked, she crawled across the dark wood floor, scarred by years of heavy factory equipment and hand trucks, lowered herself down the stairs from the platform that was her bedroom, hand over hand along the industrial iron banister screwed into the brick.

She had to stop and lay against the wall at the base of the stair before she crawled into the blockhouse beneath her bed which served as bath and laundry room. The floor inside was tile, blessedly cool beneath her hands and she collapsed panting for a few minutes on the bath mat before grasping the tarnished brass legs of the sink to lever herself onto the toilet, head down in her hands.

Mad was reliably informed that when you stopped having hangover headaches it meant you were severely alcoholic, and this morning she was grateful that she'd made the cut. The body adapted to metabolizing poisons. The same sources hadn't told her that she would get to retain the malaise and dizziness that made her feel like an arthritic octogenarian.

Maybe you have to level up?

Cautiously lifting her head to find the toilet paper she spotted a DuClaw Sweet Baby Jesus pint glass on the back of the tank, concluded she must have remembered

to drink water before she passed out. Her stomach was knotted against food, lips cracked and dry, mouth parched.

Rising heavily, she leaned against the sink, face to face with herself in the scarred silver mirror. At their best her eyes glowed with a greenish blue tint when she was in pain or passionate. This morning they showed a color Andrea, buying her makeup for child modeling at the counter at Macy's, had once called dishwater-grey.

Regardless, she drew in breath, felt a stab of arousal even in her current state. The tiny petechiae around her eyes had broadened into mottled red spots as she'd expected but that was not the source of her excitement. Where she had been pistol-whipped the point of impact was a fleshy yellow corona of red and purple, flaring garishly over her cheek. She touched the bruise possessively. Her chapped knuckles brushed limp hair, darker at the roots, stringy and lighter where it fell against her neck and shoulder from the last time she'd bothered trying to color it.

The marks on the rest of her body, dull red and blue, were far less livid than the one across her face. It made her feel a little better to realize that most of her stiffness and pain was due to the repeated beatings she'd invited, not the advance of drink that was slowly killing her.

Even at her best she'd never really felt the mirror was her friend. Purging and yo-yo dieting when her weight ballooned after returning from LA had left stretch marks even lasers could not totally remove. Her B-cup breasts had always been too small and after eight years of intentional abuse they had a slight sag that insured she would never return to modeling, even as a niche talent.

The vodka, tequila, and assorted other delivery mechanisms for alcohol that sustained her day to day took a toll on her skin. Her friends would say she was "thin," but there was cellulite on her thighs no matter how often she hit the hated elliptical. She'd blown off Krav Maga and the gym too often in the past six months and her round belly had a sag line of its own.

She stared at her bruised face. The thrill had passed and a sadness crept over her. Now the damage outside matched the damage inside. Not the just intangible scars of pain and suffering. Behind those bruises her hippocampus was physically shrunken. She'd learned of it from an article shortly after her PTSD diagnosis from campus health and it was something she could not unknow.

When stress chemicals dripped into your brain for long enough parts of it began to shrink. The hippocampus governed memory...emotion. The lunar distance she'd seen in the eyes of the parking lot attendant wasn't an affectation. You became deadened. Maybe feeling less empathy had allowed some hide clad proto-Dumnonii deer hunter whose name meant "getting shit-faced" to survive a catastrophic

Fimbulwinter eleven millennia ago, allowed her to pick between her children *Sophie's Choice* style when the venison ran out in January. Maybe it made scaling some dangerous cliff to scavenge bird eggs less terrifying when the herds had moved on. These adaptations didn't serve her well. Deprived of an endless winter to struggle against for survival she was forced to create her own.

In college, after one of the traumatic breaks that she couldn't hide, a girlfriend gave her a plant, a succulent she swore Mad couldn't kill. It was one of those gestures people make just before they turn away from you, and the plant remained long after the girlfriend had ghosted. She'd forgotten to water it for months, but it never lost its healthy green color. One day she'd remembered to slosh some water into its dish and it had floated. The green leaves were still shiny but the roots had withered away past saving. The plant was dead but didn't know it yet.

She imagined her brain like that. The upper part pink, bulging, filled with facts, opinions, education...the base of it a shriveled brown and white, brittle and ready to break.

Braced against the sink she tutored herself in the skill of walking without weaving or pushing off the wall, circled round the loft to the kitchen area. She poured ice cold water from a white plastic pitcher, drank it down, made herself drink a second glass though she knew it was too late to help her much.

Against the wall of the internal blockhouse that she slept atop was a lacquered Chinese table that accumulated junk beside the entry door. Beside it, next to a memo board stuffed with delivery coupons, were coat hooks but her cashmere coat lay crumpled on the floor against the firebrick wall and a scarred green depression-era workman's bench supporting the shrine to alcohol that was her bar.

Seeing the coat there triggered a cascade of recollection and she clutched the drainboard of the farmhouse sink before sinking to her knees on the tufted Ikea mat. She held her head in her hands again, torn between the desire to remember and forget.

She had driven home erratically, no accidents. Someone had honked and she flipped them off. She hadn't felt too drunk, was on top of her road game. In the garage, she'd granted herself one tire squeal, even sober it was hard to avoid on the sealed concrete. She was wildly self-congratulatory about her parking skill. Her self-assurance began to crumble when she stumbled against a Mini-Cooper getting out. She made the strategic decision to abandon her rucksack in the trunk in favor of getting to her bed before she went face down.

The only elevator to her loft was built for freight and Mad alone of all the tenants had a permanent key. She was glad neither staff nor resident was there to see her slumped against the scarred wooden bumper.

On the mat at the club, she'd been red-faced, tears streaming down, wracking sobs starting to cum. Walter kept hitting her. The padding of her shoulder, her breasts, thighs. Occasionally across the face. She cried "stop," sagged from her usual Krav Maga defensive pose, arms raised, to that of a child, hands cupped and arms drawn in to ward off the blows.

She'd not tapped out and he didn't stop so that she was dropping into a fetal black hole in her head. Alone. Unwanted. Abandoned. A martyrdom in which God did not figure, where she had lost everything worthy of sacrifice, save herself alone. It felt right to her, perversely satisfying, a hateful hell more familiar than the home she had made for herself here.

He stopped.

Mad was used to her internal exile ending with a catastrophic orgasm in which rage and eros twisted around shame and self-pity, a culmination that left her whole, if shaken.

In high school, on the occasions she spent time in the aquatic center rather than in the shadows behind it, she would dive, let herself sink to the bottom of the thirteen foot pool, hanging in the pressure and silence for as long as she could before kicking back up, lungs starved, struggling for the light of the surface, only then understanding how far down she really was. Now, too, she struggled to surface from an immense depth.

She could not see through her open eyes, could not breathe, could not manage the words to plead and beg for him to just go on. Was he scared by how far she'd gone down? Was this a mindfuck?

At intercontinental distance, someone was talking. A boy she didn't know in an orange vest. To her he looked about a freckle faced seven, though he must have been at least twenty one.

"It's okay," she snuffled. "I'm okay."

She was starting to hear the boy's words. Walter was silent, stony-faced, sweat dripping from his muscular torso.

"It's just it was upsetting some people." Orange vest, dungeon monitor...safety monitor, whatever the fuck they were called now.

This had happened before. A new DM, somebody must have been worried Walter was hurting her too much.

"The hells..." she panted, trying to wipe sweat and sticky hair from her face. She worked to focus on the boy in the vest. "You can ask Kim...I...I do this. I play like this. It's okay." Where the hell had the kid come from that he didn't already know who she was?

"I just. They asked me to ask you to keep it down a little." The boy was uncomfortable.

She'd been frustrated before, distracted, trying to recall English, to communicate that she was not in danger she had not asked for.

Even now she could not process his words immediately. They fell like those old newsreel photos of bombs from a plane. Harmless until they struck the core of her and detonated into rage. She felt her hand tremble and nearly choked on her words. "You mean you interrupted our scene because somebody thought we were too loud? It's a fucking dungeon!"

"I mean...not noise just." The boy was clearly taken aback at her vehemence, clutched at the seam of his orange vest for protection. "It was triggery for them."

Walt stooped to put hands on her shoulders but she didn't want his patronizing control, pushed him off, standing naked.

"Triggery!" The couple, she guessed. She'd been distracting the man. "You are shitting me!" she spat.

She strode across the club fully nude, sheened with her own sweat, and got Kim's attention at the bar.

"What is it sweetie, you need more paper towels over there?"

Mad slammed her palm down on the bar with a crack. "That excuse for a DM just shut our scene down because it was 'triggery' to someone."

"Oh sweetie...I'm sorry," said Kim, holding up her palms to placate Mad. "He's new, let me talk to him. I am so sorry...we've got some new promoters here, they, I guess have a different style than some of the extreme events, and they use their own DMs. I think Don mostly thinks of it as a rope night you know?"

So it wasn't the couple. Frustration born in shame and rage burned in Mad like a blowtorch. She wanted to vomit. "Don *knew* and sent that little *shrubbery* over to stop our scene? The club *is* open for play to paying members, right?" she hissed too harshly. She regretted it, but she was not in control of her mouth. Kim was past fifty and had made the club her life, now Mad saw fear erase the sadness and worry that usually defined her expression.

"Aww Maddie, don't be like that. He should never have disrupted you. I'll have a talk with him and Don too. I can refund you for tonight, I..."

Mad sucked in three deep breaths, suddenly chilled to the bone and still wanting to empty her stomach into the toilet. When she spoke she had control of the rage-fueled monster inside her that wanted to burn the world down. "...no Kim. Sorry. It was just a shitty day... You need the money a lot more than I do. Thresh said you were having trouble with the city again?"

Walt had walked up behind her, put a hand on her shoulder. She didn't want his hand on her, but it wasn't worth the explanation to remove it. There were plenty of things unwanted in her life.

"It's nothing, just some stuff with the sprinklers like usual. If it's not that it's the doors, or...you know." Kim couldn't meet her eyes. "I'm sorry about Don. He even...he wanted to talk to me about changing the sex rules for the event." Mad could read relief mixed with shame on Kim's face. Relief because Mad was not heading over to physically attack the night's host. Shame because Kim had been a hardcore player in her day, and had never wanted to encourage banality.

She mumbled words she couldn't remember seconds later, some version of "it's okay Kim" and turned toward the rope show while she fought against the tide of emotions that threatened to swamp her back into the depths.

Across the Dungeon, the great man himself had a spectacularly slender and dexterous model in a TK suspension, her body arched into an exotic curve ten feet above the floor. Glowing magenta rope hung from a custom ring beneath one of the two large suspension trusses, and Mad could not make out if the rope was a decoration on her, or she a sidekick to the rope. Mad thought her name was currently Nikki, and knew her slightly.

Two years ago Nikki had come onto the scene under the name of DarlinGirl, an early twenty-something Amy met through 101. She'd been full of girlfriend bonding energy, glommed onto the unofficial SAMs Club for her first few months, been everyone's BFF, but it burned out quickly. The other SAMs were uniformly progressive but shared a cynical sense of social tolerance that allowed for ironic tasteless jokes and players with old-fashioned ways. DarlinGirl bristled with injustices, and everything seemed to get beneath her skin. 'Lek counseled patience "I was a lot like that at first," then about a year ago DarlinGirl had unfriended most of the SAMs on *FetFo* and re-emerged as Nikki, playing with no one and dedicated only to rope.

Striding across the club Mad had been very much unconscious, and looking at Don's model brought her back to self-consciousness. She looked down at the veins on her hand, the way the bones could be seen, the roughness of the skin. Her flesh hung loose around her arms and wrists, and she could envision the blotchy alcohol

burst capillaries in her face that led to bellying up to the counter at Sephora to slam down money for Cold Plasma in an effort to slow down the march of time and vodka tonics.

If she was generous to herself Mad might maintain that she had looked like Nikki when she was half her present age. She'd been a child model, the only thing her mother ever halfheartedly approved of, and had planned to work her way through college modeling.

Before the end of her first semester, it had become clear to her that LA was a shitty place to launch a modeling career if you were merely attractive. If she'd had unlimited time, she might have made up for not being ethereal by working like a dog and eating meth. Instead school took a slice of her attention, and the girl who had been an outcast slut in senior high found recklessness admitted her to a dangerous and party focused social group which took the rest.

Despite a metabolism that burned off carbs and sweated out toxins the sheer amount of vodka she consumed filled her out beyond any possibility of a modeling career in the land of flowing blonde hair and twenty-one inch waists. Besides, Amy was starting height for a model while Mad barely reached five feet in heels. However thin and beautiful she twisted herself to be, she'd grow no taller.

After a dismal quarter trying to get television work and looking at retail, she got a job at a gentleman's club behind a King Taco in Anaheim. She was no innocent, knew before she signed for the job that she wasn't going to make most of her money turning a pole. But they'd hire a five foot girl as a pole dancer, and you could get away with being pretty, not exquisite.

It was harder than she'd thought to make the jump. In high school years it had been a quick, Dantean, descent from being a straight A sophomore student and good girl at H-B Woodlawn, tittering about blowjobs in the cafeteria to being "that girl" in her senior year at Wakefield, the one who would go to the parking lot with any boy who asked. The ruder the boy was about it, the more she liked it. She didn't know anyone at Wakefield, didn't care what they thought, had no desire to befriend them. They were using her and she was using them so that she could feel used. It wasn't a matter of bravery but a primal need to feel something, anything, to plug the giant hole that had been blown in her life during the year between.

It was one thing to be a slut, another to whore for money. The greatest betrayal of her gender, of herself, of the ideal of love. It was different than following a boy into the woods or taking a booty call from a married man she didn't like at two A.M..

She'd learned by then how to take the part of her brain that knew what was supposed to be good for her and bind it like Don's model, so she could run on

instinct alone. The pretense of performance made it a little easier. That she was only a dancer was a lie she could tell herself until the bills were in her roll and his cock was bulging against her thigh, her number in his phone.

The perfect girl, Nikki, was coming down now. Her boyfriend was standing by, an athletic stud a few years older, socially conservative by kinkster standards. Between Mad and the trusses, were an assortment of crosses, cages, padded sawhorses, mats and other furniture, sorted into two aisles. Don had a fair crowd around his rope station, where several other riggers who fell into his coterie were also doing suspensions, but much of the other equipment was empty.

"Let's hope he keeps packing people in," she said, easing back around to face the bar as if nothing had happened. "I'll try to get here more for Xtrematorium nights and for *Lair*."

"You want to pick up again?" asked Walt. He seemed serene. "Or call it a night. I'm sorry I let him interfere."

"Don't be an idiot, Walter," she said, conjuring Myrna Loy from some forgotten film. "He's the DM. If you argued with him, you'd just get thrown out. But, I think I'm going to go home."

"Who is being Miss Sourpuss...?" asked a familiar voice behind her. "Let's turn that frown upside down."

"Not now Spence..." she gave an angry jerk of her bare shoulders. Walter looked questioningly at the two of them but made no move.

"So *you're* the scene that got busted up. I wondered." Spencer was resplendent in transparent blue chiffon and wore six-inch heels better than she did. "I was just telling Kim that we need to embrace this brave new world in which kink does not involve sex or even creative tying, only the elegance of faux Japanese rope and that same fucking TK tie." Spencer rolled his eyes at the rigging display.

Mad laughed in spite of herself. "I don't blame anybody, I'm going to gather up my clothes along with any potential shreds of dignity I might find among the remains, wipe down the mat, and get home. I've got a client dinner tomorrow and I have to look respectable for it." Saying that, especially the part about the meeting, made her feel a little more like an adult and less like a six year old who'd dropped her ice cream cone then pitched a tantrum over it.

"The blame is those who are fine with being kinky as long as it doesn't threaten their comfort zone. And they are too far away from any of us to feel the pain of our darts," said Spencer. "But as Faerie Queen, I shall summon my night's mare and haunt their dreams with visions of their charter school children sucking cock in public or a Purgatory where all rope comes from Home Depot."

She gave Spencer a hug, and felt distant, human warmth.

Back at the mat, Walt had helped pull the dress over her head and get her boots on, offered to walk her to the car.

"I can take care of myself," she said. "It's what I do for a living."

"Honestly I don't give a fuck about your safety. But I have an idea if I bother to walk you to the car you'll show me that gun."

"Fuck you," she said, a pang of what she'd felt before the abrupt halt stirring again. "One condition: We're going to walk up the North Capitol side and make a stop."

Big Ben Liquors occupied a gothic red brick manse, long ago turned booze emporium. Painted directly on brick, the sign looked like it should have graced a storefront in the era of Al Capone and given the building's age it might have. Two local office girls spilled from the place laughing as she entered, one in a black coat, the other in fur-trimmed white.

Inside Mad had pointed through the inch thick Plexiglas, smeared with the accretions of a thousand human hands and worse, placed her card into the revolving tray. Behind the glass, the selection was not much worse than at Central Liquors near her apartment, and the bottles were neatly shelved and clean. The clerk was a sullen thirty-something of Middle Eastern descent, who barely acknowledged her as she slumped against the counter ledge until her receipt was passed back through the revolving compartment with a 750 of Tito's.

North Capital crossed New York Avenue through an underpass, leaving two narrow side ramps where cars were imprisoned as they waited to turn. The narrow concrete peninsulas beside the overpass were prime panhandling turf. A man in a greasy overcoat weaved aggressively among the stopped cars, only the glowing white Styrofoam of his begging cup keeping him from disastrous invisibility. A woman in a paisley headscarf wandered in front of an SUV, dragging a ruined canvas bag and declaiming loudly and repeatedly "I didn't do anything...." though to who or what Mad could not say.

"You got a whole bottle?" Walt asked. His serenity back at the club had been an act. He'd crashed as hard as she had and still wanted what she was dangling in front of his nose.

"No I got a bunch of airline bottles but they're like fucking Transformers and swarmed to assemble a seven-fifty." She let him follow her along the sidewalk of the overpass much like a padding dog. It made him angry and if he was angry enough what happened next would be ugly.

They sat in the Audi. The lot was still full of cars from *Eivassa* and the reflective rows of glass granted comfortable anonymity.

She made him wait while she drank from the bottle. She could feel from his body language that he resented being trifled with. His mouth was set hard, his eyes flashed. When it had begun to burn in she passed the bottle to him, still wrapped in brown paper. He didn't drink. She flipped open the glovebox and handed him the pistol still in a pancake holster.

"P226 Elite in .357SIG."

"Single action," he commented.

"Yeah, SAO. Lighter trigger pressure than double action. I got delicate fucking hands."

"So you sit in a car drinking with an admitted sociopath and you hand him a gun."

"Loaded," she said.

"What if I blew your brains out?" There was a heat beneath his words that made her chest tighten, breath catching in her throat as fear, arousal, and 80 proof vodka swirled in an indistinguishable mix.

For the first time she really believed him, but the feeling that she was playing with fire only made her want to goad him further. "You won't. We're on video at the liquor store, people saw you leaving the club, dozen cameras at that intersection."

"I could leave without a trace. The cameras along First down to M are focused on *Eivassa* and the Harris Teeter. And there isn't video along the block between here and the club the other way, down towards the old Coliseum. Two cameras at the viaduct, but they point at the stairs."

"There's a camera on this parking lot," she said. She wasn't out to steal his thunder but it was her day job. "I had a particularly bad week at work," he said, finally taking a drink from the bottle. "Somebody really pissed me off, fucked me over big time. You don't even know my real name. Anyway, somebody fucked around with my laptop at work and everything I've been working for the past two years is fucked, and I'm probably out a ton of money and maybe a job, so what if I'm tired of trying to spin it and just don't fucking care?"

"Then I'm kinda your dream girl right now. If it ends badly, that's how it ends," she raised her hips to free the dress and peel it over her head. She had not put panties back on and lay nude against the leather seats exposing herself to his anger. "Just so we're clear, I consent."

"To what?"

"Exactly."

"Aren't you afraid you'll take the fun out of it?" he said as the drink washed over him. "What if I decide I don't want somebody so easy."

His voice edged desire for violence with harsh desperation. With the alcohol quieting the backchatter in her brain she could tell for once she had the hook in a man. He needed someone to hurt right now, he wasn't going anywhere.

"When you pistol whip me," she said "turn it sideways and hit with the top. I don't want to fuck the gun up."

"Yeah," he said. No additional words, no bravado, which told her he already knew.

She held up her hand in a "wait" gesture, took the bottle from him. Another long swallow then she screwed the cap down set the Titos on the backseat floor behind them. "Now" she said, stretching back in the seat and closing her eyes.

She'd had about six shots in ten minutes and it hit her like a freight train at the same time he did. She drifted on the pain, the brutality. From there her night dissolved into dark, fractured, scenes.

He loomed over her, blotting out the light from on high, his face lit infernal red by the faint glow of the clock under the tachometer, lips open in a sneer. Her voice raspy from the drink, begging him to fuck her with the Sig...he did...and begging him to pull the trigger...he didn't, apparently.

"It's 11:44, do you know where your daughter is?" she thought aloud then giggled. "She's cumming on her own handgun for a strange man." He hit her for laughing and said some words after, but she wasn't listening.

It didn't last long after that. She recalled her head against him, breathing the dry cleaning smell of his shirt, running her fingers over his chest and throat, begging to go down on him, finding him already hard, him saying something about condoms as pleas to fuck her rolled from her lips like a waterfall. She remembered speaking the words "fuck barriers", an abrogation of personal responsibility she would vehemently deny when sober.

Great safer sex practices there, Maddie.

Standing out, though she wasn't sure where in the sequence of things it had happened, the memory of asking him to pistol whip her face just once, and the floating sea of stars and surreal pain that had followed. In the bathroom mirror, her cheek had not been sunken, meaning the bone had not been broken.

His feet crunching on the gravel, calling her a fucked up whore and coolly thanking her. The strange feel of urban air on her exposed skin. She'd even managed to babble an offer to drive him to his car.

"You can't turn right down New York Avenue from here. My car is in the old Coliseum lot so I can walk faster than you can drive me. Anyway, I've got to go back through the club to get my card. Try not to die on the way home."

People at the Club usually looked out for one another. Mad knew she seldom seemed as trashed or twisted as she was, but he must have had some inkling from the volume she'd consumed alone. Maybe the sociopathy was real.

Or perhaps he could intuit the world class shit storm that would have ensued if he'd tried to stop your ass from driving drunk.

Right as usual. He didn't owe her that. He wasn't the one who decided to play shit faced, was he?

She had been happy to hear him walk away. She'd struggled to prove herself to him, to meet his brutality but neither Walter, nor the other nameless men, were the one she needed to prove herself to, and after she was done using them she wanted to be alone.

She fumbled for her dress against the carpet of the back floor, standing nude on the gravel to pull it over her head body sleek in the yellow light, taking rough breaths that felt like sobs but weren't.

The seat a wet mess under her ass, getting the car in gear and instigating the sophisticated planning process that went into every turn of the vehicle. She was a good drunk driver, mechanical and careful.

With being drunk, one problem was always that, lacking focus, you might pass out. She'd fallen asleep at a stoplight and pretended she'd dropped something, waving perkily as a black SUV whipped past her.

She was convinced that being dissociative made her a good drunk driver if she could stay awake. The technical parts of her mind ran well on autopilot, like factory workers who knew their jobs well enough that the manager could pull the blinds in his office and wank to porn while they churned out baby toys or packaged slaughtered birds.

She could not remember most of the drive, though it brought her full circle to the garage, the coat, the bar glass taken to the bathroom, her last waking thoughts falling down on her bed.

She had passed out still nursing the touch memory of his hand on her throat when he came inside her.

It was barely eight thirty. She wouldn't get back to sleep today and she had nine hours before she'd need to head out to meet with Alex's new client. Two hours to try and make herself presentable left seven to kill.

She sat naked in the leather desk chair she'd gotten from a secondhand furniture place south of Baltimore, fiddled with her computer. The chair swallowed her, made her a child, had been the office chair of an Associate Director at a Cabinet Agency

back in the days before your typical SES preferred an Aeron. There had been one much like it in her father's office at home when she was a child.

Above her, a French bulletin board held vintage postcards and a few from the odd school friends that still felt the need to impress her with their exotic travels.

The two-story loft had ridiculously large wall surfaces which Mad had filled with prints. Not since her sophomore year at college had she really decorated a space to suit herself, rather than housemates, or prospective visitors. The walls were decorated with posters, some in frames, some printed on a plotter by a graphic artist she'd been fucking regularly for several months and stuck to the grey cement plaster walls with Poster Tac.

Above the desk a one sheet for the 1996 James Spader / Holly Hunter *Crash*, and a glossy repro of the 1934 William Powell / Myrna Loy *Thin Man*. Higher above, printed on giant roll paper, a blatantly nude witch on a broomstick performed aerobatics worthy of Harry Potter in a silver gelatin photo print from the 1920s.

The loft, with her bed on top of the enclosed room which made up a quarter of the space, was the first time she'd had a sleeping space that made her feel truly safe. Small closed spaces were secure, but claustrophobic. A futon in an open plan left her too close to doors and windows to feel real privacy. Here she was a lord in a moated castle, able to survey all of her personal *Sanctum Sanctorum* while still separate from it.

It had occurred to her when she agreed to too-high monthly payments to take the place that it would also make it difficult for her to stay in bed all day. Trips to piss and forage for food took her down the stairs. She hadn't foreseen that trips back to her sleeping area would sometimes feel like making an assault on Everest.

She'd left her phone lying on a nightstand strewn with books and dirty coffee cups, and it took her the better part of twenty minutes to gather the energy to rise from the chair and climb the stairs. When she did the particular color of flashing light told her that she had an encrypted message and she opened the app she shared with Alex and Jeremy.

Alex: 11:17PM

RE: Saturday. Take a look at WhiteSquare. Use secure browser. Palm 5;30 tonight. Be on time.

She checked the VPN and loaded the site, predictably bland, almost artsy. A few words on newsprint leading to a stripped down graphic interface.

WhiteSquare was a "Corporate Intelligence" outfit, which touted itself as employing "veterans from elite intelligence units around the globe." The Board

members included a former CIA Branch Chief and a former Head of MI6's China Desk.

In the US "Business Intelligence" companies handled electronic spying and internet filtering but left hands on evidence collection that flirted with the edges of the law to investigative firms like hers. PGI, owned by her former partner Alex, specialized in "oppo" or opposition research, the branch of dirty politics concerned with finding the skeletons in the other candidate's closet.

Apparently if you had global offices in London, Paris, and Dubai you had your own "Investigative Team," though she'd be surprised if WhiteSquare didn't principally use local subcontractors for its work.

A page on "Operational Success" had a map at the top which highlighted seventy four countries where WhiteSquare had reached "resolutions" in red. Large chunks of Africa and the Pacific Rim were highlighted, along with Central and South America and parts of Europe. The US was not. Officially WhiteSquare did no work on American soil.

There were links to a dozen dry articles detailing investigations into bribery during corporate arbitration, tracing of assets in judicial judgments, security investigations and litigation successes.

If you searched for WhiteSquare on the web at large you got some different hits. Glenn Greenwald's *Intercept* suggested WhiteSquare agents in London had done "dirty ops" research on Foster's Democratic Presidential rival by contacting colleagues who had worked for him during the Obama Administration under the pretense of doing a documentary. The implication was that WhiteSquare was a conservative machine fueled by Israel and big money and dedicated to Foster's socially and fiscally conservative agenda.

Women's rights activists claimed WhiteSquare had its hand in more than politics. After the birth of #metoo and the fall of Harvey Weinstein a presumptive casualty has been reality TV mogul Bryan Hammerschmidt, but no criminal charges had ever emerged against the producer of *American Gunman*, the hunting reality series that made Bill Foster famous enough to seek the Presidency. No less staid a source than *New Yorker* had reported, a couple of years later that Hammerschmidt hired WhiteSquare to systematically discredit a string of women that he'd sexually assaulted.

She tried to sharpen the instinct for bullshit that was her birthright as a native Beltway Insider, and read between the lines. The picture that emerged was of a juggernaut largely above the Peyton Place environment that had become American

politics. Maybe the Hammerschmidt job was a quid pro quo for some past service rendered or maybe the producer just dangled a big enough wad of cash.

Mad didn't doubt Greenwald's integrity but Oppo research was Oppo research. Dirty politics, but not illegal, and no politics today was clean. Maybe WhiteSquare had an archconservative agenda, but it was a better guess they helped Foster for the same reason Willie Sutton robbed banks: "Because that's where the money is."

WhiteSquare operated in the foggy world of old money and insurgent wealth where the fortunate sons of the Bohemian Grove and Trilateral Commission collided with Russian Oligarchs, and newly minted ChiNet Billionaires.

She didn't doubt WhiteSquare was conservative but when she tried to fit them together in her head WhiteSquare and Foster were mismatched puzzle pieces. When your clients were the one percent, you didn't shit where you ate and Foster's particular brand of populism wouldn't hold much attraction for the sort of control freaks that lived by providing competitive intelligence as a branded product to the corporate world.

So, WhiteSquare wasn't Foster's lapdog. But you couldn't ignore the leader of the purportedly free world either, not when you needed to function in areas riven with CIA operatives and intelligence assets.

What was clear was that WhiteSquare was not an organization of warmth and charm. The twenty-first century was not the days of gangland, and U.S. investigators had to take it easy with strong-arm tactics against anyone who could afford a lawyer. Conducting investigations through Sub-Saharan Africa and Indonesia, it was clear that WhiteSquare had a freer hand.

"Success stories," with the names of clients carefully anonymized, dripped with suggestive references to "usually inaccessible information sources," "risk remediation and minimalization", and "executive protection." WhiteSquare bragged of delivering profiles of individuals thought to be involved in activities detrimental to clients, including personal history and behavior patterns, all obtained using techniques that included "social engineering." In one investigation of employee leaks, WhiteSquare had "additionally exposed employee criticism of management policies, allowing management to develop better future strategies."

She somehow doubted the employees exposed had been promoted for their refreshing and candid takes on the corporate leadership.

WhiteSquare was a fast gun for hire by the well-heeled, but in the end went through the same trashcans she and Alex did, just on a larger scale and overseas.

Fully awake and sobering she cursed Alex's terseness. Was WhiteSquare their target? The new client? Alex' model for a corporate expansion? Asking him for further information would yield nothing.

Probably WhiteSquare was the client. They'd be reluctant to maintain a large footprint in the US. When the Israeli Black Cube intelligence firm had been working to stifle rape claims against Harvey Weinstein, they'd hired private detective firms in New York. That had come out in the wash when Igor Ostrovskiy a Ukranian-American employee of the PI firm InfoTactic who was disgusted by what he was being asked to do, went on the record first to *New Yorker* and then to the FBI. WhiteSquare would use a similar model, hiring a patchwork of local contractors. Surveillance was boring, but if it paid well there were worse jobs. Their usual MO was to find and identify the skeletons in other people's closets, but that made them natural choices to work the other side, to handle cover-ups. Was that what had Alex so on edge?

Mad weighed Netflix versus gaming for killing the next six hours without having to get up and move again. Binging series was a good distraction when her head was fucked up, but gaming was a better treatment for hangovers because it required focus. When she became one with her avatar it tamped down just how physically shitty she really felt.

Washington DC 6:15 pm EDT

The Palm

1200 Block of 19th St. NW

Saturday, Oct 9

When Justin Drinker took his first job in DC, Ronald Regan was starting his second term and Madison's birth was a half-decade in the future. The city was known, he'd tell her years later, for its "power restaurants," serving steak or haute cuisine. Lion d'Or, the last of the French brasseries which had been the city's seats of power for half a century, died when Madison was mastering phonics. Justin's career had ridden on the coattails of wealthy and powerful Washington men, and he had been an aficionado of the old school bastions. His daughter celebrated her 16th birthday at the late Blackie Auger's House of Beef, only three months before the paneled wooden doors were closed forever.

The old spots fell, crumbling like medieval citadels at the advent of cannon fire. The pounding siege guns were concepts like Asian fusion, farm to table, celebrity chefs like José Andrés. Of them all the venerable Palm above Dupont Circle was a lonely sole survivor. Justin had never taken her there, but every place she'd ever heard him mention, every old place in the city where she knew he had spent hours, triggered the memory of her father.

She'd first come to the Palm as an adult on her first date with Alex, who was indifferent to the food but liked the mix of informality, clamor, and understated potency to intimidate clients and, apparently, dates.

When the original Palm in New York had opened down the street from King Features syndicate, the Italian immigrant owners had no budget for decor. According to legend they'd traded cartoonist and later NBC radio personality "Jolly Bill Steinke" free gin cocktails for decorating the walls in caricatures. The style had been carried over when Walter Ganzi opened a Washington franchise in 1972, but where the New York location focused on famous performers and Broadway giants, the walls of the DC outlet displayed cartoon images of the broadcasters and power brokers of the nation's capital.

On his first date with Mad the veteran international journalist had not anticipated that a short brunette whose resume included a film degree and sex work would have more than a hazy grasp of Washington's storied past, had smiled and joked his way

through an eviscerating meal in which the girl he wanted to awe with his worldliness crushed him at the impromptu game of identifying the iconic images on the walls.

Alex could have guessed a DC native might know local celebrities like the attorney who had climbed Kilimanjaro, vindicated the Mayor's frat brother, and married a "Real Housewives of DC," star. But even where the former newspaperman thought he was safe, he had trouble. "That's Jimmy Hoffa...the head of the Teamsters Union who ended up as part of the foundation of Giants Stadium," said Alex, certain he finally had one less obvious than 'Bill Clinton.'

"Jim Hoffa, yeah," said Mad. "And he was alive when this place opened in seventy-two, was murdered in seventy-five. But that's his son who's the current President. I met him once in this dingy dive bar that used to be under the Teamster's building over on Louisiana Avenue, place looked straight out of Jersey City. You thought Dean Martin was about to walk in, but they got all confused when I asked for a martini and I ended up settling for a beer."

The Palm was still Alex' choice to impress big money, but he'd made Mad give a solemn promise to amuse herself in silence without lecturing prospective clients on DC's past and present personalities.

Mad tore herself from playing trivia with the faces in the wall to focus on the filet medallions of the hundred fifty dollar dinner and the client Alex probably wished was paying for it.

"So let me heff to understand...PGI, this is the two of you?" Anders Hansen was a man with a big head, short neck, and a strong Dutch accent. Iron grey hair stood up as if a brush had been welded to his head. Watery blue eyes were recessed over freckles and a prominent mole, and his tailored blue-grey birdseye suit was worth at least eight hundred bucks to Madison's conservative guesstimation.

If graduating from school had been dependent on actually paying attention during lectures Mad would never have gotten out of grade school. It was hard for her to keep from drifting...time slipping...when she wasn't holding up at least half the conversation, and the stunning din of the Palm's dining room did not help. Voices, silverware, and clattering plates echoed off the faux stamped tin ceiling and bare walls to fall back amplified to a deafening level that made her high school cafeteria seem sedate. For others the din might keep them on edge, focused, but for her it was like the pounding, all-encompassing, noise of an industrial dance party. The overload riveted her to first one cartoon face and then another. To focus on the breathing people next to her took effort.

Alex was probably near to shouting, but he might as well have been in a soundproof chamber for all that even the most clever spy or powerful device could hear a word he said.

“Neh, we’re just the loicensed investigatory team.” When Alex spoke to clients he let enough of his East End accent bleed through to suggest that beneath his polished exterior and J. Crew suit was a football hooligan ready to bust heads with a beer bottle. His precise cuts to the thick applewood smoked bacon were those of a restrained barbarian.

“Now...you want to know about our experience,” Alex was continuing, though Hansen hadn’t asked. “I got four years of military service including Bosnia with the UNPROFOR. Madison,” he brandished the knife at her carelessly, blade smeared with thick grease “she’s...a weapon of a different type.”

Here Madison was required to say nothing, but flashed an ingénue smile and batted her eyelashes.

Alex droned on in his bluff, self-assured, manner. “We have a research department of twelve non-field investigators in our principal office and over two dozen additional satellite workers.” The first was just an outright lie, the second only true if you counted random stringers from India or Pakistan recruited over sites like Upwork and Guru.com for data sifting. Alex continued without a blink. “In addition, through our associate relationships, we have access to dozens of other qualified field personnel in fifty states and abroad, allowing us to do quick, concise, work.”

Anders inclined his heavy head. “No...just two. That is very good. This is not something for a lot of people to be involved with.”

“Well, of course we are the principals,” said Alex changing course, “and when necessary we can hold things very close to the chest.”

Madison kept beaming but felt it was time to stop trying to figure out who the broad-faced caricature on the wall with the black lab named ‘Buddy’ was, and make it clear she could use her words. “We can also keep research matters limited to our core team here, who have had extensive background checks.” She could lie as well as Alex, since “background checks” were limited to commercial services and Jeremy digging up prospective issues on social media.

“Gut,” said Anders. “You see I know a few things about chu. Alex Griffiths, you were a journalist. Paparazzi, with the...camera.”

“For a coupl’a years,” said Alex casually. “I got out’ the army, knew how to work a camera, scale walls, and run carrying a rucksack. Put all that together s’a natural career choice for a strapping young man, innit?”

“And how did you come to found an...investigations...business?” asked Hansen. It was a test of some sort, Mad was certain, but she had no idea what they were being graded on. Alex plunged ahead with a narrative she’d heard more times than she could count.

On that first date here she’d already known they would have sex. Her sexual ethics were transactional and, presuming he wasn’t a boor, a fuck was quid pro quo for the dinner. If he was rude and inconsiderate it would be that much better. The needs that had driven her to go behind the aquatic center hadn’t changed, and she’d work herself to climax on the pain of being used, moreso when in the hands of someone undeserving. In the world of dominance and sadomasochism she’d found glimmers of men with the intellect to understand what she needed, and the brutality to take it from her.

The suggestion of repressed violence in Alex’s hands when he butchered New York strip was her first inkling that she actually wanted him. She’d torn herself from trivia to ask him about himself, the one subject on which she wasn’t in danger of besting him. He’d been savage with her later, still raw from her easy demolition of his intellectual superiority, and she had used that to goad him into being rougher than he’d intended. Alex was always just at the threshold but own self-loathing tripped him up. That night they had begun a long association that involved intellectual intimacy and physical violence. She flushed at the memory. Alex was used to being the brightest bulb in the room, had laughed at himself afterward, said she was the smartest woman he’d ever met aside from Christine Amanpour.

She tried to dispel the haze of the past, to focus on sizing up Anders. Alex would ask questions later. She twisted her full weight fork, an absent minded creator-god raising mountains in her garlic whipped potatoes.

Alex was hitting all the high points, dropping the right names. Correspondent in the Balkans, Middle East, came to Washington in the run-up to Donald Trump’s election.

Even people who didn’t know anything about politics recognized the Russia Dossier, at least when you mentioned whores pissing in front of former U.S. President Donald Trump. It had been compiled by Chris Steele, a former head of MI6’s Russia Desk. If you moved in journalistic or political circles you knew the company behind the work. Fusion GPS had been founded by Glenn Simpson, Peter Fritsch and Tom Catan all off the *Wall Street Journal*.

“Yes, the Russia Dossier...of course.” Anders was placid.

“Well, you see ‘ow it was. The Fusion GPS crew were journalists, desk people. Now I might not have been MI-6, but I’d been in live fire zones and you work as a journalist in that part of the world you know some people.”

“Ches, of course...”

Alex continued with the story in his breezy reg’lar chap style. He figured most people opening political and business intelligence consultancies didn’t know their way around a live firearm or have the physical skills to conduct investigations. In the world of Journalists, only paparazzi spent much time sneaking over garden walls or bribing housekeeping staff these days. He’d bought the firm of a washed up old PI named Caleb Jackson who was running down cheating husbands at seventy five dollars an hour and gotten his supervised hours to be a licensed investigator in DC. The firm was renamed to PGI, and Jackson retired with benefits.

“Well, that is an impressif story, Mister Griffiths. Very impressif. I am curious...who is it that...pays for your services, most of all?”

At a nearby table, a woman in a workaday blouse held court for four men in polo shirts and sportcoats. Every now and then some phrase would float from their coterie with incredible clarity.

“Mail-order bride...”

“One of my staffers was like...”

Each time response and context were lost in the ocean crash of the dinnertime crowd.

Alex was rambling on about the DNC, Super PACs, and Business Intelligence firms, the clients who, as he put it, “were fine with sifting the internet, but needed to hire a chap to dig through the trashcans.” Mad’s eyes glazed and she dashed down her starchy mountains to carve out a deep valley as Alex traced the intricacies of oppo research finance. High profile political groups that relied on contributions wanted the benefits of no-holds-barred muckracking, but they needed to keep their hands clean. Individual deep pocket donors or left and right wing think-tanks and interest groups funded their most dangerous research and took payment in the form of political capital to be used or passed downstream.

They were seated at a four-top at the rear of the main dining room Anders with his back to the wall, Mad to his left, pretending to look at him while focusing on the mural behind his head. The crew from CNN’s long defunct *Capital Gang* were bobbleheads lounging around an undersized Capitol Dome.

From as far back as Mad could remember 7 pm Saturday found Justin Drinker in front of the TV in his office with a glass of scotch. Unlike her mother’s new McMansion, the old family house in Arlington had limited space. When Sarah and

Mad were given separate bedrooms at the older sister's insistence, Daddy's office doubled as the guest room with the heavy green sleeper sofa that had been Andrea and Justin's first bed.

The family room downstairs where the big 36" Sony Trinitron resided was Andrea's domain, and she watched endless hours of *Cops* and *Law & Order*, but forbade politics so Justin would settle onto the couch to watch *Capital Gang* on the archaic GE in his office.

The set had a white plastic and faux woodgrain case, and Mad remembered how you could feel a tingling of static electricity from the screen a foot away, hear a crackle if you drew your finger along it. Mad would pad her way into Justin's office and curl against him, sometimes sneaking sips from his glass. Slightly buzzed, he'd wrap an arm around her and argue aloud at Kate O'Beirne's conservative nasal musings "for fuck's sake Katie the entire Muslim world is not Al Quaeda *types*."

Bob Novak, the white haired columnist whom even friends called "The Prince of Darkness" was both nemesis and role model to her father. Justin Drinker was a Clinton Democrat, Novak an acerbic conservative with the motto "Always love your country – but never trust your government!" Mad caught her father imitating his clever barbs, his general self-possessed style.

She'd shown herself to be her father's daughter in high school debate where her dry humor and impassioned approach did not endear her to coaches or judges whose obsessive focus was procedure. Mad cycled through debate partners quickly. They were rules-oriented and wanted extracurricular brags for their college apps. She wanted to win, but cared more about style, and a resounding loss was more satisfying than a win accomplished through verbal bean-counting.

On the wall, one of Novak's rivals from the show had a voice balloon "I see Novak and Bobby Knight opening up a chain of charm schools next year" *Capital Gang* had been canceled in the long dark twilight between Justin Drinker's indictment and his trial. Novak was dead more than a decade now.

Mad nibbled at the rare meat and dug nails into her exposed thigh under the table as she struggled to bring herself present. Years of alcohol and self-abuse had eroded what focal skills she might have once possessed.

Anders said only that he was representing the interests of a "global business concern." WhiteSquare? Madison wouldn't want to play poker against the Dutchman, but still tried to intuit what she could. Definitely a real European. He held his fork in his right hand, knife in his left, for all his size the carving of his medallions was dainty compared to Alex. On his wrist was a sedate gold Patek Calatrava, fastened with a simple alligator band. He wore no wedding ring and no mark

suggested he ever had. Jeremy hadn't been able to find out much about their new client. He was a lawyer with a firm that had represented countless respectable business clients as well as a Serbian genocide and a legendary arms merchant who had peddled military weapons to Charles Taylor and Hezbollah.

Anders was giving Alex the third degree, and because it was a client interview, Alex was taking it. "You decided to become a war correspondent. Ninety-seven, chortly after the death of the Princess Diana. One might think you were....sentimental." Anders' voice conveyed a low opinion of sentiment.

"Nothing sentimental about it," said Alex. Mad caught the burr of annoyance in his voice, knew he was struggling to sound infinitely relaxed. "The public were very down on paparazzi just after that, stiffer sentences for trespass, lawsuits, so I thought it was a good time to get out the trade. That was in August and the Kosovo War started up a few months later. I didn't really want to go back into a war zone, but being a photojournalist who knew the place...that was a once in a lifetime opportunity. I was willing to go where other people wouldn't to take pictures and I got the chance to write some copy because there was nobody else willing to go where I did...honest fact is the Balkans weren't that bloody dangerous. Except for the roads. More likely to die in a car wreck than from enemy fire."

Next to them, four gay men were arguing with a middle-aged friend sporting a ridiculous striped vest who was deploring 'those fucking transsexuals' with a sneer. From the way he held court, she wondered if he was anyone famous but did not see his likeness shellacked onto the wall.

Across, two of the men had left and the lone woman was regaling the remaining polo-shirted men who hung on her words with some joke which involved "asking for a friend." She'd fucked them both, but at different times, Mad concluded. They both still wanted her but she was through with them though they weren't smart enough to know it.

"You were wit the *Express* originally, chess? As the paparazzi. But once you were overseas, you wrote mainly for the *Guardian*, the *Observer*. All very...liberal papers."

"We'd say progressive these days. But no mystery there, they didn't need a lot of what I was shooting over at the Black Lubyianka. Now if you're trying to set me up as some kind of secret liberal icon mate, I appreciate the sentiment, but I don't do pro bono work."

Anders shook his head. "No. Money is not an issue."

"Well, I am delighted to hear that..." Alex gave a winning smile "Let's move along to your investigative concerns then, away from the thrilling tale of my schooldays, shall we?"

"You did not just decide to retire though, did you?" Anders was not giving up the bone he had in his mouth. "There was something that made you walk away from being in the field."

"Walk's' an understatement innit? I'd have bloody run if only my legs weren't atrophied at the time. But you know all that already don't you? Fact is, being held hostage by ISIS in Syria for thirteen months killed my appetite for adventure. Also a fair number of my mates in the business. I decided I preferred my head staying attached to my body not rolling around on the sand like Steve Sotloff, so I decided to give up the trade."

"That is merely...the circumstance...not the reason." It was a statement. "You could have done...many things."

"I decided I wanted to do something to help the world instead of just watching it. There...now let's move along."

Anders shook his head no. "I have heard that story. No, I do not think you became some h'avenging angel. But...you have...in fact, worked for a lot more liberal groups than conservative. You have a...preference?"

"I'm not from here. No disrespect to the current Ringmaster-in-Chief, but this country's not my fucking circus and *absolutely* not my fucking monkeys. I'm fine working for respectable conservative groups long as they're not the sort that kick immigrants through the streets with steel-toed boots. That's not politics, it's just idiocy" Alex's emphatic tone told Mad that he was losing hold of the leash on his temper.

"With all due respect, Mister...Anders?" she said, putting her hand on the table as if to reach out to him. "What is it you actually want of us?"

"I apologize," said Anders. "If I have upset you. I like to know something about the...nature...of the people who I am hiring to do work. For example you, Miss Drinker? Have you been...under fire?"

Mad looked into his icewater blue eyes. "I've had somebody pull a gun on me, if that's what you mean." That was as much as Anders needed to know. "I was having sex in exchange for money at the time, it's a job hazard." Her instinct was to say 'fucking for money' because it was more defiant, and she didn't like euphemisms, but the point was not to shock, it was to establish that for all his brush headed Buddha smile, Anders was not the only one with emotional reserve.

"If you don't mind," Alex was saying, "I'd also be delighted to get to the point of this little meeting and find out just what it is you want from us."

The volume around them had fallen a little as the first dinner rush thinned. The gay man in his vest had curled his lip and left his friends to pay the bill. When they

got up, shaking heads, the servers stripped the starched white cloth. Beneath the table was made of ratty white cardboard, edges separated and buckled, worse than the banquet rounds at the club. The servers were older men in black aprons blazoned with “the Palm.” They wore white shirts with black ties and one held the wooden salt and pepper shakers while the other spread a fresh cloth.

“What I hef to ask is not complicated but...perhaps ugly,” said Anders. “D’chu remember in the election last year, there were a lot of...posting to the internet...what you call memes...that the President was involved in an relationship with his daughter...inappropriate...ehh...incestuous?”

Alex squinted. “Yeah, who could forget, but it was a lot of ad hominem shite, no?”

“There was some big flap back in the summer and there was supposed to be evidence but there wasn’t evidence,” Madison added. “and it blew away.”

“Ches,” said Anders. “The original article was on *Progress Now*, a small political blog, on Friday, 19 Chun of last year that the President had been with a...call girl. It was perhaps not such a...as you would say, ‘big deal’ as you would say. After Donald Trump, nobody is shocked, though it does contrast with his...woodsy and wholesome feel, I believe one of your chournalists put it?”

“I take it from the exact dates you know a lot about this? Details?” asked Madison. She’d lost interest in the medallions though she’d scavenge them from the office fridge like a hyena Monday afternoon.

“It has been an object of ehh...curiosity...ches. A blogger this Mark Chiu who owns *Progress Now* said that he had been in contact with a prostitute named Brianna. She had been hired to pretend to be the daughter of your President Foster, and then he had showed her pictures of sexual acts with his *actual* daughter, Kaidence. Which would have meant nothing as who would believe a prostitute. No offense intended,” his dismissal was so businesslike she took it as genuine. “But what was off interest...was that this.. prostitute was supposed to be in possession of these...photographs.”

“Yeah. I saw all the ‘Blogger Claims Foster Incest,’ articles,” said Mad. “And all the memes...‘Her Mom and I are Divorced...So it’s Not Really Incest’ and that shit... but there were never any pictures and the *Post* debunked the whole thing.” The word incest in the *Post* headlines had gripped her last year, made for an article she read start to finish. The talk of it now was making her stomach churn against a familiar ache and she hoped that Anders would put her burning ears down to wine.

“Ches. This Chiu, he promises that this Brianna will be doing an interview with him, and offers to let a reporter from the *Washington Post*, a uh...Jordan Torres, talk to her, and see the photos. But then Chiu cannot produce her.”

"Yeah. I mean, it didn't change anything. People who hated Foster and wanted to believe did. People who liked him called bullshit," said Mad. "Mostly it just meant the internet got flooded with incest jokes for a couple weeks. I figured it was like what Lyndon Johnson said. 'If you're losing, call your opponent a pigfucker because he'll at least have to deny it?'"

"That is colorful, ches. But do you not think though it would have hurt Foster more just before the election? The convention was not such good timing, was it? Foster already had the nomination, as you say, 'locked up,' and by the time of the big election it was forgotten." Anders leaned forward. "Your Lyndon Johnson would in this case have very bad timing. But perhaps if there were other reasons. A...uh...what would you say, 'second rate' chournalist rushing to publish what is the...scoop? Forgive me, my colloquial English is...needs polishing."

"Yeah...except there was no scoop," said Mad.

"So...what are we investigating?" asked Alex.

"All of it. We...my client wants to know who this Brianna was. To know if there are really these photos. And if they exist, then...copies."

"You, or your client believes these photos exist," said Mad, "and you want them, but you need Brianna to establish their provenance."

"Ches," said Anders. "There was never a real investigation after this chournalist Torres wrote that it was not true."

"Even if there were photos," asked Mad, "how do you prove they aren't just deep fakes. There's thousands of hours of footage of Kaidi Foster?"

"There are expert systems...that have been used in criminal trials in the Hague. They can...unravel these things. Enough to be...admissible as evidence. It is also possible there would be places, objects, in the background of the photos which could be identified. Things a forger would not know. It would be much different than chust rumors...many people...religious people...who think that Foster is a step up from your...Trump. They would have doubts. It would be, I think, enough to start a criminal investigation."

Mad was going to protest that Foster had a history of blatant denial of any sort of evidence, but Alex took things back smoothly. "That's not going to be a cheap investigation. We're not starting with 'track Ms. Smith to see if she sleeps with someone,' you understand. We're running down a cold case that's...more than a year old with a Jane Doe and questionable links. I understand you're well financed, but I'm very reluctant to take this. I don't want to get a reputation for squandering my clients money on...pizzagate type...conspiracy theories."

Anders bowed his head slightly as if he were a priest giving benediction. "This is not...a pizza gate." He said it as two words. "I can see I will heff to tell you this. There is a person, a very well known person in the eh...Hollywood industry who knew this daughter Kaidence. Was close to her. And they shared secrets. My client has talked to this person and believes that the charges are real and that the photos...that the story would not just be coincidence. That it fits to well to be a fiction." Anders shook his ponderous head slowly. "This Brianna must haff communicated with Chiu, yes? So. There is a trail. There will be money, yes, but for that kind of money you will not leave any stones not turned over. I am clear?"

Mad was sorry she had eaten even a little of the medallions. She felt worse than when she got up. She smiled brightly. "We excel in obtaining usually inaccessible information," she said, stealing the buzzwords from WhiteSquare's website.

Alex gave a very slight nod of his head, indicating that he understood he was being asked to break the law. "We'll need twenty thousand to get started. This is going to require a lot of hours and a lot of travel."

"I would prefer to deal in flat amounts if it is chust the same to you. I had thought perhaps one hundred thousand to be deposited now, and another two hundred thousand when you have delivered your report. Your work is well respected."

Alex crinkled his forehead gave another slight nod. If the offer staggered him, he didn't show it. "Wire transfer to Banque Audi in Lebanon work for you? US Dollars?"

"Huff course."

Alex slid a small business card across the table. It was plain white and had two numbers printed on it.

"Is there anything else we should know?" asked Alex "I'd like to know your source."

"I am afraid that would be...inconvenient. And is not really relevant to the investigation of this...Brianna, other than to know that for Foster to have kept photos of Kaidence, and perhaps to have tried to find a eh...what Freud would say...surrogate for her. That would not be so out of character as one who has seen him on the television might think."

"Look, Mr. Anders, I get where Alex is coming from. With all due respect I worked in LA for four years. Hollywood is a cesspool of gossip and allegations. If this was somebody's hairdresser's cousin's pool boy you may be snapping at shadows."

Anders shook his head ponderously. "I cannot disclose the source. You will understand. Howeffe...you may consider this source someone is willing to gamble

one hundred thousand dollars on. I do not think they would do that for the...what do you say...the pool shark. There is perhaps one other thing that I should tell you."

"What is it?" asked Alex.

Anders looked at them both intently, taking time to stare at them both.

"I am not supposed to say these things. But I...wish to prejudice for success yes? My client was approached by someone who...believed they were close to learning the location of these photographs. Believed that they exist. I cannot tell you who because I do not know myself. But they were considered a credible source. We have learned that this...individual...was compromised. That is why I was allowed to bring your...company...into this. So other investigators, may already be close to this material. Investigators who may have the direct or indirect support of the White House."

"If you could give us anything on the original lead that would be someplace to start," said Alex.

"Start at the beginning," said Anders. "And take this matter very seriously. I do not think that certain people would...hesitate to stop at killing...over this. That is why I asked so many questions about your background. I need to know that you understand what it means to investigate something of this...eh...nature."

Alex looked at Mad, "We do. If your client has anything else they want to pass along that might be of assistance, we encourage it."

Anders was already rising. "I would luff the dessert, but I must get as far as your Dulles Airport, I heff a flight direct to Dubai I must make."

Mad and Alex watched as Anders gave a low wheeze, and trundled to the foyer. The late Johnny Hart's "Wizard of Id" leaned over the Dutchman's shoulder curiously as he made a call, likely for his car, and then was gone.

Mad flagged a waiter and asked for a double vodka-tonic.

"Part of me wonders if we'll see money in the offshore account or if that was some fucked up test?" mused Alex.

"He's a real player," said Mad, fidgeting with the napkin while she waited for the drink. "He has the money, the bespoke suit. A con man would have a fake Rolex. I looked at the WhiteSquare site. Are they behind Anders, or just your grandiose plan for our corporate future?"

"I don't know anything for certain," said Alex. "But I've got a mate in Doha. Used to be with the Foreign Office, but I 'appen to know he's with WhiteSquare now. Back around the first of September, he asks me a bunch of questions about our 'current capabilities.' Asking for a friend of course. Couple of days later I get a call from an Amsterdam Lawyer working out of the Emirates. Was crickets after that and

I figure they passed us over. Then Friday morning I get a call from him wanting to meet *immediately*, he's already on a plane calling from a layover at Amman, he's inbound to JFK and wants to meet Saturday evening.

"If WhiteSquare is behind Anders, who's their client?" asked Mad.

"Ask me one on sports?" retorted Alex in answer. "Logically it would be Foster himself, trying to get the photos back, but he has plenty of private muscle. Admittedly they're mostly John Wayne wannabes. His fixer, Keith Sheppard, is pretty competent. The rest are Ex FBI, ex-cops, ex-military. He's probably got friends who could get him in the door with WhiteSquare but Foster's a home-brew kind of guy when it comes to security. So logically I suppose it's the other side. Or some foreign actor that wants to get him in a hammerlock."

The woman and her admirers were leaving now, the phrase "competitive offer" the punch line of a joke as they rose for a polite embrace. Overhead the brown ceiling fans beat the fading sound back around them, each table its own isolated island.

The drink arrived and Madison literally downed it without coming up for air.

"How ladylike," said Alex. "This seems like running down old gossip but with it coming out of the Emirates I've got to wonder if we're getting in over our heads."

"I've got some friends that need money bad," said Mad, still holding the empty glass. "I could use the bonus for this. And we're not committing espionage. It's not state secrets. It's a criminal investigation. And it's you and it's me, so we know what we're going to fucking do. What's our next move?" she sat down the glass and waved at the waiter. "Aside from not tipping off these John Wayne types that we're looking for nudie pictures of their boss balls deep in his daughter?"

"Fuck if I know. Suppose we'll get Jeremy to see where this *Post* reporter is, you can catch up with him, get the straight story."

"Why not you, you're the ex-journalist, he ought to bond with you?"

"As an ex-Journalist, I can say with some faith that he'd rather meet the pretty girl. Anyway, I got plans with Nadine this week. She's already complaining. I don't need to stand her up, make it worse for m'sef."

"If he's not local, get me tickets for Monday, I've got a family thing tomorrow."

Alex was lost in his phone, probably sending Jeremy instructions. The front room had thinned a little and she was left alone with the faces on the wall.

The face she'd avoided so far was between Batman's crotch and former WRC Television Manager David Nuell who would go on to *E.T.* and *Extra*. The smiling face of then Representative, now Senator Colleen Warner, the former Assistant United States Attorney for the District of Columbia. In the summer of Mad's Junior year, Warner was already eyeing a House race and working up law cred. The winter of 05-

06' was a good time to make a show of throwing the book at some of the people who had wrecked the economy so she could remind everyone of that when she took the same investment banking and hedge fund money as every other candidate.

Mad had already known that Daddy might have to go to jail for a while and that fact had twisted her life around. He might be away for more than a year, miss her graduation, but she was a big girl and would somehow face up to that.

It wasn't a good time to be a white collar criminal. Two years before in Manhattan, Tim Rigas of Adelphia had gotten 20 years, and the Second Circuit had just handed down a quarter century to Bernard Ebbers.

Warner had been frustrated that the D.C.C. trial of Justin Drinker had been largely overshadowed by the Southern District of Texas Trial of Enron's Jeffrey Skilling, which went down nearly simultaneously. She'd pushed for a harsh sentence to make sure she got at least one headline, may have walked away satisfied with the 18 she dealt Madison's father.

There was no parole from federal prison.

Want more?

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