

Market Forces

By
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It's All About The Business

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Needless to say the events and characters in this story are entirely fictional. No women were harmed in the production of this tale. ☺

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Preamble : Removal Men

Rebecca Hales was tired. It had been a long flight. She dragged her trolley bag through the front door of the flat she shared with her boyfriend. "Larry?" she called, not really expecting him to be there. No reply. Then she saw the note on the hall table. "Hi Hun, welcome back," it said. "I'm up in town tonight. Call me tomorrow when you get back, we'll do lunch if you're not too tired." She looked at her watch. Half past nine. Time enough to have a really good soak in the bath and then decide. She took off her uniform forage cap and tossed it down onto the table. She'd flown for four airlines over the last eight years and uniforms for cabin staff had got no less stupid. Always these terrible heavy jackets, shapeless skirts and always the stupid hats. She shook her hair loose and kicked off her shoes. "Yes," she thought, "a bath before anything else."

Her intentions were interrupted by a ring at the door. Almost without thinking she reached out and opened it. Outside stood two men in dark blue overalls. The taller one of the two, smiled and pulled his cap from a mass of black curly hair. "Ms Hales?" he said, "Ms Rebecca Hales?"

Rebecca nodded, puzzled.

"Blue Box : Archive Storage and Removals." He said, gesturing to a pile of bright blue, flat-packed, plastic crates stacked on the wheeled trolley being pushed by his colleague.

"I don't think so," Rebecca said. "I'm not planning on moving and I don't have anything that needs to go to storage."

The curly haired guy looked puzzled too. He scratched the back of his head. "I'm sorry there must have been some sort of mistake. Do you mind if I just call the depot to check," he said taking out his mobile phone. He was holding it in front of him, pointing directly at her. She thought nothing of it at first. Then she said "Why are you wearing latex gloves?"

He tapped out a sequence of numbers on the keypad. There was a quiet hiss. Rebecca looked down in surprise as the dart hit her. She gave out a short "Oh!" at the sudden pricking sensation. A tiny scarlet stain spread out around where the dart had pinned her white blouse to her belly. The chemical took effect quickly, her knees buckled under her own weight and she toppled forward into the hands of the curly haired man. He lowered her gently to the floor.

She was conscious, aware, but unable to move. He took her under the arms and pulled her back into the apartment. His colleague leant down and plucked the dart from her. This time she didn't feel a thing. "Very neat," he said, turning it over in his hand. "Very neat indeed."

The curly headed man was rummaging through Rebecca's handbag. "Be careful you don't scratch yourself with that," he said. "I don't want to have to carry you out." He pulled out a small, laminated photo-id on a silver chain. "Rebecca Hales, Atlantic Airlines, Cabin Crew," it said. He held the photo against her face. "That's her all right. Best to be sure."

"OK," said the other, as he started turning the flat-packs into the crates they were intended to be. "I'd have settled for this though." He pointed to the badge on her jacket lapel that said 'Rebecca Hales, Purser' with small replicas of the French and German flags as indicators of the languages she spoke. "Time to wrap and pack, I guess." He pulled Rebecca up into a sitting position, supporting her against his body. She could only watch as he reached around her and first wrapped duct tape around her ankles fixing them together and then did the same for her wrists.

The curly headed man emerged from the bedroom carrying a pile of her clothes. He put them into one of the crates and tossed something to the other man. "She shouldn't need much of a muffler, but you might as well gag her properly." Rebecca felt the man prise open her unresisting mouth and push a wad of cloth between her lips.

He pulled tape across her lips sealing the cloth in her mouth, half choking her. "You just love gagging them with their own panties don't you?" he said and laughed. Rebecca still had no control over her muscles. The man wound more tape around her fingers this time and then bent her over, first taping her wrists to her ankles and then running tape behind her knees and around the back of her neck pulling her head forward onto her knees. She knew that even if her muscles would do as she willed she could do nothing to escape the embrace of the tape.

As the tape was pulled around her limbs she was aware that the other man was gathering up more of her belongings and dumping them in crates. "Pack up your dirty looks, your songs that have no hooks..." He's singing, she thought... "your stacks of Modern Screen, your portrait of the queen," ... What the hell is going on ... "Da dada dad da-da, Da dada dad da-da," The tape was jerked tighter as a length went around her calves and back bundling her up into a ball. "You're headed that a-way. You're moving out today."

Her assailant called out. "She's ready. Have you got everything?"

"Yeah. Let's put her in her box." He gripped her at the ankles, the other man lifted her from behind and she was lowered into the crate that sat on the trolley. The curly haired man tossed in her shoes, her hat and her handbag before fitting the lid of the crate. Rebecca heard the clack of the other crates being stacked on top of her own. The trolley began to move. As it bounced out of the door and up the ramp into the truck her captor was still singing... "So pack your toys away, your pretty boys away, your forty-fives away, your alibis away, your silly lies away, your old tie-dyes away, your one more tries away. You're moving out today."

Chapter 1 : Lunch

I was sitting in my office at Saleware. The sign on the door said "Marketing Director". I was feeling surprisingly fit after the previous evening. That's the worst of customer hospitality events, I think. You always end up drinking more than you should – just in the interests of keeping the customers happy. And of course as the host you've got to hang on until the bitter end. I could only have had about three hours sleep.

Still, one good thing - I was amazed that I didn't have the least sign of a hang over.

Everything seemed really great. In fact I felt really sharp and...

It was then that my brain ran into a brick wall as the alcohol finally caught up with me.

Five minutes later I was sitting at my desk with my head in my hands and a glass of seltzer fizzing noisily in front of me, courtesy of my secretary. I wasn't in the best of moods when she put her head around the door five minutes later and pointed at the phone. "Can you pick this up," she said, with a grin "I didn't think you want me to ring through - all things considered."

I nodded, grateful for the consideration, and picked up the receiver. It sounded like a thousand angry snakes were hissing down the wires. I winced and moved the receiver away from my ear as the voice at the other end boomed out. "Morning," it said. "Clegg here. We spoke last night. Thought you did a good job on the event. Wondered if you might be interested in a proposition."

The good thing about Clegg's staccato delivery was at least I didn't have to cope with following long sentences. He didn't wait for an answer.

"Good, good. Thought you'd like some lunch. I'll be at my club, The Crescent. Come over about 1 o'clock. See you then."

The clunk of the receiver heralded blissful silence.

I'd only met Clegg for the first time the previous evening. His company had installed our software earlier on in the year. I ran the marketing for SaleWare – it's the UK end of a US software company specialising in systems for distribution businesses, merchants, wholesalers, that sort of thing. Anyway we like to do profiles of our customers when the systems have been in and running for a while. Clegg's company hadn't been keen so I'd invited him along to a party we were having to launch the new version. I hadn't really expected him to come but he'd been there large as life and, if the squeals of some of the girls we had on hand to ease the evening along were anything to go by, twice as willing.

He managed to avoid any discussion of a profile and then I got drawn into a debate on the merits of some particularly abstruse new feature with one of our more tiresome clients. I took a vodka or two to numb the conversation. I guess that started the down-hill road to my current condition.

I climbed out of the taxi as it stopped in the middle of a Georgian terrace of houses ranged in an elegant curve. A very small sign on a brass plate on some railings said "The Crescent". Some steps led down to a basement entrance.

The woman standing at the desk just inside the doorway peered over her spectacles as I arrived. "I don't believe you're a member," she said, suspiciously. I really wasn't in the mood for complicated power games, though looking at her in her well fitting, sharply tailored suit and crisp blouse I might have been encouraged to other activities when in my normal state of health.

"Mr Clegg," I replied. "I'm a guest of Mr Frederick Clegg."

The woman's look changed instantly to one of ingratiating pleasantness. "Of course," she said. "Do come this way. I'll show you through myself." She ushered me across the dining room. It was a rather more modern setting than I'd have expected for Clegg – I'd have thought deep padded seats and tapestries on the wall were more his style; this was all bare wood and steel. We arrived at the door to a private room and she knocked. I heard Clegg's voice boom out, "Come!"

The woman opened the door and showed me in. "Your guest, Mr Clegg," she said quietly.

"Excellent," Clegg smiled getting up and extending his hand to me. "Thank you, Hermione, give us a few minutes and then we'll order."

"Of course," she said, smiling as she left the room.

Clegg watched the door close. "Snooty bitch," he said. Hope she didn't give you too hard a time."

"Well, no," I started but Clegg cut in.

"Good, good. Now let me get to the point. You've done a good job for SaleWare. I'd like you to come and do the same for me."

"That's certainly coming to the point Mr Clegg," I replied, startled by his bluntness.

"That's me," said Clegg. "Don't believe in wasting time. My business, distribution and selling. World's changing. Too many suppliers, too much competition, too few customers. People tell me I need some of this marketing stuff. Maybe they're right. You seem like the man to do it. Talked to some people that know you. They seem to agree. So what do you think?"

"Well, Mr Clegg apart from the fact that I don't know you, I don't know your company, I don't know your products or your customers and I have a perfectly good job at the moment; I can't think of a single reason to say no."

"Capital, capital," beamed Clegg, "you'll need a sense of humour. Do you want some food or are you still feeling frail?"

He tossed a menu towards me. I looked down at the food on offer. It all looked appetising but none of it appealed just then. "I think I'll pass, if you don't mind."

A waitress appeared, blonde, coolly dressed in charcoal grey shirt, tie and skirt with a black apron over it. She didn't say anything but took out her pad. Clegg ordered a gravadlax starter followed by some monkfish. "Mineral water all right for you?" he asked peering across at me.

"Mmm, sure," I responded.

Clegg talked almost continuously about his views on business. He barely paused when first the starter and then the main course arrived. He talked and talked but I felt that the more he said the less I knew about what it was that his business did. He obviously enjoyed the company of women though as he kept up a suggestive banter with the waitress whenever she appeared.

The waitress reappeared with desert menus. Hermione came back into the room as well. Clegg leant back in his chair and turned towards Hermione. "I'll have my usual," he said. "My friend here will have a sherbet." He turned back towards me. "Trust me on this one."

Without a word and to my astonishment, Hermione pulled one of the high backed chairs from the table bent forward over the back and flipped up her skirt to reveal her naked rump. Clegg got up from the table unbuckling his belt and unzipping his fly. I looked on in disbelief. As I was doing so, the blonde waitress dropped to her knees beside me and, with practised skill, unzipped my fly, pulled out my cock and had it in her mouth almost before I could react. A teasing, nibbling, sucking followed demonstrating her abilities as a fellatrix in a way that quite took my mind off of my hangover. Clegg, meanwhile, was working away at Hermione from behind her back, squeezing and pinching at her tits by reaching around her. He carried on with evident pleasure until he came with a grunt and turned to me with a smile. "Enjoying your desert?" he asked as the waitress finally brought me to orgasm.

The waitress zipped my fly and got up from her knees as Clegg, backed away from Hermione. The two girls left us. Clegg standing with his trousers still around his ankles, poured a brandy for each of us and passed one to me.

I nodded in thanks for both the brandy and the desert. It hadn't been what I expected but my own firm was hardly above offering similar inducements if the situation needed it and I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth or to look a gift mouth in the mouth either. "Mr Clegg, I have to admit that the, shall we say, fringe benefits offered by your company seem attractive. But I still don't understand what it is you buy or sell."

"I'm sorry, old chap. I should have made it plainer - don't mean to lead you up the garden path. It's quite simple, really it is. Probably one of the oldest commodities on the planet."

"Uh,, huh," I said, "and that is...?"

"Women, old chap, women."

I choked on my brandy in disbelief. "You must be joking," I exclaimed but I could see from his face that he wasn't. In fact he looked pained at the suggestion. "I'm sorry Mr Clegg, I might be interested in a career move but I don't think I'd consider working as a pimp. Prostitution is hardly a legitimate line of business."

Clegg tried to smooth me over. "I do believe you should think carefully about this. It's not such an extraordinary career move. Some would claim that pimping is the ultimate form of marketing. Besides, I'm not really talking about prostitution, it's more about trading - we're a distribution company, I suppose. Let me give you an example of some of our stock." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a slim folder. He passed it across to me. I opened it.

Inside the folder were a series of photographs, all of Rebecca. One thing that was clear from them was that Clegg was quite ruthless in his treatment of his merchandise. Poor 'Becca was standing in a room somewhere. Her wrists were manacled and her arms were chained above her head. She been gagged - a bright red ball was wedged between her teeth. I assumed she'd been picked her up on the way back from the airport - she was still wearing her uniform, or at least some of it. Her blouse was torn open, one breast bare. Her skirt had been ripped as well, the dark welt at the top of her tights clearly visible where the side seam had been torn from hem to hip. Her hat was still perched incongruously on her head. She was looking pretty sorry for herself. "I suppose this is blackmail," I said to Clegg.

"Well, let's say it's more a sort of 'golden hello'. If you're going to work for us we'd like to feel that you were fully committed, at least until you've had the opportunity to demonstrate your value."

Chapter 2 : An Organisation

I looked again at the photographs. I'd often fantasised about having Rebecca like that but somehow things had never worked out that way. I handed the photographs back to Clegg.

"There's only one trouble with your suggestion though," I said as I pulled an envelop from my own jacket, took out the sheet of paper within and handed it to Clegg.

He peered at it and read it out laughing, "Rebecca, I'm sorry. This will be a shock but there's no easy way to say it. I think we should end it. It's not your fault. I guess I'm just not ready for the sort of steady life I think you are looking for." He tossed the paper back to me. "Oh well, our intelligence isn't as faultless it seems. Still it seems like we've done you a favour. Never easy saying good bye is it? And if you're looking for a less steady life then working for us would have a lot to commend it. I mean, it's not like I was asking you to join a tobacco company or something."

For some reason I found myself warming to Clegg. "All right I said, tell me more. Well at least tell me as much as you feel able to without having to kill me if I don't decide to go along with you."

Clegg grinned. "Excellent," he said, pulling up his trousers. "Have another brandy, it's the best cure I know for a hangover. If you're sitting comfortably, then I'll begin."

Clegg started with a question. "How much do you know about slavery today?"

It was a bizarre question as a continuation of a bizarre encounter but I responded as best I could. "Err, not much. I guess these days I mainly associate it with eastern block countries, trafficking women into the west, women kept in prostitution by drugs or threats of exposure to immigration authorities, that sort of thing. Look is this really a safe place to discuss all this?"

Clegg smiled. "Oh yes," he said. "When I said this was my club, I didn't mean that I was a member. It's useful to have a base in London and the staff are very discreet." He went on. "Well, what you say is true but that's very much what I guess you marketing types call the bottom end of the market. Not my area at all. Least ways not as far as the market goes; I've no objection to Hermione's bottom, none at all." He grinned. "No, the area that I'm interested in is rather more sophisticated, shall we say, and with rather higher rewards."

"But slavery nevertheless?"

"Yes, I won't deny it. It is very definitely about the trafficking of women. Collected, rather as young Rebecca has been, prepared for their new lives and sold on. Like all trading businesses mine has its costs, its revenue and, I'm pleased to say, its profits. Most of our activity is concerned with the collection side, lots of research for the most part, although occasionally we'll pick up inventory if the opportunity presents itself. We have one small preparation centre."

"Preparation?"

"Well, you can guess how it is. Take Rebecca for instance. I imagine she's fairly sexually experienced?"

I gave an affirmative grunt, recalling some energetic evenings and week-ends over the last year. "Yeah, pretty much."

"OK. Even so she won't be used to the idea of being available as and when required. I'm afraid that today's young women have developed a sense of independence that is not always conducive to our requirements. As and when required is what our clients expect. And how required come to that. She'll need time to get used to that idea – our clients can be quite demanding – so she'll definitely need time. And some encouragement. There's a rather secluded location we use for that. We don't do a lot of preparation - we're not what you'd call in the mass market and many of our clients like them still to have a few rough edges to be smoothed out by themselves."

"So, just the one preparation centre?"

"Yes. And then there's the sales centre."

"What, like a car showroom? You're joking."

"No, not joking. And yes, it is pretty much like a car showroom. Especially when we're running an auction. Most go of the stock is for private sale these days – a lot are commissioned collections anyway. That's where the buyer specifies the inventory and we arrange as requested. We still have the occasional auction, though."

"Your clients?"

"Wealthy, of course. Male, mostly though there are exceptions. I think every continent is represented though there's a lot more activity in some areas than others. You do need a certain amount of space and privacy if you're going to keep slaves successfully. They're not the easiest of pets, as you can imagine."

"And your problem with your business is?"

"Like I said, I think I need some of this marketing stuff. We're successful but I'm not sure we'll go on being successful. We've lost a few clients recently. It's always hard to find out why but I get the idea that they're getting a better service somewhere

else. Not that we're bad, almost like someone else is better, if you know what I mean. I'd want you to come in, tell us what we ought to be doing and then see it through."

"It's probably the most bizarre proposition that I've ever had."

"That doesn't altogether surprise me," Clegg smiled. "We may operate like an ordinary business but I can hardly pretend that we are. Almost every thing we do is illegal – that is apart from our tax and accounts; never sensible to upset the revenue men, eh? Still it's also likely to be the most lucrative proposition you've had. If your Rebecca isn't going to prove a point of leverage then you should at least get a finder's fee for her – that'll come in at \$10,000 for a start."

"That's a finder's fee?"

"Well, she's an attractive piece. Useful skills too. There'll be no problem in selling her on and she won't need too much training, not with the job she's been doing up until now. We'll probably find a role for her with someone flying their own private jet. There's money in this business Larry, but I do it for the love of it, really. We'll put together a good deal but you'll find it fun, mark my words."

"Yes, I can see that," I said. "More fun than SaleWare anyway. Look I've got a couple of good marketing execs over there that I'd like to bring along with me. They're good girls; smart and hard-working."

"I thought we'd just start with you Larry, if that's OK," said Clegg. "Let's see how it goes. If we need more help I'm sure we can pick your girls up later on."

"Ah, I see what you mean," I said. It probably wasn't fair to think about involving them, though I had to admit that at least one of them would be very much improved by the type of gag that had been used on Rebecca. "OK," I said taking a deep breath. "How do I start?"

Chapter 3 : On A Mission

Clegg and I discussed it. I always like to get a feeling for the business overall before I jump to any conclusions. Clegg agreed and promised to set things up. "You'd better start at the sharp end," he said. "I'll get you out with one of the snatch teams."

To say I was surprised was putting it mildly. I'd never thought of myself as a law breaker, well not apart from illegal parking and speeding. Still Clegg wasn't the sort to beat around the bush and I guessed he'd want to discover if I could stomach this stuff fairly quickly. Actually I was more worried about what would happen if I found out I couldn't – or strictly speaking if he found out that I found out....

Not surprisingly the snatch team wasn't keen on having a stranger, and a beginner at that, along but Clegg had been pretty insistent when he called them and told them I'd be joining them.

A week later I was sitting in the passenger seat of a nondescript van as we pulled up at a garage. It was a quarter to midnight, it was dark; we were the only vehicle on the forecourt.

The driver turned to me. "Just don't fucking foul this up, we've been setting this one up for ages," he said conversationally. I tried to look unimpressed. He climbed out and went to the diesel pump. I heard him call into the microphone on the side of the pump. "Hey, can someone give me a hand this pump's not working."

The speaker crackled back. "It should be fine." A girl's voice. "Try again"

My companion, Harry, spoke again. "No, not a thing."

More crackles. "Hang on I'll come and have a look." That was my cue, I shuffled across to the driver's seat. I watched as the girl locked the shop behind her and then half walked, half ran towards us, walking round the van to where Harry was standing by the pump. I just heard a muffled squeak, a thump and the sound of the rear doors opening and closing. Then there was a slap on the other side of the panel behind my back and Harry's voice calling, "Go!"

I drove off, slowly and carefully as we'd agreed. We'd gone about five miles I guess when there was another thump on the panel behind me. We were out of town by then. I pulled over into a lay-by. As the van stopped I heard Harry get out of the back. A moment later he was climbing in and off we went again. "That seemed pretty easy," I said.

"It is if you prepare enough." Harry's response was terse.

"I mean, it could have been difficult. What if she hadn't come out?"

"She always does. There wasn't any doubt." He pointed to a side road. "Turn down there." The road was dark. I almost missed the gateway on the left hand side. "In here," said Harry. "Over there," he waved, "into the barn." I drove in through the open doors and stopped the van. "Come and look at what we caught," said Harry, getting out. He was more relaxed now, but he still had his hand on the butt of the pistol in his waistband as he pulled open the van's doors.

He needn't have worried. Our captive – well I felt I'd helped a bit – was lying, face down, on the floor of the van. I climbed in. Harry had done a thorough job on her with duct tape. Several turns were wrapped around her ankles and above her knees. There was more on her wrists and he'd even taped her hands together wrapping tape around her fingers as well. She was quite slightly built, she'd obviously given Harry no trouble. He turned her over. The tape had been used to good effect to gag and blindfold her as well. Her face was almost covered with the grey, shiny tape, bulges beneath it made clear that he'd packed her mouth and covered her eyes with pads before using the tape. All that could be seen of the girl's face was her nose. She was breathing, slowly, quietly, apparently trying to listen for clues of where she might be but unable to hear much because of the tape that covered her ears.

"Well, what do you think?" asked Harry.

I looked her over. She was slim, wearing a pair of tight, low cut jeans. Her pink sweat top was stretched tight across small breasts by the way the tape was wrapped around her chest and arms. The top stopped inches short of the waist band of her trousers showing off a taught belly that you could bounce a coin off and a silver ring through a piercing in her navel. She'd evidently tried to struggle a bit during her ride - one of her trainers had got kicked off - but she'd made no impact on her bonds. With all the tape on her head it was difficult to tell anything much apart from the fact that her short, spiky, blonde hair wasn't naturally that colour. The tabard she wore as her one concession to a fuel company uniform was a dull, brown, nylon material that clashed with the pink top. A badge on her lapel said "E6 Fuel Stops – Happy To Help" and her name, I assumed, "Jackie".

"She seems safe and sound. Is there much call for fuel pump attendants?"

Harry grunted, bent down over the girl and dragged her to the tail of the van. She squealed and tried to kick out. Without much effort he hoisted her over his shoulder. "Don't be fooled by appearances. Let's get her stowed, we'll have a drink and I'll fill you in." As Harry stood up Jackie was struggling ineffectually and trying to kick with her bound legs. A door opened at the back of the barn.

In shuffled a little old lady of about seventy. She wore a rather shabby grey dress with a shawl about her shoulders. She was carrying a small wicker shopping basket. "Hello Harold," she said warmly. "Have you had a nice evening? I see you've brought another guest to stay for a while. I'll settle her in if you like."

Harry put Jackie back down on her feet. Pulling a knife from his pocket he sliced through the tape that bound her ankles. The little old lady walked up to her. "You come along with me, dear," she said quietly. Jackie turned towards the sound of her voice and gave a puzzled, gagged, squawk. She tried to kick out. The little old lady gave a sigh and took a small pistol from her basket. Beneath I could see an extraordinary array of cuffs, shackles and gags. "Don't be stupid, you dumb little cunt, this is a gun" the little old lady hissed, jabbing the pistol against Jackie's ribs and grabbing her arm. The turning to the two of us, she smiled again. "Why don't you boys go and have a drink?"

"Sure thing, granny," said Harry.

I followed him out of the barn and into the farmhouse beside it. Minutes later we were sat beside a roaring log fire, each with a glass of scotch in our hands. "So?" said Harry.

"Like I said. Neat enough I guess but I'm not sure why you picked this one up."

"Intelligence," he said, "that's the answer in this job. This one's going to be a real asset. The garage job is just a fill-in for her; paying off her student loan. She's an undergraduate at the university. Third year studying computer science and mathematics. She's been working on encryption algorithms. This one's not for trading, we'll keep her in-house. She's going to be very useful."

Still isn't it a risky place for a pick-up? There must have been CCTV on that forecourt.

"Yeah sure. Here look." Harry picked up the TV remote and the old television in the corner of the room flickered into life. He tapped in a few numbers on the control and we were watching a recording of the garage's CCTV, views flicking from the forecourt to the shop and back again. The pictures had been taken the day before – Jackie was standing behind the counter in the shop, numbers at the bottom of the screen gave the date and time as well as the camera number. A man came to the service window. He was pointing to the pump we had been using. Jackie went out to look at the pump and then came back into the shop. "Like I said she always came out," smirked Harry. "Quite a few people had problems with that pump. Very handy, CCTV."

"But how do you do that? Won't that have got pictures of the pick-up?"

"Let's see," said Harry, tapping more buttons. The picture changed. The numbers on the screen indicated 11:40 p.m. No sign of anything on the forecourt, Jackie was behind the counter. The numbers gave a jump. 11:55 p.m. A grey car pulled on to the forecourt and the driver got out to try to use a pump. He looked across to the shop and then walked over to hammer on the service window. Disgusted to get no response, he went back to his car and drove off. Midnight.

"So where are we?"

"There's a terrible flaw with these digital CCTV cameras. IP transmission through to the control room is very convenient but the problem with digital stuff is that it's really easy to intercept and edit. Same goes for the number plate recognition stuff too. Probability is no one will notice the glitch when they view it. We can redo the time stamping so there's no gap. That's the sort of stuff we need young Jackie for."

'Granny' appeared with a beatific smile on her face. "The young lady is all bedded down, boys," she said. "These young girls you seem to pick up with are always so bothered about the accommodation. She was quite a handful, believe me."

"Thanks Granny," Harry said. "We won't be long." He turned to me. "You get to see all that you wanted?"

"Is that it?"

"Pretty much. She'll stay here tonight. She'll move on tomorrow. Granny's got to go out with a load of pigs for market. Young Jackie will share the transport. "We've got a compartment under the floor of the trailer. It smells a bit of course but she's in no position to complain. Then we'll transfer her over to a better truck for the journey to the Prep Centre."

"Somehow I thought there would be more to it. The pick up I mean."

"Oh, sure. This was a straightforward one but we like to make them as simple as we can. It's all in getting the venue and the timing right, I guess. No point in making things difficult for yourself."

"No. Well thanks for that," I said. "Any chance of a lift back to civilization?"

Chapter 4 : Preparation Is Everything

As it happened my visit to the Prep Centre coincided with when the girl I had helped to snatch turned up.

The Prep Centre was a big shed – ‘Distribution Depot’ it said over the outside – sitting like a great white shoe box on the edge of a small airfield. A truck pulled up and backed on to one of three loading docks at the right hand end of the shed. “F.C. Meat Products” it said in large lettering across both doors and beneath it in smaller script, “Prime Quality – Farm Fresh – Organic”, a telephone number and the web site address “www.FC_Meat.co.uk”.

The doors at the back of the truck swung open with a loud clang as they slapped back against the sides of the truck. Inside there were four girls, taped up and gagged, strapped to the back wall of the truck. They were all looking startled and scared. I watched as each of the girls was loaded onto a four wheel trolley. A hook from the frame held them up on tip toe by the tape or rope that joined their elbows behind their backs. The trolleys were rolled off the truck, passing us and off into the depot. Jackie was rolled off first; startled to see Harry and me standing at the end of the truck’s ramp.

“Don’t we need masks?” I said to Harry.

“Oh no,” he said shaking his head as Jackie was pushed away. “No masks except on operations, and only then if there’s a risk that someone other than the target will see us. The boss doesn’t like them. Says they encourage sloppiness – this way it keeps people’s minds on the need to make sure our young ladies don’t wander off. We don’t blindfold them either once they’re here, for the same reason.” Jackie was squeaking quietly into her gag as she was wheeled away.

Next off was a girl in a long, electric blue, strapless evening gown. She was still wearing her jewellery – pearls and diamonds so big they had to be fakes, though I guess they might just have been real. “Hope she enjoyed her party,” Harry grinned. Just like Jackie, her mouth was taped shut, cheeks bulging like an over-fed hamster. “The lads did a good job when they picked this one up. With her mouth stuffed like that there’s no risk of her making a noise. It’s no good just taping over their lips – they’re likely to push the tape off with their tongues if you leave them for long.”

The other two girls looked like they’d been snatched off a tennis court. One in shorts, a blonde, the other, mousey haired, in a short pleated skirt, both in white, both wearing short sleeved tops and trainers. They’d used one trolley for the two of them. Harry leant forward as the trolley came by. He reached out and groped the blonde’s breasts. “These are nice,” he said, squeezing and pinching as the girl tried to struggle away from him. “Not too big, nice and firm. I might get together with you later on.” She looked at him, her eyes wide in terror, as the trolley rolled her away.

“Don’t you have to leave the girls alone, then?” I asked. “I mean, shop-soiled merchandise and all that.”

“Nah,” said Harry. “We’re encouraged to. It lets the girls know what they are in for from day one.”

“That’s it - look cute and be ready for pain ‘Chic and Ow’, we call it –,” said a voice from behind me.

“Bloody hell, Rick, your jokes don’t get any better,” said Harry, turning round “This is Rick, he runs the place. Rick, meet Lawrence – he’s doing some stuff for Mr. C.”

I put my hand out to shake his.

“Great,” he said, with a grin. “When Harry met Larry.”

“Whatever,” responded Harry, “Mr C, thought he should have a look around. Can I leave him with you? I thought I might take up some tennis lessons. See you later, Larry” Without waiting for Rick to reply, he stalked off in pursuit of the trolleys.

Rick gave a snort as he watched him go and then pointed to a door at the other end of the loading dock. “Come on through,” he said, “I’ll give you the grand tour.”

Through the door lay a corridor with a series of doors leading off it. “What’s through here?” I asked. “Cells? Weapons rooms?”

Rick looked almost embarrassed and opened a door revealing a few desks, some computers and two large filing cabinets. “Nothing so exciting along here. Just offices, I’m afraid. All this stuff takes a load of admin. You’ve no idea how much effort we have to put in just to keep track of where the girls are.”

“Uh, huh, I grunted. I wasn’t hard to be unimpressed.

“This, though,” he went to open another door, “is more interesting.” The room inside was a dark corridor. From it viewing panels looked into a series of rooms each of which seemed to hold a captive woman. “Come on in – these are one way mirrors in the cells, the girls can’t see us. Not that it would matter anyway, I guess.”

We stood beside the panel looking into the room that held the party girl. Under the panel was a frame which held a card with a number – 06/034 – and a name - Vivienne - after it in brackets. She'd been stripped of her blue, silk, dress but she was still wearing the underwear she had put on that evening, no doubt in hopes of an intimate encounter different from that which she could soon now expect. She had been left in her silk basque and knickers, together with her stockings and shoes. The tape had been taken off her wrists, elbows and ankles and now all that held her was a chain padlocked to the wall at one end and her ankle at the other. The gag had gone as well but I could see the red rash where they had pulled the tape from her face. The screwed up tape and a wad of cloth lay on the floor beside her. Her cheeks were tear streaked with mascara. Her hair was a mess - she had put her long brown hair up but some of it had come loose in her struggles and now tumbled across her naked shoulder. The room was empty apart from a single, naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling and a small metal bucket.

"OK," said Rick, "this is how it starts. We bring them in here and keep them in one of these rooms for a couple of days. Mostly they think they're being held for ransom for some reason. Two days - three days on their own; then they start to get a bit twitchy. The cells are all wired and video monitored so we can keep an eye on them. Let's have a look in the next one." We took a few steps along the corridor. "This one's been here for a week."

The girl in the cell looked less than twenty years old but a haunted look in her eyes suggested that she had seen more in the last week than in the rest of her young life. '06/022 (Anya)' the label on the frame said. She was completely naked apart from a collar around her neck with a small metal tag hanging from it. Her head had been shaved. She wore the same chain as the girl in the cell next door.

"Watch this," said Rick pressing a button on a panel below the viewing panel. A buzzer could be heard sounding in the cell. Almost at once the girl got to her feet and turned to face the wall we were looking through, she put her hands on her head and looked blankly towards us. "That's pretty good. After a week they're already conditioned to respond to simple instructions like that. It's all part of encouraging them to get used to doing as they are told. When they leave here, they are ready to be trained for whatever specific role they are going to take up. We don't do anything more than get them set up for it."

The girl was standing only a foot from the viewing panel. Red weals were clearly visible across her breasts. "Do they need much 'encouragement' in the early stages," I asked pointing at the marks.

"That's quite mild," Rick said. "We haven't asked her to do anything difficult yet. She'll still be in the state where she thinks she can go along with some things but hold on to some control herself. She'll learn. Of course it's difficult to strike a balance – enough encouragement to get them to comply, not so much that they end up damaged." He pushed the button again, another buzz. She dropped her hands to her sides and then sat down again on the floor. "Each little buzz, each piece of obedience helps reinforce things. We don't mind if it takes a while."

The room alongside held the girl that Harry had gone off in search of. '06/038 (Carol)' her label said. As we walked by she was being manhandled, still bound and gagged, into the cell. Harry followed her into the cell. "Put her ankle chain on," I heard him say, "and then I'll see what those titties are like close up." He turned to the girl. "Don't be upset little cunt," he said, almost affectionately as he reached out a hand and cupped one of her breasts, "you'll have plenty of gentlemen callers while you're here." She tried to pull away from him, earning a slap on the face. He grabbed her by the hair and forced her back against the wall of the cell. Pushing her sports top up over her breasts he started to pinch and squeeze her tits.

"That's pretty much the shape of things here - sex and violence," said Rick as we walked on. By the time we send them on they're ready for what they'll have to cope with."

We walked on passing five or six more cells, all occupied by naked, chained, prisoners. At the end of the corridor a door opened out into a brightly lit lobby area. At a desk to one side, next to what was evidently the door to a parallel corridor serving the cells themselves, a bored guard sat, working away at a cross-word puzzle. Manilla folders were piled up on the desk in three trays, Incoming, Outgoing, Storage. Rick walked across to the desk and picked up one of the folders from the tray marked Storage. "Here you go," he said, passing it to me, "these are the sort of records we keep."

It was the file for the girl I had helped capture. On the front the word "collected" had been stamped in red. Inside the front cover was a full face photo and a form listing a set of basic data; name, age, height and weight, vital statistics, home address, work place. There was space for details of medical conditions, educational qualifications, close associates. In the rest of the file were a series of what seemed to be surveillance reports. There were more photos of Jackie – her in a coffee shop chatting into her mobile phone, emerging from a clothes shop clutching a large carrier bag and wearing a big smile, skipping up the steps of the university library. The final document in the file was a short memo which said. "Subject authorised for collection for internal use. Not for re-sale. FC." I handed it back.

"You see, we try to run a professional operation."

"Sure," I said, "why wouldn't you?"

Rick showed me through another door. "These are the research facilities," he said. It looked just like another room full of computers to me. "We do some from here, most of the major stuff is done elsewhere but if we've got an opportunity for a pick up we can carry out the basic checks – make sure they won't be missed too quickly, that sort of thing."

"Harry said you use video surveillance in research,"

"Oh sure, we keep any thing for the current projects on a video server farm – we can call up anything we've got at one of these work stations. Use it for planning or briefing the snatch squad as we need to. Here, look," he scrolled down a list of numbers, until he picked out "05/209 (Caroline)". A tap on the keyboard brought up a further list, dates, times, locations. "These are all cross referenced as we collect them. Some of the footage is from intercepted public systems, sometimes it's our own concealed cameras. Another tap on the button and the file started to play. It was a bar. Sitting at it staring at a half empty glass was a man. From the back it could have been anyone. "That's Harry," said my host. He always likes at least one chance to get up close to the target. Says you can't really judge weight, agility, stuff like that, from video.

A girl came into the bar, the camera lens zoomed in on her, out of focus for a moment. She was a blonde, wearing a v-neck sweater that clung tightly to a pair of tits as round as grapefruit. She walked passed the camera and it panned back, following her across the bar. Her arse was as nicely rounded as her tits. The bar was empty but she stood right next to Harry. He looked up as she reached the bar. There was no sign of the barman. She turned to Harry, "Can I get a drink here?" she asked.

"I guess," Harry replied. "I got this in living memory. You don't look like the kind of girl anyone would let go short of a drink for long."

"Well, thank you kind sir," Caroline answered. She was twisting a lock of her hair in her fingers as she talked, looking straight at Harry. The barman came into shot. She didn't notice him; she was just looking at Harry. They talked some more. She was flirting, he was flirting back.

He looked at his watch and apologised. "Sorry, I have to go," he said.

"I may still be here later," she said.

"That would be great, I'll maybe get back." He left her. She turned to the barman and ordered a vodka and tonic. He served her. The video stopped.

"And then?" I said. Rick picks another file further down the list. The video started up again. This time it was dark, out of doors. Harry was standing at the back of a large saloon car. He lifted up the lid of the boot. The camera zoomed in. It was Caroline. She was unconscious; gagged with silver tape that reflects the lights from the video camera. The same tape was wound around her chest and arms, just below her tits. It dragged her sweater tight across her breasts making them look even fuller and firmer than they did before. Harry smiled at the camera and dropped the lid of the boot. The video stops.

"Its not just video though," Rick says selecting another file. It was Caroline voice again. This time she sounded like she was on the phone. She's talking to an answering machine

"Hey," she said. "I thought I'd call you. Just popped back to the room. I met this cute guy and ... well you know me....let's see how it goes. Wish me luck." The phone went dead.

"Phone tap?" I said.

"Uhhuh," says Rick. "Phone taps, bugs, anything really to get the background or limit the risks. With that one we could hack the machine and wipe the message. Harry doesn't like leaving loose ends." He smiled. "The other thing we do is to record all the debriefing sessions we do here. Here, watch this..." He clicked on a file labelled "05/224 (Jane)". The video had been shot in a small room with a single chair. Behind the chair was a door. It opened and two men pushed a tall blonde girl into the room. She was wearing a white blouse and a straight black skirt. She was wearing heels – they made her stand taller than the two men. Her hair was quite short, cut close to her head giving her a curiously punkish look that contrasted with her conservative clothes. She was gagged. They sat her on the chair and tied her to it. They took off her gag and left the room. She was looking around to left and right. A disembodied voice said, "Hello, Jane." She looked startled, staring around herself, looking for the source of the voice.

"Where are you?" she sad. "Why am I here? You've got to let me go. There must be some mistake."

The voice seems to sympathise with her. "Don't worry, Jane," it said, "There are mistakes sometimes. I'm sure if there's any mistake we can soon sort it out. Perhaps you can help me?"

"Oh," Jane said, puzzled. "Help you? Why should I help you? Why don't you let me go?"

"Well, Jane, I could but then if there hadn't been a mistake – then that wouldn't be right would it?"

Jane seemed confused. "Err, no, I guess not but you can't have meant to kidnap me."

"As I say, it's possible that a mistake has been made. Let me ask you some questions. In your office, tell me, are you the only senior secretary?"

"Oh no, there's four of us."

"Ah, perhaps that's the problem. Tell me about the others."

"The others. Ah – there's Angie. Actually she looks a bit like me, blonde too but a bit shorter. Her parents are quite wealthy. They've got a yacht, she goes off for long weekends, we never know whether she's coming back on Mondays but she doesn't seem to care – says she doesn't really need the money. You must have meant to kidnap her. Or, Louise. Oh, no I shouldn't be telling you this."

"It's all right. You're just helping me out. We have to correct any mistakes, don't we?"

"I, I guess so, well, Louise she's"

Rick turned down the volume. "Will you look at that," he says. "She's falling over herself to find something that will let her get free. We'll get enough information to pick up two of her three friends over the next couple of weeks. You get that sometimes. If they don't resist then often they'll be really cooperative. Makes our job easy but, hah," He flicked the video off in disgust. "I'm glad I haven't got friends like that. Anyway, where have we got to?" He scratched his head and thought for a moment. OK let's see. You've seen research, the reception cells, a little bit on debriefing, something about the records and admin. I guess you should see something of the processing that goes on after arrival."

"OK," I said, "lead on."

Rick lead the way back out into the lobby. Alongside the desk that guarded the entrance to the cells were three other doors, each labelled with clear signs, Evaluation, Orientation, Despatch. As we got back to the desk Jackie, now naked but still bound, was hustled through the door from the cells. "Ah, here's your little friend," Rick said, picking up her file. "Why don't we go watch as some of the blank spaces in her profile get filled in."

Jackie was kicking and struggling against the two men holding her as she was half pulled, half thrown through the door marked "Evaluation". We followed her. Beyond the door was a small doctor's surgery. As we came in one of the men called, "Hey, Rick, since you've got her file can you note the scores down?"

"Sure," Rick replied. Jackie was squealing as they pushed her onto a pair of scales in one corner of the surgery.

"Stop struggling, cunt," barked the man, cuffing her and sending her reeling against the wall. Dazed, she stood as still as she could on the scales. "115lbs," he called out to Rick. He grabbed her by the arm and pushed her back against a height scale on the wall. "5 feet four."

The other man picked up a tape measure from the desk and pulled it around her chest, waist and hips. "34, 22, 32," he called out to Rick. "Looks like a B cup to me."

Rick was noting down the details as a blonde woman in a white coat came in. "Another one?" she asked. "Where's the file?"

"Here you go, Doc" said Rick passing it to her. He gestured towards me. "This is ..." he began.

"I know. Well don't get in the way either of you." She turned towards Jackie, "Put her on the couch," she said and then walked across to stand beside her. "Now, young lady" she said quietly. "I need a blood sample and a urine sample. You can either help me or you can be difficult but you won't like how I take the urine sample if it comes to that. OK?"

Jackie looked around at the two men, the doctor, Rick and myself. She nodded slowly and grunted an mmphed acceptance through the tape of her gag. The doctor rolled her onto her face and stuck a hypodermic into her arm, She drew off a sample of blood into a small tube. She tossed a stainless steel bedpan onto the couch alongside the girl. The two men knew the drill and lifted the helpless Jackie onto it. "Let's have it," said the doctor. Jackie whimpered and looked around again. The doctor slapped her. "Do it, or I'll get a catheter," she snarled.

Jackie whimpered again as the ringing sound of her pee hitting the steel of the pan confirmed her compliance. "Why the urine sample?" I asked.

"Pregnancy test," the doctor replied as Jackie was pulled off from the pan. "We don't get many but it complicates things if we don't know early on." She reached for a small jar on her desk and pulled a pair of disposable rubber gloves from a box and wiped off Jackie with a wad of tissue. "On the other hand," she went on, "you'd be surprised how often I find little trophies hidden in the most unusual places. Take her gag off."

One of the men pulled the tape from her mouth, she cried out as the tape ripped away from her skin. He prised out the wad of sponge that had been filling her mouth. She barely had the chance to squeal before the doctor crammed a Whitehead gag into her mouth, ratcheting it open to force her jaws apart. Picking up a torch she peered into Jackie's mouth, running her fingers

inside. Apparently satisfied, she turned her attention elsewhere, pushing Jackie back onto the couch and plunging her fingers into the girl's vagina. Jackie groaned as the doctor's fingers probed inside her. The doctor ignored her complaints and rolled her over once again, this time probing with her fingers inside the girl's anus. More gagged whimpers accompanied the doctor's actions. The doctor stood up and snapped off her latex gloves. She turned to the two men. "Any sign of medication?"

"No, nothing we could see in her handbag," one of them replied. "A half used pack of contraceptive pills and some headache tablets was all she had that looked medical."

"Fine," she noted down some comments in the file and handed it back to Jackie's guards. "I'll add the test results later. You can put her back in the cells now." Jackie was pulled from the couch and hustled away.

"Thanks, Doc," Rick said. "That'll do us for now, I think. You OK with that Larry?"

"Yeah, sure," I said, although it wasn't clear how this was helping yet.

"OK," said Rick, "let's go look at Orientation and Despatch."

Chapter 5 : Well Begun Is Half Done

Rick showed me through the door marked "Orientation" into another featureless corridor.

"I'm not sure we really need a separate area for this," he said. "We could just as easily do their training down in the reception block. Still we've got the space so I guess it doesn't matter. Anyways, it's just the basics they get put through here; learning to cope with simple commands, that sort of thing. Have a look at this one." He pulled open one of the doors. "She's been here a few days now. Just starting to get the hang of things, she is."

Hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room was a small cage, barely larger than the girl it contained. Inside it knelt a girl, blindfolded and naked, her wrists and ankles shackled to the bars of the cage that held her. It was only as she lifted her head in response to our arrival that I saw her collar and tag and the stewardess cap. I realised it was Rebecca and I saw at once from Rick's grin that he knew who she was as well. "A friend of yours, Mr C tells me," he said.

I nodded. Rebecca, confused and traumatised by her experiences, barely registered our presence. I looked at her feeling sympathetic in one sense but curiously detached in another. Only a week before we had been sharing a bed and yet now, somehow, it seemed quite reasonable to see her like this.

"They all spend some time caged, just to get the hang of what they can look forward too if they don't behave," said Rick, interrupting my thoughts. He swung the cage around. As he did so I could see that a pair of vibrators had been pushed into her and then fixed rigidly to the bars of the cage. He flicked a switch on the side of the cage and the vibrators sprang into life. As they did so Rebecca gave a soft groan and began to wriggle in time with the motorised thrusts. The cage swung right around. "No gag, you'll notice," Rick went on. "She's learning to keep quiet. If she manages to take an hour or so of this without too much moaning she'll be allowed out of the cage for a while."

"Isn't it, well, a bit brutal? I mean is it really necessary to treat them like this?"

"Nah. The way I see it, if we get them orientated properly they get an easier ride with their owners. We can't change the fact that they're going to be owned, but this way it should go better with them. By the time they leave here they've left their previous lives behind. They can cope with what comes next. I tell you, if your paths cross again she won't even recognise you."

"OK," I said, "maybe I just haven't got used to this business yet."

"I know how it is. I was the same at first but there's been a lot of thought put into this whole process. If you like I can have her put in a room for you afterwards. Nothing like getting close to the product for seeing the benefits of the system."

I thought about it for a moment but shook my head. It didn't seem like a great idea just then.

"Please yourself," Rick said. "I might have a go myself, Clegg doesn't mind if we take the odd hour off, providing it benefits some of our guest in one way or another. Anyway, that's basically how we do it. Simple tasks with rewards to reinforce appropriate behaviour. Let's have a look at the next one."

We left Rebecca swinging in her cage trying to cope with her simple task of keeping quiet with the vibrators pulsing away in her pussy and her arse.

"Here's an interesting one," said Rick. He said opening the door to another cell where a naked, girl was kneeling, chained by her collar to a steel pillar in the centre of the room. "This one was a librarian," he ushered me into the cell. "Turned out to be relatively sexually inexperienced when we interviewed her and while that's attractive to some folk most buyers want some basic skills. We use this to train the ones that aren't very capable at oral sex. Look at this."

As we walked around the post I could see that her mouth was round a large artificial phallus that projected from the pillar. She was sucking at it enthusiastically. "Looks to me as if she's learning what she needs to here," I said.

"Yes," said Rick. "And as long as she keeps that up she'll be all right." He saw my puzzled look. "Check out our little book worm's titties," he went on. She had clamps on her nipples which wasn't unusual for the girls in the Prep Centre but from each ran a cable that disappeared into the pillar. Her pace slowed as she tired. Almost at once she squealed and bucked as an electric current shot down the cables. She set to again, using her mouth with renewed energy.

"And if she doesn't there's an electric shock to remind her what she's supposed to be doing? Ouch! How long does she have to keep that up?"

"She'll do an hour today, a bit more tomorrow. We'll increase the time and increase the voltage over a few days. She may not develop much technique but she'll at least develop some stamina and it should cure some of her gag reflex."

"How come?"

"There's a sensor in the tip of the phallus. As long as she keeps it pressed against the back of her throat the shocks take a little longer to develop."

"Impressive engineering," I said.

"Well, that's one of Freddie's personal contributions. He's good at that sort of thing. Seen enough of this?"

"Yes, sure," I said. As we left the cell I heard the girl give another squeal and whimper.

"OK, here's another of Freddie's engineering solutions," he opened another door. Inside four running machines were lined up facing the room's one way mirror. On each a chained, corseted, girl was walking slowly and carefully. "This," Rick said, "we've had to install because girls today just don't know how to walk properly."

"It's not a problem I've really noticed myself," I said.

"No, you wouldn't, but it matters to our customers. Look what they've got on their feet."

Each of the girls was wearing shoes or boots with extreme high heels. Two of them had on shoes with thick platform soles.

"Most of the girls we pick up spend most of their time slobbing around in jeans and wearing trainers. They just don't know how to walk properly in heels and they'll all need to do that when they come up for auction. We don't want them falling off their shoes like Naomi Campbell do we? So we give them some acclimatisation here. They've rarely had any experience of being corseted either. That changes their whole posture so they need to get used to that too."

"I presume they're chained to those treadmills," I said peering more closely. Every so often one of the girls would slow her pace and then give a gagged yelp before stepping out again.

"Uhhuh," Rick responded. "And you'll see that their tits are wired up just like the last girl."

"OK. So how does that work?"

"Do you see - at the back of each treadmill there's a little black box on either side? That's a photo-cell and lamp arrangement. If they slow down and get carried back by the belt they break the beam and zip."

"Zip?"

"A quick shot of electricity through the tits gets them going again. They don't have to be fast, they just have to keep up a steady pace. It seems to work."

"Our Freddie is an ingenious soul." We left the room as the girls walked on.

Rick showed the way to another room. It looked more like the bar of a comfortable hotel than a dungeon cell. Rick sat down on one of the deep padded armchairs. "Strictly speaking this is part of 'Orientation' but it's also somewhere for us guys to take a bit of time off - we give the girls a chance to practice their service skills here. Do you fancy a drink?"

I nodded in acceptance. "Why not?" I said, "I've been in stranger looking bars than this." To myself I thought, stranger looking maybe but probably not, actually, stranger. Remembering what Clegg's club had been like in London, I hardly thought that this would be any less bizarre.

I wasn't disappointed. Rick pressed a button. I response a door swung open and one of the girls teetered in on stilt high heels, evidently she had at least succeeded in completing that aspect of the training. In front of her she pushed a trolley containing an array of drinks and glasses. I guess "high fetish" would describe the look. Her head was encased in a skin tight hood of latex so thin that her features could be clearly made out beneath it, as could the fact that her mouth was filled with a jaw-breaking ball gag. Her head was held erect by a broad leather collar locked about her neck with her number tag tangling from it. Her breasts were bared, her only other garments, a waist cinching corset and a leather single sleeve binder that held her arms locked behind her back.

As she came up beside our couch I realised that she was pushing the trolley by means of a bar that was fastened to a dildo that was strapped into her, penetrating her vulva.

Another girl followed her into the room. Similarly dressed she also appeared to have a plank strapped to her back. It was only as she knelt in front of us that I realised it was her role to act as our drinks table. Rick picked a beer bottle and glass from the trolley and stood them on the table. "Help yourself," he said waving to the trolley girl. I assumed he meant drink, although the girl's reaction suggested that she was equally expecting me to take advantage of other services.

I restricted myself to joining Rick in a beer. He took a sip from his glass. "These two have been here a couple of week's now," he said. "They're fairly docile. They've learnt to do as they are told, although this one," he reached forward and pinched one of the trolley girl's nipples, "this one still thinks she can decide when she's going to behave and when she isn't. Don't you?"

The girl shook her head slowly, the movement impeded by the rigid collar that she wore.

"Well, that is good news," said Rick, smiling. "We'll be able to get you helping with the training of the new girls, then." The girl looked distressed, shaking her head again. Rick turned back to me. "You have to keep ratcheting things up. As soon as they think they've given in you find a new hurdle for them to jump over. That way you build up the submissive response over time. This one," he pointed to the table, "is doing much better. She's pretty well jumping through any hoops we put in front of her. We'll move her on to her owner within a week."

"She's been bought then?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's not so common now. It used to be that almost all of them were picked up to order so they were bought before we'd grabbed them. Nowadays we're auctioning more and more of them. That's not so good - it's never certain what you'll get for them and the market's been a bit flat lately."

"How come you're not grabbing so many to order?"

"I'm not sure why the commissions have dropped off. I guess there's competitors out there offering better rates. Guys in the Sales Centre would have a better idea, I guess."

I made a mental note to add that to my thinking on Clegg's marketing problems. I needed to remind myself I was supposed to be working, though it was pretty difficult, supping beer in the company of two virtually naked women.

Rick downed the last of his beer. "Anyway, I was going to show you Despatch," he announced, getting to his feet. "Fuck off, sluts," he barked at the girls. The table shuffled slowly, away on all fours, taking care not to dislodge the empty bottles and glasses still balanced on her back. The trolley followed her, each step causing the dildo attached to the trolley handle to push into her cunt. The gag only served to make her muffled whimpers sound more plaintive.

"OK," said Rick. "Let's move on." We stepped out of the room, back into the corridor and on into a loading dock. "Well," he said, gesturing, "this is Despatch. We either ship direct to the customer or via the sales centre. Shipping to the Sales Centre is the easiest of course - it's only about three hours from here by road so all we have to do is make sure the consignments are in here just before the trucks turn up and that they're securely packed. 'Ship to Customer' is a bit more of a challenge. It's usually overseas - airfreight mostly - and the flight times are often ten hours or more. We use standard airfreight containers like these - modified a bit. Here, I'll show you - this one's going out in about an hour."

Rick pulled open the side panel of the container, inside there were two couches set side by side. On the nearer was strapped an almost naked, partly conscious girl. She turned her eyes slowly towards us as the panel opened, aware of the sudden bright light. Her mouth and nose were covered by an oxygen mask that was held in place by tape that seemed to cover most of the rest of her face. Her eyes flickered and she sank back into sleep.

"Drugged?" I asked.

"Uh huh," responded Rick. "It's the kindest way really. She's almost unconscious, so it minimises the risk of her doing any harm to herself by struggling." We walked over to the container. The girl couldn't move; straps around her forehead, arms, chest, belly, thighs and ankles held her in place on the couch. I could see that when the side panel of the container was closed foam padding would restrict her even more. A breathing tube ran from the mask to gas bottles below her couch. A small gauge on the bottles showed they were 90% full. All the girl was wearing was a pair of padded pants. Rick saw me looking at them. "Well, she can't get out of the hold to go use the wash-room," he said. "We keep them off liquids and use diuretics for a day before shipment and the drugs suppress the production of urine but there's always a risk of spillage."

"Where's she going?"

"Err, not sure. Let's see." He reached across to the girl's couch, in a pocket by the side was a folded document. He opened it out. "Shipment note," he said, explaining. He read it. "Oh yeah, I remember this one. She was a bit unlucky."

"Unlucky?"

"Yeah, We had a very nice snatch set up. We were picking up a student, Carol - degree in modern languages; very bright, doing post graduate studies in Russian. That's very useful at the moment both from the point of view of new acquisitions and for some of our new customers too. So we monitor our little student's house and get her pattern of movements. It's the end of term so she's not going to be missed for a few days at least, weeks maybe. We've got the whole thing set up. A little light jemy work at the back of the house; get ourselves; set up wait for her to come home that evening; nice quick grab and bag and Robert is very much your father's brother."

"But it wasn't as easy as you thought?"

"Well, yes and no. Getting in was no problem. The snatch team had no difficulties at all. Only problem is they're just sorting out their stuff in the hall when they hear a voice from upstairs calling 'Carol, is that you?' and they realise that the brown smelly stuff is in the fan."

"Ah, not your actual cunning linguist then?"

"You catch on quickly my friend, no, not our linguist at all. Anyway the lads are crouched under the stairs as our friend over there comes down stairs. She's been in the shower; she's wearing a towelling robe; she's got a towel around her head and nothing else. The lads had no choice really, so when she gets to the bottom of the stairs they jump her. She puts up quite a fight - turns out later she trains at a gym - both the lads end up with bloody noses and one with a considerable pain in his crotch. However they manage to subdue her and strap her wrists with the belt from her robe. They weren't too gentle but then having your balls kicked tends to cause your judgement to suffer. It definitely was not the girl they were looking for; the towel has come off her head and even the dimmest of our snatch teams can tell the difference between a blond and a brunette. The real target is not due home for another three hours and this one is busily trying to bite her way through the hand that's keeping her quiet. Well to cut a long story short they find some stuff to gag her with - I think it was her face cloth and a pair of tights she had hanging on the bath rail - and hog tie her on her bed. Well, much as they might enjoy the prospect of a young lady trussed up wearing nothing but a bath robe, they at least know that they've got to sort things out.

They make a couple of calls and we decide to bring both of them in. They make sure this young lady can't wander off and wait for the real target to turn up."

"So Carol's house guest gets to join her in an exciting new life."

"Well, sort of. Having brought her in it turns out that the house guest here doesn't really have much in the way of any specific skills we need, so we've just sold her on. Got a reasonable price which will cover the overheads but that's about it. Anyway, the irony is that this one's off to a little dacha near Kharkov, so she might end up learning some Russian a bit more quickly than her friend, though my guess is she won't be reading Chekov or Turgenev."

The girl slumped back in her couch, the effects of the drug overtaking her. Rick put the shipment note back in its pocket, lowered the panel of the container and fastened it.

"Do you get many problems like that? Unplanned stock?"

"Not as much as you'd think. The research is usually good enough. And usually we can off-load them. It just seems a bit unfair, somehow. I must be getting soft in my old age. Let's have a look at this other one. She'll be on this afternoon's truck to the Sales Centre." Rick pointed to a cable drum on the far side of the loading bay. We walked across.

After the relative comfort of the long haul container, the poor girl being shipped out to the Sales Centre was clearly going to have a more difficult ride. She obviously hadn't had the benefit of any tranquillising drugs. As we approached the drum the distinctive sounds of complaint muffled by a mouth filling gag could be heard.

Rick rolled the drum away from the wall. The grunts of complaint got louder. I had to admit the way that the cable drum was being used was ingenious. As Rick swung it around I could see that the girl had been strapped in place, face up, around the core of the drum. She was naked apart from the straps that held her tightly against the drum's core. "Toss me those slats," Rick called pointing to a pile of short pieces of wood. I passed them across to him one at a time as he fitted them inside the drum until they made a second outer core, completely enclosing the helpless girl and making her gagged grunts sound still quieter. "There we are," said Rick, "a convenient package we can roll straight onto a truck."

I realised there were four other drums on the loading dock. "Are all those the same?" I said pointing. I looked at the drums. On each was stencilled the words "FC Components Ltd. 'Plug & Play' Wiring Harness & Cables".

"Yep," said Rick, "that's the results of the last week's orientation. They'll be in the Sales Centre tonight. There's an auction at the weekend and then they'll be off to their new owners."

Chapter 6 : Hands On

Freddie had got an office for me in the run-down block that he used on the edge of the city. "FC Enterprises" it said on a dingy plate by the door. The whole building looked pretty dingy. The up side was that I could get to Brick Lane for a good curry at lunch time. The down side was that even if I didn't feel like a good curry I could still smell it all day.

Upstairs there were researchers and the accounts department. I was sitting in my office, going through my thoughts after my visit to the Prep Centre. What worried me was how normal it all felt, how easily I seemed to have slipped into accepting the ideas, the whole basis behind this bizarre business. A few weeks ago I wouldn't have believed there was such a place as the Prep Centre in the heart of England. Now I was trying to work out ways to make best use of it. I suppose I ought to have had some moral scruples about the whole thing but I guess I was just focused on the problem. It's one of my faults, I know, solving the problem at hand even if I should really be thinking about other stuff.

I was thinking about the trip up to the Sales Centre when the phone rang.

It was Freddie. "Morning, Lawrence," he boomed. "All well at the Prep Centre?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Good, good. Now tell me, do you know an Amanda Hollis?"

"Yes, sure," I said, "she's a friend of Rebecca's, works for Atlantic Airlines too. They used to crew together sometimes."

"Word is that you two used to 'crew' together occasionally as well when Rebecca wasn't around?"

As I was beginning to appreciate, Freddie's intelligence network was extensive.

"That was a long time back," I said.

"Good, good. Then you won't have any objection to us adding her to the collection?"

As always I was nonplussed by Freddie's matter-of-fact approach. Thinking about it, compared with the rest of what I'd been involved in over the past weeks, it was hardly much of a problem. I hadn't seen Mandy for six months – somehow she and Rebecca had always been on the same trips for a while. And anyway it hadn't been much more than a shared physical thing – Mandy was fairly energetic between the sheets, if you know what I mean – so I couldn't say that I had any real reservations about Freddie's proposal. "No," I said, "not really."

"Excellent, excellent," beamed Freddie. "Thought that would be the case. It's just that she's been kicking up a bit of a fuss over her friend's disappearance and that could be a bit inconvenient. I thought you and Harry could deal with it. You seemed to get on all right with the last one."

I was conscious that I hadn't been more than a spectator at the garage job but Freddie didn't seem to want to be diverted by practicalities. "Sure," I said, feeling less than confident, "leave it to me."

"And make it quick can you," Freddie came back. "I'd like to get her in before she causes any ripples."

Harry was hardly what you could call happy when I spoke to him. The broad gist of his remarks was along the lines that he thought we didn't really have enough time to do a proper job and that flight attendants were always a problem, 'cos you never knew if they were going to get re-rostered and you'd find all your plans in the skip. Since it was my fault (not sure I quite understood that bit) I could do the hard work.

I say the broad gist because it was sometimes quite hard to make out his exact meaning in between the various expletives.

We talked through Mandy's likely whereabouts. Harry's view was that her flat was the best bet – he was fed up with trying to find good pick up points in airports and the muzak in Heathrow Terminal 3 drove him mad. He also "suggested" that I could make up for the fact that I'd obviously caused all this rush by setting up the snatch myself.

I gave her a call. She was pleased to hear from me. She was worried about Rebecca. "So am I", I said, "why don't I come round and we can talk about it."

"I'd like that," she said.

So that evening I was standing outside her door with a chloroform soaked pad in a sealed plastic wallet in my jacket pocket and very clear instructions from Harry once again not to "fuck this one up either."

Amanda let me in. She was looking cute. Like I say, I hadn't seen her for a while. It looked as if she'd dropped a few pounds. She was wearing a shirt and jeans, they were tight and I liked the effect. She'd left the shirt unbuttoned enough to show a hint of cleavage. I guessed that her thoughts weren't entirely on Rebecca. She fixed us both a drink.

"Have you heard anything from Becky?" she said. "We were supposed to do a trip together on Monday and she didn't show up. It's not like her and I know you two were, well, seeing quite a lot of each other."

"No," I said, peering at the vodka and tonic she'd brought. "No, I haven't seen her for a while. Things were, well, you know how it is."

"She didn't say. I mean I thought you were still together. If I'd known I might have given you a call."

"That might have been nice." I downed the vodka. She smiled in return.

"Can I get you another?" She sank her own drink.

"Mmm, please."

Amanda picked up the two glasses and headed towards the kitchen. I followed her and thought that now was as good a time as any to make my move. I slipped the plastic wallet from my pocket and pulled out the pad. I caught up with her just as she reached the refrigerator looking for some ice. I was surprised how easy it was. The pad went over her nose and mouth, her arms flew out and the glasses cart-wheeled across the room to shatter on the floor. She gave a muffled squeal as she gasped for breath but all that did was to give her more of the drug. I got my other arm around her chest. That stopped her arms flailing. She tried to break free of my grip but I had her held tightly and soon her struggles subsided. I felt her go limp and let her slide to the tiled floor of the kitchen. "How easy was that?" I thought. "Even quicker than Harry had said." I pulled out my mobile to give Harry a call. No bloody signal.

I went back into the living room and the signal improved. I tried Harry's number again "Hi," I said. "Smooth as a nut. Bring the car round the back and we can go out down the fire escape as we agreed."

"O.K." said Harry. "Open up, I'll be there in a minute."

The fire escape was through Mandy's bedroom window. Sure enough, moments later, Harry appeared outside. I pulled up the window and he climbed in. He looked around. "Where is she then?"

"In the kitchen," I said, pointing the way out through the bedroom door. "She went out like a light. It was even easier than you said." He followed my pointing finger.

Harry came back almost immediately. "In the kitchen, you said?"

"Yes, sure why?"

"It's just that there's a lot of broken glass in there but, unless this lady is particularly petite, I don't see her there."

I barged past him into the kitchen but sure enough Amanda wasn't there, just the broken glasses and the discarded chloroform pad.

"You did give her plenty of it?"

"Yeah sure. Well, hey, I've not had any training in this. How am I to know? Look she can't be far away. She can't have gone out through the front door, I'd have heard her. She must still be in the flat somewhere."

"Let's hope so. We'd better go look, hadn't we?"

Harry started checking the cupboards in the kitchen. I went back into the living room. As I stepped in, she was standing behind the door. I didn't hear anything until she hit me with the vodka bottle. The next thing I know is I'm on the floor with a headache worse than the one I had before my first lunch with Freddie.

Moments later Harry came back into the living room. He was half pushing, half carrying a struggling Amanda. He'd got his hand over her mouth but underneath it I suspected that Mandy's language was every bit as colourful as Harry's had been earlier.

"I think you lost something," said Harry, grinning. "Now if you could find something to make sure our young friend doesn't wander off again and something to keep her quiet too, that would be really helpful. And you," he turned to Amanda, "quit struggling or you'll get another dose of that pad and I'll keep it on for long enough this time. Plus it's covered in broken glass which will make a mess of that pretty face of yours."

I had a look around her bedroom and grabbed a couple of scarves and some pantyhose. I took them back to the living room where Harry had wrestled Mandy to the floor and was sitting astride her back. I tossed him the stuff. "Yeah," he said. "That'll do." He pulled Mandy's wrists together behind her back and tied them there before tying her ankles too. He rolled her over on to her back. She was scowling at the two of us.

"What the hell is this all about, Larry," she gasped, "Is this some kinky game? What on earth's going ongggh." Harry cut her off by wedging one of the scarves into her mouth. He tied a knot in the middle of the other one, pushed that into her mouth over the other scarf and knotted it off behind her head. Amanda gave a groan.

Harry sat her up and turned to me. "Now why don't you go pack the young lady's case like we agreed and we can be on our way?"

Embarrassed by my poor showing. I scuttled off to do as he asked. The idea was to make it look like she'd decided to go away for a few days. So I picked out a selection of clothes and underwear and put them in a case. Harry had said to bring her work uniforms and airport passes as well, so they went in too.

It didn't take long but by the time I'd got back Harry was already amusing himself. Somehow Mandy's blouse had come unbuttoned and Harry's hands were all over her tits. She was wriggling to avoid his attentions but the panty hose knotted around her wrists and elbows meant that she wasn't having much success. The scarves made sure that her objections weren't heard.

"Hope you don't mind Larry," he said. "I'm a sucker for a well filled blouse, if you'll pardon the expression and this one had a rather pleasant pair of tits inside it. You got the case? OK, let's take little Mandy here for her trip." He reached down, picked her up and threw her across his shoulder. She kicked out a bit until he slapped her backside. "Don't be a silly, girl," he said, heading for the bedroom and the fire escape. I followed him carrying Mandy's bag.

Chapter 7 : Red Sales In The Sunset

Clegg called me the following day. "Good job on the Hollis pick up," he said. "Knew I could rely on you."

"Well, I'm not sure I'm suited to field operations. It wasn't quite as straight forward as it should have been."

"No," said Freddie. "So I heard. Still never mind. Harry seemed to think you did all right, all things considered. It ended up clean, That's the main thing. Anyway – Sales Centre – you said you wanted to see it. Suggest you get up there today. That's if your headache is better."

I could almost hear the smirk. "Fine. Thanks. I'll get on my way," I said.

The Sales Centre looked impressive from the moment I first saw it. It was a large, modern, building clad in stainless steel, overlooking a lake and parkland. It looked like a very upmarket car dealership and the Ferraris parked in front certainly added to that impression.

I'd been invited to watch an auction. By the time I arrived the buyers were already in place, chatting away one to another. The first lot was already on the block – my erstwhile girl friend, Rebecca.

The auctioneer was standing on a small podium to one side of a stage. "Gentlemen, welcome. Our first lot this morning is #06/078, Caucasian, 24 year old female, fully trained as a flight attendant, fluent in French and German as well as her native English. Recently acquired and prepared to level one. You'll see in your catalogue that.... "

Rebecca was sitting passively on a stool in the middle of a raised stage, her hands clasped loosely together in her lap, make up perfect. She was staring blankly ahead across the group of buyers that were lounging on couches in of the platform. She seemed almost unaware of her surroundings. She was wearing her Atlantic Airlines cabin crew uniform. The dark blue jacket and skirt were clean and pressed, her white blouse starched and fresh, her forage cap perched on immaculately back-combed and lacquered hair.

"78," the auctioneer called, "if you could let these gentlemen see you move please."

Rebecca looked across of the auctioneer and got slowly to her feet. Without a word she walked slowly from left to right across the stage, turned to face the buyers and then walked back to stand beside the stool. As she did so I realised that the heels she was wearing were higher than anything she'd have normally worn on-board and her skirt had been altered to make it narrower, giving her walk an agreeable wiggle.

"Your jacket, please," the auctioneer said. Rebecca slipped the jacket from her shoulders and placed it neatly on the stool. "And turn, please." Rebecca turned around, giving the audience a good view of her body. "Open the blouse." She stood still and unfastened the buttons of her blouse without protest. As she let it fall open I could see that she was wearing a white under-wired bra that was presenting her tits to the best advantage. She normally wore something with a softer line. I had to admit I preferred the new look. She let her hands fall to her side. "And the skirt, please." She unfastened the waist band and stepped out of her skirt, placing it on top of her jacket. She was wearing stockings, a plain white garter belt and white panties. These guys evidently know how to get a girl to do what they want, I thought. I'd been trying without success to get Rebecca to wear stockings ever since I met her, but then I hadn't tried shutting her up naked in a cage as a way of convincing her that I had the right ideas about how she should look. I wondered if they'd had her on the fellatio trainer too. "And turn again." Rebecca did as she was told. I looked at the group of buyers, they were nodding approvingly. "There we are, gentlemen. I think you've all had the opportunity to examine this lot. I have a number of initial offers so I would like to start the bidding at \$60,000, Eu72,500 or 6.9M Yen."

There was a flurry of response in the room. Bids ran quickly up to \$90,000 but then slowed. The auctioneer walked over to where Rebecca was standing. "Come along, gentlemen, please," he said "I'm sure we can do better than that." He clicked his fingers and pointed to the floor. Rebecca dropped obediently to her knees. "Very responsive, you see gentlemen and with some unique skills from her airline training."

One of the bidders to my left was muttering into a mobile phone. He waived his catalogue to indicate a further bid. More bids followed and the price skittered up to \$130,000 before stalling again. "Are we all done, gentlemen?" the auctioneer asked. "It's in the room at \$130,000 Against you, sir," he nodded to the man on the mobile phone. "For the last time, at \$130,000. No more?" The man with the mobile phone shook his head. "\$130,000 then." Rebecca peered into the audience, looking scared. She looked back towards the auctioneer as the gavel came down. "Sold! Thank you."

As soon as the gavel came down a man appeared on the platform with a pair of handcuffs. He waited for the few moments that Rebecca took to get dressed before cuffing her wrists behind her. The auctioneer said, "Client 1033." The man wrote the number on a label and fastened it to the collar around Rebecca's neck. He grasped her arm and led her from the stage. The auctioneer turned back to the audience. "Our next lot is #06/082," he said as another girl was led onto the stage.

The buyer who had been successful in his bid for Rebecca got up from his seat. He was a thin man, a little shorter than me, blinking short sightedly at his surroundings. I approached him as he went to leave the room. "I wonder if I could have a word," I said.

He looked at me myopically, peering through thick lensed glasses. "Yes,, Yes, of course. You're Clegg's new man, aren't you?"

"Err, yes, Larry, Larry Ross" I replied, surprised that news of my appointment had been shared with Clegg's clients.

"Don't worry," he said, "Clegg and I go back a long way. He told me he was bringing in someone to help with the business. I'll be interested to see what you make of it. I've been buying here for years and I've had some good pieces from him. This one's going to be handy for my new business jet."

"Were you pleased with the price?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "not bad at all. I thought it was going to be even better at one point but that phone bidder kicked it up a bit. That's what I like about Clegg's sales, there's often quite a small number of buyers. Means that prices stay sensible if you get my drift."

I nodded, hoping to get him to talk further but he made his excuses to go.

"I'm sorry, I really need to go and arrange shipment details for that young lady. There's another lot I'm interested in a little later on and I'd hate to miss it."

"Of course," I said. "I don't mean to hold you up. Enjoy your purchase."

"Thank you," he said. "I really think I will."

I watched as some more lots went under the hammer. Each time the girl was brought out, told to exhibit herself by removing some or all of her clothes and then subjected to the humiliation of hearing the bids called out.

The auction came to an end. The buyers began to disperse.

I heard a voice behind me. "Larry, can I have a word." It was the auctioneer. "Hi," he said, "we haven't been introduced yet. I'm Brian – I run the Sales Centre, Freddie asked me to look after you."

"Well thanks Brian. The auction seemed to go OK."

"Yeah, not too bad. We could have done with a few more buyers. The prices weren't all I'd hoped for. Still, the stewardess fetched a good price. Better than expected."

I thought back to what her buyer had said. I wondered who had the better idea. I said, "This is a pretty impressive place."

"Glad you think so," said Brian. "Come and see some of the stock." He gestured to the door that the girls had been brought through. We walked down a corridor similar to the one at the reception centre, its glass panels looking into a series of cells. Given that a sale had just finished I was surprised by how many girls were still there.

Brian suggested that we stopped by one of the cells and listened in. There were three of them in there; all naked and chained but not gagged. They each wore a collar from which a chain ran to a ring set in the wall. On a low table in one corner of their cell stood four beakers and four metal plates that held the remains of a meal. Brian flicked a switch on the wall and a speaker crackled into life above our heads. The girl sitting on the floor with her back to us was speaking, the others looking at her. "... after all if that's what needed."

"No, Sally," a dumpy brunette standing opposite her folded her arms. "Can't you see that's just giving in to them?"

"We're not supposed to use names," a redhead standing beside Sally said. "Please don't use names, they might be listening."

"And you," the brunette was scornful, "you're every bit as much help to them as you can be, Anna and what are you getting for it? Is your chain any longer than mine? Is your collar not as tight as mine? Are you raped less often?"

Anna hung her head. "No, no. It's just that we should do as we are told. It will be easier for us."

"Easier for them, you mean. You can give up your name if you like. I'll hang on to mine as long as I can."

"Why weren't we sold today? There was a sale today, I'm sure."

"Who the fuck knows? What does it matter, Sally? What does it matter? We're still here. Maybe we can get out of here."

"Perhaps it's because you're so difficult." Anna spoke out. "They'll keep us here until you're ready to do what they want. And don't talk about trying to get away, they'll punish us if you try to get away. They'll punish us if we talk about trying to get away."

The brunette span around as the cell door opened and two guards entered. Without a word one wrenched her arms behind her back and cuffed her wrists together. The other jammed a plug gag into her mouth and strapped it tightly in place. "You know the rules, 201," he said. "No names." She tried to kick out at him, earning a slap in the face for her trouble. The man holding her arms pushed her down in a corner of the cell. He walked across to Anna. "Thanks for the tip off, darling," he said as the two of them left the cell locking the girls in once more.

Anna looked confused. Sally said, "How could you? How could you?"

"I didn't. Really I didn't," Anna replied as Sally moved away from her.

The brunette grunted angrily into her gag.

"Did she?" I asked Brian.

"No, I shouldn't think so," he replied. "It's just the sort of thing the guards will do to break them up and break their spirit. They'll have heard them talking on the monitors."

"Shouldn't they be a bit more docile than that after orientation? I mean the others that I've seen are really disorientated."

"Well, yes, they would be usually but if we're holding them until a specific buyer is available then we do some of the orientation here. I'm not sure what's gone on there but they're probably due for another week or so here. Maybe I'll talk to the Prep Centre."

We moved on to another room. "I thought I'd give you a buyer's experience," Brian said. "I've had a few girls put into the display area where the buyers get to check out the lots before an auction and then we'll have one of the girls brought in for a pre-sale interview.. As far as she's concerned you're a potential new owner. It'll give you a chance to see how we set things up for customers. Are you happy with that?"

"Yeah, that sounds fine. I'm sure I can project myself into the mind of one of your customers. Where's the display area?"

Brian pointed to another featureless door. "Through there," he said. "Come on, I'll show you." He opened the door to a brightly lit room.

Along the left hand side of the room as we entered were five diagonal crosses of wood on the facing wall were another five, identical to the first except that four of these were each occupied by a naked and shackled girl. With their hands cuffed above their heads, one to each upper arm of the cross and their legs spread with their ankles cuffed to each of the lower arms, they were completely exposed and accessible to the prospective buyers.

Brian showed me each of the girls in turn. "An interesting selection," he said. "The results of a visit by one of our teams to a shopping mall. We 'borrowed' one of the dress shops there that caters for young ladies like these. Dresses for those looking for something a little daring to go clubbing in perhaps or to impress a prospective boyfriend. We made a few adjustments to the arrangements of the changing rooms and we were able to collect these delightful specimens. I think you'll find them to your taste."

"Let's see," I said walking up to the first and youngest looking girl. She looked terrified as I gripped her chin and turned her head from side to side, examining her face. "Hmm, a bit of acne I see."

"Ah," said Brian, "often a problem with diet for girls of this age. You'll find that will clear up with a normal slave's feeding regime."

I took hold of a hank of her auburn hair. "This feels a bit oily to me and the hair seems quite brittle."

"Yes, said Brian, again changing the feeding regime will help that and of course she colours her hair. I'm sure you'll either be using better stylists than she could afford or returning her to her natural colour or keeping her shaved. I don't think that should be a problem."

"Maybe not," I said. I moved my hand back to her face. "Eyes look clear enough though."

Brian looked at the number on the tag attached to the girl's collar and consulted the list on the clip board he was holding. "Let's see. Yes, perfect vision without glasses or contact lenses, this one."

I let go of her chin and let my hands run down to her breasts. They were pleasantly full, with perky nipples that stiffened to the touch and wide dark areolas. "And these are real?" I asked, bringing a whimper from the girl.

"Quiet you!" Brian admonished. "Yes, not enhanced as far as we can tell. It's quite unusual to find much surgery done on girls under twenty five."

The next captive was less cooperative. She hung her head sullenly as I approached her. "Look up," barked Brian grabbing her by the hair and jerking her head up.

"Now this one is of eastern extraction. Indian or Pakistani?"

"Bangladeshi," said Brian consulting his clipboard. "Parents originally from Rangpur but she's British, born and brought up in Birmingham. Just graduated from medical college."

"Bright girl then?"

"Yes. We don't routinely IQ test them but it's reckoned that a medical graduate typically has an IQ of 125."

I ran my hands across her breasts and down across her belly to her crotch, she tried to avoid my touch, struggling against the cuffs that held her spread-eagled on the cross, "Well that may actually be a drawback for what I have in mind for whichever I purchase. Still she's got quite a nice taut body. Looks like she kept herself fit. Maybe the athleticism compensates for the brain

power." The girl scowled at me as we walked on to the next. "You said that you 'borrowed' the shop. Can I take it that you acquired the staff as well?"

Brian smirked. "Yes indeed," he said. "One of the team 'entertained' three of them in the stock room while three of our girls ran the shop on their behalf. The staff were a bit the worse for wear when we got them back – it was hard for our man to keep his hands off them 'cos they'd been stripped of their uniforms for our girls. We drove them all off in the shop's van at the end of the day. We took the stock as well, cleaned the place out. These little shops are closing down all the time. No one thinks too much about it."

The next girl was more an advert for fast food outlets than health food shops. She had full breasts that certainly wouldn't pass the pencil test, a thick waist and heavy thighs. In spite of this she returned my appraising looks with an earthy, sexual gaze. She writhed appreciatively as I pinched and squeezed at her nipples. "This one," I said, "might be useful. What's her background?"

"Bit of a young entrepreneur, that one. Started up her own business with a network of office cleaners."

"Excellent, excellent," I said. She looked hopeful. "I need someone to keep the place clean, and this one will look good corseted into a maid's uniform. She won't need much training in what's required, will she?"

"Bastard!" the girl exclaimed pulling against the straps that stretched her out on the wooden cross. "I'm no skivvy!"

"You're told not to talk to the buyers," Brian barked slapping her face.

"That's all right," I said, warming to my part. "A little spirit goes a long way. I find it's easier to break the competent to my will than to teach the incompetent. She'll see sense, I'm sure."

She growled but said nothing. The next girl was more distressed than angry. She tried to keep still as I ran my hands testingly over her body but it was evident that she was having to try hard to suppress a reaction.

"This one is more docile," Brian advised. "The marks from her beatings have more or less healed. She needed rather more encouragement than is usual." I could see that there were still raised lines on the inside of her thighs but she did not try to pull away as I touched the bruised area.

"Hmm," I said seemingly uninterested. "I'm not so keen on these shorter girls. I suppose she good be used for breeding stock. What do you think?"

"She not been pregnant that we know of," Brian said, "but she's fertile enough. Her periods have been disrupted since she came here, but that's not uncommon. She could be useful if you're looking to breed."

"Well, thank you," I said. "I've seen enough for now." Brian smiled and showed me out. "That was useful. Who decided to do the shop raid? Actually, who chooses the targets generally? I mean, how do you decide which girls to pick up?"

"Ah, good question," said Brian, "I hadn't thought about it all that much, I just do the selling. I guess it's the snatch squads. Sometimes Freddie comes up with an idea but mainly it's the squads themselves, I think....." That seemed a bit odd to me but I let it pass. We went into another room. "We've set up a face to face sales interview here," Brian explained. "The sort of thing all the girls have to do if there's a client that seems particularly interested after seeing them in the display hall. The girl we've chosen is due to start sales interviews this week so she should be as ready as they usually are."

"Bring her in," I said, "let's see how she acquits herself."

A young woman, about twenty five years old was brought in by one of the guards, led by a leash from her collar. She was dressed in a simple black dress with long sleeves and a skirt that stretched to just above her knees. She was carrying a small back case in hands that were cuffed in front of her. Her hair was dark and wavy; long, it hung to below her shoulders. Her skin was pale, dark eyebrows, dark eyes, and full red lips stretched around the ball that gagged her. I looked at her body. Her dress wasn't doing her any favours but it looked as if she might have a reasonable figure underneath it. She was wearing black tights or stockings and high heels. Her legs looked OK.

Brian put a file on the table in front of me. "This is 05/179," he said. "I think you'll find she has the profile you're looking for."

"Hmm," I said getting to my feet. "I'm not so sure." The girl looked concerned as I approached her. "It's hard to tell if she's got much of a body." I took the case from her and put it on the desk. I lifted her skirt. She was wearing stockings. She had no pants on. I had a good view of her neatly trimmed bush. I dropped her skirt. The girl looked relieved. I sat down and looked across at Brian. "So what's the sales pitch for this one?" I asked.

"She can do that herself," said Brian getting up and loosening off the girl's gag.

She shook her head as the ball came free of her mouth. "Thank you, Sir," she said, automatically.

"See," said Brian, "she's had her initial orientation training. You'll find her appropriately respectful. Stand up straight girl and answer the questions."

I turned to the girl. "Well, you'd better tell me about yourself, if you're looking for a new owner as I hear."

"Yes, Sir," the girl replied. "I'm number 05/179, I'm 24 years old, British born. I speak French and Italian as well and English. I have a degree in music and I was most recently a clarinetist in a classical wind quintet."

"Sexual experience?" The girl blushed. "I mean before you came here, I imagine you've had plenty during your orientation; that doesn't count."

"I've had two lovers, Sir. One shortly after I went to university and the other a year ago. I don't really consider myself sexually experienced but I am sure that I can be trained to be a good slave in that way."

"Men or women?"

"I'm sorry, Sir?"

"Your lovers. Were they men or women?"

"Oh, I see, men Sir, both of them. I've never, well, been, with a woman. Not even here. But, Sir if that was what you required of course I would..."

I cut her off, "Yes, of course you would. I was interested in actual experiences however."

She looked abashed and hung her head. "No, Sir," she said.

"Never mind. That needn't be a problem. You play clarinet?"

"Yes, Sir. That's my instrument," she pointed to the case on the desk. "I could play for you if you like. If my hands can be freed." She held her hands out towards me.

"I would like that, girl," I said. Brian got up and unlocked the girl's cuffs. She moved to pick up the clarinet. "Take off your dress first."

She looked shocked but composed herself quickly. She reached behind her back and unzipped the dress. She shrugged it from her shoulders and it fell to the floor about her ankles.

"And the bra," I said. She unclipped the front fastening of her bra and pulled it off. She stepped out of her dress and put it and the bra on a chair beside the desk. "Not too bad," I said, giving her an appraising look. "All right, get on with it."

She reached for the pieces of the clarinet and put them together. She took a reed from the case and wetted it between her lips before fitting it in place. She put the mouthpiece between her lips and sucked at it.

"That's a useful skill apart from her music," Brian prompted. "Show us!" The girl gave a frightened look but then started to suck and lick at the clarinet as if it were a man's cock. She reached down with the clarinet and pushed it into her cunt before returning it to her mouth and repeating her lascivious performance.

"Now, that I like," I said. "And you thought I couldn't appreciate skilled musicianship. All right, enough of that, let's hear you play."

She started with the wailing opening of Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue. It was almost enough to make me leap the desk and fuck her there and then. I restrained myself, sitting quietly, absorbing the music. She was lost in concentration, appeared to have forgotten that all she was wearing was a pair of shoes, stockings and a leather collar. She moved on to a classical piece. I'm no expert but it could have been Mozart. Then back to jazz, with a couple of Sidney Bechet tracks. I was enjoying it, which wasn't really the point. I waved her to stop. "OK," I said, "that'll do."

She stood quietly, licking her lips, breathing slowly. "Should I put my cuffs back on?" she asked. I nodded, she put her clarinet back in the case and locked the cuffs back around her wrists

"All right, tell me how you come to be here."

She looked across questioningly at Brian. He nodded.

"Err, I was kidnapped, Sir." She said, in a husky tone.

"I imagined so, girl. I hardly thought you had put yourself up for sale. Tell me how."

"Oh, I see. But... Oh, I hate to remember it." She put her hands to her face.

"Listen young lady," I said sternly, "your life became your owner's property from that point on. You'll tell me willingly or you'll suffer for it."

"No, please. I don't want to be hurt any more. I'll tell you. Listen. I got an email. It was from the leader of our quintet. Or I thought it was. It asked me to go to a new rehearsal room that evening. We were preparing for a concert. This was somewhere I hadn't been before. The street was dark. There were two other musicians standing outside the hall, a man and a woman in a cape. I didn't recognise them. We stood around waiting for the hall to open. A car pulled into the road, drove up and stopped alongside us. And..." She faltered.

"Go on," I urged, "continue."

The girl swallowed. "The woman took off her cloak and threw it over my head. They pushed me into the car and drove off. It was all so quick, I didn't have a chance to cry out or anything. They tied me up and pushed me down on the floor of the car and just drove away. They put something in my mouth and taped it shut. I couldn't cry out. It happened in moments. One minute I was waiting to play, the next I was on my way here."

"And then? Your training. Have you been trained?"

"Well, Sir, I know I am only starting to learn. I know that I have to do all I am told by my owner. I think you will find me obedient and willing to please."

"Hmm, perhaps. Turn around again for me. Put your hands on your head, I want a clear view."

She did as I asked, still evidently embarrassed by her virtual nakedness.

I turned to Brian. "I'm not sure that she's really what I'm looking for," I said.

She fell to her knees as I got up to leave, grabbing out at my ankles. "Oh, please," she said, "please, you must buy me. I'll be punished if they think I haven't done a good enough job of selling myself, please you must understand. I cannot stay here."

I looked down at the naked musician sprawled at my feet. "You'll need a more convincing reason than that, girl. No one is going to take you on just because you want to leave here. They'll buy you if they think that you're the most useful for them. Now let go. You'll be taken back to your cell."

Brian and I left the room with the girl still on the floor sobbing. We looked back in through the one-way glass panel as a guard appeared to return her. He jammed the gag back into her mouth and hauled her to her feet before ordering her to pick up her clarinet case and clothes. He clipped her leash to her collar and hauled her back out of the room.

"How was that," said Brian.

"Interesting," I said.

"You should come in and do that for all the girls," Brian said. "They could do with a practice run through before meeting real customers."

"It would be worth doing," I said, "but I'm going to be busy. Why don't you get some of your own team to do it?"

"Yeah," said Brian. "Yeah, maybe I will." I was unconvinced.

It was then I bumped into Harry. "You doing anything tomorrow morning?" he said.

"No," I said, "nothing special. Why?"

"Let's just say I'm embarrassed about your last little try out on operations. I thought you could use some practice."

"I dunno Harry. I don't want to cause any more problems."

"Don't worry about it. We all had to start somewhere. I'm taking another snatch trainee out. It may even be useful just for you to watch."

"OK," I said warily. I guessed I needed to see more of that side of things.

"Great," said Harry, tossing me a small back pack. "Get yourself familiar with the contents of this goody bag and meet us in the parking area at 8 o'clock. There's some coveralls in the bag. Better have those on too."

Chapter 8 : Practice Makes Perfect

I fetched up in the car park just before 8 o'clock. The white van that we'd used to pick up Jackie from the petrol station was parked with its engine running. Harry leant out of the driver's window. "Come on," he said, "get in. I'll brief you on the way."

I jogged around to the far side of the van and slid back the door.

"Hi," said a girl's voice as I went to climb in. Sitting next to Harry was a girl in her early twenties with short blonde hair. She and Harry were wearing the same coveralls that I'd put on.

"Hi," I said in response, not sure if names were in order.

Harry cleared up the doubts. "This is Tricia," he said, she's a trainee for the snatch squads. "Tricia, this is Larry."

Tricia smiled as the van pulled away. "This your first live one too?" she asked as she buckled her seat belt. Pulling the diagonal strap tight down between her tits showed that the coveralls were certainly camouflaging something worthwhile underneath.

"No," I said, "not quite, but I'm pretty much a beginner."

"OK," said Harry, as we drove down the motorway, "listen up. This is a training exercise so we don't bring anyone back, all right." Tricia and I both nodded simultaneously. "There's a big house we're going to. There should be two ladies there according to our friends in Research. We bust in, make like it's a burglary and you two get some practice in grab and secure. OK?"

"Sure, Harry," I said.

"Yeah," said Tricia.

"Right. Well since we will be leaving the ladies we meet behind we'll do this in masks, which you should have in your bags. So get those ready and get your gloves on. We're nearly there."

The van off the motorway and along a road towards a nearby small town. We turned left into a leafy avenue of large houses, each set back from the road with fifty yards or so of driveway leading up to them. Some had big security gates. We stopped on one side of the road just as a pair of gates opened on the other side. There wasn't anyone else about, no other traffic and it didn't look like the sort of district where anyone would walk if they were going further than their neighbours. A Porsche Cayenne pulled out of the gates and drove off, a young, blonde woman in sunglasses at the wheel. She didn't bother to close the gates. "There she goes," said Harry. "She's away to drop the kiddies off at playgroup. Now here's the deal. We wait five minutes. Drive in and park around the back. You two are going to do all the work, I'm just along for the ride and to make sure no one drops any bricks. "He grinned at me. "They've had tradesmen in and out all last week so no one will be bothered about us. There'll be a girl inside cleaning house. Tricia, you'll go in; grab and secure the hired help. We'll follow. Yummy Mummy will be back after fifteen minutes so Tricia, you'll need to be slick with the help. Larry, you can do the same for Mummy when she turns up. Clear?"

"Clear enough, I guess," I said not entirely confident after the debacle with Amanda.

"Fine," said Tricia.

"OK. Now this is a nice quiet neighbourhood and we want to come back. So we make sure our guests don't make too much fuss and don't get hurt any more than is needed for you two to get your practice. Like I said, it's to look like a burglary; so if you want to pocket stuff, feel free. If you want to scare them, then fair enough; specially if it help with your grab. Just don't do anything that would get the police more interested in us than necessary. OK, check the contents of your bags and remember to check that you bring it all back apart from the consumables."

Tricia called out, "Ski mask, pair latex gloves, dozen cable ties, one roll duct tape, multi-function tool, knife."

"Yeah, same for me," I said.

"OK," said Harry, "gloves on now, masks on as soon as we are round the back. Here we go." He pulled out across the road and up the drive. "Pleasant Pastures" the sign said on the gate. Gravel crunched under the van's tyres as we pulled in behind the house. I let Tricia climb over me to get out. She trotted over to the back door of the house. The back door was open. She slipped inside. A few moments later she reappeared at the back door and waved us in. We got out of the van and joined her. "Any problems?" said Harry.

"See for yourself," said Tricia pointing into the kitchen.

We went through. The hired help wouldn't be doing any more cleaning up for a while. Tricia had her well and truly helpless on the floor, cable ties around her wrists and ankles, another one linking her wrists and ankles in a tight hogtie, tape across her mouth. Struggling in her tee-shirt and jeans, I reckoned she wasn't even as old as Jacqui, the girl I'd helped Harry pick up at the petrol station. She squealed in fright as she saw there were three of us. "OK," said Harry, "neat enough."

We heard the sound of a car pulling up outside the front. "That will be the lady of the house," said Harry. The help started squealing some more. Tricia pulled a kitchen knife from a wood block beside the cooker and held it against the girl's throat.

She quietened down a whole lot and paid the knife a lot of attention. Harry gestured towards the pantry and Tricia grabbed the girl under her arms and dragged her off there. We heard the front door open. Harry gave me a thumbs up and followed Tricia into the pantry. I was on my own.

I stepped behind the kitchen door. It was standing ajar. "Natalie," I heard a woman's voice call out. "Natalie. I'm back. Natalie. Where are you?" The sound of her voice was getting closer. I guessed she would come through into the kitchen searching. The door started to move, I swallowed and got ready to spring.

Before I could, the phone rang. The kitchen door was pulled shut from the other side and I heard the tap of heels on a wooden floor receding down the hall. I waited, uncertain if I should try to follow or stay put and wait. I decided to wait. There was no rush and no point in trying to snatch her in the middle of a phone call, either.

The phone call only took a few moments. "Natalie, Natalie," called the voice again. There was a squeak followed by a muffled grunt from the pantry. I guessed that Tricia had given her a thump. The door to the kitchen opened this time. "Natalie?" I took my chance and grabbed Yummy Mummy as she got through the door. One arm around her waist to trap her arms one over her mouth to silence any cries. Her silk shirt was cool and slippery. The grab seemed to work. I kicked the door shut behind us. "Keep quiet, bitch or you'll really get hurt," I hissed in her ear. She was struggling but it was nothing I couldn't handle, she was quite small and lightly built and she'd obviously never learned any self defence techniques. Neither did she have a bottle of vodka in her hands. "Now do as you're told and it'll be a whole lot easier. Keep quiet and I'll take my hand off your mouth, make a sound and I'll slice your tongue off. OK?"

She gave a grunt that I took as agreement. I eased my hand away and she didn't make a sound.

"Down on the floor hands behind your back," I ordered, gripping her at the back of her neck. I pushed her to the floor, grabbed her wrists and put a cable tie tightly around them. I did the same for her ankles. Good legs, I thought as I pulled the strip of plastic into place. She gasped as I jerked the ties tight.

I took another knife from the block. She looked terrified. "No, please," she said. I cut a strip from my roll of tape and strapped it across her mouth. She gave a resigned "mmph". I sat her up, pleased with my work:- one cute lady, very neat in her Hermès silk shirt and short black skirt, snatched, bound and gagged and no fowl ups this time.

My satisfaction didn't last long. "Louise!" another voice was calling from the hall. The woman I was holding looked even more scared. "It's Jenny," the voice called, "I came straight over. Much better than talking on the phone. Hope that coffee is ready. Louise?" The kitchen door swung open again. The owner of the voice appeared. "Oh, no," she cried as she saw me crouched over the helpless Louise, knife in hand.

"Come and join us," I barked holding the knife against Louise's throat. "Nice and slowly or your friend Louise here is really going to get hurt." Louise whimpered into her gag. The neighbour gave a swallowed cry of fright.

She had obviously read all the right books. She put her hands up. "Please don't hurt us. I'll do as you say."

"On the floor! Face down!" I ordered. "Hands behind you!" She was as good as gold. I had enough cable ties and tape to deal with her as well and she was soon no more of a threat than Louise. I rolled her over and took a look at the pair of them, Louise; early twenties I guessed, blonde, slim; Jenny; older, mid thirties maybe and already using botox if the fixed expression on her face was anything to go by, though I guess that could have been terror. Tricia emerged from the pantry, jogged passed me and out into the hall. Harry pulled the other girl out to join my two. The three of them were evidently all distressed to see the others.

Tricia returned. "The front door's shut now," she said. "We shouldn't get anyone else coming to join us."

"Good," said Harry, "I hate uninvited guests". He turned to the bound and gagged women and checked the cable ties and tape that held them helpless. "You three ladies stay here, we'll see what we can find and then we'll be off. OK?" A series of grunts greeted his question. It was hard to tell what they meant. I guessed it wasn't, "Sure, why not and while you're about it would you like some coffee?" Harry led the way out into the hall.

"Not bad," he said when we had all assembled. He turned to Tricia, "You were pretty slick, and dealt with the help quickly and cleanly." He turned back to me, "And you did a good job too, especially with the other woman turning up. You did the right thing when the phone rang and you could have panicked when her friend arrived but you didn't. Have a look around and see what you can find, nothing too bulky. Make as much mess as you like but nothing that'll be seen from outside. Take about ten minutes and meet back here."

We spread out. I found the study and turned out the desk, contents of the drawers all over the floor. There was a bit of cash but not much. I went back to the hall. Tricia came down the stairs shortly after. Harry appeared. "OK," he said. "What now?"

"We put our friends somewhere that they can spend the rest of the morning without being disturbed," said Trish.

"Sounds good to me," said Harry. "Did you find anywhere upstairs?"

"Yes, the main bedroom looks out over the back and there are some chairs in the corridor up there too."

"And what about making sure they stay there?"

"We'll need some rope or something," I volunteered. "I know, there's plenty of wire on the electrical appliances around the place. We can use that."

"Fine," said Harry, looking approving. "Better get on with it."

We went back into the kitchen. The three girls were still sprawled out on the floor but they had obviously been trying to get loose, Jenny had her hands pulling at the cable tie on Louise's wrists, Natalie was trying to rub her gag loose on the corner of a cupboard. "Naughty, naughty," Harry said as they looked around guiltily. "Right, you're coming upstairs."

The girls gave out with whimperings of alarm, interpreting this as a prelude to rape. Harry took a knife and sliced through the cable ties that held their ankles. He pulled Natalie to her feet and prodded the knife against her ribs. "You other two get up." I grabbed Jenny and pushed her towards the stairs. Tricia did the same with Louise. The women stumbled up the stairs, grunting with complaint all the time, with us half dragging, half pushing them. Tricia led the way to the main bedroom. She had really turned it over. Clothes were strewn everywhere, jewellery boxes were upturned their contents scattered. Harry brought a couple of straight back chairs in from the corridor. There was one in the bedroom already next to the dressing table. We lined them up in the middle of the room.

Jenny went on the first one, I still had some spare cable ties, I looped one around each of each of her arms above the elbow and used them to tie her to the chair back, There was plenty of tape left and I used that to strap each ankle to one of the front legs of the chair. I cut the power cord from a hair dryer and pulled that around her waist tying her to the chair as well. Another couple of lengths of tape went around her thighs just above her knees and fixed her legs to the top of the legs of the chair, spreading her thighs nicely and giving us a good view up her short skirt. Harry, still holding on to a terrified Louise, looked on with approval. Tricia took care of Natalie. The cable from the vacuum cleaner that the help had been using served to tie Natalie to her chair, with lengths around her chest and arms and across her lap.

Harry spun Louise around. "Did you guys find much money?" he asked. Tricia and I both shook our heads.

"No," said Tricia, "not even any good jewellery."

"Disappointing," Harry said to a wriggling Louise, "Maybe you and I should try out the bed to make up for my trouble." Her gagged squeals and struggles made it clear that she didn't think much of the idea. Harry relented and pushed her across to Tricia, who tied her to the third chair with the same thoroughness she had used on Natalie.

"We'd better gag them properly, if we're leaving them here," said Tricia. "Get some scarves and socks or anything like that. I rummaged around in the pile of discarded clothing and found some likely looking candidates including some expensive looking silk ties. Tricia pulled back the tape from each girl's mouth in turn, wadded socks or panties between their lips, tied a scarf or tie across it and then applied two new strips of tape in criss-cross fashion. Natalie made the most fuss, begging not to be gagged as soon as the tape came off. Tricia showed her no mercy and pushed a pair of sports socks into the girl's mouth before adding the tape. The three of them sat shaking their heads, their cheeks puffed out by the wads of cloth that packed their mouths. Between them they weren't going to make enough noise to be heard from any distance.

While Tricia was doing this I noticed a necklace that Louise was wearing. I pulled her blouse open to get a better look at it. "Here," I said. "At least there's some jewellery here." I pulled it from her neck and took off the earrings she was wearing too. I checked her hands – some nice rings. She was struggling in her chair as I pulled those from her fingers and making quite a fuss into her gag as well. Jenny and Natalie got the same treatment. We blindfolded them and just to get them really worried Harry and I had a good grope at each if them while Tricia packed up the things we were taking. Jenny had some pretty pricey underwear on once I got her dress pushed up; I used my knife to cut her dress open to get a better look. I sliced through her bra between the cups. She squealed in fright as her tits were exposed. I gave her nipples a friendly pinch.

We left the girls struggling in the shambles that was Louise's bedroom, a right bunch of desperate housewives. They were going to make a right sight for whoever discovered them

I watched from the bedroom door when they thought we had gone. The level of 'mmping' went up noticeably and the three of them were all trying to move back or forward, side to side, in attempts to loosen off their ties. They weren't having any success but it did make their tits bounce around agreeably. Natalie was shaking her chair up and down, if she wasn't careful she have the whole thing over and it wasn't like there was anyone to hear the noise. Louise was working hard to free herself too. Her skirt had ridden up where Tricia had tied her on to the chair and I had a good view of her legs. Jenny's efforts just meant she was starting to fall out of her dress completely. I was beginning to enjoy this side of the job.

We figured that Louise wouldn't be missed until that afternoon when she failed to turn up to pick up the kiddies, Natalie was probably expected to be there all morning and it wouldn't be until hubby came back for Jenny. Either way, that gave us plenty of time to get clear. We were back in the van, masks off, and on our way in minutes.

"Not a bad job at all," said Harry as we got back to the motorway. "Tricia, that was a fine first run and Larry, you seem to have worked out how to do this stuff now."

"Gee, thanks," said Tricia. "Oh, I get it," she said looking at me with a smile, "you're the marketing guy aren't you? That's pretty cool – I don't expect to see the suits down in operations."

"Thanks," I said. "Even the suits need to get their hands dirty occasionally."

Tricia giggled and smiled again. This could be interesting I thought. Then she laughed, "Hey, I've just realised – 'When Harry met Larry!'"

"We've heard it," I grimaced as the van turned out of the estate and back onto the ring road but I was feeling pretty pleased with myself. Harry didn't say anything else. I took that as a complement.

I took a call from Freddie later that afternoon. "How was the Sales Centre?" He didn't wait for an answer. "Good, good. Anyway, you said you wanted to chat to some of my customers," he said.

"If that's possible, I replied, "I can understand why they might be reticent."

"No, no problem. Anyway it's all fixed. Steve Glennis. Has a place in the Leeward Islands. Bought from us plenty of times in the past. Got quite an eye for a filly, they say, He'll be the chap for you. Get yourself out to Barbados. He'll pick you up from there.

Chapter 9 : Island Girl

"It's very good of you to see me, Mr Glennis," I smiled extending my hand to the tall, distinguished looking grey haired man who was welcoming me into his island home. As we walked down the pier, towards a path that led away from the palm trimmed beach, two heavily set men passed us. They headed towards the seaplane that I had just left; no doubt to collect the "cargo" that I had shared my flight with.

"It's my pleasure, believe me. And it's Steve, please. I've had the benefit of Clegg's services down the years and I'm happy to do him a favour. I hope you didn't mind coming out with my latest shipment."

"No, not at all," I replied. "She was pretty quiet. No trouble to anyone."

The two men came back along the jetty. One had the helpless, blindfolded and gagged girl that had been strapped into the Beaver's back seat, tossed across his shoulder. "Excuse us, Sir," he said.

My host waved them through, "Of course. Carry on," he said before turning to me again. "You're new to this line of work he tells me."

"Err, yes, it's a sort of career change for me," I replied

"That's OK. It's not the sort of job you'd necessarily go to straight from college. Plenty of people in this business start at your sort of age. Now how can I help?"

"Well, I'm trying to understand a bit more about Clegg's customers. What their needs are; why they do business with us. That sort of thing."

"Fine. Well I guess we'll take a bit of time, let you see how I put Mr Clegg's products to use and so on."

"Fine by me. Where do we start?"

"Oh, right here I think. Do you fancy a drink?"

I certainly did. It was pretty hot and, although the deck was shaded, the white sands in front of the villa seemed to be throwing heat at the building. I was happy to accept his offer. He pressed a button on the wall beside the couch. Moments later a slight, Chinese girl appeared, her slim figure modestly covered by a one-piece bathing costume. "Hi," she said. "Can I get you guys something?"

"Yes, please Sukie," my host replied. He turned to me "Beer OK?" he asked.

"Sure," I replied.

"Better make that two, please," he said to Sukie who smiled again and disappeared. As she did so he turned to me sensing my confusion. "You're wondering if she's one of my slaves or something else," he said. "Well, just because I want them to stay doesn't mean they all have to be kept in chains, you know. It's not such a bad place after all and anywhere else is a real long swim from here, unless she was to try to stow away on the seaplane or the supply boat." Sukie reappeared carrying two bottles of chilled beer on a tray. "Tell Larry how you came to be here," he said to her.

Sukie smiled shyly and sat at our feet. "It's not such an interesting story," she said. "I'm from L.A. originally. I was working there in a jewellery store. A guy came into the store one day and asked me to serve him. He wanted to buy a bracelet. It was rather nice - gold set with rubies. He had me model it for him. Said I should always wear bracelets because I had such slim wrists. Said he wanted it for someone special."

"And then what happened?"

"He paid for it and left." She giggled and played with her hair. "Oh, you want all the gory details. You men are all the same. Well, Steve obviously has some friends who are very good at helping him get the things he wants. And one of the things he wanted was me. Maybe two days later, a uniformed chauffeur arrives at the door of my apartment. I mean can you imagine! He gives me a small box. Inside it is the bracelet and a note on headed paper from a down town restaurant, 'Have dinner with me?' it said.

I just thought it was so romantic. I followed the chauffeur down to the road and out front was this enormous limo - you know the sort of thing; stretches two blocks, blacked out windows, bright chrome. As we drove off I thought, is this wise? I've no idea who this man is, really. I was thinking if this driver takes one wrong turn then, I'll be on my mobile faster than he can think. But it's fine. He drove me to the restaurant. I felt like royalty. When I arrived they took my coat, showed me to a table.

"Then they said there was a phone call. I went to a booth and picked up the phone. There was a quiet hiss and I woke up with a headache, bouncing around inside a wooden crate with cuffs on my wrists and ankles and a ball strapped into my mouth. I guess that bit wasn't so romantic."

Steve smiled. "My friends have ways they find hard to change," he said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Anyway the crate was in a truck. It's transferred to a plane. It ended up here. Steve makes it plain that he wants me to stay. So I do. Of course I know if I tried to leave he'd kill me. But it's nice here." She gave a half smile that lacked any sincerity. "Now if you'll excuse me."

"Sure, Sukie," said Steve. "Run along." I watched her neat backside as she walked back into the house. Steve looked at me. "Do you want to try her?" he asked.

"But isn't she, well, I thought..."

"She's only one of the girls here. She does what I want her to and that includes looking after you if I like it. Just because I don't keep her with chains on doesn't mean I don't own her. Do you want to try her? I meant it. Freddie said to look after you. Said you'd just split up with your girl or something."

It seemed impolite to refuse the offer and it had been a while. "Something like that," I said, " Yeah, that would be great."

It was after dinner when she came to my room. It was hot. I was laying on my bed, the ceiling fan spinning slowly above. She'd let down her long, straight, jet black hair. It almost reached the hem of a skirt that came barely below her hips. Her hands were behind her back; I guessed they were strapped or chained there. She wore a ball gag like a necklace, the ball at her throat. She smiled, still without warmth and then looked down at the floor. "Steve said I should be nice to you," she said.

"Did you need to be bound?" I asked.

I was lying on the bed, naked. She climbed up alongside me. "Steve thought you might like it. You can use the gag on me too, if you want."

She seemed to combine a direct sensuality with a strange vulnerability. "Would that be a good idea?" I said.

"Only if you're planning to hurt me," she said, "and then only if you don't want to hear the results. Otherwise you might like it better not to." She wriggled closer to me and then knelt astride my belly. She smiled again as she gripped the zip of my trousers with her hands behind her back. With practiced ease and still smiling directly at me, she reached back and pulled my steadily growing cock from my pants. I felt the edge of her finger nails on its underside as she stroked and teased it. "Did you like hearing about my abduction?" she asked. "My talking of it seemed to excite you."

"I, ah, guess so," I replied, responding to a firmer caress. "Uh – huh, it's new to me and I, mmm – that's good, I need to learn."

"I had to learn too," she said, continuing to squeeze and stroke at my cock behind her back. "but that was different. They took great care of me. They took me from the crate and made sure I wasn't hurt. They took off the gag and gave me water. They even took the cuffs off my wrists and my ankles. That's when they raped me the first time. Told me to strip and then raped me. Three of them, one after the other. Said I'd need to get used to it. They were right of course. Then they came back for my mouth. Then they came back for my arse."

I could see she was distressed by the memory. "You don't have to tell me any more," I said.

"Yes, I do," she said, flatly, lowering her eyes. "Steve said that I should."

"And what if use this," I sat up and reached for the gag. For the first time her smile seemed genuinely warm.

"Then I would have to let you." She parted her lips as I pushed the ball in and strapped it in place. With the gag filling her mouth she whimpered and nodded her head in gratitude, freed of the need to tell me of her trials. I reached up to touch her breast, she relaxed as she realised I didn't intend to pinch her. She eased herself backwards until her cunt slipped over my cock. She seemed to lose herself as she slid up and down on my member. First, the hunted, frightened look faded from her face and then she closed her eyes as the rhythmic sensations took hold of her.

Afterwards she lay beside me on the bed, her wrists still chained behind her, the gag still in place. I had made a move to remove it but her wide eyed, pleading look had stopped me. In response she had nuzzled against me and moaned softly as I toyed with her nipples.

Somewhere far off in the house I heard a clock start to chime midnight. Sukie sat up suddenly in reaction to the sound. She knelt on the bed beside me and gave a bow of her head. She got to her feet and left without looking back. Somehow I felt more lonely than before she had come to my room.

The following morning I joined my host for breakfast. Sukie was there, smiling as she served us.

"Did you two have fun?" said Steve as Sukie poured orange juice into two glasses. I scooped pieces of mango into a bowl.

"Yeah," I said. "Sukie was very sweet. Thank you."

"Don't mention it," said Steve. "That's what you're for isn't it, Sukie dear?"

Sukie bowed her head. "Yes, Sir," she said.

"Good girl," said Steve. "Run along."

I took a drink of my juice as I watched her leave. "That's quite a story of hers. Did Freddie pick her up for you?"

"No, that wasn't one of his. I guess I don't think of Freddie for that sort of specific pick up. I mean his auctions are good if I can get over there – like I did for the girl that came out with you. He's always a good man to call if you're looking for something in stock. I had a couple of house slaves from one of his auctions last year, but when I need something specific picked up there's some folk I use over in the States. Here let me show you who I used for Sukie."

He pulled out a laptop from beside the table and fired it up. He opened a web browser and I found myself looking at a website, "Chicks In Chains". He typed in a membership ID and password.

"Bondage porn?" I said.

"It looks like it, doesn't it," he said. "The only thing is that all these bound and gagged young ladies in this part of the membership area aren't actually willing participants in the site. They're all this guy's stock. You can check out what's there at any time and put in a bid if there's anything you fancy. Plus there's a part of the site... Oh, where is it... Oh, yes, here. Part of the site where you can check out what the girls are good at, there's a lot of feed-back on what they can and can't do. It's all pretty easy. See."

I watched the tour of the site with interest. "Have you got any more pick-ups planned?" I asked.

"Yes, sure. A couple. I'm planning to replace Sukie as a house slave soon. Oh, don't mention that – I don't think she knows yet. I'll use these people again I think, they know what they are doing and the prices were OK. Not cheap but OK. They'll trade in Sukie against the new one and I'll get a fair price."

"So, what about your new acquisition? The one that came over in the Beaver with me."

"Ah yes," Steve said, smiling. "She's for the stables."

"Stables?" I said.

"Yes. Didn't Freddie tell you about my little hobby?"

"He said you had an eye for a fine filly but that was about all."

"Well, I guess he was right in that. Come and see."

Chapter 10 : Horse Feathers

The stables were just that, a low range of buildings set around three sides of a cobbled yard round behind the house. There were six stalls along either side and at the end of yard a carriage shed, tack room and feed store provided all that was needed for the horses I assumed to be kept there.

My assumptions were confounded by what I saw as we entered the yard. Hearing our feet on the cobbles, faces appeared looking over the half doors of four of the stalls. Each was a young blonde woman, Each wore a halter around their heads, ropes stretching around their foreheads, around their neck and beneath their chin. .

"Some of my fillies," said Steve gesturing to the girls. "They take some training but I like to think I produce the best pony girls in the western hemisphere. I thought we'd look in on the new girl and then take a carriage out for a trot."

"Why not?" I said, somewhat bemused by his suggestion. He led the way to the last stall and opened the door. Sprawled on a bed of straw, naked and asleep, was the girl that had been on the flight with me. She too was wearing a head harness, with reins locked to it and in turn to a ring at the back of her stall. Steve took a riding crop hanging from hook on the side of the stall and tapped her lightly on the thigh with it. She woke up suddenly, turning her head towards us. She gave a startled cry, rendered into a grunt by the steel bit gag that stretched across her mouth. She tried to back away from us but was stopped as she reached the end of her tethering rein.

"Up! Up!" ordered Steve. "On your feet."

She tried to obey but found it difficult. Her arms were fixed behind her in some way and her feet were locked into curious boots that gave each the shape of a horse's hoof. As she eventually got to her feet it was obvious that the boots were also pushing her up on tip toe as well.

Steve gripped her reins and pulled her towards him. "What do you think?" he said. "Nice conformation, I thought." He ran his hand down the small of her back over her backside and down to her thighs and calves. "Good hindquarters, firm fetlocks." I nodded to agree. He turned her to face us, the girl moving unsteadily on her hooves. "Right sort of chest too." He patted her breasts. "Quite small is best for pulling work. No good if you've got big breasts swinging around. "Good mane, too." He took a curry comb from the shelf on the side of the stall and pulled it through her long loose hair. "Needs a bit of attention after the flight but it'll soon come up nice and glossy. Still we'll let her rest for now and give her a session on the lunge rein later. That will start getting her used to walking and trotting on her new hooves. Back down girl. Back to sleep." He watched as the girl carefully curled her legs beneath her and lay back down on the straw. "Come on, Larry," he said, "I promised you a carriage ride."

He locked the stable door behind us as we left the stall. The four others were still looking out of their stalls. Steve went to each in turn offering them a piece of apple in his open palm, checking their head bridles and patting them tenderly. They were all of similar height and all with the same long blonde hair fastened back behind their heads. He finished up at the farthest stall. "We'll take this one," he said. "You can help me tack her up. You'll find some harness on a hook labelled 'Dawn' in the tack room. He opened up the stall door as I went in search of the harness. "Come on Dawn," I heard him say. "Come on girl."

I found the harness without trouble and carried it back into the yard where Steve was already leading Dawn up and down. She was wearing the same hoof boots as the other girl but had evidently become practiced in walking in them. "Right let's get your harness on you girl and you can do a bit of work," Steve said to her. He took off her stable halter and replaced it with the finer, black bridle from the harness I was carrying. "Give me her snaffle, would you?" He held out his hand and I passed over the hinged steel bar that he fitted across her mouth and clipped to the bridle. She ran her tongue side to side beneath the metal, gave a short whinny and shook her head. I watched as he fitted the remainder of her harness, leather straps across her chest beneath her small tits were cut to support them and had clips that linked to cuffs on her arms above the elbows to hold them in place. A broad collar held her head erect. As he turned her around I saw that her arms were held in a leather sleeve that fastened her fore arms together and covered her hands. The harness also fitted around a butt plug from which draped a long tail of hair that could well have been cut from her own head.

"Now, since we're going to show you off," said Steve, affectionately. "I think we'll add all the furniture. Hold her for a moment, would you," he said passing me her reins as he walked off towards the tack room. Dawn looked at me without attempting to speak. She tossed her head experimentally as I held her, so I tightened her rein. She responded to the pressure and stood calmly. Steve returned. "Are you used to hoses?" he said.

"I've not really had much to do with them," I replied. "My girlfriend used to ride, so I know a bit, but not much."

"Well, this one is quite a good beast. Not too spirited but not shy of hard work either. Let's put these on her." Steve fitted a pair of polished black blinkers to her bridle and then added a splendid plume of feathers to the top. He also took two silver bells and clipped them, one to each nipple. She gave a whinny through her snaffle as the clips went on but was then quiet. "Now let's get her between the shafts."

Shafting girls was something I had often enjoyed, though not quite in this way. She was soon harnessed up to a small two seat carriage. Steve picked a driving whip from the rack, invited me to take a seat, got in beside me and urged Dawn out of the yard. "Go on girl, go on," he said tapping her lightly with the whip to get her started. She stepped away carefully, picking her way across the ground with care. The cart moved off at a slow but steady pace, with Dawn's bells tinkling at every step. Steve drove her forward along a trail that led past the house and down towards the beach. We reached the quay and stopped. "You see," said Steve, "a quite practical mode of transport. Let's go back. I think its time for lunch." He tugged at Dawn's reins, and flicked at her rump with the whip. "Go on girl, round you go."

Dawn pulled us back up the incline to the stables. The cart turned into the yard just as Sukie appeared wearing the tightest of jodhpurs, riding boots and a tee shirt. Steve pulled Dawn to a halt with a short "whoa" and a pull on the reins. Sukie took the reins from Steve as he and I got down from the carriage.

"Good ride?" she asked.

"Yes, fascinating," I replied.

Steve handed his driving whip to Sukie. "Give her some water and then rub her down. She'll need it after that trot. Look in on the new pony and make sure she's all right, then come and join us for some lunch."

"Sure thing, Sir," Sukie smiled and led Dawn away towards the carriage shed, the carriage clattering across the cobbles behind her, her tit bells jingling.

Half an hour later we were sat on Steve's veranda with two rum punches and a plate of blackened flying fish with some rice and peas. We talked about the business. How he selected his ponies. I asked him if he'd ever bought any from Freddie. He said, "No".

It seemed that whenever he'd checked Freddie's stock or the auction catalogues there wasn't anything right for what he needed.

"Which is what?" I said.

"Tall; blonde for preference; thin, quite fit, but small tits, definitely small tits. I guess that last one is against the run of most people's requirements."

"Well, I guess so too, but it can't be difficult to find them. Has anyone from our side ever asked you what you were looking for?"

"No, I don't think so, no," Steve said. "But that's really not the business you're in is it? I mean you just grab them and then see who you can sell them to?"

"Well it looks like it's been that way so far," I said.

Sukie joined us. She sat on the floor beside Steve, smiling up at him. She'd find it hard when he told her she was to be sold again, I thought.

Steve asked her to entertain me again for the afternoon while he worked on the new pony. She came to my room an hour later. This time she wasn't bound or gagged.

Chapter 11 : Flying Home

I was sorry to say good bye to the island, Steve had been a good host and I'd learned a lot. Sukie had been agreeable company – I was partly sorry that I wouldn't be able to scrape together the asking price. Still there was work to do and so I was very pleased to have the offer of flight back in a private jet owned by one of Steve's associates.

I'd imagined a Lear Jet or a Citation but when I turned up at the airport and found my way to the departure lounge I found we were boarding something the size of a Boeing 737. There was about a dozen of us in the lounge including, I noticed, the short sighted man from the Sales Centre that had bought Rebecca. He was talking to a tall, blonde woman. She wore a dark blue uniform suit and carried a peaked cap. Our pilot, I thought. She gave him a curt nod and headed off towards the plane.

Boeing Business Jet, it said on the side of the plane and while it might have looked like a pretty ordinary small-sized airliner on the outside, the inside was very different.

We were greeted at the doorway by a smartly dressed flight attendant and shown inside to something that looked more like a gentleman's club than the usual seat warehouse. There were small clusters of seats, perhaps 20 in all, couches and tables, a large bar and plenty of space to walk around. I took an empty seat and sat back while the rest of my fellow passengers went through their rituals of stowing their bags and getting comfortable.

There were three flight attendants. I wasn't entirely surprised to see that two of them were Rebecca and Amanda. Neither of them appeared to recognise me.

The girl who had welcomed us on board introduced herself as Elaine, our senior flight attendant, and began the usual safety demonstration. Rebecca was in the front part of the cabin pointing out the exits and doing her bit with the oxygen mask and the lifejacket. Just like on most business flights the passengers carried on reading newspapers or magazines or talking amongst themselves, paying scant attention to what was being said. As the safety demonstration came to a close, though I was suddenly conscious that the passengers were paying attention to what was being said, putting their papers down and stopping their own conversations.

Elaine was still talking from the front of the aircraft as we started to push back from the terminal. "Gentlemen, I hope you will join me in welcoming two new crew members today," she said. "They are both having their first flight with us today, so I would like to introduce them, In the front cabin we have Rebecca and in the back cabin Amanda. Although they are new to us they are both experienced cabin crew and will be able to deliver our usual range of in-flight services. Rebecca and Amanda are joined by Brenda who some of you that have flown before with us will all ready know."

That was nice, I thought, I'd never had Becky wait on me hand and foot in the air, or at home come to that.

"And of course gentlemen that includes the usual range of massages and sexual services. Please just ask your attendant for anything you require. Amanda, Becky, if you could show our guests what is available." Rebecca appeared to hesitate for a moment. Elaine stared at her. "Please Rebecca, I think you know what to do."

She turned back to face us, unbuttoned her dark blue jacket and removed it. The white shirt she wore beneath it was sheer and it was clear that beneath it she wore a quarter cup bra that forced her tits up, pushing her nipples against the tight sheer fabric of the blouse. She took off the blouse and put that with her jacket. Without pausing she unzipped her skirt and stepped out of it revealing garter belt, stockings and a thong. She put the skirt with her other clothes and walked slowly up and down the aisle between the seats. I heard some approving grunts from my fellow passengers. She walked through into the rear cabin. Amanda, having stripped in the same way, came through to our cabin giving us all a good look at her talents. She returned the back and Rebecca rejoined us.

Elaine spoke again. "There we are gentlemen. Just press the call button by your seats for anything you require. Thank you girls." Rebecca and Amanda put their clothes on again. The aircraft had reached the runway. "Flight attendants, seats for take off please," she said. The girls strapped themselves in the jump seats just inside the cabin door and the plane started down the runway with the usual combination of disconcerting thumps, bangs and roaring noises. Moments later we were airborne, wheels and flaps up, heading back towards Europe.

Most of my fellow passengers were busy on their lap tops by the time the plane levelled out. Rebecca and Amanda, jackets off, wandered through the cabin offering drinks. Nobody seemed keen to follow up on Elaine's offer. I felt it was churlish not to; besides it was an opportunity to fulfil a long-held fantasy.

Rebecca placed the drink I'd asked for on the table beside me. I looked up at her. "You don't remember me do you?" I asked as she stared blankly at me.

"No, Sir. Should I? This is my first flight. Have you flown with us before?"

"No, that's all right. I thought I remembered you from before you worked here."

"Oh, no, Sir. I've only worked for this airline."

I wasn't sure that I followed the logic but I could see that whatever had happened to her during her training had blotted out any memory of her previous life.

"That's all right," I said, "it must be my mistake." I took a sip from my drink. "I heard that you are available to us during the flight. Is that right?"

Yes of course Sir. I can entertain you here in your seat or there is a bed in a cubicle towards the back of the 'plane."

"No. Go to the washroom but leave the door unlocked. You can entertain me in there." There was a long time fantasy that I now had the chance to turn into reality.

"But Sir, surely the cubicle would be more comfortable."

"Perhaps but I'd like to take you in the washroom, thank you."

"Of course Sir, if that's what you desire. I'll just return this tray to the galley."

I watched her arse as she walked back to the galley. She emerged a moment later and went to the washroom. I followed her in. It was fairly spacious compared with a regular flight but even so there wasn't too much room. "Right," I said pushing her back against the door and sliding the lock closed, "you're going to get fucked."

"Sir, there's no need to force me. I'm expected to look after the passengers as I said."

"No need perhaps, but maybe I like it that way. Give me your belt."

"Very good sir," she said, doing as she was ordered.

I wrapped the thin strap around her wrists and knotted it. I hoisted her hands over her head and tied them to the coat hook on the back of the washroom door. She gave a short, "Oh!"

I grabbed a handful of paper towels from the dispenser and jammed them into her mouth. "Shut up, bitch," I said as I pulled her blouse from her skirt and unbuttoned it. She squealed as I pinched and squeezed at her tits. I put my hand over her lips and she choked and coughed as it pushed the wad of towels deeper into her mouth.

I swung her around and dragged her skirt up over her hips. I pulled her pants down around her knees. Her arse was framed by her garter belt and stockings. I took her from behind, grunting as I pushed my cock inside her lifting her up on her toes as I pushed up under her. She whimpered into the paper gag as I came. It was great.

I pulled the gag from her mouth and let her wrists off the coat hook, she fell to her knees on the floor, sobbing. "Clean me up," I ordered.

She looked up at me and composed herself. "Of course, Sir. I won't be a moment." She reached for my cock and took it in her mouth. Licking and sucking the cum from it. It didn't take long before I was erect again but I knew from long experience that there wasn't much point in her carrying on. She'd had as much of my juice as there was likely to be for a while.

"That's enough," I said pushing her back on her heels as I zipped my fly. I turned my back on her, left her on the floor of the washroom and returned to my seat. I wasn't very proud of myself, I guess, but I had enjoyed it.

Rebecca followed me a little later, having dressed herself and reapplied her make up. She made her way between the seats again asking if the passengers wanted drinks. A fat, florid, red haired man a little way away from me started a conversation with her. She returned wearing her uniform jacket, hat and gloves. Soon she was on her knees gobbling greedily at his cock, while the man toyed with her hair.

As she finished and got to her feet I pressed the call button. She looked up and walked slowly over to me. Her make up was messed again and there were splatters of the man's cum on her blouse where it had dribbled from her chin. She seemed unconcerned. "Can I help you, Sir?" she asked.

"Another vodka when you have a minute, please," I said.

"Of course, Sir, I'll just be a minute if that's all right."

"That's fine," I said.

The short sighted man came through from the back of the 'plane and sat down beside me. He held out his hand. "Narod Jesper," he said by way of introduction. "I think these two are pretty good value, don't you?" he said nodding towards Rebecca.

"It must have been handy for you to be able to get two fully trained cabin crew for this, Mr Jesper."

"Cheaper than training them myself," he chortled. "But that's the great thing about auctions, you can pick up some real bargains. It's a lot easier than recruiting them myself like I did with the other one - what's her name? - Brenda. Anyway, how's your work for Clegg coming along?"

"Interesting." I said. "I'm learning a lot and the benefits are good. Oh, thanks for the flight, by the way. And the in-flight services."

"That's OK, happy to do you the favour. I'd rented out some hold space to Freddie on this trip anyway. He had a couple of packages he needed back in the UK and it's easier for him to use me than regular cargo flights if I'm coming across."

"Are all the passengers buyers?" I asked.

"I couldn't possibly say," Jesper replied, with a chuckle. "That would be most indiscrete. But if you were to see any of these people at one of Mr Clegg's little events I wouldn't be at all surprised. Why do you ask?"

"Well," I said, looking around, "I'd say the profile of people here is a bit different to the one's I've seen at Freddie's. There's what, a third of them women? And a third under thirty?"

"Yes, something like that. I'm afraid that the more mature buyer like myself will soon be in the minority."

"I thought so," I said. "Interesting."

"I'm sure that I might be able to persuade one or other of them to chat if it would help your research. They're often pleased to have a chance to sound off. Unless you're planning to sleep off your bout of exercise?"

"No, not just yet. I'll get some sleep later on but if you can introduce me I'd like to get another perspective."

"OK, I'll see what I can do."

He headed off into the rear cabin. A few minutes later a rather dumpy woman put her head around the partition, obviously looking for someone. It turned out to be me. "You'd be Larry," she said, sitting down heavily in the seat next to me. She held out a rather limp hand. "Daphne Challis," she said in a quiet New England accent. "Our host said you'd like a chat." She nodded towards the rear cabin.

"Did he say what about?" I looked at her. She was overweight and didn't carry it well. She wore a rather muddy brown tweed jacket and skirt. Her greasy hair hung lankly to her shoulders. She was sucking on the stub of an unlit cigar. I guessed it was some consolation on a 6 hour non-smoking flight. She reached up and pressed the call button.

"Uh, yes," she said. Rebecca appeared in response to the call. "Gin and tonic for me," she said. "Anything for you?" I shook my head. "And some nuts or crisps, snacks." She turned back towards me as Rebecca left us. "I guess I don't look like your idea of a lady slave owner."

I shrugged my shoulders. Actually, she didn't look my idea of a lady anything.

"Well, whatever. It wasn't what I thought I was going to do either. I just needed some help around the house and a friend suggested they could get me some that would very attentive help. Turned out it involved owning rather than hiring. I was happy with that; too much legislation over employees these days. I guess I'm a fairly typical buyer that way, I have three or four at any one time. Trade them in when I get bored or they prove unsuitable."

Rebecca returned with Daphne's drink and snacks on a tray. She picked up the glass and grabbed greedily at the nuts and biscuits with her other hand. Rebecca went to leave. "No, wait," said Daphne, putting her drink back on the tray and grabbing another handful of nuts. Rebecca stood patiently by.

"Are these males or females," I asked. I hadn't seen Clegg dealing in male slaves but I guessed that it was possible, if there was a market.

"I'd intended men originally," she said. "and that would have been really easy. Just advertise yourself as some dominatrix and they line up. And pay you for it too!" She looked disgusted and crammed some more nuts in. "I tried a couple. Hopeless. They just need too much attention. I haven't got the time. And besides I decided I quite liked a little female company. This one," she took a sip from her drink and pointed to Rebecca, "is a real treasure, isn't she?" I watched as Daphne's free hand pushed up under Rebecca's skirt and started fondling her arse. Rebecca's nipples stiffened visibly under her blouse. "I like them like this," she said. "Good tits, nice arse. I keep my house slaves corseted and bare breasted, they need to look good." Her hand came out from Rebecca's skirt to grab some more nuts.

Maybe they need to look good, I thought, but I didn't think I'd like to see her naked with the rate she was going through the snacks. "So, have you bought any from Clegg?"

"No," she said. "It's all a bit of a boy's club isn't it? Well, old man's club really, no disrespect. Just a bit behind the times the way they do things. I spend my time making money or enjoying it, I haven't got time to waste going off to his auctions. There's easier and better ways to get hold of what I need. Mind you I like Brits as slaves, they seem to have the whole behaving respectfully thing down to a fine art. Clegg's got a good reputation for British merchandise. If I really wanted a British item specifically then maybe it'd be worth the trouble."

"So no one from there has ever talked to you about the things they can do?"

"No, I can't say they have. I mean I know Clegg's got some good snatch teams and some good intelligence gathering too by all accounts but they've never approached me that I remember."

"Well, thanks," I said. "That's a help."

"That's OK. Now if you'll excuse me I need to get a bit of sleep before we reach the other end." With that she got to her feet, brushing the crumbs she had dropped into her lap down onto the floor. She looked at the debris and then at Rebecca. "You'd better clean that up, girl."

"Of, course, Ma'am," Rebecca responded respectfully, "I'll do it straight away."

"Good," Daphne responded, "and when you've done come back to my seat. I've thought of something that will help me get off to sleep." Rebecca disappeared. "Daphne turned for the after cabin. "Call me sometime if you start doing anything interesting. Clegg's got my number." She picked up her gin, drained the last drop, pulled the slice of lemon from the glass and sucked it clean. "You never know, we might be able to do some business."

As she went back to her seat the third stewardess appeared beside my seat. I looked up at her, "Brenda Alexander", her badge said.

"Hi," she said in a warm Texan drawl. "I just wanted to make sure you were enjoying the flight, Sir. And to see if there was anything more that I or the other girls could do for you."

I decided to take advantage of the fact that I hardly felt like sleeping. "Yes," I said there is. "Come and talk to me for a moment."

Brenda looked surprised by the suggestion.

"Have a seat," I said.

"I'm not really supposed to sit down with the passengers, Sir," she replied. "I could kneel here if that would be alright." I nodded and she did so.

"I know how Rebecca and Amanda came to be here," I said. "How about you? Were you bought at auction like them? Tell me."

The short sighted man was passing my seat. Brenda looked up at him, concerned. "That's all right, Brenda, tell him anything he wants to know. And if there's anything else he wants, see to that too. You know the rules."

"Yes, of course, Sir," she said. He nodded and went on forward. She folded her hands in her lap and began. "Well, it seems a silly story, really. I don't know there is much to tell. I was working for another airline, mainly short haul flights around the south western USA, and I saw an advert for a start-up business charter airline with the opportunity to do some long haul trips too. It seemed like the opportunity to get in at the start of something so I applied."

"Go on," I said.

"Well, I very nearly didn't get to the interview. It was in a hotel on the airfield I was flying into and I'd arranged to go straight over to the hotel when I landed. Anyway there was a flight delay, air traffic control problems, we were an hour late in landing. I tried ringing the number they had given me as soon as I got down but couldn't get through. I thought I'd missed my chance. I practically ran through the terminal building and across the car park lot. I was still in my uniform, I'd intended to change but I just didn't have the time."

"OK," I said. "Look while you tell me this, open your blouse. I got a good look at Rebecca and Amanda at the start of the flight but you must have been in the rear cabin."

"I was looking after Mr Jesper," she said, apparently embarrassed but starting to unfasten her blouse nevertheless. I had a good idea of what 'looking after Mr Jesper' would mean. She looked up at me as she finished opening her blouse. I nodded approvingly at the sight of her tits. "Should I unfasten my bra as well, Sir?" she asked.

"Yes please, Brenda, that would be excellent. Then put your hands behind your back, please." I watched as she did so and then urged her to continue with her tale.

"Well I got to the suite they were using for interviews. There was a receptionist that tried to fob me off, that they'd finished, and they had already offered the job to someone. But I wasn't going to be put off. I pushed by and into the suite of rooms they were using for interviews. The first two rooms were empty and then I burst into the third room. There were two men in there. I'd obviously startled them, they turned round suddenly. I saw there was a girl slumped in the chair beside them. It was Elaine although I didn't know her then of course. I don't know how I could have been so stupid looking back. Is she alright, I said, I've had first aid training. Can I help? I was just so keen to help I didn't think what might have happened. Anyway the first man said that she'd suddenly fainted or something and could I do anything. I bent over the girl and went to check her breathing. I heard the two men say something. I'm not sure what but now I realise they were agreeing to take me as well. Then I felt a sharp pain in my backside and everything went black."

"I see," I was pleased by her frankness. I reached out for one of her nipples and squeezed it. She gave a short gasp but didn't pull away. "Go on."

"Well when I woke up I couldn't move. They'd tied the two of us up. We were laying back to back, my hands were tied in front of Elaine's waist, hers in front of mine, They'd roped our ankles together as well. My mouth was stuffed full of something and all I could do was grunt and whimper, whatever they'd used it was tied into my mouth with a rope that went around Elaine's mouth as well, whenever I tried to move my head, the back of her head banged against mine.. I caught sight of the two of us

in a mirror on the far side of the room. They'd strapped tape across my mouth too. The two of us were wriggling and struggling but it didn't do too much good. Then the two men and the receptionist came back in. They were arguing about me. The receptionist was furious, she was saying that they were only supposed to collect one and that the whole expensive exercise was in danger of being a complete shambles. The man bent down beside me and pulled my skirt up. Look at the legs, he said. Too good to let those go. The other man bent down beside me and tugged at my shirt. Nice tits too, he said. come on she's worth bringing along too. The receptionist seemed to relent and said that it would probably be all right but that she'd have to clear it. The men said if she didn't want me they'd find a way of making use of me. I can't remember when I've been so scared. Anyway..."

She was about to continue when Elaine, the senior stewardess appeared. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Sir," she said. "But Mr Jesper said when you have finished with Brenda he'd like to see her in the cubicle."

Brenda looked uncomfortable. "I really should go," she said.

"That's all right," I said. "I can hardly deny the owner his pleasures."

"Thank you, Sir," said Elaine. "Can I get you one of the other girls?"

"No," I said, "that's fine." I watched as Elaine helped Brenda to her feet. She made no attempt to button her blouse. Elaine reached up to the overhead locker and pulled out a seat belt demonstration strap. She pulled it around Brenda's neck and used it to lead the girl as if on a leash towards the back of the plane.

Whatever else I had learned on this trip it was clear that Jesper had got a bargain from the auction – Rebecca and Amanda had to have been cheaper for him than commissioning a pick up like the one he'd used for Brenda and Elaine. I was beginning to feel that Freddie was being taken advantage of and I couldn't imagine that he would be pleased by the idea.

Chapter 12 : SWOT versus SWAT

I got back to the London offices the following day. A comfortable flight had made it easier but I was still suffering from jet lag. Still I doubted that I was feeling as rough as the packages that had been in the hold.

Freddie gave me a call and suggested a meeting. He wanted an update on progress. I was happy that I had some ideas after my various trips. We agreed to meet in the board room the following afternoon.

Clegg arrived on time, looking in as good humour as he usually was. "Afternoon Larry. Good trip? Well I guess we'll hear about that. Not a bad bunch out there. Hope they looked after you."

"It was fine," I said. "everyone was very helpful. I got some good ideas, I think."

"OK," said Clegg. "That's what you're here for. How do you want to do this?"

"I'd like to talk through my thoughts using a few tools that I find helpful, basically summarising what I've learned over the last few weeks."

"You seemed to have learned how to enjoy yourself, young man, if what I hear of your trip is right. That's all to the good. Don't look so worried, I'm quite happy for you to take advantage of any opportunity – its part of the package as far as I'm concerned."

I gave an embarrassed cough. "Well, thanks. Yes, there was some fun but I thought I'd try to focus on the things I've learned about the business. Then we can agree what we want to do about it."

"Fine by me. You lead off."

"One of the things I have done is a SWOT analysis," I said turning to the flip chart that stood beside the board table.

"Special Weapons And Tactics?" asked Clegg looking puzzled.

"Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats," I explained as I drew the board into four segments, S, W, O & T.

"Ah," Clegg responded. "I see."

"I'll write up the things I think I've got from the meetings and visits of the past few weeks. If you want to pitch in with any thoughts as we go along, feel free to do so."

"Ha! Going to have to work for my living am I? OK"

"I'll start with the strengths. The research team is a definite plus." I wrote 'RESEARCH TEAM' up on the board. "All the clients that I spoke to reckon that you've got one of the best research teams in the business. Plus your snatch teams think the research is pretty good too. They don't get many surprises when they are on a job."

"So how does that help us?"

"Well, I don't want to jump to any conclusions, let's look at the other factors. Hacking – that's something your team is pretty good at too." I added that to the list. "Plenty of others have been making use of the Internet but your team seem to have got further on than most. In fact the whole IT side seems pretty strong to me."

"I'd have thought the fact that we can deliver all over the world was a strength -, don't you?" Clegg joined in.

"Well, certainly it's something the organisation does and it's perfectly good at. Virtually all of your competitors do it as well though, so I don't think it can be considered a particular strength. I didn't hear anyone saying you could do anything that others can't. I think you can only really count the things that are different or better than competitors – otherwise you just end up being a 'me too' operation."

"Hmm, yes. See what you mean. Never been my goal to be like the rest of the herd."

"But one other feature that was mentioned was your knowledge of the UK as a source of product. All of your clients said that was a big feature and important to them as well. It seems there some markets where UK product is a plus and you're definitely seen as the expert."

"OK, that's encouraging anyway. Any others?" I shook my head. Freddie looked concerned but pressed on. "How about weaknesses?"

"Well, something your clients talk about is a lack of choice – they feel once you get stuck into a commission there's not much chance to influence what's going on."

"Well, that's inevitable, isn't it?. You can't go changing operations in mid-stream."

"Maybe not but your competitors give their clients the feeling that they have more flexibility."

"Uh, huhh, OK," said Clegg warily. "Mm, well we ought to be taking account of the competition."

"Oh, yes. I think we can assume that if we're doing things right they will respond in some way. For now though I'm mainly interested in doing things our customers want that the competition aren't doing or that the competition is doing better than us. That's why I thought about the auctions."

"Hang on," said Clegg. "We've got one of the best Auction Centres that I know. You can't say that's a weakness."

"Well, I agree the Centre itself is impressive. The problem is that there aren't enough buyers and because there aren't enough buyers you're not getting as good a price as you could. If you could get a bigger audience you could find prices going up. Or if you could make things so that you really exploit the specialised talents of the stock. Take the chap who runs the business jet I flew back on. He got two fully trained cabin crew at one of our auctions for about what he'd have expected to pay for any two pieces in their mid-twenties. He got a real bargain. I think you end up under valuing the stock."

"I see what you mean. Certainly prices have seem depressed but I'd put that down to a more general market trend."

"There's no evidence to support that. In fact from my discussions some of your customers are paying higher prices from your competitors, not lower."

"Ha! Not my idea of the best way to do business."

"I think it stems from a number of problems. Customers just don't think you're interested in what they want, just in what you have to sell, so they come to see what you have to offer as an opportunity for a bargain, nothing more." I wrote 'Don't handle MY problems' up under weaknesses."

"All right."

"And the other thing is the stock that you carry." I added 'STOCK' that to the list.

"Can't sell what you haven't got," said Freddie, frowning his brow.

"A common view but not always true. Sometimes you can sell what you know you can get. I think what I mean is that there doesn't seem to be any control over what stock you bring in or when. It seems like the snatch teams just pour stock in at one end and the Sales Centre has to find ways to shift it."

"Hmm, I'm not sure that's completely fair but there may be something in what you say. Certainly we had to clear a lot last year."

"OK. Well, the strengths and weaknesses all tend to be about what your business does. The opportunities and threats are all about external factors. I'm not sure I've really got to grips with this yet but here's a couple of thoughts. There's a growing number of women buyers in the market – that's got to be an opportunity and I'm not sure that anyone's really catering specifically for them. Then there's the younger buyers too. Again there are signs that the average age of buyers is coming down – a few people have said that. Again, I don't see anyone shaping up to that."

"Interesting, interesting. Well, if we're looking for threats, there's always the forces of law and order."

"Well, yes, but again that's pretty much the same for everyone isn't it? I guess if you have more problems because you're based here in the UK we could consider it a weakness but otherwise it's just what this market is all about, isn't it?"

OK, yes, I see what you mean. It's probably the same for all of us. It's no worse here than in the States or most of the other EU countries. Maybe a bit better at the moment with most of them off worrying about counter-terrorism rather than us."

I ran through a few more thoughts but I could see Clegg's attention was wandering. Time to cut to the chase, I thought.

"So here's what I think we should do," I said. Clegg sat up. "Have you heard of the '4P's'?"

He shook his head.

"It's a way we talk about the mix of factors you need in a marketing approach: product, price, place and promotion."

"OK, I get it," said Clegg.

"Well here are my thoughts." I turned over a clean sheet on the flip pad and wrote:

Product – UK females that meet specific customer requirements.

Price – premium priced for a premium service

Place – Eastern Europe, Middle East, Far East

Promotion – account managed approach supported by video / web
+ explore opportunities in new markets (women / younger buyers)

Clegg looked at it. "Go on," he said, carefully.

"My view is that the future of Clegg Enterprises lies with higher value niche opportunities rather than the mass markets. I recognise some of these, especially the US, seem attractive and appear to be the areas of largest growth today but all my research indicates that these buyers will move to becoming more discriminating over time. The skills of the business in research and specialist acquisition of stock will match the emerging demands of the market for particular items. I'd recommend that Clegg Enterprises defocuses on the current auction approach and instead looks towards an approach in which buyers are encouraged to specify their requirements directly and indeed get fully engaged in the selection and acquisition process. Over time we would aim to migrate more of the current clientele to buying in the way that the most profitable customers do."

"OK, I can see the sense of that. I guess the big questions are how do we do it and how do we fund it?"

"Let's talk about how we should do it first. I've got some ideas that should prove simple to put into practice for starters. Firstly I'd like to start an account management approach with some of the current clients. Assigning a particular contact to them to be responsible for knowing their requirements and working with them on how we can meet them. I mean, for example, when I was out on the island, it was clear that Steve Glennis has a number of projects in mind that we could help him with, he hadn't thought about talking to us. If someone had been talking to him, understanding his projects, we'd have been able to make suggestions and with the research skills we'd have been able to find just what he wanted."

"So instead of waiting for him to turn up at an auction," Clegg began.

"Which he may or may not do," I said. "And in fact he hadn't for over a year until last month."

"... instead of that, we work with him on specific acquisition projects."

"We follow that up with an approach that lets clients review and comment on our plans - we could use some sort of secure web technology; share the surveillance stuff with clients; get them to comment on the girls before we pick them up. The idea should be that we move to more acquisitions for specific projects and fewer speculative collections. If we make things specific enough for people they'll pay a lot more, we'll be able to command a premium price because we'll be getting the customer just exactly what they want."

"Well, it's funny you should say that I mean that's how I started out. I mean apart from my own little hobby activities, the first professional job I did was for a guy who was infatuated with a girl. He tried to date her and she laughed him off. I told him I could get him what he wanted and I did. He came up with a big wad of cash, very grateful he was. That was the seed funding for Clegg Enterprises." He went on, "But your ideas are going to need cash too. So how do you propose funding it?"

"You're going to think this a bit radical," I said.

"I like radical if it solves the problem," Clegg responded.

"OK," I took a deep breath. "Close the Sales Centre."

Clegg spluttered, "But that cost us a fortune to set up! I thought you marketing guys were all about better selling."

"Nah - marketing's about getting people to buy. I bet it did cost you a fortune to set up. And it's costing you a fortune to run. It's expensive and you don't actually need it. It isn't much used apart from the auction suite. It's much better to go to the customers. If you need them to come to you, use the London Club."

"But what about the warehousing facilities and re-sales and the auctions?"

"There's probably enough space at the Prep Centre. If we're doing more collection against specific requirements then we should need less warehousing anyway - not point in keeping stock if we don't need to. I think you can use the Internet more for auctions of any commodity stuff, we'll still get 'opportunities' presenting themselves and I don't propose we should turn them down. But when you do use an auction you need to get to a wider customer base - it's all got a bit cosy at present and you don't get the prices you should because there just aren't enough bidders involved."

Clegg looked thoughtful and then seemed to come to a conclusion. "All right let's go with this," he said. "You try your account management approach with one or two clients and see if that works. Go make a video about what we are up to - I like that idea - but don't spend too much money on it. And you can get Technical to do a feasibility study on the Internet service. How does that sound?"

"Fine, that'll let us make a start. And the Sales Centre?"

"I'll think about it. We'll talk about it again after you've done this first bit. I'll set you up with a couple of clients to go talk about their requirements."

"OK," I said. "Fine by me. Just make sure that Research are teed up to play their part."

"Don't worry, Larry, you'll get all the help you need. Oh and you'd better go have a chat with Harry, I can imagine that field operations are going to be working harder."

Harry proved difficult to track down but eventually I got him to answer his mobile. "Can we chat," I said.

"Sure," said Harry but I'm a bit up to my ears in it right now. I've got an operation in hand but if you want to come up here I'd be OK with that."

"OK," I said. "Where's 'here' then?" He gave me an address in a small town about 20 miles away from the Prep Centre. I took the train from Euston. It wasn't much later arriving than I'd expected and a short walk from the station found me outside a door sandwiched between a greengrocers and a pet shop. There was only one bell. I pushed it.

Harry's voice crackled through a small brass grill, "Yup?"

"It's Larry," I said.

"Come on up," he replied, the lock buzzed and I pushed the door open. A narrow staircase led upwards. At the top of the stairs was a glass panelled door that opened into a scruffy reception area. Behind the empty reception desk was a door into an inner office. Harry put his head around the door and waved me in. "Larry," he said, "excellent. There's someone I want you to meet."

Sat in the chair beside a large desk was a cheerful looking, red haired girl. She got to her feet as soon as I got into the room. "Hello," she said, enthusiastically, "I'm Sarah."

"Hi," I said giving Harry a quizzical look, unclear if she was part of Clegg Enterprises or not.

"Sarah's my new PA," Harry said. "Or at least she will be if she decides to accept the offer."

"Don't be silly," she said, "of course I'll accept. It all sounds very exciting, import, export, all that. Much better than the dull old car dealers."

"Sarah is currently working in the motor trade," said Harry.

"Well I can see that might be less exciting," I said guardedly. "Was your last job very dull?"

"Awful," she said. "And the boss couldn't keep his hands to himself. Furtive groping, if you know what I mean." She gave a conspiratorial wink.

"I can't see you having that problem with Harry," I said. "There's nothing furtive about him."

"Do you want a coffee?" Harry offered, interrupting the banter. I nodded. He pulled a note from his wallet and tossed it to Sarah. "Can you pop across the road and pick us up a couple of cappuccinos, Sarah? And grab one for yourself if you're stopping."

"Sure thing, boss," Sarah said with a grin. "Coffees coming up." With that she bounced by me and down the stairs.

"Does she know what we do?" I asked as the door slammed behind her.

"No, not at all."

"Won't that make things, err, rather difficult?"

"Not with what I've got planned. I wasn't thinking of employing her as such, just sort of acquiring her."

"Ah, silly of me," I said. "And is this soon?"

"Well, yes, right about now actually. If you hang on a minute I'll have got it all sorted out."

Sarah reappeared with the coffees. "Here they are, I hope they are all right," she said. She shrugged off her jacket and I could see why Harry was keen on having her around. I guessed she was in her early twenties, twenty-two or three maybe. Her shoulder length, red, wavy hair was striking in itself and the dark green top she wore clung agreeably to her figure. She didn't have big tits but they were neat, well formed and pert and the fact that she had a trim figure made them look bigger than they really were. Her dark skirt was probably a bit tight and a bit short really but I wasn't complaining. Her pale complexion and freckled face made me think that the hair inside her knickers would match that on her head. "Here you are boys," she said, setting the coffees down between us.

"Thanks Sarah, that's great. Now can you organise something for me, please?"

"That's why I'm here," she reached for a note pad, "fire away."

"All right, can you call this number 07788 656556. The gentleman concerned is expecting to have confirmation that a shipment will be ready today? If you can just call him and tell him that it will be ready as agreed. Oh, and I need to meet him. Can you suggest that he and I get together this evening at the Red Bull on the Warwick Road say, oh half past seven. Then I need you to pick up a few things for me, nothing to do with work I'm afraid, personal stuff, I hope you don't mind?"

"Of course not. That's all part of the job."

"Well it's just that I've got some stuff I need to package up and put into storage. Can you pop into the DIY Centre and get 50 feet of three quarter inch rope, a couple of rolls of duct tape and some Hessian sacks. If you can get that it'll make things a lot easier."

Sarah jotted the details down on her pad. "No problem at all, boss," she said brightly. "Shall I bring this stuff in tomorrow?"

"Yes, ah, no. Look tell you what, why don't you bring it out to the Red Bull, and I can introduce you to this chap. You'll need to meet him sometime. I might even buy you a drink."

"Goodness, can I trust my new boss, I ask myself?" Sarah giggled.

"Very wise, very wise," said Harry with mock seriousness.

Sarah giggled again. "Still this is great," she said. "My last boss really kept me chained to my desk."

"And I'll do the same if you aren't working well," said Harry with a grin. "In fact maybe we'll use heavier chains if you're not doing so well, lighter ones for better performance."

"Oh, you are funny," Sarah said, grinning, as she picked up her coffee. "I'd better get back to work." She went back out to the reception office.

I briefed Harry on the outcome of my discussions with Clegg. I left out my thoughts on the Sales Centre. Harry seemed to like the approach and said he'd be happy to support any of the acquisitions that might fall out of it. His only comment was that Brian wasn't going to be pleased if it meant less going through the Sales Centre. We'd been talking for about half an hour when Sarah knocked on the office door.

"I've spoken to the gentleman," she said, "and that's all fine he'll see you at 7:30. And he says, thanks for arranging the shipment he'll be able to pick it up as agreed. Now, do you mind if I get off? If I'm going to get those other things you wanted."

"No, that's fine. Are you sure you've got everything on that list?"

"Yes, here it is," she took out the paper, "rope, tape, sacking. Nothing else?"

"No, I don't think so, no that will be fine." Harry smiled as Sarah turned to pick up her jacket and go. She stopped at the door to Harry's office.

"Hey," she said, "I've just thought – when Harry met Larry!"

"We've heard it," I said. "Have a nice evening and don't let this guy tie you up in knots. He's a hard task master."

Harry gave me a warning look but Sarah simply smiled. "Oh, I think I'll be all right," she said. "Bye for now."

I waited until the office door closed before allowing myself a chuckle. "Fifty feet of rope and two reels of duct tape?" I laughed. "She's really going to get it isn't she?"

"I very much think so," said Harry, "but you don't grudge me a little amusement, I'm sure. Anyway, come out to the Red Bull, you can drive one of the cars back."

We took some time discussing a few of the ideas that I would need Harry to pick up on for the plans I had agreed with Clegg. By the time we were through it was already gone seven and dark so we headed off to Harry's car and drove out of town. The Warwick Road wasn't the best part of the area and as we got to the pub I could see that it wasn't open. I didn't think it would be, the "For Sale" sign outside the front gave me a clue. As we pulled into the unlit, pot holed, car park I could see that Sarah was already there chatting animatedly to a man standing beside a white van. There was another girl with her. "Oh great," said Harry, with heavy irony, "she's brought a friend." We pulled up between her car and the van. She waved as she saw us getting out.

"Yoo hoo," she called and then added redundantly. "Over here!" We wandered across. "This is Julia," said Sarah introducing her companion. I watched Harry giving her the once over, evidently approving the girls rather full figure and long blonde hair. He had a slightly puzzled look, I guessed he was trying to work how she could wear a skirt that was as short and tight as the one she had on and still manage to move.

"Hello, Julia," he said, smiling.

"Jules," she said, "call me Jules."

"OK," said Harry, "Jules it is."

"We've already met your friend here. Your business associates seem such nice people. We were just discussing where we might go on to – I don't think we'll get a drink here. I know some good clubs."

"Yes," cut in Jules, "we were going on too a club anyway after this to celebrate Sarah's new job, why don't you all come?"

"Yes," said Sarah. "We could all go have some fun. You boys look like you could use a night out – I'm a great dancer, you should see me."

"Well," said Harry, "I'm sure you're right about not getting a drink here. I don't reckon Larry here could keep up with you on the dance floor but I'm sure we'd all like to see you strut your stuff. Mind you it won't do if you're late in tomorrow."

"Oh goodness, you can't imagine I'd be late in on my first day," said Sarah.

"You needn't worry about Sarah," said Jules, "she's so eager to please she'd come hopping in with a broken leg if she thought not being there would upset anyone."

"Oh, don't exaggerate!" exclaimed Sarah. "But I will be there and on time."

"I sure you will," said Harry. "Oh, by the way, were you able to get those things?"

"He hasn't got you shopping for him already, has he?" said Jules.

"Shh," said Sarah. "I don't mind. I like to help out." She turned back to Harry. "Yes, no problem. The girl at the check out gave me ever such a funny look, though, I can't imagine what she thought I wanted them for. They're in the back of my car." She passed her keys to Harry.

"I'll get them," he said and walked across to the car.

"What on earth did he have you get?" said Jules.

Harry got back from the car. "Just a few things from the DIY shop," he said. "Some rope, duct tape and sacking."

"Ooh," said Jules, "sounds kinky to me! Who were you planning a bondage session with?"

"Well," said Harry joining in with Julia's giggles. "It was to have been Sarah but now I've got a choice."

"Not me," said Jules, "I make it a rule not to get tied up on a first date. Doesn't give you a chance to get to know one another. Mind you if you're persuasive enough there's quite a lot I will do."

"Oh, Julia!" Sarah complained. "Don't talk like that, I've got to work with these guys, you know. What will Harry think?"

Sarah turned towards Harry's friend, saying that Julia wasn't really like this, usually. The two girls were still talking animatedly about the clubs they thought we all might visit as Harry nodded to his colleague.

It was almost like watching a ballet. Harry tossed a sack over the girls' heads to his friend. Both girls watched, puzzled, as he caught it. Sarah had her back to Harry as he pulled his sack down over her head. Jules went to run to her aid as Harry's friend did the self same thing to her. It was instructive to see two experts at work. As the sack came down each man grabbed his captive around the arms and then took a length of rope, knotting it across the girl's mouth over the sack, pulling the Hessian into her mouth and gagging her.

The two girls, struggling and kicking now and yelping into their rope gags, were wrestled to the floor. Harry tossed one of the rolls of tape to the other man. He used it to strap Jules's wrists while Harry was winding rope around Sarah's waist and chest. Soon both girls were trussed up with sacking over their torsos and tape wrapped around them at the ankles and the knees. In a matter of seconds, Sarah and Jules were both laying on the floor of the white van, squirming and mmping in protest. I had a good view of both girls' legs - skirts that short aren't really the best thing to get kidnapped in.

We slammed the door on the back of the van. Harry took his car, I took Sarah's. We followed the van back to the Prep Centre. I watched as the doors of the van were opened. Both girls still had the sacks still tied over their heads, Sarah was sitting up, almost as if she was waiting to be helped out. Jules had been putting up more of a fight, with only her short skirt her wriggling on the floor of the van had left her with laddered and torn tights. She'd even managed to break the heel of one of her shoes - as she was pulled form the van she was hobbling on one high heel.

I took Sarah's car around the back. The motor pool supervisor looked at it sniffily, declared it not worth changing the chassis and engine numbers on and put it on to the transporter that would take it over to the crusher later

When I saw Sarah again she was in one of the holding cells. Harry was already there. Sarah was sitting on a solid wooden chair in the middle of the cell. They'd taken the sacking off or her head and replaced the rope gag with a ball strapped tightly into her mouth. It didn't stop her making a noise but it certainly made it difficult to understand what she was saying.

"GNNASKAART!" she grunted at me- which I took to be a commentary on my parentage. She was obviously pretty angry and they hadn't really started on her yet. They'd put her in handcuffs which must have been better than the ropes around her wrists. She had shackles on her ankles and a short length of chain between them but as long as she wasn't trying to walk around that wasn't really a problem.

"ECCHT EE O, ECCHT EE O!!!" she groaned, shaking herself on the chair in some attempt to loosen the cuffs. The strap of her gag had gone over the top of her red hair, one lock of hair hung down loose across her face; shaking her head did nothing to stop it brushing across her nose. She gave a frustrated snort, as drips of drool fell from the corner of her mouth.

"What do you think, Larry?" Harry asked. They'd left her skirt, shoes and tights on but Harry had taken her green top off to get a better view. "I think what sold her to me was her legs but these tits are quite nice too, not big but nice. That and the fact that she's obviously looked after herself; quite a fit looking girl really."

"I think she'll make a very decorative addition to your office. Unless you are planning to take her friend instead?"

Sarah glowered at me. "GAARHGH!!" she grunted.

"Sounds like something out of 'My Fair Lady'," I laughed.

"Fair indeed," said Harry pulling a knife from his pocket. Sarah tried to shrink away staring in fright at the knife as he advanced towards her. He sliced through her bra straps and then through the strip of cloth between the cups, pulling the bra from her and letting her breasts fall free. Sarah wriggled and tried to pull away but then glowered at Harry as she saw the amusement her bobbling breasts caused.

My only disappointment was that I didn't have time to see what happened next to Harry's new recruits.

Chapter 13 : The Kalinin of Kushtia

As far as trying out the account management idea was concerned, Clegg was as good as his word. He set up a meeting for me only a few days later.

"So, I understand from Mr Clegg, that your new approach is to meet the specific needs of your clients rather than just picking up whatever you find lying around." The robed man in my office had an Asiatic appearance but spoke English without any trace of an accent. Clegg had said he was the Kalinin of Kushtia an old school friend, though he didn't say from what school.

"You sound sceptical, your highness," I responded. "I'm sure it was never Mr Clegg's approach to simply collect stock on an ad-hoc basis but, yes, we are interested in developing the way we do business."

He shrugged. "We shall see. I have a problem. Mr Clegg tells me he can solve it. He has always managed to meet his commitments in the past."

I was standing. He was seated. I've never been much of a fan of royalty but when they're the customer they get all the politeness they want as far as I'm concerned. Mind you if someone had asked me who (or even what) the Kalinin of Kushtia was, I couldn't have told them. Couldn't have told them where Kushtia was, either. It turns out Kushtia is a narrow strip of a country that runs along the northern edge of the Hindu Kush. The Kalinin is the hereditary ruler.

The Kalinin went on. "Let me tell you my problem," he said. "It is conventional in my country when a prince comes of age that his father provides him with the pick of the women of the village to become the start of his harem. Naturally we wish to continue the tradition even though we are here in your country, in exile."

"Naturally," I replied.

"But here in the west there is little understanding of our customs. I fear that our traditions are not accepted. The ways of our culture are not always honoured here. I believe that I must exercise some care in the way that these things are handled."

"I am sure you are right."

"So, we wish you to arrange this. Mr Clegg tells me that your goal is to meet your customer's needs. My son has made a list of those women he desires. I wish to satisfy him as far as is possible. Perhaps I could have your views?"

I looked at the list he was holding out to me.

- 1.** Girls Aloud (especially : Nicola)
- 2.** The Spice Girls (especially : Geri)
- 3.** The Pussy Cat Dolls (especially : Carnit)
- 4.** Nicole Kidman
- 5.** Lindsay Lohan

"I think I'm beginning to detect a trend here..." I said, noting the enthusiasm for pop singers and for redheads. I wondered what he would think if he ever chanced on Sarah, Harry's PA.

- 6.** The Sugababes
- 7.** Destiny's Child

"Oh, OK, not quite single minded. Look, your highness, I think that, even with our resources, we are going to have to reset some expectations."

- 8.** Hooters waitress
- 9.** NFL Cheerleader

"How old is your son?" I asked noting that at least the last two might be achievable.

"Twenty five, that is the age for the taking of wives," his father replied. He saw my raised eyebrows. "But in some ways he seems much younger. Even so, you do understand – this is the tradition – that he should have the best that is available; that his father should provide the best for his son's harem women. That, after all, reflects on me."

"Of course your highness but I am sure that you see what a challenge this list is. If we were to succeed in acquiring some of these then I fear that a great deal of unwelcome attention might be attracted. If it were to ever be traced back to yourselves then it could make it difficult for you to remain here. Our asylum laws are flexible but there are some things that even the British Government's Home Secretary may take exception to."

"Indeed, we must operate with a certain discretion. However, Mr Clegg has great faith in your ability to solve problems. I will allow you to surprise me." He got to his feet, smiled and swept out. It was my first real job for Clegg and I wasn't optimistic.

I needed to talk to Research, I thought. I really needed some ideas on how we could set about this. Then I had a bit of luck. I was walking through Southwark past a run down pub when I heard the strains of "Wannabe" drifting out. A chalked sign on a board beside the door said, "Live Music – All Spice – 2nite."

I went in.

It was a pretty seedy venue. I bought myself a pint. The beer wasn't any better than the rest of the pub but the stage in the room at the back held five reasonably convincing look-alikes, a Spice Girls tribute band, thrashing their way through the Girl Power repertoire. Ginger and Posh were the closest to the real thing for looks, which suited me. They probably sang better than the originals had. The rest of the pub's clientele didn't seem to be taking much notice.

One guy was sitting on a pile of cases that had evidently held their kit. He looked as if he might have something to do with them. I walked over to him. "I'd like to talk to the band," I said.

He didn't look interested. "Yeah – you and all the jack-off johnnies."

"No, seriously, I might have a gig for them."

He looked bored, unconvinced. "Maybe I could get you a chat with 'Victoria'. Only problem is she talks to blokes on a professional basis."

"Huh?"

He tossed a small, pink, card across the table to me. Under a picture of a high heeled shoe and a pair of crossed whips the lettering said, "Spice up your life with Mistress Posh". There was a mobile phone number. "Not really my scene," I said.

"Please yourself," he said.

The girls finished their set with '2 become 1'. I could see the band starting to pack up. The girls were getting ready to go. "Hang on," I said, slipping a ten pound note in his hand. "Put in a good word for me can you?"

He peered at the note but then stuffed it in his pocket. "Wait," he said. "No promises." He headed off to the back of the stage.

She emerged a few minutes later. She'd changed out of her stage costume; now she was just wearing a pair of jeans and a sweater. The likeness was still striking, even close up; slim build, and short, dark, urchin-bobbed, hair. She was pretty good at the trademark Victoria scowl, too. She tossed a carpet bag onto the table between us and sat down directly opposite me. She didn't say anything at first. She just pulled a soft packet of cigarettes from her bag, tapped one out and lit it. She inhaled, let a stream of smoke out in the general direction of the pub's grimy ceiling and then looked towards me. "Here's the deal," she said. "No water sports, no medical play, no penetrative sex or flesh on flesh of any kind and neither you nor I end up in an England soccer shirt. We use my hotel not yours and it's all cash up front. Right?"

"I was thinking of something a bit more specialised," I said, slowly in response. "How about if you bring the girls round and you all sing for me?"

"Wow," she said, "a real pervert! Were we really that bad?" She allowed herself an out-of-character smile as she stubbed her cigarette out. "He said," she nodded towards the bar where my ten-pound-richer companion was leaning, "you were looking for a date."

I nodded. "Yeah, sort of. But not with Mistress P. I meant it about getting the band round for a gig. I know a couple of guys who might be able to get you some bookings. Better than this. Not great - but better than this."

"What sort of thing?"

"Clubs rather than pubs. Maybe some cruise work. We're not talking X-Factor fame and fortune but it would be more than you're making from this, I'll bet."

"So, what if we wanted to?" She tossed the pack of cigarettes back into her bag.

"I get a venue; you bring the girls; you audition; I talk to my friends; we see what happens."

"As 'All Spice' or as ourselves?"

"Let's do it as 'All Spice' for a start," I could see she was disappointed. "Stick a couple of tracks on of your own at the end if you want to take the risk." She perked up at the idea. "Will the rest of the girls want to do it?"

"Oh sure," she said. She picked up the pink card and scribbled a mobile phone number on it. "They'll do it if I say so. It's not just blokes that I get off on getting my own way with. If it helps, I could maybe give you a freebie."

"Thanks, but it's not my thing. I'd just like to set up an audition."

She looked at me with a raised eyebrow. "Really? Please yourself. I've got plenty of clients that tell me I'm pretty good. I'd hate to miss an opportunity to convince you of the benefits of booking the band." She smiled. I shrugged. She tossed the card back to me. "Give me a call on that number when you've got a time and place."

'Geri' called across from by the pub's door. "Are you coming?" she said. I took a good look at her as 'Victoria' grabbed her bag and headed towards her. I thought that the Kalinin's son would be happy enough with her as well, just as long as he didn't let her get on top. And I was having some ideas about the other redheads too.

Chapter 14 : I Spice With My Little Eyes

I'd arranged to meet up with the Kalinin and his son in the conference room at the Prep Centre. I got there a little early and bumped into Harry as I walked in. "How's your new PA," I asked. "Has she worked out what's going on yet?"

"Oh, I think so," said Harry. "In fact I was just about to pop in to see her, if you wanted to have a look."

"Yeah, sure," I said, "I've got a while and I haven't really seen too much of the Prep Centre side of things."

"She's in here," said Harry unlocking a door.

Sarah was curled up on the floor in one corner of the cell, chained by her neck collar to a ring in the wall. She looked up with a scowl as we came in.

"She seems to have lost some of her sunny disposition," I said.

"I don't want to see you. Go away. I've got nothing to say. Leave me alone why don't you?" Sarah said.

Harry looked disappointed. He unlocked a small cabinet to one side of the room. I saw it contained an array of straps, chains, and flogger. Harry took a ball gag from the cabinet and advanced on Sarah with it. "This conversation is going to be a little one sided, I'd like you to listen and not interrupt,"

"I won't be gagged, I won't, I won't," she shook her head as Harry went towards her. He ignored her objections and grabbed a hank of her red hair and twisted. As she yelped in pain he pushed the ball in place, jerked the strap tight and clicked the locking catch shut. He let go her hair and she sank back down on her heels, reaching up to tug ineffectually at the strap that held the gag in place. She gave a muffled groan of frustration.

"There," said Harry. "Now perhaps you'll listen. You've had an easy ride of it here, so far." A muffled grunt of disbelief answered him. "Because you aren't being sold, or at least you're not being sold yet, you've not been raped and you've barely been beaten except when you've been particularly difficult. All that is because I am keen for you to take up the role for which I originally interviewed you. Now it seems to me you have a choice at this point. Either you can accept my job offer," Sarah grunted and shook her head. "As I was saying, either you can accept my job offer or we can put you into the pool of girls for resale." This time she shook her head vigorously. "I can offer you a situation in which you will remain here and be treated well. I am sure you can imagine how it will be if you are sold – I cannot be responsible for where you will end up and to what use you might be put. I am sure that your talent for dancing will attract a certain sort of buyer but apart from that who knows." Sarah gave a whimper of despair. "Now, I'm going to give you one last chance to decide."

As he said this another girl appeared carrying a tray containing a heap of ropes of different thicknesses. "We have a buyer coming to our next auction who is particularly interested to acquire a red headed slave for his collection: he's particularly keen on elaborate bondage and he's asked for a few pictures of potential acquisitions. We'll give you a chance to show if you're suited to this sort of thing." He turned to the girl with the ropes. "See what you can do with her," he said. "She should be fairly supple, most dancers are. Don't hold back - I know our prospective buyer won't."

I left Sarah, Harry and the girl to go in search of the Kalinin.

The Kalinin and his son were sitting on the couch in our conference room. Clegg had come in with them as well. "I am surprised that you have solved this problem so quickly," the Kalinin said.

"Well, your highness, I'll wait until you have seen what I propose before making any claim," I replied. Clegg smiled. "I'd like to show you a short video and then we can discuss next steps, if that is acceptable."

"Video?" queried the Kalinin.

"Yes, your highness. I wanted to make sure we were going down the right track."

"Very well," he answered, "continue."

I pressed the button that closed the conference room curtains and dimmed the lights. The video projector flickered and burst into life with the Clegg Enterprises logo. Out of the speakers came the sound of U2's "Even Better Than The Real Thing..." It faded down and the video began with All Spice hammering out "Say You'll Be There". Close ups of the five girls were inter-cut with black and white photos of the real Spice Girls as they were then and as they are now. It was interesting watching the Kalinin's son – he'd obviously never thought about the fact that the pictures of the chicks he'd been beating off to were all taken seven years ago. He was definitely attracted by the idea of All Spice who look more like what he'd been getting off on than the girls who were in the real band do now. Plus the All Spice 'Ginger' was in her more pneumatic style which also got approval. The U2 track faded up again. Next up was a Nicola Roberts look-alike that we found. She's got a pretty good voice too and if anything her hair was redder than the real Nicola's – least ways that's how it looked in the video. Same went for the 'Nicole Kidman' who thought we were looking for a stand in for some advertising work. I could see that the son was getting pretty keen. The U2 track faded down. The video moved on to a series of short clips from some recruitment auditions. The girls had thought we were setting up for the opening of a new Hooters in London. Each had a girl sitting in a chair saying, "Hi, I'm Jo (or Jenny, or Marcy or whatever) and I really want to be a Hooters Girl. Pick me, why don't you?" Then she pulls off her top, gives the camera a good shot of her boobs, pulls on a Hooters t-shirt, steps out of their skirt or jeans and into a pair

of the famous orange shorts before walking up and down to show how the outfit looks on them. There were six of them all well stacked, of course, and blondes or redheads.

By the end of it the Kalinin's son was practically dribbling. The Kalinin beamed with approval at me. He turned to the distracted youth. "Well, my son, he said. It is traditional for your father to provide the first women for your harem. You can make your choice from those."

"Choose, father?" the son responded. "I do not need to choose, I shall be able to satisfy them all." I was pleased by the son's response, reckoning the value of an order for thirteen pickups.

His father, however, was less than happy. "Son," he said, a harem is like a garden. You should not plant all the beds at once. At first it is best to begin with a plot that can be easily cultivated, then as experience grows, it is possible to tend a larger area. I suggest that you start with three."

"But father, your own harem in Kushtia had over fifteen wives."

"Yes, son, but that took me many years."

"But father, .." the son began.

"I wonder if I might suggest a compromise," I said, concerned that the entire exercise was about to dissolve into a family argument.

The Kalinin held up his hand to silence his son. "Please do," he said.

"Perhaps if we were to proceed initially by acquiring the group All Spice for your son. It seems that, although they are five, they will be easily managed as they are used to being together. Because of their youth they will soon become adapted to your son and his ways. From our side it would be very difficult to acquire less than the entire group and it hardly seems sensible to split up the set once acquired. I would think, also that the group provides a good selection of women as a starting point for a harem with a range of different looks and characters. It will provide the Prince with a good selection of types with which to develop his skills and tastes further."

The son looked sceptical at the reduction in his ambitions as did the father, concerned at this increase in his planned commitment. "Five is still more than I had considered," he said.

The Prince however, evidently saw that this was as good a deal as he was likely to get. "Oh father, please," he said. "They will look well together in the harem dress. The one called Posh has a haughty look that I long to tame. Emma has a sweetness that will be so good to corrupt. The two Melanies will be a source of constant amusement."

"And I think your highness," I interjected, "that Geri will prove a satisfying acquisition as well. As far as we can tell both the hair colour and the figure are genuine and un-enhanced."

"You see father," the Prince went on, "a good investment. A good starting point for me."

The Kalinin appeared to soften. "Very well," he said. "How can I deny my eldest boy?" He turned to me. "It seems we are agreed on your proposal," he said. "You will arrange their collection?"

"Of course, your highness," I replied, thinking that I'd keep the rest for another occasion.

"Good," he said. "That seems to resolve things. I shall tell Clegg that I am pleased by your approach. I am sure we shall do more business in future."

It had been a successful session. I went to tell Harry that we needed to get started on the arrangements. I found him back in Sarah's cell. The bondage that Sarah had been put in was evidently agonising, her gagged grunts of complaint from earlier had been replaced by an almost continuous muffled wail of pain. She was swinging suspended from the ceiling of the cell, her elbows dragged together behind her back and her ankles doubled up behind her back. Coarse ropes criss-crossed her tits, and pulled across her crotch. Thin ropes stretched from each of her big toes to rings on the wall so that the slightest swinging motion threatened to dislocate them. The ball gag had been replaced by a gag of knotted rope that was linked back to her elbow tie and her ankles, bending her head backwards.

Harry turned to the girl that had put her into her predicament. "Have you got all the photographs you need?"

"Yes," she said. "I think she'll be quite good for this if you do decide to let her go."

"Thanks," said Harry. "We'll have to see if she's decided that this is her sort of thing or not. Now, Sarah." She gave a groan of despair. He picked a cane from the toy cupboard and ran it along her thigh. "Now, it seems to me you have a simple choice. Come and do the job I asked you to do or take the chance of something like this." Another, more pleading, groan came from the suspended girl. "Would you like this to stop?" A slight nod of the head set her swinging, the cords pulling at her toes, causing another squeal of pain. "Good," said Harry. "I can make it stop if you're ready to do as I ask. Can I assume you are?" Another nod, another squeal of pain. "Excellent, I am pleased. You know what they say - one volunteer is worth ten pressed men." Harry turned to the girl. "Cut her down," he said. The girl looked disappointed. "There will be plenty of others don't worry and this one will be back if she doesn't continue to comply."

Sarah was lowered to the ground slowly, the ropes removed from her toes, elbows and ankles. The knotted rope gag was removed, leaving the corners of her mouth sore and bleeding. She curled up in a sobbing heap at Harry's feet.

"Now," Harry said to the girl. "You can start earning your way out of here. Keep on being obedient and you can earn some clothes, when you're fully dressed you can start work. You'll be out of the cells and you'll only have me to answer to. Do you understand?" Sarah nodded. "Every time one of the guards thinks you're not being obedient enough you'll be stripped naked and have to start again. Understand?" Another nod. "It's up to you how long it takes." He turned to the girl that had trussed Sarah so viciously. He passed her the cane "Give her twenty stokes with this every evening that she remains in here," he said. Sarah whimpered. "But give her some stockings and a garter belt. I think she's earned those this afternoon."

Harry smiled as we left the cell. "She'll come around to my way of seeing things," he said. "Now, what do you want to set up for the Kalinin.

We talked through my ideas about All Spice and then Harry suggested we went down to the canteen for some lunch.

It was pretty crowded by the time we got there but we managed to find a table. We'd been there about five minutes when two heavily built men in the uniform black tee-shirts that all the guards wore wandered up.

"Mind if we join you?" the taller of the two said.

"Sure," said Harry. "There's not much space in here today."

"Can't think why," said the other, "when you look at what they're serving. Harry, you really ought to try and pick up someone that can cook for in here."

Harry grinned and prodded his lunch with his fork. "It's a thought," he said.

The first man said, "Hey, you two guys picked up the busty blonde piece that was snatched with the redhead, didn't you? You're going to love this."

"Uhuh, what was her name, Julia – Jules," said Harry, "Is she giving you some grief?"

"Nah. She's in the block I'm looking after and she's been average cooperative up until now. This morning she starts coming on to me, when I take her gag off. 'Why don't I be nice to you,' she goes. 'Sure you could fuck me, like you get to fuck all the girls but wouldn't it be nice to have some fun where I'm joining in?' And she's pushing her tits at me and licking her lips."

"Even Jack here got the point," his friend said.

"Well I think her idea sounds like fun, I mean when you get to rape women anytime you choose you think maybe there's something a bit kinky about her joining in, you know. She says that it's part of a deal, she'll give me a real good time if I help her get out. I think the first bit sounds good - let's worry about the second bit after. She turns out to be rather a good screw. Very bouncy, if you know what I mean, given the limits of those beds in the cells."

"Yeah, Harry, can you do anything about that?"

"Not my area, really," said Harry, "I don't run the Prep Centre, better talk to Rick." He took another mouthful of food. "So then what?"

"Well she says how are we going to organise the escape? I tell her we'll use one of the transport trunks. I get it down from despatch and bring it into the cell, tell her to hide inside it."

"And strap her in because of course she might bounce around otherwise," Jack's pal interrupts with a grin.

"Then I tell her that I'm going to smuggle her out but it will take a while and she's got to be real quiet. I shut the trunk and left her for about half an hour then wheeled it around the Prep Centre a couple of times, put her on a truck and drove her around the site for a while. She's in the trunk on the truck in the delivery bay right now."

"Ain't that a gas! She's going to be spitting pins when we get her out of that trunk," Jack's friend laughed.

"This I want to see," said Harry. "How about you, Larry?"

I nodded. We all finished up our lunch and Jack led the way down to the delivery bay. Jules's case was sitting there just as he'd said. He leant down beside it and said quietly, "Hey babe, we're here. Not far now." There was a squeak from inside the trunk as he pulled it back on its wheels and pushed it towards the cell that Julia had left only a couple of hours before.

With the trunk back in Julia's cell. Jack bent down again beside it. "How you doing babe?" he asked.

"I'm real stiff," she called out from inside the trunk. "These straps are too tight and I can't move at all in here. Are we there yet?"

"Yeah, sure," said Jack, "hang on, I'll open the trunk." He laid it down so that Julia was on her back, bringing another squeal from inside the trunk. He fumbled noisily with the locks on the lid. As he lifted it open, Julia realised that she and Jack were not alone.

"Hello," said Harry. "I really don't think you should be trying this sort of thing."

Julia was struggling against her straps and suggesting that Jack was in the business of having carnal knowledge of his maternal parent.

Harry went on, "You've really got to get used to the idea" – he picked up the dog tag she wore attached to her collar – "06/085, that you'll get on better here if you do as we wish. Now since you were so keen to get into that trunk you can stay there for a couple of days. Spend a bit of time thinking about things. You're not going to get away. I think you'd be better off coming to terms with that."

Chapter 15 : Spice Racked

About a week later I needed to check the final arrangements for the All Spice collection with Harry. When I called him, Sarah answered. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised but I hadn't realised that she would be out of orientation that quickly. She set up the meeting efficiently. I could see that Harry hadn't only been interested in her for her physical attributes.

When I got to Harry's office, I saw Sarah for the first time since she'd been cowering at Harry's feet after being released from an extreme bondage session. She had evidently come through her orientation without her cheery approach being affected. She looked up from filing her nails as I walked in. "Good morning Mr Ross," she said with a smile as I walked in "He won't keep you a moment, please take a seat."

I did so. Sarah went back to her manicure. Harry obviously favoured a traditional look around the office. Sarah was still wearing her wavy red hair loose. She had on a white high necked blouse but I could see the line of her slave collar beneath it. Harry obviously had her wearing a padded bra, she'd certainly filled out since I'd last seen her and there hadn't been time for surgery – I guessed Harry had that planned in her future. I still really didn't understand what they did in Orientation but Sarah certainly seemed to have been trained quite quickly and she seemed as willing to please now as she had been when I'd seen her at interview.

"Can I get you a coffee or something Mr Ross?" she asked brightly.

"No, I'm fine," I said. "How are you settling in?"

"Oh, OK," she said. "I mean I know I was a bit silly at the interview and everything. Well, how stupid can someone be? Going off and buying the things their kidnapper needs to kidnap them!"

"Harry's very plausible," I said sympathetically.

"I know. I felt bad about it at first but then I got to see some of the snatch reports from the teams and there are plenty of brighter people than me get trapped in fairly silly ways. Lawyers, doctors, all sorts. And I mean actually it's quite a good job. I know he just wanted to pick someone up and I can't say I enjoyed the kidnapping bit and all the training and the rest but actually the job is all right. And Harry really needs someone to help him keep the office in order – there's so much to do around here. Do you think I'm doing all right?"

"I'm sure you're doing fine," I said. "Harry would soon let you know if you weren't."

"Well, I like to do a good job, even if he did grab me like some piece of meat."

A buzzer went off on Sarah's desk and she got to her feet. As she came around the end of the desk I saw that at least Harry hadn't changed her taste in skirts – if anything the navy blue skirt she was wearing was shorter and tighter than the one I had seen barely covering her backside as she struggled in the back of the van – and the heels she was wearing were higher than you'd usually expect in any normal office. She turned to open Harry's office door, giving me a glimpse of stocking through the short slit at the back of her skirt. The day was getting better by the minute.

Harry got up from behind his desk and waved me in. "Thank you, Sarah," he said. "Come on in Larry." The day carried on getting better, Tricia was in his office too. She gave me a welcoming, "Hi".

Sarah showed me through the door. "Can I get anything?" she asked.

"Now," joked Harry, "the last time you asked Larry and me that, I seem to remember you ended up going shopping for ropes and tape."

"Yes," said Sarah, good humouredly, "and I never got my expenses paid either."

"Ah," said Harry, "where were the receipts? Can't pay out expenses without receipts. Ask any of the team."

"Oh, well," giggled Sarah, "It could have been worse. You might have wanted handcuffs, a ball gag and a hood from a fetish shop. I'd have probably got those too."

Harry smiled and waved her out. Turning back to me he said, "I asked Tricia to join us. You said you wanted to set these girls up in a recording studio? Tricia used to do a bit of studio work. She can drive a desk; give it all a bit of authenticity."

"Great," I said. "It'll be fun. Have you done much operational stuff since our little burglary outing?"

"Oh sure," she said, "Harry doesn't let you sit around once you've shown you can do it. This one looks a bit different though."

"Well, I guess so," I said. "Let me fill you in on the plan..."

I'd just about got to the end of it when Clegg put his head around the door. Tricia seemed to sense that Freddie wanted a private chat, got up and excused herself to go. Freddie didn't stop her.

"That your new secretary?" Freddie asked, nodding towards the door. "Very nice girl. Bubbly personality. And that hair colour looks real too."

"Yeah," said Harry. "She was a find."

Freddie barely paused. "Oh, by the way Harry, she'll have to go, you know."

"What?" said Harry. "She's only just started."

"Come on if you're in the meat products business you can't keep the prime cuts for yourself. With legs like that and that red hair you know we'll get a terrific price. And Brian's numbers don't look too good this month – he needs something to boost his margins and he's got some Balkan buyers in the auction in a couple of weeks, they just love redheads. She needs to go in the sale with the other one you picked up at the same time."

Harry tried to protest, saying that Sarah had only just finished her training and she'd not really been broken properly for resale. Freddie was adamant. "Sorry, Harry, if you want to recruit a PA you'd better find something that's not so saleable or get Brian to fix his revenue stream" he said. "Call her in and tell her. I'll do it if you're not happy with it."

Harry looked glum but gave in. "OK, Freddie, I'll do it to help out the numbers, but Brian needs to lift his game." He reached across and pressed the intercom buzzer. "Sarah, in here, please, now."

Sarah appeared at the door of the office and seemed to sense at once that all was not well. "Is there a problem," she said. "Have I done something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing you've done Sarah. However, you know how it is with slaves, we buy and sell them. I've been discussing your future with Mr Clegg here and we've agreed that the best option for you is to put you on sale at one of our next auctions."

"Oh, but, don't you need someone to go on doing the work I'm doing now? I mean I know I haven't fully got to grips with all of it yet but I thought I was doing everything you wanted."

"It's all right, Sarah, you've been doing fine," Harry was reassuring. "It's just that we've had a change of plans."

"I'll take her back to the orientation area to finish her training," said Freddie. "You'd better come with me, Sarah."

"Oh, all right," said Sarah. "She held out her arms. "Don't you want to chain my wrists?" she asked. "They always kept me chained up when I was down there before. And gagged. I had to wear a gag. Is there one in here? I could get a scarf or something if you wanted."

"Don't worry, Sarah," said Harry gently. "They'll sort you out when you get down there."

"Well, I don't want to be any trouble," she said.

Harry and I watched as Freddie led Sarah away.

"Bugger," said Harry. "She was shaping up nicely."

"I tell you what, Harry, I might be able to do you a favour. I going to need someone to do some work on a video I'm organising. I'll try and get Sarah assigned to it. If Clegg agrees then maybe she'll miss this sale and you can get another go at putting her back in the office if Brian's numbers pick up. I reckon I owe you a favour."

"That would be a help, Larry," Harry said. "Do what you can."

I wasn't sure how I would persuade Freddie but that could come later. "How did Jules shape up?" I asked, changing the subject.

Larry had still looked glum but he brightened up at a little. "Well, she does seem to be seeing sense now. No more crazy escape attempts at any rate – she could hardly move for a day after we got her out of the trunk. Two days in one of those without the relaxants aren't anyone's idea of fun. I think she knows she's not going to escape and that there's no knight in shining armour going to come galloping over the hill. Jack said she was asking what she needed to do to get best billing at the auction next week. She even spent time trying to persuade Brian to spice up her entry in the sale catalogue. Brian was pretty pleased; he doesn't get the stock coming on to him too often. And she really did seem to do all she could to promote her very considerable assets. Brian seems to think she might help the numbers too."

"Interesting," I said. "Brian obviously needs something to help things out. Still, I'd better get on with our little project." I punched 'Victoria's' number into my mobile. Her answer phone cut in; "Hi, I'm not around right now but if you leave the usual details I'll get back to you."

The phone beeped, I spoke in response, "Hi, Vicky, it's Larry. Just to let you know my client liked your audition tape. Can you give me a call?"

It was only about five minutes later that she called back. "Hi," she said, "sorry I missed your call. I was a bit busy."

"All Spice work or Mistress P work?" I asked.

I heard her giggle. "The latter," she said. There was a pause. "Hang on." She'd obviously put her hand over the microphone, her voice sounded muffled but I could still hear her. "Back on your knees, you!" she barked, "I didn't say you could get up." She came back to the phone. "Sorry about that," she said.

"That's OK," I replied, "I guess it's not very convenient right now."

"No that's fine. You said your client liked the tape."

"Yes, he's really keen. He'd just like to hear a couple of extra tracks of your own stuff."

"Wow, that's great!"

"Yeah, can you get the girls back together? I've got another studio we can use. And can you all wear your stage costumes? I'd like to get a few publicity shots at the same time."

"Absolutely!" Vicky was evidently pleased. "Where's the studio?"

I gave her the details of a converted warehouse in the East End and a time for them all to turn up the following day. Harry's team didn't need much time to get things set up and all was ready as I greeted Vicky and the others outside the studio that afternoon.

They'd gone to town on their costumes: all of them were in different black outfits. "I like the look," I said welcoming the girls. "Cover of Rolling Stone, July '97, unless I'm mistaken."

"Wow, you are a fan," Posh said. "What do you think?"

What I said was, "Like I said, I like the look." What I thought was; it was going to be a close call which of them the Kalinin's son found sexier; 'Emma' in her short skirt and basque, 'Scary' in leather bra and trousers, 'Posh' in her short, slit skirt and bikini top; not to mention the outfits that Geri and Sporty were wearing. I guessed that Ginger's hair would take priority, though.

'Sporty' handed over a bag of mini-disks. "Backing tracks," she said, "your engineer will want them. Let's get started."

I was as keen as the girls. Tricia and another of Harry's snatch team were with me in the control room. All Spice piled into the small studio booth. They pulled on headphones and plugged themselves in. 'Emma' called across to us, "We'll do the track on the green disk first if that's OK."

Tricia held up the disk, 'Emma' nodded and she plugged it into the console. A thumping bass line spilled out of the monitors. She leant forward, hit stop and the music died away. "I'll cue that for you," she said, "three ... two ... one." The music started again and the girls joined in. Emma started a solo part, with the two Mel's backing her up.

They were sounding as good as they looked. It was almost a shame to hit the button that fired the gas canister.

As they reached the chorus the gas began to seep into the booth. Emma, stretching for the high notes sucked it in quickly. She gave a puzzled look and slid slowly to her knees. Ginger and Sporty went forward to catch her and caught the gas too, following her to the floor of the booth. Scary and Victoria spun around and tried to open the door of the booth but found it locked. They started to hammer on the glass, coughing and choking as they took in the gas, clawing at the glass of the booth in an attempt to escape. Moments later they succumbed as the others had and slid to the floor.

We gave it a few moments for the gas to disperse. As we opened the door to the recording booth, the unconscious form of Vicky slumped through it, down onto the floor of the studio, lying face up with a frozen, startled look on her face, her headphones clutched in her hand. The snatch team went to work quickly, taping the girl's wrists and ankles, gagging them and blindfolding them too. Each of them was folded up into their own personal transport box. Emma and Vicky the two smallest into double bass cases; the others into boxes that looked from the outside like music amps. "We'll get them back to the Prep Centre and see if they go up to 11," said Harry's man with a laugh as he and Tricia wheeled them out to the truck waiting outside.

"See you around," said Tricia with a smile and a wave.

Chapter 16 : A Call From The Kalinin

I was up in the Sales Centre watching another auction. Some of the women that had taken longer in orientation were now ready for market. Brian was convinced that prices were starting to rise. I still wasn't convinced. I looked around the room; it didn't look like there were too many buyers to me.

I saw that the first lot onto the platform was to be Julia. I'd seen her, after she'd got over the punishments for her escape attempt, being trained to play her part in the auction. Brian was evidently keen to show that he could drive up the prices by getting the girls to pitch themselves better. This time he'd set up a big video projection screen at the back of the stage.

I watched from the side of the platform as she came on stage, teetering in high heels, bottom swaying in a very short tight skirt and her ample tits straining to burst out of a crisply starched white blouse. With a brown manila folder in her hand, her long hair pulled tight back from her face into a pony tail and a pair of glasses perched on her nose she looked the archetypal secretary.

A murmur ran around the buyers. It was as much, I thought, surprise at the fact that, while she wore the collar that marked her out as sale stock, she was neither shackled nor gagged. I guess it could have been appreciation.

"Welcome lot number 06/086," Brian said in an oily tone. "I understand that you wish to apply for the job of personal secretary to one of our audience today. I see that you've brought you application folder."

"That's right, Sir," Julia responded. "I'd make a very good, very personal, secretary."

"Well, please take a seat. And face the camera, won't you? I'd like everyone to be able to see exactly what you have to offer."

Julia sat herself down on a high stool in the centre of the stage. The screen flickered into life and her face was projected up on it. The image was six feet high or more, you could almost see the individual grains of mascara on her eye lashes as she batted them at the camera. She crossed her legs and then gave a giggle as she tugged ineffectually at the hem of her skirt in an attempt to keep it some sort of order. I could see some of the buyers in the audience leaning forward with interest.

"Now," said Brian, beginning what was evidently a pre-rehearsed interview, "I'm sure you like to tell us about your capabilities. Your office skills and so forth. What are you like behind a desk?"

"I'm very efficient, Sir, always happy to put in long hours and make sure my boss is happy," she smiled directly at the camera.

"And how about on top of one?"

Julia appeared embarrassed, "Well Sir, I am sure that I have never had any complaints in that direction either."

"How about your typing skills?"

"I'm quite proficient."

"And you find you can manage to see the key board underneath those tits of yours?"

"Really, Sir. I'm not sure that's the sort of question I anticipated at this interview." Her prim response was greeted with a quiet ripple of laughter from the audience.

"You understand I must have the answers to these questions though," Brian said sternly. "Now let's talk about time management. Very important for a secretary you'll agree?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well perhaps you'd tell me how much of your working week you routinely spend fucking with your boss."

"Goodness. What sort of question is that?" Jules appeared to become flustered. She fanned herself with her application form. She licked her lips as the camera zooms in on her mouth and reached behind her head to free her hair from its pony tail. She shook it loose. A vaguely appreciative grunt could be heard from the audience. I had the impression that while they were amused by the display, some of them felt it was all going on a bit too long. Julia looked up at the camera and gave it a knowing smile. "Well," she said, "I've never refused if my boss asked me to take a few things down."

Brian continued with his patter. "I see," he said. "And the quality of your work?"

Well," Julia said, "of course I make mistakes the same as anyone else. But I've always felt that the best policy is to make a clean breast of it." With that she quickly unbuttoned her blouse and her bra and took both of them off, continuing to sit perched on the stool with her tits naked for the whole audience to see. There were some grunts of approval and a few coughs. The bidders were clearly appreciative but somehow it all seemed to have fallen a bit flat, though you could hardly say that for Julia's chest.

"There you are gentlemen," Brian concluded. "Let's hear your bids for this piece. Can I suggest \$80,000?" The room fell quiet. No one responded. "\$70,000 then? \$60?"

"40," came a call from one side of the room.

"45," responded another. The room was quiet again.

"Surely we can do better than that?" Brian chided. "Excellent secretarial skills and other useful attributes as you've heard. Any more? Is that really all?" He looked almost irritated with the bidders sitting in the hall. I could see that they didn't like that. "Very well then. At \$45,000 – it's you sir, in the corner. No more? At \$45,000 then. For the final time. \$45,000 in the room. Sold!" He brought his gavel down with an abrupt tap.

Jules looked disappointed as two guards came on to remove her from the platform. Brian did nothing to hide his sense that she hadn't reached her potential price. Julia looked upset and confused as she was hustled from the stage. The audience simply returned to studying their sales catalogues. "Funny idea, that," I overheard one of them saying to a colleague. "I mean quite amusing and all but it didn't seem to have much to do with why we are all here."

Immediately after Julia came Caroline, the girl I had seen being abducted on video when I'd first visited the Prep Centre. "Lot number 05/209," called Brian to the audience. He seemed to sense their impatience and was now trying to move things ahead. "I have several commission bids for this lot...." I looked at the catalogue. Sarah wasn't on the list. Brian had been adamant that she'd have to be fully prepped before he'd even think of including her. I think Freddie thought he was being a bit ungrateful given that he'd just been trying to help him out. I wasn't bothered; it just gave me a bit more time to think of an excuse to hang on to her for Harry.

All Spice had been through Orientation swiftly. The Kalinin had asked us to "leave the rough edges on, that way my son will learn the quicker what it is to manage his wives". Rick had shipped them up to the Kalinin after only five days. A week later I picked up a call from the Kalinin on my mobile. "Mr Lawrence," he said. "I wanted to tell you how pleased I was with the merchandise that you supplied recently. It certainly conforms to my expectations."

I made some remark about being pleased to have been able to help and hoping that his son was pleased. The Kalinin enthused some more and then went on, "I think I mentioned that I had some other business that I thought you might be able to help me with. I was wondering if you could stop by at a convenient point. Give my PA a call, Clegg's got her number."

I called Clegg. "I thought you'd like to know the Kalinin of Kushtia wants to talk about some further acquisitions."

"Good," said Clegg, briskly. "Maybe your ideas are working out." He gave me the number I wanted. "Those five singers were a good piece of work," he said. "The snatch squad said it all went very smoothly."

"Well, the Kalinin says he is pleased anyway."

"Yes, he called me. His little lad is happy as a pig in shit and the Kalinin reckons he'll be so busy with the five of them that he won't have time for some of his other, more expensive, hobbies. Oh, by the way," I knew now that these throw away lines from Clegg were usually anything but, "how's the video coming on?"

"The video" was intended to give Clegg's clients a briefing on our new direction. "We start scripting next week."

"So, not actually started yet?"

"Well sort of. We know who the script writer will be at least. In fact I'm just going over to sort out a meeting with her now. Just to make sure that she gets her mind around the idea of working for us."

"Ah," said Clegg, perceptively. "Not actually a willing participant."

"Not entirely, no. Well, not at all." I said, thinking of the pick up we had planned.

"Good, good. I can't stand the idea of paying writers. Sounds like you're on the right track. Keep me up to date, won't you?"

"Yeah, sure," I said. Then remembering I'd agreed to try to keep Sarah out of the auction catalogue, I thought I'd broach the subject with Clegg. "Oh, one other thing, I need a red head for the video, I think. Can I use the one you saw in Harry's office? It would just save picking up another one. I don't want to increase stock for the sake of it."

"No, fair enough," said Clegg. "It might be worth hanging on to her anyway if the Kalinin's son has a taste for that sort of thing and Brian's not getting such good prices at the moment. You'd better have her earning her keep, though. She might as well go back to Harry's office, if he still needs someone."

"Fine," I said. Harry would be happy that we wouldn't have to let Sarah go for a while at least.

I called the Kalinin from the cab as I headed up to Euston for the train north and the meeting with our script writer. The Kalinin's PA suggested we got together on the Friday. That was fine by me. She gave me a location in North Wales. For the time being I had other things to do, I had a writer to recruit.

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From one of the organisation's white vans, I watched the video feed from the flat. It was great the way that the snatch teams could get surveillance stuff in place now. I could tell Rachel Kernow was thrilled. For the first time in her life, she was thinking, there was a chance that she would get some recognition for what she did. Actually she probably felt it was really recognition

just to be nominated. "Best TV or Video Script by a New Author"; even being on the list was a step in the right direction. And you could see that she really thought she had a chance of winning and even if she seemed determined to have a fantastic evening.

She looked in the mirror checking out the dress and the shoes that I reckoned must have cost her a small fortune. You could guess that she was saying to herself, "Hey, a girl has to make an effort, and that's not a bad effort. Not Scarlett Johansson, maybe, but pretty good nonetheless." She smoothed the purple silk of the long gown down over her hips, happy that it made the best of her figure. The matching purple long evening gloves that she wore as well added to the elegance of the outfit.

It was then that her door bell rang. She opened it to a woman in a chauffeur's uniform. It was Tricia. The chauffeuse tipped her cap. "Miss Kernow?" she asked. "It's your car. For the ceremony."

"Terrific," said Rachel. "I've been expecting you. I'll just get my bag." She snatched up her evening bag, checked that it held the essentials – a credit card, the notes for her acceptance speech, and a handkerchief to blot away any tear of delight or, perish the thought, disappointment, and followed the chauffeuse out of her flat.

I was watching outside as she got into the limo. The car was enormous, big and white with blacked out windows. "Is this all for me?" she giggled as her driver held open the door and she slid onto the vast leather covered back seat

I guessed that by now Tricia was into her routine, "It should have been Miss Kernow, but I have to pick up another passenger if that's all right. There was a problem with one of the other cars."

"Oh, that's fine," Rachel would be saying, "No problem at all." All the research said she was a helpful sort of girl.

"Good," Tricia would reply. "Please help yourself to a drink, there's some champagne in the bar cabinet to your right." I watched as she stepped around to the driver's seat and got in. The car pulled away. I followed in my own car as the limo meandered through the suburbs, heading towards town. It pulled off of the main road and onto a small housing estate. The car stopped. Tricia, the chauffeuse, got out of the car.

I imagined Rachel in the back of the limo, sipping some more champagne and watching as she walked up the drive. I was watching myself. "That's quite a kinky uniform," I thought, "boots, tight trousers, buttons, cap and gloves. Those boots look a bit tight though from the way she's walking."

The reason for Tricia's tight boots was helplessly struggling in the boot of the limousine. Eileen Donald, the real driver of the car had been ready to leave for the evening's work when she opened the door to the garage to find herself staring at a determined looking woman, pointing a gun directly at her. Forced to strip to her underwear at gun point, Eileen had been pushed down on the floor of the garage while the woman wound tape around her wrists and ankles. The woman had wasted little effort in securing her captive but in moments she was helpless and could only look on as the woman pulled on the shirt, tie, trousers, jacket, cap and gloves that Eileen had just taken off. And the boots – the only problem was they were half a size too small.

Eileen had been bouncing around in the boot of the limousine. Well bouncing probably wasn't the word – the rest of the limo may have been enormous but the boot was tiny, she was wedged in. Now she would be aware that they had stopped. No doubt she was listening for what would happen next.

I watched as the new passenger, sharply dressed in a black velvet trouser suit, joined Rachel in the back of the limousine and the car moved off. Tricia told me how it went afterwards.

"Hi," said Rachel and introduced herself, "I'm Rachel. What award are you up for? Have some champagne."

The newcomer smiled and took a glass from Rachel. "Hi," she said. "I'm up for the 'Best Author of a True Crime' award."

"Scary stuff," said Rachel, "what sort of thing?"

"Well," she said, reaching into the black velvet bag she was carrying, "it's a bit of a coincidence, really. It's all about a girl that is kidnapped on her way to a book award ceremony."

"What?" said Rachel. "That's silly ... Oh!" She found herself staring at a gun in her companion's hand.

"Please don't make a fuss," the woman with the gun said. "Just put that glass down."

Rachel did as she was told. "Why are you doing this? Is it to stop me getting to the award ceremony? Who has paid you to do this? It's ridiculous."

"Do be quiet, Miss Kernow," the woman was reaching into her bag again. "Please put this in your mouth and fasten it tightly behind your head." She passed Rachel a bright red ball threaded on a leather strap. Rachel complied, choking as she pushed the ball into place and staring, wide-eyed, back at the gun. "Very good," said the woman.

"GMmng," whimpered Rachel in response as the car drove on.

"And now chain your wrists behind your back with these please." She passed Rachel a pair of handcuffs. Even through her gloves, the steel of the handcuffs felt cold and hard about her wrists as they locked in place. The woman put down her gun.

Their driver called back, "You two all right back there?"

"Hmmpmph," grunted Rachel.

"Yes, all under control," said the other woman. "Just one more thing." She took the black velvet bag that had held the gun, gag and cuffs. "While I'm sure you are interested in where we are going, I think you'll understand why we're not keen for you to see," she said, pulling the bag over Rachel's head and drawing the neck of the bag tight around her throat.

Rachel, blinded by the bag, gagged and cuffed, could do nothing as the car sped through the night.

I was already at the safe house when the limo arrived and watched as Rachel was pulled out of the car with the bag still over her head. Tricia went to the back of the car and pulled Eileen out of the boot. The two of them were struggling against their captors. Eileen looked the worse for her experience, streaked with grease from where she had been forced to the floor of the garage. She had cut her head in the back of the car in her efforts to escape. Tricia ignored her efforts to break free for a while but finally lost patience and slapped her face with a leather gloved hand. "Stop struggling or there will be more of that," she warned. She hustled her captive away.

I was pleased with Rachel what I could see of her. We'd picked her for her writing skills but I'd thought when we'd looked at the surveillance material that she'd be easy on the eye as well and the evidence so far confirmed that. Of course I couldn't see her face but her figure looked pretty good in the dress she was wearing and the view of her legs through the slit in her skirt wasn't bad either. "Take her through," I said. "I'll have a chat with her."

They put Rachel in one of the rooms that opened off the basement garage. By the time I got there she had already been sitting in the room for half an hour or so, tied to a solid wooden chair. She was still blinded by the bag but she turned her head towards me as I opened the door. She started struggling and grunting into her gag, I assumed to demonstrate that she wasn't happy with how she had been treated.

I pulled the bag from her head and she blinked in the unaccustomed light. I checked her handcuffs. Her gloves looked creased from where she had obviously tried to free herself but it didn't look like she was having any success. I unfastened the strap of the gag and eased the ball from her mouth. She coughed and groaned. "Please, why are you doing this?"

"You're going to work for me," I said. "I need a script written."

"You must be joking," Rachel responded. "You don't have to kidnap writers. You just hire them. Anyway, I'll be missed. Have you any idea how many people there were going to be at that awards ceremony? Don't you think they'll have noticed that I didn't turn up? They'll be looking for me."

"Oh, you've been missed all right. The White Head people were very disappointed that you weren't there to collect your award. You did win, by the way."

"Bastard!" Rachel spat. Pulling against the ropes that held her to the chair.

"I think the press will have a real field-day with the story. 'Award Winning Writer Vanishes' something like that – lots of coverage along the lines of 'Was the pressure all too much? Has Rachel Kernow followed in the footsteps of Agatha Christie, disappearing in response to the strain?' Actually my money's on a story headlined 'Winning Author Skips Awards With Gay Lover' or something similar."

"What?" Rachel said. "What sort of stupid nonsense is that?"

"The sort that the newspapers will cook up when they find the passionate letters between you and Eileen Donald." I had to confess I was enjoying myself.

"Who the hell is Eileen Donald?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Of course, you didn't meet. Eileen was the driver that was supposed to pick you up but got picked up herself instead. Look, don't worry. All you need to know is that no one is coming looking for you so it's probably easier if you go along with what we want."

"You must think I'm stupid."

"No, but for a writer you're certainly working your way through the clichés. Why don't you try 'you'll never get away with this?'" Rachel simply glowered back at me. I knew I wouldn't get anywhere with her until she'd spent a little time in Orientation. There wasn't any point in trying to rush things. I gave a sigh and jammed the ball gag back in her mouth. She wriggled and grunted as I tightened the strap. The snatch team came back in. "She doesn't want to play," I said. "Ship her up to the Prep Centre and I'll talk to her again in a few days."

Rachel's chauffeuse smiled, "Can we play with her? My partner's driving the next bit and I do like a girl in evening dress." Rachel looked even more distressed as the girl eased the strap of her gown off one shoulder. Rachel looked across at me with wide, pleading eyes.

"Sure, I said. Normal rules apply." I turned back to Rachel. "Best get used to it," I said. "You'll do what we want in the end." She shook her head vigorously and the snatch team laughed. I was quite surprised at myself. It was proving easier to be a villain than I'd thought.

Chapter 17 : Kalinin's Castle

Wales was wet. From where I'd stopped the car there should have been a view of Snowdon. Instead all I could see was the Glaslyn valley and a sheet of cloud. Porthmadog was sitting sulking in the last of the winter afternoon's light at the other end of The Cob. I looked along the causeway that the road shared with the narrow gauge railway that once hauled slates down from the Ffestiniog quarries to the coast and now hauled tourists. There wasn't another car in sight.

I drove on across the Cob and through Porthmadog, past Criccieth with its castle overlooking Tremadog Bay. It seemed like I was heading off the edge of the country. I knew the Kalinin was in exile from Kushtia, I hadn't realised he been exiled quite as far as he had.

The sign by the side of the road said, "Abererch Centre For Meditation Studies". I turned in and parked outside a formidable, Victorian, dark stone, house of three stories. The heavy oak front door swung open as soon as I got from the car. The Kalinin was there to greet me.

Stepping inside the hall was like stepping into a sultan's palace. Outside it may have been the epitome of restrained English Victorian architecture. Inside it was elaborately decorated with sumptuous gilt carvings and silk drapes.

"So pleased you could come, Mr Lawrence, so pleased you could come," he beamed. "You'll take some tea?" He gestured to a room leading off of the entrance hall.

"That would be most welcome, your highness," I said glad to be out of the car and into somewhere warm and comfortable. The Kalinin gestured to a couch and I took a seat. He clapped his hands and a girl in harem dress appeared, her face veiled but her body very much on display, and fell to her knees beside him.

"Tea for myself and my guest, girl."

"At once, highness," she said getting immediately to her feet and scampering off.

"This is splendid," I said, gesturing to the room's extravagant carvings.

"Thank you, Mr Lawrence. Of course it is little compared with the home I will have on my return to Kushia." The girl reappeared carrying a small tray with glasses of tea. She set them down on the table between us and left without waiting to be dismissed. The Kalinin watched her go with a sigh. "So difficult to get them to learn proper respect here," he said. "Now I will have to see she gets more instruction as to how to behave. So tiresome."

"You hope to return to your home soon?" I asked. "Is your exile to end?"

"With your help, my friend, with your help. Kushtia is now a democratic republic. Those that sought to keep me from my throne have been deposed. The Council of the Kalin has been restored. They will ask me back, I am sure."

"I hope so, highness," I said, uncertain as to why this change in the political status in Kushtia should have required me to trek into the depths of Wales.

"Hope is not sufficient. A leader and ruler must act. There is a tradition which I wish you to help me with. In the past the members of the Council of Kalin were appointed by the Kalinin, now the Council is elected by the parliament. That is only proper if Kushtia is to take its rightful place on the world stage – we must be seen to conform to the norms of democratic societies. There used to be talk of corruption; of bribes paid in exchange for seats on the Council. Not in my time, of course, but nevertheless, you will understand how a government must be free of any taint."

"Of course, highness. Such things can never be acceptable in a modern state."

"Of course. But we also recognise the importance of prestige, of status, of position. In the past, the Kalinin presented the each member of the council with a new wife to recognise the importance of their civic contribution. Since all are treated equally there is no question of corruption. I intend, with your help to ensure the tradition is continued. You will find me six women, one for each of the Council. They will see that I respect the traditions. They will understand the value of asking their rightful head of state to return."

The Kalinin was turning out to be an excellent source of business. Freddie would be pleased I thought. "I am sure we can help, Highness," I said. "In fact I am sure there are six available at present. How soon would you like to take delivery?"

"No, no, I think they are most unlikely to be suitable. Most of Clegg's – what does he call it – stock are young girls, slim, and slight of build. All of them on diets, I am sure. Obsessed with their slimness; eating with the appetites of birds. This is fine for those with modern tastes like my son. But I know the members of the Council. They are men for whom a woman must have substance."

"Substance? You mean they must be wealthy?"

The Kalinin laughed. "No, no, Mr Lawrence. Wealth is not the question. This is more an issue of size. They need to be well formed, large of bosom. They need to be women of experience, not young girls barely in the first flush of adulthood. No, this is not Mr Clegg's usual stock. This will need one of your specialised collections."

I listened while he spelt out his requirements. He was right we didn't have anything to suit in stock. It would need a special project but after all that was what I was encouraging Clegg to think of as our future.

We discussed the details. The Kalinin was sufficiently confident of the outcome to commit a significant level of funding up front. I felt sure Clegg would be happy to proceed. We shook hands on the deal.

"Enough of business," said the Kalinin. "I must let you see something of Kushtian hospitality. Did you like the girl who brought the tea?" He didn't give me the chance to respond. "Good, good. She will please you a lot. Come, come, you must have the chance to rest before your return. And you must see how well is my son's new harem." The Kalinin got to his feet and gestured to the stairs leading up from the hall. "Let us join my son."

I followed the Kalinin upstairs. He opened a door from the landing into a massive bedroom. Sprawled on a bed hung with purple and gold drapes was the Kalinin's son. Alongside him were two of the members of All Spice – Geri and Mel B – clad in harem costumes. Two others, Mel C and Baby, were standing chained against the wall with their wrists above their heads. Drool dripped from their ball-gagged mouths as they whimpered in discomfort. They had evidently been there for some time. "Mr Lawrence, welcome," the Kalinin's son boomed leaping to his feet. He bounded across the room to embrace me. The two girls knelt up, heads bowed, on the bed. "Father," he chided, "you did not say our great friend was coming. Mr Lawrence, I have to say how pleased I am with my new wives. They still need much training," I saw that even the two girls on the bed were still wearing shackles, "but these two bring me much pleasure."

"And the others?" I asked.

"They bring me pleasure too. Although my Victoria needs much correction still." He lifted the lid of a large casket at the end of his bed. Inside Vicky was doubled up, roped and gagged and with the signs of a recent beating across her back. "The others are less trouble but she will be an obedient wife too, I am sure. And besides, it amuses me to punish her. Please join us, here."

He waved at the bed. It was big enough for five. I climbed on. As I did so, the girl who had brought the tea re-appeared. The Kalinin gestured towards me and she climbed onto the bed alongside me.

"You like my body?" she said reaching behind her back and unfastening her bra before I had the opportunity to respond. I nodded, smiling as her pert breasts were bared showing pieced and ringed nipples.

"Please, enjoy her," said the Kalinin. "She will allow you anything but she must keep on her veil. It is our way that girls must not show their face before they are married."

By the time he had finished speaking, the veil was the only thing that she was wearing and she was busily trying to remove my clothes so that I might join her in her nakedness. The Kalinin's son laughed as he pulled Geri and Mel down on the bed with him. "You see Mr Lawrence we shall make a Kushtian of you yet."

Chapter 18 : Rachel's Readiness

I got back from Wales the following day and went to meet with Rachel, my script writer, at the Prep Centre.

She was no longer wearing her evening gown; now she just wore a simple short black skirt and matching, low cut, sleeveless top. One strap of her top was hanging off her shoulder. She also had on the stiff leather collar and the identity tag that marked out all of those that were going through preparation. Her face looked gaunt; dark bags under her eyes testified to nights without sleep. She stared past me with an empty look in her eyes.

She'd been brought to one of the interview rooms. "Hello Rachel," I said, pointing to a chair. "Sit down."

She looked at me, puzzled. "I have to stand or kneel," she said in a flat voice. "I'm not allowed to sit. The rules say I'm not allowed to sit. They punish me if I sit."

"I know," I replied, gently. "But it's all right if I say so. You can sit down." She did so, keeping her legs side by side, her feet flat to the floor, her knees slightly parted. She was wearing shackles around her wrists but her hands were chained in front of her. She put her hands in her lap and sat quite motionless. I could see that her wrists were bruised from the shackles. Her face was bruised too. She had a cut over one eye, and a puffy lip. They hadn't been gentle with her. She could see I was looking at her.

"They raped me."

"I know," I answered.

"The men and the women."

"I know. I can make it stop. If you do as I ask then I can make it stop."

"That's what they said. If I do as I'm told all will be well. I'm trying to do as I'm told. Can you make it stop?"

"If you write for me. If you do as you are told."

"I'd like you to make it stop."

"Good. I'll send you some papers. They'll explain what I want. You'll be given a computer to write with. You'll give the files to your guard. He will give them to me. As long as you do as I ask it will stop."

"No more rape?"

"No. Not if you do as I ask."

"It was so many times. I've lost count. Both in front and behind. And in my mouth."

"I know."

"Sometimes they tie my wrists before they rape me. Sometimes they spread my legs out with a bar. Sometimes they gag me. Sometimes they let me scream."

"I know."

"And you can make it stop?"

"If you do as I ask."

"Are you going to rape me?"

"No, not now."

"Not now?"

"No, because I think you are going to do as I ask. At least at the moment I think you will do as I ask. If I find that doesn't happen I may change my mind."

"Thank you," Rachel said. "I want you to make it stop. I don't want you to rape me. I don't want them to rape me." I pressed the button.

A guard appeared. "She's to have a computer in her cell," I said, "No network of course. And some papers I'll send. She'll provide files each day. She's not to be raped. As long as she behaves, and provides the files, she's not to be raped."

"Understood," said the guard. "I'll pass the word."

I saw her later, watching her through the panel of one way glass. She was seated at a table. A chain ran from her ankle to a ring in the wall. She had been given a computer and the file of papers. She was reading the file. She put her head in her hands. I could see she was sobbing. She stopped after a few moments and looked back at the door of her cell and then back at the file. She turned on the computer. It seemed like I was going to get my script.

I went off to speak to Harry. Sarah in his outer office doing the PA thing just as she had been before Freddie had thrown his little spanner in the works. She greeted me with a smile and buzzed through to Harry without being asked. "Mr Ross for you, Sir," she said into the intercom. Harry told her to send me in and she ushered me through the door into his office.

"How are things now Sarah's back in her seat?" I asked.

"Fine," said Harry. "Thanks for your help with that. I don't know why Brian wouldn't take her for that sale. She'd have helped his numbers no end. Freddie was furious."

"Was he? He didn't say anything."

"No, that's the worst time. Freddie when he's quiet is a worrying prospect."

"Well, I guess that's Brian's problem," I said. I wasn't feeling terribly sympathetic. "Still, what I wanted to see you for was this video stuff I'm doing. I ought to include Sarah, because I told Freddie that was why we were hanging on to her. It's only some prototype stuff at the moment but I'll need her for a few days. Is that OK?"

"Sure," said Harry, "I can hardly complain can I? She wouldn't be here at all if you hadn't put your ideas up. I'll set it up now." He buzzed on the intercom. "Sarah, come in please."

"Yes at once," she said and was through the door almost before the click of the intercom had died away.

"Sarah," Harry said. "Larry wants to make a video an example of the stuff we're going to use to help sell girls on the web site. He's asked that you take part in it."

"Well if you can do without me. I mean I don't want to let you down."

"That's all right, Sarah. Please do all you can to help Larry."

"Oh, of course, if you say so."

I turned to Sarah. "Let me explain a bit about this. I need a short sequence of a slave selling herself. You'll be interviewed on camera, asked to show some of your dancing skills, that sort of thing. You needn't worry about it too much, we'll steer you through it." I didn't wait for her response. "We'll start right now." Harry put in a call from his phone. A few moments later a guard appeared. I asked him to take Sarah over to the room I'd had set up. "They'll sort you out there," I said to Sarah. The guard gripped her by the arm and almost pulled her through the door.

Two days later with Sarah returned to her cell I took the video up to show Harry. "I thought you might like a preview," I said, slipping the disk into his DVD player. The video opened with a close up shot of Sarah's face, her mouth distended by a bright red ball gag. Behind her head, out of sight, the strap was loosened and the gag pulled clear. She worked her jaws to relieve the stiffness, licked her lips and swallowed. "Thank you," she said.

"Right, #06/085," it was my own voice off camera. "You are going to need to be convincing if you want to stand out from all the other slaves on offer. Let the buyers see what they would be getting first of all. Stand up!"

The camera zoomed back as Sarah got to her feet. You could see that she was wearing a short tight fitting mini-dress with cap sleeves and a scooped neckline that just showed some cleavage and, of course, her collar. She held her hands modestly in front of herself. Her hair was loose, as red as ever, hanging in waves to her shoulders.

"Turn around!" Sarah did so, compliant as always. As she did so the camera zoomed out further giving a shot of her legs in black tights. "And sit please." Again she did as she was told, sitting in the approved manner, feet side by side and flat to the floor, hands in her lap. The camera zoomed in slowly to fill the screen with a shot of Sarah from the waist upwards.

"Personal details," I said peremptorily.

"I am #06/085," she answered. "23 years old and five feet four inches tall. I weigh 115 pounds normally. You can see I'm a red head, I think. I was collected in early March and I've completed my basic training. I've learned the basics of obedience and I hope that my trainers would agree that I have been a good student." She turned to look at the camera and bit her lower lip, obviously concerned that the audience should indeed believe her.

"You're a dancer, I believe. You have some skills in that area which I am sure prospective purchasers would be interested in. Please show us."

"Oh, well, I'm not a professional or anything it's just what I do at week ends at the clubs in town for fun. But if you think the buyers would like to see it, of course I will."

She got to her feet. A Northern Soul medley kicked off on the sound track. I know they're corny but I've always been a sucker for the floor fillers from the Wigan Casino and I reckoned they would fit our demographic better than some of the techno that

turns up in the clubs now. Curtiss Mayfield started off with "Move on Up". Sarah seemed to managing it nicely. I'm no expert on dance and I certainly couldn't tell you anything about her moves except to say that she managed to combine an athletic movement with a graceful timing and soulful interpretation of the music. It looked like, for a few minutes she'd forgotten where she was and why she was doing what she was doing. Her hair span out like a halo around her head as she gyrated in time with the music. K C & the Sunshine Band came on with 'She's the Queen of Clubs". Sarah picked up her tempo to match. I had her finished on a slower track; Frank Wilson's 'Do I love You?' She did the business to that as well. I left off the tracks that I thought might upset her. I didn't think Fontella Bass and 'Rescue Me' or Edwin Star and 'SOS' would be quite the thing.

The music stopped and Sarah returned to her seat. "Thank you," I said.

"Was that all right?" she asked looking over her shoulder towards where she had been dancing. "I could do some more if it helps?" She looked back towards the camera. "I hope everyone enjoyed that. Please watch the rest." She smiled nervously, uncertain of what was to happen next.

"That's fine #085," I said, "But now we need to see some more of your body." She started as two masked guards came in and gripped her by either arm. In an admirable display of obedience she allowed herself to be led from the stage only to reappear moments later. In the intervening moments she had been stripped of her dress. Now she wore only bra, panties, stockings, a suspender belt, high heeled shoes and her slave stock collar. Her gag was back in place, forcing her lips into a big round 'O'.

"Walk up and down, please, 085," I said. She did as she was asked, swinging her legs from her hips, making the most of her heels, clasping her hands behind her back as she had been instructed. "And, stop. Hand behind your head." The camera panned over her body lingering in close up over her tits, belly, hips, crotch and calves. "Turn around please." The camera tracked up. "And bend please." She reached forward, Fit as she was, she had no difficulty in clutching her ankles as I had asked. The camera took a good shot of her tight arse before zooming back to see her looking back through her spread legs, her red hair tumbling to the floor behind her head.

"And move again please." Sarah got up and span around. She placed her right hand on the chair she had been sitting on and lifted her left leg until it was at hip height. She changed hands and did the same with her right leg. The audience would be in no doubt of her athletic abilities. "Let us see your breasts, please." She looked at me for a moment and then obediently reached behind her back and unfastened her bra, stripping it off and dropping it on the chair. The camera zoomed in again, filling the screen with her pert breasts and the dark areolas surrounding her nipples. The camera zoomed out. "And walk." She began to parade up and down the platform. "Head up, back straight," I ordered. She stiffened in response. "Shoulders back, breasts out. And turn..." She walked back. "And turn. Keep your shoulders back and breasts out please. Thank you. And turn..."

The video footage came to a close. The screen went black.

"What do you think?" I said to Harry.

"Well she knows how to take direction, that's for certain," he said with a grin. "But I think I knew that already. Seriously though I think it looks quite good. Have you worked out what you're doing with it yet?"

"Yeah, I think so. But at least with that in the can we can convince Freddie we've done something and she can get back to work in your office tomorrow."

"Well thanks for that Larry," Harry said. It's been a real help having her around. Let's hope we can keep on thinking of excuses to hang on to her."

Chapter 19 : Something for the weekend

The Kalinin's requirements for Council of Kushtia had been precise. Between him and his son, I was coming to understand that Kushtians were capable of developing fairly specific tastes.

Luckily, I'd been able to work out how to satisfy them.

I was sitting in the lounge of a comfortable 1930's style house, looking out across a perfectly manicured lawn. The rum punch on the table in front of me was completing a pleasant afternoon. I was about to be joined by Alessa Moran, which was possibly the only down-side. I'd worked with Alessa before. She could be over-powering, tiresome even, but she could usually fix things.

Alessa burst through the double doors from the hall. "Larry," she gushed, "how LOVELY to see you."

"Alessa," I responded getting to my feet. "always a pleasure." Like everything else, Alessa invariably took greetings to extreme. The conventional kiss on either cheek was, as usual, repeated three times and accompanied by a rib crushing embrace.

"Well," she said, "this was a little challenge, wasn't it?" Alessa looked, as always, striking. Her black jacket and skirt were perfectly tailored; her buttercup yellow blouse contrasted with the suit and her own dark skin. She sat down and crossed her legs, smiling all the time. She shook her head as she laughed, her mass of tightly curled, black hair bounced like a sprung ball. She was an incorrigible flirt. I could tell that she knew exactly how far up her thighs her skirt had ridden. "But such fun and so good to be working with you again."

"I'm sure you've come up trumps, Alessa. I hope you were able to keep this quiet?"

"Absolutely, Larry, absolutely. All done through my company, no mention of anyone else. You know me, the soul of discretion."

Alessa was the soul of discretion like Liberace was shy but we'd been monitoring her emails and her mobile. It seemed like she had managed to keep her mouth shut about this little project.

"It's very exciting, Larry! I'd never realised you had contacts in the fashion business. And it's such an exciting idea, why shouldn't bigger ladies have sexy swimwear too?"

"So, you've managed to find me some models."

"Of course, Larry, of course. They're getting changed now. Six lovely ladies. I think they'll fit the bill for your project."

I'd just passed on the Kalinin's requirements to Alessa though I had interpreted the way in which the Kalinin had expressed them. Six women, he had said. At least 40 years old, possessed of a bosom able to comfort a man after many days in the desert and a seat that will endure ten days ride of a camel. I had also not been entirely honest about the exact reason why I was interested in seeing them. Alessa thought they were going to model a new range of swimwear for the well endowed, mature woman. And she was right, they were right now, it was just I had other plans for their future. "Well, let's see them, then," I said.

"Right away, Larry, right away. I'll just check that they've got changed. They were all supposed to bring a costume but you know what models are like." Alessa wandered off in the direction of the hall. She returned moments later. "All ready, Larry, darling," she said. "All ready. You sit down and we'll give you a show. Oh, I brought some music."

She slipped a CD into the hi-fi and pressed 'play'. Strains of the Beautiful South spilled out of the speakers. "She's a perfect ten, but she wears a twelve. Honey keep a little two for me...." I put my head in my hands. Alessa was definitely the down side of this project.

The first of her models strode in wearing a shiny black one piece bathing suit. She certainly fitted the bill – probably forty two or forty four inches around the chest. Her swim suit was well cut and lycra does a wonderful job. She stopped in front of me to spin around. I guessed she was forty five years old, maybe a little more. She was well covered, for sure, and while she didn't have the body of a fitness freak, she still looked as if she took care of herself. She posed, hands on hips, directly in front of me, smiled, turned and left. At the rear, she was sufficiently well upholstered to cope with the Kalinin's notional camel ride, I thought. Not bad for a woman of her age.

The next went through the same routine. She was bigger breasted and a little bigger around the waist and a little shorter too, blonde hair and a really friendly smile. She would be fine too, I thought as she left the room.

Four more followed, each stepping confidently across the room, high heeled mules clacking on the wooden floor. At the end all six returned and stood in one long line across the room. Alessa made a big thing of the costumes. "I hope you approve Larry, you said they'd be doing swimsuit modelling. I told them all to bring something that showed them at their best. Look at the woman on the end there, doesn't she just show that an older woman can wear a two piece if it's well designed and well made? Don't you agree? And that purple costume is really the right colour for the one on the left, isn't it. Such a flattering shade. I only hope I've got their same fashion sense when I get to their age." She smiled in anticipation of a compliment. I grunted in response. It didn't dampen her enthusiasm. "And they're all available for an overseas assignment at short notice, just like you asked. Three of them are single, two of them have just divorced, and the other one is widowed." she laughed. "I found them

through that divorcees, widows & singles support group. Such a clever idea of yours. They'll all be glad of a bit of excitement, I should think!"

I asked the girls to walk around in a circle. I needed to be sure they'd fit the bill but I was pretty confident that the Kalinin would approve. Irritating as she was, Alessa had done a good job. Two blondes, three brunettes – two of them greying slightly with a salt and pepper look – and one suspiciously orange-haired redhead. Two long legged and tall, two of them rather short. All of them well covered and with bosoms that would offer sufficient comfort. They might all be over forty but they certainly didn't look over the hill. I thought the range would get the Kalinin's approval. Without knowing the tastes of the individual Councillors it was difficult but I guessed there would be something to suit each of them.

I clapped my hands. "Thank you ladies, thank you. That was fine. If you'd like to get dressed now." The six of them relaxed and left the room, chatting and giggling like young girls. I turned to Alessa. "Well," I said, "we need to talk. Let me just make a call. Excuse me."

I followed the girls out into the hall, leaving Alessa in the lounge. As the last of the six went back into their changing room one of the snatch squad emerged from the room next door. I gave him a thumbs up sign. "They're fine, I said. "All six." He smiled and went back into his room. I went back to Alessa.

"You like, Larry? You like?" Alessa was as enthusiastic as ever. "You see how I meet your every need?" She smiled at me encouragingly and sat back, opening the jacket of her suit. Her own bosom was as well able to offer comfort as those of her models. She'd taken the opportunity while I was out of the room to undo one more button of her blouse. The cleavage revealed looked as if it would swallow a small Kushtian without a trace. I suppose it was intended to distract me.

"Very good Alessa. Absolutely fine. Just what I was looking for. They'll be perfect."

"So where are you planning to do the photo-shoot? Somewhere exotic I hope"

"Exotic? Yes, I guess you'd call it exotic." I was thinking that I didn't actually know much about Kushtia but I was working on the basis that anywhere that you hadn't heard of was likely to count as exotic.

"Well, I hope I'm invited too. After all the trouble in setting this up, Larry, it's the least you can do. I fancy a little winter sunshine. We could enjoy ourselves while the girls work."

"Alessa, I'd love you to come. In fact I'm going to absolutely insist."

"Wonderful, Larry wonderful." Alessa beamed. "When are we going?"

"Oh quite soon. I want to get on with this project quickly."

"Terrific, I'll tell the girls right now." Alessa leapt to her feet and was off towards the changing room as quickly as she could go in the heels she was wearing. I followed her. She was going to find out sooner or later, it was really too much effort to try to damp down her enthusiasm.

As Alessa burst through the door to the room that the girls had been using to change, she gave a startled cry at the sight in front of her. Two men were busily applying ropes to two of the women, Tricia, the third member of the team, was holding two others at gun point with their hands in the air. She gave me a friendly wave. The last two had already been roped and gagged and were sitting on the floor trying vainly to free themselves; rolling from side to side in attempts to loosen their bonds and grunting in a frustrated way into their gags.

Tricia turned her attention to Alessa. "Over here lady," she said. "Join these two. Hands up and keep quiet." Alessa did as she was told, first staring at the pistol that was jammed against her belly and then watching in horror as the last two of her models were forced to the floor to be tightly trussed.

"Larry, what on earth is this?" Alessa gasped. I didn't bother to answer her.

I looked around at the way things were going. The team had done a neat job. Two of the girls were still in their swimming costumes, the one in the black lycra one piece was putting up quite a struggle but the ropes were showing no signs of letting her get free, the one in purple seemed to have abandoned hope of escape already, staring in terror at each of the snatch team in turn. One of the others had got into her skirt but she hadn't put on her bra or top when the snatch team had disturbed them. They'd had fun with tying her up, lengths of white rope criss-crossing her tits, cutting painfully into the flesh. The redhead was completely naked, she was rolling around on the carpet grunting and groaning into her gag. The other two had got back into their street cloths before the snatch team came in. It didn't really matter; they were all going to be stripped off back at the Prep Centre anyway.

Alessa was fuming. "Larry, what is going on?" she demanded. "This isn't the sort of thing I expect." Even with her hands up and a gun pointing at her she seemed to think she should be able to control things. Tricia didn't seem impressed.

"Is this one coming too?" she asked.

"Oh, yes I replied. She's really keen to join the trip. Aren't you Alessa?"

Alessa turned towards me. "Have you gone mad?" she fumed. "Oww!" She yelped as one of the team grabbed her arms and wrenched them behind her back. The ropes were jerked tight around her wrists and then her elbows. She kicked out at the

man, scraping the heel of her shoe down his shin. In response he dragged her around and pushed her down face down across the large table that stood against the wall. The impact knocked the wind from her. "Dumb bitch!" the man exclaimed passing a loop of rope around her ankles and knotting it off. "That'll slow you down." He pulled her up from the table and span her around.

I walked across to where she was. One of the snatch squad's kit bags was sitting on the table. I rummaged in it and pulled out a wad of foam. "Alessa," I said, "after having to put up with your constant stream of chatter, you've no idea how much pleasure this gives me." I nodded to the man holding her. He grabbed at her curly, jet black hair and pulled. She reacted with a yelp and I pushed the foam into her open mouth. Ignoring her choking and spluttering I slapped a length of tape across her mouth and followed it with two more. Alessa's muffled groans and protests joined the chorus of complaint from the six other, helpless, women.

"Shall we get them shipped out?" the man holding Alessa asked. The captive women set to with a chorus of muffled grunts of complaint.

"Yeah, sure, I answered, earning still more terrified moans. "But just one thing." I turned back to Alessa who was still struggling against her captor. "Alessa, dear," I said, "you've really been taking great trouble to flash your legs at me today. So I think I should take a closer look." I reached around her and unclipped the waist band of her skirt, I slid the zip down and let her skirt fall to the floor. "Very nice," I said admiring the sight of her legs. "And you've been so keen to show me what's in your jacket, I can hardly miss out on that, can I?" I pushed the jacket back off her shoulders.

She squealed as I grasped her blouse and tore it open. "Excellent," I said, as I pulled the blouse back to expose her breasts, her yellow bra and panties pale against her almost black skin. "Well, I think they'll be plenty of people enjoying that view over the next few days." I turned to the man holding Alessa. "O.K." I said. "now we can go. Let's get them on the truck."

Chapter 20 : Not In The Script

With the Kalinin's requirements well in hand, I had some time to spend on the video. I'd sketched out the framework for Rachel and she'd already let me have a storyboard and I'd set up to visit the Prep Centre to run through the script.

I'd told them to let her have some decent clothes as long as she was behaving. When I got there I could see that she was making an effort to impress, she'd obviously been well enough behaved to keep the guards happy. Or maybe she'd been using some other talents to achieve the same ends.

One thing that I'd found while working for Clegg was there wasn't much time for civilised conversation with the guests. It was a pretty much relentless production line that ran them from the pick up point to the Sales Centre and out. A shame really, I thought, as I looked at Rachel.

They'd put her to work in one of the Prep Centre cells. She was sitting at the table that held her computer. She had a brown manila folder in front of her. "Well, Miss Kernow," I said. "You look rather better than when I last saw you." The bruises had gone and the cuts had healed. She'd managed to find a colourful, knee length skirt and a pale blue sweater from somewhere. She looked, well, attractive, in a girl-next-door sort of way. Of course, she still had the leather collar and tag on, which spoiled the effect somewhat.

"They stopped raping me," she said. "Thank you."

"That was the deal," I said. "You write for me and you don't get raped. I bet you didn't get as good an offer as that from your regular literary agent."

She gave me a humourless grin. "Does the same thing go when I give you the script or does that mean you just take your turn then?"

"That's not very kind," I said, though I'd been thinking she look a whole lot cuter with the skirt up around her waist and the sweater up around her neck. But that's what working for Clegg does – it tends to change the way you look at girls. "There will be other projects," I said. "Maybe we can keep the arrangement going." I sat down at the desk. "Show me what you've done."

She hesitated a moment before pushing the folder across to me. I opened it. The neatly printed sheets inside were clearly laid out. Scenes, camera angles and shots, dialogue, sound effects, it all seemed to be there. I started reading through it.

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[Scene 100 : Graphics : Logo and titles

SFX AUDIO TRACK: "Weapon of Choice"

We see the opening credit sequence, finishing on the logo of Clegg Enterprises and the title : "CHOICE"

Scene 110 : Exterior : a car parked in a dark country lane.

FADE-IN

SFX: AUDIO TRACK: "Just what you've always wanted"

CLOSE UP OF CAR BOOT LID

We see the boot lid open. Inside there is a blanket. A hand appears from out of shot and pulls the blanket away. Beneath is the face of a girl. She is gagged.

VOICE OVER: "She's here."

TRACK TO CLOSE UP OF GIRL'S FACE.

Her eyes are wide in terror. She shakes her head.

VOICE OVER: "This is how it begins for her and, of course, for you."

Scene 120 : Interior : a dark room with a small circular podium in the centre.

MIX TO MEDIUM SHOT OF GIRL STANDING ON PODIUM

We see she is standing with her wrists chained over her head, She is still gagged.

VOICE OVER: "What you wanted. When you wanted it. How you wanted it. But how do you get just what you want?"

ZOOM TO CLOSE UP OF GIRL'S CHAINED WRISTS & TRACK TO CLOSE UP ON GAG.

Scene 130 : Interior : an office desk and comfortable arm chair.

SFX: FADE DOWN AUDIO TRACK

MIX TO WIDE SHOT OF OFFICE.

We see the narrator seated in the armchair.

ZOOM TO MEDIUM SHOT OF NARRATOR.

NARRATOR: "Hi.....

.....

I read it through to the end. I expected that there would need to be changes but it looked as though she had done a good job to start with. "This looks fine," I said.

"Great," she replied without enthusiasm. "Does it get to win an award?"

I let the irony pass. "I could get you a drink, if you like. I've got some vodka in my bag."

She thought about it for a moment and then said, "Why not?"

I turned around and bent down to get the bottle out.

You should never turn your back on a writer. You never know what will happen to the plot.

What is it with girls, me and drink, I wonder? I mean Amanda brained me with a vodka bottle and it was while I was finding a drink for Rachel that she hit me too.

Not with a bottle admittedly. This time it was the edge of her computer keyboard. It slammed into the back of my head with a very painful impact. I toppled forward over the bag and then fell to the floor. I didn't quite lose consciousness, which was a shame as Rachel was shouting "Bastard!" and kicking seven kinds of excrement out of me. However, I was sufficiently disorientated not to put up any sort of struggle as she pulled the lead from the computer keyboard around my wrists and the power cable around my ankles.

That was bad enough. Then she jammed the computer's mouse into my mouth and wound the cable round my head a few times to keep it there.

She'd obviously thought about this a lot, while she'd been writing my script she'd obviously been working on one for herself.

She gave me another kick, this time in the groin. Luckily, with my ankles tied together and the fact that I was coming to enough to try to dodge, she didn't really manage to land it. Even so the heel of her shoe scraped painfully across my thigh. If my mouth hadn't been stuffed I'd have given out a cry that should have been enough to bring the whole lot of the guards in. Except, I remembered, they were quite used to gag-muffled cries of discomfort around here, Just to be sure she knotted the cord from the mouse to the one around my wrists and my ankles. That bent me up and I thought she was about to land another kick when she thought better of it and headed out of the cell, locking the door behind her.

Not even a good-bye, I thought as I tried to free myself from the cables while avoiding choking on the block of plastic wedged in my mouth.

Of course it had to be Harry that found me. "I thought you'd given up on this," he smirked from the cell door. "You're obviously not safe left alone with a woman – fall too easily for their charms. Why don't you hang on there for a minute and I'll see if I can find your lady friend." Ignoring my grunts of frustration and complaint, he shut the door.

In fairness to the guy he must have mentioned my condition to someone because the Doc came in a few moments later. She set to, untying the cable around my mouth first of all and pulling the mouse carefully out. "Ouch," she said, "that must have hurt. She might have broken some teeth but I think you've been lucky."

She managed to untie the cable from around my wrists and I sat up, untying my own ankles. "Thanks," I said.

"Don't mention it," she replied, with a grin. "It makes a change untying someone."

"Shouldn't there be alarms going off?" I asked. "You know, wailing sirens, flashing lights, that sort of thing."

Harry reappeared at the door. "No need," he said, "she won't be far away. I just needed to get my tracer. Do you want to come find her?"

"Tracer?" I asked.

"Uh, huh," said Harry, pulling a small box from his pocket. It looked like a voltage meter. "Those collars they wear aren't just there to hang their slave number tags on," he said. "There's a little chip inside and with this little box we can walk right up to her. She won't have got her collar off unless she's found a cutting torch lying around somewhere. Come on. If you can walk that is."

The Doctor and I followed him out of the cell and down the corridor leading to Despatch. He showed me the box, the needle was pointing off to one side, through the door of a janitor's cupboard. Harry put one finger to his lips asking for quiet. He took out his wallet and pulled out what looked like plain sheet of paper about the size of a bank note. He picked away at one corner with a finger nail until a plastic backing sheet came loose. He pulled that clear and slipped the paper under the bottom of the door.

A few seconds later there was "Phoosh" noise, smoke started to appear under the door which moments later burst open. A coughing and spluttering Rachel emerged from a cloud of acrid looking, orange, smoke. She ran into Harry's arms. "Stupid bitch," he said as he hit her with the edge of his hand on the side of the neck, knocking her unconscious. He let her slide limply to the floor before he turned her over and pulled a cable tie tightly around her wrists. He turned to me. "Had you two finished, or was there something else you needed to discuss?" he asked.

"No we'd finished," I said. "She can go back in her cell. In fact," I wasn't feeling too pleased with her, "you can tell the team she's back on the 'available' list until further notice."

"Oh good," said Harry. "It's always nice when someone that's been off-limits becomes available. Do you want to book a slot?"

"Not right now," I said. "I'm afraid I've got a headache."

Harry laughed, pulling the slowly recovering Rachel to her feet. "Fair enough. She probably has too, but I don't think it will make much difference to the guards or anyone else that wants to play." He dragged her off towards the cells. I had some sympathy for her. Then I went to move and felt the pain where she'd kicked me. The sympathy wore off quickly.

Chapter 21 : Bar Talk

It was the following day. Harry and I were sat in a small bar in a hotel overlooking the river. He'd been up in town for a meeting with Freddie. I felt that at least owed him a drink for helping sort out Rachel. He'd been good enough not to make too much of a joke of it around the place, too. He'd been sympathetic about what happened and gave me a bit of a lecture on not turning my back on work in progress. Nothing I didn't deserve. I wasn't going to let it happen again.

It was mid afternoon and we were almost the only ones in the room. A group of three girls sat on stools at the bar, chatting and laughing. We took our beers off to a quiet corner. I could see Harry was giving each of the girls an appraising look.

"See anything you like?" I said.

Harry took a pull on his bottle of beer and spoke under his breath. "Hmm, maybe \$120,000. The one on the left possibly a bit more than \$40k, not sure. Sparky, ought to train well. Easy pick up too, careless with her stuff – see how she's just left her handbag on the floor. It's a sure sign - no idea about her surroundings - you'd bag her before she knew anything was happening. Other two might go down well with the eastern Europeans, shape's all right, weight's all right. Nothing special though – can't see them fetching the sort of margins we're looking for now."

"Silly of me, I guess," I said. "I wasn't really talking shop."

Harry chuckled, putting his beer down on the table. "Oh, sorry."

"I sort of meant, what do you do for fun?"

He stared down at the beer bottle. I wondered if I had touched a raw nerve. "Larry, you're right," he said. "I guess doing this you stop seeing women as fun and start seeing them just as dollars and shipping weight. Quite a lot of the time it's as if they're not wearing clothes even. You can watch their naked bodies as they walk by – you've seen so many of them stripped, you know what they'll be like. The only surprise now when you get them naked is whether they've had themselves tattooed. I wish they wouldn't do that though, it's much harder to shift the ones with marks – especially some of the designs. We had one we picked up a while back, had so little spare flesh we could barely find space to put a bar code on her."

I nodded.

Harry went on. "It's odd really. You stop thinking of them as people at all. Take the one in the middle – she's wearing an engagement ring. So I'm thinking, watch out for the fiancé turning up at an inconvenient moment, maybe he's a possible patsy for her disappearance. That portfolio case propped up against her stool – looks like she might be a bit arty – could mean she gets to galleries; great snatch venues, plenty of quiet corners. Slim build, blonde hair – maybe your Caribbean pal would like her; looks like she'd be good between the shafts of a pony cart." She looked up, noticed that Harry was looking at her and smiled. Harry stared blankly, ignoring her look, and went on talking. "Whereas actually she's this really nice, normal, girl who does a perfectly good job in an ad agency somewhere and has slipped out for a bit of fun with her girl friends on a Thursday afternoon before she goes home to fuck the arse off her fiancé tonight. Somehow you don't think about their real lives, except like it helps plan the snatch." Harry looked up as a waitress made her way over from the bar. "Uh-oh," he said, with a grin, "Here comes \$50k."

The waitress came over to our table, picked up my empty bottle and put it on her tray. "You boys all right?" she asked. We nodded. "Do you want another beer?" she asked me. I said, "Sure." Harry shook his head. Two other guys on the far corner of the bar were calling out to the three girls. The girls were ignoring them. Pointedly. "Jeez," our waitress said, "you'd think this was some sort of slave market the way some men carry on. They treat them like they're pieces of meat."

"Shocking," said Harry. One of the girls span round in response to some remark or other and raised a finger to the two men. One of them started to get to his feet. The waitress went over to try to calm things down. She was standing with her back to us, hands on hips as she argued with the men. "Nice arse," said Harry, quietly. "She'd be good for some of the spankers we've got on the books. Strapped down, with that up in the air, nicely framed with garter belt and stockings, you could see the price going up." She was pointing at the door. The two men got to their feet and made a few abusive remarks before up-ending a beer bottle and storming out. The waitress got a cloth and started cleaning up. "There," said Harry, "domestic skills too. The price is going up all the time."

"We weren't talking shop," I chided.

"Eh? Oh, yeah." Harry was obviously having trouble switching off. He took another pull at the beer.

"I mean do you ever date any of the team? Or is that frowned on? Obviously it's going to be difficult with a girl from outside the business but there's a few around Clegg's operation that look like they might be fun."

"Well," said Harry, "I try not to get involved with any of my lot; that can really make life difficult and it's a sure recipe for fowl-ups in my book. There's been a few from Rick's team that I've hooked up with. The trouble is when you see them coming out of the shower and think, 'that'd look nice on the platform' or when you wake up in the morning next to them and its 'oh fuck, she's loose, where are the ropes?'. I guess this job just screwed me up. How about you?"

"It's funny," I said, "you'd think with women available any time you want, it'd be like some sort of dreamland. Doesn't seem to work like that, though. Hang on." I noticed the waitress coming back.

"Sorry about that gents," she said. "Was it still just the one beer?"

Harry said, "No I'll have one as well now, thanks. Do you get a lot of trouble in here? Doesn't look like the sort of place that you would."

"No," she said, "not usually. And usually I'm happy to let them get on with it. The girls can give as good as they get and as long as they aren't actually fighting and it doesn't disturb the other customers, I don't mind. It was just that short arsed guy – the one with the ginger hair – called me a thick bitch that would be better with a bottle jammed up my fanny*."

"Not nice," I said.

"No," she said. "I'm not thick – I've got a history doctorate: 'The Growth of Brewing and Wine Trades in Late 13th Century England'. Only thing is there's more need for bar staff than there is for historians." Harry laughed. "I'll get your beers."

"Bright girl," I said as she left.

"Yeah," said Harry, "always a problem. Mostly they just end up gagged for more of the time. Still worth remembering if any of your accounts comes looking for a medievalist with a great arse." He grinned and downed the last of his beer. "Still," he said, "it might be fun to see if I could park something other than a bottle in her fanny*."

"OK," I said, "here's a challenge for you. Get a date, take her out, take her home. Screw any part of her you like but see if you can get through to tomorrow without actually wrapping her in rope or tape and dumping her in a crate somewhere."

"Yeah, maybe," he said as he watched her bringing us our beers.

She gave him a smile and a warm, "There you go," as she put them down and left us.

"What about the other three? \$120k of prime cuts, just asking to be put on Rick's conveyor. Look at the mouth on that one at the other end, wide as anything, very nice lips. Lot of buyers go for a big mouth, Larry. Skinny wrists though - need to be careful with that, might slip out of handcuffs."

"Harry, take your mind off the job for one night. Go date the waitress. Talk to someone outside of our world that you aren't planning to snatch for one evening."

Harry smiled sheepishly. "I guess I do get a bit caught up in it all," he said. "You might be right. I'll maybe see you tomorrow." He got to his feet and headed off towards the bar. I downed the last of my beer and started to leave. I waved at Harry as I went by him. "So what do historians do when they finish serving beer?" I heard him saying to the waitress as I left.

I was heading north to find out how Rachel was getting on and to see Rick.

* American readers please note: "fanny" is a British slang word for cunt not arse, what you call a "fanny pack" we call a "bum bag". I wouldn't want anyone to feel that Harry didn't know his way around a woman. ☺

Chapter 22 : Ready For My Close Up Mr Demille

In her Prep Centre cell, Rachel was in a pretty sorry state. The guards and anyone else that felt like it had taken the opportunity presented by the "available" sign on her cell door. Someone had started chalking five bar gate counts on the wall by the door. It had reached twenty eight. As I got to her room, the Prep Centre's receptionist was emerging with a smile, clutching a strap-on dildo and a harness. "Hi, Larry," she said, "back again?" as she ticked off another stroke on the wall. Twenty nine.

I nodded.

"Your writer has been giving everyone a good time," she said, hefting the strap-on with a smirk. "Makes a change for us support staff to get a chance to play."

I edged past her into Rachel's cell. As I got in the receptionist called after me. "Oh, Larry, I've left my tit clamps on her. Be a love and drop them off at the desk when you've done, could you?"

Rachel was sprawled on the floor in one corner of the room. She was in a terrible state and it had only been two days since I turned the guards loose on her. If she had looked shocked before, she was almost catatonic now. They'd replaced her standard collar with a broad one that forced her head upwards. Her mouth was distended by the wire frame gag that held it open. Her eyes were staring unblinking from dark hollows in her face. I couldn't work out at first what she was wearing but finally realised it was the tattered remnants of the sweater and skirt that she had on when I'd last seen her, torn by the mistreatment that she had suffered over the last two days. Her tits were purple, and sore, the steel claws of the tit clamps, pinched into her nipples. Her hair was lank and greasy, sticky with I wasn't sure what; her face puffy from where her mouth had been used repeatedly. They'd strapped her wrists to the tops of her arms and her ankles to the tops of her thighs, leaving her breasts, arse and cunt available for any intrusion. From the bruises on her legs, especially on the inside of her thighs, it was clear that she'd had a lot of attention. Seeing me, she gave a whimper of recognition.

I bent down and unfastened the ratchet on her gag. Even with the wire frame removed her mouth stayed open as though her jaws were locked wide. I took the nipple clamps off. She gave a sharp, animal-like, cry in the back of her throat as the blood started to rush back and feeling returned in a wave of pain. Minutes went by before she regained the use of the muscles that allowed her to talk.

"Th, th, thank you," she stammered, hardly able to form the words, "I'm sorry. Please stop this. I'm sorry."

"I stopped it before and look what happened. Why should I stop it again?"

"I, I, I know. I can't bear this any more though. Over and over again. So many times. Please. I'll do anything."

"You say you will, Rachel, of course you say you will. And right now you believe, it too. But I'm not sure I can risk it. It took a long time to lose that headache." She looked scared at the prospect that I would not relent. "We'll give it one more try though." Her expression changed to one of relief. "You'll work on the script. There are some revisions." She nodded animatedly. "You'll be kept shackled, though." More nods of agreement. "There'll be no more rapes. IF you behave. But if you don't you'll be beaten and you'll be back in here with the 'available' sign on the door. Do you understand?"

She nodded. I still wasn't convinced. I should have let Rick do a proper orientation job on her. I aimed to mention it to him later. He could have a go as soon as we finished the first script. I left Rachel, giving instructions to the guards to clean her up and put her back to work on the script. They were disappointed of course but later I heard they were laying odds on how soon she'd be back on the available list. I gave the receptionist her tit clamps back. She grinned and asked if I fancied playing with them later. Somehow I wasn't in the mood.

I was on my way over to see Rick when I bumped into Harry as he strolled down the corridor with a cheery smile on his face. "Uhhuh," I said sensing that he'd had a good time the night before. "So you did get to date that waitress."

"Is it that obvious?" he asked.

I nodded. "I hope she's still footloose and fancy free. Tell me she isn't languishing down stairs somewhere."

"Don't worry Larry, I took your advice. Absolutely no business whatsoever and some extremely agreeable and very conventional sex, right up to the point..."

"Oh, Harry!" I said, "that wasn't the idea."

"No, listen," Harry responded. "Let me finish. Right up to the point where she said, 'I hope you don't think I'm kinky, but have you ever tied a girl up?' It took all my self control to give her a less than honest answer."

I guffawed in response. "Oh well," I said, "at least you tried."

"No, don't knock it, Larry. It was good, straightforward, uncomplicated fun and we both ended up grinning like idiots and covered in sweat. I had a great time. I think I might do it again."

"With the waitress?"

"Oh, I sort of have to really," he said. "If only because of her name."

I looked blank.

"It's Sally," he said. "You know, 'When Harry Met...'"

"I've heard it," I said and left him, still grinning, to search out Rick.

I found him in his office. I was clutching the version of the script that I already had. "How are we going to set this up then?" I asked as we sat together. "You've seen the script. We need to get the girls looking presentable and showing themselves off to best advantage."

"Well, I've made a start," said Rick. "I've put a small team together to help. You've not really seen much of the Prep Centre staff yet have you?"

I shook my head.

Rick continued. "The Prep Centre isn't just about basic slave conditioning. I also try to get the merchandise into a condition so it can get a better price when it gets up to Brian's Sales Centre. We need to help the girls to look good and they need to be healthy too. They get quite a lot of physical mistreatment as part of their training but there's nothing worse than a scrawny, bruised body on the auction block."

"Well, I've only seen the guards. I hadn't realised there were any other staff."

"Not staff as such," Rick smiled. "More sort of slaves. Well, not 'sort of' really."

"Silly of me," I said. "Freddie wouldn't want to pay for that sort of thing would he?"

"Uh-huh," said Rick shaking his head. "Very careful with his pennies, our Mr Clegg. Come and look in here, I've got the team together." He opened the door of his office, walked across the corridor and unlocked the door to one of the Prep centre cells. As the door opened six girls, all dressed in identical, white, button-through, short sleeved, dresses, got to their feet, turned towards us and bowed their heads.

I looked around the cell. It was quite an improvement on the conditions that the merchandise had to put up with. There were two couches, a couple of arm chairs, two low tables. In one corner of the room there was a television. A pile of DVD's stood beside it. On one of the tables was a heap of magazines.

"My training team," said Rick. "Carry on girls." They went back to what they had been doing before our arrival. One was busy working on the make up of another, a third was trying to create for a girl with long dark hair a particularly elaborate hairstyle modelled on a photograph in one of the magazines. Another sat cross legged on the floor in front of the TV watching a group of girls working out in a fitness video. "Now let's see," Rick went on, pointing out each of the girls in turn. "These two are our beauticians. This one is a qualified hair stylist; her guinea pig here is a choreographer. That one is a physical training instructor – she'd been a personal trainer in her local gym, now she's making sure our merchandise is fit for purpose. And that one," he pointed to the last of the girls sat reading on the couch, "that one was a medical student. Now she provides nursing services for the group. They have an easier life as long as they do what we ask of them. They're excused rape – though I don't mind if they want to get it on with any of the team willingly – and you can see their work cell is quite comfortable. We give them the stuff they need to keep up to date on their field of work. Plus their overnight accommodation is better too; sheets on the beds, lighter weight restraints, stuff like that. OK?"

"Yes fine," I said, "and have they got started with the cast yet? Oh rats!" I cursed as my mobile phone started to ring. It was the Kalinin. I felt obliged to take it.

"Ah, Larry, so pleased to have caught you," he said. "I wanted you to know that the shipment you organised for me has arrived in Kushtia."

"Good, good," I responded. "I hope you are satisfied with the goods."

"Yes, indeed," said the Kalinin lapsing into the oblique terminology that we all used when using telephones. "The upholstery is quite up to our expectations and the pieces are all of most acceptable quality. Very good for the year of manufacture in every case."

"Well, I am glad you are pleased I hope that these items are soon gracing the bedrooms of your Councillors."

"They are already, Mister Larry, they are all ready. And providing great comfort to all, I am very sure. The Councillors will find them a very appropriate gift, I will achieve my aims. Oh yes and the other piece, the one in ebony; most unusual for Kushtia."

He was talking about Alessa.

"I've decided to keep that for myself. Not such a well aged piece as the other items but I think with time it will prove excellent. Let me say how much I appreciate your generosity with the ebony piece."

I'd included Alessa as a complementary. Well, after all the Kalinin had taken 11 pieces from us, it seemed only reasonable to make up the round dozen. She'd have been furious if she'd known she was a freebie of course. After all, the woman has her pride.

"Now one more thing. I have a friend that I think you can help. A Mr Hannani. He will call you. He has my personal recommendation to you as you have to him. That is the way we like to do business in Kushtia. I am sure you can help him. I have told him of all the wonderful things you have done for my son and myself. Oh yes, I should say my son's five piece suite is still proving most comfortable. He is hardly ever off of one of the couches or chairs."

The Kalinin's use of the furniture metaphor was getting stretched but I was pleased he was so satisfied. "Thank you, your highness," I said, "I hope that they are proving to be sufficiently hard wearing," I heard him chortle, "and we will do all we can to help Mr Hananni. Thank you for recommending us."

"Not at all. It is all I can do." He said his goodbyes and hung up.

I apologised to Rick and returned to the matter in hand. "Sorry. Are they working with the cast yet?"

"Yes," said Rick, "They had their first class with them this morning to get them set for a training session this afternoon. We can see how things are going, if you like."

"Sounds good to me." I followed Rick out of the cell and he locked the door. He showed the way to a cell with a large open area. Inside it six women, faces immaculately made up, hair carefully coiffured, wearing nothing but their lingerie were walking slowly around in a circle. A girl in a white button through dress was standing to one side calling instructions. Three guards were sat in a corner of the room playing cards. "Head up ladies, posture is everything," called the girl in the white dress, "shoulders back, please, and chests out, remember you have to show your assets off to their best advantage. And smile please, always remember to smile. Now step out. From the hips and one and two and one and two. That's better. Good. Wait! Stop! 317 – you're out of step. I've told you before. You must keep in step."

One of the guards put his hand of cards down slowly, got his feet and walked across to the group.

"Alright, 317," he said. "Take off the bra."

The offender whimpered but slowly complied, dropping the garment into the middle of the circle where it joined a small pile of underwear. The guard went back to his seat and the girls started off again. "It's all part of the training programme," Rick explained. "They make a mistake, they lose one item of clothing, if one of them ends up naked she gets beaten, if they all lose more than ten pieces, they all get beaten." Rick turned to the guard. "How many is that now?"

"Six, boss," the Guard answered. The girls had gone into a huddle. 317 was coming under pressure from the others. "That's your fourth item, you're going to get us all thrashed. We're going to be beaten just because you're not paying attention," one said.

"It's not my fault," 317 responded don't the edge of tears. "I've never done anything like this. I am trying really."

"She is you know – and you lost your robe when you missed your footing on those heels. And I lost mine when I wasn't standing up straight."

"Yes but that was only once. She's lost her robe, both gloves and now her bra."

"Yeah, I'm not going to get beaten because she can't keep in step."

"All of you, back in your circle," the woman in white called. "Start again, heads up, chests out, think elegance, smile and step out. Step out. No! No! No! 317 again! You're still out of step."

The guard went across again. "Now the girdle," he said. "I hope you're all looking forward to your beating." The four that had been attacking her looked furious, the one that had defended her was looking worried too. The four of them were murmuring under their breath until the guard told them to shut up.

"Start again," the woman in white called. This time they managed to continue for a few more circuits. Before she called a halt. "335, you are not smiling. That is absolutely not acceptable. I've explained it all enough times now."

335 added her robe to the pile. Rick spoke a few words quietly to the woman in white. She looked pale and put her hands up to her mouth. Rick came back to join me. "Come on, let's go," he said. "They're going to be at this for a while. I just told her that if the girls get beaten she'll join them."

I walked by the training room a little later on. All six girls and their trainer were strapped down, bent over a low beam with their arses pointing skyward. Two of the guards were making their selection of whips from a rack on the wall. Interestingly I noticed that 317 still had her stockings, shoes and garter belt on. She'd only lost one more item while the girl that had been criticising her had managed to lose everything but her panties. "There you go," I thought. "It doesn't do to criticise too soon."

Chapter 23 : Couch Potatoes

The training was finished, the script was finished. The first version of the video was shot. It was time to show it to Clegg.

Clegg sat back in his arm chair opposite the big video projection screen. "OK," he said, "let's see it."

I sat in the chair alongside him and hit 'play' on the remote. The Clegg logo span around in the middle of the screen and then dissolved to show a helpless girl in a car boot. A girl standing with her hands chained over her head followed, then another shot of a girl bound helplessly and pushed into a crate. Then the scene switched to an office. The camera panned around to face a woman, seated behind a desk. It zoomed in on her face showing her wide smile. In her mid forties, with big hair and a suit jacket with shoulder pads thick enough to land a helicopter on, she looked like she had stepped out of 1985. "Hi," she said. "I'm Angie Dennison. You'll remember my hit 80's show 'Miami Detective'. Quite a few of our dramas dealt with ladies in distress. Even me sometimes!" She laughed. "Nothing in that series compares with what happens these days. Just watch..."

I could see Clegg was leaning forward appreciatively. "How the devil did you get [i] her[/i] to introduce this? And what on earth does she think she's compèring?"

I let the video keep running.

The picture on the screen dissolved to the auction room in the Sales Centre. Angie's voice continued. "What will be the fate of girls like these?" As the picture came into focus five women could be seen sitting on the stage. Each was perched on a tall bar stool and wore a low cut dress with a short tight skirt. They all sat identically, hands clasped in their laps. They all wore the collars and number tags that marked them out as victims of Clegg's snatch squads.

The voice of a man off screen said, "Number 302 come forward please." The first of the girls climbed down from her stool and walked towards the front of the stage, teetering on high heels and making effort to walk gracefully in a skirt that was both too tight and too short for comfort. "302, your details please."

The girl looked to one side, obviously towards the voice that was directing her. "Your details, please," the voice repeated. She turned back towards the camera.

"I'm twenty one years old, a trainee accountant from Maidenhead in England. My measurements are 34, 23, 35. I'm 5 feet six inches tall and weigh 113 pounds. In my new life I could be your very personal assistant, because you see, as well as having a head for figures I know how to make use of my own." She reached behind her, obviously unzipping her dress. She shrugged off the shoulder straps and let the dress fall to the floor. "Wouldn't this make going over the month-end numbers more interesting?" she said, slipping the bra strap from her right shoulder, smiling at the camera and running her tongue across her lips.

"Thank you 302," the voice said. "Please put your hands behind your back." She did as asked. "Now tell us a little more about yourself, please."

"I've recently completed the first year of an accountancy course which I passed. I play sports at weekends - I'm part of a women's hockey team - and I exercise regularly. I'm, I'm," she hesitated.

"Go on, 302, the voice urged.

"I'm not particularly sexually experienced with either men or women but I have learned many of the basic skills during my initial training here and I'm sure I will be able to satisfy any prospective buyer in that area."

"Thank you very much, 302. Please take your seat." She walked back towards her stool. "Number 317, please."

The second girl came forward, her dress no less revealing than that of her predecessor, her heels no less high, her walk made slightly easier by the hip-high slit in her skirt. "Your details please, 317." The girl stared at the source of the voice. "Go on." She shook her head and held her face in her hands. "Go on, 317. I am sure you wish to be cooperative. You will remember how important this is for you. Do as you have been instructed." The girl bit her lip, looking from side to side. "Go on!" the voice barked. "Your age, your measurements, your weight, your skills. Continue!"

Slowly, the girl began. "I'm, uh, twenty three years old, from a small village in Oxfordshire, England. I am, I was a secretary for a firm of lawyers in Oxford. My, measurements are 38, 25, 36. I'm five feet three inches tall and weigh 120 pounds. I could be your very personal secretary," she was looking at the floor now, "and I am sure you'll want to take the law into your own hands."

"Look up, 317," the voice ordered.

The girl appeared to pull herself together. "I'm a competent typist and I can handle most office administration. I like to go clubbing, I'm a good dancer and I'm good to watch." She unfastened the front of her dress and took it off. She was clearly a little fatter and less fit than the first girl but her bigger breasts would be attractive to many. "I've had about twelve lovers, all but two of them men. You'll find that I am sexually skilled with both my mouth and my hands."

"Thank you 317, that was better," the voice said. "Now please give us a smile and return to your seat."

The girl did so.

The picture dissolved again to Angie Dennison. "Abduction, kidnapping, white slavery. Whatever you call it, these girls will have a whole new life." The picture returned to the auction room.

The girls were back on their stools, dressed quite differently, still wearing their collars and tags but now all gagged. The voice spoke again. "Girls, now you have the opportunity to demonstrate your skills for your potential new owners. Number 323, please."

A woman wearing a smart business suit, hat and gloves, stepped forward.

"Now, 323, you told us you were the sales manager for a packaging company. You also claimed you were used to using your charms on both your customers and your colleagues. Perhaps you can demonstrate that to us now?"

Music started and the girl looked straight into the camera. She struck a pose, hands on hips, head back. As the beat of the music picked up she began a sensuous striptease. Peeling her gloves off with the assistance of her teeth, she unbuttoned her jacket and trailed it behind her as she walked across the stage. She returned square to the camera and started to unbutton her blouse, bumping her hips as she did so. Her blouse followed her jacket to the floor of the stage, with her skirt and slip soon after. She spent longer parading herself in her underwear before removing her bra, stockings, shoes and finally panties.

The music faded. "Thank you, 323," the voice said. "Return to your seat." The camera zoomed in on the face of 323 as she stooped to collect her clothes. The camera caught the girl flushed with the effort of her dance; the beads of sweat, the drool from the gag and the streaks of mascara across her face.

"And now, 331, our student from Cardiff." The voice spoke once more. "Now you said you enjoyed amateur dramatics and your last performance was in 'Flower Drum Song.' So, let's see what your buyer can expect from you." A slight looking girl walked onto the stage wearing a short, blue silk cheong-sam, holding her hands palm to palm in front of her. She fell to her knees at the front of the stage and bowed her head to the floor. Then she lifted her head to show the bright blue ball that filled her mouth as a gag. She was swaying from side to side as she stayed on her knees in front of the camera. She smiled and got to her feet, ripping the fastening of her dress open and stepping out of it before going into an acrobatic dance routine that ended with a flying cartwheel and a splits landing, her face only inches from the camera.

The source of the voice could be heard applauding from off stage. "Impressive, 331, impressive. Thank you." She picked up her dress and threw it over her shoulder triumphantly before skipping off stage.

The image of Angie Dennison returned to the screen again. "But that's all in the future. Why are they here? How did their luck run out?" The screen split, Angie's face still in one part seeming to watch the other where the camera was close-up on another gagged girl, her face filling the rest of the screen. A hand off screen unfastened the gag and pulled the ball from her mouth.

"My number is 335, I was acquired for an owner in Sarawak. He wants a new slave to teach his others the skills of western cooking. I was working in a small restaurant when I was approached by one of our customers who said he was looking for a new chef. I agreed to prepare a meal for him and his friends to demonstrate my skills. They ate the meal and pronounced themselves satisfied. One of them produced a gun, the others tied me up and forced me into a car. I have learned some other skills and I leave for Sarawak tomorrow."

She was followed by an athletic looking blonde. Again the camera zoomed in on her face as her gag was removed. "My number is 342. I was acquired for an owner in Surinam. He wants a slave to run a fitness regime for his wives. I was a personal trainer. I was out jogging with one of my clients. I enjoyed working out with him; he had been seeing me for two months. We had jogged our route many times before. I felt quite safe with him of course. But the last time, as we jogged past a van, I was grabbed, pulled inside, bound and gagged. My client has now been seeing to my training. He has been teaching me skills that he tells me I will need in Surinam. They have the money for me now, they say. I am being shipped on Friday."

Each of the others turned up in their own screen split in turn. "Acquired for an owner in Sinkiang", "an owner in Kachin", "to do the administration of his businesses", "to teach his slaves English", "to join his breeding slaves".

The slaves faded out. Angie's face filled the screen. The camera pulled back, She was sitting in a large arm chair smiling directly at the camera. "So, there you have it - we'll listen to what you want. And we'll see that you get it." The picture froze as text scrolled across the screen, "Clegg Enterprises offers a custom service in slave acquisition, finding exactly the right property to meet your needs. We'd like to talk to you about how we can help." The picture faded to black.

I turned up the lights, peering at Clegg anxiously. He broke into a broad smile. "First class!" He exclaimed. "First class! Angie Dennison, good grief. Brings back fond memories of adolescent television viewing. For some of the older guys it's The Avengers, for me it was Miami Detective. How did you get her to do that?"

"Well, we weren't entirely honest," I said. "Here watch this - it's the video footage we shot of her doing the 'come-on' advertisement that we told her we were making to attract sponsors for a new series."

I started the video player again. On came a shot of Angie in the armchair talking directly to the camera. "Can we get on with this? Jeez you guys are slow. I've worked with real film crews you know - MGM, UA, Touchstone, ..." A voice from someone off camera says quietly, "RKO." "What was that?" said Angie but she was interrupted by a clapper board appearing. "Scene 105, take 14, mark!"

Angie composes herself instantly, smiles and continues, "Hello. I'm Angie Dennison. You'll remember my hit 80's show 'Miami Detective'. Quite a few of our dramas dealt with ladies in distress. Even me sometimes! But nothing in that series compares with what happens these days. Just watch..."

"This is a new series of Miami Detective for the new century. It will be must see viewing just the way the 1980's series was. But now there are new crimes to combat. Abduction, kidnapping, white slavery. Whatever you call it, these girls will have a whole new life. But that's all in the future. Why are they here? How did their luck run out? What will be the fate of girls like these?"

"Each episode of Miami Detective '06 will follow the fortunes of one victim of crime and how the perpetrators are brought to justice."

"I'll be there too. You'll see me again as 'Salty' Anders – Captain Anders this time – and no doubt I'll get into some scrapes too. But here's the trick and this is what makes Miami Detective '06 different. Miami Detective '06 will work with viewers. We'll listen to what viewers want each week on our web site. Viewers will directly affect the story lines. We'll listen to what they want. And we'll see that they get it. Just like Miami Detective in the '80's every episode will feature some of the most attractive young actresses around. Your company could be one of the lead sponsors on this show and help shape the story lines too. So, there you have it - we'll listen to what you want. And we'll see that you get it. I'm proud to be a part of Miami Detective '06 – I hope you will be too."

"Cut," another voice called. "That's fine Angie. We'll use that one. Great."

"About fucking time," Angie's scowl showed itself through her botox frozen forehead. "I've been pissed around all morning. Fuck know how you guys will make a series if you get the funding."

I turned the video off. "Marvellous what you can do with a bit of editing," I said.

"First rate job," Clegg enthused. "Shame you didn't tell me you were shooting. I'd have liked to have met her. Liked to have more than met, if I'm honest."

"I'm glad you said that," I said getting to my feet. Clegg looked puzzled. I opened the door to Clegg's office. Harry was outside as agreed. Without saying anything he wrestled a woman into the room.

Clegg got to his feet. "Angie Dennison!" he roared in a combination of recognition and approval. "Well I'm certainly delighted to meet you."

"Hmgh," Angie grunted into her gag. We had dressed her in as close to the costume from the '80's series as we could get. We'd got a blue short sleeved uniform shirt and tie, with the Miami Police insignia and a straight black skirt. We'd even managed the regulation handcuffs – even if they were locked around her wrists. They'd gone in for over the mouth gags in the original series so in deference to that Angie was wearing a scarf across her mouth. Of course her mouth was packed with foam and taped shut underneath it – there are limits to authenticity. I wasn't keen to be around when Clegg took her gag off; I'd had enough of an ear bending from Angie when she found out what we had planned for her after filming the promo.

"We'll leave you to get acquainted" I said.

"Thank you very much Larry. And by the way – I think you've proved your point about the value of matching what we do to what the customer's want – I'd have paid a great deal for this. We'll talk about what you want to do with the video at some other point."

I grinned and waved to the pair of them as I made to leave.

"Oh," said Clegg, "by the way. What happened to that red-head of Harry's?"

I looked him straight in the eye. "I shot some footage with her but it didn't really fit in when we came to cut the final version," I said honestly, waving another disk. "I can let you see it if you like."

"No," said Freddie, "not a problem. I just wondered."

Yes, I thought to myself and I wonder what you'd have said if I hadn't done anything with her.

Chapter 24 : Sebastian's Web

I'd left the City offices and gone back up to the Prep Centre. I needed to talk to the IT folk about the other part of my plans. As usual there was a problem finding a parking place with Clegg Meat Products trucks all over the place.

Eventually I managed to squeeze the car in and headed into the building. "I've got an appointment," I said to the receptionist. "Sebastian in IT?"

"Sure," she said, punching a number into her phone. She spoke into the mouthpiece, "Seb? Visitor for you." She put the handset down and turned back towards me. "He'll be over in a minute. Take a seat."

I'd barely the chance to thank her before a figure appeared through the door from the admin areas. He looked like Murdoc from Gorillaz. It ain't a great look, even if you're a cartoon, but he seemed friendly enough. "Hi," he said, "you'd be Larry."

"Yeah, hi. Have you got something to show me?"

"Sure," he said, "come on through and meet the team." He showed me through, back along corridors I'd seen when I'd first visited the Prep Centre. We got to a door. It had a card pinned to it, 'Seb's Harem'. Sebastian stopped. "Just before we go in, let me explain a couple of things. All the team I've got working on this are pick-ups, not staff. They all think they're working their tickets too – Do a good job and the bonus is a free pass out of here. It isn't true, of course but it's a hell of an incentive."

"OK," I said, "sounds like good use of resources to me."

"Like your style, man," Seb said and opened the door.

I saw what they meant by the sign on the door. The team was six girls, not one of them could have been over twenty years old. They all wore mini kilts in different tartans, they all wore white shirts, some of them tucked into the waist bands of their kilts, some loose, one with her midriff bare and the shirt knotted up under her tits. They all wore thin, straight, black ties, some knotted up to their throats, most loose showing beneath the collars that were routinely put on when pick ups were booked in to the Prep Centre.

I looked appreciatively as they busied themselves at their tasks. "I like your style too," I said.

"Well," said Seb, "I guess it's a bit of an indulgence but a man's got to give in to his enthusiasms. Come over here, I'll give you a demo – the site that is, not the girls," he grinned. "214," he called and one of the girls turned towards us. It was Jackie. She didn't appear to recognise me. "Show us the site, please."

Jackie slid between us and sat down at the keyboard. A few taps brought up a web site in her browser window. "OK," said Seb, "this is the entry portal, it's a pretty ordinary BDSM photo and video gallery site. All the usual membership features, forums, all that sort of stuff. This bits not finished yet but it'll do for now. To get beyond this you need a security token and some souped-up encryption software which Jackie here has developed and when you're in you get this..."

The page was headed up, "Larry Ross – My Control Centre". Underneath were panels headed up "My Projects", "News", "Catalogue", "Search & Snatch"

"Let's deal with the easy ones first, said Seb. "The 'News' section is pretty self explanatory – they can get details of forthcoming auctions, special offers and so forth, we'd feature videos of the prize items in upcoming sales and they can select live web cams of particular cells to view lots as well. The section headed up 'Catalogue' is just a list of any of the stock that we have on hand at any one time with photos and the key details about them. There are sort options so they can view the catalogue by age, height, racial characteristics, colour of hair and so on. We can also put up a series of video clips for each of them too. I thought we might have a sort of rotating view as standard, a short interview and then anything that showed off particular skills."

"Fine," I said, "that sounds pretty much like what I had in mind. What about the other areas?"

"Well, you know you said people wanted to feel we were solving their problems, meeting their specific needs. The other two areas are meant to deal with just that. Look at this. I've mocked it up on the basis of your last few projects."

I looked at the 'My Projects Area'; there was a short list: 'Kalinin's Son Project'; 'Kalinin's Councillor's Project'; 'Clegg Video Project'. Jackie clicked on the link to the 'Kalinin's Son Project'.

"Buyers can set these up themselves," said Seb. They fill in a requirements form. They can get at a copy of that through here. Our progress reports and video footage – surveillance for example – gets published through here. They can feed-back on specifics as they see how things are going and using this we'd get their OK before any pick up. That should mean we have less redundant stock – we quite often pick up a girl for a specification and discover later that she doesn't quite fit in some way; then she's back in here for resale at whatever we can get for her."

"Right, right. I could see that working. What about the 'Search & Snatch' area?"

"Now that's the bit that's really clever, thanks to my little team of lovelies here," he gestured at the girls who had all gathered round to watch. "This is really intended to open up the buyers mind to the opportunities out there. Try it yourself."

Jackie got up and let me take her place. I clicked on the Search & Snatch button. Up popped a form. Down one side was listed a series of links under the heading 'My Saved Searches' with the unpromising titles of 'Test 1'; 'Test 2', 'Test Search Blondes' and so on. In the middle of the form was an array of tick boxes. At the top it said, "Search & Snatch : Explore our on-line database of a wide range of possible UK products. Search on the basis of your choices. Choose those that you think you would like to own. Clegg Enterprises will provide a customised quote for acquisition and delivery." I looked more closely at the tick boxes. One provided for age ranges, one for colour of hair, one for racial type, one for skills and qualifications, one for height another for weight and so on.

"Go on," said Seb, "try it."

I found myself thinking of Rebecca. Suppose I'd been looking for someone like her. I ticked a number of boxes; 26-30, English / British, 5 foot 4 inches, 110 – 120 pounds, blonde, flight attendant." I hit the "search" button – it occurred to me after that 'submit' would hardly have been appropriate.

I'm not sure what I expected but I certainly hadn't expected the response, 'List Mode. Your search has found 124 entries. These are listed below by name. To select an alternative order click here. To refine your search please return to the previous page. To see this search in display mode click here. To save these search criteria in My Searches click here.' Beneath the text at the top of the screen was a long list of names. I scrolled down. Sure enough there was 'Hales, Rebecca'. I clicked on the link up came a page with Rebecca's details and a photograph which looked as though it had come from her Atlantic Airlines personnel file. Under 'Employment' it said; 'Last known employer 01/06 : Atlantic Airlines'. I went back to the previous page and tried clicking on 'Display Mode'. The same list appeared but now with a short summary of each person and a thumbnail picture alongside.

"Extraordinary!" I exclaimed, "how can you possibly have all those on file?"

Seb grinned. "Tell him Jacqueline," he said. "This has been your contribution."

Jackie turned around in her chair. "The data comes from a number of sources. We haven't built a database here. We plant a small programme, a virus I guess you'd call it, on the servers of certain companies. Then when we do a search we poll each of those servers. Our virus does a search on that database and sends the results back. The system at this end collates the results, combines data for similar looking responses and presents it to the user. Easy."

"Easy," I said. "But what are the target systems? I still don't understand how you're getting the data."

Seb butted in. "Come on," he said, "you used to be in the software business. What proportion of companies uses standard software packages?"

"Pretty much all of them these days, I guess. For some parts of business people still develop their own programmes but generally it's not worth while."

"So for personnel, HR, say?"

"No, you wouldn't bother developing something customised. It's going to be far cheaper to buy a package or use a service."

"Exactly. So what we've done is to develop a virus that works with the five or six HR database packages that make up about 90% of the installed systems. Then Jackie here has managed to load that virus on virtually all of the major temp and executive placement agencies and a few of the major employers too. We reckon we can get access to around 250,000 records relating to women between the ages of 18 and 40 say; anyone who is on their books or has applied for a job via an agency. They're supposed to clean off old data but none of them do."

"But the photographs?"

"They all do that now. Take a digital photo at the interview, stick it on the file. We strip the photo out just like any other data. The systems ought to have sufficient security to stop anything like this but most of these guys have pretty sloppy security and even the people that do have good systems – the banks say – their focus is on keeping you out of financial applications not the HR stuff."

"And as long as their security doesn't spot us we can go on querying their data."

"That's it. And actually what we do is to keep a copy of the results for each query so that even if a system does go off-line in the future we'll have built up a lot of data of our own."

"Fantastic! The customer gets to choose from an enormous shopping list and we got quite a lot of data on which to go back to them with a quote to collect and supply quite quickly. We shouldn't need to collect speculatively for auction at all."

I was really pleased with the work that Sebastian and his team had done. I wanted to check it out with some customers, of course but it looked to me like we had a solid basis for a really innovative approach.

I went back to town to try and catch Freddie. I certainly wanted his OK before talking to any of the existing customers and besides I hoped he would help out at the event I had in mind. I was sat in my office starting to sketch out the programme when a knock at the door disturbed me. I looked up.

Normally the arrival in my office of a raven haired, blue eyed, woman with legs up to her armpits and a suit with tailoring so sharp you could cut yourself on it would be greeted with considerable enthusiasm. On this occasion, though, my pleasure was tempered by wariness. This was Ellie, Elspeth Grant – the head of Clegg’s legal department and according to most office gossip, Clegg’s long term partner in matters carnal. In fact, as far as I knew, she was Clegg’s only interest outside of his work. As a legal eagle she had a lot going for her, fine feathers and the sharpest of talons.

“Mr Ross,” she said extending a perfectly manicured hand towards me.

I reached forward and shook it carefully. Someone had advised me once to count my fingers after shaking hands with a lawyer; from what I’d heard about Elly I shouldn’t make an exception for her. “Indeed,” I said. “What can I do for you, Ms Grant?” I was hoping she wasn’t about to basll me out for setting Freddie up with Angie Dennison.

“Oh, please, it’s Ellie,” she smiled. I wasn’t sure whether I needed to be encouraged by the familiarity or not. “Freddie suggested I had a word with you.”

“Fine,” I said, still wary. “Take a seat.”

She sat down in one of the chairs beside the coffee table. “I thought you ought to get a briefing on what we do in Legal,” she said. “After all, I can imagine that some of things you’re doing might need our help.”

“Fair enough,” I said, “I hadn’t really thought about it. I guess that since to the best of my knowledge most of what we do is outside the law, your team’s main job was keeping the law out of everybody’s way.”

Ellie smiled tolerantly. “Well, there is that,” she said. “I do have a small team of girls to keep some of those who might cause us problems ‘on side’ so to speak. You needn’t worry about that though. Just think about it as part of FCE’s central services – canteen, mail room, photocopying, girls to shag the commissioner of police – it’s all the same thing.”

“You sound like you don’t feel appreciated.”

“Hmm, maybe,” she smiled, surprised that anyone should seem sympathetic. “You’re right, though. Freddie’s always been supportive but I don’t think many people see the value of what we do. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you about contracts.”

“For the girls?”

Ellie laughed. “Oh no, of course not. They’d have no standing in English law. You can’t make a contract under duress and I fear that most of our products are under duress in one way or another. We do have some legal cover in that area. It’s all a little complicated; there were some oversights when the anti-slavery acts were passed in the nineteenth century but I won’t bore you with that. I’m not sure how well it would play in the courts if it came to it. We ought to win in the Crown Court, the Court of Appeal and the House of Lords here but if the European Court of Human Rights stuck its oar in then I think we’d have difficulty. No, we’re better off steering clear of contracts for the girls, I’d say.”

I must have looked relieved. I was. She went on, “It’s contracts for the clients that I’m concerned about. We have a standard sale agreement that covers purchase at auction, warranties, transfer of entitlement to goods, payment terms, standard disclaimers, that sort of thing. The Sale of Goods Act 1979 and the Sale and Supply of Goods to Consumers regulations 2002 apply, you see. Goods have to be “as described” and “of merchantable quality and fit for the purpose they are intended for”. That’s usually OK, Harry and Rick take a lot of trouble to make sure the end product is as expected and as long as we don’t get too carried away with the descriptions in the catalogues we are fine. For buyers at auction it’s only different if the goods are second hand. I’m not sure how it would relate to some of the things you’re planning with the account management programme though.”

I must have looked puzzled. “I’m not sure I see how it’s different,” I said. “We just end up with a sale at the end, same as at auction legally, I’d have thought. What sort of thing are you worried about?”

“There has to be a question of title to the goods in the period between collection and transfer to the client. Normally title remains with us to the point of auction but where a client is commissioning a collection – that’s your usual model isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Pretty much from a legal point of view.”

“Where the client is commissioning we should be careful to have a service contract that covers the research and collection phases. We’d want to ensure that any costs incurred are recoverable in the event of the client deciding not to proceed and that title remains with us until the client takes delivery and concludes a final sale agreement.”

“Sounds reasonable. Do we need one of those every time we engage with a client?”

“No, that’s not necessary. We could come up with a standard managed account agreement if you like. Then we can simply add schedules to it covering individual projects, the specification of the product involved, agreed pre-collection activities and so on.”

“Sounds reasonable. We could add something similar to the website user’s agreement too. Not that anyone ever reads them!”

“None the less binding!” she said with a grin. “Harry’s team may like cable ties, rope and straps but I’ll stick with contracts.” She got to her feet, looking at her watch. “Well thank you for that Larry,” she said, bringing our discussion to a close abruptly. “I’ll drop you a note on the things we need to do. Freddie said you’d be all right about it. Thanks.”

And with that she left. I still had all my fingers. I thought it had gone all right.

I went down to see Rachel. She'd done a good job with the video and I thought that she deserved a thank you at the very least. I'd kept my part of the bargain and told the guards she was off-limits. She'd kept hers. No more stupid escape attempts and the script she had produced was fine. I opened the door to her cell. She looked up at me from her seat beside the table we had given her for her computer. Mind you the table was bolted down. So was the computer. A light chain ran from her ankle to a ring in the wall. The guards have given her some clothes, a loose sweater and a skirt. They hadn't let her have any shoes. She still wore her collar but she wasn't gagged. Even so, she didn't say anything. Most of her cuts and bruises had healed up, but she didn't look great.

"I came to say thanks for the script," I said. "It worked well."

"Terrific," she replied sullenly. "What happens to me now? Is this when you come to collect? Or do I just get put back on the available list again and sold off when someone comes along and asks for a piece of meat that can spell properly?" She was staring down at the table.

I sat down at the other side of the table facing her. "I need some more stuff written," I said.

She looked up, tired, desolate and silent.

"I need a brochure and some case studies. How we've helped our clients that sort of thing."

"Fuck off," she said. "Why should I help you? Why make it more likely that you'll trap more girls like me?"

"Because you're here. And the alternatives aren't good."

"Fuck off."

I looked across at her. She was staring down at the keyboard of the computer. It wasn't going to work, I decided. She'd been broken down by the rapes but there hadn't been anything put in its place. I'd spoken to Rick before I came to see her. He thought he might be able to do sufficient orientation on her to fix things. Enough to get her compliant but still able to write. I'd hoped that I wouldn't have to put her through it but I could see that she wasn't about to become more pliant without a lot of work by someone; and at least Rick's team was trained to do it. I got up and walked to the door. Two of the guards were waiting. I beckoned them in. Rachel looked up terrified that she was about to be raped again. She wasn't. It would be much worse than that.

"Sorry Rachel," I said to her; and then, to the Guards, "Take her down to Orientation. There's a programme set up for her."

The taller of the two guards grabbed her by the arms and pulled her to her feet. He jerked her wrists upwards and over her head to fasten her wrist cuffs to the back of her neck collar. The other wedged a gag into her mouth before she could protest. They unfastened her ankle chain from the ring in the wall and hustled her, struggling against them, out of the cell. I wouldn't be seeing her for a while.

Chapter 25 : Quest for the Questors

"The question is, can you do it?"

Word, it seemed was getting around about the willingness of Clegg Enterprises to take on apparently difficult projects. Peter Hananni was the latest of a series of individuals that had appeared with a range of challenges to Clegg's research and snatch teams.

"I was put on to you by a mutual friend. The Kalinin of Kushtia? He indicated that you had been able to help him out with some of his requirements."

"Yes," I said. "The Kalinin is a valued client of ours. I am pleased he speaks well of us. He said you would call." I wasn't clear how Hananni and the Kalinin were connected. Hananni looked to be of north African origin, Egyptian or Libyan possibly, I thought. He sported a style in dress and personal jewellery that left no one in doubt of the material success his business endeavours had achieved.

"He does indeed but as I said, the question is, can you do this?" He smiled. He had almost as much gold in his mouth as on his knuckles.

"Well, Mr Hananni, I won't give you an answer off the cuff. Give me a week and I'll come back to you with a proposal or a no-can-do. I am sure you realise that this is going to need some level of ingenuity to execute."

"Of course, Mr Ross," said Hananni, disarmingly, "That's why the Kalinin suggested I talk to you. And why Mr Ross, I am most keen that you should handle this personally."

'This' was on the face of it a fairly demanding project. Hananni had a new business venture in hand; a game in which players gambled on the one to emerge victorious from a labyrinth of problems, dangers and other competitors. The game would be staged on a remote island. The competition was to be based on a popular computer game in which four buxom adventuresses strive to find the fabled Jewels of Nefertiti. My client's request was quite simple he wanted us to supply the Jewel Questors; the actual Jewel Questors; the characters that the game was based on.

The only problem was that, for the first time since I'd joined Clegg, the Research team had drawn a blank.

Derek Johnson in the Research Centre was looking glum. "Larry, I'd like to help but I don't see how we can. I'll tell you what we've got but it isn't much."

I wasn't that happy with the prospect of going back to the client and saying 'no can do' but I let him go on.

"Jewel Questors is developed and published by NRT Games. They're a British company and their development takes place here in the UK. They've controlled the franchise very tightly, hardly any merchandising of the characters, no spin offs at all. If you want to get into the game, you have to buy the game. It's been the most successful NRT product but Jewel Questors III – The Amarna Ring didn't get the greatest of reviews. Their competitive edge was that they use very accurate physical modelling for the animation and personality modelling for the interactions and responses and they did this by using four real individuals as the basis for their programming. I understand that it is these individuals that your client is keen to acquire?"

I nodded.

"The problem is that no-one know exactly who they are. The legends on the message boards say that they are NRT employees who were working in their development team when the game was devised. It's also reckoned that the company paid to have breast augmentation surgery so that they would better match the interests of the game's target players."

"Adolescent males of any age?"

"Uh huh. So the four women that are used to model the game characters and who do the very, very few, personal appearances have never spoken publicly and we haven't been able to find out who they are. We've been watching the company offices but seen no sign of them"

"So is there anything known on the company that would help?"

"Not much. It's a private limited company so they don't have to give out much apart from publishing accounts which don't really tell us much. All we do know is that the second largest, shareholder, one of the founders and the Development Director is this lady." He tossed a grainy photograph, obviously a blow up from a telephoto shot, across the desk. "Helen Stanhope, 43 and as far as we can tell the only person that has direct involvement with the Questors. She's there at any event where the Questors do appear and it's only ever her that's there from the company."

"OK, maybe some sort of in, there."

"Well maybe, but she's going to be difficult to get at. She's more of a geek than her team is. Home – work – home; lives in an apartment in an old mansion that's been renovated, trouble is the place is stiff with CCTV – and yes we've seen if we can crack it and the answer is no – and security. Seems like she's one nervous lady. But maybe that's what working on these games does for you."

It wasn't looking hopeful. I was groping around for some leverage. "Husband? Boyfriend? Girlfriend? Kids? Aged aunt?"

"Not that we've found. She divorced about twenty years ago, no kids; parents died about five years back in a car crash; doesn't look like she has a social life outside the office or inside it either." I was feeling glummer by the minute. "There is however, this." He tossed me another photo.

The woman in the picture was in her mid twenties. She looked like a younger version of Helen. "Sister?" I said.

"Yeah," said Derek. "Andromeda Stanhope."

"Andromeda? What was with their parents? Too many holidays in Greece?"

"There are some limits even to the capabilities of the Research Team, Ross," said Derek, investing his remarks with all the pomposity of Q admonishing James Bond. But then he grinned. "We've no idea. But it would appear that younger sister is both accessible and a potential lever. She and big sis don't meet up much but they do exchange emails every day, sometimes four of five times a day."

"Is that healthy?"

"Who knows but it could mean that if anything untoward were to happen to little sister then big sister might be willing to help us to get access to the Questors. It's about the only shot we've found so far."

"Well we only need one. Do you want to do a bit more research on Andromeda, talk it through with Operations and work up a collection proposal. If we can invite young Andromeda around to a rock that she can be chained to then I'll be happy to have a chat with Helen and see if she can launch four Questors in our direction even if she can't manage a thousand ships."

It was less than a week later when I had the chance to talk to Helen Stanhope. It was a pleasant day and we'd agreed to meet by the lake in St James' Park. I was sitting on a bench at the agreed time when I saw Helen walking towards me along the path by the edge of the lake coming from Horse Guards Parade. She sat down on the bench beside me. I could tell she wasn't happy with having to be there. I was pleased to see her, especially after she'd been so rude when I first phoned her. "Absolutely not," she'd said, "Nobody gets to meet the Questors, especially right now. I don't care how big your sponsorship offer is, we're not meeting with anyone until after Jewel Questors IV is locked down and even then I'll need something more convincing than some half arsed co-marketing idea to get interested. Call me back when your brain gets as big as your dick obviously is."

Mind you that was before we sent her the emails showing her sister naked and in chains. I thought that the guys in the Prep Centre had done a creditable job of reproducing the scene from Jewell Questors II where the Questors have to free a hostage from a chamber in an underground tomb. I mean she was still pretty foul-mouthed about it all but this time she agreed to meet me.

"Good morning, Helen," I said. She scowled back but said nothing. "I thought we might talk about happy families." Still nothing. "How, let's say, one sister has all the business skills but another one has all the ideas, all the stories, all the scenarios. How one is happy to plod away at a job but the other wants nothing to do with work. How one is currently enjoying the morning sunshine in St James Park while the other is in, shall we say, less salubrious surroundings."

"Is she safe?" it wasn't much of a conversation but at least it was something. She was looking straight through me.

I nodded. "And she can stay that way."

"What do you want? Money, I suppose. It's usually money?" She was getting more talkative.

"Well, surprisingly it's not that. It's just that, well, I'm a terrific fan of the game. Always have been, ever since Jewell Questors – The Golden Ankh, and I've always wanted to meet the Questors."

"Nobody meets the Questors." She cut in automatically but then stopped herself. "You kidnapped my sister so you could meet the Questors?"

"Kidnapped is a horrible word. I'd prefer to say she's a house guest."

"It didn't look like she was really able to leave even if she wanted to from the pictures you sent me, you arsehole."

I ignored the abuse. "Ah. Well, I hope you didn't mind me using your sister's email account to send those. It seemed the best way to make sure you read them. I'm sure you must get a lot of emails from all sorts of lunatics."

"All sorts of other lunatics."

"That's rather unkind but I'll ignore it. So when can we arrange my meeting with the Questors?"

"You're assuming a lot."

"Well, that's what us lunatics are like but it doesn't seem much to ask. You set up for me to meet with the Questors. Just me and the four of them and you too if you like. Just so I can see them in the flesh as it were. Well in character at least," I smiled. "Then I can achieve my ambition and you can have your sister back. And then she'll be able to let you have all the interesting

scenarios she's been thinking about for Jewel Questors IV. Some of it sounds very exciting. I'm really looking forward to it already. Oh, and of course that might help the IPO you've got planned. I can't imagine that your prospective investors will be frightfully keen to discover that the creative energies of the company aren't actually employed by it."

"How do I know you will do as you say?"

"If you let me get to see the Questors then you and her get back together and I get to see part IV when it's developed and NRT Games get to carry on. If you don't then she'll stay with me until she runs out of stories to tell – a bit like Scherezade – and by then I'm not sure if it will matter; NRT Games will have run out of time and, I suspect, money."

"How do I know she's safe?"

"I brought you a present." I reached into my pocket and pulled out a black iPod. "You'll find some video to watch on there. I took it while she was watching the news this morning. The picture's not great but it should be some comfort to you. I'd really like this not to be the last you see of your sister."

She slipped the iPod into her handbag. "What do you want me to do?" she asked in resignation.

"I'll let you know," I said. "I'll drop you an email. Might even send you some more video for the iPod. Just set things up so you can get the Questors to turn up. I'll leave you to work out how to do it. Anyway, I must be off now; better make sure my house guest is still all right. I'm never sure if there's really enough oxygen in those little boxes."

Helen whimpered as I got up to leave. "Don't worry," I said as I walked away. "I'll make sure that you and your sister get back together. See you soon"

Chapter 26 : Web In Focus

We were in Freddie's club, expecting a dozen or so clients to turn up. I wanted to give them a briefing on the new web services to get some feed-back.

I had a good session with Clegg before the clients turned up. We'd run through the arrangements for the day and he seemed very happy with the plans. "I like this idea of getting feed-back from the clients," he said. "We could spend a lot of money without having a solid foundation, otherwise."

I thought I'd take the opportunity to raise one of my concerns. "You're right," I said. "I really want to find a way of getting better insights into the client's minds to help strengthen the account management approach alongside this. It's a big problem – I just suspect that it's one of those areas where they won't realise if you're doing a good job but they'll soon complain if you're doing a bad one."

"Hmm, maybe," said Clegg. "Of course some of the merchandise must get a pretty good insight into their owners over time. Only problem is we don't see many of them back through our hands. And I draw the line at kidnapping our client's property! Still if you have another idea, let me know. Things seem to be going the right way and we need to make sure that we keep this on track." We broke off our conversation as the first of the clients started to appear. Clegg was at his best greeting them, sliding from one to another, making all feel equally valued. Eventually all twelve had arrived and we got them sat down in the presentation area. Some of our clients were travelling with slaves and had brought them along. I wasn't keen that the slaves heard what we had to say so we'd come up with the idea of allowing them to remain but having them ear-plugged and hooded, We'd provided the hoods as the clients arrived; soft black leather to cover the eyes, the ears and the back of the head, back laced to allow for long hair. The hoods left the mouth free – we knew that many of the clients would have their slaves gagged anyway. Each hood carried a Clegg Enterprises logo worked into the buckle of the strap that ran around the slave's neck to keep the hood in place. A nice memento, I thought.

"Good morning, ladies & gentlemen, welcome to the club here and thank you for coming along today," Freddie said, greeting the clients we had invited to preview the efforts of Sebastian's team. I was pleased that he felt ready to front it; it was all a bit of an innovation after all. He'd been happy to invite folk too, putting a squeeze on them to free up some time in their busy lives. "I know you have all been interested to learn what we have been doing to improve our sales approach, so I am very happy to introduce our Marketing Director, Larry Ross. Some of you I know have met Larry all ready and I hope you'll agree with me that he's bringing a whole lot of valuable new ideas to Clegg Enterprises, ideas that I think you'll find interesting. We've asked you here today to preview a new service that we are about to launch. We've spoken to people about different parts of it but this is the first time any of our clients have had the chance to see the whole thing in action. We are really anxious to get your feed-back on this. I can't stress enough how much we want to fit this service to what our clients want, so please be as open as you like on what we have done. Still, enough from me. Here's Larry."

Clegg sat down to polite applause and I took the stage. We'd agreed to make the whole presentation very factual, very professional. Brian had wanted us to field some of his latest acquisitions as evidence of what we could do but I didn't want anything that would detract from the systems. Fortunately Freddie had agreed with me. I looked out at the audience. They looked as though they were ready to give us a hearing at least. At the back of the room four hooded women stood, shackled and silent.

I started off with a short presentation summarising some of the things that I felt we'd not been good at previously, particularly the whole thing around not responding to customer needs. I gave them a short case study on the way we were becoming more interactive; using the project that we'd done for the Kalinin's son. If nothing else I thought it might help drum up some more custom acquisition work that way and some of them might see the value of putting enough business our way to warrant becoming an account managed client. They seemed quietly impressed. I went on. "The real purpose of today, though, is to show you the proposed web service. This will be available to all of our clients and I think it offers many features that you will find useful and that aren't offered by any of our competitors. It's got three main aims; to help our customer select potential acquisitions, to track any projects that you might engage us for and to participate in auctions without having to trek up to our sales centre. Of course you'll still be welcome if you want to come in person but we believe that many of our clients are busy people and find it increasingly difficult to justify the time to visit auctions unless there is a very special item available."

I could see that the audience was still interested but I felt that if I didn't get down to the nitty-gritty pretty quickly they would start to get restless. I'd arranged for a PC to be hooked up to a projector. One of Sebastian's team of young ladies was back stage pressing the buttons. I talked them through the features of the system. The News and Catalogue areas were greeted with luke-warm enthusiasm, although there was some interest at some of the items of stock on display. Attention picked up though when I started to explain the "My Projects" area and interest turned to enthusiasm as I began to run through the "Search & Snatch" service. By the time I asked for questions at the end most of the audience were looking keen.

Inevitably at such an event there were few questions in the open forum, most people wanted to talk one-to-one. Clegg, Sebastian, Harry and Brian were all on hand to chat people through what we were aiming to do. Clegg had got the club to lay on some drinks and snacks. It was a novelty to be served by women that weren't chained and gagged. We'd got an information pack together for each of the attendees with a security fob that gave access to the service and a set of simple instructions. We'd also included a discount offer for the first live auction that we had planned for later that month. I'd figured that anything we offered off the top would be offset by higher prices resulting from more bidders, so the whole thing should be self funding. Clegg had agreed – he liked the idea of giveaways that didn't cost anything. Brian had just seemed disagreeable about the whole thing. Just to make the most of it I'd arranged with Rick to have five of the auction lots shipped down and put on display in cages in the room where we were serving the drinks. They weren't very far on in Orientation yet so we'd had to make sure they were well shackled. Even so some of them were trying to rattle the bars in protest at being put on show. I was pleased by how quiet Rick had managed to keep them. He'd shown me a new gag that some of the guys in

technical had been working on; a heavy leather, padded face piece coupled with a mouth filling plug stuffed with a gel that expanded slightly as it warmed. That way the plug swelled up once it was pushed into the slaves mouth. Small tubes allowed cold water to be run through the gel to shrink it when the gag needed to be removed. It wasn't pretty but at least it let us talk to our guests without too much disturbance from the exhibits and some of them were expressing interest in the gags as much as in the women that were wearing them. I made a mental note to think about whether Clegg Enterprises should consider going into the business of branded restraints.

I spent some time talking with Steve Glennis. He confirmed that what we were doing was well ahead of anything he'd seen from the American agencies and he thought he'd be able to use it for future acquisitions for his stables. I asked him about Sukie; if she'd been sold yet.

"No," said Steve, "she's with me now – at the back there." He nodded his head to the back of the room where the four hooded slaves stood patiently. I hadn't recognised her at first but I could see that the girl second from the left, in black polo jumper and slacks, could well be Sukie. "She still doesn't know that I intend to sell her on. I'd hoped I might find some interest on this trip from some of my contacts but no luck."

I thought back to the conversation I'd had with Clegg. "Suppose we took her off your hands as a sort of down payment against a future project?" I said. "It's not what we'd normally do but you obviously won't be wanting to cart her back to the island. We'd be happy to take her on account, so to speak and credit you with her resale value when we deliver the next piece of merchandise you take from us." I was on fairly safe grounds, I thought. Sukie was eminently resaleable, and Glennis hadn't bought anything from us for ages, so if this got him started spending with us again it would be a double bonus. Besides, Sukie was a bright girl. She'd give me plenty of useful insights into slave owners – from our conversations on the island there had been at least four or five others that she had been leant out to during her time with Glennis.

Steve looked a bit sceptical at first but then warmed to the idea. "All right," he said. "Have one of your legal team run up an agreement. You might as well take her now though," he said, leading the way across to the hooded, gagged and deafened form of Sukie. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small fob on a ring. I recognised it as a USB pen drive. "All her documentation is on here," he said, clipping the fob to a ring on the girl's hood. "Let me know if there's anything else you need." He ran his hand down her back and patted her backside. She gave a puzzled grunt through her gag, unaware of anything that had been said. Steve smiled and shook my hand before apologising that he had to leave. Sukie never saw him again.

Brian had been cornered by Daphne Challis, the dumpy woman I had last seen on the flight back from Steve's island. She was standing closer to him than he felt comfortable with. I had some sympathy with him, I could tell from where I was standing, twenty feet away, that her personal hygiene hadn't improved any since the flight. Clegg was doing the rounds of his old pals, beaming effusively and enthusing about the work that Sebastian had done. Seb himself was being engaged by several of the audience who were keen to see how things worked close up. We were all being fairly tight-lipped about how we did the Search & Snatch thing. No point in making things easier for the competition than we needed to.

Freddie came up to me afterwards in as cheery a mood as ever, evidently well pleased with the day's proceedings. Brian was being unenthusiastic. "Why on earth did you get me stuck with that Challis woman?" he complained. "And I don't see how this can substitute for proper selling," he said. "No real contact with people. I think you're on the wrong track Ross."

I started to defend my approach. "We'll see," I said, "people seemed interested today at least."

"Interest is one thing, sales is another," said Brian.

"Yes," said Clegg, "quite right. I want to talk to you about that Brian. Can you run me through the numbers from the last auction? I don't think we're seeing the improvements you hoped for yet are we?"

Brian looked even more uncomfortable than he had when Daphne had sidled up alongside him. Clegg steered him away as Brian glowered over his shoulder at me.

"Had a good day?"

I jerked around, startled by the sudden words. Elly, elegant as ever, had slid silently up behind me. "I think so. The feed-back has been good."

"Freddie was looking forward to this. I think he's pleased. He's been quite the happy bunny lately, first the Dennison woman and now this."

"Brian wasn't too impressed."

"Oh, I shouldn't worry about that, if I were you," Elly encouraged, "I think he's feeling a bit insecure at the moment. Not quite on top of his game as Freddie might say."

Something told me that was exactly what Freddie would say and presumably had been saying. "I needed to talk to you," I said and explained about Sukie and the scheme with Steve Glennis.

Elly looked sanguine about it. "I'd rather you'd consulted me first," she said, in a carefully measured tone that left no doubt about what I should do next time, "but it sounds all right. I can get an agreement drafted for Glennis, best keep it all above board, less danger of confusion and fallings out down stream that way. A Clegg Enterprises hire and agency agreement should cover it. We can add your credit arrangement as an annex to the main contract."

Chapter 27 :The Abduction of Helen

With the web site launch done, I had some time to devote to the Questor's project. I know I shouldn't really go on operations but it's hard to resist the adrenalin rush and besides, Freddie and Harry both seemed happy that I was getting involved. "Just as long as there are no vodka bottles around," said Harry with a smirk. Plus, of course, Hannani had been keen for me to handle things personally and the customer is always right.

I've always liked the Ashmolean Museum. Not a lot of people go to visit it. It's in Oxford and most people go to visit the colleges but the Ashmolean is like a jewel box. It's extraordinary really – one building with the whole of mankind's history on display. Plus it was founded by a man who basically stole the original collection from the man who set up the first ever public museum in Britain. The handy thing is that they are always ready to open it up after hours for corporate hospitality events. They were really cooperative when I asked if I could hire the Egyptian Gallery to impress a few clients and perfectly happy for me to organise my own caterers; just as long as I didn't break anything, they'd said with a smile.

I was sitting in the Morse Bar of the Randolph Hotel opposite the museum, looking out across Beaumont Street when I saw the cab pull up. Three women got out – Helen Stanhope and two others that I took to be two of the Questors. I was pleased, she was on time and obviously doing as she had been told. There was no sign that she'd brought any help but the snatch crew would be looking out for that. I saw two other women walking up Beaumont Street, waving to her. That made the full set as far as I was concerned. I watched as they went up the steps into the courtyard and towards the museum entrance. I left them for a few minutes to get settled and followed them in.

I found them as I expected in the Egyptian Gallery. The women had all taken off their coats and were standing, drinks in hand, admiring the exhibits. They were being served by two waitresses, both dressed in the usual black dresses with white aprons and caps. One held a tray of drinks, the other, Tricia, a tray of canapés. I was beginning to enjoy it when Tricia turned up on a job. She certainly looked good in the uniform.

Helen scowled as I entered first of all, but then managed an insincere smile. "Well, hello," she said, sourly. "We were beginning to wonder if you were going to come."

I gave Helen an equally insincere embrace of greeting. "Goodness, I wouldn't have missed this Helen," I said. "It's so good of you to arrange it. And these are the Questors. Wonderful. Ladies, it's a great pleasure to meet you and in such appropriate surroundings too."

That bit at least was honest. The extent to which the computer game characters resembled their originals (or vice versa) was remarkable. I'd spent some time playing the game – purely as part of the project, you understand – and the four Questors in the game were only slightly exaggerated versions of the real things. There was Anya Tanith, archaeologist and fortune hunter, bush shirt tied off under her tits and khaki shorts that looked like they had been spray painted on; beside her was Dr. Elspeth Train, the linguist and scholar in her trademark dark tweed jacket, tight black skirt and half-moon, gold rimmed spectacles. Between these two and Helen were the black jump-suit clad Aniko Tomaka – the all-action heroine - and Caressa Santango, the fiery, Latin, intuitive one of the four, in a scarlet dress that was cut every bit as low as those she wore in the game. For what it was worth, I reckoned that all four of these ladies had been surgically enhanced so that their attributes provided the desired look when animated. They didn't say anything, they just smiled. I wondered what Helen had told them about our meeting.

Helen wheeled out a suitcase. "I brought the clothes you asked for," she said with an air of distaste. "One costume for each of the characters."

"Thank you," I said, "a wonderful souvenir."

"A gift for a pervert, if you ask me," she hissed under her breath. I smiled. Still Helen had certainly delivered her side of the bargain. It was just a shame that I wasn't really going to be able to do the same or at least, not in the way that Helen imagined.

"Would you like some wine, Sir," the waitress with the drinks tray said to me.

"I'd rather have a scotch if you can manage it," I answered giving the girl the signal to start. I looked up at the CCTV camera that covered the gallery. The techies would have it on divert by now.

"Of course, Sir," she said putting down her tray of drinks. Tricia did the same with her canapés. The first waitress reached behind a statue of Ahkenaten and pulled out a pistol, a second later she had her arm around Helen's throat and the gun pointing at her temple. As she did so, Tricia grabbed an Ouzi from inside a canopic chest and was pointing it at the other four. "Nice and calm, ladies, please," she said politely. "Just remember there aren't any cheats for extra lives in this game."

Helen was looking furious and was about to speak when her captor jerked her arm more tightly about her throat and jammed the barrel of the gun harder against her head. "Not interested, sister," she said. "Lots of quiet is what is needed. You others," she barked at the four Questors staring on in disbelief. "Grab a napkin each, from the table there and push it into your mouth as far as it will go. Then put your hands up way over your heads and get over facing that wall. Get on with it! Are you waiting for me to press CTRL-SHIFT-Get The Fuck Over By The Wall or something?"

I watched as the four girls did as they were told. Tricia and her Ouzi went over, She made sure each got a good prod in the ribs from the gun just to reinforce the situation and then frisked each of them in turn, removing Anya's bowie knife, and Aniko's throwing knives - one of the benefits of the games was that we knew what to look for.

"OK, ladies, turn around but keep your hands up please." The four of them turned around each with a wad of white napkin spilling from their well stuffed mouths. I walked along the line strapping the napkins in place with a couple of strips of tape for each. I took a napkin for Helen and gave her the same treatment. "Very good," Helen's waitress said. "Now round again and hands behind your back, please." The waitresses had brought plenty of rope with them so it was easy for me to get their wrists tied and then to put a turn or two between their elbows and around their chest. Helen was dealt with in the same way as the others.

"Thanks a lot girls," I said to the waitresses. "You can clear away now and make sure they're all bagged up. We haven't got time to strip them now and I don't want those costumes messed up on the journey. Here, take this case too." I pushed across the suitcase that Helen had brought. The four Questors and Helen were hustled away at gunpoint, out through the kitchens and into the catering van that the waitresses had come in. Helen's waitress came back to pick up the glasses, the plates and the remains of the food and drink. I knew they'd be out and on their way to the Prep Centre in minutes.

I went to find the museum's curator to let him know that my hospitality event was over. He seemed happy. "Just as long as you didn't break anything," he said with a grin.

"No, no," I replied, "though of course we did steal a few priceless items."

He laughed in response. "I'll enjoy watching that on the replays," he said nodding to the security monitors. "Well," he said, "I hope your clients enjoyed themselves."

"Oh, yes," I answered, "they were quite taken with the place."

I passed the catering van as they reached Warwick on the M40 going north. I was back at the Prep Centre before they were.

I was waiting for them when the catering van backed up to the loading dock. When we opened the doors at the back of the van I was pleased to see that Tricia and her pal had done just as I asked.

The four Questors had been bagged in zip-up nylon bags that closed up to their necks. It was just as well for their outfits, a couple of trays of food from the buffet had tipped over during the trip and spread themselves around the back of the van.

Like I say, the Questors were fine but Tricia hadn't bothered to bag Helen. She had evidently been trying to free herself in the back of the van, I reckoned that was what had dislodged the food trays. The combination of her struggles and the spilled food meant she was in quite a mess. I untied her ankles and pulled her from the van.

Her tights were laddered from struggling on the floor of the van and her black jacket and skirt were streaked with mayonnaise and prawn sauce. She'd got something in her hair; it took me a while to work out what it was, you don't normally expect to see asparagus up there. Her blouse was soaked from something; spilled wine I guessed – there was an open bottle lying on the floor of the van where she had been.

As I stood her up, I brushed off the worst of it. She'd even sat on some sandwiches; the back of her skirt was covered in crushed food. "You're a messy eater, Ms Stanhope," I joked. She didn't see the funny side and growled back through her gag. From the way her mouth was working underneath the tape, I could see that she felt she had plenty to say about her current circumstances.

I pushed her on to the loading dock and passed her over to one of Rick's team. They took her away, still struggling. Tricia and her colleague had got the Questors off the van and out of their bags. Two more of the Prep Centre guards made to take them away as well. "Have them stripped," I called out, "But carefully, the client wants the outfits as well."

I smiled at Tricia and her pal as the Questors were led away. "Thanks, ladies," I said, "that was great."

Tricia's colleague said, "Thanks, no problem. I'll check them in." She gave Tricia a wave and followed the captives into the building.

Tricia watched her go. "She's been a real help. She's been doing this for a couple of years now, I'm learning a lot."

"Great," I said. "Well, today was certainly professional. Harry would have been impressed."

Tricia smiled, "Yeah, maybe. I hope so. It seems to take a lot to impress him." She seemed a bit subdued; she should have been really up after a good snatch like that. She looked as though she needed cheering up. I felt I could use an evening of female company that wasn't under duress.

"Well," I said. "Anyway," I pointed at her uniform, "I wouldn't want you to think I made a habit of making passes at waitresses but I thought we might go for a drink when you get off."

Tricia hesitated for a moment but then grinned, "Yeah, why not. I'd like that. I need to do the paperwork for this snatch and book the outfit and the Ouzi back into stores but I'll be done in about an hour. How's that for you?"

"Fine," I said. "It's a date." And it was – the nearest thing to a normal date that I'd had since, well, since Rebecca had gone off on her last trip for Atlantic. I watched as Tricia headed off towards the stores. It was a shame she was checking the uniform back in, I thought, she looked cute in black and white. I headed off to the Prep Centre reception cells.

They'd put Helen in with her sister. That was considerate, I thought. Andromeda had been giving the guards some trouble, I imagined, and they'd strung her up naked, with her wrists high over her head, balanced on tip toe in the middle of the cell. For consistency they'd put Helen in the same position, though she was still wearing her food stained suit and wine soaked blouse. They'd swapped her napkin gag for one of the Centre standard ball gags but that didn't seem to have improved her humour any. They both scowled at me as I came in. Andromeda gave me a rather more animated grunt through the ring gag she'd been given.

"Good evening," I said. "Here you are Helen, I promised I'd reunite you with your sister and you see I am a man of my word." Helen was having trouble standing upright, swaying on the chain that held her wrists high above her head. "Those clothes are in a real mess," I said. "Here, let me help. If we undo this blouse it will get a chance to dry off." She squealed and twisted as I unfastened the buttons and pulled her blouse from the waist band of her skirt. "There," I said, "isn't that better." She seemed to indicate that it wasn't but as far as I was concerned the unobstructed view that I now had of her tits was a distinct improvement. I unzipped her skirt too and let that fall around her ankles. Her legs weren't bad either. I suppose I hadn't really worked out what we were going to do with her and little sis – the client hadn't specified them at all. They were just collateral in the collection of the Questors.

Tricia put her head around the door to the cell. "I thought I'd find you here," she said. She'd changed out of her waitress uniform and was now wearing a summery dress. It didn't quite square with my image of a gun toting abductor but she looked agreeably normal. Suddenly I just wanted an evening off from all this. "Your client wants to see you. He's in with the Questors."

"OK, I suppose I ought to see him. You won't mind waiting a while will you? I'll make it quick."

Don't worry," she said. "I can hang on. I'll see you in the office."

I gave her a smile and left her. I heard the groans of Andromeda and Helen as Tricia followed me out and locked the door to their cell. The Questors were two doors further on. Mr Hananni and the girls were already there together with one of the Centre guards. He was wasting no time in taking advantage of his new purchase. Anya Tanith was bent forward, face down across a desk, her hands still tied behind her. Hannani was in the process of buckling his trouser belt, having evidently taken his pleasure with Anya from behind. The other Questors were looking on in horror.

"Mr Ross, you have excelled yourself!" Hananni exclaimed. "Everything that my friend the Kallinin said of you was true."

"Well, Mr Hananni, thank you but it's not all down to me."

"Well, it is your team and that is the main thing. You have done just as you said." He gestured to the four girls as the guards herded them across the room until they were standing chained by their neck collars to the wall of the cell. Looking at them naked I could now see just how much modification they had had done to them; natural breasts just aren't that spherical for a start nor do they have nipples that you could use to hang things from. The Prep Centre team had done a good job of getting them displayed for Hananni, Rick was certainly getting in touch with the idea of fitting in with the customer. I particularly liked the fact that he'd arranged for some dress makers dummies to be positioned beside each of them, half of them dressed in the costumes that the Questors had been captured in, half in the costumes that Helen had brought. A nice touch.

"I'm glad you are pleased, Mr Hananni," I said. "In fact, I wondered if you'd like to consider another couple of properties that we have available to us that could add significantly to your business venture." I took him to one side and explained the availability of Helen and her sister. I was pleased with his response; it looked like we wouldn't need to put them to auction after all.

Hananni wanted some time to think about the possibilities for Helen and Andromeda, which was fine by me as they weren't taking up too much space in the cells and in any case I had other plans for the evening than chatting to clients. I agreed to get one of the sales team to talk to him in a couple of weeks and left him in search of Tricia.

We had a great evening. It was good to spend some time with a woman that didn't involve chains, ropes and gags. Tricia seemed happy too – at least that's how I interpreted the enthusiastic sex we both fell into at the end of the evening and the way in which we both went on repeating it for the next two weeks.

Chapter 28 : Account Planning

I was in the staff bar chatting with Rick. "Just wanted to give you a bit of feed-back," I said. "The Kalinin called last night. He's as pleased as punch with the girls you set up for his councillor's project. Said they were working out really well with their new owners. He'd been a bit worried whether women of that age could be made sufficiently obedient to appeal to a Kushtian – they wouldn't want to have to bother with too much training and punishment. But it seems your 'orientation' has been first rate. No problems at all. In fact a couple of them have proved a bit too willing for their new masters. Two of the councillors have had to take holidays to regain their strength."

Rick chuckled, "Kushtians obviously need their cushions." I didn't bother with a laugh.

We were still chatting when the news started on the big TV screen that hung on the wall behind the bar. An implausibly attractive newsreader was shuffling her papers and smiling out of the screen. The sheen on her lip gloss sparkled as she turned towards the viewer. "A surprise development this afternoon in the Central Asian Republic of Kushtia where recently the first ever democratic elections were held. The new governing council has announced that the Kalinin of Kushtia, is to be sworn in as democratic life president of the new republic. The Kalinin was the last hereditary ruler of Kushtia and had been in exile in the UK for the last two years. Since the coup that brought about the introduction of democracy there has been doubt about how the role of Head of State would be filled. The First Minister of Kushtia explained the decision, which comes after months of uncertainty about the role, by saying the Kalinin offered continuity with many of the traditions of Kushtia that were so important to retain while the country embraces the modern world of democracy and free market economies."

Rick snorted. "Continuity! That's a new word for it. Still it's good for us I guess."

"Sure," I said, "it's had the desired outcome." Brian drifted into the bar. "Hey, Brian, you'll be pleased about this. The Kalinin's been elected president by the council. I reckon it's all down to the girls we got for the councillors."

"Your project, not mine," said Brian, irritated. "Won't do me any good. I don't suppose he's going to be jetting over here for auctions, is he?"

"Well, no, I guess not but it's got to be good for all of us, hasn't it? I mean that brought in the Questors job and now he wants me to go out to Kushtia to talk about some more opportunities. Come on, mate, you can't just look at it from the point of view of who's at the auctions."

"I bloody well can. I'm not paid on anything that doesn't go through the Sales Centre. And don't call me 'mate'!" He grabbed his beer and stalked out.

Rick watched him go. "He's pretty peeved about this, you know. He had a pretty easy time of it until you turned up. Least ways, that's how he sees it. Anyway have you heard how the Kalinin is getting on with his freebie? What was her name? Oh yeah, Alessa. Can't remember a piece we've had to keep gagged for so much of the time. What a mouth!"

"She seems to be getting on fine. Alessa has many faults and her mouth is probably the biggest of them but the Kushtian's have their own way of solving that sort of problem. Apparently they've pierced her tongue and every time she speaks out of turn they link her tongue stud with a chain to the back of the mule that they have treading round in circles to pump water for irrigating some of the fields on the Kalinin's farm. She gets to follow the mule around for a while and tread in the odd mule pat now and then. That seems to be having some effect."

"Ouch," said Rick. "I'll say one thing for your customers Larry they certainly have their own ways with women. I saw some traffic about the girls we got for Hannani. He's got them working in his hi-tech maze already. He emailed me a link to their video feed if you want to see it."

"That's quick work, I didn't think you'd have finished with orientation yet."

"We weren't doing it. He took them un-prepped. I guess he wanted to do the orientation on site."

"What's he got them doing?"

"Nothing much yet. Just settling them in. They've got like a bedroom with doors leading off into different parts of the maze. The idea is that he turn up the heat cold or noise in the bedroom and drive them out into which ever part of the maze he wants. There are lots of doors. If the controller is quick he can separate girls by opening and closing them as they go though. First time that happened they got really twitchy. Should make good entertainment for Halinin's pals."

"Interesting," I said. "I need to keep an eye on that stuff. Looks like we could pick up some hints."

"Yeah, you're right." Rick went on. "Still we manage to do quite well too. We've finished with that writer of yours. She's ready any time you want. Guaranteed not to whack you with a keyboard or anything else."

I grimaced. "Yeah, well, I'm trying to forget about that. Can I see her? I was planning to talk to the woman that Glennis gave us. She might as well get started on that at the same time?"

"Sure," Rick said, "come on through to her cell." I followed him through.

I'd not really been exposed to the results of Rick's orientation programmes before so I was interested to see what he'd been able to do. I did actually need her to be working properly.

As Rick opened the door to her cell, Rachel got to her feet. She was looking much better than when I'd seen her last. She'd lost the sunken look from her eyes and she'd even put on a couple of pounds. They'd put her back in the black short skirt and low cut top, low heeled shoes and dark tights or stockings, I couldn't really tell. She had on her collar and identity tags of course. "Good morning, Rachel," said Rick. "How are you today?"

"I am very well, Sir," she said. "Thank you."

"This is Larry," Rick said. "You'll be serving him, now. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir," Rachel responded looking at me without any indication that she remembered us ever meeting before. "She turned towards me. "What would you have me do, Sir?" she asked.

"You're a writer, I believe," I said. Given the way she was behaving, presumably as a result of her orientation, I thought it was best to go back to first principles.

"Yes, Sir. That is one of the duties I am trained for."

I looked at the way her breasts had been hoisted up by the bra that they had put her in. No doubt they trained her in the other duties that slaves were usually expected to perform as well. I wasn't sure if or when I'd have time to try them out. Things were working out pretty well with Tricia and I guess I didn't feel the need. "Good," I said. "In which case bring your pad and come with me." I turned to Rick. "Thanks for this," I said. "She'll be fine I think."

I took the leash that was fastened to her collar and led her down to the cell where Sukie was being held. I was aiming to use Sukie's experiences as a way to understand better the ways in which slaves were used in the US.

Sukie was still cuffed, shackled, hooded and gagged when I found her but then, like the guard said, no-one had said they should do anything else with her. She still had the pen drive fob hanging from her neck. I unfastened it and put it into my pocket to check out later.

I looked at her curled up in a corner of the cell and reached around behind her head to unbuckle her hood. Even though lighting in the cell was subdued, she blinked in the unaccustomed light as the hood came off. Her head was soaked in sweat, her dark hair plastered down against her scalp. I prised the ball-gag from her mouth.

"Thank you," she said, her voice unusually loud as a result of her ears still being plugged. I pulled the wads of wax from each of them. She shook her head and thanked me again. "Where is Steve?" she asked. "Am I being kennelled while he is away?" Then realising such familiarity might not be appropriate in her new surroundings she dropped her eyes to the floor. "I apologise," she said, "I did not mean to speak disrespectfully."

"That's all right, Sukie," I said conscious that she had obviously had no idea that Steve had been about to abandon her. "You are no longer with Steve. We are your owners now." She looked confused and upset but said nothing. She bit her lip and hung her head, understanding that she had no reason to have been told of her impending change of ownership, but nevertheless disappointed,

"I need to talk to you Sukie. I want you to tell us about your experiences, about how you were treated by those that Steve gave you to. Rachel here is going to write down your story. Do you understand?"

Sukie nodded. "Will I be with you?" she asked. "I enjoyed serving you on the island."

"No Sukie, I have to go away soon."

"Oh," she said, disconsolately, another straw of hope removed from her grasp.

"Do you remember how we talked when I came to the island first of all?" Sukie nodded. "You told me how Steve took you in?" Another nod. "Well, I want you to tell your stories to her." I gestured towards Rachel who was sitting silently in a chair by the door. She had her notepad opened on her lap; pen in hand she was waiting to begin. "Let's start with those that Steve gave you to."

"But there were so many," Sukie said. "On the island, if ever there was a visitor, I was asked to be nice to them." I looked across at Rachel, she was scribbling away on her pad.

"Like you were with me?"

"Yes. Yes but not like that. Some of them were brutal, cruel. Some of them were strange. But always I would do what I could to please them. It was what Steve wanted."

"Go on I urged." Rachel was listening attentively.

"The worst were the ones that came for the pony races. Especially if their ponies had lost or if they'd lost a lot betting. Then they'd beat me, or worse."

"Were there many of those? Pony races?"

"Oh yes, perhaps one each month. There were a dozen or more owners that would come. I was given to many of them. They all have two or three ponies. Work them for a year or so and trade them on."

"And how would it work? With Steve and you?"

"The guests would arrive. I'd serve them drinks. Sometimes they had their own slave girls with them - many of the owners have three or four slaves as well as their ponies. Steve would have me dress in riding clothes, jodhpurs, boots. They'd like that. Sometimes one of them would just ask Steve if he could have me for the evening. Sometimes Steve would offer me without being asked. Once they tied me up and four of them played cards for me. Sometimes they just got drunk and weren't interested."

"Always men?" Rachel was still scribbling away.

"Mainly. I did see some women at Steve's. One a very dumpy, unpleasant woman. I'm not sure about the others. They were the worst."

"How so?"

"A woman knows how to please another woman but she knows how to hurt as well."

I looked across at Rachel. If she was remembering anything of our earlier encounter she was managing to hide it. She'd have plenty to do while I was away. It was sounding like Sukie would be an excellent source of intelligence.

Chapter 29 : Lost in Translation

I rolled over in bed. Tricia smiled. "I'm sorry you're going off to Kushtia. Why couldn't they send that unpleasant shit, Brian?"

"Brian?" I said, "What's with him? I know he hasn't been happy with what I've been up to but he could make it easier on himself if he just saw which way the wind was blowing. His sales numbers have been hopelessly optimistic for months according to Freddie. Even normally discreet Elly has been getting impatient with him."

"Oh, this wasn't business," Tricia grinned, rolling over to my side. "He made a pass at me this morning. Seemed pretty upset when I turned him down, but I'm afraid that jolly sales manager persona has never cut it with me."

"No," I said, turning towards her. "You've always had much better taste." She threw a pillow at me.

Two weeks after the Questor's collection and my first date with Tricia, I'd had to endure quite a few jokes from the guys in the Prep Centre and the Sales Centre about bothering with a girlfriend when I could make use of any of the stock at any time I chose. I didn't think I really needed to explain that it wasn't the same thing. Besides, if things worked out the stock levels would be coming down and then where would I be?

Now though, and much to my regret, I had to leave Tricia behind and take myself off to Kushtia.

It was a gruesome flight. Air Kushtia had a lot to learn about in-flight service and comfort even from Ryanair. They certainly didn't have the idea about cabin crew. Homely would be the generous description of the two stewardesses. I don't know if the Kushtian's had a shot-put team in the 1976 Olympics but if they did this was what happened to them. Their uniforms looked like they had been designed by a committee of misogynists and manufactured by a team that were more familiar with a staple gun than a sewing machine. I wondered if we could re-acquire Rebecca and interest the CEO in her experiences.

Then the Ilyushin hit another air pocket and I found myself thinking that the main priority for once wasn't the cabin service. I tried reading the report that Rachel had prepared on her initial interviews with Sukie. The turbulence made it impossible. The in-flight movie turned out to be a celebration of the new Kushtian hydroelectric dam and irrigation programme. The food gave me little encouragement as to how well I'd be eating for the next few days, but then I guessed that there aren't many airlines where the food on board is a great advert for the national cuisine. I settled down to try to doze.

We touched down (I use the expression loosely) at Kolin, the Kushtian capital's airport. I was grateful to get off the plane, though given the decrepit nature of the airport buildings, I felt I might have been safer in the air. A charmless Kushtian immigration officer scowled at my passport and waved me through. A sign in the baggage reclaim said in encouraging letters, "Air Kushtia : Kushtia's Favourite Airline". An indignant traveller had crossed out the word "favourite" and written in "only". Nobody had bothered to correct it.

Against all expectations my suitcase fell through the hole in the wall of the baggage reclaim area onto the pile of waiting bags. There wasn't anything resembling a trolley. I was glad that I'd decided to travel light.

I found my way to the Kolin International Hotel, a fly blown piece of 1960's soviet concrete, still pock marked from the machine gun fire of the fighting that expelled the regime that had deposed the Kalinin or possibly from the coup before the coup before that. Halfway between the airport and the Kushtian capital, it sat sulkily behind a wire fence alongside the main highway. As evidence of the economic revival in Kushtia there were more trucks on the highway than there were mule carts but not by much. It looked like the only excitement I'd be seeing would be whatever was on television in the hotel.

The aim of the trip was to visit the Kushtian Minister of Trade. Freddie had said that it was another contact the Kalinin had passed on. "Might be a chance to get some orders, old man!" He'd said. "Build up the old exports like you suggested. I'd got an appointment to see him on the following day. I was also aiming to look in on the Kalinin's son just to provide a little after sales contact. It was the least we could do, I thought.

I was standing in the hotel bar, trying to decide just which sorts of vegetables had been boiled, pressed, strained and left to stand in a warm place order to provide the traditional Kushtian non-alcoholic cordial. I was coming to the conclusion that you wouldn't be able to work it out from the taste and that maybe you wouldn't want to know when an attractive young woman strode into the bar and swept confidently up to me. Things were improving I felt.

"Cora Argyll," she said extending her hand. "You'll be from FCE? I'm the Trade Attaché from the British Embassy." She gave a welcoming smile and then, seeing my sceptical look. "Well, the second assistant trade attaché actually."

I smiled in response. "Lawrence Ross," I said. She was certainly a welcome addition to the scenery. Tall, willowy and with long, wavy, dark hair she was in her late twenties. Probably her first overseas posting, I guessed. She had a friendly smile and what looked as though it might be an attractive figure hidden underneath a mannish jacket and a skirt that, in deference to Kushtian views on women in public places, reached the floor. She wore a pale blue, fur trimmed, pill box hat in the tradition of many Kushtian women's dress and a long scarf in a matching colour draped around her shoulders.

"I was asked to attend your meeting with the Minister," she said. "The Ambassador is most keen that the Embassy is seen to be helping British companies to build links with Kushtia."

I wasn't keen for official involvement. "I'm not sure that will be necessary," I said. "I mean I appreciate it and all that but I'm sure I can manage."

"I'm sorry but I really must insist. You'll need a translator at the very least and the Ambassador is most anxious that the trade delegation does everything possible to assist in discussions with the new regime. I'm sure you won't want to cause any difficulty with the Ambassador?"

I decided that she was possibly right. At the very least she could help to get things moving. We arranged to meet the following morning. I spent my evening watching Kushtian television. It wasn't as good as the in-flight movie had been.

She met me at the hotel an hour before my meeting with the trade minister. "We'll take my car," she said as she strode up to greet me in the hotel lobby.

"That shouldn't be necessary," I responded. "I believe a car is being sent."

"Oh, I'd be surprised," she said. "It would be most unusual for a Council Minister to show such ..."

We were interrupted by the arrival of a bell hop. "Your car is here, Sir," he said. I smiled and thanked him.

"I am impressed," said Cora and we headed for the door. As we got there Cora paused and swept her scarf up across her face.

"Is that necessary?" I said.

"Oh, yes. The Kushtian Council is trying to be as open as possible to western ideas but people still expect an unmarried woman to be veiled, especially in the presence of a married man such as the Minister. It's not really a religious thing as I understand it – it's more that the Kushtian men sort of - well – owned their wives and a women could not show her face until she had an owner. Can you believe the trade minister has four wives? In this day and age?"

"Extraordinary."

"His latest wife is said to be a gift from the Kallinin! I think what really happened was that there was some sort of ritual gift bestowing – probably based on some historic practice. It's funny how these things live on. Still we must respect their culture. After all, look at us with the Changing of the Guard and the Yeoman Warder's Ceremony of the Keys. I expect that all seems silly to them."

"Yes," I said as we stepped outside the hotel to see the bright yellow HumVee with its government flags and a smartly uniformed driver standing beside it. "I hadn't realised we needed armour plated transport," I said.

"I think it's mainly because of the roads," Cora said. "They are pretty atrocious."

The driver opened the door for us and we got in. She was right about the roads. As soon as we left the beautifully surface hotel drive, the road degenerated into a series of potholes across which we bounced remorselessly. Another length of smooth tarmac heralded the imminent arrival at the Trade Ministry. "My word," said Cora as the HumVee drew up. "you are honoured. That's the Minister on the steps, come to greet you." She adjusted her veil and the two of us got out.

As we reached the top of the steps the Minister greeted us in the guttural tones of the Kushtian language.

"The Minister welcomes you to Kushtia and hopes that you and he can have a mutually beneficial discussion," Cora translated.

"Please thank the Minister for his greeting and say that I too hope our discussions will be mutually beneficial," I said, keeping up the formality.

He showed us through the building and into his office. Sitting at a desk as we entered, a veiled lady, her wrists in manacles, sat pummelling an ancient typewriter. "Don't worry about the secretary," Cora said quietly, "I know it looks like she is in chains but it's just a sort of costume jewellery. The Kushtians used to keep their women under very strict controls and even though now the new regime is introducing more liberal ways many of the women like to dress traditionally."

"Ah," I said unconvinced by her explanation.

Even with her veil on, I could tell that Cora was embarrassed by the Minister's next remark. She turned towards me. "He says would you like to, err, wash your hands?"

"Oh, good idea, before we get started on talks," I responded.

"Its just that obviously, well, I can't come with you can I?"

"I think I can manage that without creating a diplomatic incident," I said

"Of course, yes, well. He says it's through there," she pointed to a door, "if you'd like to follow him."

The minister was a tall man. I felt dwarfed as I stood beside him in the stalls of the washroom and we studiously avoided looking at one another in the manner common to men in washrooms everywhere. Suddenly he spoke; not in Kushtian but in perfect English.

"She's very attractive but a bit of a pain in the arse, isn't she?" he said.

"Ah, I'm not sure it would be diplomatic to say," I responded with a smile. "I didn't think you spoke English."

"No," said the minister, "no, neither does she. Still, we'll humour her. Let's take this as far as we can with her here and then we'll talk again later." He turned to the basins, we washed our hands and returned to his office.

The minister and I were sat in armchairs facing one another. Cora sat between us. The minister began speaking in Kushtian again. Cora translated.

"The Minister says that he understands that Clegg Enterprises are seeking to supply the Kushtian Government procurement programme. And oh, sorry,"

I looked down to see the minister ostentatiously zipping his fly to the consternation of Cora. He didn't stop talking.

Cora coughed, embarrassed, and went on. "Perhaps you could outline your proposals."

"I represent a number of concerns together known as Clegg Enterprises," I said. I allowed Cora time to translate. "The most relevant of these to the Kushtian procurement programme is, I believe, Clegg Meat Products. We specialise in a range of prepared and treated meats. Our customers tell us that they are very much to the taste of a discerning palate. If Kushtia is intending to develop its tourism infrastructure then I you will need to have access to the best of international cuisine alongside traditional Kushtian dishes and of course as the Council extends its international ties they will wish to ensure that only the finest dishes are available to their guests." As Cora translated, the Minister laughed and muttered something.

Cora said, "He says you shouldn't expect too much of Kushtian cuisine, it's an oxymoron, like military intelligence or - oh! - women's liberation." There was a pause. "Ah, I see." Cora said something in Kushtian back to the minister. He smiled. "He was explaining the joke," she said, not apparently amused herself.

"Perhaps I can explain further Minister," I went on. "As I said we can offer a wide range of meat products, most based on British livestock of course. Our most important value to yourselves though is that we can make particular products available to meet particular needs. So for example, if the minister was to be hosting a dinner for a number of dignitaries we could make available particularly dark meats or light meats or for those that like their meat rare, very red. I believe the Kalinin's son is particularly fond of red meat, for example. Of course we are able to offer a range of meats from rare breeds and from some of the finest herds in British bloodstock."

Cora translated diligently. The minister responded. Cora was apparently embarrassed again, I could swear that I could see her blush behind her veil. "The minister says that he understands your proposition. In Kushtia they can appreciate excellent food for after all was it not the first Kalinin that said, 'The sweetest milk comes from the cow with the largest udders.' He also wonders if you have brought any samples with you."

"Regrettably no, Minister," I replied, "It is difficult without import clearance and until we have an agreement I thought it wise not to do so. I believe, however, that the Minister and several other members of the Council have already had the chance to sample our products."

Cora translated, the Minister responded and she spoke again. "The minister says that the products he has sampled have proved most excellent though he is a man of a hearty appetite and always welcomes more." Cora put in an aside, "I think he is angling for some sort of inducement. It's quite common business practice here, I'm afraid."

I said to Cora, "I know. I'll be quite happy to accommodate him if it helps things along. You won't want to know about this, though. Right?"

"Well, I think it would be best. Ah" The minister started speaking again. "The minister says he has a taste for some rather leaner meat. He is reminded of a meal that he had at the Embassy recently. When he had a most enjoyable time, he says, - ah - because he had the opportunity to sit next to your delightful interpreter. Perhaps you could arrange for the same meat to be made available." Cora looked a little confused. She turned to me. "I'm sorry," she said it's a little difficult to translate, The Kushtian language sometimes gets parts of speech muddled up and its not always easy to work out exactly what is being referred to.

"That's all right," I responded. "You are doing an excellent job. Tell the minister I will see what I can do. I think that's all we can hope for today."

Cora and the Minister exchanged words in Kushtian and he got to his feet holding out his hand. I shook hands with him and we left. The HumVee was waiting for us outside.

We got in and it headed back to towards the hotel, bouncing over the poorly paved road. Cora unfastened her veil with relief. "Thank you," I said. "You were most helpful."

"That's all right. It's what the Embassy is for. We can't be seen to be involved with inducements, though. That would be quite improper. I could, quite informally, find out what was on the menu for that dinner if that would help."

"Well, yes. I want make sure I that the Minister gets exactly what he was hoping for." I smiled at Cora, convinced that while translating accurately she had completely failed to grasp the meaning of my discussions with the Minister.

"Yes," she said looking puzzled for a moment. "Although, now I come to think about that dinner I'm almost certain we had fish." She grinned sheepishly. "I'm sorry," she said, "I Think I may have got this in a bit of a muddle. Still while we're talking

about dinner, how about if I take you out for something tomorrow night? The Ambassador is always keen for us to be building contacts with new companies out here."

"Good heavens, Ms Argyll," I said with a smile. "It sounds like you're propositioning me. But that seems like a great idea. I'd like it."

"OK," she said, "I'll catch you about 7, if that's OK."

"Fine," I said, though somehow I thought she wasn't going to make it to our meeting.

Chapter 30 : On The Road Again

I spent most of the following morning at the hotel, talking on the phone to Freddie. He wasn't keen on a pick up without doing a proper background check first but he did want to help out the Minister. In the end we agreed to go ahead. I took a short call from the Minister. He'd just wanted to check that I'd understood his point of view from our previous meeting. I had. Did I think I could provide a solution. I did. Would it help if he got me some assistance from the Interior Ministry? It would. They were very helpful. I was more than confident.

I had one other phone call. It was from Rick. He thought I'd want to know that Rachel had gone over the wire. He sounded pretty embarrassed about it. So was Sebastian. It was him that she'd jumped to get out.

The way Rick told it; Rachel had a problem with her computer. Sebastian had been working to sort it out. Rachel had come across very grateful and he'd decided to take advantage of the fact that they'd given her the full set of slave skills when they conditioned her. The only problem is that it looked like some of the conditioning didn't take for some reason. Seb had Rachel strip off and was getting naked himself. He had one leg out of his pants, and was balancing to try and get the other one out when she crashed him against the wall. The cell walls are tough. She was luckier with Seb than she was with me. It was late at night, some of the security guys on CCTV watch were dozing and it was about an hour later when they found him. She had used her stockings to hog tie him and then she'd gagged him with her panties and her bra. He was grunting like mad by the time someone had worked out he was missing and gone looking for him. It looked like Rachel had used Seb's key tag to get out and had got clear of the Prep Centre. Harry was spitting mad, he'd had to pull a team off collections to go looking for her.

There wasn't much I could do about it from where I was and I guessed that everyone involved would be having a discussion about their shortcomings with Freddie. I asked Rick to give me an update when he knew more.

That afternoon, as I later heard, Cora Argyll was heading back to her apartment in her Mini Cooper on the stretch of gravel and potholes that passed for the Kolin ring road. With irritation she saw a police car behind her. The flashing blue lights meant the same in Kushtia as they did anywhere. She pulled over and stopped.

She'd looked back at the police officer coming towards her car. It was a woman. "Well, that's good to see," thought Cora. Then looking at the overly tight black shirt and the mirrored, aviator sunglasses, "but why do they always think they have to look like something out of Police Academy?"

The police officer came up to her window. "Could you get out of the car, please madam," she said with the growling accent of a Kushtian from the far north of the country.

"What is the trouble officer?" Cora asked.

"If you could just get out of the car, please." Cora did as she was asked and handed over her driving license and Embassy papers. "You were driving rather erratically, madam," the officer said, "all over the road."

"I was avoiding the pot holes officer," Cora responded. "You can see what the road is like."

"Well maybe madam. But I would like to test whether you have been drinking." Her hand went to a pouch on her belt and she took out a breathalyser.

"It's nonsense officer. I know the law in Kushtia, I know you have a zero-alcohol limit for driving. I'm a British diplomat."

"Yes, madam, I saw the CD plates on your car. I'm afraid that we find some diplomats do not have great respect for our local laws and customs. Irrespective of your diplomatic immunity we cannot have drivers under the influence of alcohol. Please blow into the breathalyser."

"Oh, this is absurd. But very well," she'd said grabbing the box.

"Just blow steadily into the tube." She did so. The officer took the breathalyser from her and peered at it. "Oh, dear," she said. "I'm afraid this is not good. You see this number here – this is far too high. We'll have to get this checked. I'm sure there is no problem really but if you could come back to my car we can go to the Police Station."

"But, but, its nonsense," said Cora, protesting, as the police officer took her by the arm.

"Yes, madam, but I'm afraid you must come along with me," she said taking her towards the police car.

"Well, all right but you must contact the Ambassador."

"Of course. We can do that at the station. I'm sure we'll clear things up quickly there anyway." The officer reached to another pouch on her belt. "I need to handcuff you, please, Madam."

"That's not necessary officer."

"I'm sorry madam, but it is the procedure. You see my partner will have to drive your car back and I can't have a suspect in the car with me on my own unless they are handcuffed. Our procedures are quite clear. I'm sure you understand."

Reluctantly Cora held out her wrists. The officer snapped one cuff on but pulled her wrists behind her back before fastening the second. Cora yelled as the cuff locked shut. "Sorry Madam, I'm sure we will sort this out. Now get in the car please." The officer helped Cora into the back of the car holding the top of her head to make sure she cleared the roof as she got in. Getting into the front she drove off with Cora fuming quietly but helplessly on the back seat.

Ten kilometres down the road the car pulled off at a petrol station. The car parked at the back. "I need the rest room," said Cora's driver. "You'll be OK there."

And that was where I found Cora when I drove up alongside in the battered pickup truck I had hired. She seemed pretty pleased to see me until she saw what I aimed to do with the roll of tape I was carrying. Once I got it over her mouth I couldn't tell whether she was swearing at me in English or Kushtian. I was certain though that it was one or the other. I got her out of the police car and into the front seat of my truck and strapped her in. With her veil arranged across her face no one could see she was gagged. Then there just remained the question of the commission payment. I tossed the package as agreed onto the front seat of the police car; two genuine Wonderbra's each for the girls, one in black, one in white, '36B' for the arresting officer, '34C' for her partner. It seemed like a good deal to me but apparently they were a rarity out there. I dropped Cora off as agreed at a corrugated iron shed that backed onto a wire fenced compound on the edge of the airport. I added some ropes to Cora's ankles to stop her wandering off. The sign on the compound said Kushtian Ministry of Trade : Bonded Stores. She was still pretty peeved as I padlocked the door

My meeting later that day with the Trade Minister went exceptionally well. There was one interruption. Apparently the Interior Minister had been asked by the British Ambassador to try to track down a diplomat that appeared to have gone missing. There was some question that she may have been kidnapped by insurgents from over the border. The Ambassador was most upset. The Ambassador was concerned that nothing should interfere with my negotiations. The Interior Minister promised an investigation. I was happy to reassure the Ambassador that I saw no reason for this to interfere with my business discussions. I hoped that no harm had come to the diplomat concerned. Apparently her car had been found near the border. Burned out, it appeared. The Ambassador agreed it was not a safe place for his staff to be travelling to and, of course, he would advise his staff not to do so in future.

The Trade Minister, apologised but was unable to spend much time with me. He was anxious to get on with his business of state because he had a relaxing evening planned at home that day. He was however, very happy that Clegg Enterprises should handle Kushtia's future requirements for shipments from the UK. His secretary would draw up the appropriate license, he said. If I liked he could have her deliver it to my hotel that evening.

That seemed an excellent idea to me. We shook hands and I left him.

To while away what was left of the afternoon I had a visit planned. I'd promised to see the Kalinin's son as part of the trip and took the opportunity to call in on him.

"Mr Larry," he beamed as I walked in through the ornate archway that led into his palace from the courtyard. "Welcome, indeed. Welcome. Will you take tea with us?"

I was happy to accept his hospitality. He showed the way to an opulent room, its walls covered with elaborate patterned mosaics. He reclined on a bench along one wall and invited me to do the same. He clapped his hands. Ginger, the two Mel's and Emma appeared in full harem dress, wrists and ankles shackled, and knelt before us.

"They look well," I said. "Married life must suit them."

"It certainly suits me," the Kalinin's son responded. "They are a source of constant delight to me. Tea!" he ordered and the girls scuttled away, giggling.

"I did not see Victoria," I remarked, and then, recalling my visit to Wales, said, "Surely she is not still locked in your casket?"

"Ah, no, Mr Lawrence. I must admit that she, of all of my wives, found it the most difficult to adapt, but now all is well between us. She has some very remarkable skills which I have found most valuable now we are back in our home country."

"How so?"

"Well, Mr Lawrence, you must understand about Kushtia that our society is very much oriented towards the desires of the men and the need for women to meet those needs." There was more giggling as the four girls came back in clutching trays with tea, cups and sweet meats. They knelt between us, pouring tea and passing food to us. "So in our society if a man should submit to a woman it would be a cause of great scandal."

"I can see that," I responded. Emma was sliding towards me on her belly, somehow managing to hold a plate aloft. She sat up and offered the plate to me. I took one of the cakes from it and nodded my thanks.

"Well, wife Victoria has a talent that is very rare here. She can bend a man to her will. Not, of course, a strong man like myself,"

"Of course"

"But a weaker man, then yes. And of course if I should come to know of such things it gives me a great power over the man too. And such power can be useful in a country like this."

"So you encourage Victoria to exploit these men?"

"Not encourage - require! She is subject to me as my wife and she does as I will. And like a good wife she is a great help to her husband."

"And that is why she is not here now?"

"Indeed. Let us see if we can find her." He clapped his hands and his other four wives made to collect up the tea things and clear them away. "Come through here." He led the way through a beaded curtain that hung over another arched doorway, along a tiled and mirrored corridor and on to a balcony overlooking a lower room. There, Victoria was reclining on a couch in a room as luxuriously furnished as the ones we had just left. She was running the leather thongs of a flogger through her fingers. Crouching at her feet, providing an attentive foot massage, was a naked, hooded, Kushtian male with a collar around his neck and a golden chain that ran from a strap around his penis to Victoria's hand. The Kalinin's son clapped his hand and Victoria looked up towards us. She waved and leapt to her feet, knocking her slave over as she did so. She tied his leash to a ring beside her couch and ran to greet us.

As she reached the top of the stairs and approached us it became apparent that her costume was even richer than that of the others. She was dressed in a black costume decorated with gold chains and coins. Her veil – unlike the others she wore a veil – was black as well, covering all of her face except her eyes. It draped from a gold chain across her face down in two long cascades of silk that linked back to rings set in her pierced nipples. As she reached us she fell to her knees. "Husband!" she greeted the Kalinin's son enthusiastically. "And Mr Lawrence!"

"Greetings wife," the Kalinin's son said. "How are your duties today?"

"You can see, husband," she gestured to the man who was kneeling, head bowed, totally motionless, as he had been left. "He is completely at my command. And so he is completely at your command too."

"Very good. It would suit my purpose if he were to leave at the end of this afternoon aching to be with you again and distracted from his purpose this evening. I expect to meet him later."

"Very good, husband, I shall do as you wish." She put her hands together and bowed before each of us before returning to her couch. We watched from the gallery as the man looked up at her return. She gestured with a finger to her left foot and he bent to it with his tongue. She lay back, reaching out for a piece of fruit from the golden plate that stood beside the couch. She looked up at us as she did so and gave an exaggerated wink.

"You see what an asset she is to me. Truly, Mr Lawrence, you are helping to re-establish our dynasty. Even my father sees what an asset my wives are. He will be persuaded to let me have more soon, I know."

"I hope we can help you in that quest," I said.

"I am sure, Mr Larry, I am sure. You have shown your skills in that area, why should I turn to others. Besides, I still remember some of those others that you suggested when we first met." He gave me an exaggerated wink. I smiled in response, happily pondering the opportunity for further business.

"Things have turned out well for your father. Good fortune has seen him to his new position."

"Come now, Mr Larry, do not be naïve. Good fortune had little to do with it. Fortune is like a precious metal, first you have to smelt it from the ore and that takes effort. Fortune only comes to those that seek it."

"I believe the Kalinin's gift to the Councillors may have helped to smelt the ore of his fortune in this case," I said, happy to adopt the Kushtian allegory.

"Surely you do not think our councillors corruptible?" the son giggled conspiratorially.

"Not in the least," I said with mock indignation. "I merely suggest that the Council recognised the value of old traditions respected."

"Well these old traditions are working in other ways than even my father hoped. One of our poor councillors has become most unwell. I believe it to be the exertion. He is a very proud man; a very vigorous man. He was very potent in his youth, but now, in later years, it is not so easy for him and I fear his new wife has such enthusiasm."

"Which of them is it?"

"The one whose hair is like the sun setting through the dust of the autumn storms. Her appetites match and exceed the councillor's own. It is feared he may die."

"Oh dear," I said. "Will that cause your father difficulties?"

"Not at all. Quite the reverse. You see the councillor, knowing my fondness for women with auburn hair has bequeathed me her in his will, and that will mean I shall also take his position on the council."

"I thought the council was democratically elected."

"Of course, Mr Larry, of course. But you have to remember how democracy works. People vote for those that they feel ought to rule. Here if a man wills his wife to another, others will think that he is showing who should succeed him. As we say 'who follows me in the bed chamber, follows me in life'. There will be an election. But I will be surprised if I do not win." The Kalinin's son smiled.

"But still, as I say, I need to leave shortly. I have some things to prepare. You are most welcome to stay here of course. You must enjoy my hospitality. I suspect this is a little more comfortable than your hotel.

"I am expecting to receive something there this evening from The Trade Minister's secretary, otherwise I would be happy to accept."

"That is no problem. I will have word sent to his office. She will be instructed to deliver it here."

"As you wish. I gratefully accept."

"Excellent, I will send Emma to take care of you. She seemed particularly pleased to see you."

"You are most generous," I replied. It would at least be more entertaining than an evening in the hotel. The Kalinin's son's palace looked like it had a better stocked bar and Emma was likely to prove more entertaining than anything on TV Kushtia Channel One, Two or Three. Plus I needed something to take my mind off what was happening back in the UK with Rachel.

Chapter 31 : Emma's Contribution

The hospitality of the Kalinin's son was proving very agreeable. Emma joined me in one of the large bedrooms. She was sprawled on the canopied bed when I emerged from the shower.

She was wearing a stylised, emerald green, version of the Kushtian national costume, a beaded and jewelled bodice that left her midriff bare with a long panelled skirt split to the hip so as to reveal her legs as she rolled across the bed. She grinned as my towel slipped from my hips. "Excellent," she said, "I win!"

"What?" I said.

She pointed at my naked crotch. "Victoria said that you'd be really well hung."

"Oh thanks," I said. "Hang on; aren't you supposed to be the slave?"

"Pooh!" she said sitting up on her heels and leaning forward to display a cleavage that was doing it's best to help my insulted member to redeem its reputation. "Wives aren't slaves in Kushtia, they are valued possessions. Anyway, you owe us an explanation."

"Explanation?"

"We were a happy bunch of girls, enjoying making music and enjoying our own names. We meet Mr Impresario who seduces us with promises of bright lights and glamour. And instead we're stolen away, bought by a man that insists on calling us by our stage names and flown half way across the world to heaven knows where. I think that needs explanation."

"I don't remember the bit about bright lights and glamour," I said. "I think the best I offered was some better gigs. Isn't this a better gig?" I sat down on the bed beside her.

She smiled, "Well it's better than that pub in Southwark that's for sure and our husband's cute enough. Except we have to perform as the band – he's got this karaoke machine and we all have to turn out in the gear. Getting here was completely shite as well."

"Bad flight?" She seemed quite happy for me to run my hand up her leg in the general direction of her thigh.

"Not the flight, the bit before," she said. "The being bundled up into boxes, the being fucked whenever anyone felt like it without so much as a please or thank you, the beatings and the chains. That was the shite bit."

"Yeah well, when the Kalinin decides on something for his son, he likes people to go for it." My fingers were tracing a pattern across her belly. Her body was responding to my touch even if she wasn't saying anything to acknowledge the fact.

"Still, all we were ever in it for was the money and the glamour and this," she waved at the opulence of the room's décor, "looks like money and glamour to me."

My hand was on the fastening of her bodice. "How do the others feel about it?"

"Mel C probably took it hardest, but even she's coming round. She found the rape and the humiliation hard. But we all looked after her. Mel B's been like a bitch on heat with hubby; she's pregnant, would you believe, though hubby doesn't know yet. Ginger – well she's just good for a laugh anywhere and here's no different. And Vicky, she's has found her own little niche."

"Yes, I saw," I said. "What will happen to the baby? Mel's?"

"Can you imagine? If it's a boy? The first son of the first son of the Kalinin? It will be a major state celebration. Kushtia may be a democracy but that doesn't mean they don't still have a yearning for the old days of a hereditary dynasty. If it's a girl, well, she'll have a wonderful life here in the palace and marry well. Either way the child will have five doting mothers, more when our husband marries again, and probably quite a few brothers and sisters."

The hooks on her bodice fastening finally came loose. I pushed the garment aside exposing her breasts. I cupped one in my hand. Finally she acknowledged my touch.

"That's nice," she said, "I like that. And," she reached out with her hand for my now well stiffened cock, "you seem to be liking it too."

"Yes, the only question is how far your husband's hospitality extends," I said sliding closer to her.

"Kushtian traditions of hospitality are strong. The first Kalinin said 'for my guest; my property is his'. Those traditions are upheld to this day."

"And you are your husband's property?"

"Oh yes. Even allowing for the conventions here, the wedding ceremony is quite explicit. The husband vows 'I take this wife in ownership to keep and care for as my finest horse or hawk', and the wife answers 'I pledge myself to be kept and cared for.' Besides, I'm assuming that a sum of money changed hands for arranging the match between us and our husband. In Kushtia

it is usual for the husband to pay the father of the wife but I suppose all traditions have to be updated. Still," her finger nails raked up the underside of my cock, "don't worry about going further than my husband would wish." She shrugged off her unfastened bodice and leant towards me waving her head backwards and forwards so that her long blonde hair brushed sensuously across my crotch. She moved her mouth towards my cock. "Well, I may have won my bet with Vicky but it seems to come up to expectations with a little encouragement. I guess I win both ways."

I leant back and let her bring her lips down around my shaft. I didn't know whether she had learned her techniques before she got to Kushtia or after but she was certainly more than competent. "Well," I said, arching my back to push forward to meet her, "you're well able to keep your head up in the fellatio stakes. Or should that be down?"

She coughed with laughter and pulled away.

"Don't stop," I said.

"Then don't make me laugh, or you'll end up being bitten," she answered, licking her lips and bending her head to her task once more.

I was still enjoying Emma's skills as a fellatrix when the Minister's secretary arrived. She appeared in the room wearing a long sleeved white blouse and a floor length black skirt, her face veiled, of course under a long white scarf. She seemed to see nothing odd in Emma and myself stretched out on the bed.

Without saying anything, she passed me two envelopes, one large and thick, the other small and addressed to me. I opened it. Emma carried on trying to distract me.

I read the contents: "My Friend," it said, "Thanks to your ingenuity I shall be enjoying a pleasant evening. I hope you will accept my thanks and the use of my secretary, Ekrana, for the evening. She may lack the sophistication of some western girls but I think you will find her amusing, nevertheless. She has also prepared a license for Clegg Enterprises but I suggest you review it at some other time; you will have plenty of other things to occupy you tonight. With best regards."

I finished reading the letter and looked up to discover an almost naked Ekrana standing before me. She was still veiled, of course. Emma broke into a fit of giggles at the sight of my astonished look. I threw a cushion at her.

I spoke to Ekrana. "Do you speak English?" I asked.

She nodded. A laughing Emma got to her feet and ran to Ekrana's side. She lifted the secretary's veil sufficiently to reveal the large rubber ball strapped into her mouth.

"Can you take it off?" I asked. She nodded. "Then do so, please." She started to fumble with the strap, Emma helped her and the ball came loose from her mouth. Ekrana quickly adjusted her veil to cover her face properly again but allowed the scarf to fall across her shoulder and down her back, giving me an uninterrupted view of her naked body. I felt the least I could do was to look appreciatively. Her skin was darker than that of many of the Kushtian's I had met and had the soft look of a girl not long out of adolescence. Her long dark hair spilled out from around her veil; coal-black, almond shaped eyes looked unflinchingly at me. "Did the Minister say how you should entertain me?" I said.

"Don't be silly," said Emma, leading Ekrana across to the couch. "This is Kushtia. She'll have been told to do whatever you please."

"Thank you, Madam," said Ekrana, haltingly. "It is as you say."

"Madam!" I laughed, Emma was hardly older than the secretary.

"Don't laugh," Emma chided, "I am a wife and so warrant the respect that becomes my status. Even if I wasn't the wife of the Kalinin's son, Kushtian girls are taught to hold a wife in almost as high esteem as a man. And in Kushtia the training is rather more subtle than in your 'Preparation Centre' – they know that women respond to other things than having the back of their heads rammed against the headboard of a bed. She'll do whatever I ask of her too."

"She'll go down on me?"

"Of course."

"Or you?"

"Yes, of course. Why? Would you like to watch us play together?"

"Yes," I said, "of course."

Emma gave a look of mock disapproval. "If that would amuse you," she responded. "But as Ekrana is manacled, I should be chained as well. In Kushtia it is most improper for a wife to appear less subservient than a femnyette - oh sorry, it's the word for an unmarried woman in Kushtian, it means "woman not yet a wife" - if they are in the presence of a man. A Kushtian wife prides herself on her subservience to her husband and those her husband chooses for her."

"A fine idea," I said. Emma led Ekrana towards an ornate chest. She lifted the lid to display an array of chains, straps, whips, paddles and floggers.

"This is called the Cabinet of the Marriage Bed," Emma explained. "By tradition, the father of the bride provides the husband with the tools by which his new bride will be ruled. These were a present from your Mr Clegg to my husband. Ekrana, please use these wrist cuffs on me."

Ekrana took the cuffs from Emma and fastened them about her wrists. As she did so, she kissed each hand in turn. Emma, seeing my approval of the girls' intimacy, encouraged her to continue. It did not take long until all three of us were tangled together on the bed; the two girls pleasuring one another and competing to see which could delight me more. I suppose I should have had some feelings of guilt – what with leaving Tricia behind and all – but I have to say I managed to overcome them. And after all I was only trying to get to grips with Kushtian culture.

Chapter 32 : Trade Ministry

"Minister," I said, nursing a hangover from a great deal too much Kushtian beer and probably an excess of unaccustomed exercise with Ekрана and Emma. "I hope you won't think me rude if I do not stay long; especially after your generosity with your secretary. My flight leaves shortly and much though I have enjoyed my visit here I must return to England if I am to put in hand the preparations for implementing our agreement."

"Of course, of course," the Trade Minister replied. "I just wanted you to see a couple of things before you went back. Firstly, I thought you might like to see my new house guest."

I assumed he was talking about Cora and, in that, I was right. He showed me out of his lounge and down a corridor towards the back of the house. Steps ran down to a basement area. Along one wall were four identical doors, three were open showing small, windowless, rooms beyond. The fourth was closed. The Minister took a key from the pocket of his jacket and unlocked the door. It swung slowly open. Inside, sat on the floor, chained by her neck to the wall and recognisable by her long dark hair in spite of her veil, was Cora Argyll. The growling grunt that she gave as the door swung back told me that she was still gagged behind her veil. Her wrists and ankles were shackled but the veil, the gag and the chains were all that she wore. The only other thing in the small room was a small bucket.

"I thought you might like to see my newest acquisition," the Minister said. "In Kushtia there is a long tradition of public officials having concubines. The pressures of public duty are onerous. Holders of public office need to be able to relax. They have their wives to raise their families and run their households but for more recreational female company, a Minister needs more than wives." Cora grunted her objections furiously. "They are a great aid to the process of public administration. I may have a difficult meeting. Perhaps one of my colleagues is trying to pursue a misguided policy. There may be a complicated matter of legislation to consider. All these things are best dealt with if the Minister is relaxed and in good humour. Ministerial concubines provide an important public benefit. I have no difficulty in justifying to myself the cost to the public purse. And since we expect to do much business with your country, I felt it would be only helpful to have one of your compatriots in my service."

"She seems a little less than willing, Minister," I said, noting how Cora was now almost growling through her gag.

"It will be a while," the Minister said with an air of regret, "until she can take up her duties fully. I fear that western girls need much help in learning our local ways. They have many mistaken ideas and it takes time for them to see the value of the Kushtian culture. Fortunately Kushtian tradition says that once a woman has been chosen as a concubine the man can take his pleasures with her as he will, so she can still be of use as she becomes better acquainted with her new role. Of course, a concubine is not a wife; she still has to wear her veil."

"I trust that will not be too much of an inconvenience."

"It has not proved so, this far," said the Minister with a grin. "In spite of her relative inexperience, she has managed to bring me pleasure on four occasions since she arrived here yesterday. I have managed to find parts of her body unencumbered by her veil. She is most lively in her service. She feigns resistance of course but that is only to be expected. She knows a Kushtian man values the sense of conquest. I can tell she will soon be able to fulfil many of her duties. An excellent start."

The Minister walked across to where Cora was sitting on the floor. He grabbed her by the hair and pulled her to her feet. She grunted and tried to break free. "I wanted to ask your advice."

"Of course Minister," I responded.

"Do you think I should have one or both of her nipples pierced?" He pushed her trailing veil back to give us both a clear view of her breasts. They were well rounded; firm, like small grapefruit.

I gave the matter some thought. I hardly considered myself an expert but I was enjoying the prospect of the almost naked Cora. She tried to wriggle free of the Minister's grasp. He laughed and wrenched her head back. "Both, I think Minister. I think she would look well carrying rings or perhaps small bells to announce her presence."

"A fine thought, my friend, a fine thought. I shall take your advice." Cora groaned in despair. The Minister took no notice and spun her around. "And her owner's mark? Here?" he asked pointing first to Cora's left buttock and then to the right. "Or here?"

"You might consider marking her belly," I ventured entering into the spirit of the discussion in awe that Cora evidently found as disturbing as the Minister found engaging. "If you intend to use her mainly from the front, I think it is nice to see the mark there. Like the badge in the middle of a car's steering wheel."

The Minister laughed. "A splendid idea. I shall suggest the Minister of Transport does the same with his concubines."

I thought back to the circumstances of Cora's acquisition. "Will it not be difficult keeping her here? With your contacts with the Ambassador and so on."

"No. She will not remain here in Kolin. I have a country estate. She will take up residence there at first. There is adequate accommodation for her while she is learning her place. Not perhaps as comfortable as here in town, but she will be able to learn her new skills, un-distracted by the concerns of the city."

I looked at the bare concrete walls of the room that Cora currently occupied and wondered what could be less comfortable. Cora gave a gagged moan of distress to the Minister's amusement. "You see, she retains her spirit. That is good. Rest quietly

girl, you will have the opportunity to pleasure me later, do not worry." Cora squealed in frustrated defiance. The Minister grinned again.

"Come now," he said. "We must not disturb her meditation any longer. A new concubine must spend much time in thoughts of how she will bring her man pleasure. And besides there was something else I wanted to show you."

He led the way back upstairs and back into his lounge. From behind his desk he pulled out a battered black brief case. "It was this," he said.

I took the case from him and looked at it. On the flap it carried an embossed version of the United Kingdom's coat of arms, the lion and unicorn rampant, supporting a shield and helmet. "Ms Argyll's case, I imagine," I said. I had seen her with something similar when we first met.

"We assume so. It was found in the back of her car."

"Should it not be returned to the Ambassador?" I asked.

"Yes, yes, I am sure it should but I thought you might like to see inside it first."

I undid the catch and pulled back the flap. I tipped the contents of the bag onto the table in front of me. The collection of file folders was hardly surprising. What was more unexpected was the contents of a small leather pouch – six cable ties, a pair of handcuffs, a roll of duct tape, a hypodermic syringe in a case and a series of grainy, black and white photographs of me.

"Ah," I said. "I see what you mean."

"I take it you were unaware of Ms. Argyll's intentions?"

"You take it correctly. I think I need to discuss this development with Mr Clegg when I get back. I trust it won't interfere with your enjoyment of your new concubine."

The Minister laughed "Not at all, not at all, Mr Ross. We have a saying here, 'a concubine's life begins with her man'. The young lady's past is of no concern to me. We must both look to the future. Of course we will let Mr Clegg know if she should happen to mention any piece of information that might indicate the reason for her interest in you. However, you had better be careful between here and the airport. To assist you, my friend the Interior Minister has arranged to provide an escort. I suggest you take the Ministerial car from here. I will have your bags collected from the hotel. We take a dim view of those who seek to interfere with our trading partners."

"Thank you Minister," I said, relieved.

"And here is your escort." A woman police officer came in. Well stacked, I thought. I wondered if she was the '34C' I'd left the Wonderbra for. "Sergeant Dobranin here will see you get safely to the airport. She's been doing an excellent job for us, helping with our crack down on drunken driving," said the Minister, so I realised, of course, that she was.

Sergeant Dobranin smiled. She took her sunglasses from her shirt pocket and put them on.

"Splendid," I said as Dobranin led the way to the Minister's Hummvee. "You must tell me about your latest arrest." I hoped that what she had to say would amuse me. I wanted something to take my mind off the Rachel situation and what looked like my own problems as well.

Chapter 33 : Back To Earth

The Air Kushtia return flight wasn't much better than the flight out. I emerged from the Arrivals Channel in Heathrow Terminal 3 to see Harry waiting. "Hi," I said.

He grunted, "I was your wet nurse, now I'm your babysitter. Clegg thought you might need a lift."

"Well thanks. I'm sure I'm fine," I responded.

Harry grabbed one of my bags. "Not with your track record. Anyway you need to be in the Whitechapel office." He pointed to a car parked outside the terminal. I got in the back, Harry followed. Tricia was driving.

"Hi," she said, "welcome back. Good trip?" She wasn't too effusive, neither of us liked to parade our relationship while we were at work. It wasn't like it was a secret or anything; we just preferred to get on with the day job when we were working.

"Thanks," I said. "Yeah sure. It's a very different place."

Tricia pulled out of the airport and down onto the M4, heading into London. "How's things?" I asked Harry.

He grunted in response. "If you're worried about your writer we've got her back."

"Great," I said, "Did she get far?"

"No, not too far but we had a hell of a job getting her back. She found a way to fuck up the chip in her collar. Seb's still trying to work out how she did it. It meant we couldn't use tracers. We had to use dogs for fuck's sake! We haven't done that for ages. You remember that farm we went to on your first pick up? We keep a few there but they were definitely off-form. First work they'd done for a while and too many dog biscuits, if you ask me."

I looked down at my own waist line. The past few days hadn't helped. The Kushtian's hospitality meant I'd put on a few pounds and the exercise with Emma and Ekran had had enough of a compensating effect.

"Still in some ways it was fun. It's good to go back to first principles occasionally. I haven't had to do any field tracking for a while. I guess she'd thought she'd be OK without the collar chip, she didn't go far. We were pretty certain she hadn't got clear, we'd have heard through some of Freddie's contacts in the police if she'd got far and that would get very complicated. We thought she was probably holed up in the woods at the back of the Prep Centre; picked up some tracks going through one of the gates – girly shoes are a bit distinctive. We thought she'd be waiting for the hue and cry to die down. So we put on a show, moved a couple of squads through the woodland, crashing about and making a noise with the dogs. Then we left things quiet for a day."

The car pulled off the M4. Unusually the traffic was moving and we were soon heading on through Hammersmith and down the Euston Road. "And then she walked out?"

"Not quite," Harry went on, "but very nearly. We left a few heat sensors around the woods and put in a couple of guys with night vision goggles. They picked her up moving around near the northern edge. Anyway to cut a long story short, they flushed her out with the dogs, we had a team by the edge of wood and she took a tranquilliser dart in the butt as she tried to track out towards the road along a hedge. Went down as easy as you like. Well, apart from the yell of "No!" as she realised she'd been hit. I had to discourage the guys from bringing her back swinging by her wrists and ankles from a pole. They get a bit gung ho with things like that. She's back in storage now and Rick's team are having a very detailed discussion with her about just what has gone wrong with the prep programme."

"How's Freddie been about it?"

"Surprisingly relaxed. But then it's the first runner we've had in ages. I think maybe he feels that you need one now and then to get people back on their toes. He handed out a few ear blisterings though. People won't forget for a while. Plus the security teams have been having regular drills again."

"They'll not be happy with that."

"Well, maybe not but it's the only way. Anyhow, I hear you've been busy too."

I saw Tricia's head give a twitch of interest. "Just a pick up for the Trade Minister," I said, not keen to discuss Cora before I'd had a chance to show Freddie what I'd found in her case. "And I didn't have to do too much."

"Just as well given your previous performances," said Harry with a smirk. "If you're going to be doing this sort of thing you'll need some training."

"I wasn't planning on it become part of the job description," I said and looked out to see that we had arrived. Tricia stopped the car outside the office in Whitechapel. Harry and I got out. I gave Tricia a smile. She waved back and drove off.

We pushed passed a group of people on the pavement. One of their number was holding forth waving at the surrounding buildings. "And just here," he said, "were plotted some of the most violent crimes ever recorded against women."

I was looking over my shoulder, puzzled as we made our way into the building. "Jack the Ripper Tour," said Harry.

"I was worried there for a minute," I said, "I thought someone had done too good a job promoting our activities."

Five minutes later I was in Clegg's office. Ellie was with him. "You're going to find things a bit dull after Kushtia, I suspect," said Clegg.

"Well everyone was very hospitable," I responded with a smile.

"We got your writer back."

"So I hear. I suppose Seb's OK?"

"Oh yes. I think he got over his encounter with Rachel quicker than his encounter with me. They'll all have learned a few things from that."

"I guess so."

"And you were able to help out the Trade Minister, I understand. He called me. He seemed very happy."

"I thought it was the right thing to do."

Ellie got to her feet, stubbed her cigarette in Clegg's ashtray and blew a stream of smoke from her cigarette in the general direction of the window. "I'll let you boys get on with talking shop." She said. "I've got some stuff to do."

"OK," said Freddie.

"Can I drop a license agreement off with you later?" I asked. "It's something the Kushtian's gave me. It'll give us preferred supplier status out there."

Ellie gave me a pained look. "I can just imagine what Kushtian legal documents are like. I'll have a look at it but heaven knows what we'll have to do to make sure we're properly covered."

"Do what you can, Ellie," Freddie chipped in. "This could be good for us. If we're not having to invest I don't think we'll want to beat them up to hard on terms and conditions. Let me know if there's anything really troublesome."

"Sure," said Ellie. "I'll mug up on their legal system. Larry, if you can drop the license by when you've finished here."

"Sure," I said. Ellie left us. I turned back to Clegg. "You said the Minister was happy."

"Well yes. It caused a few ripples in the Diplomatic Corps, though. They tend to be a bit sensitive about that sort of thing you know."

"Sorry. I hadn't realised they were off limits. She might have worked out what was going on, you know. I mean she translated the whole thing with the Minister's tongue hanging out and practically dribbling on her."

"Yes, the Trade Minister mentioned that she wasn't the sharpest pencil in the box."

"There was one other thing."

"Uh huh?"

"You hadn't told me this was going to be fucking dangerous." I dumped Cora's pouch on the table between us. Clegg opened it and peered at the contents.

"Of course it's fucking dangerous," he said calmly. "To the best of my reckoning you've been involved in the abduction of twenty two women – twenty three including your friend in Kushtia - since joining us. You're doing things that will mean some of our competitors feel a bit more squeezed than they would like to. In this business they don't just write a letter to the local chamber of trade if they feel the competition is getting a bit keen. I'd take it as a complement if I were you."

I grunted, unconvinced. Clegg went on. "Still never mind about that now. I'll get Harry to look at it later. I want you to sit in on today's executive committee meeting and give us an update on the marketing projects."

It was the first time I'd sat in on an Exec. Clegg had handled the meetings up until then.

It was about as entertaining as these things usually are – that is not at all, except for the usual combination of aggression between peers and fawning to the boss. What was interesting though was the extent to which some of my initial conceptions seemed to be being borne out by data.

Rick was there to run through what was going on in the Prep Centre. He trotted out a series of statistics on cell occupancy, time from intake to shipment and internal shipments versus external shipments. He spent quite a while on the tightening up of security measures after Rachel's run. He seemed to be well on top of the logistical issues but the numbers sounded like they were going the wrong way to me. Harry's review of field operations didn't have any surprises and he seemed happy with the

new intake of trainees, which I assumed included Tricia. The CFO – I'd not met him before - gave a run down on the finances and, while cash intake was down, costs seemed to be under control. He was complaining that IT were spending too much time on research projects and not enough on the new accounting system. Freddie listened sympathetically and smiled at me.

Brian's pitch on the situation in sales didn't get such an easy ride. Freddie had evidently asked him for some numbers on average prices and on how they compared with the number of buyers present at the sales. He hooked up his PC to the projector and started to run through an interminable number of graphs, pie charts and other diagrams. The presentation didn't make encouraging viewing. As I had suggested; the fewer the buyers, the lower the margins. And it was evident from Brian's data that the number of buyers had been steadily falling over the previous year. What was worse, when Freddie pressed him, he didn't appear to have any thoughts on what to do about it. Freddie concluded the session with a "well let's hear if Marketing can get us out of this. Larry can you take us through what you've been up to..."

Brian looked pretty pissed off as I got to my feet. Elly, who had sat through the whole meeting without saying a word, leant across and whispered something to Clegg. "Morning everyone," I said. "I'm going to have to apologise to those of you who were looking forward to a real marketing presentation but I haven't got any slides, so no death by PowerPoint, I'm afraid. I just thought I'd talk things through if that's OK?"

The rest of the meeting looked relieved.

I ran through the SWOT analysis just as I had with Freddie and then put a bit more detail on what I intended to do about it. I didn't mention the idea of closing down the Sales Centre, I thought I'd leave that to Freddie at some other time. I didn't go through any of Rachel's stuff as I hadn't really had a chance to review it properly but I gave them some feedback on the first experiences with using an account management approach with the Kalinin; how the initial contact had led to the acquisition of the five All Spice girls and then the extra six for the ministers and the Jewel Questors project and not one auction for any of them. And now there was the opportunity for an overall contract with Kushtia. I ran the video and gave them a demonstration of the web site. "Sorry if this has held up your accounting system," I said to the CFO.

"No problem," he said. "This is good stuff, but we're going to have to work out how to fund it properly."

"Yes," said Freddie, "I think you're right. We must give it some thought. Brian, you need to work out how you're going to support this too." He scowled but said nothing.

Back in my office I thought about the meeting. I'd felt it went well although Brian had a bit of a hard time. I didn't really have time to worry about him though. There was an email for me from Steve Glennis, forwarded from the encrypted area of the member's web site. "I've got that project for you, we talked about," it said. "I've been through the search facilities – great stuff, by the way – and there isn't anything I can find. Give me a call when you're free and I'll run you through it."

I looked at my watch, six o'clock in the evening UK time. My body was somewhere over Turkey if I thought about it, for Steve on his Caribbean island it would be two o'clock in the afternoon. It was probably as good a time to call as any, I reckoned.

"Steve," I said, "It's Larry. You said you might need some help."

Steve was as friendly as ever. I asked him about his pony school. "That," he said, "brings us right to the point."

"I'd have thought you should be able to find suitable candidates on the site," I said. "You can specify the physical characteristics, hair colour, that sort of thing."

"No, that's not the problem," he said. "That's all fine. In fact I've put in a request through the site for a quote on a couple of dark mares, just for a different look, you know. No, what this is for is a carriage driver. I know the site picks up hobbies and interests but this is a bit specialised, I'm looking for someone to drive a carriage for me competitively and something to give the stables a bit of class, if you know what I mean."

I grunted in response and then asked, "How about looks?"

"Well, she'll need to be easy on the eye, obviously, but nothing too specific in that direction. Just if you're going trawling in the British aristocracy don't find me one of those women that looks more like a horse than the horses. When do you think you can give me some ideas?"

"We'll need to do some research," I said. "Let me get back to you in a week with some ideas."

"That'll be fine, Larry," Steve said. "Gotta go now though. Just heard the seaplane,"

"OK," I said, "talk to you soon."

Steve's call was good news as far as I was concerned. Clegg would be pleased that the new approach was generating business through the web site and for custom commissions. I had the report from Rachel to go through as well. At least she'd finished the reports on her interviews with Sukie before she went over the wall. There were pages of it.

On the other hand, I was more concerned about getting some sleep. After the flight back from Kushtia without any of the comforts that I'd had on the return from the Caribbean, I felt I was in need of a quiet evening.

That was until Tricia put her head around the office door. "You look like you need a good feed," she said. "Why don't I cook you something at the flat tonight?"

All of a sudden it seemed like a good idea. Even the comforts of Emma back in Kushtia seemed to have had something missing. "Yeah, sure, why not." I tossed her the keys. "I've got some stuff to finish up here but I'll be there by seven. Why don't you go on ahead?"

She caught the keys, smiled, and said, "see you later," as she left the office.

Chapter 34 : A Messy Apartment

As it happened she was wrong. It took me longer than I thought to finish up. The traffic was lousy. I was feeling guilty about how late it had got. It was almost nine o'clock.

When I got back to the flat the front door was ajar. "Naughty Tricia," I thought, "anyone could get in." It didn't take me a moment to realise that someone had, I hadn't seen anything as bad since Tricia trashed the bedroom during our practice burglary. It looked a similarly messy job, done to impress. Well I was impressed. What was worse Tricia wasn't there.

Something told me that calling the police wasn't a great idea but even so I was pretty wary about looking around. It didn't take too long to work out what had happened. You didn't need a degree in forensic science to work it out.

It looked like whoever had made this mess had snatched Tricia when she arrived and had hung onto her waiting for me to turn up. Then they'd got bored or worried and gone, taking her with them. One of the dining chairs had been dragged into the bedroom. There was the remains of duct tape strips around the bottom of each of the front legs of the chair, she'd obviously been taped to the chair at some point, one of her shoes lay beneath it. A screwed up wad of cloth and some strips of tape were the remains of a gag that I guessed had been changed before they took her away. A spent hypodermic lay in the rubbish from the upended waste basket. A heap of tissues soaked in blood suggested that someone hadn't had it too easy. I liked to think it was whoever had snatched her. The core of a roll of duck tape under the chair suggested that in spite of that they'd got their own way. Her handbag had been upended on the bed, its contents spread around.

I phoned Harry. "I need some help, I said as calmly as I could. "Can you get over here?"

To say that Harry wasn't happy when he saw the shambles would be putting it mildly. Certainly his exclamations as he rummaged through the muddle left me feeling sympathetic towards anyone that he linked to the events. He was even less amused when he heard about Cora and the events in Kushtia. "So you fucking knew you were at risk? And you let Tricia walk in here without warning her?"

"Well, I'd only just told Clegg about it and .. "

"Fucking great. One of my team is sitting fuck knows fucking where and all because you hadn't got round to cosying up with her and letting her know just what you'd been fucking about at in the mountains."

"Harry, it's not like that."

"In just what fucking way do you think it's not fucking like that?"

"Harry, it's not going to help us, is it? I'm as keen as you are to see her back."

He seemed to calm down a bit. "Yeah, well, OK sure. Look, who knew you were in Kushtia?"

"I dunno, a few people around the business. I hadn't made a secret about it around here. I've been trying to let people know how well this stuff has been going you know. Nobody outside the business apart from the Kushtians, though, as far as I know."

"So how did this Cora know to turn up to meet you in Kolin?"

"I guess the Kalinin spoke to the Ambassador or the Trade Minister asked for her." I told him the story of my first meeting with Cora at the hotel and the subsequent meeting with the Trade Minister

"But he didn't need a translator did he? So why would he have bothered? Although he obviously had the hots for her already."

"But he didn't need to invite her along to the meeting to set her up did he?"

"No, no, I guess not."

"I'll see what I can find out. My suggestion would be to stay out of the way for a while. Go find somewhere quiet where no one from this world is likely to find you. Check your mobile message box but do it from a landline. I'll get Freddie to leave you a message when it's safe to come out."

"I'd like to help to get Tricia back."

"Yeah well. I don't think that's a great idea unless there's no alternative. I mean, I know you've come on a bit but this could all get a bit messy and if there's going to be any mess with one of my team then I'll sort it out. Just lose yourself, right?"

"Hang on. Look, if they've snatched her to get at me, they're going to turn up with some sort of demand aren't they? I need to be around for that. If they can't reach me what will they do to Tricia?"

"Well, I dunno." Harry was considering my remarks when Freddie walked into the chaos.

"This is a mess, Harry," he said. I didn't think he meant my flat.

"Yeah, I'm going to fix it," said Harry.

"Larry," Freddie said, seeing my discomfort, "I think you need to let Harry handle this."

We were debating the point when my mobile beeped to say I had a new text message. It was from Tricia's number. "Larry," it said, "if you've been to the flat you'll know what this is about. Keep H & F out of it. TXT U L8R. T."

I showed it to Harry & Freddie. "Guess I can't really stay out of this."

Freddie looked at the phone and agreed reluctantly. "Well, it looks as if you're in it if we like it or not." Harry snorted. "I guess you'll just have to pick up the messages and play it as it seems." Suddenly he seemed to be losing interest. "No point in us complicating things. We'll only fall over one another. Maybe we'll be able to help." Harry tried to interrupt. "No, Harry, I think we'll back off on this one. Leave it to Larry. It's his problem. We've got enough to do."

I wasn't happy with that and Harry didn't look happy either but Freddie was insistent. I didn't see why Freddie was washing his hands of it. I had wanted to be involved with helping to get Tricia back but now it looked like I was on my own. I hadn't the faintest idea what I was going to do. I'd have to play it by ear.

"Now," said Clegg, changing the subject, "have you been able to do anything about that request from Steve Glennis? I wouldn't want us to fall down on that one."

I glowered at him. "Freddie, I've got other things on my mind."

"Sure, sure," he said "but you need to keep busy. You can't do anything about this for a while – see what you can do for Steve. Got to look after the customers."

Chapter 35 : Tracking Tricia

I hated to admit it but Freddie was right. There wasn't much else I could do after I had put the flat back together again so I went in to the office as usual. I reckoned the kidnappers would find me if they had something to say.

I tried to do some work on the Glennis request. I'm not a big fan of desk research, it's pretty dull to start with, but sometimes it's the only way to find out what you need to know. Normally I do this stuff to analyse markets; this time it was to look for a potential target but the principles are the same. You aim to gather up the right sources and then work through them looking for clues, linking things together. Since Freddie had OK'd my thoughts on including a focus on British middle and upper class targets as one of our market niches, I'd been building up a library of stuff that might help us understand the market better. I'd got a pile of back numbers of 'Country Life' and 'Horse and Hound' and a copy of "Debrett's Peerage & Baronetage". For this project I added a few copies of Carriage Horse – the magazine for the British Horse Driving Trials Association. After that it was a matter of flogging through them. Looking at Carriage Horse for accounts of event winners and championship holders; checking out the "Lady This" or "Honourable That" in Debrett's and rooting through the other magazines for pictures that might give some clue as to whether they passed the Steve Glennis "can I tell if this is a woman or a horse?" test.

At the end of it all I had four possible candidates. The favourite, mainly on looks – not in the least bit horsey, I thought – was Lady Angela Marchmont. I dashed off an email to Research to do me a full profile of her and the other three. It worried me a bit. I'd worked all morning and I'd hardly thought about Tricia at all.

Rick phoned to give me an update on Rachel. They'd had quite a few "assisted conversations" as he termed it. He reckoned they had quite a good fix on what had gone on as a result. Turns out she'd studied psychology at college – they'd done a module on some of the brain washing techniques used in the cold war. It was primitive stuff then but apparently we'd used the ideas as the basis for our initial preparation. Apparently Rachel was a big fan of the Ipress File – a book by Len Deighton and a movie in the sixties with Michael Caine. In the movie, Caine's character distracts himself from the brainwashing by using pain – he drives a nail into the palm of his hand during the brainwashing sessions. Rachel had been using the same approach, but without leaving any marks. She'd retreated into the pain and humiliation of her rapes, counting them off inside her head. They'd got her to vocalise it under sedatives. Rick said he'd play me the tapes. He thought that now he could fix her. It was good news, I guessed, but I was still thinking about my own problems. Getting the writer back on stream wasn't very high up the list.

My mobile beeped again later that evening. It was Tricia's number again, another text. "Dont 4get the shopping. We need some wine." I guessed that this was setting up some sort of a meeting and the local supermarket seemed as safe as anywhere as far as I was concerned. I needed some food anyway.

I took a trolley at the door and started making my way up and down the aisles. I got as far as the wine. I'd picked up a couple of bottles of Californian wine when a woman turned into the same aisle. As I went to move along the aisle she pushed her trolley across mine blocking it in. She smiled at me. "You look like you're looking for something," she said.

"I'm told supermarkets are a great place to pick up women," I said, "would you know anything about that?"

"Tricia said you had a sense of humour." She peered at the bottles in my trolley. "You'd be better off going for a Chilean or South African," she said, "you're really paying for the label with those."

"I don't drink enough wine to bother with cheap bottles," I said.

She ignored me. "Are there any of Harry's team around?" she asked.

"How would I know?" I said. "You'd be more likely to spot them than I am. He's pretty pissed about this. So is Freddie. But I haven't seen anything of them for a while."

"No," she said, not even bothering to look around. "They seem to have left you to swing. Do you want to see Tricia free?"

"Sure but I'm guessing that might be hazardous to my health. I'd like to be a hero but I find it a bit of a challenge."

"All right," she said, "here's the deal. Your lady is sitting someplace where she won't come to any harm. We go for a ride in my car and talk to someone. You get to see her."

"Talk?"

"Talk."

"That still sounds hazardous to my health. Why don't they just give me a phone call? You've got my number." Another woman turned into the aisle pushing a trolley that held enough shopping to feed a small army for a month.

"Excuse me," she said pushing between us and picking up a twelve pack of beer before walking on.

I watched as she disappeared around the end of the aisle. The woman I was talking to just smiled. "And the alternative?" I said.

"Alternative?" the woman looked puzzled.

"Usually there's an alternative. You do this or we'll do that?"

"Oh, yes, sorry. Well, if you put it like that. I guess my contact can take out their disappointment on her. That might not be pleasant."

I was beginning to feel backed into a corner, which I supposed was the idea, but I didn't want to take more chances than I needed to. "You won't mind if I just check whether or not you're carrying a weapon? It's just that I've had a number of unpleasant experiences with women in recent times."

"Help yourself," she said. "I'm sure that it's not uncommon for two people meeting like this to become entangled in an intimate embrace."

She was right, of course. This wasn't the place for a conventional frisk down but there were other ways to achieve the same result. I pushed her back against the rack of wine bottles in a reasonable simulation of a passionate grapple. I ran my hands down her body and across her tits. She pushed back against me, helping out and no doubt looking for just the sort of things I was looking for. I groped beneath her skirt, running my hands up the inside of her thighs. She gave a surprised start and pressed her lips against mine. I pushed my tongue between her lips. She kissed me back enthusiastically. Satisfied that she was carrying nothing that might cause me any problems, apart from a well built chest. I backed away.

"Satisfied?" she asked. "Only I thought you might have found something in my fillings, the way your tongue was going."

"Yeah," I said. "That's fine." I looked up to see two old ladies peering disapprovingly at us from the other end of the aisle. "Maybe we'd better go for that ride. I'm feeling more heroic by the minute." I turned my trolley towards the check out. "Where are we going then?"

"I shouldn't bother with the wine," she said. "There's plenty there if you fancy a drink." We both left our trolleys and headed out to the car park. "Now I think we were going for a drive." She gestured towards a dark saloon car. I followed her to it. She opened the door to the back. "My friend here will keep you company on the drive." A smartly dressed woman beckoned me inside with a smile that held no warmth at all. I slid onto the bench seat alongside her with considerable trepidation. The car pulled away.

The woman beside me in the back seat handed a scarf to me. "I wonder if you'd mind wearing this" she said, passing me a scarf.

"Around my neck?" I asked ingenuously.

"A blindfold," she said. "If you don't mind." I didn't see how it was likely to make things worse so I did as she asked. "Thank you," she said, politely. "That's most helpful."

We drove for an hour or more, I guessed. There wasn't any conversation. Then the car stopped. My back seat companion pulled off the blindfold. We were already inside a garage. I heard the door sliding shut behind us. The woman from the supermarket opened the door of the car and we both got out. She pointed to a door at the end of the garage. "Through there," she said. I opened it and went through into a darkened room. I wasn't really surprised when the door shut behind me with the disturbing clunk of a lock closing. It was pitch black.

It became brighter slowly as two red lamps in the ceiling began to glow. As the lights went up it became obvious that I was in a well equipped dungeon. The walls were lined with padded red leather, racks to one side held a selection of whips, tawses and floggers while pegs on the end wall held hanks of rope in various thicknesses and colours. I heard a quiet groan from above and behind me.

Swinging close to the ceiling, out of my reach, was a ball shaped steel cage. The cage was locked shut with a huge padlock. Inside, naked, shackled and ring gagged, struggled a helpless and indignant Tricia. She became more animated as she saw me but I couldn't make any sense of her distorted speech. Wires ran from clamps on her nipples and labia to a small pedestal beside a door. I was angered by what I saw but it was obvious I wouldn't get anywhere without a key to the padlock. I was staring up at her as I heard a door opening behind me. I turned around.

A doorway on the other side of the dungeon swung open.

Standing in the door way was the figure of a woman clad in a suit of skin tight, black leather. The suit was criss-crossed with leather straps that emphasised her ample breasts. Over it she wore a waist-cinching corset. Her face was covered by a mask of the same black leather. From the back of her head erupted a pony tail wig of exaggerated blondness. She was carrying a heavy whip, wearing stilt heeled, knee length boots and stood with her hands on her hips confronting me. A strap on dildo rose with exaggerated tumescence from her crotch giving her the look of a female Priapus.

"You've caused me a lot of problems, Mr Ross," she said in a gravelly, gruff, voice that suggested a lifetime's use of cigarettes and whisky.

"Problems?" I said. "I can't think how."

"You activities for Mr Clegg," she said, huskily. "Let us say, I don't entirely approve of your approach to the market. It interferes with those of my own businesses. I am sure you understand that this is a world in which the status quo is so easily disrupted."

"I'm not sure I understand," I said. "There's enough business to go around if I believe my research. The problem is supply not demand."

The woman gave a grunt and ignored my remark. "I thought that you should have the opportunity to see that your young lady is in good hands." She gestured to the cage. "But her future well being depends a lot on your suggesting to Mr Clegg that he changes his approach to the market. We'd be much happier if he went back to something more traditional."

"I don't think Mr Clegg is very amenable to suggestions about his business from outsiders."

"I'm sure but I'd like you to give him this," the leather clad, masked woman passed a sealed envelop to me. "Now if you go back through that door, she gestured to the way I had come in.

"My girls will take you back." She turned towards Tricia. "Say good-bye to Mr Ross, dear," she growled, turning a knob on the pedestal beside her.

Tricia bleated in pain as an electric shock stabbed at her nipples and labia. I started towards the dominatrix. "Oh, no, Mr Ross," she said huskily, pulling a pistol from a drawer in the pedestal. "Definitely not. Now do take that envelope to Freddie or it really will be goodbye to Tricia and not 'au revoir'. And I'm sure you wouldn't want that."

I looked down at the envelope and gave a last look at Tricia in the cage. She whimpered into her gag. Fuming I turned towards the door. My chaperone was waiting with the blindfold.

Chapter 36 : A Legacy or Trussed

Harry listened sympathetically to my account of my trip to the dungeon. He looked across at Freddie who was sitting back with his feet up on his desk, staring away and out through the window, apparently disinterested. The envelop and paper lay discarded on Clegg's desk, ignored. As I concluded he swung himself around to face me.

"Fine, fine," he said.

"With respect, Freddie," I responded, "it isn't fine by my books. What are we going to do?"

"Do?" said Freddie. "Oh, I'm not sure we need to do anything. Well not about the dungeon anyway, not right now. I think I know what's going on. If that letter was meant to irritate me, it has certainly done so. The only problem is that it also confirms what I suspected. I think we may know where young Tricia is. Harry done some research haven't you?" Harry nodded with a grim smile. "And we have a little job set up."

"I thought you were leaving me to get on with this?" I said.

"Larry, you don't want to believe everything I say. I don't even always believe me, myself. Now I am assuming you want to join in with this?"

Harry leant forward with a conspiratorial air. "You remember that first burglary you came out with Tricia and me on?" he said. I nodded. "Well, I think we need to go on another."

"We're going to rescue her?"

"No, not exactly," said Freddie. "There's some collateral I want to pick up first. Just in case of any problems."

"Does this help Tricia?" I asked.

"We think so. Maybe. Certainly it'll make me feel better about things," Freddie said. They wouldn't explain any more but I trusted their judgement. I certainly hadn't come up with any ideas.

A day later, we ended up outside of an office in a run down building not far from our Whitechapel office. The dimpled glass panel on the door carried some old fashioned black and gold lettering. "Shuster, Siegel & Kent," it said, "Solicitors & Commissioners for Oaths".

I took one look at the threadbare carpet outside the door and the damp stain spreading from a corner of the window frame. "Super," I said, "really super."

"Don't worry about it," said Freddie. "We're only borrowing it. It's just what we need for this job."

Clegg knocked on the door. A voice from inside called, "It's open. Turn the handle." Freddie led the way. The girl sitting at the desk looked up, evidently surprised by the idea of customers. "Uhhuh?" she asked. I'd known women that were more articulate with a two inch rubber ball in their mouth.

Clegg persevered. "Good afternoon."

The girl sat with her arms folded. "They're not here. None of them. Mr Shuster's out. Mr Siegel's away and Mr Kent is not coming in this week."

"Oh, dear," said Freddie, at his most conciliatory, "I had hoped to be able to consult with one of your team. Is it really just yourself here?"

"Oh, what? Well. No. There's her."

"Her?"

"She's their para – whatsit. Parallel?"

"Para-legal?"

"S'wot I said. Miss Lane, she is. But they don't usually let her talk to anyone."

"I'm sure she'll be able to help," Clegg said patiently, "Even if it's just to suggest whether Mr Kent, Mr Siegel or Mr Shuster would be best able to help us with our problem. Perhaps you could show us through."

"S'pose so. You'd better come through." She got up and showed us past her desk, not towards either of the three large glass panelled doors behind her but to a solid wooden door between two enormous filing cupboards. Whereas each of the glass panelled doors proclaimed the identity of their occupants in gold lettering there was simply a card pinned to this door with the word "Lane" handwritten on it in felt tipped pen. The receptionist opened it without knocking. The office's occupant didn't seem surprised to be disturbed without warning. "Gentlemen for you," said the receptionist.

The smartly dressed girl behind the desk looked up with a smile. "Hullo," she said. "How can I help?" The smile turned to a look of alarm as she watched Clegg pull a gun from his jacket. In the same moment Harry had one hand over the receptionist's mouth and another around her waist, pulling her back against him and stifling her cries.

"We need to borrow your offices for a while," Clegg said. "I do hope you won't mind." The girl's hands flew to her mouth. The receptionist was kicking spiritedly against Harry's hold. He swung her around and slammed her against a rack of files. File boxes fell to the floor with a crash. Her struggles subsided a bit.

I knew what to do. I took the reel of tape from my pocket, grabbed the girl in the chair by the wrists and taped them to the arms of her seat. A wad of sponge followed the tape from my pocket. I pushed it into her resisting mouth and taped over it. I taped each of her ankles over to the legs of the chair and did the same with her knees. It left her a bit exposed; she didn't look happy with the way that Freddie was checking out her legs.

Harry wrestled the receptionist to the floor. She was still struggling, squealing and kicking as he wrenched her wrists behind her to tape them together. He didn't seem bothered by her efforts. He taped her ankles as he had done her wrists and then ran a short strip of tape between wrists and ankles bending her backwards in a vicious hog tie. He wound more tape around her arms and chest.

We finished the two of them off with pads over their eyes, wax ear plugs and tape to keep it all in place; there was no need to bother them with what we were up to. Not that I knew what was going on anyway. I still didn't see how this was helping to get Tricia back.

It was a little while later when we'd installed ourselves in Shuster's office that Clegg's four guests arrived. Two of them were women in their mid-forties, two of them young girls. The two older ones looked rather similar; both carried themselves with the air of women that had gone through life without too many problems and seemed as if they felt that their future lives should continue in the same vein.

"Ah, excellent. Come in," said Clegg, waving them through into Shuster's office. "Come in."

The taller of the two women peeled off her gloves. "I hope this isn't going to take too long," she said.

"No, no, I don't think so," Clegg responded. The two girls were nosing around the office, managing to combine an air of curiosity with a sense of utter boredom. "Do please sit down, though." The two women did so. The two girls continued to prowl.

The taller of the two girls picked up a paperweight from the desk. "Don't do that Beth," the woman said to the girl. "I am sorry," she said to Clegg. "Now what was it you wanted? Something about a legacy, you said."

"Yes," said Clegg. "I just must make sure that you are the individuals concerned. You have the necessary identification?"

"Oh yes," the woman said, rummaging in her handbag. She pulled out four passports. "This is me, Alice," she said passing one over. "My sister, Carol here and my two daughters, Beth and Ella." Clegg smiled at the two girls. They both scowled back, evidently irritated at being dragged into some dusty office by their mother.

"Ah, good," said Clegg examining the passports. "These are fine. And I can see they confirm the girls are of legal age – it makes everything so much simpler, you understand."

"Quite," said the woman.

"Now this legacy relates to an individual, her siblings and her immediate descendants. Can I confirm that is yourselves?"

"Yes, that's right. This is my only sister and my only children.

"I see. Good, that seems to be in order. Well, as I explained the legacy is to the wife of the purchaser of this particular property, 64 Lisson Way. It's a little curious, I will admit, for someone to leave money in this way but not unknown. Oh, you did keep this confidential, didn't you? As I said, the will clearly states that the wife's husband must not be informed. I think the individual concerned was particularly keen to see that women had a source of income completely independent of their husbands."

"Of course. We didn't wish to do anything to jeopardise the possibility of gaining the inheritance." Alice said bluntly.

"Excellent," said Clegg. "Well then it's just a matter of providing proof of ownership of the property. Do you have the details?"

Alice passed across an envelope. Clegg opened it and pulled out some papers. "Fine," he said, examining them, "that's fine. And this property was acquired by your husband recently?"

"Yes, that's right. Well, in fact I didn't really know about it until you contacted me. I found the details in his desk. I can't think why he was being so secretive."

"Oh, I expect he was hoping to use it as an investment. Many of the properties in that area are bought and then rented out. Perhaps he wanted to surprise you?" Alice looked sceptical.

There was the sound of a heavy thump. It had obviously come from Ms Lane's office. "If you'll excuse me," I said. "We're having some alterations done. I had asked them to make sure we were not disturbed but, well, I am sure you know how it is.... I'll just go and deal with it."

Clegg smiled and I left them to it. As I suspected the noise had been caused by our other two guests attempting to escape. Ms Lane had managed to tip her chair over on its back which had evidently caused the noise that I had heard. She'd made no progress in freeing herself though and all she had to show for her efforts was a cut on the back of her head where she had fallen against the radiator that ran beneath the window behind her. She groaned as much in frustration as pain, I imagined, as I put her chair back on its four legs. I checked that the receptionist was still helpless. The tape was still doing its job in her case too. I made my way back to join Clegg, Harry and their guests. "All fine," I said. "Sorry about that." The four women turned towards me. Freddie was evidently happy to take advantage of the distraction. When they looked back at Clegg they found themselves staring into the barrel of Clegg's gun.

"I am afraid I've misled you ladies." The four women gasped. Alice made to get to her feet but Clegg shook his head and waved her back into her seat with the barrel of his gun. "Would you be good enough to put these on please?" He tossed four pairs of handcuffs onto the desk. "Beth, Ella, perhaps you could help your mother and her sister," Clegg said politely. The two girls stared at him, rigid with terror. "Do it, you stupid cunts!" he barked. "Hands behind your backs, you two," he ordered Alice and Carol who were already whimpering with fear. With the two older women secured, he had Beth handcuff Ella before putting the cuffs on the last of the women himself. "Tape them up," he said turning to Harry, "and we'll be on our way. Do you want to bring the other two?"

"I'm not bothered," said Harry, as he started to wrap tape across Carol's mouth, "probably just a complication. Not worth it, I'd say."

Freddie looked at me. "Any of your lot want them?" he asked. I shook my head; the more I did with account clients the less need I saw for random pick-ups. "OK, make a bit of a mess. Our hosts will think they've been turned over by ungrateful clients. Then let's get going," said Freddie, grabbing the two daughters by the arms and hustling them towards a back door that led out onto a fire escape. Harry followed with Carol. I turned over a few files and pulled some drawers out of the desks and cabinets. It's surprising how much of a mess you can make quite quickly. I grabbed hold of Alice and pushed her along behind the others. Freddie led the way to one of our regular white vans and our captives were soon installed in the back. Clegg shut the doors.

"Aren't you going to blindfold them?" I asked.

"No point," he said, climbing in to the driving seat.

"Why," I asked as Clegg passed Harry the envelope that Alice had given him. Harry waved it in acknowledgement and headed off to his own vehicle. The van pulled away with me in the front alongside Freddie, our cargo moaning quietly behind us. "Where's Harry off to? Where are we going?"

"We're taking them to their home," said Clegg, mysteriously without explaining about Harry. I sat back and wondered just what it was Clegg was up to. Most of the kidnappings I had seen so far had involved taking the captive away from their homes not the other way around. And I still didn't see how it was going to help Tricia.

Chapter 37 : Best Served Cold

Clegg drove the van up to a comfortable looking detached house just as night was falling. He tossed me Carol's handbag. "You'll find a door key in there, I guess," he said. "No point in busting the door in if we don't need to."

Sure enough I found a key and went off to open the door while Freddie checked out our cargo. I went back to the van as Clegg was dragging the two girls to the van's tail board. "Cut the tape on their ankles," he said, "and we'll get them inside."

Soon all four women were in the hall of the house, mpmphing with shock at where they were. "Through here, I think," said Clegg, opening a door to the living room. He pushed Alice and Carol inside. I followed with Beth and Ella. Freddie pushed his two captives down on the settee and went to close the curtains. "There," he said, "nice and cosy." He looked at his watch. "We've got some time, why don't we have some fun?" he said as he looked at his watch. He sat down between Alice and Carol, running the barrel of his pistol up the legs of each in turn.

I didn't really understand what was going on. Clegg was normally so measured and contained. Now he was showing a rapacious side as he started to toy with Alice's blouse. "Looks like this little lady has quite nice tits. I'm sure her daughters have too. Why don't we see?"

Beth and Ella started complaining at once. Freddie hefted his gun and pushed the barrel up under the hem of Alice's skirt, jamming it against her crotch. She gave a terrified squeal. "Not a good idea, girlies," said Freddie, "You wouldn't want Mummy to get hurt would you?" Then turning to me he said, "Undo their wrists, old man, but leave their gags on. Get them stripped down to their underwear." Carol and Alice were wriggling and grunting their objections. Freddie jammed the gun up against Alice still the harder and snarled at Carol, "You'd better behave too."

I got the girls undressed down to bras and pants. Beth struggled a bit. I had to slap her back into line before she'd strip off her jeans and top. Ella was less trouble when she saw the treatment her sister got. Freddie to tie them up again so I taped each girl's wrists together behind their backs and then taped their elbows close together too. It made them whimper but it gave Freddie a view of their tits that he seemed to appreciate.

"Very nice," said Freddie, admiringly. "They do take after their mother, don't they? So well developed for what was it Beth, 18? And Ella, 19? Firm and with a rather agreeable fullness, I think we'll all agree. I wonder about Carol?" Freddie grinned humourlessly. "Yes, let her get her top off will you?" I cut through the tape around her wrists. Carol pulled off her sweater under threat from Freddie's gun and then took off her bra, fumbling with the catch behind her back as Freddie continued to threaten Alice and the two girls. Carol's tits were heavier than her sister's with large, dark brown, areolas. Freddie looked approving as he told her to come and kneel beside them and I taped her wrists securely once again. Freddie was toying with Alice's tits through her blouse. "So many tits," he said. "I'm spoilt for choice. The older women or the daughters. Ah, difficult decisions. Ella you come here."

I pulled her up and pushed her towards Clegg. The girl joined the three others beside Freddie. He grabbed her by the back of her neck and pushed her to her knees. Without pausing he wrenched away the tape that gagged her and pulled out the wad of cloth that filled her mouth. "Stay quiet," he warned, pushing the barrel of his gun between her lips. "Now what you're going to do for me is to see if we can't get Auntie Carol's tits to perk up a bit. You're going to kiss and nuzzle at them and see if Auntie Carol likes that." Ella gave a choked grunt of objection. Freddie thumbed back the hammer on the gun. Ella gave a muffled squeal. Alice tried to struggle away from Clegg. He grinned at their ineffectual protests, pulled the pistol barrel from Ella's mouth and jerked his hand back, catching Alice full in the face with the back of his hand with the weight of the gun behind it. Her head snapped back, a small cut over her eyebrow. Ella began to sob. "Do it!" ordered Clegg.

Ella complied, still sobbing and begging us to let them all go. Carol tried to ignore the bites, licks, teasing and kissing that Freddie was forcing Ella to perform but in spite of herself I saw her nipples stiffening. "There," said Freddie smugly, "Auntie Carol is enjoying that." She shook her head and looked down at the floor in shame. Freddie just laughed. "Only problem is, poor little Beth is feeling left out and we can't have that can we." Beth shook her head vigorously. I guessed that she wasn't complaining about being left out at all. "Quite right young Beth," laughed Freddie. "Why don't you give Auntie Carol a nice kiss." He got up from the couch and grabbed Beth by the arm pulling her across the room. Taking her gag off, he pushed her to her knees alongside her sister and forced her head between her aunt's thighs, up under her skirt. "Now," said Freddie, "I'm sure you'll have done this with your sister or one of the other girls you know." Beth shook her head vigorously to Freddie's laughter. "Auntie Carol is really going to like being kissed down there, so get started." He draped Carol's skirt back over Beth's head. "And get started," he snarled, grabbing by her bound wrists and pushing them up her back to force her forwards. "I want to see some results."

Ella had pulled away from Carol's nipples. "No one told you to stop," Clegg barked, slapping her face and pushing her back to work. The two girls, fearfully sobbing, set back to work. Carol, unable to respond because of her terror, groaned through her gag. Clegg said, "Excellent," pulled off Alice's gag and dragged her from the couch. She tried to speak, coughing and sobbing as the gag came free of her mouth. "Please stop," she begged. "Let the girls go. I'll do anything you say, please."

Freddie grinned at her. "You'll do anything I say? I know that you stupid bitch! We're not letting anyone go." He pulled at the front of her dress tearing it open. She begged him not to hurt them. He pushed her down on all fours, pulled Beth's panties down and pushed Alice's head up against her daughter's arse. "Now help your daughter out, get your tongue on her rim," he said. "Show her how it's done and she can do the same thing for Alice. And just by way of encouragement..." From behind, he pushed her skirt and slip up over her buttocks, dragged down her panties and tights. Unzipping the fly of his trousers, took her doggy style as her face was forced up between Beth's buttocks. She groaned in shame and fear and tried to pull her face from her daughter's backside. She was rewarded with a back-handed blow to her head that sent her falling back to her task again.

The five of them made a tableau of threat, fear, lust, despair and abandon. As Clegg was pushing home against Alice's buttocks, she in turn was tonguing her daughter. Beth and Ella, terrified by the situation continued to torment Carol. All five were grunting and groaning in misery, fear and humiliation.

The living room door opened. Into the debauched scene walked Harry, pushing in front of him the bound, helpless and struggling form of the dominatrix, wearing the same leather outfit that I had seen her wearing in the dungeon with Tricia. "Well done Harry," said Clegg pulling back from Alice's buttocks. Sinking back into one of the arm chairs he grabbed Beth by the hair, forced her to her knees and pushed her face into his crotch, demanding that she take his engorged cock deep into her mouth. She was coughing and choking as he wrenched at her hair and thrust forward with his hips to push his cock deeper into her throat.

The dominatrix wriggled and bellowed with fury. Tricia came into the room, holding an old blanket wrapped around herself. Purple rings of bruises on her ankles and wrists testified to how she had been held captive. Apart from that, she looked OK.

"Ah, you managed to get your girl back too," said Clegg. "Fine." For the first time I realised that Tricia had been seen as expendable in this, all Clegg was concerned about was that his business wasn't being messed around with. "Do take off our guest's hood, Harry," said Clegg, nodding towards the dominatrix and pushing Beth's head back down as she tried to gulp for air.

Harry grinned and unlaced the leather mask that his captive was wearing. As he pulled it clear the identity of the struggling, leather clad, dominatrix became clear.

"Hello, Brian," Clegg said. "How nice to see you. Your family are doing a much better job of looking after my interests than you appear to have done. I've been having such fun with your family. Such a delight to meet your wife; a shame we hadn't met before. And these daughters of yours too. Fancy keeping them hidden away. And your sister in law too! My, my, Brian, quite a little harem. Oh, I don't suppose your wife realised that you and Carol had a bit of a thing going, did she?" Brian growled. Alice gasped. Clegg gave a grunt as he came into Beth's throat. The girl started choking but Clegg made no attempt to withdraw, instead, enjoying the pulsing sensation of the orgasm as his crotch pressed against the girls face.

"You bastard, Clegg!" the unmasked 'dominatrix' exclaimed. "Let my family go." The women tried to turn around at the sound of Alice's husband. Clegg slapped each of them in turn to put them back to their tasks. Brian tried to start forward in defence of his family but Harry simply grabbed the chain that linked his wrists and dragged him back.

"Now let's see how much of this I've worked out, shall we?" said Clegg getting to his feet, zipping his fly and knocking Beth to the floor in the process. Clegg's cum dribbled from her mouth as she coughed and sobbed. The others were all left crying, cowering together in a heap in the corner of the room. It was clear that none of them had the slightest idea of the business that Brian had been involved in, much less his recent misdemeanours. "You decided that our friend Larry here was making things complicated for you, cutting down the need for auctions. Now I think you've been taking a slice – enough to fund that little fun nest where your two lady friends run that dungeon and where you've been keeping Tricia. I can't prove it but I think that's what has been going on. So you want to discourage Larry and you tried to have him snatched in Kushtia. Very silly that – there weren't too many people who knew he was going; you, Me, You, Harry, Rick and Sebastian. I was reasonably sure it was someone inside the business and I didn't like the idea of that. I know Larry has been shaking up things for us but we haven't really upped the number of girls we are taking overall so I didn't think that any of our competitors would really be hurting. I couldn't see that Harry, Rick or Seb had any reason for doing this. But you, well, the numbers from your side haven't been getting any better have they Brian, old man? And Larry's work has really been helping us stay afloat."

Brian tried again to break free but without success. "I'm not sure how you set up the girl at the Embassy. What was her name? Cora. You can't just have been lucky although Larry here certainly was. Perhaps we'll have a chat about that? Perhaps the Minister can have a chat at his end? Maybe she was working for one of other firms; someone you were helping out with special prices maybe? Not sure if you've that clever but that might cause a few problems if we've now upset someone that thought they were going to get a slice of the trade to Kushtia. Still, I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of that. Won't we, old man?"

"Then of course you made a very big mistake. I'm sure you realised I wouldn't like being threatened," Freddie held up the envelope and the letter that I'd been given in the dungeon. "But perhaps you thought it would annoy me enough to move Larry here on. The only thing is Brian, old man, if you're going to send threatening letters don't use our office stationery." Freddie held the letter up to the light, The Clegg logo was clearly visible as a watermark. "That really wasn't clever. It just confirmed what I thought. And I must say I didn't like that idea at all. Then when I found out about the Lisson Way property I thought that would probably be where you were hiding our Tricia. Harry did the rest."

"Freddie..." Brian began.

Clegg got to his feet, "Sorry, old man, I'm not really interested." As Brian tried to break free of Harry's hold, Clegg reached forward and jammed the envelope and paper into Brian's mouth. He coughed and choked in response. "I'm sure we'll find someone to take you off our hands," said Freddie. "Larry, I know, will be keen to find a customer. It could be a new line for us - male slaves. Perhaps that Daphne Challis you got on so well with at the video screening might be interested. And you'll be anxious to show how willing you are to make amends by having your family help us out too. The two girls should fetch a price and Alice and Carol seem to have their uses. Should help the numbers, old man, should help the numbers." Brian was still struggling to break free from Harry's hold but without success. Freddie smiled and went on, "Just so you know Brian, old man, people who fuck with my little family find that their family gets fucked with!"

Clegg turned to the women. "Get this lot into Prep, Harry," he said. "I'll be up at the Centre tomorrow and I want to see them naked, collared and shaved. And you can let Rick's team know they're all on the available list." The women looked shocked and

confused. Brian was at once terrified and furious. "And that includes him," Clegg pointed at Brian. "Get someone from the team to go through here and get anything that looks like theirs into the incinerators. Clothes, jewellery, everything, I'd hate them to think there was anything of their past life they could go back to." He went across to where Alice was sprawled on the floor, her dress torn and cum smeared, her two daughters and sister crowding close to her as if by doing so they could avoid Clegg's attentions. He reached up to Alice's neck and tore her string of pearls from her. "Start with this," Clegg snarled tossing them into the middle of the room. "And don't forget this one's wedding ring. I'd hate her to have some reason to remember what got her into this."

"Well," said Tricia, as Harry was about to hustle Brian and the women out to the van, "If we're taking him into stock, I wonder if I might help out with some of the orientation sessions at the Prep Centre. I think there's a whole lot I can do to help get him ready for his new life." Her grin could only have increased his apprehension.

It was a side of Tricia that I hadn't seen before but I understood how she felt and I was just glad she was back safe and sound even if Freddie hadn't been worried. And if I'd ever had any doubts about Clegg's ruthless determination to have things the way he wanted, they were certainly gone now.

Chapter 38 : All Bar None

It didn't take Tricia and I long to get our lives back on track. She didn't seem to be bothered by Clegg's attitude. "It's the game" she said. "At the end of the day it's dog eat dog. You have to accept that. Loyalty is only as good as the use you are. They came to get me because it suited them." I was surprised by her casual acceptance of the risks not only of something going wrong but of being left to swing if it didn't suit the organisation.

In the end she decided to leave Brian's "orientation" to Rick's team, Harry was keen to get her back on operations and she wanted to forget about being snatched herself. She also wanted to show she could take the lead role on a pick up, she was fed up with playing second fiddle to some of the others on Harry's team but she knew she'd have to up her game after the business with Brian.

I'd finished up for the day in the Whitechapel office. Tricia and I had arranged to meet up in the bar where Harry and I had had our drink before the Kushtian trip. I was there first. The bar was almost empty.

I was sat there listening to my i-Pod. Rick had let me have a down-load of Rachel's distraction mantra. It made eerie listening.

As Rick had said, she was counting off each of the rapes in her own head; distracting herself from the conditioning tapes by concentrating on the pain and humiliations she had suffered since her abduction. "27," I heard her voice say. "It's the tall blonde guard with the very short hair. He wants me to suck him off. He tells me he'll beat me if I don't 'do it nice'. I believe him. He's big, muscular, tall. No fat anywhere on him. No sign of any humanity either. He tells me to unzip his fly. I'm too slow. He slaps my face. He's wearing a ring; gold, a jaguar head with rubies for eyes. The ring catches the side of my mouth. There's a sharp pain. It's bleeding. He grabs my hair. I'm scared that he'll break my neck. I'm on my knees. I fumble with the zip of his fly. I can see the stitching on the denim, the yellow metal of the zip tag. I'm still too slow, another slap. My ears are ringing. I pull his cock from his trousers. He tells me that's good. It's swollen, purple, he's obviously already excited. It smells musty, somehow, as if it's come from some damp, dark cave. He says to use my mouth; like I've done for the others. They've all told him that I can do it all right but he might have to force me. I say he doesn't have to hurt me. He says maybe he'd like to anyway and laughs. I'm more scared than before. I do as he says. My mouth is full of his cock. He pushes back against me, I'm choking. It seems like his whole weight is behind his cock, threatening to push it through my throat. He doesn't take long. I feel him come, his cock pulsing with a rhythmic judder. I taste his salty, slimy cum. He keeps my head pressed against his groin. Not bad, he says. That's what he thinks. For me, it's vile. I'm choking with the taste and the smell and the feel of his slime in my mouth. He pushes me away, I fall back against the wall, my bound arms hit the wall first and then the weight of my body crashes against them. I can feel the skin on my elbows scraping away as I slide down the wall. The guard walks towards me and crouches down. I think he's going to help me up but he doesn't. He reaches down and pulls at my skirt, he uses it to wipe off his cock. Not bad at all, he says. Perhaps, I'll be back, he says. I hope he isn't. But I know there will just be more. I curl up on the floor, trying to get inside myself. It's only there I can get away from all of them."

I could hear the voice of the preparation tape in the background. "Listen to me," it said, in an insistent, flat monotone, "Listen to me. You know what you must do to be happy. You know that you only have to obey. Listen to me. Listen to me...."

"28," she went on, insistently. "It's one of the trainers. He's short and thin with long dark hair. He wears a mask, a white face; expressionless, no feeling. He's holding the cane they use to beat me. He spreads my thighs with the tip of the cane, looks at the cuts and the bruises. He seems pleased but I can't tell from the featureless mask that covers his face. My cunt is naked, exposed, but he's not looking at that; he's enjoying the bruising that they've done to my thighs. It's horrible how he's staring at me, more interested in my pain than my sex. He changes how I'm tied, straps my wrists up to the top of my arms, my ankles up to the tops of my thighs. I can't protect myself at all but then I never could. He watches as I wriggle on the floor. At least I think he watches, I can only see his eyes flickering back and forth behind the mask. His skin seems soft when he touches me but what he does to me is hard. My limbs are bent and aching already. He is still watching me wriggle. I don't want to do this for his amusement, but it's so uncomfortable. He tells me I must learn to accept restraint. I spit at him. He's not pleased. He gets a wire frame and wedges it in my mouth. I try to shake my head. He moves a catch at the side, the frame spreads my mouth wider. I can't stop it. He laughs behind the blank white mask as I groan. I shake my head in protest. He shakes his head, more slowly. He's got some sort of short wide belt. It's a collar as deep as my neck is long. He fastens it in place. It holds my head rigid. He tells me I must learn acceptance. I don't believe him. I won't believe him. He takes off his trousers, hangs them neatly over the back of the chair. He's going to rape me but he wants to make sure his trousers don't get creased. He takes me on the floor. He pushes his hand against my crotch. I try to pull away and he laughs. He tears at my knickers, they are sodden with my own fluid and the cum of those that have been before. I feel him push his soft fingers into my cunt. He pulls at the hair that is there. One more rape. No different to the others apart from in the trivial, miniscule details of who and what and how. His cock seems no different to the others. His hands no different. His breath carries the sweet and pungent smell of garlic. I can smell tobacco on his clothes. His white, rigid mask presses against my face. I smell its plastic artificiality. Expressionless I can see nothing of his feeling from the mask while within me I sense every rise and fall in his lust in the stiffening and ebbing of his cock. He pulls away. He moves behind me. What's he doing now? I can't see what he's up to. I feel him pull at my hair, feel his cock against my head. He's wound my hair around his cock, he pulls back and presses forward. I feel his cock against my scalp, the tug on my hair as he pulls back. With a short spasm he comes, pinching at my tits with his soft fingers as he does so. He leaves me on the floor; his cum dripping from my hair. My clothes more torn than ever. He says nothing; just looks at me through his expressionless mask and leaves."

"29," she continued. "The last one's only just gone. It's the receptionist. She can't be any older than me. Why is she doing this? Why is she doing this to me? She's got mousey hair with blonde highlights. What's she wearing. I can't remember. Oh yes, just a t-shirt and a skirt. She's saying why should the boys have all the fun. She's had a boring morning, what can I do to amuse her? I can't say anything, the gag has my mouth spread wide. My tongue is dry as much from fear as anything. A cough and groan. She laughs and says that's a start. She's got something in her hands. What is it? A dildo and a harness. And tit clamps. I don't need to guess what she'll do with them. She pushes me down on my back. The last one strapped my wrists

to the tops of my arms. She slaps at my tits. To perk them up she says. I cry through the gag. They still hurt from the last one and now she's doing this. She fits the clamps to me, they cut in with a sharp pain. I gasp. She smiles. I know it will be worse when they come off. She's taking off her skirt. Plain white panties. So normal. So ordinary. She squats across me, tracing a finger nail around my lips, spread wide by the gag. My clothes are in tatters. She says how bruised my body looks. I keep thinking of something else. Taking myself somewhere else. Not there. Not in that room any more. Far away. She pulls on the chain linking the nipple clamps. The sharp pain brings me back. She smiles again at my groans. She gets up and straps on the dildo. There, she says, this will be better than all those boys you've had to put up with. I try to beg her not to. Even with the gag she knows what I'm saying. She laughs and tells me that she'll do just as she likes, that I'm here to be used, that I'm fuck meat. I don't believe her. I go on not believing her. She sees me shake my head. It makes her angry. She grabs me by the hair and hits my head back against the floor. You'll be fucked until you give in, she tells me, pushing the dildo into my cunt. It's hard and rigid, and cold. She tells me I am going to cum. I shake my head again, she can't make me. She carries on thrusting the dildo into me. Again and again. I loose count of the number of times. I'm no longer there. My body is there, but I am elsewhere. My body is being fucked but I am not. She bangs my head against the floor again. I am back in the room with the pain and the shame. She can tell and pushes harder. I give a whimpering cry. She gives a guttural snarl and a grunt. I can tell she has finished. She climbs off and gets to her feet. She un-straps the dildo and puts on her skirt. She turns to go and then turns again. She kicks me. The toe of her shoe hits against my side. Pink leather, pointed toe, four inch heel, strap around her ankle. I look down as the heel slides across my naked belly leaving a red scrape behind it. I try to curl up into a ball as she leaves me. The clamps are still on my tits. I focus on the pain."

I knew what happened after that. It was, as they say in the cinema, where I came in. I wasn't sure whether or not I wanted to listen to more but then Tricia arrived. I took the earphones off, relieved to have an excuse to stop listening.

I went over to the bar to get Tricia and me a couple of drinks. I felt I needed one, she was being sociable. The girl that Harry had been hitting on when we were last there was still behind the bar. I took that to be an encouraging sign. I hadn't thought that he'd have her snatched but you can never be sure with Harry.

"Hey," she said. "Nice to see you again. Haven't seen your friend for a while, either."

"I've been out of the country," I said, honestly. "Haven't seen too much of him myself."

"Well, if you do, tell him I asked after him."

I picked up the drinks and took them back to our table. Tricia had noticed my conversation. "Another of your conquests?" she smiled, almost suspiciously, picking up her drink.

"No," I said. "Harry's"

Tricia smiled. "I didn't think he did anything apart from work."

"Yeah, it looks like that doesn't it? I encouraged him, I suppose. I thought he was seeing that girl but it sounds as if things cooled off. I dunno. It all started before I went to Kushtia and I've had other things on my mind since I got back."

"I know. Thanks for helping get things sorted out."

"Well, I didn't do too much. It was all down to Freddie and Harry really. And if it wasn't for me you wouldn't have been snatched in the first place."

"It could have been worse, I suppose," Tricia said, looking around the bar to see that we couldn't be overheard. "They didn't treat me too badly apart from when they brought you over to impress you. The snatch was the worst bit. I was pretty scared, I'll admit. I had no idea who they were and they weren't too gentle tying me up. Actually thinking about it, it was kind of interesting – I'm going to suggest to Harry that he includes being on the receiving end as part of the training programme. They were arguing about whether to take me with them or whether to wait for you. I got worried that I was very much expendable. It was all a bit of a shambles really. Then, when they got me to that dungeon, Brian tried to perv his way around me a couple of times in that dominatrix outfit but the girls - the ones that picked you up - saw him off – I don't think they were too keen on him either. What happened about them anyway?"

"They weren't around when Brian was collected but, since you ask, I think Harry's running a check on them as possible recruits. Oh, here he is."

Rachel waved to Harry as he stood at the door of the bar looking around. He waved back, pointed to a bottle on the bar, asking if we wanted another. We nodded. He got chatting to the girl behind the bar. It didn't look like we were going to get our drinks for a while.

Tricia pointed to the iPod. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yeah," I said, "not real pleasant listening. It makes me wonder if I should be doing this. I mean it started off like a bit of a game. Just a different product. But somehow, this, well."

"I know," Tricia said. "It's hard I guess. I try not to think too much about the girls. To Harry they're just so many kilos of live-weight, so many dollars traded, but I can't get that abstracted. The problem is the whole thing is such a kick. There's nothing like the buzz of a snatch. I guess I'm addicted." She pointed to Harry at the bar. "Is he planning to lift her?"

I shook my head. "Don't think so," I said. "They seemed to be having something approaching a normal relationship when I last looked."

Tricia looked puzzled and took a pull of her beer.

I changed the subject back to Rachel. I waved the i-Pod. "Have you heard if Rick has made any progress with this young lady?"

"Uh huh. Seems like they've found some psychotropic drugs that have been able to suppress her ability to distract herself. Look like the conditioning is working properly this time. They aren't sure if she'll be able to write but I'm sure Harry can find you another one if you need."

I shrugged my shoulders. I wasn't sure if it mattered now. We seemed to be getting on OK without her skills. Eventually, Harry came over.

"She was asking after you," I said nodding to the bar.

"Yeah, it's been a bit difficult but we're going for a meal later. Life might be a bit quieter now."

"I thought that was what Sarah was supposed to be helping out with – getting the admin off your back."

"Well she does, sure, but she's a bit of a distraction too. And she's been getting a bit over her position lately. Still, I wouldn't want to lose her."

"It's not like she can resign," Tricia chipped in.

"No, but Freddie's bound to suggest selling her again and ..."

I interrupted him. "Stop being so bloody miserable Harry. Just let Sarah get on with the admin. If she's getting out of line give her to the guards to play with for a while. That'll solve things. And you take some time out for fun. You'll be busy enough soon with the work we're going to get as a result of the Kushtian trade license."

"I'd forgotten about that with all the problems sorting Brian out but yes, you're right. Do we know what it will involve yet?"

"No, not really. It's only a sort of framework contract as it is. It gives us exclusivity to supply from the UK and establishes the opportunity to quote for any Kushtian import requirements. So it's not like they're going to suddenly order a batch of product. We'll probably have to put some effort into developing the business I guess. I need to talk to Freddie about that."

"So no more orders like Hannani's or the Kalinin's at the moment?"

"Not yet, although Freddie mentioned he's got a meeting with some UK based Kushtian, the Emir of somewhere or other. I wouldn't be surprised if something comes out of that. He's going to tell him about what we've done for the Kalinin, the Counsellors and Hannani."

Chapter 39 : Training Plan

With Brian and his family packed off to orientation, things started to get back to normal in the office. Business was certainly getting back on track. There seemed to be plenty going on.

After the worries over Tricia it was a relief to get back to some real work. I had the project for Steve Glennis to deal. I was happy with the way the account management activities were working out generally but I needed to do some more thinking about that. Sebastian had finished the first version of the web site and circulating the video to our clients seemed to have worked in driving folk to look at the new services. We were already seeing some benefits from that. Tricia told me that the research teams were rushed off their feet doing quotes for the Search & Snatch service and she had four pick-ups scheduled the following week. I should have been pleased at the increased activity, I know, but it meant Tricia and I weren't getting much time together and after recent events I was seeing that as a bad thing.

Harry had the idea that I ought to get some more field experience. "I get worried," he said, "when anyone that hasn't had the experience starts tinkering around in field ops. I mean the thing in Kushtia sounded like it went OK and you've sat in on a number of pick ups now but it's not the same as doing the job yourself. I think you ought to do some more familiarisation."

"How do you mean," I said. The ops side was interesting and anything that Harry had planned was likely to be more fun than working up market plans.

"Well, do you remember the practice run we set up when you met Tricia first of all?"

I did. The burglary had been one hell of an adrenaline rush. I nodded.

"OK," said Harry. "We've got another site that you can practice on."

Harry's team set up a briefing session. The idea was that I'd raid a small office on the edge of town. There would be one girl there according to surveillance. I just had to secure her and rob the place. They'd scoped it out. They reckoned I'd be safe to do it solo. I wasn't so confident, but Harry insisted I'd be all right.

I pulled on a pair of latex gloves and a ski mask. Once I got inside, it was pretty obvious that there was no one else around apart from the girl behind the desk, just as the briefing had said. She looked up as I walked towards her. She put her hands up to her face as she saw me, obviously startled. Dark hair, early twenties I guessed; efficient looking in a neat, white, short sleeved, blouse. I didn't want to scare her too badly, even if it was only so she didn't make too much noise. I slid my jacket back and pulled the pistol from the waistband of my trousers. "Please don't cry out," I said, quietly. "And keep your hands where I can see them. I don't want to hurt you."

"Oh, wow," she said, apparently unfazed, "are you robbing the place?"

I was surprised by her reaction. "Err, well, yes, I mean, look aren't you supposed to be frightened by this?" I waved the gun at her.

She grinned back. "Don't be silly. I know about guns. I can see you've still got the safety on."

"Shit!" I said, nonplussed. I looked down briefly at the gun but jerked my head up again, half expecting her to try to jump me across the desk. I looked back at her. She was grinning.

"Don't worry. I'm not bothered. You can take what you want from here. I'm pissed off with the place anyway. It's just so dull. The boss is a fart. You've brightened the place up."

"I don't suppose you know where the safe is?"

"Of course! It's through there in the old man's office." She pointed to a door behind her. "Here, I'll show you." She got to her feet. "Ooh, I guess I ought to do this properly," she said raising her hands above her head in a gesture of surrender as she walked across to the door to another office. I watched her rear. With her tight black skirt and her high heels tapping on the wooden office floor, I was enjoying the view. "Come on, follow me," she said looking back towards me over her shoulder. "It's this way."

"Look, don't think I'm not grateful and everything but this isn't really how you're supposed to be is it?"

"Oh, come on! You're not some mindless thug. Actually you're kind of cute and I quite like forceful men." She led the way into the other office. "The safe's down there," she said, pointing behind the desk. She stood with her back to the wall, hands still raised. "The key's in the drawer of the desk." She smiled at my evident confusion, but her next remark did nothing to make it any easier. "But you'll probably want to tie me up first, won't you?"

I almost dropped my gun.

"I mean, so you can go through the safe. I don't think there's much in there but, you'll want to have a good look and you can't really rely on me standing here like this can you? Anyway, I'll get tired with my hands up like this."

"Oh, all right," I said. She smiled. "I don't suppose you've got any rope have you?"

She shook her head. "Don't be silly," she said. "You can't expect me to do all the work."

I looked around. The office windows had a venetian blind, a long cord hung to one side. I decided it would be good enough. I yanked it free of the blind. She looked approving. "That'll do," she said. "How do you want me?" she asked flirtatiously, raising an eyebrow.

I was convinced that I would be safer with her tied up, though not for the usual reasons. "Turn around, get your hands behind your back," I ordered, waving the gun at her.

She giggled but she did as she was told. "That's better. This is more fun." she said as I closed in behind her, pushing the barrel of the gun against the nape of her neck. "And that's quite sexy." I ignored her, focussing on using my other hand to loop the cord around her wrists. With a couple of turns of the cord in place I felt able to put my gun down so I could tighten the cords and knot them off. I let her go and she turned around. "Pretty good," she said as she flexed her arms experimentally but without seeming to loosen the cords.

"Are you an expert, then?" I asked.

"My boyfriend's tried a few times," she laughed, "but he's not as good at it as you."

"I'll take that as a compliment. Now take a seat while I have a look in the safe." I took her by the arm and led her to the big, leather, padded, chair that stood behind the desk. I found the key and went to open the lock. Nothing happened.

"You'll need the combination," she said, quietly. "I could tell you. If you made me."

I was beginning to get the measure of my captive. I picked up the pistol and walked towards her. "I imagine threats aren't going to be enough," I said, pressing the gun up under her tits. She shook her head smiling. "But perhaps," I ran the barrel of the gun across one of her nipples; it was already stiffening, "if I were to pinch, here," I reached forward and gripped the nipple through her blouse. She gave a gasp but didn't try to pull away. I pinched again. She responded with an appreciative grunt and pushed her hips forward. I slid my hand up under her skirt. A pleasant surprise; she was wearing hold ups, not tights. She didn't try to pull away. My fingers were twisting at the hairs spilling around the edge of her already damp panties.

"Oh," she gasped. "That's – uhh – not fair, Mr Burglar. Oooh." More pinching of her nipples and her labia seemed to have the desired effect. "No,oooo," she sounded unconvincing, "uhhuh, 7 left."

"Good," I said, pinching and stroking some more. "Go on."

"Ahh, uhh," her hips were pushing her crotch against my hand, "Gnngh, ooooh, 24 right. Don't stop." Her pants were now soaked. I switched from pinching to stroking the inside of her thigh. "NNgh, oh, you bastard, you absolute fucking bastard, you complete marvellous bastard." She bucked again. "17 left. That's it. Ahhh."

I pulled my hand away, left her and headed back to the safe.

"You can't stop. Come back." She seemed to shrink back into the chair, squeezing her thighs together, panting slightly. I dialled in the numbers and span the wheel. I pulled the safe door open. She was right there wasn't much in there, just a few hundred pounds and a lot of dull looking papers. Still, that wasn't really the point, whereas the slim, dark haired, girl in the chair rather was.

"Not much there for my trouble," I said.

She was looking up at me from her chair. "How about here?" she said.

"It's been fun," I said, "but I have to go." She looked disappointed. "I'll make you as uncomfortable as I can before I go," I grinned.

She seemed to perk up. "Are you going to tie me to the chair?"

I shook my head. "Nuh uh. You're going to struggle and if I leave you on there you'll pull it over. You'd hurt yourself. Got to remember the Health and Safety regulations. Get down on the floor." She shuffled herself off of the chair and got down on her knees. I looked around for some more cord. There was a laptop computer on the desk, the cable from its power adaptor looked like it would do for her ankles. She smiled as she caught me looking up her skirt as I bound her ankles. "Nice legs," I said.

"Thank you, sir," she responded, wriggling a little, testing the tightness of my knots but giving me a better look at her legs at the same time. "But you know I'll get out of this quite easily, as it is." I could see as she wriggled that she'd be able to get at the cords on ankles with her hands.

"I'm sure I can fix that," I said. "It would never do for you to get free too soon." I found some more cable and ran a loop around her waist, fixing her wrists to that. Another length around her legs just above and below her knees made it harder for her to move around.

"Hmm," she said, trying again, "more convincing."

"I try to oblige," I said but I hadn't finished. A final length around her arms just above the elbows and around her chest just below her tits, locked her arms against her body.

She gasped as I jerked the cable tight. "Ooh, that's tight," she said but I didn't think she was complaining.

I knelt beside her on the floor. "Better than the boyfriend?"

She nodded. "Mmm. Do you really have to go?" She wriggled her shoulders, the cords had pulled her blouse tight across her tits. It made for a pleasant view.

I nodded reluctantly. "Sorry," I said.

"Oh well, you'd better gag me then."

I grinned. "Aren't you going to offer to keep quiet?"

"What and miss out on the fun of wriggling and groaning after you've gone? Don't be a spoil sport."

I thought that the gag was going to be a problem until I noticed that her boss had left a suit hanging on the back of his office door. I searched the pockets and came up with a handkerchief and a necktie. "These will do. I'm sure your boss won't mind." She coughed as I pushed the handkerchief between her lips and grunted a bit as I pulled the tie tightly across her mouth, cramming the cloth in. "How's that?" I said, reaching down and pinching one of her tits. She gave a muffled squeal. She shook her head but her eyes were bright with excitement. There was a roll of packing tape on the desk. I used some of that as well. She wasn't completely happy with that as it got caught in her hair but it meant the gag would take longer for her to dislodge.

I took another look at my captive. "Now since you've already warned me that you're expecting to get loose." She shook her head but I ignored her and jerked her ankles up towards her wrists. I knotted the cables together so that her wrists and ankles were touching. I got some more cable and pulled her elbows together with it. She groaned into the gag as I rolled her onto her side. "And let's make sure your boss gets a treat when he finds you."

She started to shake her head but I didn't let that stop me and with the gag she wasn't making much sense. I guess she didn't fancy her boss and wasn't looking forward to him finding her. I unzipped her skirt and pulled it down until it was around her knees. I did the same for her pants. Then I went to work on her blouse, pulling at it until the buttons tore loose and she was left exposed. For the first time she was looking as though she wasn't completely enjoying it. She had a chain around her neck. It carried a name in gold letters. "Kelly," it said. Well it was nice to know. I waved her good bye, pocketed the money and left her.

I got back to the car where Harry was waiting. "What took you so long?" he asked. "I was getting worried. Did she put up a fight?"

"No, not really, quite the reverse. It was quite good fun but it wasn't much use as practice," I said tossing the meagre take into his lap. "Here, I've got enough to buy us a couple of drinks. I'll tell you about it."

Chapter 40 : Market Research

Harry had a good laugh about my encounter with Kelly. I'd been a bit suspicious that it was a put up job but he assured me it wasn't. She was just one of the possibles that they'd had on a target list a while back. When they decided she didn't fit the customer profile they left her office on the list for possible training exercises. He seemed convincing enough about it. I didn't mind either way, it had been fun.

I bumped into Freddie outside of his office. "Well," he said, "at least the numbers seem to be picking up."

I had to agree with him. "Yes," I said, "the Search and Snatch service has been getting a lot of response and some of that is already feeding through into billings, the on-line auctions have been good for moving some of the stock too."

"You're right," said Freddie, "I can't remember when we've had so little prepped stock sitting around. That's helped keep the costs down in stock holding too. Mind you some of the staff up there are getting a bit restless; not enough girls for them to play with."

"We need to find a way to fix that," I said, "the last thing we want to do is to hack the guards off, they do a great job."

"Well give it some thought, can you. They've got a bit of diversion with Brian's family but they'll be sold soon enough and I don't want to stack up any problems for the future." He stopped and thought for a moment. "Oh, and another thing... how do you think our market share is now?"

I stopped dead in my tracks. With all the other activities, I'd forgotten one of the basics. I hadn't really thought about what share of the market we were getting and how we were shaping up against the competition. With Freddie, though, I knew there wasn't any value in trying to bluff my way out of things. "Freddie, I haven't the faintest idea. I'd not really thought much about it with all the other stuff we've been doing on analysing the client needs and setting up the new products and the account management. You're absolutely right though. We might be growing but if competitors are growing faster we could be going backwards."

Freddie grinned. "Don't worry," he said, "I thought that might be the case. You've been focussing on urgent stuff plus the whole Brian thing was a bit of a distraction. I even have friends that are saying if you carry on like you are the UK will run out of women." I laughed. Freddie went on. "We need to try to get some sort of a picture though, don't you agree?"

I nodded.

"I don't think you'll find it easy. It's not like anyone publishes the auction prices and volumes! Anyway see what you can do. I was just going down to see how Rick is getting on with Brian's family. Do you want a look?"

The real answer was "no, not really," but I thought that probably wasn't wise. Freddie still harboured a grudge over the whole Brian business and he'd been getting Rick to make things pretty tough on the women. Plus, of course, he'd been making sure that Brian got to know what was happening to them on his account. Freddie strode off towards the preparation and orientation areas. I tagged along behind him. Rick was there to greet Freddie when he got to the cells.

"You're looking to see how Alice and her family are getting on?" Rick said.

"Mmm," said Freddie. "I'd just like to satisfy myself that the regime we are holding them under is sufficiently, let's say, rigorous."

"Rigorous," said Rick, "is the watch word. Come and see." He opened the door to one of the cells. I followed Rick and Freddie inside.

The four women barely reacted to our arrival in the cell. Clegg had insisted that they should be all kept together so that they should each witness the humiliation and subjugation of the others. That included Brian who was standing chained to the far wall, naked, with his wrists shackled over his head. He was looking in a pretty sorry state. Rick explained that some of the girls had volunteered to, as they said, soften him up. Tricia had quite a few friends in Prep and they had all welcomed the opportunity to take their revenge on her kidnapper. There was a shelf on the wall beside Brian, Ranged along it was an impressive array of butt plugs, nipple clamps, gags, paddles, whips and other items of dubious but almost certainly unpleasant purpose. From the blood that encrusted the wheals on his legs, it looked like quite a lot of the shelf's devices had already been employed on him. He tried to turn his head towards Clegg. I could see that he'd been fitted with a dental gag. He managed a sound from his throat at once angry and despairing. It wasn't helped by the collar he'd been fitted with. The stores had only had them in women's sizes; the biggest they could find still looked like it was choking him. Clegg ignored him and turned his attention to the women.

"I see they've been shaved," said Clegg, looking down at the four bald and women. "That's good. Keep them like this, don't let the stubble grow back," he said bending down beside Beth and running his hand across her shaved pubis. "This one's smooth enough, good." He put his hand beneath her chin to lift her head so he could look at her face. Her eyes were red with tears. "Oh, yes. Take their eyebrows off as well and their eyelashes. I want all their hair off and kept off." He turned his attentions towards Ella, pushing her down so she was laying face down on the floor of the cell. He kicked her legs apart and then crouched peering closely at her backside. The bruising around her arse showed she was being used from behind as much as in front. "How often is the 18 year old one being fucked?"

Rick picked up the clipboard used to record punishments and rapes of the cell's occupants from the hook beside the door. "This one?" he said, pointing at Beth. "Three times so far today, seven yesterday. The 19 year old was eight times yesterday, twice so far today. The girls are more popular than their mother or their aunt. They were done three times each yesterday. "

"Hmm," said Clegg. He got up and gripped Alice by the throat, pulling her to her feet and thrusting her back against the wall. She was choking from the pressure of his hand on her windpipe. "Can't have you feeling left out, can we? I know you just love watching your daughters being raped but we'll have to see you get your fair share. Rick, make sure she and her sister are getting fucked just as frequently as the girls. It's not like your lot to need encouragement. Get the guards to roll dice for which one they get to do if they can't be relied on to share it out evenly. Otherwise pretty good, pretty good. Keep them going on this regime until they're ready for training." He turned to me. "Have we had any offers or interest yet?"

"Well, Challis might be interested in him," I nodded towards Brian. "She's asked for some photos and an estimate on initial training costs. It looks like we've got some Kushtian interest in the two girls but nothing on the mother or her sister yet. I think the sales team are a bit disoriented by all this. They thought a lot of Brian. I'm not sure they are putting all their efforts in."

"Well, see what you can do," said Clegg. "And tell the sales lot, they've got a new incentive plan. If they can't find customers for these they'll be joining them on the web site." He stalked out.

I went back to my office to work on the market research challenge. I tried to map out a strategy for the problem. I reckoned there were two main things we needed to know. How and what our competitors were doing and what the total volume of sales, in the UK and globally, were. I had a word with Seb, he reckoned he could give me a fix on the volumes and values going through the internet auction sites with just a bit of hacking. I said fine, as long as he didn't leave our sticky paw prints over anyone else's web site.

Freddie asked Ellie to give me a contact that might be able to let me have a picture of the total number of abductions in the UK. I was puzzled as to how we might get that until she gave me the phone number to call. Chief Superintendent Phyllis Jacobs of the National Crime Squad sounded like she ought to be an authority and so she was. She pointed out that much of what I needed to know was publicly available. The moves in Government to have police forces publish their performance statistics meant that lists were available of the number of missing person complaints and the clear up rates. She pointed out that if I were to ask for a break down of numbers by sex and age, she would be obliged to provide them under Freedom of Information legislation and I might well get a good fix on what I needed. She was right; it was quite interesting to see what a disproportionate number of women between the ages of 18 and 35 had gone missing over the previous year, and how low the clear-up rate for these disappearances was in comparison with that for other groups.

I didn't ask Freddie why she was so willing to help.

I cut the police numbers down by a figure that looked like the disappearance rate for other groups, that took care of the "genuine" missing persons, I thought, and left the probable number of slave abductions. Of course I still didn't know how many of those on the police list were as a result of operations like ours, some of them had to be amateur collectors, picking up by individuals for their own use. They weren't really competitors individually but, of course, if they were snatching their own they weren't buying from us. It occurred to me that it might be useful for our overall market share if the police were being more successful against the amateurs, I'd have to think about that.

Seb came up with some useful data. He'd come up with three web sites run by UK organisations.

That linked up with Freddie's assessment that there were five main competitors to us, Seb reckoned that there were two others under development but not yet operational. We had a look around. One surprise was to see two faces that I recognised. Staring out at me from the screen were Rebecca, my some-time girlfriend whose kidnapping had started my involvement with Clegg's business, and Amanda, her flatmate. Just out of curiosity I clicked on the "more details" button under Rebecca's photograph. "Offered for sale by private treaty," it said. "Following the decision of her owners to replace many of their current slave stock, this well trained piece is available for immediate shipment to a delivery point of your choosing. An experienced flight attendant, she has been serving until recently on her current owner's aircraft and would be an ideal purchase for any owner seeking to improve service on board their own flights or with minimal cross training on board an owner's yacht."

I wondered for a while where she would end up.

Seb interrupted my thoughts, "Do you want to look at the numbers?" he said.

He'd got figures for each of them. Together they made up about 20% of the total number of girls lifted by my reckoning. Given that there wasn't much different about any of their web sites I guessed that the share of overall sales would be pretty much the same as their share of web based sales. It wasn't accurate but at least it gave us a working hypothesis.

As well as the numbers I felt I needed the background data. At least I had Rachel's report following her interviews with Sukie. I pulled the wad of pages from the file. It looked like she had done a thorough enough job. Producing that had stopped anyone asking about what else she had planned, I guessed. She'd organised it much as I had expected with separate pages on each of the "keepers" that Sukie had been loaned out to, 15 keepers detailed on one or two pages each and an overall summary page. I started to read wondering if it was actually going to help. It was interesting but anecdotal. I wasn't sure how I was going to draw any conclusions from it.

There were some possibilities, though. The interesting thing was the way in which so many ideas recurred. The sex of course and the violence and the institutionalised humiliation; as if it wasn't sufficient for the slave to be restrained at the bid of her keeper. It was almost as though the keepers defined themselves in terms of their domain over the slaves that

they kept. The slaves weren't simply utilitarian items, they brought status to their owners in the same way that an expensive car or yacht might. Thinking about it, it shouldn't have been too much of a surprise.

What was puzzling was that none of the descriptions that Rachel had provided seemed to reflect the woman that I had encountered on the island; her warmth, intelligence and instinct for companionship. Whether that was a result of her perspective, or Rachel's interpretation or the influence of Sukie's owner, I couldn't say but I did end up feeling that there I wasn't getting the whole picture

Tricia was out of town on a job and I was at a loose end anyway, so I thought I'd spend an evening with Sukie.

I found her in a cell in the Prep Centre. It didn't look like anyone had taken much care of her. She was naked and wearing some heavy shackles around her ankles. Her black, straight, hair was hanging lankly, she didn't look as if she had washed for days, she smelled that way too. A steel yoke kept her wrists at shoulder level and the steel band around her throat was closed with a padlock that also fastened her to a chain to the cell wall. She was gagged as well. She turned towards me without any show of resentment and knelt up presenting herself to me. "Hello, Sukie," I said.

She nodded in response. I unfastened her gag, prising the ball from her mouth. "Thank you," she said.

"Why are you being kept like this?" I asked. The yoke and shackles seemed much more severe than was usual and girls were rarely kept gagged after they arrived unless there was some disciplinary reason.

"The guards tell me it's because I have not been "prepared"; not been "orientated". Because you wanted my stories they have just kept me secure, not done anything more. They worry that I will try to escape, I suppose."

"Aren't they right to?"

"Perhaps," she said enigmatically. "But perhaps I have known this way for too long to want to be really free now."

"I want to talk to you," I said.

"I thought that's what you were doing," she answered.

"Not here. Somewhere more comfortable." She looked resigned. "It's not like that," I said. I called a guard and had him remove the yoke. She still had her standard collar, I thought that would be enough. She seemed to take that as a token of sincerity. "Come on, Sukie," I said. "Through here."

We went though to one of the semi-secure suites that clients could use to evaluate stock. The doors can be locked remotely and they have CCTV monitoring, but apart from that they are pretty much like hotel rooms. Sukie looked covetously at the bathroom. "Go on," I said. "use it if you want."

"A shower?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. "Take your time." She gave a smile of gratitude and disappeared into the bathroom.

She emerged about twenty minutes later, her dark hair wrapped in a white towel turban. I tossed her a white towelling bathrobe, she grabbed it and pulled it on, instinctively wrapping the robe about her. Suddenly she stopped and looked directly at me. "Oh," she said, "I'm so sorry, I forgot for a moment, please forgive me." She loosened the belt of the robe and let it fall open, exposing her tits and her cleanly shaved sex. "Of course, I shouldn't cover myself without permission."

"It's all right, Sukie," I said. "Fasten the robe. Come and sit here."

She did so, gratefully.

"Your discussions with Rachel," I said.

"She is very troubled," Sukie replied. "She finds it hard to accept her place. I have not seen her for a while but I like it when we talk. She wrote down many things. About how I was treated. About the men and the women."

"But not how you felt?"

Sukie looked towards me and smiled. "No," she said. "Not how I felt. She did not ask. I did not tell her. I think she still found it difficult to feel. From her taking. From her treatment. She is frightened to feel and she cannot ask how others feel. I don't think she is as much of a slave as you might believe."

I looked silently at Sukie, impressed by her perceptiveness. "Tell me how you felt."

"Felt?"

"When you were taken. When you were raped. When you were given to others. When you found yourself here."

"I don't know," she said, pulling off her towel turban and running her hands through her hair. "When I was taken? Shock, I suppose. Shock that it could happen. Hope that I would be rescued. Fear that I might be killed. And then the fear that I would live. That was the shock, I think. How much you can take and still live. How much pain. How much horror. How much fear."

And you go on living. Then the denial; that it can't be happening; that there's been a terrible mistake; that these people don't really know who you are."

"But nothing changes?"

"No, nothing," she relaxed a little and let her robe fall loose. "Then you get angry. Angry with them; angry with whoever they are doing it for; angry with the people where I'd been that they'd done nothing to stop this. I smashed the chair in my cell. Smashed it against the bed. It didn't help."

"Did you find anything that did?"

She shook her head slowly. "You try to negotiate. I'll suck you off if you let me have more food. I'll give you a hand job if you find me some clothes. I'll let you fuck me if you'll just let me remember what it was like to be me."

I looked on sympathetically.

"It makes you sad. I sat for days without moving. They came and did whatever they wanted. I did nothing to stop them. There was no point in resisting, it didn't matter." She shrugged her shoulders. "And then you know it won't work. That you can't change it. That the bargains don't work. That you'll never be free. And with every change you repeat the cycle. You're raped – it didn't happen, he was a bastard, I could stop it happening again if only I did this or that, it was all my fault, it was just my fate. You're given to another; the same thing all over again. When I found myself here; the same."

I wasn't sure how this was helping. I offered her a drink. She seemed surprised. I gave her some wine. She smiled and drank it gratefully. She looked at me suspiciously.

"Are you going to rape me now?" she said.

"No," I said. "We've finished for now. I'll try to get things made more comfortable for you."

She looked grateful. "Will I need to talk to Rachel some more? She seemed very troubled."

"I don't know. Not for a while," I said. I was thinking it was pretty unlikely that Rachel would be doing any more writing given what I heard about the chemical cosh that Rick was using to suppress her ability to distract herself. He'd kicked off some thinking about alternative approaches to orientation but they wouldn't be on stream in time. The guard came to take Sukie back to her cell. I told him to put her on a light regime. He grunted. I knew I'd have to check that things were all right later.

Another guard appeared with Rachel moments later. She must have passed Sukie in the corridor. I wondered what Sukie would have made of the sight.

The guard gave me her leash and handed me the key to her gag. I asked about her wrist and ankle cuffs. He wasn't carrying the keys to those he said, standing orders said that her keys had to be held by three separate guards. I wondered if they weren't over reacting but I guessed nobody wanted to find themselves on their back with her panties in their mouth like Seb had; much less the conversation with Freddie that would follow. They'd stopped raping her. The last thing they wanted was to give her any more sources of distraction.

I led her to the couch and told her to sit. She did so without apparent reaction. She was naked but wore a metal head cage that kept her mouth closed. They'd shaved her head, the black stubble of her hair growing back showed as a dark shadow between the bands of the head cage. I unlocked the chin piece to allow her to speak. She turned to look at me.

"Hello Rachel," I said.

She seemed only to half recognise me. Her eyes looked as though she was having trouble focussing. I put that down to the drugs. She didn't say anything.

"Are they letting you write?" I asked.

She looked at me again. It was obvious she was having trouble finding the words. "Write?" she said. "Oh, words, on paper." She paused. "Write?" Another pause. "No, not yet. Cannot write yet. Must learn to please first. Must learn to obey first. Then can be more free. If I obey I can be more free. Have to obey to be free."

I didn't bother trying to debate the intellectual inconsistency. There was a knock at the door. It was Rick. I waved him in. Rachel got to her feet automatically, bowing her head as she did so. He told her to sit.

"What do you think?" he said.

"I think she's unlikely to be any further use for my projects," I said regretfully, "at least any time soon. She sounds like she's pretty well conditioned. Only problem is she's probably too far out of it to be any use to me."

"Yeah, the EEG's seem to show she's not faking."

"It sounds like her brain's been fried."

Rick gave a grimace. "Well it's not the phrase we'd use. 'Higher function disruption' is what we'd say." Rachel was sitting motionless and silent. "It's not permanent. Well not all of it is permanent. Well, we think that most of it isn't permanent."

I shook my head. "It's not going to work at all. I can't make use of what's here, least ways not for writing." Rick gave a smirk. "Couldn't we have found a less destructive approach?"

Rick looked discouraged. "We did what we could, Larry," he said. "Maybe we need some new techniques. I'll think about it for the future. We are where we are with this one though."

I looked at where Rachel was sitting passively, not reacting to anything we said. "She's got quite a nice body," I said. "I'm sure we can find a buyer once she's safe. I can't see any reason to keep her around, can you?"

Rick shook his head. "Fair enough," he said. "I thought that was what you'd think. I'll get some of the sales team to trawl through their contacts and see if there's a taker for a dark haired girl with small tits and slim hips."

"That's about all I could think of too." It was a shame but I guess it didn't really matter. I locked her mouth strap back in place and watched as Rick and the guard took her away. She didn't resist. I went back to my office and fired up the laptop. I had a market study to write up.

MEMORANDUM

To: F. Clegg Dept.:

From: L. Ross Dept.: Marketing

CC: Date: 27/05/06

Subject: Market Share, Market Development & Account Management

Freddie,

You asked for a summary of our market share position and I also wanted to update you on my thoughts following a review of the material collected from acquisition number 06/349 ("Sukie") by our writer. I think it has a number of implications for the development of our account management programme and the way in which we develop future markets.

The market share data collected (see attached) indicates that we have achieved a market share of 24% which confirms us as one of the top three concerns in the market. Since the data indicates that all three organisations have a market share of around 25% and this method can't give a result better than +/- 5% I can't identify one specifically as market leader. It could even be us! Obviously we need to continue to track this and determine whether our increased volumes are coming at the expense of our competitors (greater market share) or as a result of expansion in the market (either as a result of our own efforts or of external factors). My current view is that the increase results from market growth stimulate by the social and economic factors we discussed before. Future analysis of competitor initiatives should provide further evidence of this.

I have summarised my conclusions and recommendations below. A more detailed analysis follows. If you want to see the original report prepared by #06/285 ("Rachel"), I can let you have a copy.

Summary & Recommendations

The overall conclusions drawn from my analysis of the #06/349 data are:

- (1) There is a significant growth in the numbers of women keeping slaves of all kinds and especially women slaves (F-on-F). Some of this can be attributed to the growth in disposable income amongst US females and to socio-cultural changes in that market. We can expect an increasing number of F-on-F opportunities to present themselves generally and specifically in the UK and should gear our promotion and client recruitment programmes accordingly. According to the experiences of #06/349 F-on-F arrangements include principally domestic service and sex-slave ownership scenarios. Alternative uses for property (as discussed below) are less common in F-on-F arrangements. As a result it can be expected that current preparation and orientation activities within Clegg Enterprises will be sufficient for this new sector. F-on-F owners do collect their own property but also rely on purchase at auction or commissioned collection as a route to acquisition. F-on-F acquisition commissions are like to be based more on personality than on physical attributes. This will require different approaches to recruitment planning and a different approach to the management of F-on-F accounts.
- (2) The US is seeing an increasing use of slaves for other purposes than the traditional sex slave / domestic servant roles. This includes usage of slaves for such purposes as:

- Ponies : given Glennis's enthusiasm for this it is not surprising to find that #06/349 records this. It represents a small but distinct market.
- Décor: this is the second most popular use for slaves. #06/349 records instances of slave usage as lamp holders, furniture (especially tables and footstools), and as fixed display pieces.
- Toys & Pets: #06/349 recounts eight instances of product acquired for a maze where they were kept under observation for the amusement of the owners and a further six instances of pet keeping where the product is used as a house-pet.

(3) US and other nationality owners are increasingly inter-acting and as a result territorial differences between markets can be expected to reduce.

I propose the following in response to this:-

- (A) We should focus an account management activity to develop the F-on-F sector.
- (B) Our preparation / orientation activities need to review the opportunities presented by the emerging new roles for slaves. This could include development of new orientation programmes for toys and pets and the development of approaches that will make it easier to deeply product for décor purposes.
- (C) Account management activities should be organised to focus on networks of owners rather than along geographical lines.

Regards

Larry

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I finished the memo and sent it off. I wasn't completely happy with it but it was a start.

Sometimes market research is as important for what it doesn't tell you as what it does. I felt we needed to think outside the box, or rather outside the packing case containing a tightly bound and tape gagged girl, when it came to product and market.

My encounter with Kelly had made me think that we needed to look at things through different eyes. I felt I needed to see her again.

Chapter 41 : Kelly Girl

I suppose I was cheating on Tricia but she was still off on some collection way up country and wasn't going to be back all week. I was bored and besides I was very interested in trying to think about the market from a different perspective. Least ways, that's what I told myself.

I was sitting in the coffee bar across the road from the office that I'd burglarised the week before. I don't really know what I was planning to do. Just see what happened, if anything, I guess. I watched as Kelly walked along the street on the other side of the road. She didn't look any the worse for our encounter but then apart from the embarrassment of being found with her clothes dishevelled, I didn't think she'd had to put up with all that much.

She stopped on the steps of the building and looked at her watch. Deciding that she had some time to spare, she skipped across the road towards me. She came into the coffee bar and went up to the counter. "Slim latte," she said, chirpily to the guy behind the counter. "Thanks."

I drew in my breath and decided to trust my judgement. "Hi, Kelly," I called. "Want to join me?"

She looked puzzled but came across to my table anyway. "Have we met?" she said.

"Sure," I said. "I came by your office last week."

She stared at me hard, right in the eyes. She put her coffee down and put her hands to her mouth. "Oh. My God," she said.

"It's going to be a bit difficult talking if you put a full stop after every word."

"It's Mr Burglar, isn't it?" she hissed quietly.

It was my turn to look puzzled. "I'm sorry?" I dissembled.

"OK," she said, composing herself. "Silly of me. Nice to see you again. I really enjoyed our last date, though I was upset when you ran out on me when you did. I didn't expect to see you again so soon. Or at all really." She smiled, stirring her coffee without really paying attention to it.

"I thought we might go somewhere."

She put her head on one side, thinking. "I'm supposed to be at work." She paused. "But I'm not really feeling up to it. I had a disturbing experience there last week. I'm having a flashback, right now."

"You look fine."

"Yeah, I know but I was thinking I'd call in sick. Tell the boss I was planning to spend the day in bed." She looked at me over her coffee, dark eyes staring out through a fringe of dark hair.

"I could make sure you got home safely. If you liked."

She looked me up and down. "Yeah," she said, taking a deep breath and following it with a big slug of coffee. "That would be good. You won't mind if we take my car though?"

"Fine by me," I said. "I came by bus. I hoped I might get picked up."

She gave me a long hard look, picked up her coffee and said, "Let's go."

I followed her out of the coffee shop and down the road towards a multi-story car park. We got into her VW Golf, she dropped some coins in the exit gate and we were on our way.

As we drove she clipped her Bluetooth earpiece on and punched a number on her mobile. "Mr Lewis? It's Kelly. I was on my way in but I don't feel like I can work today. I'm going back home. Well thanks for being so understanding. Sorry to let you down." She turned the mobile off and tossed the earpiece into the cubby hole between the seats.

"Why did you come back?"

"I enjoyed our last meeting," I said. "And I was puzzled."

"Puzzled?"

"By your reaction. That's not the effect I usually have on girls."

"Like I said, I like forceful men."

"Don't you think this is a little dangerous?"

"Yes," she grinned.

We stopped outside a small semi detached house in a tree lined street. "Do you know," she said turning to me. "What would really scare me?"

"Mice?" I suggested.

She shook her head. "If I was to be attacked in my own home. Much worse than being burgled in the office." She smiled as she opened the door. "Come on in," she said.

We got through the door, she shut it behind us and instantly we fell on each other. I pushed her back against the closed door, my mouth on hers, my hands running over her body and hers over mine. I kissed her, she kissed back. We paused for breath. "Not like that," she said, thickly, "like this." She turned her back on me, grabbed my hand and pulled it up to her mouth. I got the idea and pulled her hard back against me, crushing her mouth with my hand.

"Shuttup bitch, if you don't want to get hurt," I snarled. She pushed back, trying to pull her head away from my hand. She was struggling like she meant it but not so I couldn't keep hold of her. I grabbed her arms and swung her against the wall. She was winded and slid to the floor. I ripped the strap off of her handbag, rolled her over on her face and used it to tie her wrists.

"What, what do you want?" she gasped.

"Money," I said. "And maybe some fun."

"There's no money here."

"Then it'll have to be the fun." I pulled her to her feet, dragging her up by an arm. She yelped as the belt took her weight and cut into her wrists. "What's through there?" I nodded to a door off the hall.

"Living room," she coughed; getting her breath back. I nodded to another door. "Kitchen," she said.

"That'll do," I said pulling her down the hall and through the door. I pushed her down on the floor beside the cooker. There was a knife block on the worktop beside it. I picked out one with a 6 inch blade and held it to her throat. "You're going to be good." It was an instruction, not a question.

She gave a quiet, "yes," staring at the blade. She looked convinced. I found a tea towel on a rail by the sink and used it to gag her, ripped the power cord from her food blender and tied her ankles. "Stay there," I told her and left to explore the house.

I started in the living room. Nothing too interesting there. A collection of R 'n B CD's scattered on the coffee table meant at least we'd have some music to get down to later on. I looked back in on Kelly in the kitchen as I went back down the hall. She gave me a "Hnng" from behind her gag and wriggled her shoulders, experimentally trying to loosen the bag strap around her wrists. It looked like I'd made it a bit easy for her so I went across and looped her ankle cord back to her wrists. I tipped her onto her face. She grunted and gave another wriggle.

I thought I'd check upstairs. After all, she'd said she wanted to spend the day in bed. Her bedroom was quite girly. No surprise there, I suppose; soft toys on the window sill, patterned eiderdown on the bed. I pulled out the top drawer of her dressing table and tipped it out on the floor. Underwear; pants, bras, thongs, tights, stockings. I chose one of her dark tan stockings and pulled it over my head. That would do for a mask, I thought. Time for some more play.

I got back to the kitchen. She'd put in some effort and managed to wriggle herself most of the way across the floor towards the door. "Good try, darling," I said as I got to the door.

She looked up, saw the mask and gave an appreciative grunt.

"Like I said. It'll have to be the fun." I ran the tip of the knife blade down her thigh. She squealed in what sounded like genuine fright. The blade snagged on her tights; a run disappeared up beneath the hem of her skirt. I took the knife, cut through the cable around her ankles and pulled her to her feet. "Upstairs, cunt," I said, grabbing her arm and pushing her forward. She staggered up the stairs, half falling as she reached the top. I pulled her into the bedroom and pushed her down on her back on the bed. I lay down beside her, the knife close to her throat.

I eased the gag out of her mouth, the knotted dish cloth hung around her neck. She worked her jaw a bit, panting slightly. "You are good at this, aren't you?" she said.

I used the knife to slice the buttons from her blouse. She tried to shrink back into the bed but the way her nipples had stiffened underneath her bra betrayed her true feelings. "And you like this a lot too, don't you?" I responded.

She whimpered as I ran the knife blade down her cheek. "Mmm," she muttered quietly.

I thought it was all getting a bit too cosy. I reached out and grabbed a pair of panties from the pile of underwear on the bedroom floor and crammed them into her mouth. She bucked and struggled as I knotted the tea towel gag back in place. I guess she felt she still had some more to say. I found a couple of pairs of tights in the pile. I pulled her by the legs towards the end of the bed. She squealed behind the gag as she fell backwards. Pushing the pants into her mouth had improved its muffling effects. I grabbed each of her ankles in turn and tied them to the legs of the bed so that her legs were well spread

out. She was trying to thrash about without much success. I pushed her square in the chest so she fell back on the bed again. I climbed up alongside her and put one arm across her throat. "I'd keep still if I were you. I think you're over dressed."

I slipped the knife under each of her bra straps, slicing through each in turn. Another cut between her breasts let me pull her bra from her. I pulled her tights down a cut through her panties on either side. If her nipples had shown that she was starting to get excited, her soaked panties confirmed that her excitement was rising. She moaned as she felt my hand on her snatch.

I sat up. She gave me a quizzical look and a puzzled and disappointed grunt. She tried to wriggle her hips indicating that she wasn't happy that I had stopped. "Uh-uh," I said wagging my head. "The burglar's got work to do. I haven't even started looking for jewellery or cash yet."

Kelly whimpered in response, plainly unhappy at being left, but I felt I ought to play the part. I turned out the contents of her dressing table, tipped out her handbag, went through a couple of jewel boxes that stood on the window sill behind her bed, pulled some clothes out of her wardrobe, upended some drawers on the floor. I made a bit of a mess but I guess she wouldn't mind clearing up afterwards. There wasn't much there. If I'd been a real burglar, I'd have been disappointed with everything but the girl. It was then that I stubbed my toe.

It was a suitcase under the bed. I went to pull it out. Kelly got distinctly agitated, bouncing around on the bed without having any effect on her bonds. "What's this?" I said, earning a look of disapproval from Kelly on the bed. She shook her head and squealed.

I sat down on the bed and put the case down beside me. I opened it. I guess I wasn't surprised by what it contained. Kelly was still looking furious but now she was blushing as well, curious given that she'd let me tie her to the bed and cut her clothes from her I thought.

It was her BDSM toy box. There were a couple of bondage magazines, a couple of fetish scene magazines, and a collection of straps, gags, dildos, vibrators and other stuff.

I reached across and loosened off her gag. She pushed the panties from her mouth with her tongue. "You are a bastard," she said. "You weren't supposed to find that."

"Shame," I said. "You can't rely on anyone. Do you want to tell me about this stuff?"

She shook her head. "I was happier with what we were doing before."

"You're in no position to negotiate." I ran one of the vibrators along the inside of her thigh. I thumbed the switch as it reached her crotch. She gave a squeal and tried to snap her knees together. It jerked her ankles painfully against the stockings that tied her. She yelped.

"Bastard," she panted, arching her back to push herself against the vibrator. I picked up one of the fetish mags and started to thumb through it, ignoring her reaction to the vibrator pressed against her crotch. "What's to tell? You know what I'm in to." I switched the vibrator off. She grunted and tried to push her hips forward. "I go to the occasional club event. It's the only way I can get the buzz. My boy friend wasn't keen. I think it scared him off. There's a few of us at the munch that have had the same problem." I flicked the vibrator back on. "Ahhh!"

"Munch?" I said.

"It's a sort of casual meet-up at the local pub for folk interested in this stuff," she said. "I've got a few girlfriends I see there. They're pretty much like me. Wish they could get to do more of this; can't find the blokes that will give them what they want. There's plenty of opportunities for female tops. Subs like me find it harder."

"Let me make it easier." I jammed the vibrator into her cunt and turned it on. It cut the conversation short as she moaned in reaction to it. I left it in her while I rummaged through the box. I pulled out a ball gag. It was bigger than the ones we used in the Prep Centre. She took it without trouble. The vibrator was bringing her close to a climax. She was drooling around the edge of the gag as she shook her head from side to side and twisted her hips back and forth.

It made for a fun day's play. At the end of it I was wondering if perhaps we really needed to go on abducting girls to get the slaves we wanted. I left Kelly to worry about clearing up.

Chapter 42 : Building Works

Business was certainly getting back to normal. When I next saw Freddie he had quite a chirpy air about him. I was still worrying about Rachel, I couldn't help admiring the way in which she had held on, even if it now looked as though she been irreparably damaged by it. The one encouraging thing was that Rick reckoned she was showing signs that her catatonic state was easing. He hadn't found any potential buyers yet. I suggested that he held off for a bit until we had a better picture of her prognosis. It didn't sound like smart business to me to be selling stock on unless you were certain what you were delivering.

Clegg had asked me to join a meeting. I got there before he did. Sarah was there looking as efficient as ever, sitting beside Clegg's desk, demurely dressed in a white blouse and a long black skirt that reached almost to the floor. I'd have asked her what the meeting was about but her mouth was filled with one of the Prep Centre's standard issue ball gags.

There in the middle of Clegg's desk was an architectural model. It looked like quite an old house – a late Elizabethan manor house butted onto the keep of an earlier castle was my guess. The house was surrounded by a moat and outside of that by a circular bank. I was peering closely at it when Freddie came in with Harry and a visitor, a young man wearing a loud check sports jacket.

"Ahha," said the visitor, in an ear splitting Brooklyn accent. "You're admiring my new home. Whaddya think?"

"This is Ross," said Clegg introducing me. "Larry Ross."

"Sure, sure," the visitor said. "I've heard about you. Big help around here."

I tried to smile modestly but it was difficult to hide the pleasure of being recognised for the work I was doing.

"This," said Clegg, pointing at the newcomer, "is the Emir of Kolin" Clegg saw my look of surprise. He certainly didn't sound like any of the Kushtians that I had met so far. "He has recently inherited the title. He's been living in the States for the last forty years,"

"Like forever," the Emir cut in with a grin.

Clegg smiled tolerantly and continued "And he's coming to the UK to establish trading links between Kushtia and with various UK companies. The Kalinin is apparently very keen to have commercial links here. We have another little project on for the Emir with one of our other divisions," Clegg gestured at the model, "and now he would like us to help out with the sort of task that you and Harry are such experts at. Harry; thank you for bringing Sarah along, she can take notes, there will be quite a lot to do."

"Ah, she works too, does she?" The Emir smiled. "Thought she was just the office eye candy." Sarah looked as though she was embarrassed by his remarks – she still hadn't really got used to being viewed as a sex object – but she liked being noticed too.

The 'other division' turned out to be the company that Clegg used for construction projects. Most of that was legitimate work but they also had a side-line constructing dungeons and other secure accommodation for slave keepers. They had lots of experience with concrete set metal bars, heavy doors, underground construction, that sort of thing. Clegg's team had been extending and converting the Emir's new home in the Worcestershire countryside. He'd bought it cheaply after a plan to convert the building into a hotel had collapsed. The developers had got as far as installing the pool, the gym and the spa and creating 20 bedrooms in what was the old castle keep. They'd built the golf course. Then the money had run out.

"Work is going fine," the Emir said. "All on schedule and to what I understand to be Mr Clegg's usual standards of quality. What's needed now is the final preparations for the soft furnishings."

The Emir could see I looked puzzled. "Ah, please excuse my euphemism," he said, "by soft furnishings I mean my wives and concubines. Let me explain." He went to pick up his briefcase from the desk. As he did so he got the view that I had been enjoying for some time. Although from The Emir's side, Sarah's skirt looked had extremely modest, draping across her lap and falling to the middle of her calves, from my side you could see that it was slit to the hip, showing her legs off beautifully. "Oh, very nice," said the Emir. "Hey Larry, you've been holding out on me, enjoying that." He nodded to Freddie. "Do you mind," he said waving a thumb at Sarah. She looked worried.

"Not at all," said Freddie, "help yourself."

"Great," said the Emir pulling papers from the case. As he started to consult the documents his free hand dived inside Sarah's blouse, squeezing and pinching at her tits. "She gave a muffled squeak of pain. The Emir ignored her reactions. "Now youse guys, here's the game. I've got five wives and three girls that are, let's say, going to be 'living in' for my amusement. They are prime Kushtian womanhood. Man of my status only gets to wed the best." Sarah gave another squeak in response to the Emir's attentions. "And I like to take care of my wives. Freddie here has done a good job on the hotel facilities. I'm going to need some staff to keep the ladies comfortable."

Harry looked interested. Clegg looked smug. He could tell this was going to involve a multiple collection of some sort or a way of shifting some stock. "But you won't be looking for additional wives or bed mates?" I said, looking as always to the higher margin opportunities.

"Well, I am going to need some local girls for entertaining my customers. And I don't mean playing checkers if you get my drift. So no wives but we'll need some girls that can bounce to order."

"OK," I said, "so what are you looking for in the staff line?"

"I've got a list here," he said, "your girl here can type it up later." He rolled up the paper and pushed it down the front of her blouse until it was wedged in Sarah's cleavage. She gave a disconcerted whimper. "But mainly what we need is a beautician / hairdresser, a nurse, a dietician, someone to keep the girls fit and four maid servants to keep the place clean. On top of that I think I need three maybe four for entertaining. I'd just like to see a selection of what you've got in stock for that, I'm not too fussy. Just as long as they're equipped and willing."

"Well, what do you think, gentlemen?" Freddie said to Harry and myself.

Harry spoke first, "I'm sure we can come up with some possibilities. The research teams have been doing well lately and were building a bigger and bigger database of potential acquisitions. I'd suggest that we try to pull together a list of maybe's and then get you to look over them Emir, to see which of them will fit the bill."

"Sure," said the Emir, still toying with Sarah's breasts. "That sounds great. If the pick-ups are as good as the staff," a pinch to the nipple brought another squeak from the gagged Sarah, "I'll be happy. Why don't you bring your ideas up to the castle next week? Your guys will be finished by then won't they?" Freddie nodded. "OK come up to the castle, you can show me what you propose and I'll show you where they'll be working."

"That sounds fine," I said.

"Great," said the Emir. "Oh, and bring this little cutie with you." He pinched Sarah again. "She's fun to have around."

Chapter 43 : Into Worcestershire

A week later, Harry and I met up in Harry's office in the Prep Centre. It was only about an hour's drive to the Emir's new home but we wanted to give ourselves plenty of time.

Harry summoned Sarah. "Have you got the folders?" he asked.

Sarah, neat and efficient as ever placed a pile of file folders on the desk. "Yes, sir," she said. I think you'll find that it's just as you wanted. There's a folder for each of the potential acquisitions and a summary sheet for each category. I've tried to make it all as clear as possible and...."

"That's all right Sarah, I'm sure it's fine." Sarah allowed herself a smile of satisfaction.

"Well, I like to do a good job, as you know."

"Sure Sarah," said Harry. "Still we'd better get you ready if you're coming with us." He reached into his drawer and pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

"Oh," she said, "but surely you don't need that. I mean, I'm part of the team now, I've done all this work with Rick and..."

"I'm sorry Sarah, you know the rules." Harry said, bluntly. "I can't take you out of here unsecured. Even with your collar on," she fingered the tags that held her identity details. "In fact, I think you're forgetting your place, young lady. You'll be gagged as well."

Sarah looked pained but did nothing further to object. "Now put these on." He passed her a pair of handcuffs.

She picked them up and fastened one of them around her wrists. "Is that tight enough?" she asked, falling into a more compliant mood.

"That's fine," said Harry. "Now this gag, please." Harry handed her one of the gags that Rick had been experimenting with since the client presentation we had given at Freddie's club.

"Shouldn't there be a strap with this?" Sarah asked, turning the object over in her hands. It looked like the mouth piece of a snorkel but with a small ball shaped rubbery swelling where the air hole would normally be.

"No, that's all right. Just push the ball into your mouth and grip the rubber piece between your teeth"

Sarah looked confused. "Oh, but it's far too small. It'll never work. Let me get one of the standard gags from my desk."

"Sarah," said Harry. "Please just do as you are told." Sarah looked sheepish and put the mouthpiece between her lips, taking the small ball into her mouth. Within a moment the gel began to swell with the warmth of her mouth. The startled look on Sarah's face was a delight. She squealed as the golf ball more than doubled in size, stuffing her mouth until her cheeks bulged with the pressure of the expanding gel. A rigid tube through the centre of the gel maintained an airway but her mouth was completely filled and there was no question of her pushing the gag out, even without a strap to hold it in place. Her hands flew up to her bulging cheeks but there was nothing she could do about the mouth filling gel. "Humwumhumph," was the only sound she could make.

I had to confess to being impressed. Harry was too. "It's the first time I've tried one," he said. Sarah looked distressed at the idea of being a guinea pig for the technology. "But after that, I think I'll be using them on field operations." He reached into one of the drawers of his desk and pulled out one of the nylon sacks of the type we'd used on the Questor pick up. "This will stop our friend here from getting too messy on the journey," Harry said adding to Sarah's confused concern as he fitted the bag around her and zipped it up to her neck collar before tightening the straps so that her arms were locked against her sides and her legs were locked together. "Let's go."

He picked up the bagged and gagged Sarah and tossed her across his shoulder. I followed him out to the car park, grinning at Sarah's plumped out cheeks as she wriggled around on Harry's shoulder.

We put Sarah into the boot of the car and strapped her in so she wouldn't bounce around. "Just remember, girl, you're not staff, you're stock," said Harry, bluntly, as he shut the lid.

I rode up front with Harry. An hour later we turned off of the road past a broken down sign that had been put up for the hotel. The drive wound through trees and then the castle itself appeared. Far more imposing than the model had suggested, the grey bulk of the old circular castle keep rose behind the red brick of the Tudor house, slowly filling our view as we approached it.

The Emir was there to greet us. "Nice to see you guys. Welcome to Worcestershire." Harry opened the boot. "And you brought the girl too, great. She'll love some of the facilities." Sarah looked unconvinced as she climbed out of the back of the car. The Emir made no attempt to conceal his pleasure at the sight of her legs as Harry unzipped her from her sack and helped her to clamber out. "We might as well start the tour right away," he said waving us in through the door.

The manor house itself was unremarkable. Comfortable and well furnished but hardly anything unusual. The castle keep however was very different. We walked across a covered way from the manor house into the keep at first floor level, emerging into a circular room in the middle of the keep. Ranged around us were a series of heavy wooden doors.

"These were the hotel rooms," said the Emir, "but your man Clegg's made them better suited for less willing occupants. Look at this one." He pulled open a door. It was solid oak with a heavy lock. We looked inside. It wasn't too small. There were four bunk beds, solidly built and equipped with shackle rings at each corner. The room still had its bathroom but there was no door. The room had one window but criss-crossed bars covered it. As we looked around it was obvious that anyone staying in the room would have little opportunity to escape. "Freddie's team do a real neat job." He gestured to the ceiling. "Audio and video surveillance of course, linked to voice and movement activated recorders in the main building. And the whole building has RFID sensors fitted so we can put tags on the girls – we'll use anklets – that will let us track any of them wherever they are in the complex. Same sort of technology that you use in the Prep Centre, Freddie tells me. That way we can let them get on with their duties but still have them under control. You can let your girl out of handcuffs if you like; her collar will be tracked here too."

Harry looked impressed as he freed Sarah from her cuffs. He took a small cartridge from his pocket and screwed the nozzle into the front of Sarah's gag. It gave a hiss as the CO₂ rushed through the tube that wound, capillary like, through the gel. As the gas discharged the gel inside Sarah's mouth was cooled and shrank back to its original size. Harry prised the mouthpiece from Sarah's lips to her relief and popped the device in his pocket. Sarah coughed, spluttered, worked her aching jaw, and looked sheepish but said nothing. "Well when we get them it looks like you'll be able to hang on to them," said Harry. "We've got some files to go through with you, possible pick ups. Like we agreed."

"Yeah sure," said the Emir, "but I've got something else to show you first. Come through here." He showed us the way through a low stone arch. "Look at these walls – seven feet thick – solid stone, terrific building – these guys knew how to make things to last." It led to a spiral staircase cut into the thickness of the wall of the castle keep. He pointed upwards. "There's another three floors up there," he said. "Plenty of room for expansion. But I want to show you down here. This is the real goods." We followed him down, Sarah tagging dutifully along behind us.

The foot of the stairs brought us out into a dark stone line cellar. The Emir turned a control by the door and the lights came on slowly revealing that one half of the circle had been divided up into a series of cages. Some of them were small with a single low door, their occupants would be unable to stand up when inside them, two in the middle would allow some movement, two on the right were very narrow; once inside the occupant would be unable to sit down or lie down. "This used to be the dungeon," the Emir said. "They'd converted it to a wine cellar. Well, I like wine as much as the next man but there are limits, I thought I'd put it back to its original use. Plus, I get to keep some of my toys in here." he pushed a switch that turned on a battery of spot lights. Whoever had the misfortune to be occupying the cages would have an unrestricted view of a range of unpleasant devices that could be used on them.

Sarah was obviously disconcerted by the sight of a series of medieval implements of restraint and torture but said nothing.

"Ain't this the goods?" the Emir said. "They're all accurate replicas. Had some guys from your Tower of London check them out. Said they were just like the ones in their museum. Pillory, stocks, whipping post, gibbet cage, rack. Make me feel like the Sheriff of Nottingham, all I need is a Maid Marian, now." He smirked at Sarah. "Say, why don't you let the boys see how good you could make some of this stuff look."

"Oh," said Sarah. "I'm not sure. They all look horrid. I don't think...."

"Now, Sarah," Harry interrupted. "I think you'll look good in the pillory. You ought to oblige the Emir."

Sarah still looked uncomfortable but agreed and walked across to it. She was about to lift the bar that would lock her head and wrists in place when the Emir stopped her.

"Say, what's your name, why don't you take that jacket off, give us all a better view." Sarah looked across at Harry but if she was expecting him to intervene she was disappointed. He just nodded. The blouse she was wearing was pale pink, tight and high necked with long, loose sleeves. "Hmm," said the Emir, "that's not going to really show it off well, you'd better lose the blouse."

Sarah complied, putting it with her jacket on a chair. "Perhaps you'd like me to take of my skirt as well, Sir," she said. Harry looked approving.

"Excellent, excellent, you've got the idea," said the Emir, grinning as Sarah unzipped her skirt. "Now put your head in the centre there and your wrists up here. Then all I have to do is to lower this beam. See how it just fits around your neck," Sarah gave a cough as the beam came down, "and your wrists. Nice and snug fitting, see. Then all we do is clip a padlock in this fastening here and you're all secure."

Harry picked up a device from the table opposite the pillory. "Isn't this a scold's bridle?" he said. "Let's try this on as well." Sarah looked distressed. But the Emir was obviously pleased that his toys were attracting approval. Harry picked up the bridle, amused by the fact that it carried a pair of metal asses ears, as well as the metal bands designed to enclose the head.

"Be my guest," he said, watching as Harry unfastened the cage of metal bands and fitted it around Sarah's head, positioning the inverted Y over her nose and pushing the metal piece into her mouth to press down on her tongue. He fixed it shut at the back of her head with the small padlock that hung from the neck band. He pulled Sarah's hair through to let it fall loosely around her face.

"Gech icch goff," complained Sarah, "icchs eggy ng icchs hurging ghi gouth." She shook her head without effect. Nobody took any notice.

"It's all authentic stuff," the Emir said. "I studied this at college in the States, never thought I'd get to actually put it to use. She'll find that a bit heavy after a while, it's made of steel same as the original." He walked around behind her. "This girl of yours might have been built for this," he said, licking his lips at the sight of Sarah in her bra, panties stockings and suspender belt, locked in the pillory with her head trapped in the scold's bridle.

Harry smiled. The Emir ran his hands across Sarah's thighs and buttocks. "Yes," he said, "very nice. She's a cute girl like I said. How much do you want for her? Can we add her to the shipment for here?"

Sarah gave a squeak of alarm from inside the bridle. "Well," said Harry. "We hadn't thought about selling her. I guess it's a possibility." Another squeak from Sarah. "But we couldn't do it straight away. We could lend her to you, I guess."

"Yes," I said. "Your Minister of Trade was kind enough to lend me his secretary for an evening in Kushtia, this seems only fair in return."

The Emir looked a little concerned. "Well, I don't want to take advantage and Kushtian hospitality is never given in the expectation of any return. I mean like I know you brought her over here and everything. So, well, look how about if I rent her for a while. You can see how you get on without her, I can see if she fits in." Sarah squealed again, the scold's bridle stopping her from making any articulate protest.

I remembered a paper I had back in my brief case. "I've got a rental agreement with me," I said. Elly had been drawing one up and I'd printed out a copy. "Our legal department has been working on a standard one for us. It covers all the usual stuff; waiver in the event of damage caused by the item being rented, acceptance of liability for any permanent damage caused to the item, that sort of thing."

"Sure thing, said the Emir. "That sounds fine. Youse got to protect your assets. Especially if the assets have arses like this." He smirked, giving Sarah's backside a pat. "If we go back to the house I'll sign it. Plus you can show me what you're proposing."

Harry gave Sarah a wave. She looked distressed as we left her in the dungeon to head back to the house.

Back in the Emir's lounge, I got out the rental agreement that Ellie had drafted up for me. I filled in a few details to cover the rental of Sarah. He didn't even read it but scrawled a signature across the bottom. I rummaged in my case and found the summary that Sarah had typed up from our earlier meeting. "Well, Emir," I began.

"Hey, come on," the Emir said, let's not keep this so formal. Call me Brad."

"OK, Brad," I responded. "Now, I think what you were looking for was a beautician, a nurse / dietician, hairdresser, a fitness coach and four house maids, plus three or four for entertaining. I hear you've already picked out some stock for the entertainments, so we're only talking about the staff at the moment. Right?"

"Spot on Larry, spot on," Brad smiled. "Four very nice pieces from your stock room, I must say. We don't have to take so much trouble over the fuck-bunnies but they look as though they'll give my guests a good time. Your man Rick seems to have a good training programme going there."

"Well yes, he does, I guess. Anyway we've got some proposals for the rest of the staff. Our research people managed to track down these two as possibles for your beautician / hairdresser. They are two sisters, set up their business last year specialising in an in-your-home service. They go out with a sort of travelling beauty parlour. They also run a web site where they give beauty tips on-line and show some examples of their work. Here look," I took out my lap top and turned it on. I'd canned a version of their site to show the Emir. I took him through it.

"They seem to do quite a good job, looking at this stuff," Brad said. "Sisters, you say?" I nodded. "Well they'd be unhappy if we split them up. I reckon you should get the pair of them. I'll be able to use them. Got to keep the girls looking cute, haven't we?"

"Fine," I said always happy to add to the quota. Harry grunted approvingly. I knew he'd reckon it was easier to snatch both of them than one. "Now, I've got some video of the next one. We thought this would do for your fitness coach." I fired up the video we'd had taken. A group of girls were playing beach volley ball. They all looked fit but of the four, one team was of a rather muscular build while of the others the girl playing at the back was long legged and blonde, her partner equally leggy but with short cropped dark hair. "That's our suggestion," I said pointing to the blonde girl as she leapt forward to knock the ball back over the net to her opponents. It came straight back. Her partner intercepted it and pushed it high and away towards the back corner of their opponent's court. They just reached it. A diving, two handed blow pushed the ball back up again towards the net. The other girl batted it up intending for her partner to slam it to the floor across the net but instead the ball headed over the net. As it did so, the blonde dived forward, tipping the ball back over the net to fall between two of her opponents. She and her partner threw their hands up in excitement. It was obviously the winning point. They embraced one another, but it was fairly obvious that the kiss between the two girls was more than you'd normally get for a winning point. Giggling the two of them fell to the sand, locked together while their opponents looked on amused, hands on hips.

"She's 28 years old, a qualified physiotherapist and a diploma in sports medicine. She's trained volleyball, tennis and ladies soccer players. Plus as you can see, she's pretty well set up herself. Prefers the company of girls to men, as you can see, but I'm assuming that won't worry you."

The Emir gave a smirk. "What about her girl friend? She's cute too."

"She's 26, not qualified as far as we can tell. She runs, middle distance stuff mainly, pretty good club performer but she's never going to make it to the Olympics. She's been shackled up with our target for about six months, but she'll get over her soon enough."

"Seems a shame to split them up," said Brad. "Being so fond of each other and all. I think I can run to the two of them."

I tried not to grin, but things were going pretty much as I'd hoped. "OK," I said. "Now for your nurse, we found this a bit further down the beach." I pushed a series of grainy photographs towards Brad. Obviously taken with a telephoto lens and then blown up they showed two girls, both blondes, sun bathing in bikinis. "The one in red is our suggestion. She 25, Dutch, qualified as a nurse last year in Holland. The girl in blue is her friend, she's Dutch too, over here in the UK to improve her English. Works as a secretary in the local hospital." I flipped another picture in front of him, The girl in blue had stood up and was towelling dry her hair. The girl in red was sitting up, leaning with her hands on the sand behind her, looking up at her friend.

"Are these two candidates for the little Dutch boy?" Brad asked. I looked blank.

"You know, the one that saved the country by sticking his finger in the dyke. They look like an item too."

"Yeah," I said, "you could be right. We think they're that way. But don't let that worry you. We can set things up so it looks like she's responsible for the fact that her friend's gone missing. The papers love that sort of stuff." I was thinking back to the coverage that Rachel's disappearance had generated when the press had found out that her chauffeuse had gone missing too.

"No, no, I can't have that," Brad smiled. "Gotta have the two of them as well."

"I think that will put us rather over budget, Emir," I said. "I wouldn't want there to be any difficulties with the Trade Minister as a result."

"Don't you worry about that. I can square him. This isn't all on his budget anyway. I'll be picking up quite a bit of the cost. But then like I say you got to be in to win. Eh, Larry boy???"

"Just as long as you're happy," I said.

"Sure, sure," he answered.

"Well, it's fine by me," said Harry. "Leaves fewer loose ends around. Makes the pick ups easier."

"OK then," said Brad, "that's about it I guess." His mobile phone bleeped and he looked down at it. "Uh oh," he said, "message from the boss."

"How about the house maids?"

He was looking down at his phone. "Uh, oh, yeah. Look I'm sure you can pick those out. I'll trust your call. Give me one of your order forms, will you?" I pushed the document across to him. He scribbled in "14 items, as agreed," and signed it. "Look, I'm sorry I've got to go. Urgent meeting. I'll be off for a few days. Don't worry about your girl, Sarah. I'll brief the guards to see she's looked after. We'll sort things out when I get back. Just get on with the pick-ups can you? I need to grab some stuff."

The Emir's signature was good enough for me. Harry and I gathered up our things. We were just about ready to leave when Brad came dashing back into the lounge carrying a small overnight bag. "Can youse guys give me a lift to the airport?" he said. "Only my driver's in town and I don't want to miss the next flight."

"Sure," said Harry. I agreed with him. After an order for 14 pieces and a rental for Sarah, I felt it was the least we could do.

It was as we were on the way back I could tell that Harry was working himself up to say something. He was never the most talkative but he developed a tense look that told me he was worried. It turned out that it wasn't about the Emir or Sarah. He wasn't happy about what was happening with Rachel. He thought I was giving Rick a good enough steer.

"Look, Larry," he said. "I don't want to talk out of line and you can tell me it's none of my business but you've always been pretty straight with me about things. You need too do something about Rachel. You commissioned Rachel's collection but now she's a problem and you seem to be leaving it all up to Rick. It's too much of a mess."

"Hang on," I said. "He's the expert."

"He's the expert at doing what he does. It ain't no good if what he does isn't what's needed. You're going to have to pick up the ball. The 'see if she can survive being fucked ten times a day' approach hasn't worked and the 'let's take her mind off it with drugs' approach looks close to disaster too. You're the only one who can tell Rick that he should be doing something else. And the fact that you think you can get by without her now isn't an excuse."

Chapter 44 : Stimulation

I'd taken on board what Harry was saying but I really hadn't decided what to do about it. If what Harry had to say hadn't been enough, the earful I got from Freddie the following day made the point even more strongly. He asked to see me in his office. When I got there Elly had evidently just finished a conversation with him. He didn't look happy. Elly just looked at me, dropped a file on Clegg's desk and said "See you later," to him She gave a nod to me but said nothing more and left.

Clegg gestured for me to take a seat. "How's things with the Emir?" he asked.

"OK," I said. Harry's got research to do some collection proposals. The Emir's happy with them. He's going to take 14 pieces from us. Some will come from stock but most will be custom collections." I'd expected him to be pleased with the news but it didn't look like he was.

"Larry," he said, "That's fine. Good news." He moved quickly on, evidently keen to get to what he really wanted to talk about. "Look, I know operations aren't your responsibility but I'm worried. There's been too many cock-ups recently in the field and in the Prep Centre. And then there was the business with Brian. The difficulty with all this custom collection work is that it means we're being more selective about targets. I'm not sure we're taking account of the extra risks the you get when you go after someone specific rather than just collecting opportunities. It was your idea to go down this track. The business needs to deal with the consequences but you need to get on board with that too. I got Elly to do some rooting around on some of the problems. She's just been filling me in. The only good thing is that it looks as though the Brian thing was well contained. Seems like he wasn't just keeping down sales prices he was skimming the receipts as well. The people who thought he was helping them are most upset. They actually sounded grateful that we'd taken him out. Sure, they like to make a bit of money but they don't like things be de-stabilised any more than I do. Not sure where that leaves him when I've done with him though. Nobody's even interested in him as meat. As to the rest of it, Elly was pretty scathing. The whole team's got too bloody casual. It needs to be tightened up. If we carry on like we are doing then someone's going to get killed or worse."

"Well, hang on," I said defensively. "I'm not sure that you can point deficiencies in operations or the prep centre at me. I know Brian was pissed off because of what I'd been doing but that's hardly my fault is it?"

"No," said Clegg, "it's not. But, and it's a big but, if this organisation as a whole can't cope with the attentions of that incompetent better than we did then we're in trouble. If one of our own folk gets snatched by amateurs; if one of our own folk lets herself get snatched by amateurs; if we only avoid you getting picked up by chance; if we let your writer run amok and break out of the Prep Centre; if we have our sales director running scams on the inside of the business and no one knows; if the Prep centre is so heavy handed it gets to blister the mind of one of our assets," I looked blank, "your bloody writer – Rachel; then I think the business has a problem. And if you don't think that's part of your responsibility then maybe I have a problem with you."

"Hey, I'm not backing away from any of this but I can't do other people's jobs. You didn't hire me because of what I knew about this business, remember?"

"No, I didn't. But I do expect some level of involvement. And I need to see some follow through on the consequences of getting into this approach to market. Now I'll admit I haven't pressed you on this. But I'm pressing you now Larry, I'm pressing you now. And you won't want me to press you any harder. Believe me."

Something about his humourless smile made me very certain that I agreed with him.

"The first thing we're going to do is fix your writer," he said bluntly. "I don't like wasting assets. You wanted her, you can take the lead."

"Well, I'm not sure we can, I've spoken to Rick and" Clegg's cold stare cut me off.

"I said it's going to be fixed. I've spoken to Rick about a few things too, including this and he's feeling much more motivated now." I imagined the conversation had been along similar lines. "He's made some progress. Got a new approach. Looks as though it might work, Go talk to him again. And then come back and tell me how you're going to fix it. That's not 'if', Larry, that's 'how'! Don't take it personally. I'm going to be pretty intolerant of cock-ups all round from now, but this one is very much on your priority list. I'm interested in your continued well-being Larry. Don't disappoint me."

I left Clegg's office feeling somewhere between deeply uncomfortable and scared shitless. Whether or not it was personal it was pretty clear that any failure would result in some personal attention and I didn't think it was about to be a quiet coaching session. In fairness, I had to admit he was right but it didn't make me any more comfortable about the possible outcomes.

I bumped into Rick in the corridor at the Prep Centre and told him Freddie had asked me to talk to him about Rachel. "Yes," he said, "Freddie had a chat with me, too." He gave a look that suggested he'd left his discussions with Clegg in about as comfortable a state as I had. "So, it looks like we need to try and fix this."

I asked whether he'd made any progress with Rachel, whether he'd found anything yet that might be able to help her.

"No," he said. "We stopped the drugs and we've put her on a fairly minimal security regime while we've been trying to think of some other stuff. The good news is that she seems to be recovering. No more compliant than before but certainly less damaged than I thought. There could be something there to work with after all but we need a different approach."

"What sort of 'different approach', more drugs or what?"

"Nuh," Rick shook his head. "There's one idea that one of the team came up with. We were working on it before Elly got Clegg all wound up about things. They thought that maybe instead of trying to break her we should just give her a really comfortable environment, let her recover as best she could, and then, well.... Look have you got some time?"

I looked at my watch. "Mm, sure," I said. "I want things to turn out for her. I am responsible, I guess. I had her snatched after all. It's not her fault things moved on. Plus Freddie wants some feed-back on what we're going to do. He's taking a personal interest. I can see it wouldn't be a great idea to disappoint him."

"Yeah, I know. The good thing is that it was what Freddie has set up for Brian's family that gave us the idea for this. You know he was really angry about all that you know. I wondered if there wasn't going to be blood spilled in a deliberate, unpleasant and terminal fashion over it."

"You're not telling me that he's mellowed? Decided to send them all off for a pleasant holiday somewhere with his compliments?"

"That's not really Freddie, is it? Look at what he asked us to set up for the wife, the sister and the two girls. Here." Rick pulled back a curtain that had covered a viewing panel. Behind it were four tables each of which had one of Brian's family strapped down to it. They weren't struggling. Alice was nearest, then Carol and then the two girls Beth and Ella. All four were naked and as far as I could tell as hairless as when I had last seen them. Wires ran from an overhead gantry to each woman's nipples, labia and clitoris. From the way that each was bucking and twitching in turn it was evident that they were being stimulated electrically. Every so often one or the other would give a sigh, a low moan or a short grunt. I assumed it had been going on for some time. "The wires provide low frequency stimulation directly to their arousal centres. There's a sort of randomiser so they'll be stimulated in left or right nipple, clitoris, anus in different sequences one after another. They are sedated but they are already showing signs of distress when we turn the current off. I think it should be soon time to move them on to the next stage."

"Something more intense? Hang on. Did you say they're distressed when you turn the current *off*?"

"Oh yes. They are becoming addicted to the stimulation. So the next stage isn't really to make it any more intense. Quite the reverse in some ways. What we do next is to provide them with a highly normalised environment. Comfortable surroundings, bright colours, good food, opportunities for relaxation. Except they get to learn that they can have intense sexual stimulation whenever they want it. We've designed a device that fits like a thong, a radio receiver triggers it. Using that, we can let them learn that they can gain stimulation with conforming behaviour. They can try self stimulation of course but they'll find that it's not as intense as what we can deliver through the thong. Pleasure is very addictive."

"But I'm not sure I see how this helps us with Rachel. I don't even really see what the end point for them is. How does this help Freddie's need for revenge on Brian?"

"Well, can't we use the same approach on Rachel? The end point for this lot is that Clegg gets four females, completely addicted to sex that will do almost anything for the sexual stimulation that they crave. I am sure he can find a use for that." Rick gave a smirk.

"And Freddie's revenge?"

Rick pressed another button and a light lit at the back of the room. There, strapped to a chair, fully able to watch every aspect of the proceedings, was Brian. "He's watching every last part of it," said Rick. "Freddie's really quite pleased that he's going to be able to watch his wife, sister-in-law and daughters turning tricks because they want to."

"Sounds like something the Emperor Tiberius would have thought of."

"Funny you should say that," Rick came back. "Freddie's got a copy of Suetonius 'The Twelve Caesars' on his desk at the moment."

"I think we should all be worried by that. From what I remember it didn't turn out too well for any of them or many of the people around them."

"No," said Rick, "I'm no classicist but I think you're right. Still to come back to the point in hand. I thought we could use something similar for your writer. Do you want me to put her on the same regime?"

"Let me think about it," I said. It seemed like it might offer some possibilities but I was worried. I suspected that Rachel's almost catatonic state had been the result of trauma from her use of the memory of rape as the diversion from her conditioning added to the effect of the drugs. I wasn't sure that more sex was the answer. Leastways not at first.

Chapter 45 : The Emir's Photo Collection

"Yes, that's right, Janice, it's for a photo shoot. Well, I saw the stuff you do on your web site and I thought you'd be ideal for this. I'll cover your fees of course but I'll credit your work on the pictures too. They've been commissioned by a new magazine: South Coast – it's going to be promoting all sorts of businesses around here, this shoot is for their launch issue. It should get a lot of attention. Anyway they want us to do a feature on a couple of volley ball players, we're going to want to do a sort of make over shoot, some pics of them in their volley ball kit and then in evening dress. So you'll need to do a fairly high-energy make up and hair for the first shots and something a bit more sophisticated for the evening look. I guess you and Jilly can handle that? I thought so. OK well if you can be at my studio tomorrow lunchtime, that will be great. Keep it quiet though, the magazine doesn't want anything to get out about this until they do the launch. If it goes well you should have plenty more opportunities like this. ... Right, see you there."

I overheard Tricia's phone call. It sounded like she had no problem setting up Janice and Jillie, the make up girls. Karen and Peta weren't any trouble either when Tricia called them. They were keen for some publicity as they saw it and, like she said, the worst that can happen is you don't like what the make up girls do.

The next day in the photo studio we'd hired for the occasion, Janice and Jillie were setting up their stuff on a couple of tables to one side when I saw Karen and Peta coming up the alleyway towards us. They squeezed past the van that almost blocked the alleyway and onto the stairs that led up to where we were.

We were using Tricia and Eva, the girl she'd worked with on the Questor pick up, for this. We thought the targets would be more comfortable with a couple of female photographers. I was there ostensibly to rig lighting. I just liked to watch the girls at work I guess. Tricia and Eva seemed to get on and it looked like everything was working so far. Tricia was keen to get a lead role but she didn't mind working in to Eva and Harry had been adamant that she needed a few more pick-ups under her belt before he'd let her take charge of one. She and Harry had had a bit of an up and downer about it. I was trying to stay out of it. At least it didn't seem to be interfering with this job.

The six of them were enjoying a glass of chilled wine before getting started while I fiddled around with the flash stands and the reflectors. Karen and Peta stripped down to their bra and panties to let Janice and Jillie get started on their make up and hair. There were some robes hanging by the chairs at the make up desk but they didn't bother with them.

Janice was just about to start on Peta's hair when Tricia and her friend went to work. The targets found themselves staring into the barrel of an Ouzi and a pistol. "Sorry, ladies," Tricia announced. "Just be careful or it will be a different type of shoot to the one you expected. Now keep your hands over your heads and sit down on the floor."

Janice, Jillie, Karen and Peta followed instructions, staring up from the floor at their attackers.

"Karen, Peta, on your face, please, hands behind your backs." Tricia passed two pairs of handcuffs to Janice and Jillie. "Put those on them," she ordered watching as Janice and Jillie cuffed the two volley ball players, "and squeeze them closed real tight. Tricia's associate was rummaging in Karen and Peta's sports bags, she pulled out four pairs of sports socks.

"One pair each, ladies," she said tossing them to Janice and Jillie. Seeing their puzzled look she pointed to her own mouth. "In the mouth, girls, in the mouth. We want you four quiet. You two roll the others over and stuff their mouths. Then do your own."

"No, please," begged Janice. "We won't make a sound. We'll be quiet."

"Will we, fuck," growled Karen.

Tricia grinned. "That's what we thought," she snarled. "Now get on with it." She aimed a swipe of her gun butt at Janice who fell into line quickly. Cramming a pair of socks into Peta's mouth before doing the same for her own. She looked back plaintively at Tricia. Jillie did the same for Karen. "Now some tape," said Eva, tossing a roll of gaffer tape across to Janice. Jillie knelt on the floor with her hands in the air, staring in fear at Tricia's gun. "Three strips - two diagonal cross ways over the mouth, one horizontal, use plenty and make sure it's pulled tight over those socks." Eva ordered Janice, watching as she did as she was told. "Great, you've done that really well. Now do your own."

As Janice pulled the strips tight across her own face she gave a muffled grunt. "Grunghhh," she went.

Eva smiled. "Yeah, it works doesn't it? Now do the other two." Janice taped over Peta's mouth and then did the same for Jillie before dropping the remainder of the roll on the floor. She looked up at Tricia and Eva and raised her own hands in resigned surrender.

"Very good," said Eva. "Now let's get you two tied up."

"Hang on," I said, interrupting things for the first time. "Let's have these two strip off. They're looking a bit over dressed alongside our sporty two." Tricia and Eva exchanged a look that said, "Men! Huh!" but they knew as well as I did that the more you did to humiliate them early on in the game, the easier they were to deal with as things went on.

"You heard the man," said Eva. "Stay down on the floor but get out of those dresses." Janice gave a muffled whimper. Eva responded by jamming her pistol into the girl's cleavage. Get started if you don't want an extra button hole," she snarled and Janice began to unfasten the buttons up the front of her dress. As she pulled it from her shoulders, I got a good look at her tits, she tried to hold her hands across her chest but Eva wasn't having any, ordering her to put her hands behind her. The

gag muffled Janice's sobs but the tears on her cheek told the story of her distress and terror. Jillie offered no resistance as Tricia prodded her into stripping like her friend. She gave each of the make-up girls a pair of handcuffs and told them to lock their own wrists behind their backs before she pushed them face down alongside Peta and Karen. We let the four of them whimper helplessly while we cleared the place up.

It didn't take long to get the girls down the stairs and into the van; the alleyway wasn't overlooked so we didn't even have to wait until dark. They were soon on their way. I suggested to Tricia that she and I might go for a drink but she turned me down. She claimed that she and Eva still had another pick up to plan but I thought it might have had something to do with me insisting that Janice and Jillie strip off.

Later it looked like I needn't have worried. I was laying in bed in my hotel room, later that evening, flicking idly through the channels on the TV when there was a knock at the door. "It's me," said Tricia's voice. "I thought we might have that drink....." I'd hoped we might have some fun or maybe even talk through some of my problems. Instead Tricia spent the time telling me that Harry really ought to let her lead a pick up and she didn't see why she had to go on playing second string to Eva. I sat there listening or looking as though I was, and thinking that an evening with Kelly would have been more amusing. In the end she went back to her own room.

I spent the rest of the time thinking about what I was going to suggest to Clegg about Rachel. I'd had a long talk with the Prep Centre doctor – the one that had helped me the time that Rachel attacked me. She had agreed with me that the whole sex orientation thing was unlikely to work in the short term after the traumatising effect of Rachel's multiple rapes. She argued that what Rachel needed was a chance to draw a line under that, to set herself free from her past, to start again. In the longer term, having done that it would be possible to use Rick's approach but she was too unstable now. The Doc argued that one of the ways forward could be to induce some sort of near-death experience; to give her something to recover from and then to help that recovery. That way she would come to see us as her saviours rather than her oppressors; at least as long as she didn't suspect that we were the authors of her fate. The fact that she'd been on a less oppressive regime already would help. After that we could probably introduce the sexual programming.

I'd felt the Doc was making sense. It sounded like a better bet than trying to shock her into sexual compliance from where she was now. I had the ideal nurse available in Sukie, and from what I'd seen Rachel trusted her. The Doc knew how to engineer the near death experience. We just had to organise it and make sure no one else knew about it.

The discussion with Clegg turned out to be a lot less difficult than I'd expected. But then I'd thought a lot about it.

"You wanted me to tell you how I was going to fix the Rachel problem," I said, taking as positive an approach as I could.

"Uhhuh," said Clegg.

"Well, I've got the answer. It depends on inducing an immediate crisis for Rachel and assisting her recovery." I talked him through the Doctor's hypothesis that Rachel would respond to the opportunity to draw a line under her past life and start again. I didn't explain how we were going to achieve that and he didn't press me. "After the induced crisis she'll need an extended time in recovery. I'll want a minimum security suite. I'll be living in it myself – I want to keep this very close to me and I don't think I can do it in my flat. And I want Sukie assigned to the project as well. I'll need some help from the Doc too."

Clegg looked thoughtful. "How long is extended?"

"It could be six months. It could be less."

"We're not talking 'horse might talk' here are we?"

"Sorry," I said. "How do you mean?"

"It's a parable on the value of delaying tactics." Clegg was watching me closely. I looked him straight in the eye. "A man is about to be executed by the King and he says, 'Surely you wouldn't execute the man who could make your horse talk? Give me a year and I'll do it.' The King agrees and as the man is dragged off to the stables, one of the guards hisses at him, 'You can't make his horse talk, can you?' And the man says, 'In a year a lot can happen. I might die, or the horse might die, or the King might die, ... or the horse might talk.' You see Larry? I'd hate to think you were thinking along those lines, Larry."

"Freddie," I said, "I don't have any other horses to back on this one." Clegg laughed. "I thought about using the techniques that are being worked on Brian's family but that's not right for this. At least not at first. This is the best bet."

"Good," he said. "At least you're committed. What shall we call this project? 'Mr. Ed?'"

Chapter 46 : Dutch Collection

I couldn't really justify the time to sit in on another collection. I had Rachel to worry about and I really needed to finish off the plans for putting in place a proper account management function now that Brian was no longer around. Tricia and Eva seemed quite able to get on with it, anyway. After all it was their job.

I did take some time out to see how things were progressing with Brian's family though. Rick took me into one wing of the Prep Centre where from the viewing corridor we were looking into not harsh prison cells but a comfortable living area that looked like a small apartment. There were bright colours, comfortable furniture, books on the table, CD's and a stereo. Ella, her mother and her aunt were all lounging in chairs around the room. They all wore similar smock like dresses that hung from their collars, flowing loosely and stopping well above their knees. The dresses were in bright, pastel colours, pink for Ella, pale yellow for Alice, pale blue for Carol. The women were all smiling but didn't appear to be doing anything. "It's every bit as secure as the other rooms," said Rick, "but the occupants have complete freedom inside their area. Here, here comes Beth now."

A door opened on the far side and Beth appeared. She looked happy, tanned, and relaxed. She'd obviously just come from the shower. She had one towel wrapped tightly around her body and another around her head. She shook the second towel loose and sat on a chair, rubbing at her hair with the towel. I could see that she was still wearing her collar but apart from that there was no sign of any restraints.

She dropped the other towel, leaving her almost naked. All she wore was the briefest of thongs, simple, white, and barely covering her at all.

"This is all very pleasant, Rick," I said, "but I'm not sure what's going on."

Rick, taking his usual irritating pleasure in holding out for the least bit of dramatic effect, pulled a small control box from his pocket with a flourish. "This," he said, "provides a radio signal to a tiny receiver that is held in Rachel's vulva by that thong. It can pulse on demand or deliver low frequency stimulation to the girl's clitoris. It's possible to induce and maintain high levels of sexual arousal. Watch." He pressed a button.

At once, Beth stopped what she was doing turned towards the panel we were standing behind and said in a clear voice. "Oh, yes, please. I want you to." Rick pressed another button and Beth soon appeared to be highly aroused, laying down on the couch, stroking her own body, clutching at her groin, panting and keening with desire. Rick let the effect continue for a while, until he pressed the button again and almost at once, Beth's arousal could be seen to diminish. She sat up catching her breath, staring wistfully towards the screen. "Thank you," she said. "More?" She looked at the panel for a few moments but could see that nothing further was coming. With a disappointed look she sank back down on the couch and picked up a magazine. As she was leafing through it I could see it was one set or pornographic pictures after another. She seemed to study some of the pictures intently. She had completely forgotten that, apart from the thong, she was naked.

"Well," I said, "I think I understand what I saw but I'm not sure what it means. Why doesn't she just take that thong off?"

"Why should she want to? Then she wouldn't get what she wants most of all; sexual stimulation. It delivers frequent bouts of stimulation at irregular intervals, keeping her in a slightly aroused state. From that point any further stimulus creates a state of rapid arousal. If we brought one of the guards in for instance, she would be desperate for sexual activity to raise herself up from the background level of arousal delivered by the thong."

"And how do you stop them all just going at each other? If they can get each others stimulation don't they lose the need for the thong?"

"Unapproved sexual activity is non-conformant behaviour. We turn off their thong. The choice is between low level but regular, almost continuous arousal coupled with satisfaction when approved or occasional satisfaction but without the background of arousal. So far they've all chosen the former."

I had to admit it looked promising but I still thought that carrying on with my current plans looked like the better start for Rachel. Rick's methods could, however, have us offering a much better service to those who were looking to acquire slaves as sexual playthings. "How come you hadn't developed this before?" I asked.

"We didn't have the problem before, really. Don't forget when we've been collecting for stock we haven't had to worry about the results of training. As long as the girls were saleable for something then we weren't too worried what the outcome of orientation was. If they were damaged by the process it just meant that they fetched a lower price. Actually, thinking about it that might have been some of Brian's problem. There had been a few cases of 'difficult' girls over the last year."

"Well it sounds like you needed to rethink the orientation approach anyway."

Rick nodded, thoughtfully. "Yeah," he said, "that's pretty much what Freddie said. But not quite in those words."

I was still working at the Prep Centre later when Eva and Tricia came in, pleased as anything and giggling like girls. "We've come up with a new Clegg Enterprises product," Eva announced as she came into my office. "You'll never guess what it is."

"You're right," I said. I've never been much good at guessing games. "Does it involve your Dutch project?"

"Oh yes," said Tricia. "Absolutely!"

"And this wonderful idea is?" I asked.

"Tinned slaves!" Tricia and Eva blurted out together, collapsing on the office couch with a peal of laughter.

Harry, disturbed by the noise, came to see what was going on.

"Come and see," said Eva and led the way out to the delivery bay. There was one of the standard Clegg white vans. Behind, it was towing a caravan. "There" said Eva, pointing to the caravan, "two tinned slaves. Probably well stewed in their own juice by now."

Harry and I walked across to the van and climbed inside. The muffled grunts of two gagged women told us that Eva and Tricia had been successful. Eva climbed in behind us and lifted up the cushions of the bench seat that ran across the caravan's large front window. In the base of the seat, wedged in between piles of clothes and boxes was a bikini-clad, bound and gagged girl. She looked panic stricken, her eyes wide in terror, evidently attempting to scream behind her gag. "Greetje Van Bruijn," Eva announced, "who was so friendly as to invite Tricia into her van for a cup of tea. Unfortunately Tricia popped a little something in her cup and she ended up in there. All we had to do then was to wait for Femke to get back from the hospital."

"And she is where?" Harry asked.

Eva and Tricia were enjoying the theatrics. "Ta – da!" Tricia said as she pulled open the door of the caravan's bath cabinet. Sat inside on the chemical closet was Femke Toos, the Dutch nurse. Still wearing her white uniform dress she'd been trussed up with strips of cloth, torn I guessed from clothes found in the caravan. Her mouth was well stuffed with a cloth gag. She'd lost her cap in her struggles and it lay on the floor near her feet, but that was all she had managed to dislodge. I reached forward and pulled off the identity badge that she wore pinned to her dress, "Ward Nurse : F Toos," it said. Well, she was going to be working in some different wards from now on.

"It was soooo easy," Tricia crowed. "Snatched her when she got back to the 'van. Stuffed her in there. Eva hitched the caravan up to our truck and we were off the site and on our way in 15 minutes. How easy was that? Nobody was bothered, caravans come and go all the time."

Tricia grabbed hold of Greetje and pulled her from beneath the couch. Eva untied the cloth strips from Femke's ankles and got her to her feet. The two captives were led away to be introduced to Rick's team and their new, albeit temporary, accommodation.

Freddie was up at the Prep Centre for one of his occasional visits. I guessed he'd been giving folk a little "encouragement" and getting his ear closer to the ground than had been the case for a while. He called me up to asked me for an update on the current projects. I assumed he'd want to hear about Rachel too.

I found him in one of the offices, evidently talking on the phone to Elly. "Yes, that should be fine," he was saying. "You know I trust your call on the legal stuff. No, I'm not worried about any of the clauses they've added to the contract except for the suggested warranties. We can't warrant the stock for anything more than its current status. I'm certainly not getting into 'freedom from disease or any significant medical condition that might prevent the goods from providing the specified services or might reduce the value of the goods on re-sale'. That's a mine-field. I'll happily agree to confirming that no medical condition has arisen during the period of acquisition, preparation and orientation but we can't be responsible for pre-existing medical conditions. Jeeze, they'll be wanting me to send Harry out with an MRI scanner." He waved me to a seat. "And I don't want a buy back clause either or if we have one then it's got to be 'current market prices' not 'purchaser's acquisition price'. I don't care if they're complaining that they don't know what the market will do; neither do I. ... That OK? Fine.You're a star. Talk to you soon." He put the phone down.

"Hi, Freddie," I said. "Contract problems?"

"No, not really. Nothing out of the unusual. Some of the buyers are always trying it on. The bigger ones are starting to get purchasing managers in their organisation for crying out loud. They don't think they've added any value if they haven't changed at least one clause in the contract. Elly will sort it out. It's just noise, really."

"Maybe they don't understand the process," I said. Perhaps we should give them some hospitality to help them see what a great product we provide. We could do it somewhere nice and comfortable – use the Emir's castle maybe – let them have the experience their companies are buying into. They probably don't get much in the way of perks. We could do it as a training exercise for them – giving them insights into the problems of slave keeping so that they can negotiate better acquisition contracts."

"Not a bad idea, Larry, old man, not a bad idea," said Freddie. "It'd certainly help to get them on-side and it might make them a little more comfortable with dealing with us."

"And, when we quibble over a clause, they'd know why we were doing it."

"Yes, I see your point. Let's think about it in a bit more detail. Anyway, that's something new to worry about. I wanted to get an update on the current stuff."

I gave Freddie an update on the current state of the Kushtian activities including the Emir's purchases. I'd exchanged a number of documents with the Trade Minister and we now had a frame contract that everyone, even Elly, was happy with. The Trade Minister was working with the Council and other government departments to get together a consolidated list of likely

requirements and we were due to discuss how we might help build the market for imported product outside the government as well. Freddie seemed pretty pleased.

He asked about the Steve Glennis project. I had to admit it was taking longer than I'd hoped. We'd identified the target – Lady Marchmont – and Steve was happy with that. Research had been working on a collection proposal but it was proving a challenge to put together something that looked as though it would work. Steve had been being quite patient, he felt it was better to take the time and get it right. The urgency had gone out of it from his side and he'd really been taken with the pictures we provided, especially some of the covert video footage. We'd managed to get that from one of the paparazzi that had been caught filming her with one of a string of boyfriends during a holiday in Mustique. He'd had seven kinds of shit kicked out of him which had left him in no doubt that he couldn't publish it but he was happy to cut his losses and let us have it at a price.

We talked about the market research report. Freddie seemed happy for me to carry on exploring new market opportunities. He was still thinking what to do about the sales activities now that Brian wasn't around. Luckily he wasn't thinking about pointing them at me. I had enough to worry about.

I told him about Kelly. He had a good laugh at the bit about the gun's safety catch. "I told Harry you weren't safe to be allowed out," he chuckled. I didn't really try to get introduce the idea of trying to establish a "force-free" slave line based on recruiting willing slaves. I thought Freddie had enough on his plate at the moment without more good ideas for new things to do. And I knew that if I wanted to get very far with that argument I'd need a lot more solid evidence. Even then it might not be enough.

We finished up talking about Rachel. I said I had the first step set up for the following day. He said, "Good, let's hope it works," with one of his most worrying smiles. "Oh," he said, "by the way I've drawn a line under the whole Brian business, I mean his family will still finish their programme – that all seems to be working well – but I've pulled him out of it. It just wasn't fair on him. And it wasn't doing me any good either."

I didn't really know what to say. "And next?" seemed about the only question to ask.

"I don't know," said Freddie with a sigh that indicated he really was letting go of the whole thing. "I just asked Elly to sort it out. She's good at that sort of thing. No loose ends with any of his associates, no mess. It'll be all right. I can rely on Elly."

I suddenly realised that when Clegg said "sort it out" he wasn't simply talking of Brian getting a new career direction, unless you include in that playing a major supporting role in some local construction project.

I wasn't sure which I found more disturbing; the obsessive vengefulness that he had shown before or the disinterest in what presumably would be Brian's violent demise that he was showing now. I just knew that I didn't want to be on the receiving end of either.

Chapter 47 : Crash Team

Anaphylactic shock is a terrifying condition. The symptoms are extreme. The onset is rapid. The outcome can be fatal.

The Doc and I had planned the scenario carefully. She dosed Rachel's meal with the cocktail of drugs that she'd calculated would replicate the symptoms while I distracted the guard that was about to take it in to her. We wanted his response to be genuine.

The symptoms started to appear very shortly after she started eating. The guard hit the panic button when it became obvious that she was having a problem. I arrived with the Doc to find her clutching at her throat with one hand and her belly with the other. The Doc took her pulse. "It's racing like anything," she said. Rachel was coughing saying she couldn't swallow, that she had cramping pains in her stomach, that she was finding it hard to breath. She lost control of her bowels. She was groaning in a mixture of pain and terror, staring wildly around her trying to understand what was happening to her.

"Help me, I'm dying," she gasped. "It's all going – awwkkgh – so black. I can't...."

The Doc turned to the guard. "Get my bag," she said, "Quickly! It's in my office."

"I'm not supposed to leave her," he said.

"Do it, or you'll have to explain to Clegg why we've lost her," she barked. Sheepishly the guard padded off.

"What do you think's happening?" I said.

"It looks like anaphylactic shock," the Doc said. "I need to give her adrenalin." Rachel was clutching at the Doctors arm, choking and looking wild eyed in terror.

Rachel passed out before the Guard got back. The Doc grabbed her bag and grabbed a hypodermic, using it to administer supposedly, adrenalin, actually a glucose solution that would do no further harm. But then neither the Guard nor Rachel knew that the effect of the drugs would wear off quite quickly anyway.

She recovered in the Prep Centre's clinic, laying on a bed, a glucose drip in her arm, an oxygen mask over her mouth and nose and with me holding her hand.

She peered weakly at me. Muttering from behind the oxygen mask, "Whha... what happened? Where am I?"

"Shh," I said, "don't try to talk. You've had a bad attack. The Doctor will be here in a minute."

She pulled her hand away from me. "Why are you here?" I didn't try to take it back.

"I was worried about you, Rachel." That at least was true. I'd really been concerned that she was going to die even though I'd known that it wasn't likely. I guess I hadn't wanted the horse to die so soon in the exercise. "But rest now. I'm sure you'll be all right."

The Doc appeared. "Ah, she's recovered consciousness," she said. "How are you feeling?"

"Weak," said Rachel, quietly. "But the pains have gone, I can breath again."

"The adrenalin worked."

"Why? What was it? I thought I was going to die?"

"You might very well have done. I shan't know for certain until I get the results of the blood tests but it looks like an anaphylactic episode. Are you allergic to anything? Nuts for example?"

"Nuh, no, I don't think so."

"It's just that it's a common cause of this sort of reaction. But yes, you could have died. Anaphylactic shock can kill. Extremely low blood pressure, breathing failure. They can be fatal."

Rachel tried to lift herself up, but fell weakly back. "I'm not tied or chained," she said.

"No," said the Doctor. "But you'll feel too weak to go anywhere. Just rest for now. Get your strength back."

She still had her collar on, of course. She wouldn't be going anywhere even if she did feel able to but it suited us for her to feel that she was being trusted. "I'll let you rest Rachel," I said. "Don't worry about anything, I'll see you later."

I looked in on the medical centre later. She was asleep. The Doc had given her a mild sedative. She'd been happy to have it administered. It was the first time she hadn't fought us about something.

The following morning she was sitting up in bed, wearing a white patient's robe and looking a whole lot perkier. She still had a drip in her arm. She was hooked up to a blinking and beeping ECG machine. What she didn't know was that the readings

weren't always real. It's surprising how ill you can suddenly feel if a machine tells you your heart rate has risen and your blood pressure has dropped.

"How are you, Rachel?" I asked.

The Doc appeared. "She's still weak," she said. "Aren't you dear?" Rachel nodded. "So don't spend too long with her."

"Thank you," she said, quietly, dropping her eyes, "for saving me."

"It was the Doc," I said. "It was lucky she was there. I couldn't have done anything."

"I didn't think anyone cared," she went on. "I thought you all just wanted the meat, just whatever you could get, whenever you wanted it."

"We just want you to get well, Rachel. That's all."

"What happens? When I'm well?"

"That just depends on you Rachel. You write the script for your life, even here. Wait till you're a bit stronger. Until that," I pointed to the now wildly fluctuating ECG scan. Rachel looked at it, frightened again, "until that gets a whole lot more regular. Then we'll set things up so you can be more comfortable. Sukie can look after you." I'd made a good call with that idea, Rachel gave a weak smile.

I left Rachel and spoke to the Doc. "How soon can she come out of here?"

"For real? Right now," she replied. "For what you need? Leave it a couple of days."

I did. The set up we'd organised was to convert one of the visitor suites into a flat for me. Sukie had been installed, happy to be out of the cells and pleased to be with me. I'd told her she'd be helping with Rachel's recovery. She seemed happy. They'd got on well before when Rachel had been recording her experiences. The Doc brought Rachel down in a wheel chair – she was still weak but that was as much due to her own fear as to any drugs that had been used on her. She had her own bedroom in the suite. Sukie helped her into bed. She fell asleep almost at once.

I left Sukie and Rachel together. The suite had three bedrooms, a living area, bathroom and kitchen / dining area. It was ranged around a small grassed, garden area with a couple of trees. The two girls both had normal clothes to wear. They could pretty much do as they pleased in the suite, apart from the fact that they both still wore their collars.

I had plenty of work to do. It wasn't until the evening that I got back to the suite. Rachel was sitting up in bed, Sukie was brushing her hair. Sukie smiled welcomingly as I appeared. Rachel managed a smile as well.

"Hello," I said. "How are you Rachel?"

"Better," she said. "Not well, but better."

"She has had some tea, Sir," said Sukie.

"Good," I said. "But please don't call me, Sir. Larry is fine, in here." Sukie looked grateful. Rachel looked up at me and suddenly burst into tears. She clutched at Sukie who held her closely. "I'm so scared. What if it happens again? The Doctor still doesn't know what caused it I don't want to die. Not like that. It won't happen again. Will it?"

"Shh, shh," said Sukie cradling Rachel against her.

"Who knows, Rachel," I said, trying to be sympathetic but also honest. "We all have to die."

"But like that? No, it's too horrible."

"Worse than living here?"

"Worse than living like this," she said smiling at Sukie. She put her arms around her and hugged her back.

"I don't know," I said, "it could have been some effect of a combination of drugs, I suppose. It might not happen again if we can keep you off them." At least in that I was being honest. "Don't worry about it happening again, we'll keep you well." She looked up at me. I could tell she wanted to believe me.

"You've been working hard," said Sukie to me. "Can I get you some food? Rachel will be all right for a while." I looked across at Rachel. She nodded.

"Yes, Sukie," I said. "I'd like that."

"And perhaps later I should come to your room?" Sukie said. Rachel was clearly startled by her directness.

"That would be nice, Sukie," I said, "but I want you to worry about Rachel at the moment. Fix me something to eat and then look after Rachel for the evening. I have some more work to do anyway." I don't normally turn down gift horses, I thought, but if I was going to get the other horse to talk, that was the right move. Rachel even looked a little impressed.

Chapter 48 : The Write Stuff

It took about a week. Rachel was getting stronger by the day. We put some gym equipment into the suite so she could exercise. Sukie was doing a good job of caring for her and I had to admit that I'd been enjoying having the two of them to come back to at the end of the day.

I came back in and Rachel and Sukie were playing chess, Tommy Smith's recording of Eric Satie's *Gymnopédie* was playing on the CD player. The two of them looked up at me as I dropped my papers on the table. Rachel waved. Sukie got to her feet.

"How's the game," I asked looking at the board.

"Rachel is winning," said Sukie. Rachel looked surprised. I looked down at the pieces.

I could see what she had to do. "Sometimes you have to sacrifice something to get what you want," I said, looking at the position of Rachel's queen. Rachel looked again at the board and then, finally, moved her queen. Sukie, her own king now in check had no choice but to take it. Her capturing knight now lay vulnerable to Rachel's bishop. It swept across the board to remove the knight.

"Check mate," laughed Rachel, clapping her hands. Sukie smiled to Rachel and then smiled in turn at me. Rachel pushed the board away from herself. "You're right," she said. "sometimes you do have to sacrifice things." She turned towards me. "I feel things have started again. Since the attack. It might happen again but it might not. Either way I am here now. I have left a lot behind me. I have to find where I go next, from here, not from somewhere else. Maybe that needs acceptance. Maybe that needs sacrifice."

"Maybe," I said, watching her.

"Sukie tells me you saved her too." Sukie looked embarrassed as she went to clear away the chess pieces and the board.

"No. No, I didn't save her. She saves herself. I gave her a new place in which to try."

"I want to save myself too. I have a new place too, since the attack."

"Can you accept things the way that Sukie does? You have the strength I am sure but can you do it?"

Rachel looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure," she said, "but I want to try. Do what you want with me. I'll learn acceptance. I'll make myself for the life I have to lead here. I'll write for you."

"I want to believe you, Rachel. I'm sure you can make yourself. You just need to follow your own script. Can you write it?"

"Yes," she said. "I am writing it already," she tapped the side of her head. "In here."

"I could get you a laptop. It would be easier."

Rachel smiled. "Later," she said. "Come to bed, now. With Sukie and me. Now. It's in script."

Sukie was standing at the door to the bedroom. They had obviously discussed this already. She was grinning widely, pleased that, at last, she and I would be together again. We took ourselves to bed for over three hours. At one point Rachel was kneeling with her wrists bound, fellating me while Sukie knelt across me, her tiny nipples pressed against my face. At another Rachel tied Sukie's wrists, giving head to her while I stroked the two girls. All three of us, panted and grunted our way through orgasm after orgasm. (Well they did at least, I'm no athlete. But they didn't let the fact that I had spent myself prevent them continuing to enjoy themselves, taking amusement in my exhaustion while they pleased one another.)

Rachel and I were still together in bed the following morning. She still wearing nothing apart from her collar and the silken cords that she and Sukie had used in bondage play looped loosely around her wrists.

Sukie appeared at the door to the bedroom, naked and carrying a breakfast tray for the three of us. She sat on the bed beside us. The three of us devoured the figs, honey yoghurt, rolls, orange juice and coffee.

Rachel sat up, putting her hand on my thigh. "I meant it," she said. "I'll do what you want. I'll write for you."

"I know you mean it," I said. "I believe you want to. I have a job for you. There is a group of four women going through a new form of orientation. Go and talk to them. Write about them, understand what has been done to them. I want to understand how they feel. You may think it's brutal. Can you do it?"

She gave me a look of firm resolve. "Yes," she said, "I can."

"You'll have to be chained outside of here," I said.

She looked shocked for a moment but then smiled. "Of course," she said. "I should have realised. That's all right. I understand."

I breathed a sigh of relief internally. At least she had crossed that hurdle of acceptance. I made a few phone calls. After a few minutes a guard appeared with a set of shackles and a laptop to escort Rachel. She went with him willingly.

I'd always meant for Rachel to be exposed to the sexualisation of Brian's family at some point in the process and it seemed like now would be as good a time as any. The idea was to give Rachel the opportunity to demonstrate her resolve both to me and to herself and to see that she could confront what the organisation did.

I stopped by at one point to watch her through the one way mirrors that looked into the rooms that Brian's family occupied. The light in the rooms was bright, the colours vivid. Beth and Ella were showing Rachel a range of sex toys, all in bright, primary colours with soft rounded edges. Beth lifted up her short pale green smock exposing her naked breasts and allowing Rachel to experiment with one of the vibrators on her nipples. She laughed as the tickling sensation brought her the pleasure she craved. The two girls drew Rachel to one side showing her Alice as she applied body paint to Carol's naked flesh. The swirling psychedelic patterns recalled those I'd seen on old '60's album covers. Carol was smiling happily as Alice drew the brush across her back making a curving line from the nape of her neck to the base of her spine. She reached out for a handful of soft berries from a bowl of fruit near her head, cramming some into her mouth, the red berry juice trickling down her chin, before beckoning to Beth, Ella and Rachel in turn to feed each of them some of the fruit. Alice stood up. Carol had obviously been practicing her own artistic skills on her sister with an elaborate paisley patterned design across her belly stretching up to between her breasts. It was only as I stood there looking at it that I realised it was an abstract rendering of a vulva, rays of light shining out from the clitoris, beneath it a colourful, patterned penis stretching up towards it. Alice walked across to the pile of toys and picked up an acid pink, soft plastic, dildo. She started to lick and suck at it. As she did so it was obvious that the vibration in her thong kicked in to reward her compliant behaviour as she smiled and clutched at her crotch, sliding back on the couch in ecstasy.

When Rachel returned that evening it was clear that she had had done more than just confront what the organisation was doing. She had been fired up by what she had seen.

"Do you want to talk, Rachel?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, I want to write. I really want to write. I'll use my room. Why don't you and Sukie enjoy yourselves for the evening. I really need to write." Her eyes were flashing with eagerness, her cheeks flushed. She scurried into her room, clutching her laptop to her.

Sukie emerged from the kitchen. She saw Rachel disappear. "She is better?"

"I don't know," I said. "She seems to have found a new way forward. We'll have to see,"

"You're worried about her," Sukie said. "I can see. And it's about her, isn't it? Not just what she means to the business or what that means to you?"

I nodded. As always, Sukie, managed to see inside what was going on.

"You won't send me away will you? If she is well?"

"No, Sukie, I won't do that," I said reassuringly. Although I wasn't sure how I could justify hanging on to her at the end of the project, I didn't think I could betray her like that after all she had done.

She smiled, grateful. "Come," she said. "I'll make some food. Rachel will be busy for hours. You need something to take your mind off your worries."

"Yes," I said. "I'll let you win at backgammon again if you like."

"Let me win!" Sukie laughed. "I suppose the slave must let her keeper retain his illusions."

"Of course," I said.

Chapter 49 : Rachel's Report

Rachel worked on her report for all that evening. She slept by her laptop. I heard her working at it at various times through the night. When I got up to leave the suite for a meeting with Harry, she was fast asleep across the keyboard of the computer.

I had to put up with quite a bit of teasing from Harry and the others over my personal harem as Rick had called it. "You'll be off to Kushtia next," he'd said. "What with Tricia, those two and that Kelly girl. I don't know how you have the energy."

The truth was I didn't have the energy. I hadn't seen much of Tricia or Kelly. Tricia had been a bit pissed off when I told her I was moving into the flat with Rachel and Sukie, which I guess was understandable. The project for Rachel was soaking up all of my time. I certainly hadn't got time to go off playing kinky games with Kelly. As Freddie had said, I didn't want pressing any harder on this one.

When I got back to the suite, Rachel and Sukie were waiting for me. It wasn't surprising, really; they couldn't leave after all. What was surprising was Rachel's appearance. She'd made up her face and done her hair (actually I reckoned that Sukie had helped with that). She was wearing a very short skirt and a very tight, low cut top that left her arms and midriff bare. She had put on the manacles that were used when she needed to leave the suite. She was holding a folder, which I guessed was her report. Sukie stood beside her holding a leash that ran to Rachel's collar.

I sat down at the table. Somehow I felt I should let Sukie or Rachel make the first move. Sukie led Rachel towards the table.

"The slave Rachel wishes to speak, Sir," Sukie said.

I felt that the situation demanded formality and a firm tone. She wouldn't need questions now. Maybe that could come later. "Approach slave," I said, beckoning to her and noticing that she seemed pleased by being addressed that way. "Say what you have to."

"I have completed my report, Sir," Rachel said, putting the folder on the table. "Can I talk to you about it?"

"Yes, of course, slave. What is it?" I was concerned in case she had found the programme too close to her own experiences of rape.

"I'll explain about it in a moment but there's something else I have to say. I want to undergo the programme. Myself. I'll do it willingly. This is my script. I want to do this and write for you. They were so alive; so untroubled by anything apart from pleasure; so lost in their desire to please. It's what my life should be; about pleasure and pleasing."

"And you understand what is involved?"

"You will see that if you read the report. I think you'll find it thorough."

"I'm sure it is Rachel," I said.

"It's in my script," she said firmly. "But you own me. You saved me." She dropped to her knees. "You can say if I may follow my script."

I put out my hand and brought her to her feet. "Of course, Rachel," I said. She smiled. "Let me talk to the team tomorrow." She looked sad. "We cannot do it now. I have to be sure that you are properly cared for. I don't want the risk of you being hurt again." She smiled again with relief, grateful that I wasn't simply trying to postpone things. Nothing could have been further from my mind. I looked across at Sukie. She nodded. Her judgement was important to me. I wanted things to turn out right for Rachel, I wasn't sure she knew what was best for herself yet, but I trusted Sukie to understand. Rachel hugged me as best she could with her wrists in chains.

"Now, Sir," said Rachel making a visible effort to contain herself, "would you like to hear the report or perhaps you might like to take pleasure in my body."

I took her by the arm and pulled her down to sit beside me. "The report for now," I said. "Perhaps Sukie can fix us some food." Rachel looked disappointed. "And then perhaps we can all play later." She brightened up. Sukie bowed, smiled happily, and headed off to the kitchen.

Rachel picked up the file and began pointing out the important parts of her report. "Here's the account of the process," she said barely pausing for breath as she hopped backwards and forwards through the folder. "I understand that you saw something of the initial stimulation programme. There's a summary of the normalised environment and the technology that they have used for the thong and the women's reactions to it. They've managed to do some psychological profiles of each of the women now and I've summarised those. And here is a table showing the results of the progressive reduction in time from initial stimulation to orgasm as they have each progressed through the programme. I spoke to the two girls first. They were both quite inexperienced sexually so it was an interesting exercise to contrast their reactions to that of their mother and their aunt. It was so useful to have family members like that. Here's how they felt about things like the toys and the free expression, music, art, colour and sensations of touch and taste and smell, And here's the accounts of their first sexual encounters following the completion of the programme and their reaction to varying frequencies of stimulation from the thong. I've put in an account from each of them on how they felt initially and their attitudes at the completion of the programme. What was also fascinating was the reaction of the men that they had been with. I managed to get details from some of them as well. They describe the performance of the women as extremely satisfying, far improved over rape – unless of course

forced sex was being specifically sought – and better than most sexual encounters in almost every case. Only those in committed relationships felt that their encounters with the subjects did not fully measure up to those with their own partners and even then there are some thoughts that where a commitment already exists that the programme could reinforce it.” She looked shyly at me. “I’m sorry, Sir,” she said. “I’m talking too much.”

“Not at all, slave,” I said. She sat up with pride at the use of the term. “You’re just following your script.”

“You’re making fun of me,” she said, accusingly.

“No, not at all. I’m glad you found this in yourself. You can be safe now.”

“I know,” she said. “I have to lose something in order to gain other things. I’m ready to do this.”

And she was. I was able to get her started on the programme the following day. She’d spend the day relaxing with Sukie to prepare herself. The programme proper would start in the evening. That gave me time to go with Harry for a further meeting with the Emir. We had to deliver the first part of his shipment.

Chapter 50 : New Homes

The Emir had been very specific. He had wanted his new property delivered without any "preparation" as he called it. "I know you have a very good Centre, Larry my friend, but I was always told a Kushtian teaches their own, so I'll do it that way if you don't mind." Well, of course we didn't mind. It was a whole lot less effort for us that way, all we had to do was to pack and ship. Harry and I took the van up to the Emir's new home. We were keen to see whether he wanted to take delivery of Sarah as well. We'd got the first six of his fourteen items all wrapped up cosy in the back and we planned to be back in the Prep Centre that afternoon.

It wasn't to be quite as straightforward as we'd hoped.

The main problem was that when we turned up at the Emir's place he wasn't home. Who was home was his daughter.

One of the Emir's heavies opened the door. Verbal communication didn't seem to be his strong point but we managed to make him understand that there were ten items in the back that needed moving across to the castle keep accommodation. He grunted to indicate that he'd do something about it. One of his pals emerged from a room off the lobby to help. The two of them began to unload the van, wheeling each of the girls off on her own self contained pallet. Lauren, the Emir's 19 year old daughter, swept into view. She was quite small, maybe only five feet two or three tall, but her voice was loud enough to crack a glass.

"Hey, what's this?" she called. "Looks like the curse of the mummy's tomb!" She wasn't far wrong with each of the girls wrapped tightly in the white tape that kept them strapped to their boards. "Dad said you'd be dropping these off. He's not back yet. You'd better come through." She gestured through towards the lounge. "I hope that this lot end up being more use than the one you left him."

I looked at Harry. That wasn't the reaction we'd expected. She wasn't really trained as a domestic slave but we'd thought that Sarah would have been all right here. We followed the Emir's daughter into the lounge. She flopped down on one of the enormous couches.

Sarah was standing at the far end of the lounge. The pillory had been brought up from the dungeon and Sarah was locked helplessly in it. "I need to keep an eye on this one," Lauren said. Poor Sarah was bent forward with her head sticking through the central hole of the pillory, her wrists trapped in the holes to either side. In her left hand she held a heavy leather paddle, in her right a many tailed flogger, in her mouth a riding crop. "That's the only way she's gonna learn, stupid bitch," Lauren said with a determined look. I walked across to her, she was dressed in a bikini but instead of her pants she had been locked into a chastity belt. One metal band bit tightly into her waist, another stretched down from the middle of her back between her buttocks over covering her sex with a pierced metal plate and then running up to be padlocked to the waist band at the front. It was clearly uncomfortable, red sores could be seen on the inside of Sarah's thighs where the belt had rubbed.

Her backside was criss-crossed with wheals from a vicious beating. She turned her head towards me with a pleading look in her eyes but kept silent, unable to speak, fearful of dropping the crop from between her lips.

"Do you know how I found her when I got here?" Lauren said, "sprawled by the pool with one of these stoopid guards waiting on her. Sure she had shackles on her but the guard looked like he'd been having a really good blow job, and she was lounging around like she owned the place. Jeez! Tried to kid me that the guards had been taking advantage of her. She had a day in the scold's bridle for that. It's obvious what the little slut was up to. She's been finding out what slaves are for since I turned up, haven't you my dear?" Sarah nodded slowly. "The chastity belt is to make sure she behaves. The crops and floggers are to remind her what happens when she doesn't."

Harry was looking for an opportunity to get Sarah out of her predicament. "She should sort out the new slaves," he said. "Make sure they're settled into their cells properly."

To my surprise Lauren looked thoughtful. "Yeah, sure," she said. "Dad will want them all ready to go when he gets back. Here's the key, you can let her out." She tossed him a bunch of keys. Harry caught them and unlocked Sarah from the pillory. "Go on, slut," Lauren smiled, waving Sarah off. "You heard the man. Make sure they're sorted out and tell them what to expect round here." Sarah put down the flogger, crop and paddle and shuffled off, her movements restricted by a short length of chain between her ankles. Lauren watched her go. "Do you guys want a beer?" she said.

"Shouldn't we check she's doing as she's told, after what you said?"

"Nah, I'll show you. Dad's got all this sorted." She picked up the remote control for the TV. As the set came into life she punched a button on the remote. The channel changed on the TV to show one of the cells. "Neat – huh?" Lauren said.

One of our captives had been laid on their back on each of the bunks in the cell. They were still swathed in tape and the wheels attached to the frame that they were bound to could be seen clearly at their feet. We heard a click as the cell door opened and heard one of the guards say. "Sing out when you've done. I'll let you out then." The still shackled Sarah came into view. The door gave a clang as it was slammed behind her.

"Oh my," we heard Sarah say as she saw the helpless forms laid out on the bunks of the cell. "You poor things, let me help you out of that tape." We watched as the tape cocoons that held the girls squirmed in response to a friendly voice.

Sarah started to free the girl in the bunk nearest too her. As the tape came clear of the girl's head we could see that it was Greetje. With the swathes of tape removed from her head. The terrified look in the girl's eyes could be clearly seen. She tried

to wriggle but with her arms taped to her sides and her legs trapped one against the other she could do little more than twitch. Sarah eased away the tape that covered Greetje's mouth and prised free the wad of cloth that had been gagging her.

"Oh, dank u," the girl coughed, "thank you."

"Hush," said Sarah, "wait. I must free you and your friends." She went to work on the tape that held the girls limbs. Soon it was lying in a heap on the floor of the cell and Greetje had managed to ease herself up into a sitting position pushing the board that she had been strapped to onto the floor. She looked around her, taking in the solid stone walls, the barred window and the massive door.

Sarah was working to free the second girl. Greetje got uncertainly to her feet, steadying herself on the side of the bunk. "Where are we? What has happened to us?"

Femke was next to be freed from the tape. She sat up shakily and turned to hug Greetje. Sarah went to work on the other two girls. Talking over her shoulder to Greetje and Femke, she said, "You've been kidnapped by slavers," she said "and you are in the home of your new owner. You'll have to do exactly as you are told. These people are very cruel. Don't try to resist them." We could see from the monitor that both girls were clearly terrified.

"But why would we be kidnapped? No-one would pay a ransom for us; we have no rich family; we have no money."

"No, that's not the point. It's not for money. You have been brought here for yourselves. It's not for money. You have been brought here for your bodies. You belong here. Just like this furniture. You belong to the man that owns this bed. His bed. His table. His room. His women. You will do whatever he tells you."

Greetje and Femke held each other in fear. "It cannot be true."

Sarah pointed to the anklets and shackles that lay on the chair beside the bed. "You must put those on," she said. "We all have to wear a collar or an anklet and chains."

"No," said Femke, "we won't. You can't make us."

"No," said Sarah, "I can't but there are those that can. They'll hurt you. Believe me. It's better to do as they say." Greetje and Femke looked at one another and picked up the anklets. Sobbing, they fitted them around their ankles, reacting in fear as they locked shut with a menacing clunk.

Back in the lounge, Lauren smirked. "There," she said, pointing at the television, "what good little girls. Dad will be pleased. Anyway, excuse me. I have to use the can." She got up and flounced off. Harry and I just sat and looked at one another.

Sarah returned having finished "welcoming" the castle's new residents. Lauren was still out of the room. Sarah turned to the two of us. "Please," she said, "please take me back."

Harry smiled in response. "I don't know," he said. "It sounds like you've not been very good." He pointed to the chastity belt.

"I didn't deserve this, really I didn't. I mean the Emir even told the Guards not take any liberties with me. I just was getting so bored in my cell and they said I could use the pool and the gym if I did it naked. Well I didn't mind. And yes they groped me a bit and I didn't like that, but that was all."

Harry looked sceptical. "Come on Sarah, I know what these guys are like. They're no different from Rick's team.

"Well, all right. Yes I did give one of them a blow job and, yes, he was getting me a coke when Lauren appeared but that's all there was to it. I don't deserve this," she tugged at the iron band circling her waist. "Oh, no, she's coming back." Sarah picked up the paddle, flogger and crop and put her head and wrists back in place in the pillory.

Lauren drifted back into the room. She looked at Sarah in the pillory and pushed its locking padlock closed. "Good," she said, "glad you're learning where a slut belongs. Locked in there you won't go sniffing round the cocks of any of the guards will you? Just remember around here you ain't the original good time that was had by all."

She flopped down on the settee as her father came in through the door. "Hi, princess," he beamed. "Hope you've been good."

"Daddy, you know I always am," Lauren batted her eyelashes at her father in a way that must have earned his indulgence since her earliest childhood.

The Emir looked around at Sarah in the pillory. "Lauren, I told you that Sarah was to be your babysitter, this doesn't look like how I said things should be." He turned to Harry and me. "Yeah, I know it seems odd but us Kushtians think a girl needs her father or an older woman around until she's married."

Lauren looked sulky. "Daddy we're not in Kushtia now. I don't need a babysitter and besides you should have seen what she was up to."

The Emir looked on patiently. "I will Lauren, I will. I'll have a look at the videos later. Now let Sarah out of the pillory and leave us boys to talk business."

"Whatever," said Lauren before unlocking the pillory and walking off.

The Emir lifted the top bar of the pillory and helped Sarah out. He took the flogger, crop and paddle from her and put them on a table. "I don't know what you did to give her that opportunity," he said to Sarah, "but I guess that you've worked out that it wasn't a great idea."

Sarah looked apologetic but said nothing. Brad turned back to us. "So you got all the girls I asked for?"

"Yes," said Harry. They're all installed."

"Great. And what about this one?" He reached out and patted Sarah's arse. She looked pleadingly at Harry.

Harry shook his head. "Sorry Brad," we've looked at it and we want to hang onto her for now at least. I'm sure we could find you a new PA."

Brad looked disappointed. "Shame," he said. "I was just getting used to her being around. Kind of has the right look for the place."

"It's a shame you never met Cindy." Sarah had chimed in from the other side of the room. "She looks just like me, people used to take us for sisters and..." Her voice tailed off as she realised just where what she was saying might lead.

"Now that's interesting," said Brad.

"Yes indeed," responded Harry. "Tell us more."

"Oh, no, I couldn't, I mean, you wouldn't. That wouldn't be fair. Not at all. No" Sarah was evidently worried. Harry and Brad exchanged a look that suggested she had good cause to be.

"Don't be worried," Brad said to her. "Go and wait by the swimming pool. Harry, come and give me a hand with something." The two of them disappeared. Sarah and I made our way through the house to the pool. All the way she was saying that she shouldn't have said anything and she couldn't possibly be involved in anything to do with Cindy. She was so busy protesting to me that she didn't see what Brad and Harry were wheeling in along the side of the pool. Dragged up from the dungeon, Brad's replica of a ducking stool was pushed into place.

"Please, Larry, speak to them. I shouldn't have said anything. I'm sure she doesn't look like me really. And anyway it was a while ago and .. Oh!" Sarah gave a startled cry as the edge of the stool struck the back of her knees. She fell backwards and in a moment Harry and Brad had fixed her into the seat, strapping her in with a belt around her waist and others which held her wrists against the stool's armrests. "No, please no!" Sarah yelled as Harry and Brad swung the beam of the ducking stool out over the pool.

"Now," said Brad. "This implement only dates back to around 1597 and then as a method of punishment for scolds, prostitutes and witches. However, I suspect it could also have been used as a way of enquiring into matters of interest to the authorities. Let's see if it helps us with our enquiries." With that he let go of the beam and the stool with Sarah on it plummeted into the pool. Harry and Brad held their end of the beam up for a few moments, keeping Sarah submerged before they put their weight onto it, hauling a spluttering Sarah back to the surface. "And again, I think," said Brad, levering the beam up and lowering a now screaming Sarah once more beneath the waters.

She came up once more, kicking her legs and trying to break away from the straps that held her in the stool. "Now, perhaps you'd like to tell us more about Cindy," Brad called from the pool side.

"No, no, no, n --- ppllpl," came Sarah's voice, first yelling and then burbling as she went under again. Four more duckings followed, each longer than the last, Sarah yelling more loudly and coughing and spluttering more violently on her return to the surface, her hair drenched and hanging limply.

Harry called a halt to the proceedings. "Good demonstration, Brad," he said. "But I think we need a different approach. Either that or colder water." Brad looked pensive for a moment.

Sarah was still kicking and complaining on the stool. Brad swung her back over the side and un-strapped her. "Hey, he said. "We didn't mean no harm. You go and get yourself dried off." He tossed a towel to the shivering Sarah. "There's a dress over there. Put it on and we'll get you a hot drink."

While Sarah was dressing, Brad picked up the pool side phone and muttered a few quiet words to whoever was at the other end. As she finished dressing, Harry clipped a leash to her collar and scolded her. "Really Sarah, you're being very difficult."

Brad, seemingly sympathetic said, "Hey you've got to admire the girl's principles. Not many girls would stand by their friends like that."

Sarah brightened up. "Thank you," she said, I'm glad you understand."

"In fact, I'm so impressed that I'd just like to tell the other girls about this. It will be good for them to see that a slave doesn't have to have her spirit completely crushed. Might make them accept things a bit easier."

She said nothing but followed us as Brad led the way along one of the castle's corridors.

Chapter 51 : What Are Friends For?

The winding corridor eventually took us along to the accommodation cells. As we walked by Sarah said, "Aren't we going to see the girls after all? I thought..."

"They've been moved," said Brad. We turned a corner. Coming the other way was one of Brad's guards. Clad only in black leather trousers and a leather hood that masked the upper half of his face, his torso glistened with the sweat of recent effort. He and Brad exchanged a few quiet words. The guard took the ring of keys that hung from a clasp on his belt and passed them to Brad. We carried on as the guard pushed passed us. Sarah watched fearfully as he went.

The corridor carried on down into the castle's cellar and the room that the Emir had fitted out as a dungeon-come-torture chamber. Sarah gave a startled, "Oh!" as she entered the room.

What she saw was the six girls we had delivered to the Emir, locked into one or other of the Emir's medieval "toys". Femke was strapped to the heavy wooden rack, her arms and legs already stretched to painful tautness. Peta was hanging by her wrists and ankles which were tied star fashion to the rim of a great wooden wheel dangling from the ceiling of the room. She was crying out as she tried to relieve her arm and leg muscles of the strain of supporting her weight.

Janice had been tied, naked, in a hogtie. She hung by the ropes that ran around her chest so that her crotch was only millimetres above a knife sharp block of wood that threatened to split her in two if the rope supporting her should fail or be loosened. Karen sat alongside her strapped into a heavy wooden chair with her head locked in a strange frame that could be tightened by handle and ratchet. Similar boards designed to press and crush on limbs enclosed her arms and thighs. "We're missing one," said Brad. "Oh yes." He pulled back a heavy oak box that was hanging from chains. It was clear from his effort that the box and its contents were extremely heavy. As he pulled it back a chained and helpless Jillie could be seen struggling, tied to the frame beneath it. "Terrible thing if this should fall," he said, letting it swing back into place. Brad moved across to where Greetje was standing in a human form cabinet. Naked, bound and gagged, her eyes wide with terrified panic, she watched as Brad started to swing the door of the cabinet closed. A grotesque skeleton was painted on the front of the cabinet door providing a clear indication of the likely fate of the occupier. "This," he said, "was known as the Iron Maiden. There's one in Nuremberg which as you close the door pierces the occupant with spikes." Greetje screamed behind her gag. "This one's a bit different; you can control the depth of the spikes from the outside with this wheel. Of course it's easy to get things wrong. Look at these," he pointed to two thick spikes in the head piece of the cabinet's door. "they'd pierce the eyes like cocktail sticks in olives." Greetje screamed again. "And Greetje here is unlucky too. I hear she suffers from claustrophobia. Isn't that right Harry?"

"Mmm," said Harry responding. "Yes, she was in a terrible state when we got her out from behind the couch in the caravan after we snatched her. She must be finding this awful."

"Well, yes. But still. Where was I?" He let the door of the Iron Maiden slam shut absent-mindedly. Sarah gave a horrified squeal. Greetje gave another gagged scream. "Oh yes," Brad said to the helpless girls. "Thought I'd introduce you girls to Sarah," he said. "We sort of wanted her to help us out with a problem but it seems like her principles won't let her. We can't persuade her to change her mind. I'd planned to do some other stuff this morning but now I'm feeling a bit upset and I'll need you girls to help cheer me up. I hadn't really thought I'd put these toys to use but it seems a shame to let them rust." He grabbed Sarah. "Why don't you sit down and have a chat with the girls. I'm sure when you explain your point of view they'll be OK with it," he said manoeuvring her to a set of stocks. He locked her ankles in the stocks. "Now if you're going to chat." Brad walked across to each of the girls in turn and pulled off the tape that gagged them. He opened the Iron Maiden and peeled back the tape gagging Greetje. Immediately she started yelling, hysterically, begging to be let free. "Oh, no," said Brad, "that won't work." He smoothed the tape back down and shut the door again. Greetje's muffled screams could still be heard from inside. "We'll talk again in a bit, Sarah," he said.

"You can't do this," yelled Sarah as he got to the door. "It's, it's, it's unfair."

"Unfair!" the Emir almost exploded. "What is unfair is slaves that won't do as they're told; slaves that think they can hold out on their owners. Just you remember girl, a slave owner invests a lot in his property he's entitled to expect the slave keeps their part of the bargain. We do the owning, you do the being owned. This is all your fault, Sarah, you made the suggestion, now you're backing out on it. Don't talk to me about unfair. You can solve the problem yourself. It's all up to you."

We didn't go far. The CCTV link in the next room let us watch the proceedings. Femke, Jillie and Karen were pleading the most convincingly. Janice was adding her own punctuation of groans as their own discomfort increased. Peta could be heard moaning from beneath the box that threatened to crush her. The whole conversation was punctuated by Greetje's stifled but progressively more panic stricken screams from within the case that held her. Sarah was trying to defend herself.

"I can't betray my friend," she tried to explain. "How can I tell them where to find her? And it's not my fault that the Emir is doing this to you."

"We don't care," came back Femke. "Poor Greetje, locked in that thing, do you think she cares? Of course it's your fault. If you hadn't said anything he wouldn't have thought of this. Who know what they'll do in the future? You said yourself they are ruthless. You have to take care of the people closest to you and right now that's us. Maybe they won't find her. Maybe she'll escape them. We can't escape this."

"I know. It's horrible. I just don't know what to do." Sarah tried to struggle against the steel bands that held her ankles locked.

As she did so, the rope holding Janice above the knife like wooden block creaked and she dropped a millimetre or two. She squealed in terror as she felt the sharp rigidity of the block's knife edge brush against her crotch. "Nooo!" she screamed. "The rope will break. It will split me in two."

Greetje screamed again within the Iron Maiden setting off another round of sobbing and pleading

Sarah lasted for about five minutes. Soon she screaming to be freed, calling out that she'd do whatever we asked as long as the girl's didn't suffer any more.

We freed a sobbing Sarah from the stocks and took her back to the lounge. Lauren looked up as we came in. "Has she been trying it on again?" she sneered. "I hope she hasn't talked you into taking that belt off her. She'll be pushing the guards up against the wall in no time if you have." Sarah burst into tears again.

"We're taking her back with us," Harry said.

"Like I care?" said Lauren.

"There'll be a replacement."

"Better send one that's had her cunt plugged then."

"Lauren!" interrupted Brad. "That's enough. Just go to your room."

"Whatever," said a sullen Lauren as she slunk off.

"Grief," said Brad, "she's getting to be a real pain. And it will get worse when she find out I've found a husband for her and she goes back with him to Kushtia."

"How come?"

"Do you think she's going to find it easy to swap her trainers and baseball cap for harem slippers and a veil?"

"Ah, I see what you mean," I said. "Not to mention the shackles."

"Yupp. But as the daughter of a Kushtian government official she'll have to and learn to like it. Still the problems of fatherhood, eh? You'll sort things out with your girl?"

"Yes," said Harry, "once she's says she'll do something she will. It may take us a while to set up the collection. It depends on her circumstances. If there's any problem I'll give you a call."

Harry turned to Sarah. "Time to get you back," he said.

"Where's the gag?" she asked, grabbing it gratefully as Harry held out the gel ball gag in his palm. You could almost sense her relief as the gel swelled to fill her mouth. She held her wrists out for the handcuffs and was happy to be led to the boot of our car.

We left it until the following day before following up on the conversation at the castle. Sarah was back behind her desk when I went to join Harry in his office.

"Now," said Harry, "let's have a chat about your friend Cindy."

"Oh," said Sarah, looking crestfallen. She had evidently hoped the whole thing had been forgotten.

"Tell us some more about her. I hope you aren't going to go back on your promise."

"No, no. I couldn't let the Emir do what he was doing. And poor Greetje. Will she be all right?"

"I think that's still a bit up to you. I have to give the Emir a progress report tonight and I'm sure Greetje will be fine if I can tell him we've got some activity in hand."

Sarah looked at first relieved and then miserable. "What do you want to know?" she said.

"Well let's start with who she is and where we might find her."

Sarah started hesitantly, "Her name's Cindy Bailey. Like I said she looks a lot like me. Really, a lot, same hair, same build. We used to swap clothes sometimes. She's two years older than me, people thought she was my big sister. She used to live in the same town; she worked in the next street we'd meet up for lunch some times."

"OK," said Harry. "She used to live in the same town, you say. Where is she now?"

"I don't know. We lost touch about a year ago." She saw Harry's sceptical look. "It's true. You know I wouldn't lie. I really haven't seen her since then. I know her job was moving – she worked for another car dealer – BMW it was – and they were closing their garage and building a bigger one in the next town." I thought Sarah looked tentative for a moment. "Coventry it

was. I guess she went there. We swapped emails a few times but then, well, I got busy and she got busy. You know how it is."

"And what did she do?"

"Just admin stuff like me. Booking cars in for servicing, sending out invoices, that sort of thing."

Harry looked thoughtful, tapping his ruler on his desk. "Hmm, that may be enough to go on. I'll get Research to do some work and we'll see how far we get. Don't think you're off the hook though. First thing you can do is to type up this discussion as a memo to Rick. Ask him to do the initial research and work up a collection proposal. Better copy Larry here to keep him in the picture. When we've got Rick's response we'll see how you can help."

Sarah looked woeful as she picked up her notebook and headed back to her desk.

Chapter 52 : Rachel's Programme

Rachel was laying on one of the couches where I had first seen Brian's family being treated under the electro stimulation programme. She was sedated but conscious; she'd not objected when the Doctor slipped the hypodermic needle into a vein in her arm. She'd asked if Sukie could be with her for the start of the programme. We'd agreed and Sukie was sitting beside her stroking her hair. Rachel looked calm. The Doc lowered the gantry above her and took down each pair of wires in turn, fastening them to the studs that had would carry the current across each nipple, across her clitoris, her vulva and her anus. I could see that in spite of the sedation Rachel was gripping Sukie's hand tightly.

"We'll start now," said the Doc. "Are you ready?" Rachel gave the slightest nod. The Doc threw the switch and the sequence started. Rachel gave an involuntary grunt as the first pulses began. She gripped Sukie's hand even harder at first but then seemed to relax. Soon a quiet smile spread across her face. The Doc turned to me. "We can leave her now," she said. "There'll be nothing more to do now for two hours."

Sukie looked up at me. "Can I stay?" I looked at the Doc. She shrugged.

"Yes," I said. "I'd like that. Thank you." Sukie smiled and turned back towards Rachel. The Doc and I left the two of them in the room. I could hear the pulse generator humming quietly as we walked out.

"It's been interesting," the Doc said once we were out of the room and away from Sukie's hearing. "I think what happened was that the mental trauma of the rapes and mistreatment and her focus on using that as preventing her conditioning created a sort of mental blockage. The drugs that we were using simply served to reinforce that. It was only the effects of the staged anaphylactic episode that allowed her to draw a line under that. As you say, it's as if she's been able to give herself a whole new start."

"That doesn't explain her willingness to undergo this though, does it?"

"No, not at all. I think that's got to do more with her past before we took her in, if I'm honest. I wonder how well she had been able to accept her sexuality prior to us acquiring her. I think that she is basically highly sexed – all our psychological profiling prior to the programme indicate that her artistic drives are perhaps behind that. She's highly emotionally aware and highly physically sensitive as well. If she had been in an environment where that had been suppressed its probable that there was considerable internal conflict. Seeing what had been done with the other women opened her eyes to a way she could reach what she suspected was in her already. It's curious. In some ways she's absolving herself of responsibility by being able to claim that her behaviour is the consequence of the programme but equally she has taken the responsibility of putting herself into the programme. It's a bit of a paradox."

"Well, I can agree that she's quite highly sexed," I said thinking back to my recent encounter with her and Sukie.

The Doc, gave an embarrassed, "Hmmp. Well she's staying in the treatment centre tonight. I want her to have at least four days on this part of the programme before taking the risk of exposing her to any other outside stimuli. Then she'll go into her own normalised suite and start working with the thong."

"That's OK, Doc," I said, "I'm as keen as you are for this to succeed. I don't want to do anything to rock the boat. I've got some other work to do. If there's nothing I can do for Rachel now, I guess I'll get on. Let me know if there's anything I should do."

"Sure," said the Doc.

I went back to my office and spent some time going through Rachel's report on Brian's family and the programme. I could see plenty of opportunities on the back of it, but then I guess you didn't need to be a marketing genius for that. What I did do was to write a memo to Freddie suggesting that we used them for the hospitality event that I'd suggested for some of the buyers. Thought he'd think it was a good idea for all sorts of reasons.

I went back to the suite when I'd finished. One of the guards turned up escorting Sukie shortly after. "How is Rachel?" I asked. Sukie sank down on the couch, looking exhausted. "And how are you?"

Sukie looked up at me. "I'm. I'm all right." She said hesitantly. "Rachel is fine too. I'm sorry. I just found it very frightening. She's so very brave to do that."

"I know. But it's important to her."

"I couldn't do it," Sukie was almost sobbing. "I thought I could do almost anything to please my man but, not, Not that."

"She's doing it to please herself, Sukie. No-one else."

"You might believe that," Sukie smiled. "You're important to her, you know."

"I know. She's important to me. And so are you." I sat down alongside her and took her in my arms. She was shaking.

"I can't take the programme," said Sukie. "But I can please you. If you want me to."

I could see that right then nothing was more important to her. "I'd like that, Sukie," I said. I did and she did too. Afterwards we both fell asleep. When I awoke Sukie slept on. I fetched her breakfast. She was outraged and we both laughed.

"Will you sit with Rachel again today?" I asked her.

"If you want me to," Sukie said.

"You find it difficult don't you? I don't want to make you."

"I know. I will go but it is frightening. I don't know if she will be the same when she comes back. She was always sweet and kind to me. Now perhaps she will feel jealous of me. Perhaps she will forget about me. Perhaps she will ask you to get rid of me."

"I don't think so Sukie. And I don't think I would listen if she did." The girl brightened. "Look, let's go and see her together. You needn't stay if you don't want to. There's no need for you to be there. Unless you want to be."

"Thank you," she said, smiled and got out of bed to get showered and dressed.

We found our way back to where Rachel had been the day before. She was sitting, naked, on the side of the treatment couch. She waved as she saw us coming into the room.

The Doc appeared. "I'm just restarting things," she said to us and then; "Lie down Rachel, please." She picked up a hypodermic syringe. "Sedative," she said. Rachel nodded, acceptingly. "Less than yesterday, though." She nodded again. The Doc administered the injection. Rachel gave a comfortable, "mmm" as the sedative began to take effect. The Doc hooked up the wires and started the sequence of low frequency stimuli once more.

Rachel relaxed into it; mewing quietly, sighing, muscles twitching in response as the sequence took control. Sukie threw her arms around me. I took her out.

From what the Doc had said there was little point in either Sukie or myself being around after the first day. In spite of the lower level of sedation, the cumulative effect of the continuous stimulation meant that Rachel was pretty much lost in the programme apart from when she was sleeping – and she needed the sleep to allow her body to rest.

We both went to see her after she had been in the normalised environment for a couple of days. She came rushing towards us as soon as she saw us, flinging her arms around first Sukie – that comforted her – and then me.

Rachel was wearing one of the smock dresses in a pale blue that went well with her dark hair and piercing blue eyes. It hung from her neck collar, swaying loosely around her as she moved.

"You're looking well." I said. She was.

"Mmm," she said. "I'm fine. Look it's lovely here. See." She waved around the flat. It was brightly lit, with cheerful colours and white wood furniture. "Let me show you. I'm going to write about it for you. So customers will know how their girls will be treated. I think they will need to know." Her enthusiasm was infectious. Sukie was looking happier.

"We can watch all the television we want." She picked up the remote and flicked through the channels. "Of course it's all quite sexy stuff," she paused on a scene of two girls stroking and licking at one another's bodies, "but I like that. And there's music." I looked at a pile of CD's, on top of the pile was Marvin Gaye's 'Sexual Healing', there were plenty of other similar plays. "And magazines." I picked up one, it looked like the usual celebrity gossip magazine on the cover but the pictures inside showed the rich and famous in positions that would startle many of their fans. "Look," she said gripping my arm and pointing with a giggle to the magazine I was looking at. "Who'd have thought she could do that???" She sank back on the couch. "It's just lovely and I feel so..."

She paused and put her hand up to the side of her head. I saw she was wearing a small ear piece.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I must do my exercises now. Will you excuse me? If I don't .. they won't .. Well, you know about the thong, don't you?"

I nodded.

"If I do as they say then I get my pleasure from the thong. Not like with you," she looked at me, "or you," she turned to Sukie, "but it's so nice and it seems so right in here. So I must exercise."

"That's all right, Rachel."

"You should call me 'Slave' really Sir, or use my number." No sooner had the words left her mouth than she gave an "Mmmm!" and clutched at her crotch. She gave a satisfied "Ohhh", swallowed and blushed. I could see at once the effect of the reinforcing stimulation of the thong in response to approved, conformant behaviour.

I smiled. "Of course. Run along Slave. Do your exercises. We can talk later. Remember what happens. I want you to write it for me."

Rachel smiled and bowed her head. "Of course, Sir," she said. "It will be my pleasure." She laughed and skipped off towards the other room. Sukie and I left the room. I took her back to our suite.

"Rachel seems happy," I said.

"Yes," said Sukie slowly. "I think she is but only time will tell if this is right for her. Where I was brought up it was usual for girls to learn to be subservient, to seek to bring pleasure. Here in the west it is not part of your culture. Perhaps it can be learned when you are older. I am not sure."

"I'm not sure either, Sukie," I said. "But I hope you will help her. It's what she wants."

"And it will be difficult for you."

"For me?"

"It's not easy to have someone who depends on you. You've been kind to her and to me. But being kind is not easy. Cruelty is always easier."

As always Sukie gave me a valuable insight. I hadn't really thought about what would happen when Rachel completed her programme. All I had thought so far was that she would be there, writing when I wanted. That and the fact that I'd have Freddie off of my back as well. I needed to think about what was next.

I went back to see the Doctor. "How's she doing?" I asked.

"Well," she said. "Really well. I mean she is obviously responding to the programme but it's more than that. She's really taken it on board very willingly. She's making much quicker progress than the others we've put through it. We've started her on the exerciser already."

"The exerciser? I knew she was doing some exercises but I wasn't sure what was involved."

"You can have a look if you like." The Doc said, pulling back the curtains from a viewing panel that looked into part of Rachel's accommodation.

Rachel was crouched, kneeling, over a metal frame. She didn't appear to be strapped to it but she was effectively held in place by three plugs that protruded into her from the frame. One, at her head, filled her mouth, the others penetrated her arse and her vagina. The set up looked very similar to the cages and frames that we'd been using in Orientation for some time. Rachel's fingers could reach buttons that were connected by wires to the plugs and to other wires that attached to her nipples.

"This is about reinforcing her ability to give herself pleasure. The thong gives her pleasure feed-back in return for conformant behaviours. This allows her to get used to acting directly for her own pleasure. The buttons control the activity of each of the plugs and the wires. The plugs can expand and contract and move in and out. The wires deliver low frequency pulses or short sharp shocks. The screen in front of her gives her the sequence of buttons that she should press. As long as she follows the sequence the plugs and wires deliver appropriately pleasurable stimuli. If she makes a mistake or she doesn't respond quickly enough the stimuli stop and she has to wait for a while. That's excruciating for her in her current state of arousal so she has a high incentive to keep pressing the buttons. It helps reinforce the idea that conformance brings pleasure. At this stage is pretty much the equivalent to the thong, just more intensive and covering more points." Rachel gave a moan. I could see she was sucking vigorously on the plug that filled her mouth as it moved backwards and forwards slowly. "After this she'll be given a target score to achieve during a particular period and allowed to make her own choices about which stimuli she uses in what order." The screen in front of Rachel changed again and she gave another squeal and bucked her hips as the pulsing at her mouth was succeeded by a thrusting motion from the plug that penetrated her cunt.

"What will she be like, Doc?" I said. "When she's finished?"

"I'd have thought she'd be every man's dream," the Doctor said. "Obedient, respectful, willing to please and desperate for sex at every opportunity."

"That's going to take quite some living up to," I said.

"She's a writer isn't she?" I nodded. "She'll be anxious to do whatever you want. So if you want her to write, she will. She'll be very keen to please – she should produce good work, just because it will be important to please you. She'll need stimulation in return, of course. You'll have to maintain the positive feed-back at least for a while. But you can do that with the thong. Or you could grant her time on the exerciser. Or," she gave me a look that suggested she'd already decided that I was a complete degenerate, "you can take care of things yourself. I'd advise a combination of the three really. Unless you want to completely wear yourself out. I'll warn you that her appetite will almost certainly exceed your ability to respond."

I could see that I had plenty to think about.

Chapter 53 : The Price of Friendship

I gave Freddie an update on Rachel's progress. He seemed happy. I was wondering whether he was really worried about the outcome or whether he was just keen to see me getting fully involved. Whichever was the case, the threat of violent intervention appeared to have receded.

Rachel was still completing the programme. I'd called Sarah into my office. She appeared, smartly dressed as always her clearly visible collar the only real indication of her slave status, exactly on time. "Good morning, Mr Ross," she said brightly. "It's so nice to be back here. How can I help?"

I told her that I wanted to talk to her about her experiences with Brad and Lauren to help build up my picture of the ways that our customers used their purchases. I could see she was uncomfortable with the idea of re-visiting the past few weeks but I wasn't really interested in her concerns and I brushed them aside. "I'm sorry, Sarah, I'm sure you didn't enjoy it but that's hardly the point is it? I know you've enjoyed some privileged treatment around here but do I really need to remind you about your role?"

"But Larry," she began.

"I think we'll keep this on a formal basis, #06.085," I said using her slave number. You could see that she wasn't used to it. It brought her up short.

"I'm sorry, er, Sir," she said, recognising that she had stepped out of line. "Of course, I'll answer any questions that you have."

"Good, that's better, Sarah," I responded. She smiled. "Carry on in that way and we'll get along just fine."

"Of course, Sir," she said.

I picked up my note book. This would have been easier with Rachel to take notes and write things up but I could manage. She was well on in her programme but I wasn't going to use her for things like this just yet. "So," I said, "tell me about your duties at the Castle."

"Umm, well, I didn't really have anything much to do for the Emir, you know. He left on some business trip and I was supposed to be taking care of his daughter. Well, she took that to mean I was to be her personal slave. Most of the time I was running around for her finding meals or drinks or getting her things when she was down by the pool. Fetching and carrying really. I mean she shouted at me a lot and she locked me in the chastity belt when she found me with the guards by the pool but apart from that, she was alright I suppose."

"Beatings or other punishments?"

"Well no, not really. I mean I try to do a good job so perhaps she didn't have cause to. She did slap my face once when she thought I hadn't been quick enough to bring something but apart from that, until she locked me in the pillory, she hadn't beaten me at all. It was all a bit sudden. I didn't expect it; she just seemed to suddenly decide I'd crossed some invisible line. Thinking about it maybe she had her eyes on one of the guards for herself."

I thought about what Sarah was saying. Lauren was obviously inexperienced. Keeping slaves needed skills like any other form of management. I knew from my own background that if you wanted staff to change it was best to pick up undesirable behaviour early on. "But then who sends you to slave keeping school?" I thought. It was an interesting thought. I made a note of it. Maybe there was an opportunity related to the expansion in markets with new slave keepers emerging. How else would they learn about security, appropriate punishment, care and feeding? It wasn't intuitive, after all.

Sarah carried on talking about her experiences serving Lauren. It sounded pretty much as though Lauren had just wanted a housemaid, although amusingly Sarah was absolutely banned from cleaning up Lauren's room. Lauren had been very concerned that her father shouldn't get the wrong idea, she wanted it to look like a tip and so it was left.

I quizzed her some more. No, the guards hadn't raped her; Brad was very tight on discipline and wouldn't allow it, although a couple of the guards had asked him if they could. No, Lauren hadn't tried to use her sexually either, hadn't made any mention of it.

I asked her about her living arrangements. It had been fairly comfortable because there hadn't been any other slaves in the castle at the time, she'd had a room to herself, locked in at night, of course, and the way things were set up now there would have been three others in the room and they'd have been locked to their beds but they hadn't bothered with that because she was on her own. The daily routine started at 6 o'clock with cleaning and getting the house ready. Lauren usually called her at about 9 when she woke up and she'd have to serve breakfast in her room. After that, it was whatever Lauren wanted, blended in with a routine of house cleaning and odd bits of secretarial work whenever Brad phoned in. It wasn't arduous. The main problem was the boredom.

We spent an hour or so talking. I thought I'd got some useful ideas out of it. It was clear that new slave keepers and the expansion of the market into slaves for women was going to need different training arrangements. I sent Sarah back to Harry and set about drafting a note to Rick and Freddie on my thoughts. That took me up to lunch time.

Rick caught Harry, Tricia and myself in the canteen. We'd just finished lunch. He dropped his own tray alongside us. "Snatched any good women lately?" he asked.

Harry just looked up from his coffee.

"I've got an answer to that memo of yours – about the Cindy collection."

"Good," said Harry. "How does it look?"

"OK, I think. We found her all right, although your details were a bit misleading."

"How come," said Harry, warily.

"Well we've got a Cindy Bailey. Works for a motor dealer. Used to work in their Rugby branch."

"That sounds right," Harry said.

"We thought so. Only thing is your note said you thought she'd be in Coventry now. She's actually in Solihull."

"Fair enough, it's not that far away. She could have moved again."

Rick shook his head. "Nope. Been there all the time since they closed the Rugby branch. And it's not a BMW dealer, either, it's Mercedes. Your note sent us on a bit of a wild goose chase."

Harry grunted.

"Anyway, do you want to run through the details?"

"Yeah sure," said Harry, "I'd finished lunch anyway."

"Fine," said Rick pulling a manila file out from under his tray. "I thought you would. He opened the file. "Let's see. Cindy Bailey, 25 years old, red head, neat body. Looks quite like your Sarah, thinking about it."

"Yeah," said Harry, "I know. In fact that's the idea."

Rick went on, reading from the file. "Lives on her own, small flat, edge of Solihull. Split up from a bloke about a month back. Sounds like it was a pretty bruising relationship. Works for Mercedes in Solihull as one of their 'sales negotiators'. Quite good at it by all reckoning."

"I thought Sarah said she had more of a PA / admin role," I said chipping in.

"That's right," said Rick. "She did. That's what she started as when she moved up from Rugby. Changed over to this about six months later. Three months after that she bought the flat. Makes her targets every month. One of their best performers if I believe my sources."

"They seem to be more reliable than mine," said Harry with an acidic tone.

"That's what you pay research for," Rick chirped. "There's pictures in here including a couple that we sneaked of her sunbathing on the back of a truck behind the garage. Certainly a saleable body if you ask me. Takes a lot of trouble with her looks. Spends on the clothes, make up, jewellery. May even have had a bit of a perk-em-up job done on the front lady bumps. They shouldn't point up at the sky like that when she's laying on her back, I think."

Harry winced at Rick's use of language. "OK. What's the collection proposal?"

"The flat's a possibility but it's not great. It's on the second floor," Harry grimaced, "but there's access at the rear through a garden and out to an alley way. Couldn't get a van down there though and it's maybe 80 yards to the road running down behind seven other properties. You'd get in that way all right but you'd probably have to bring her out through the front. Social venues are a bit unpredictable after dumping her bloke. My favourite is to set up something around work maybe. She's out and about a lot of the time. Seems to manage her own diary. They don't keep very close tabs on her. You could maybe show some interest in a motor, take it for a spin with her, use your usual charm, just don't take her back."

"That could work," said Harry. "Are there details on the garage in the file?"

"Yeah, sure," said Rick, passing him the file. "Here you go."

I really didn't have time to get involved in the Cindy Bailey collection, after spending effort with the other pick-ups for the Emir. They are fun to go on but, it's not really the job and besides I needed to finish mapping out the account management programme for Freddie. It looked like I was going to need a team of two or three to cover the Kushtian side of things, two more for the UK and one for our north American accounts. That would probably grow and there was Europe to think about too. It was hard to be precise. I thought that it would be better to establish the criteria for appointing account managers and then run with that, building up the numbers as the opportunities allowed. I could see suggesting getting a big team on board from day one, even if I'd thought Freddie would go for it, which I didn't.

I was still beavering away at my ideas a couple of evenings later when Tricia walked in closely followed by Harry and a bound Sarah. Harry sat Sarah down and tossed his knapsack onto the desk alongside of her. Tricia untied Sarah's wrists.

"Easy job," said Tricia. "Easy job."

"Yes," said Harry, "you did that well. You're certainly coming on. That's got our little red-headed girl in the bag, so we can keep the Emir happy."

"Oh right," I said, "this was the Cindy Collection was it?" Sarah was busying herself tidying away the contents of Harry's knapsack into the cupboard in his office. She said nothing.

"Yepp," said Harry. "They're just getting her out of the back of her car down in the loading bay."

"It went all right then?"

"Sure it did, thanks to your girl here and some help from Sarah."

Tricia chipped in. "It was pretty straight forward really. Harry and I posed as a couple of potential buyers. Looking for a fleet deal for a new business we're establishing, maybe half a dozen sales exec cars plus four higher spec models for board members. Cindy was hot to trot for an order like that. Like we expected, she didn't even stop to tell her boss where she was going. Anyway she pulled out all the stops. Took us for a test drive in a S600L All very nice."

"Then we just had to get her bagged," said Harry. "We asked her to stop at our hotel. We said we were renting a couple of rooms as a base until we got the offices set up. She didn't really want to come up to our room but we said...."

"There was an old friend that wanted to meet her. Didn't she know a girl called Sarah in her last job? She was now working for us and would hate to miss seeing her. Well Cindy's really keen to see her old friend, says how they lost touch what with the problems with her ex and all and that she'd meant to get back in touch with her again but she'd never got around to it and it would be great to see her again."

"So we all walk up to the room and sure enough Sarah's in there, and Cindy says 'Hi!' and that moment is all we need."

"By the time she realises anything is wrong, Harry's in behind her with a chloro pad and she's stretched out on the floor of the room. I get her taped up and quiet with a nice big wad of cloth in her mouth. Used some of the new lip glue to keep her mouth shut like we had with Sarah. Oh shit – I forgot to tell the guys on the loading bay we'd used chloro. She'll vomit all over them as soon as they loosen off her lips and take that gag out." She looked at her watch. "Oh well, probably too late now. Anyway, we wait until dark, slip her out the back way and into the back of the S600L. She and Sarah ride in the back strapped in and sitting up nice as you please. Cindy's still out, Sarah's trussed up, both of them with their lips glued shut - from outside they look normal as anything. We motor quietly back here."

What's all this about lip glue? Is this something new?

"Yes," said Tricia. "It's quite useful stuff. It's a high-strength skin glue. Works pretty well instantaneously but you can loosen it off with the right solvent. You can put it in all sorts of stuff. Like a lip-stick, for example. Can't you Sarah?"

"Mmmm," said Sarah in response and I realised that her lip glue gag was still in place.

"You should have seen the look on her face when she realised what had happened! We gave her the lipstick as we were going out and suggested she try it. A couple of strokes, she purses her lips in the mirror and – whap – they're stuck together. There was quite a lot of mmphing, you can imagine but there was no way we were taking her out on a job without some security in place and that proved ideal. We walked her into the hotel with no problems. Got her set up behind the desk with her ankles roped and tied to the chair. From the front it looked like she was just sitting at the desk. She couldn't say anything with her lips glued shut. We left a baby sitter with her to make sure she behaved until we got back with Cindy the sales lady. I reckon we'll use the stuff again."

"How was Sarah? She must have found it hard, helping you pick her friend up?"

"That was the deal," said Harry, grimly. "She was supposed to help and in return she didn't get sold to the Emir. A deal is a deal in my book. If she hadn't wanted to be involved she shouldn't have said anything in the first place."

"And," said Tricia, "we've got a nice new limo for the business. Plus there was a whole pile of Cindy's work files and her laptop in the boot. Might be some interesting stuff there. Harry, I'd like to get Research to check it out. If there's any follow ups on this then perhaps it's a project I could take a lead on."

"Maybe," said Harry. "I'll think about it."

Chapter 54 : The Kushtians of Suburbia

There were three clear bangs on the door of the wardrobe. That meant that Kelly had had enough. I put down the mug of tea that I'd made for myself and walked back across the room. I pulled open the wardrobe. Even with the blindfold on she knew I was there. She gave a whimpering moan and shrugged her body against the ropes that pinned her arms to her sides.

I lifted her out of the wardrobe, carried her across my shoulder to the far side of the room and dumped her down on the bed.

Her blouse was soaked in sweat from the effort she had put into trying to free herself. That was all she had to show for her trouble. I'd learned a bit about the erotic uses of bondage from her magazines. I don't think anyone in Harry's team ever bothered with a crotch rope for example and the 'lift and separate' effect of ropes across the chest and between the tits seemed to have a purely aesthetic purpose that they hadn't latched on to either. I won't complain you understand. I've always enjoyed the visual arts. I eased away the scarf that gagged her. She coughed and spluttered, using her tongue to work out the pair of sports socks that I'd wadded into her mouth. Still blindfolded she fell back on the bed, breathing deeply.

"You are a bastard, you know," she said, working her sore and aching mouth and still trying to wriggle free of the ropes that held her body, wrists and ankles.

"I thought that was the attraction," I said, reaching out to run a finger across where her belly had been exposed as her blouse had pulled loose from the waistband of her skirt by her struggles.

It had been quite a while since we had seen each other. I'd been busy with Rachel and there had been problems with Tricia too. I hadn't really intended to see Kelly but she'd left me a text on my mobile and then we'd chatted and suddenly it had seemed like a good idea.

"If you're nice to me I might fix you some dinner," she said.

"How about if I'm nasty to you?"

"Then I could do something even nicer," she giggled. I reached across and pulled away the scarf that was blindfolding her. Her long, dark hair fell loosely across the pillow. She smiled up at me. "That was fun," she said, moving herself slowly into a sitting position, still stiff from the hour or so she'd spent in the wardrobe. She looked at my mug of tea. "Where's mine?" she asked. "And look at this place; you could have cleared up while I was in there."

She was right I supposed, but I wasn't going to admit it. She put quite a struggle when I told her what I was going to do with her. One of the armchairs had been upended and the coffee table had got kicked over too. The remains of the Chinese take away meal she'd had last night were spread across the floor, a broken plate lay where it had fallen. Luckily the carpet was patterned, the added stains wouldn't show. "Slaves make their own tea," I said starting to untie the ropes that were knotted about her, "and if they don't want a mess they shouldn't resist their captors. Beside, I wanted to watch the news." I nodded to the television.

She made a noise that suggested to me she wasn't entirely convinced by my arguments. I got the last of the ropes off. She flexed her arms and rubbed at her wrists. "Did you want some more tea?" she said.

"Sure," I replied. I passed her my mug. She picked her way across the room towards the kitchen, avoiding treading in the debris in her stocking feet.

"Oh, there's a magazine there I thought you'd find interesting," she called from the kitchen. "On the table. Or at least it was before you turned up."

I pulled a magazine out from under the coffee table. "National Geographic?" I called back to her. "Not usually my sort of reading. Not yours either if my memory serves me right." I thought back to the fetish magazines I'd discovered in her bedroom.

"No, look at the cover story," she called. "Right up your street if the way you play is anything to go by. I'll be there in a moment. The kettle is just boiling."

I looked at the yellow cover, two almond eyes set in light brown skin stared out at me from above an elaborately embroidered yashmak. "Veiled & In Chains," the headline read. "The Women Of The Kushtian Uplands."

"See what I mean?" Kelly emerged from the kitchen clutching two mugs of tea.

"Extraordinary," I said, taking a mug from her and thumbing through the article. "I wouldn't have believed it." That at least was true enough; I wouldn't have believed it before I'd met the Kalinin. I think she thought I meant before reading the article.

Kelly plonked down on the couch beside me. "Look at that poor girl," she said pointing to a photograph of a veiled woman carrying a water pitcher on her head, ornamental chains running from her wrists to an elaborate collar.

"Poor girl?" I said. "It looks like just the sort of thing you'd like; slave of a rugged tribesman kept in chains and subject to his every whim if I believe this article."

"It would depend on the rugged tribesman," she said, placing her hand on the top of my thigh in a way that indicated that I would probably qualify. She pulled a corner of the bed sheet up over her mouth and nose. "How do you think I'd look in a veil," she said flirtatiously.

"Just fine," I said.

"Pig!" she exclaimed, throwing down the sheet. "That's one of those questions you're not supposed to answer honestly."

I laughed and took a swig of my tea.

She was as good as her promise and cooked some food. While she was busy I read the article. It had been written by Dr Karen Armstrong, an American anthropologist, who had smuggled herself disguised as a boy across the border from the north with a trading caravan. She had taken some extraordinary photographs of the women of the northern tribesmen and some of the tribesmen themselves. From the article it sounded like the tribesmen had a very similar society to that in Kolin but without the sophistication of city life. The author seemed to think that the growth of urban culture in Kolin would eventually dilute the primitive traditional ways of the tribes. She also thought the change from the soviet command economy to a western market economy and the introduction of democracy would also lead to emancipation for the hill tribeswomen. From what I'd seen of life in Kolin I wasn't so sure.

We didn't have any shackles so I had Kelly serve dinner in handcuffs and with the sheet draped across her in a Kushtian fashion. She wasn't too pleased when I made her kneel beside me holding the tray while I ate from it, and it didn't get any better when I pushed her ball gag in behind her veil to silence her protests.

She came around in the end and was showing every sign of becoming a suitably compliant Kushtian wife by the end of the evening. She certainly picked up the idea that Kushtian women were expected to serve their men as sexual playthings, happily accommodating me in a range of entertaining positions before allowing me to remove her gag so that she could use her mouth as well. She wasn't as accomplished a veil wearer as the girls I met in Kolin but in every other respect I thought she did quite a good job.

Just as I was about to leave I picked up Kelly's copy on National Geographic. I turned the pages, leafing through the pictures of the veiled, chained women. Kelly came over beside me. "The funny thing is," she said, "they all look really content. Look at their eyes, bright and smiling even if their mouths are hidden. Perhaps it's not such a bad life for real."

"Is that what your friends at the munch would think?" I asked.

"Gosh, no," she said. "They'd think I was mad. Well, most of them, would. Probably."

I wondered. It might be interesting to find out. I wondered what the Kushtians thought about it too.

Chapter 55 : Sarah & Cindy

Cindy didn't spend too long in prep. The Emir wanted his new acquisitions "fresh" as he called it. That was fine by us. I'd gone down to the customer lounge to join Rick for the handover of the remaining eight of the Emir's household slaves, four house maids, three for 'entertaining' clients and his new PA. We'd got together pretty much everything he'd wanted and, of course Cindy as well. Tricia had suggested using Brian's daughters, Beth and Ella, as two of the 'entertainers', I didn't want to do that, I thought that output from the sexualisation programme should be more use than just general purpose bounce fodder but Tricia said we ought to be getting some benefit from the family. We'd had an argument about it. We were doing a lot of that lately. In the end my point of view was the one we went with. It wasn't really a marketing decision but Freddie didn't want to argue about it.

The Emir was due anytime so Rick had the guards bring the girls in and line them up. Brad had been clear that he'd want to check them out before he took delivery, so we'd had the girls stripped. All nine of them were standing in a line, wrists and ankles shackled, collared as always. They wore ball gags hanging loosely around their necks waiting to be put in place when needed. There was the usual mix of looks of sullen resentment, terrified acceptance and cowed compliance on the girl's faces as Rick checked them off against the list he had on his clip board.

Sarah appeared, smiling and looking as efficient as ever, in a tight black skirt and an equally tight white blouse. She handed an envelope to Rick. "Harry asked me to give you this," she said. She suddenly saw Cindy at the far end of the line. At least Sarah had the grace to look embarrassed, I thought. Cindy of course had had enough prep to know that she shouldn't react. Even so, I could imagine that she was angered by the sight of Sarah.

Rick was puzzling over Harry's letter. "Why does he leave these things to the last minute?" he was asking himself. "It always more difficult if you don't have time to sort things out properly."

"Can I help?" offered Sarah. Rick was scribbling something on his clipboard and fiddling with a pile of numbered tags in his hand.

"Err, oh, err, yes. Thank you Sarah," he responded. "If you could just clip these asset transfer tags on each of the girls listed on the sheet and check them off. Just make sure the tags and the numbers on the sheet agree with the numbers on their collars, can you?"

"Of course," said Sarah taking the board and tags from him.

Rick went back to reading Harry's note. Sarah worked her way down the line checking each girl's number in turn and fastening a tag to her collar. She got to the end and found herself facing Cindy. The two of them exchanged looks. Cindy's failed to convey the contempt she felt for her former friend, Sarah's couldn't show her sorrow and regret. Sarah checked the collar and the tag. She came back over to Rick.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but the last one doesn't tally. Its got all of Cindy's details here but her number has been scribbled out and another written in. Should I just put the tag on her or should we find the girl with this number, #06.085?" Sarah's look suddenly changed. Her hand flew up to her own collar. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "That's my number! That can't be right."

"Ah!" said Rick. "Now I understand. Sorry, Silly of me. Yes. That's right. If you could just step over there Sarah and clip that tag on. Oh, and just pop your clothes off if you could there's a good girl."

"No, wait," said Sarah, "I'm sure this is wrong. I mean, the whole idea behind this was to ... And then I helped, well, with her," She nodded towards Cindy, "so that, and"

"Well, Sarah you may be right but I can't do anything about it right now. We'll have to swap you and Cindy over for the moment and we'll sort it out later, I'm sure. I'll see what I can do but I have to follow the procedure. You know what a stickler for this sort of thing Freddie is."

Sarah looked uncomfortable but could see no choice but to comply.

Rick turned to one of the guards. "Can you take the one on the end back down to the cells for the time being," he said pointing to Cindy. "Now, come on Sarah, do as I asked. Get your clothes off and get in line with the others and then we can get the shipment tallied and I can try to sort things out." Sarah watched as a puzzled Cindy was hustled away. Rick turned to the rest of the girls. "Kneel down, please," he said. "Ball gags in place now. Thank you."

I watched as Sarah stripped off, taking off the high necked white blouse and the pencil slim black skirt that she so often wore around the office. She looked around for somewhere to put her clothes and draped her skirt carefully over the back of a chair, adding her blouse and then her bra, panties and stockings. She put her shoes neatly beside the chair and then stood, sheepishly waiting while Rick continued to check off details on his clip board.

Rick looked up and saw the now naked Sarah. "Ah, good," he said, "that's a help." Sarah smiled. "If you could just go over there on the end. Oh, yes, sorry I hadn't given you one of these." He passed her a ball gag and turned to one of the guards. "Get some shackles on this one, could you. Thanks." He pointed to an increasingly confused and concerned looking Sarah. The guard fastened shackles around her wrists and ankles and clipped the asset transfer tag to her collar. He led her over to the line and got her kneeling like the others. I heard voices in the corridor outside.

"Straighten up, ladies," Rick called. "Hands on the back of your heads." The girls responded, Sarah last of all. "Come on all of you, make the best of yourselves, your new owner is going to be here in a moment and you won't want him to see you like this. That'll be no way to start." The girls visibly stiffened their posture, breasts were thrust forward and backs were arched. Even at this early stage they'd worked out that displaying themselves to their best advantage was likely to make their lives easier. Even Sarah responded.

The Emir came into the room with Harry. "Here we are," said Harry to the Emir. "Just as we've promised. You know Larry, of course." He gave me a wave of greeting. "Have you met Rick before? Runs the Preparation and Orientation activities here."

"No," said the Emir. "Good to meet you. Looks like you've done a good job at first sight. I'll need to look them over, of course."

"Naturally," said Rick. "Take your time. They're all yours."

"That's the idea," said Brad, laughing. "Assuming the cheque clears." The two of them went up to the first in line, Harry unbuckled the girl's gag. Brad examined her carefully, checking her body and her mouth as you would a piece of livestock at a market. He worked his way along the line. A guard called Harry from the door. He went across and the two of them muttered an exchange of words. The guard went out and reappeared with Cindy. Clothed in a high necked white blouse and tight black skirt, the resemblance to the way that Sarah had looked was striking. Harry walked her across to Rick and the Emir who had just got to Sarah.

"Sorry to interrupt things," said Harry. "I thought I ought to introduce my new PA, Cindy, here." She gave Rick and Brad a smile, all the while ignoring, Sarah's worried look. "I think she'll prove a little more reliable than the last one. Do you know she had the nerve to try to deceive me? Girl like that has to be sold on, can't keep her in an office like mine once she's shown she's not 100% reliable." Sarah looked frightened as she realised the consequences of her deception. She tried to protest through her gag but her whimpered, muffled, remarks did nothing more than to attract a scowl from both Harry and the Emir

"Well, whatever. Glad you decided to let me have this one after all," Brad said to Harry. "Now let's just see that she's OK." He ran his hands across her buttocks, down the outside of her thighs and back up the inside. "She's kept in trim, hasn't she?" He asked rhetorically. He moved his hands to her breasts. "You know these are nice," he said. "Liked them the first time I saw them in your office. Feel good too, all real. You can tell." Sarah bit back a whimper. "Can I?" he gestured to Sarah's mouth.

"Cindy, take this one's gag off, will you. Beat her if she makes a sound." Harry instructed his new PA.

"Of course, Sir," Cindy said compliantly, unbuckling the gag and pulling the ball from Sarah's mouth as the Emir prodded and probed at her body. Sarah wisely kept silent.

"Open your mouth, girl." Brad pulled back her lips and peered inside. "Yeah that looks all right. I had a slave that cost me a fortune in dental bills once but she looks all right. Not too much metal work in there and the teeth look OK. Fine." He pushed her mouth closed and then turned her head this way and that peering at her eyes, ears and skin. "OK, she'll do. A few more piercings in her ears and maybe some other places but I can get that done all right."

"Oh, please, wait," Sarah blurted out. Cindy went to pick up a riding crop from the nearby chair.

"That's all right, Cindy," said Harry. "What is it, err" he reached out for her tag, "#06.085?"

"Oh, thank, you, I'm sure there's some confusion Ha..., err, Sir. I'm sure you've misunderstood what I said about Cindy and ... Well, it's just that I'm not supposed to be part of this shipment, I only came down to help out with the tags and there was some mistake and now I'm..."

Harry cut her off. "Is this right Rick?" he said. "Not like you to make a mistake." Rick shrugged. "I know how to sort this out," Harry said. "Let's make sure that Rick's shipment list tallies with mine. If that's the case then we're all right." He turned to Cindy. "Could you just check our list against Rick's, Cindy? Just see if the two sets of item numbers are the same."

Cindy sashayed across the room to the table where Rick's clipboard lay on the desk. I watched her arse trying to fight against the skirt that covered it. It was an entertaining few moments. She spent a couple of minutes ticking off numbers on the two lists and turned back to the two groups. "The two lists tally, exactly, Sir," she said, putting Rick's clipboard down and returning to the group.

"I thought so," said Harry. "We've heard enough from this one. See to it, will you Cindy."

Sarah watched in numbed astonishment as Cindy took her ball gag and jammed it back into her mouth before she could utter another protest. For good measure Cindy clipped Sarah's wrist cuffs to the back of her collar. I heard the click of the ratchet on her cuffs as Cindy pushed the cuffs closed more tightly. "I hope that's not too tight for you," she said with a voice devoid of concern.

"Excellent," said Brad. "I'm glad that's sorted out. All to the good. My daughter's really looking forward to having this one around the house again," Sarah looked more concerned than ever, "and Lauren's going to need sweetening up a bit when she finds out she's off to Kushtia in a month. I'll sign off on these and you can ship them. OK?"

"Sure," said Rick waving to a Guard. He picked up his clipboard. "Loading Bay 5," he said. "They can go down now."

The guard set to linking each girl's wrist shackles to the collar of the next girl in line. Sarah was at the front. He clipped a leash to her collar and jerked her forward, "Right, keep up you lot. Let's move!"

The line of slaves shuffled across the room following the guard and Sarah. As she passed Cindy, Harry's new PA hissed quietly to her, "As if I'd be living in Coventry! You could have thought of somewhere more up market!"

Sarah whimpered, the leash tightened, and she was pulled towards the loading bay. As she left the room, her last sight was of Cindy picking up her discarded clothes from the chair and dumping them in a trash can.

Brad smiled and shook hands all round. "Good job," he said, "good job. Nice to see you guys do what you say." He took me to one side. "Did you see the piece in National Geographic?"

I nodded. "Yes, I guess it caused some excitement back home?"

"Well, yes and no," he said surprisingly. "Come on, you're a marketing man. I know they say there's no such thing as bad publicity but what do you think we should be doing about it?"

I thought for a moment. "Look," I said, "I'm no expert on international affairs but I'd have thought that the best course is to ignore it. You can't pretend it's not real. Maybe you could try to discredit the author but I don't think that gets you anywhere. I'd suggest that you just brazen it out if there is any adverse comment. Sort of 'it's our way of life, has been for centuries, all part of the rich global variety of cultural heritage' approach."

Brad didn't look convinced. "Maybe," he said. "Still it's not my call. I'm waiting to hear from the Foreign Ministry what the line is."

"Oh, I'd have thought they should have got their act together a bit quicker. You people on the ground need to know how to play it."

"Tell me about it," said Brad. "Tell me about it. Still, there's other stuff to worry about right now. Gotta get back to the Castle. See you. Thanks for your thought on that Nat Geog thing."

He gave me a wave and left.

I bumped into Elly as I was leaving the room. To say she wasn't happy would be putting things mildly. "Just help me get the facts right on this," she said. "You've taken Harry's PA, whose been working on Clegg Enterprises Business for the last three months. Who's seen our entire operation inside and out. Who's had probably one of the lowest levels of prep and orientation that any of the product has going through here. And you've sold her to that nutter with the country girl camp in Gloucestershire?"

I could sense this wasn't a time for prevaricating. "It wasn't my call," I said, "but as facts go, if you mean, 'are we shipping Sarah to the Emir?' the answer is yes."

"If it wasn't your call, who's was it?"

"Well, Head of Sales approves shipment lists. And that's Freddie these days."

"You know he hasn't got time to read all that stuff," Elly said.

"Not my fault. He could put a new Head of Sales in place. That whole piece of the organisation is broken, Elly. Brian may have been useless and a crook but at least he had time to read things before he signed them. Look, Harry was pretty hacked off with how Sarah held out on him, Cindy looks like a good alternative. Sarah was what the Emir wanted in the first place. It sounded like a good idea to me."

"Yeah, and you know so much about this business."

"No, I don't and that's why it wasn't my call and why I haven't wanted to take on that part of things. I can tell you what to sell and where to sell it and who to sell it to but I don't have the background for decisions on individual cases. For what it's worth I can see where you're coming from. I'm not convinced that the Emir is the right solution but he thinks he's bought her. If more experienced people than me are getting it wrong, I suggest you take it up with them."

Elly seemed to calm down. "Sorry Larry," she said. I made a mental note to remember that; apologies from Elly weren't common. "I'll get Rick to delay the shipment and I'll talk to Freddie about it. You're right, he needs to find someone he can delegate this stuff to."

I heard her on the phone not long after. She was talking to the Emir in her most emollient tones. "Well, thank you Brad, it's so good of you to be so understanding. There's just a question of the title transfer on that one. Yes, I know we said we'd substitute originally Yes, well I guess it will be best if we sort things out from our side first. .. You're happy if we ship the others? Fine. We'll do that then. I'll get back to you." She put down the phone with a look of relief. She turned towards me. "Right we've got a bit of time to sort this out. We're going to need some ideas and you're supposed to be good at that. Better start thinking."

Chapter 56 : Rachel's Recovery

The whole conversation was a bit difficult, I guess you could say. Elly wanted to sort out what we were going to do about Sarah, Cindy and the Emir's PA and she recognised that Freddie wasn't doing the job that needed to be done looking after sales. I wanted to solve the Rachel and Sukie problems. Harry just sounded as though he was resenting the fact that all this was taking up time he needed to work on Ops matters.

Freddie was sitting at one end of the table peering inscrutably over his hands as Elly expressed her concerns on letting Sarah out of the business. "I don't have a problem with using these girls on internal work but we've got to recognise that when we do they collect a lot of knowledge that might embarrass us later. And it's not just where they go to next it's what happens to them after that, we've got no control of who they might be sold on to."

Freddie looked pensive. "So what do you think we should do?"

Elly was blunt. "Leaving aside the current problem, there's three alternatives. Either we don't use them internally. Or we do and if they turn out unsuitable we carry the costs of keeping them in house but not using them. Or we do and if they turn out unsuitable we, to put it bluntly, dispose of them in a way that doesn't put us at risk."

"You know I don't like wasting assets, Elly," Clegg said. I wasn't quite sure which meaning of the word 'wasting' he was using. "And I'm not keen on letting the costs of keeping them go up. All right, it's cheaper than paying staff but that's not the point. Harry, what's your view?"

"Well," he said, "I know it's my girl that triggered this but actually I think Elly's right. We ought to have a consistent policy."

"OK and how are our two current problems?"

"They are both in secure accommodation on a no contact regime." I knew what that meant. It would get pretty boring for the girls in those hoods. "I didn't want things to get any more complicated."

"Fine," said Freddie. "Larry what's your take?"

"I'm not so sure," I said warily. "Look, I can't really have a point of view on what's secure or what's not. I just don't know enough about it. It's pretty obvious Sarah can't go back to working for Harry, she's lost his confidence. Equally she's been too involved in the business just to be sold on. We need to supply something to the Emir, we're committed on that and it needs to be Sarah or Cindy. My suggestion would be Cindy."

"And what do we do with the other one?"

"I think we can find a use for her. We could put her through the same programme that Brian's family and Rachel have been through. At the end of it she won't care what it is that she did in the past, she'd be completely absorbed in the pursuit of pleasure. We could use her for what we like then."

"Which might be?"

"Well, I've been thinking about this for a while – since we brought in Brian's family, really - but I hadn't really finished getting all my ducks in a row yet, so I hadn't mentioned it. What I'd been thinking was – as we're starting to see more slave owners appear, some with very little idea of how to look after slaves – I mean imagine I was trying to handle Rachel and Sukie on my own – these new owners, some of them don't have the first idea of how to do it. They've got some romantic idea about having a couple of women on tap but it's much more complicated than that as we all know. We could help them. Run a sort of training school. 'Slave Keeping 101' that sort of thing."

Freddie was thinking. He didn't say anything. Elly cut in, "And we'd use Sarah and Brian's family as the teaching aids?"

"That was my thought," I said. "Look this isn't a fully formed idea by any means. It needs a proper plan and...."

"No," said Clegg. I felt defeated. "No, it doesn't need a plan. I think we should try it. We've got the resources. Let's see if it works. It's the sort of thing we should be doing to help develop the customers – the more we can do for them the more their likely to buy from us. Don't spend time planning, spend time doing. That is unless anyone's got a better idea?"

Harry, Rick and Elly all shook their heads. "Sounds fine to me," said Elly.

"Good," said Clegg. "That's decided. Get on with it, Larry. The lads will help out." Harry and Rick both looked relieved. "Oh, but you might think twice about putting Sarah through the programme. It might be useful to have one 'training aid' that wasn't fully conditioned always to do as she was told."

I nodded. That was the sort of reason why I'd wanted a plan.

Elly wasn't going to let the issue of who was running sales to slide. "And sales management?" she said.

Clegg sucked in his cheeks. They'd obviously discussed it before and it looked like he'd been hoping the problem would go away. "All right. I can see you think it's not working like this, Elly." She gave him one of her most inscrutable looks. The others tried to look as though they were agreeing with both parties. Clegg seemed to make up his mind. "I'll look at moving one of the account managers up into a coordinating role. We don't need a sales director, I don't think."

"Your right there, but we do need someone to take day to day responsibility for sales management," said Elly.

"Agreed," said Clegg. "Leave it with me. I'll fix it."

The meeting broke up. I had a separate word with Freddie about Rachel and Sukie. I wanted to hang on to them but I might need some help as things got busier. Freddie agreed to my proposals for Rachel and for Sukie too. He complained a bit about increasing the overheads but, as I said, it was basically only food and drink anyway. Their costs were pretty marginal and the value that we were getting from Rachel's insights into the sexualisation programme were worth that alone.

The two of them were installed in an office next to mine. Sukie as a sort of admin / marketing gofer and Rachel doing any of the research or writing that I needed.

The first real jobs that I had for the two of them were mapping out the owners training programme and organising the buyer's hospitality event. The buyers took priority – we already had a date for that.

Rachel was to script the entertainments. Sukie would handle the admin. I spent an hour running through my thoughts with the two of them. In many ways it was just like a hundred events I'd organised before. Just this time the audience and the products were a bit different.

Basically the pitch was to give the buyers a training day that would help them do a better job for their employers. We wanted to let them have some fun but there had to be some work content as well. Between the three of us we worked up the programme. Sukie had some useful thoughts, she'd seen a lot of the American owners and knew the sort of things they wanted in their purchases. We thought it might be interesting to get Elly to do a short talk on contractual issues and we wanted to pull together a short documentary like video on the collection and preparation process but apart from that the idea was just to give them the opportunity to get some food and drink inside themselves and to enjoy some of the product.

I knew Rachel could write the video script. She'd already developed a rough story-board covering intelligence gathering, a surveillance project, collection, basic orientation and preparation. The brief was to focus in on intelligence and surveillance because it was those phases that most affected our ability to give warranties or provide other reassurances in supply agreements. In the end I think she did a pretty good job, pulling together some existing material that the research teams had collected, some video footage shot on a snatch as a training aid for Harry, some of the CCTV footage from inside the prep centre and some new material shot specially for the video. She even volunteered to do the voice over herself.

The three of us had fallen into a work and life routine that seemed to suit all three of us. Sukie was happy to look after running the apartment, she did most of the cooking and cleaning. Rachel was still spending part of her time reinforcing her sexualisation programme but she and Sukie had developed a very close relationship that was as much emotional as it was physical. Although both the girls were slaves as far as the organisation was concerned, when the three of us were alone together we worked or played as the mood took us or the business required, a delightful combination of labour and lust.

The girls wore their collars, of course, and shackles whenever they were outside the apartment but, apart from that, we lived what looked like a normal existence for three people sharing a flat and their workplace.

Even Tricia started to look as though she was accepting the situation. We'd been chatting one evening and she'd even got as far as apologising.

"You know, I think I might have seemed a bit single minded over some of this stuff," she said. We'd met up for a drink in the riverside bar. We were at one of the tables, Harry was at the bar trying to renew his acquaintance (again) with the bar maid. "And I'm sorry if it looked like I was jealous about your writer or Sukie. I guess you just had to do all that for the job and if I'm so all fired up by mine I shouldn't complain if you get caught up in yours."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Well maybe, but I don't blame you for getting hacked off. I wasn't very straight with you about things."

"No it's OK. I mean what man wouldn't like having two women on tap. Especially when one of them is set up to get friendly at the click of a finger."

As apologies went it wasn't actually a really good one but I didn't want to push things further. "I guess so. It's not quite like that with Rachel, though."

"No? I thought that was how the programme worked. Just like Pavlov and his dogs, except when you ring the bell with her it's not her mouth that starts dribbling." She gave a laugh that I guessed was meant to convince me that she was joking. Somehow I didn't really believe it.

"It's a bit more complicated than that, Tricia," I said, "but I can see it might look like that."

"Don't you find it a bit creepy, though? Knowing she's been conditioned to behave like she does? I always had you down as someone that liked his women a bit more independent minded."

It was obvious that Tricia was including herself in that. "Sure," I said "but don't confuse submission with a lack of independent thought. If you get to know Sukie or Rachel you'll see there's no lack of that. They just go at their lives in a different way." The conversation was spiralling down. I could see us ending up throwing things at one another if I didn't change the subject. "How are you getting on with persuading Harry to let you take a lead on a job?"

Tricia was pleased for the chance to talk about her favourite subject. "All right, I think," she said looking furtively across the bar. Harry was still chatting happily to the bar maid. "I mean at least we've agreed a series of things I've got to do to get to a position where he'll be happy for me to take the lead. Plus he's get me involved with some of the research side. I think he's happy enough with my field work, it's just the planning that he's not so convinced about, that, and the coordination of the various members of the team. I guess it's fair enough but it's pretty frustrating. I know I can do just as good a job as Eva or any of the men but I suppose I've just got to go on working at it." While Tricia carried on chatting about her problems, my thoughts were drifting back to Sukie and Rachel. I could see the clock behind the bar over Tricia's shoulder. Seven o'clock. Rachel would be starting her evening exercise sessions. I could imagine her sliding on to the frame, taking the dildos willingly with a smile and setting to with a dedication. Perhaps Sukie was with her offering encouragement. They'd tell me about it when I got back to the flat. "... or alternatively I could just tell him to stick his head as far up his arse as he can manage!"

I was suddenly aware that Tricia's tone had changed. "What?"

"You might at least pretend to listen a bit better than that."

"Sorry, sure, look I can understand it's frustrating but you'll persuade him." Tricia didn't look convinced by what I was saying. She believed that she could do it anyway. I just thought she needed to grit her teeth and get on with the hard work. Whether that was the answer or not, bitching to me about it wouldn't help and I was pretty sure she wasn't looking for advice.

That's when my mobile went off. It was from one of the guards at the Centre. Rachel had had a relapse. She'd collapsed. It looked like another anaphylactic episode. The doctor was with her.

Chapter 57 : Picking Up For Steve

Tricia hadn't looked too pleased that I was going to dash back to the Prep Centre but what did she expect? It was one of the longest drives of my life. I had the mobile on all the way but no one called. I was driving as fast as I could without wanting to attract attention from the law – this was no time to be having to explain why I was speeding.

I dashed into the Centre and made for the Doc's office. Her stressed and haggard look didn't give me any encouragement.

"How is she?" I asked. "Rachel, how is she?"

"I don't know. Maybe OK, maybe not. She had another attack."

"What do you mean, another attack? The first one wasn't real! Remember? It was a set up."

"Sure, I remember. Well this wasn't a set up, this was for real."

"Are you sure?"

"Mmm," she nodded. "Look, it's probably just as well we faked the first one. The same guard was on duty. He called me straight away. 'She's had another one,' he said, 'one of those anorexic shocks. Just like last time.' I was puzzled. I ran down there anyway, half expecting it to be some piece of faking; though how that could be after all the programme work she'd done I didn't know. He was right it was real. Luckily I had my needles and the adrenaline. She was lying on the floor just like before. There was a plate on the floor where she'd dropped it. Walnut cake. Sukie was sitting on the bed sobbing, saying she'd just made it as a treat, she thought she'd love it. That she'd never guessed."

"But you got the adrenaline in her? So she's OK?"

"Maybe?"

"Why only maybe?"

"I don't know if I was quick enough. It's not an infallible cure. We have to replace the fluids, deal with the shock. She's still unconscious. There could be brain damage, I don't know if I got the oxygen into her quickly enough. Especially after all we've been putting her through. I don't know what state she was in, how resilient she was."

"Can I see her?"

The Doc shook her head. "Not for a while," she said, "I'd really like her not to be disturbed. And I want to get her to recover from this attack as well as she did from the last one. Only this time it's going to be more difficult."

"How's Sukie?"

"I'm not sure. She was very upset. I've not seen her since we brought Rachel up here."

If I couldn't be with Rachel then Sukie was the one that needed me most. Actually even if I could have been with Rachel I was probably more use to Sukie. I went down to the apartment to find her.

She was still sitting where the Doc had said she'd left her, staring blankly ahead. I sat down beside her. "It's all right, Sukie," I said as comfortingly as I could, "I'm sure she'll be all right. The Doc got to her in good time."

She seemed not to notice what I was saying. "I made it for her. She'd finished the script. For the video. It was a treat. She was so happy, with her programme, so happy with her writing. She just grabbed her throat and fell. Down there." She pointed to the floor. "She never said she couldn't eat it. I didn't know."

"Of course not Sukie. She probably didn't know herself. It can happen without warning. With things you've eaten before. She'll be OK." I reached out towards her and took her in my arms. She didn't cry, she just sat there hanging on to me as though her life depended on it.

I sat with her all night until finally, about dawn, she fell asleep. I laid her back on the couch and covered her with a blanket before leaving to find out what the Doc had to say. Her advice was to wait. Rachel had had a quiet night. That was probably as good as it got at that stage. The Doc still wasn't letting me see her. I went and found some coffee. I felt like shit.

The Doc found me later that morning asleep in one of the chairs in the canteen, a half empty cup of coffee on the table beside me. Things were looking better she said. I looked at my watch, I'd missed out on the briefing session for the lift that was going on right then. It didn't seem to matter.

It felt like it had been a long time since I'd kicked off the project for Steve Glennis but finally we were making some progress. Research had done their work profiling the possible candidates. As I'd thought, their favourite was Lady Angela Marchmont too. Now the snatch team was out on the job.

I made my way over to the briefing room to wait for some news.

I looked up at the wall. The pictures, plans and diagrams that had been used to brief the snatch team were still there, pinned to the large cork panel that stretched along one side of the room. The architectural model of Marchmont Hall, constructed from the helpfully detailed plan found in the hall's guide book, "Marchmont Hall – A Regency Masterpiece" – stood on the table in the centre.

In the middle of the cork panel was a large grainy photograph of the target, the twenty seven year old heiress to the Marchmont titles and estate. Around it were other photographs, some clipped from a recent article in "Hello!" magazine. "Wild Child or Lady of the Manor?" said the headline, "Lady Marchmont talks to us in her delightful home." The pictures, part fashion plates, part picture post cards showed an elegantly dressed Lady Angela, draped across the furniture in the great gallery of the Hall, surrounded by its famous paintings. One, in contrast, showed the other side of Lady Angela, clad in tight leathers she sat astride the powerful motorbike that she was famed for riding at high speed through the lanes between Marchmont Hall and her flat in London.

The Marchmont collection of paintings was providing the cover for the snatch team. They would be arriving at the Hall at this very moment - a group of fine art assessors from the National Gallery, anxious to see whether the contents of the Marchmont galleries would qualify for a National Heritage Grant. As assessors of course they would be taking the greatest of care not to contaminate the pictures in any way while they examined them closely. As a result, Harry had said, this was a job where you can turn up legitimately wearing latex gloves. Training the team had been a time consuming exercise, not many of Harry's squad had much of an idea about art, much less the finer points of Flemish seventeenth century genre painting. However after some intensive cramming at least they could tell the difference between a Rubens and a Picasso.

They'd worked out a cover story for her disappearance. Even the British police tend to sit up and take notice when one of the aristocracy goes missing. There would be a ransom demand; lots of threats from the kidnappers and plaintiff appeals from her ladyship. Whether or not the ransom got paid was pretty irrelevant but when she wasn't released it would look like a kidnap that had gone wrong.

However, it wasn't to be. Harry came storming back into the briefing room two hours later with a severe sense of humour failure. Two cock ups, he bellowed, two cock ups on one job.

"What went wrong?" I said.

"Well it's not so much that we did anything wrong but the target wasn't there. Lady Angela's butler most apologetic. Terribly nice chap. Awfully sorry we'd been inconvenienced. Certain that Lady A must not have realised we were coming. Gone off to Switzerland. Only that morning. Quite suddenly. Off for a week. Heard the snow was good and was off. Hopped on the Triumph. Off to Heathrow. Creature of impulse. Apparently."

"Harry have you given up using pronouns? And anyway, you said two cock ups."

"Sorry. It was talking to that butler. One cock up was no target; the other was that when the Butler said to call for an appointment in a week or so he also said it would be better if both groups of assessors were to come together, the other team had been earlier that afternoon."

"You didn't have two teams on the job did you?"

"No. I can only imagine that we came up with such a plausible snatch arrangement that the real thing was actually going on as well. I think we'll have to stand down that whole idea."

"Well, I don't really want to wait too long anyway if we can avoid it. Steve's keen to get a driver in place as soon as he can and Lady A is going to need quite a bit of orientation. Can't we set something up in Switzerland? What's she going there for anyway?"

"Luge"

"Luge?" I said, in ignorance. "Pistol shooting?"

"No, that's Luger," Harry said, "Luge. It's a sort of toboggan. She's going to try to get a slide on the Cresta Run."

"Is that difficult?"

"It's difficult to do well, or rather quickly, and come off at the bottom with all your bones intact. Plus of course her ladyship has two important limitations when it comes to sliding the Cresta."

"And they are?"

"Her tits," Harry laughed. "The Cresta was closed to women in 1929. The men won't let the girls play on their pitch. You'd have thought they'd make an exception for the luge."

"How come?" I was getting mildly irritated by Harry's evident advance knowledge.

"They go down on their backs."

"Oh, very droll," I said. "So how's is Lady A going to do it?"

"I don't know, but knowing her she'll find a way. Oh well, if it means a trip to some expensive hotel in St Moritz, I guess we'll just have to grin and bear it."

I wasn't keen to leave Rachel but I was worried about this job - Freddie had been very keen that we get Steve's collection sorted after all the time it had taken, and I guess I was a bit twitchy after the meeting we'd all had. The Doc said there wasn't anything I could do for Rachel for at least forty eight hours. Sukie seemed to have withdrawn completely inside herself - I couldn't get more than a monosyllabic response to anything. I told her I'd be away for two days. She nodded. I could see she didn't care.

That evening I found myself with the whole team in Switzerland. The hotel was comfortable but we didn't have any time to enjoy its comforts. We couldn't afford to waste time. We didn't want her wandering off again.

Harry had found out that she'd be using a practice run on the other side of the valley the next morning. He'd set up the collection with the team's usual, careful attention to detail.

"Now this is where you get to watch some professionals in action," Harry said confidently, passing me a pair of binoculars. "Her ladyship will do her little run down the course. She'll step out through the timing hut you can see and as she does so, two of our lot will be there to suggest in quite a firm way that she accompanies them for a ride of a different kind. We'll catch up with them all back at the rendezvous. Ah there she is now."

I swung my binoculars to the top of the run. Sure enough, Lady Marchmont was standing talking to a couple of others. Even from this distance she looked stunning. She was wearing a skin tight body suit of some shimmering fabric in an iridescent black. Her hair shone in the alpine sun as she talked animatedly with the others. She was holding her helmet in one hand. The luge lay on the snow beside her feet. The others headed off as she made herself ready for her run, scoping her hair up and putting on her helmet.

She took a few moments, evidently sizing up the run before she launched herself down the track and laid back, her helmet only inches from the pounding ice. The luge wound around the series of tightly banked bends, running ever faster. I watched as she came into a slower, straight section but as I did so my view was obscured by a cloud of snow.

"Hey," called Harry, "what's going on?" I swung my binoculars first left then right and saw a snow clearing machine pumping a great plume of snow that was drifting across the track. As I brought my binoculars back down to the track, I saw her Ladyship's luge come bouncing down, empty. It scittered down the remainder of the run, bouncing off the track on the final sharp bend. "Where the hell is she?" bellowed Harry to no one in particular.

The cloud of snow from the snow blower started to settle. As it did so we saw two figures skiing with a stretcher between them. They swept around a mound of snow. Moments later from behind the mound, an all white Allouette helicopter, with red crosses on the side, lifted off. Harry watched it fly away down the valley with a furious look on his face.

"That was lucky," I said, "those medics being there. She must have had a nasty crash."

"Lucky, nothing," said Harry. "That was no accident and they were no medics. Lady Marchmont's been kidnapped. The only problem is that it wasn't by us."

Not surprisingly, Freddie was furious. It was bad enough having this happen, the fact that he was in the middle of interviews for the sales manager role - a charade he resented because he'd already decided who he thought would be best for the job - didn't improve his mood.

"Nobody picks up our targets under our noses. Get it sorted out will you," he'd bellowed as we'd spoken to him on a conference call later that day. "Harry, I'll get Elly to go through with you and Rick what you think has gone wrong this time." Harry and I looked at each other. He obviously wasn't looking forward to that conversation and after what Clegg had said to all of us following the Brian business neither of us liked to think what might happen if we didn't succeed.

For me it was just another complication. I'd tried to talk to the Doc about Rachel but I hadn't been able to reach her. Sukie hadn't been there either.

Chapter 58 : Hospital Visit

Harry sat on the hillside munching on a ham roll. To anyone passing by we looked like a couple of back packers out for a hike. Harry put down his food and picked up the binoculars. The grounds of the hospital lay almost directly below us, clearly visible through a gap in the pine trees. He seemed remarkably relaxed given the strength of the telephone call he'd had with Elly. At one point he'd been holding the phone a foot from his ear. In the end though she'd been content to let Harry get on with it.

"She's done this stuff," Harry had said. "She knows you can't cover every base although she did suggest that we might have guessed something was wrong from the debacle at Marchmont Hall, which is fair enough."

"How's Freddie," I said. "He didn't seem himself when we all got together last week."

"Bogged down in admin and irrelevancies as he calls it. He's got some problems with one of the other businesses which he can't hand off. They've kept him out of touch with our stuff and he doesn't like it. Talking to Elly, he'd much rather be out on operations or running a few accounts."

Harry swept the binoculars across the view before bringing them back to the hospital. "Yepp, he'd much rather be here. That," he said, "is what I'm interested in." He passed the binoculars to me and gestured to a small outbuilding about 50 metres from the main hospital block.

I looked myself. There didn't seem to be anything to distinguish it from any of the other half dozen or so buildings around the complex. "I'm not sure what I'm looking for," I said handing the binoculars back.

"It's in the right place," said Harry taking them and peering down again. "The lads have scoped it out and its definitely being used for something illegitimate. It's what we'd use but we need a better indication than... Hang on." He sat up still looking through the binoculars. I could see a figure moving across the yard between the hospital and the outbuilding. The figure was a woman, I could tell that much from where I was. All in white, presumably one of the nurses. She looked as if she was carrying something. She stopped at the door and after a short pause went in. "That's good enough for me," said Harry. "That's where we'll find her ladyship."

"Harry," I said, "I'm happy to bow to your judgement but I imagine there plenty of nurses going backwards and forwards between the hospital and the other buildings."

"You didn't see it, did you? Before she went in?"

"I saw she stopped but that's about it. You're the one with the binoculars."

"Well, it was a nurse all right. Carrying a tray with a meal on it."

"It's lunch time, Harry."

"Sure, but why do you suppose she stopped to put her mask on before she went into the building?" I saw what he meant.

The worst possible thing if you are running an operation like the Hospital, or the Prep Centre come to that, is to get locked in to too much of a routine. But I guess with the Swiss, clockwork is what you'd expect. Every two hours a nurse would come across to the outbuilding and put on her mask and go through the door. A few minutes later another one would leave. They were on turn and turn about. Nobody else seemed to be taking much interest. It didn't take too much thought to work out how we were going to get in.

There was Harry, two heavies and me. We waited until dusk. One of the heavies, grabbed the nurse as she opened the door. The other was through the door ready to deal with the nurse that was already inside. By the time I'd followed Harry through the door. One nurse was struggling in the arms of the first heavy, trying to breath with one of his arms locked around her chest and one hand across her mouth. The other, sitting beside her captive's bed, still wearing her medical mask, was staring at the barrel of our other heavy's pistol.

Angela Marchmont was on the bed, swathed from head to foot in bandages like an Egyptian mummy she couldn't move but she was able to see what was happening and put up a spirited mmmphing of welcome from behind the strapping that covered her mouth. Harry walked across to her. "We'll soon have you out of here, your Ladyship," he said. You could see the relief in her eyes. It was a shame that her rescue wasn't going to turn out quite like she was expecting.

We tied the two nurses up, gagged them, and dumped them on the bed. That's the great thing about hospitals, plenty of bandages and sticky tape around the place. They were wriggling and squealing quite a bit but I guess that was as much because of what their paymasters would be saying to them later when they found that her Ladyship was missing. We lifted Lady M onto a wheeled trolley and got her out of the building. Her captors might have been efficient at collecting her but security around the hospital was rotten. Two others of our team drove an ambulance in and around to where we were. We loaded her up and were on our way in moments. Nobody seemed bothered. Lady M seemed to think we should be letting her out of her bandages. We weren't convinced that was of any value. She started struggling around where she was laid out on the bench of the ambulance. Harry slipped a hypodermic needle into her arm and gave her a shot of sedative. It calmed her down quite quickly. Now we just had to get her back to the UK.

We got as far as the airport. We had a DH104 Dove waiting for us, one of the old Flying Doctor aircraft, ancient but robust. Harry drove the ambulance into the hangar. As he and I got out, pistol shots rang out, flattening the ambulance's tyres. Four

heavies emerged from behind the Dove. They seemed to be encouraging us to surrender our cargo. I could see that Harry was sizing up the options. I'm no professional but none of them looked good to me.

Then I heard Freddie's voice ring out. "I'm not sure that you have this situation quite as much under control as you think, Constanza."

A dark haired woman emerged from the Dove, clutching one of Harry's operatives against her as a shield and holding a gun to her head.

"I think we both need to sit down and have a talk." I followed the sound of Freddie's voice. He was standing on a gantry at the end of the hangar with three of our heavies all armed with machine pistols and another woman held at gunpoint. "It's really not a great idea if we let off firearms with all this aviation fuel around and I think we both might end up losing more than we gain."

"Can I trust you, Clegg?" the woman from the plane called.

"No, of course not. Any more than I can trust you. All we can do is to trust the other to act in their own best interests. So why don't we talk about that."

As a gesture of conciliation, Clegg came down from the gantry. The situation unwound slowly. Constanza let her captive go; Clegg released his. The heavies contrived to put their guns on safety simultaneously. Harry and I relaxed a bit. I was glad. I'd never fancied my chances in the middle of a Matrix style exchange of fire. I wasn't sure I could move that slowly.

"Your plane or mine?" asked Clegg.

"Let's use mine," said Constanza, gesturing to a Mystère that stood near the door to the hangar. "We can leave her ladyship in the ambulance until we've decided what's happening." Harry and I followed Clegg and Constanza onto the plane.

All four of us sat around the board table that took up most of the forward cabin of the Mystère. "We might as well be civilised about this," said Constanza, pressing a button on the table. "I assume you gentlemen would like a drink." Clegg nodded and we concurred.

An oriental looking girl appeared. Clad in a tight fitting grey silk cheongsam she looked slightly familiar. Constanza invited us to order drinks and the girl bowed and took her leave. It was only when she returned carrying the loaded tray that I realised she reminded me of Rebecca. I watched her closely. She gave no indication of recognition.

As she left, Constanza turned to me. "Have you met that slave girl before?" she asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "She looks very like a girl we sold as a flight attendant to one of the American buyers. She went as one of a pair. Maybe nine months ago. But she was Caucasian, not Asiatic."

Constanza laughed. "My surgeon would be flattered to hear you say that. It's probably the same girl. I bought her from Jesper. Narod Jesper, you know? He'd been using her on his aircraft but he's decided to give it up now. He's taken to the water, bought himself a very comfortable yacht, claims it's more relaxing. Less dangerous. Anyway he had two flight attendants surplus to requirements and I'd just taken delivery of the Mystère. He was keen to sell quickly. I got them cheap. I'd always wanted a Chinese slave though. Trouble is they're getting expensive. It's got worse since the Brits moved out of Hong Kong too. Still I used the money I'd saved on the purchase to have these two, let's say, adjusted to a reasonable facsimile. Slimming them down was no problem. They both needed surgical breast reduction to get the body proportions right and facial surgery as well of course. Remodelling around the eyes was the hardest and most important. Had to make their noses smaller too. Easiest was the dark wigs. I thought it worked well but I'm getting a bit bored with them. I'll probably sell them on soon. Let me know if you're interested."

"We're more interested in sorting out our current collection programme than actually taking your redundant stock off your hands, Constanza," Clegg interrupted, a touch irritably. "Can we get on with it?"

"Of course, Freddie," Constanza apologised.

"Now how are we going to sort out the question of the unfortunate lady in my ambulance?"

"Snatched from my hospital!"

"Lifted from the middle of an operation we had set up. Yes, I am sure we can both put up an excellent case for first come first served. Can I ask why you were targeting her ladyship?"

"Pure speculation on our part," Constanza admitted. "My research teams had noticed her as a possible a while back. She's over here skiing and tobogganing a lot. Almost an honorary Swiss. Speaks French, German and English. Plus a genuine milady. There's a few buyers over in the old eastern that block that cling to the idea of keeping the aristocracy in their place and would like to get something like her. And you?"

"Well she's down against a specific commission. I must admit we'd find it embarrassing to have to go back to the client. He's very much of the view that she's the ideal solution to his requirement. Perhaps I can suggest a compromise."

"Suggestions, Freddie, are always welcomed," said Constanza.

Freddie looked thoughtful for a moment. "Here's what I propose. We'll take her ladyship back with us but we'll provide you with an equivalent. British aristo, multi-lingual, physically attractive of course. We'll cover the collection costs, you cover the shipment costs from our UK Prep Centre. We'll do the prep and orientation for you at your expense if you like or you can do your own. We'll ship to any location in mainland Europe specified by you or your customer. You'll run whatever cover you had planned to divert the authorities over her ladyship's disappearance, we'll look after the diversion for whoever we pick up."

Constanza looked thoughtful. "Timescale?"

"One month not including prep if you use our research." Harry looked pained. Freddie went on. "If you want to give us one of your short list then we may have to research again. Could be longer."

"That sounds agreeable. There's no particular need for us to have Marchmont specifically. I'll trust your taste in women, Clegg. We'd intended to ship from the UK originally."

"Yes, we know. We nearly trod on the toes of your team at Marchmont Hall."

"Except that she got out before either of us turned up."

"Ha!" said Clegg. "Bloody product. Can't rely on it until you've got the ropes on the wrists." He picked up his glass. "Can I take it we're agreed?"

"Yes," said Constanza. "In fact I'd like to talk to you about some other UK pick-ups we need. It might make more sense for you to do them rather than us."

"Well let's talk about it," said Clegg. "You've got better access to the Eastern European markets than we have. I'm sure there could be areas for cooperation."

Clegg was insufferable on the flight back, telling Harry how he should get out on operations more but in some ways I was happy to see it. He always seemed better in the thick of things than working his way through the office politics. I could see Harry wasn't happy with the idea that Freddie might get more involved in the sharp end but at least Freddie didn't seem too worried about the things that had gone wrong. Harry had told me about the post mortem he was planning when we got back. I guessed that Freddie would let him get on with it.

I was glad things were working out. It meant I could get back and see how Rachel was.

Chapter 59 : Staples' Diet

Steve Glennis was extremely happy when we finally got Lady Marchmont shipped across to him. As he said, "It's taken a while but it's been worth the wait." He hadn't wasted any time in putting her to use. "Had her out on a trotting rig this afternoon," he said. She looks pretty good. Gonna take a lot of training of course, she's got a few stripes on her buttocks but she'll learn."

Rachel was recovering. The Doc finally let me in to see her. She held my hand tightly when I sat down beside her on the bed. "It happened again."

"I know, Rachel. The doctor thinks she's isolated the cause. It was lucky we caught you in time."

Rachel nodded quietly. "I was frightened," she said. "It was just like the first time, but worse somehow."

Yes, I thought, this time it was real.

"But I'm much better now. I want to get back to work. It's so important. I know you need the script and you know I want to finish it. I thought I could do the voice over. If you'd like me to? Please let me. I'll be well enough."

"We'll see." I wasn't at all sure.

The Doc was looking encouraging. "If you feel strong enough, Rachel," she said, "I'm sure we can do that. It will be better for you to have something to focus on."

Rachel smiled and nodded. "How's Sukie?" she asked.

"She was very worried about you," I said. "She cares a lot for you. She was so sorry - it was her cake that did this."

Rachel nodded slowly. "I didn't mean to scare her. Or you. I don't know why I've suddenly developed this condition. I'll just have to be careful about what I eat I guess."

"No more walnuts, at least," said the Doc. Rachel grinned.

"Now when can I get back to my exercises? I'm missing them so much? I need to be doing them every day at least. And what are we doing about the owner's programme when can we get started on that?"

"Hey," I said. "Let's take the recovery slowly. Finish the script for the buyer's event. Do the voice over if you're well enough. Start back on exercises when the Doc says it's OK and we'll think about the rest after that. OK?"

Rachel smiled. "Thank you, Sir," she said. "I'm sure that very thing is going to be fine."

I thought she was probably right.

While Rachel recovered we were able to pick up one of the others on my short list as a substitute for delivery to Constanza. The upper classes are such free-loaders they're always easy to entice into somewhere that they can be introduced to a few lengths of rope and a strip or two of tape. The Honourable Diana Staples was no exception. Invited to a luncheon with the proposition that there might be an opportunity for her to act as a celebrity reviewer of restaurants for a new, up-market, leisure magazine, she jumped at the chance. I guess she figured if nothing else she'd get a good meal out of it and the chance to get some very expensive champagne down her neck.

The only trouble is champagne is one of the easiest wines in which to conceal something. Let's say something even more relaxing than champagne usually is. Especially when you're into your second bottle.

The hotel was very accommodating. Could they provide a room for our guest to sleep things off? Of course! Would they make sure she wasn't disturbed? Naturally. Would they be happy if we settled the bill for that straight away so that she wouldn't be caused any embarrassment later? Without any difficulty.

The collection team knew she'd be out for hours. They slipped in and took her out the back way in the early morning. We were all discussing the problems of running a restaurant like this with the manager, a perfect alibi if anyone was concerned.

As it happened they weren't. Everyone assumed that she'd wandered off, still drunk. Of course finding her clothes by the river did make them all think she'd gone for a late night swim. It wasn't really a surprise that nothing was found of her, it being so close to the sea and everything. And in her state, who knows what might have happened to her?

Well we did. And of course she wouldn't be needing her clothes anytime soon, so it all worked out very conveniently. Constanza decided she wanted to do her own prep work, so the Honourable Diana was crated and shipped as quick as you like.

It suited Freddie; he doesn't like leaving debts outstanding for long.

The hospitality event for the buyers turned out OK. We decided to give it a bit of a Kushtian theme with the entertainments wearing Kushtian headdresses and veils, if nothing else. Probably not very authentic but I doubt if it mattered given the audience. Certainly our guests seemed to appreciate it as the almost naked girls brought the food in at dinner time. We'd

started off with Elly's talk. It was pretty well received. She even managed a few jokes although I guess purchasing guys aren't usually that long on humour. We had a break after that to give them a chance to mingle with one another and with some of our team. Then it had been back into the presentation theatre for Rachel's video.

She'd done a first rate job. After the opening titles and the Clegg logo, a caption screen had come up saying...."This is the story of how two slaves came to their present position. How Clegg Enterprises identifies, acquires and prepares its products." It moved into a section on research with Rachel providing the commentary. "We build a complete picture, carefully researching every aspect of their lives." The film moved on to a shaky, grainy, black and white shot of women walking in to a rather bland, modern building. "Fulchester University", the caption said, "Women's Issues Group Meeting". The camera was obviously held by somebody walking up to the building, perhaps concealed in a handbag. As the camera approached the building some of the women turned towards whoever was carrying the camera to wave and greet them.

The camera carrier took a seat halfway down the room. The picture zoomed shakily in to the podium at the front of the room. A woman in her mid-forties, wearing dungarees and a scarf knotted around her neck took the stage and waved to the audience. "Welcome Sisters," she said with a wave to the audience. "Thank you for turning out to support this meeting. It's great to see such a good crowd here. As you know one of our concerns has been to explore the condition of women in the countries emerging from the Russian empire and I'm very pleased to be able to welcome distinguished anthropologist and champion of many feminist causes, Dr Karen Armstrong." There was a round of applause as Dr Armstrong took the stage. I was trying to remember where I'd heard of Armstrong before.

Dressed comfortably in tan slacks and a loose sweater she smiled appreciatively, obviously completely at home presenting to an academic audience. "Dr Armstrong has recently returned from Kushtia where she has been researching the condition of women in the northern tribes. Her articles for Anthropology Today and National Geographic have highlighted the challenges that exist in bringing a more enlightened view of women's rights to the country. I'm sure she has a fascinating presentation for us..." As Karen stepped up to the rostrum, the camera swung around to point back up the hall towards the door. Two girls were arriving late. The camera tracked them, watching as they took their seat a couple of rows behind where the camera was. The camera zoomed in on each in turn, both blonde, both in their early twenties, one a little fuller figured than the other, both smiling and waving to the camera holder, though not, you thought, to the camera. More hidden camera footage followed. The girls in the university canteen; sitting outside one of the university buildings; getting onto bicycles and cycling out of shot. There was a shot from the viewpoint of someone working their way through a darkened office by the light of a flash light, the light stopped on a filing cabinet drawer, the drawer opened, a gloved hand rummaged through a series of files and pulled two out, leafing through their contents. "Student Record" each said on the front cover. The camera lingered on some of the documents, they were obviously being studied. The files were put back in the drawer and the drawer closed. The light of the flashlight moved back through the office, panning across a desk with a notice on it saying "Admissions Secretary". As it got to the door it fell on the bound ankles of a woman. The light moved up the woman showing her laying on the floor, hogtied, gagged and blindfolded, struggling impotently beside a ransacked office safe as whoever was carrying it left the office.

Rachel's voice returned on the soundtrack. "... And that research is directed to one thing, an efficient, undetected collection that does the least possible damage to the goods with the least risk to ourselves and, of course, our clients." The shot dissolved to a country scene, with fields and woods, as the camera turned a lake came into view. From out of shot, one of the girl's bicycles came freewheeling down across the field, with no one to guide it, the bike shot over a low bank and into the lake sinking quickly beneath the surface. The second bicycle followed it moments later and the camera panned around to the figures of the two girls, laying on the grass, their wrists taped behind them, tape plastered across their faces as a gag. Evidently distressed, the two were wriggling in an attempt to escape from their bonds.

There were a few chortles of appreciation from the audience as the girls wriggled some more.

Rachel's voice over came on again. "Collection is followed by training, the preparation that makes the new slaves ready for their new owners." The view changed to some footage shot in one of the Prep Centre's reception rooms. The two girls were sitting bound and gagged on the floor. A figure appeared and was heard to say, "Good morning, ladies. Please don't be alarmed. You are perfectly safe here as long as you do as you are told." The girls looked puzzled. "Perhaps I should explain," the voice said. "You are here to be trained as slaves. You'll be sold for the sexual amusement of your new owners." The girls looked at one another, wide eyed with disbelief and terror. "But as long as you do as you are told you'll be quite safe." He reached forward stripping off the gags of each girl in turn and then rolling them over on to their faces to cut the tapes that held their wrists and ankles.

"Please let us go," the first girl said, "we'll be no use to you. Please let us go."

"Yes, we won't say anything. Please," the second one chimed in, clinging to her friend as the two of them sat on the floor.

"You," the voice said to one of them, ignoring the girls' pleas. "On your feet." The girl looked back uncertain what to do. The man reached towards her with a short pole, touching her on the ankle. The girl cried in pain and drew her leg quickly back. "This will give you a shock every time I think you are not obeying me quickly enough. That was a mild one. Get to your feet!"

The girl looked more frightened than ever, clutched her ankle and slowly got to her feet, standing unsteadily with the pain in her leg.

"Good," said the man. "Now undress." The girl's hands flew to her mouth. She shook her head in defiance. The other girl shouted, "No, we won't." and was rewarded with a shock from the wand for her trouble; obviously a sharper one that threw her back across the room. The man turned towards the first girl with the prod. She shook her head again – this time the look in her eyes was begging the man to come no closer. She pulled off her sweater to reveal a slim figure with small breasts. She unbuckled her belt and stepped out of her jeans. "Keep going," the man said, gesturing with the pole. She looked down at her

companion sobbing as she pulled off first her bra and then finally her pants. She tried to cover herself one hand across her crotch the other at her breasts. The man shook his head and gestured with the pole. She dropped her hands to her sides.

The audience gave a raucous cheer.

"By the wall," the man waved her over with the pole and turned to her companion. "You next. Do the same." She only needed the threat of the pole to encourage her to her feet and to begin stripping. Slightly more heavily built than her friend with bigger, fuller breasts with large aureolas, her nakedness on the video earned a bigger cheer.

Rachel's voice returned as the two girls were herded to one side of the cell, hands on their heads, feet slightly apart. "And so their training begins. A long process, taking weeks." The man kept them under threat of the prod with one hand while running his free hand over their bodies, feeling their breasts and bellies. "And at the end – compliant slaves read for use in sexual roles, for domestic tasks or for what ever purpose their eventual owner desires."

I took my cue from the script that Rachel had provided. As the film flickered to its conclusion, I stepped onto the low stage, leading two slaves by chains to their neck collars. Each of the two were naked except for their veils and head-dresses. The eyes, heavily made up, kohl rimmed, lashes long and thick with mascara, peered out over their veils at the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I said. "You've seen how we acquire and prepare our products. For the rest of the evening, we'd like you to sample them." I jerked the veils from the two girls, revealing them as the girls from the video. The audience cheered again. The girls looked nervous but did not resist as I led them down into the body of the room. Six others were brought in at the same time, enough for each of our guest to have their own slave for a few hours. They all seemed willing to take advantage of our hospitality and the girl's availability.

It was late before the event finished and our guests retired. Rachel and Sukie were waiting for me in the suite that Brad had arranged for us. The Doc had been happy enough with Rachel's progress to let her come down provided that Sukie took care of her. Sukie had been grateful for the chance to be together with her friend again. They had obviously already been playing together, straps and handcuffs lay on the bed, Sukie was wearing a bright green strap-on that they'd borrowed from the Sexualisation programme. Rachel was kneeling up on the bed, naked and smiling. "How did it go? How was the video? Did it work?"

"It was fine," I said. "They enjoyed it. It had the effect we wanted. Feed back from the buyers is that they hadn't realised that there was so much in what we did, which is a result as far as we're concerned. Well done Rachel, the video made a big difference. But how are you?"

"Fine," she said, "I'm fine. And so is Sukie. Aren't you?" Sukie nodded bashfully. Rachel smiled happily and clapped her hands. "And are we going to play now?"

"Why not?" I said, "I think I've earned some fun today." And the three of us fell together.

Chapter 60 : Ownership 101

"Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to this first session of our training programme."

It had fallen to me to kick off the first of the Slave Owners 101 as it had come to be called. We'd converted a wing of the Sales Centre to provide some lecture rooms and a couple of rooms for practical work as well of course as the cells to provide secure accommodation for our "training aids".

We'd brought together a group of five for this first session. Freddie had canvassed some of our existing customers and got them to recommend people. Two of our trainees were members of the family of existing owners, one had just bought their first slave, the two others were prospective owners, using the course as a way of seeing how slave owning would work out for them.

Rachel had worked on the programme with some of the guys from Rick's operations team. We'd put together some sessions that covered tools of the trade, security, discipline and training, slave welfare, and (not unnaturally) buying and selling.

The group were pretty attentive as I ran through the schedule. All of them looked enthusiastic when I said that we aimed to spend as little time as possible in the classroom; we wanted them to have as much practical experience as possible, I said, and there were rooms equipped so that each of them would have their own one-on-one slave handling sessions.

We introduced them to the five slaves that they would be working with, Beth, Ella, Carol, Alice and Sarah too. It was good to have the two older women and two youngsters as a mix, plus of course there was a real benefit in having Sarah who wasn't as compliant as the other four that had been through the programme. We aimed to move the slaves around between the students so that they'd all get a chance to work with each of them.

Having told them about what we planned to cover, I handed over to one of Rick's teams to kick off the session on security. He started off by writing the on one of the flip charts. "There Are Only Two Things You Have To Remember About Security." He turned back to the audience. "Does anyone want to take a guess?"

The audience managed to look both blank and interested. He turned back to the board and started writing again. "1. You have to be lucky all the time. 2. The slave only has to be lucky once."

The audience gave a laugh. He launched into his talk. "This is all about how you make sure that your slaves don't get lucky," he said, "and how you can make sure that you don't have to be quite as lucky as you might think."

I left them to it. Rachel was waiting when I got back to the apartment. She had just emerged from the shower. "You just missed the Doc," she said.

"What did she say? Is she happy with how your doing? I mean you seem fine to me now, but..."

"I'm fine," said Rachel, "completely OK. She say's I can go back onto the programme from tonight." I looked concerned. "It's fine, Sir, really. This second attack just made me more determined. I am not going to let anything stand in my way. I'm doing a good job aren't I? The buyer's conference went well, didn't it? The training course will be good too, just wait and see."

"But do you need to do more of the programme?"

"Don't be silly," she said chiding. "Of course. I have to finish the whole thing. You wouldn't want me to turn around and whack you again like I did the first time I had the chance, would you?" She giggled, recalling her escape attempt when she had first been brought to the centre.

I smiled ruefully in response, remembering the lump that the keyboard had raised on the back of my head, not to mention the embarrassment of being found hogtied with computer cables and a mouse jammed in my mouth as a gag. "Not at all. You'd better get off to the training room straight away then. I much prefer the current Rachel."

"Yes," she said gathering up her things. "So do I."

I watched her go. As I turned back I saw that Sukie had come into the room. I hadn't heard her. "She is going to be alright, isn't she?" Sukie said.

I could see she looked worried. I took her in my arms. "Sukie, I'm sure she's going to be fine." Sukie put her head against my shoulder, her long black hair spilling down behind my back. "The Doc's going to do a battery of allergy sensitivity tests so we'll know what to look out for in future. And she'll have a crash medical kit to keep with her. It wasn't anything you did. We were lucky it happened here where the Doc was on hand. Imagine if it had happened to Rachel somewhere that she was on her own."

Sukie sniffed back a tear. She lifted up her head and nodded. "Thank you," she said. "Can I do anything for you? Some tea? Or," she smiled, "some play?"

I looked down into her almond eyes. Her offer was tempting. I ran my hand down the soft smoothness of the hair that framed her face. "It will have to be tea for now," I said. "I have to do some more work for the training course, and I don't intend to deliver a session on advanced sexual debauchery with you as a training aid."

Sukie giggled. "We'll keep that for in here," she said. "I'll bring you some tea."

I spent about an hour working to put the final touches on my session on buying and selling slaves and then went down to see how the others were getting on.

The "Introduction to Security" session had finished and the students were just getting back after a coffee break. They had evidently found the first session interesting to listen to their chatter as they returned to the training room. Another of Rick's team was waiting for them. On the flip chart at the front of the room. "Bondage Tools – Equipment Range & Uses".

The session started with a question intended to get the audience thinking. "All right," said the trainer, "what is bondage for?"

This time the students looked truly bemused. "Well, you've got to stop them wandering off haven't you? I mean we've been through all that in the session on security, haven't we?"

"True," said the instructor, "but is that all?" He wasn't getting any real response. "OK," he said. "I'd like to suggest to you that there are three basic roles that bondage will play in your slave-keeping. First is secure restraint; your point," he gestured to the student that had made the suggestion. "But there are two others. The second is punishment. You'll find that the threat of punitive restraint can have a significant deterrent value in maintaining discipline. Would anyone like to try for the third purpose?"

"Well, it's quite good fun," the same student advanced, gaining nods of approval from his colleagues.

"Absolutely," said the trainer. "That's the third purpose. Amusement. After all, if you are not enjoying the use of your slaves, there really isn't a lot of point to it. Don't ever lose sight of that." He wrote the three words – Restraint, Punishment, Pleasure – on the board and walked over to the door to the room. "Now let's have a look at a selection of devices and discuss just how we might use each of them in each of those scenarios." He opened the door and led in Beth, Ella, Carol, Alice and Sarah, each secured and gagged in different ways, the four of them joined one to the other by chains that linked their clave collars. Apart from the various bondage devices they were all naked. The trainer brought forward each of the girls in turn, asking the participants to call out the bondage items that they recognised.

"Yes, ball gag, pretty much the general purpose silencer. Good yes, that's a single arm binder as you say or sometimes called a bondage sleeve. This – yes a discipline collar or corset collar. This one's is quite an extreme version the turnbuckle here can be extended to push the chin up and the head back. These are bondage mittens and this is a ring gag – very definitely in the category of punitive restraint, that one I would say, although you might feel that it has its amusements too."

He carried on working along the line of girls. Even with their conditioning as a result of the programme Beth and Ella were obviously unhappy with being displayed in this way but as far as the tutor was concerned this just added to the student's experience. Beth was wearing a rubber straight jacket and a hood with large ring shaped panels over the eyes. The instructor wrestled a reluctant Beth to the front.

"This hood is particularly effective," he said. "You'll have noticed that it keeps the slave reasonably quiet but a nice feature is these goggles. They are equipped with two polarised lenses. You can simply rotate the outer lenses and the slave is immediately rendered unable to see." He demonstrated. Beth became even more distressed as the polarised glass cut off her sight. Her muffled grunts of complaint served only to show that the instructor had been right about the hood's gagging qualities.

My mobile phone buzzed. I picked it up. Steve Glennis was calling. I stepped out from the training room to take the call. "Hi, Steve," I said.

"Hi," he said. "The line was a bit crackly, I guessed he was calling from the island. Maybe out by the pool or down on the beach. Suddenly I felt like a holiday. "Just wanted to give you a heads up on my new driver."

I guessed he was talking about Lady Marchmont. "I hope she's doing all right for you."

"Very good, very good. Firstly thanks for sending over her details and everything. Meant I could get the right gear for her. She's looking real cute in this English riding habit, top hat, veil and everything, hair done up at the back in one of those little nets, looks like she'd win a mention for turn out in a dressage competition all on her own."

"Great," I said.

"And when it comes to driving she's real aggressive. Drives a rig like her motor bike or one of those bob-sleigh things. She's certainly exercising the ponies."

Steve was obviously pretty pleased. "Well, don't let her wear them out," I said.

"No sir! No danger of that. Anyway I just thought I'd give you a call. I'm gonna take her up to the house now see if she's as willing in the bedroom." I heard a muffled squeal in the background. Her Ladyship, evidently gagged, was presumably in earshot. "I've suddenly got an urge to push that skirt up over her hips and sink myself into a British upper class cunt." There was another squeal. Lady M was obviously having an impact on Steve, I couldn't remember him ever being so crude in the past.

"Have fun," I said. He hung up.

Chapter 61 : True Romance

I was glad to be able to duck out of the training course for a while. It was obviously going well but I've never seen myself as a natural teacher. Besides, I'd promised to meet up with Brad.

The lounge of the Emir's castle was every bit as luxurious as I remembered it. I was sat comfortably on one of large leather sofas when the Emir emerged from another room and strode across to greet me, hand outstretched.

"Hey, Larry," he boomed. "Good to see you. Been too long."

I got to my feet and shook his hand. "Yeah, well, we've all been busy and I guess you have too."

"Always busy, Larry, always busy. You know that. Not going to build a trade network over here without plenty of work." He sat down in one of the armchairs. I took my place back on the sofa.

"So, how's it going? The trade network?"

"Yeah, OK. Some of your British companies don't seem to have worked out the benefits of exporting yet but we're getting there. Too many of them think that Kushtia is some kind of third-world economy and they might never get paid."

"Can't you do anything to reassure them?"

"Well it's difficult. There's some government help on credit guarantee but that's not the tack we're taking. We're spending more effort on convincing them that the risks are worthwhile; that the benefits outstrip the potential problems. The castle here has been a great help for that. I've got a couple of directors from a defence contractor enjoying a little Kushtian style hospitality in the castle keep at the moment. The two little Dutch dykes are putting on a show for them and they've got a couple of girls in traditional Kushtian costume who have been told that they had better see that these guys have a really good time. That seems to be helping."

I smiled. "I guess that kind of thing always helps to oil the wheels."

"Yeah, but it's more like baby oil than Brent Crude," Brad grinned. "It's an uphill struggle, though. I'm not sure whether the benefits are enough to let us keep this place open in the long term."

"That would be a shame," I said.

Brad shrugged, "Things will work out one way or another. Don't worry, I don't see our requirements for your products reducing any. Hey and thanks for advice on the National Geographic article – the fuss died down soon enough apart from one thing which I want to talk to you about. That's later though. I wanted to ask you a favour."

"Happy to help if I can," I said.

"Well, here's the thing. Lauren's getting married."

"Terrific," I said. "You must be very proud. I'd like to congratulate her."

"Ah, well. That's a bit of the problem. She doesn't actually know yet. The Kushtian way is more, like, well, arranged than over here. The girl doesn't get to choose like they do over here. And with me now working for the Ministry of Trade, I sort of have to do things the traditional way."

I could imagine that Lauren wouldn't be too impressed with the idea. "Still," I said, "I'm told a lot of arranged marriages work out well. They just have to work at getting to know one another after the wedding."

"Yeah, well, I guess so." Brad seemed embarrassed by the whole thing. "I mean I didn't really get to know her mother until after we were married. Who'd have thought she'd be the whoring, vengeful, shrew she turned out to be." He gave a wry smile. "It's just that Lauren's bridegroom-to-be probably wouldn't have been her first choice. He's one of the leaders of the Hill Tribes, from way up in the north eastern highlands. Even in Kushtia they're considered a bit, well, backward. He's an old friend of my father's and he has just been asked to become part of the Governing Council."

"Good move for you," I said. "and Lauren will probably think the whole hill top chief thing incredibly romantic."

"Oh yes, it's a good thing from my perspective," Brad responded. "Definitely. But I'm not sure Lauren will get the romantic bit. He's quite, he's not, well, really her generation. There's a bit of an age gap."

"How bad?"

"Sixty."

"Hey, I know a lot of sixty year old guys. They're still able to give a girl a good time. She shouldn't worry."

"No, not sixty years old. A sixty year gap. He's 78. And after 78 years in the Kushtian highlands you tend to get a bit grizzled."

"Hmm, I see what you mean. I'm not sure how I can help, though."

"Well, I'm not sure Lauren's going to be real happy with the idea of going back to Kushtia with her new husband. I think Freddie said you guys have some great transport arrangements for less than willing travellers."

I thought back to my first visit to the Prep Centre when Rick had shown me the despatch area and the way they used adapted cargo containers to air-freight product long haul. "Yeah, sure. We have these high class crates."

"Well, I'd like to borrow one. Plus a bit of professional help to get Lauren crated up and safe for transport. Just, sort of, if things don't work out when we tell her about going to Kushtia."

"And when does that happen?"

"Just after we announce the engagement."

From what I'd seen of Lauren I was pretty sure the crate would be needed. "I'm sure we can help," I said.

"Terrific," said Brad. "Let's hope we don't need it. Now, come and meet my future son-in-law."

I hadn't realised that Lauren's husband-to-be was already here but I was happy to follow Brad down to meet him. He was sitting down in the bar beside the castle's pool, dividing his attention between the wide screen TV and the girls swimming and diving in the pool. As he saw Brad and I approaching he got to his feet. He was short, bald, and weather beaten with skin the colour and texture of a walnut. He gave a phlegm laden cough.

"Larry, this is Kushnati Koresh, one of the Kushtian Council elders. Mr Koresh; Larry." Kushnati Koresh nodded.

"Mr Koresh, I'm delighted." He coughed again and wheezed, leaning forward on his stick. The three of us sat down. One of the girls brought us some drinks from the bar. It soon became obvious that Mr Koresh spoke hardly any English.

"Are you enjoying your stay here?" I asked, slowly.

"Arrgn," he said with a smile that showed a mouth half filled with yellowed teeth. I took that for a "yes".

"I expect that the countryside here is greener than you own home land?"

"Arrgn," came the reply with another smile, this time accompanied by a hearty belch and a smell of soured yak's milk that took my mind straight back to roadside food stalls that I'd carefully avoided in Kolin.

We hadn't been sat down long when Lauren appeared, slouching along beside the pool. She peered at the three of us, blew a bubble of gum and then came over. Ignoring me and Mr Koresh, she spoke to her father. "I need to borrow the car."

"Lauren," Brad said, "say hello to Mr Koresh and Larry."

"Yeah. Sure. Hi. Whatever." She gave us a perfunctory wave. "Can I get the car keys?"

Brad fumbled in his pocket. "They're in my jacket. I'll come and find them." He got to his feet.

"Great," said Lauren. "Sorry to drag you away from the gimmers." She smiled at us and stalked off.

Brad got up. "What can you do?" He shrugged his shoulders and followed his daughter.

Kushnati Koresh watched the two of them go. "Arrgn. Much to manage," he said in a heavily accented voice. "But worth it."

"I am sure she will make an excellent wife, Mr Koresh," I said.

"Arrgn". He reached inside his jacket and pulled a stained brown envelop from it. He pressed it into my hand and mimed to me that I should open it.

Inside, written in a carefully printed hand it said. "My father has asked me to write this as he does not speak English so well. He would like your help with a problem."

I was getting used to being asked for help. The letter went on. "As part of an engagement it is usual for the bridegroom to present the father of the bride with some item of value to show his sound position and suitability as a husband for the daughter. I think the Emir has a great enthusiasm for young ladies and losing his daughter will be a blow of course. I think my gift should go some way to softening that blow. I want you to find a special girl. Someone that would bring the Emir great pleasure and compensate for the sadness he will feel in losing his daughter."

I thought about the tantrums and temper that I had seen from Lauren and felt pretty comfortable with the idea of finding a girl that would offer some compensation. "Leave it with me," I said, tucking the paper and the envelop in my pocket. "I'm sure that a suitable gift can be found."

"Arrgn," responded Mr Koresh, "

Brad reappeared "So are you going to be able to join us for the happy party?" he said. "We're aiming to confirm the engagement on the 20th. I hope that you and Mr Clegg will be able to join us."

"We would be delighted," I said, but it didn't give me much time to come up with Mr Koresh's present to the Emir.

"I'll get my PA to see to the details." Brad pressed a button on a remote control handset. There was a squeal from an adjacent room and a woman came teetering in on stilt high heels. To my surprise it wasn't Cindy. "Neat device, this," said Brad waving the remote. "Press the button, she gets a little shock in her knickers and knows to come running." The woman looked embarrassed rather than annoyed.

"Is Cindy not helping out in the office?" I asked.

"Nah," said Brad. "I wanted to talk to you about that. Would you believe my lord and master back in Kushtia took a fancy to her and had me ship her out there. Very pleased with her he was but it's left me short handed. This is one of the girls you shipped down as part of the domestic staff. Turns out she used to be a PA, so I switched her for Cindy. She's not as cute but she's OK," The girl looked embarrassed, "Trouble is, Lauren wanted to carry on having use of Cindy but I couldn't fight the top man could I? Letting my daughter have the use of Cindy had kept Lauren off my back which was sort of handy. Only trouble is Mr Koresh needs a companion while he's here and he quite liked the look of Cindy – don't you?"

"Arrgn," said Kushnati Koresh with another toothy grin and a yak's milk laden belch.

"I don't suppose I could rent that Sarah girl again, could I?"

I said I'd see what I could do.

A squeal of tyres and crunching of gears from outside indicated that Lauren was on her way. Brad grimaced at the sound of tortured automobile. "You know, sometimes, I wish that my daughter was a little more dainty. She spends all her time in jeans and swears like a long-shore man. But what can you do?"

As Brad looked towards the window, I wasn't certain if he was more worried for his daughter or his car. What I did notice, sitting in his open briefcase, was a copy of the fetish magazine *Second Skin*. On the cover was a picture of a well endowed, well corseted, young lady and the title "Burlesque Special : Newcomer Hettie Van Voom". I nodded towards the picture. "Perhaps you were hoping for something more like that?" I said.

"Ain't she something!" exclaimed Brad. "A bit different from Lauren, wouldn't you say?"

"Hmm," I agreed, leafing through the magazine at Brad's invitation. "I don't think Lauren could manage those heels with her trademark slouch."

"And that much make-up wouldn't go well with her scowl either," Brad laughed.

It was all good fun but now I had a really good idea for Kushnati's present. The only trouble was I wasn't sure we could get things in line before the 20th. And Brad still hadn't told me what the "one thing" was concerning the National Geographic article.

Chapter 62 : Practical Slave Keeping

When I got back to the Prep Centre the Owner's Course was in its final sessions. I looked in on one of the practical sessions through the viewing panel. The trainee was sitting in an armchair as Sarah appeared in the room.

"You sent for me, Sir," she said.

The trainee looked uncomfortable. "Yes, err, slave," he said, "I did."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"What was it you wanted, Sir?" Sarah said, trying to be helpful.

"Err, oh, err, yes," he was fumbling with some papers, obviously his notes from the earlier sessions. "Ah, yes. Naked. Can you take your clothes off, slave? I want to see you naked."

Uncharacteristically, Sarah looked back blankly at him. I remembered that for some of the sessions Sarah was supposed to act 'difficult'.

The trainee seemed non-plussed by her lack of response. He got to his feet. "Come on girl, get on with it. Take those clothes off. All of them. Now!" he blustered. "You're supposed to do as you are told, aren't you? Why won't you do as I say?"

Sarah stood still, staring blankly ahead of herself.

"What am I supposed to do to get you to do as you are told?" The man was looking around him in confusion. "You're a slave. Do as you are told! Now!"

"I don't want to, Sir. I don't like taking my clothes off. It's not nice of you to ask me."

"Not nice! Not NICE! What's nice got to do with it? Look just do as you are told, will you?"

"No, Sir, I don't want to do that."

The man sank back into his seat, holding his head in his hands. "Oh this is hopeless," he said. "I'm never going to be able to cope with this."

Sarah walked across and knelt beside him. "Oh, it's not so difficult," she said sympathetically. "Look, you just have to be firmer with the slave, more decisive. Threaten to punish them. Actually punish them if necessary. You remember the acronym don't you? GRIP? Get a GRIP?"

"Oh, yes," the man looked more cheerful. "Yes, GRIP. G – Give clear orders, R – Repeat to make sure they are understood, I – Insist that they are obeyed and threaten if necessary, P – Punish if they aren't." He got to his feet again, pulling himself up to his full height. "Right, let's see. You! Get undressed. Now. Straight away. Take off that blouse immediately and then the skirt. Do it girl!"

Sarah got to her feet, seeing that he was being much more decisive than before. She still wasn't hurrying to comply though.

"Haven't you understood? Let me say it again. Take. Off. Your. Clothes. That's not complicated is it?"

"No, Sir, but.."

"Don't answer back, I don't want to hear another word from you until you are naked. You'll obey me now," he said getting into his stride, "and if you don't you'll be beaten." He pulled a stick from the selection on the wall of the training room and tapped it on Sarah's arm. "Come on, unbutton that blouse." Sarah still delayed. The tap became a blow and then another on the other arm. Now Sarah started to work at the buttons of her blouse. "That's better," he said growing in confidence. "Keep going." Another tap followed as soon as Sarah showed any sign of slowing. She unfastened the cuffs of the blouse and pulled it off. "Better," the man said. "Now the skirt and be quick about it." More taps to the arm encouraged Sarah to unfasten the waistband of her skirt and to unzip it, letting it fall to the floor around her ankles. "That's not enough. Bra and panties next. Get on with it." This time the blow from the cane was heavier and came down on her thighs.

"Oww," yelped Sarah in genuine pain, "that hurt."

"Of course it did, slave. That's why you should do as you are told more quickly. Naked, I said and quickly." Now Sarah did as she was ordered and was soon standing before the man, naked except for the collar that she as all slaves in the centre, wore all the time. "That's better he said. "Now get over to the wall. Over to the wall. Face it. Hands on your head. That's right. And stand up straight girl or you'll be beaten again. Understand?"

"Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir." Said Sarah compliantly, obeying the man at once.

As Sarah reached the wall, the door at the far side of the room opened and one of the trainers came in. "Well," he said, "how did that feel?"

"Ah, well," said the man, "not too bad. In the end. Bit of a shaky start, I suppose but OK once I got the hang of it."

"Hmm," said the trainer. "Well remember the 'get a GRIP' acronym – that will help. OK let's go back to the main room now. Slave," he called across to the naked Sarah, "get dressed and that will be all for now."

"Yes, Sir," she said, continuing to stand with her hands on her head until they had left the room. I wandered around so that I would catch her once she had finished dressing.

She was still fastening her blouse as I came into the room. She stopped and looked up.

"That's all right, Sarah," I said. "Carry on." She returned to buttoning her blouse. "How did the training sessions go?"

"Umm, OK, I think? Some of the trainees seem to have caught on quite quickly. Some of the others are finding it a bit harder."

"So I saw."

"Oh," Sarah went on. "I wanted to thank you." I looked puzzled. "I think you saved me from being shipped off to that awful Emir's castle. I'd be there now if I wasn't doing this, wouldn't I?" I nodded. "Well it's a relief. I hadn't meant to upset Harry but I was concerned about Cindy, even though she turned out to be horrible to me about it but I couldn't have faced going back there with that dreadful torture chamber and that awful girl Lauren and ..."

Sarah's monologue was interrupted by the arrival of one of the guards with a trolley, straps and gag.

Sarah giggled. "You don't need that. I know my way back to my cell," she said.

The guard looked at me. I nodded. He grabbed a protesting Sarah and wrestled her onto the trolley before strapping her on to it. "What's going on?" she asked as he fastened the buckles on the straps around her wrists and pulled others across her ankles, her knees her waist and chest. "Please. What is it?" The guard held up a choice of gags, the standard ball gag or a thicker plug gag set in a leather strap that in was held in place by a head harness that locked in place. She was going to be cross when I told her what was going on. I pointed to the plug and strap gag.

By the time that was fastened in place she was struggling against the straps and grunting animatedly.

"I'm sorry that you didn't enjoy the Castle, Sarah," I said. "It's just that you're going off there for a while." Her muffled squeals took on a more intense tone. "Just for rental, nothing permanent." More squeals. "I'm sure Lauren won't be too bad. Or the other girls." Sarah was shaking her head. The guard seeing the problem fastened a strap across her forehead to stop any risk of her hurting herself. Her squeals of protest didn't abate.

The guard reached into his pocket and pulled out a sheet of paper. "Transport authorisation," he said. "Are you signing it?"

I nodded, took it from him, scribbled my autograph on it and handed it back.

"Thanks," he said. "The truck's waiting." And with that he wheeled the still protesting Sarah away.

Chapter 63 : *Fetish Un Fair*

As it happened things worked out very well on timing for Brad. It allowed us to collect the present for the Emir just in time and without any of that difficult business of trying to cover up what you are doing. It's not often you can abduct a woman in broad daylight to the applause of a surrounding crowd.

Harry's team set things up. We found out that Hettie Van Voom was featuring at a forthcoming fetish fair, helping launch a new range of corsetry by compéring their catwalk show at the event. I put my "PR expert" hat on. We convinced the company that they'd get extra attention if a Hettie was "arrested" at the end of the show and taken away by a group of corset clad dominas. They thought it was an excellent plan. Hettie, they assured us, was a game girl; she'd be happy to go along with it. We said we could supply the ideal girls to do it. They agreed to let us have the costumes.

Tricia, Eva and a couple of others from Harry's team weren't so easy to convince. "We're going to be wearing WHAT?" said Tricia, when the idea was first mooted. "This is just some way you and Harry can get your rocks off, isn't it?"

I tried to reassure her but she didn't sound as though she really believed me. It was only after Harry had run through the whole plan and the background to Hettie, the target, that she agreed to do it.

I got to the fair in plenty of time. After my encounters with Kelly it was interesting to see what an industry had sprung up around the needs and wants of the fetish crowd. I was looking on one stand at a selection of bondage toys that showed every bit as much ingenuity as some of the things in Rick's Prep Centre when I saw her. Kelly was talking animatedly with a couple of other girls, all three dressed in black PVC Basques, high heels and stockings as they wandered between the stands. I didn't think it was smart to get spotted, given what we had planned for later, so I slipped away behind the stand, backing into the one place where I could be confident she wouldn't find me; the gents washroom. I gave her a few minutes to get clear and then emerged. Luckily she'd gone.

I joined the throng of people around the stage as the corsetry fashion show was about to start. The company's sales manager was doing his initial chat but after only a few moments he said, "And now ladies, gentlemen, slaves and masters or mistresses, devotees of the bizarre and fetish enthusiasts, please welcome the sensational Hettie Van Voom!"

The crowd applauded wildly. Hettie walked out dressed in a 1950's style shirt waister dress with a widely flared skirt. It was yellow with black polka dots. So were the high heeled shoes she wore with it. Her sunglasses were perched atop a platinum blonde head of hair set rigid in a lacquered bouffant style. She stepped confidently down the catwalk. Waved to the audience. Looked thoughtful for a moment and said, "Oh, it's so hot in here." The audience cheered.

With that she stripped off her dress to even more enthusiastic applause revealing a corset, bra and pants beneath in the same yellow and black polka dot fabric. Thick suspenders held up fully fashioned stockings. Her bra was boned and wired to produce both an extravagant cleavage and an unnaturally conical breast line. She smiled and waved again and took her place at the podium.

"Hello everybody," she called. "It's so lovely to see you!"

The audience called back as one. "Lovely to see you too, Miss Van Voom."

Hettie giggled and began her presentation. "A marvellous selection of corsetry, lingerie and playwear," she said. "Let's see the first model...."

The show began to the sounds of a series of fifties pop tracks, the models stepping forward, and showing a range of exciting corsets in every fabric imaginable. The crowd seemed impressed with what they saw. Hettie was doing a good job of keeping the enthusiasm going.

Finally the show concluded. All six models were lined up on the catwalk. Hettie was applauding them and the crowd, proclaiming that she couldn't wait to try some of the items modelled for herself.

It was then that Tricia, Eva and the team made their appearance. The crowd parted as four masked women clad in black vinyl cat suits, corsets and stilt heel boots approached the stage. "Hold it there, please," called Eva, holding up her hand as she stepped up onto the platform. The other three took up positions alongside her, legs apart, hands on hips, confronting the audience. "Are you Miss Hettie Van Voom?"

"Why yes," replied Hettie feigning shock at the interruption.

"I am afraid you are under arrest for investigations relating to crimes against fashion," Eva responded.

Hettie, who had been primed about the 'arrest', milked the part for all it was worth. "Surely not officer. How can it be? I mean, you only have to look at me." She flung her arms wide. The crowd cheered, enjoying the addition to the show.

"That's enough Miss Van Voom. We have reason to believe that the polka dots on your underwear are two millimetres too large in contravention of the European Union convention on fashion print design." The crowd gave a horrified "Oooh!!"

"Oh no!" exclaimed Hettie, holding her hands to her mouth.

"You'll have to come with us," said Eva. Hettie tried to run but her high heeled, platform soled shoes encumbered her even more than the heels on the boots our girls were wearing. She was seized by Tricia and brought back to the front of the stage. "Well," said Eva, "If you won't come quietly." On cue, Tricia popped a ball gag into her mouth. The crowd cheered as she buckled it in place. Hettie was wriggling in a theatrical manner. "And you'll have to be restrained." The crowd cheered again as cuffs were locked around her wrists. "Ladies," said Eva to the others, "bring on The Transporter!"

A trolley was wheeled forward. Hettie was strapped to it. Eva and the others wheeled her back along the catwalk to cheers and applause. They stood at the curtains through which the models had appeared and waved to the crowd. Hettie gave an impressive display of gagged protest. They turned and wheeled her out through the curtains.

It was quite some time before anyone realised that they hadn't stopped behind the stage but had taken her straight through the back of the exhibition hall and out onto a truck and even then it was assumed to be some sort of publicity stunt. By then she was already well on her way to the Prep Centre, still locked in handcuffs, gagged and strapped to her trolley.

Tricia had done a pretty good job, I thought and I told her so when we got back to the flat. Sometimes giving her a compliment is a mistake. "It's a pity Harry doesn't seem to notice. After all this time he still won't let me take a lead role. I've been pestering him about it but all he says is more experience, more experience."

I tried to let the subject drop but Tricia wasn't having any of it. "You work with him. Why aren't you telling him I'm ready to take a lead."

"Tricia, he knows I haven't the first idea. You know how effective I am at operations. He only lets me get as involved as I do if there's plenty of cover. There's no chance he's going to take any notice of me."

"Well, I still think you could ask him." It was the nearest I'd seen her come to sulking.

"Look," I said, keen to move on, "I'll raise it with him but you should be asking him what you need to do in order for him to let you lead. That's more likely to have an effect."

She gave a humming noise that didn't communicate much enthusiasm. It didn't make for much of an evening.

Chapter 64 : Back With The Emir

My mobile rang the following day. It was Kelly. "Hi," she said. "I didn't know you were going to the Fetish Fair. Why didn't you say? We could have gone together?"

I made some, eh? who? what? noises and said that I would have called her but I had to be there on business. (Which was true.) I'd been looking over the hall as a possible venue for an exhibition that one of my clients was planning. (Which wasn't.)

She asked if I'd seen Hettie's "kidnapping". I didn't want to tell too many porkies – besides that might have been where she'd seen me - so I said, "Sure."

"Wasn't it just a hoot!" said Kelly. "One of the best things I've seen. Those people knew how to put on a show."

"I was impressed," I said, "more elaborate than any of our games."

"Maybe but we still have fun. When are we getting together again? Assuming that you want to?"

"Sure, sure," I said. "I'm sorry I've been busy lately. You know how things are. When are you free?"

"I've got to be down in London for a couple of nights next week. Tuesday and Wednesday. Maybe we could meet up?"

"Mmm, Tuesday's good for me," I said. "Tell you what, text me where you're staying and I'll catch up with you at some point in the evening."

"Sound like fun," she said. "Why do I think that might not be just you buying me dinner?"

"Send me a text and you'll see," I said. She laughed and hung up. I headed off to find Freddie.

Freddie and I turned up at the Castle in plenty of time for the engagement announcement. Hettie had been brought along too, in the back of a van, in some very special packaging. We'd also brought a transport case for Lauren in case the Emir needed it.

The biggest surprise was that Lauren was waiting in the lounge dressed in full traditional Kushtian woman's dress. True the robe and veil that she wore were goth-black and the pill box hat appeared to have been fashioned from leather and was decorated with studs rather than the coins which symbolised an unmarried girl's dowry, but at least she was making the effort we thought. There was one incongruous feature of her appearance, however. From each ear, the trademark white wires of iPod earphones snaked down to disappear beneath her robe.

"Hello, Lauren," I said. "Nice to see you. Is your father around?"

She looked at is as if we had just crawled out from some stone or other. She didn't bother to turn down the volume on her iPod. "Whatever," she said waving her hand in the general direction of the garden. "He's out back. Looking for that rank gimmer. He's probably mounting a sheep or looking for a yak to freshen up his breath with."

I assumed she was referring to her, still unknown, intended. Freddie and I took ourselves off in the direction of her wave.

We found Brad in the garden. "Hi," he said you haven't seen Kushnati, have you? There was a terrible row earlier on with Sarah. She wouldn't dance for him. He starts in at her in that dialect of his. I couldn't understand much of it. Hell, I've only got to chapter five on 'Teach Yourself Kushtian' and that only covers the version spoken in Kolin and the surroundings. She tries to explain and he isn't having any. He drags her off. I assume he's gone down to the dungeon to give her a taste of some of my toys so I think it's better if he gets it out of his system. Anyway, I've just been down there and there's no sign of them. Lauren said they came through this way but there's no sign of them in the garden."

We set off in different directions in search of Kushnati or Sarah or both.

I went towards the golf course. I was the first to find them. As I reached the first tee, there were sounds of raised voices coming from my right somewhere on the approach to the eighteenth green. As I crossed the green a bizarre sight confronted me in the deep bunker at the edge of the green. Standing in the base of the bunker clutching a spade and a jar of some kind was Kushnati. He had a disapproving scowl on his face. At his feet was all that could be seen of Sarah, her head. For a moment I thought he had sliced it off with the spade but the lack of blood and the fact that she was grunting animatedly from behind a ball gag told me I was wrong. She had been buried up to her neck in the bunker. In deference to the etiquette of the course, at least Kushnati had raked the sand where he had been digging; so the man wasn't a complete barbarian.

There were two of the other slaves alongside her. Femke Toos and Greetje Van Bruijn, both wearing bikinis, were kneeling either side of her head. Kushnati gestured at the two girls. Femke unfastened Sarah's gag. Toos leant forward with a drinking bottle.

"Oh, thank, you, thank you," said Sarah trying to move her head sufficiently to take the drink. She sipped from the bottle and immediately spat the liquid out. "Oh! No, no, it's horrible," she yelled. Kushnati barked at the two girls urging them on. Femke grabbed hold of Sarah's nose and pinched it shut. Unable to breath Sarah could do no other than gulp at the air and the drink that Toos was pouring into her mouth. Once the bottle was empty, Toos jammed the ball gag back into Sarah's mouth.

Kushnati waved them away. Sarah was shaking her head in discomfort. I watched as the two girls walked off, laughing together, no doubt remembering their discomforts in the dungeon as a result of Sarah's initial refusal to betray her friend.

For Kushnati, Sarah's discomfort was not yet enough. He upended the contents of the jar he was holding over her head. From the way that ants, flies, bees and wasps were immediately swarming about her, I guessed it was honey. I could understand Sarah's gagged screams and yells. I thought I'd better fetch Brad.

I took both him and Clegg back to the bunker by the eighteenth green. Kushnati was still there staring down at Sarah who was gasping hysterically into her gag at the centre of a cloud of flies.

Brad tried to discuss things with Kushnati using his limited command of Kushtian. A great deal of gesticulation was going on from both of them. Eventually Kushnati calmed down and he and Brad dug Sarah out. She'd been tied into a ball, so the hole Kushnati had dug wasn't as deep as I'd thought. For all of his sixty eight years, though, he was obviously fit.

Brad called into his mobile phone. Femke and Greetje were sent back out, this time with a brush and hose. Together they untied Sarah, hosed her down and brushed the sand from her. As they took off her gag, she retched and threw up whatever unpleasant drink, Kushnati had forced down her. Even from where I was standing I could smell it.

Brad was still remonstrating with Kushnati but eventually came across to explain. "Sorry about that guys," he said. "Just a bit of a domestic. Sarah refused to dance for him, like I said. I've told him to use the stuff in the dungeon if he needs to but he doesn't trust these new fangled things as he calls them. Things like this have been good enough for his tribe for at least fifteen centuries. He doesn't see the point of changing to stuff that's only five hundred years old as long as the old ways work."

"No problem," I said. "Is it Freddie?"

"Hmm. What? Oh, errr, sure," Freddie responded. He was obviously miles away, thinking that he really needed to find a way to talk to Kushnati to see if there were any other ideas he could pick up from him.

"I'm surprised at Sarah though, she's normally quite obedient and she quite likes dancing, I thought."

"It was the snakes," said Brad. "She didn't like the snakes. She's scared of snakes."

"Snakes?" I said.

"Yes, it's the Pythork, a fertility dance from the hill tribes. Some people reckon it comes from the same roots as the Minoan religion. The dancer performs her dance with two live snakes and finishes with the 'snake' of the person she is performing the dance for. Kushnati was keen she should perform it for him."

"Ah," I said.

"Let's go back inside," said Brad. "I've told Sarah to clean herself up and then come and apologise. Properly. Poskalic," he said to Kushnati.

We went back to the pool side bar. The Emir played the host and served us all drinks. Kushnati's humour improved with each one that he downed.

Sarah reappeared. Kushnati's first instinct to growl was interrupted by his sight of her in the costume of a court dancer. "Arrgn!" he exclaimed with approval.

Sarah stood at the edge of the room. She wore an elaborate head band around her brow. Coins dangled from it across her forehead. Her veil was fastened so that it looped down from the head band to cover her face and then draped down in long folds to be fastened at either side to heavy bracelets that circled her arms above the elbow.

Behind the half transparent veil it was clear that Sarah had followed the convention of the Kalinin's own dancers and had gagged herself as a symbol of submission and of preparedness to accept punishment. She wore her slave collar of course and chains from it ran to cuffs on either wrist. Her breasts were bare; her pierced nipples carrying studs from each of which hung a heavy snake pendant. Around her hips was fastened a broad gilded belt. Her legs were hardly covered by the flimsy gauze of her harem trousers. Her feet were bare apart from fine silver chains that linked toe rings to anklets

She dropped to her knees and bowed her head to the floor. "Arrgn," grunted Kushnati as she reached squeamishly into the two small round baskets on either side of Kushnati's feet. She pulled out two small snakes and, holding them at arms length to either side of her, started to dance. I wasn't sure how authentic the dance was. At first it looked more like Ibiza than Kolin but Kushnati didn't seem to mind. Even Freddie watched approvingly. Sarah had obviously learned some belly dancing moves somewhere; spinning around, thrusting her hips forward and shimmering her naked stomach. The result was like something out of Shakira's 'Hips Don't Lie' video. Plus the snakes of course, though Sarah seemed to have found a way of blanking them out from her mind. It may not have been as Kushnati's tribe would have performed it but you couldn't fail to appreciate its erotic appeal. Kushnati was clapping along, providing her with a steady beat to guide her movements.

Brad leaned across to me as she finished her dance, falling to her knees and sliding across the floor to lie at Kushnati's feet. She knelt up and lowered each snake in turn into its basket. The snakes seemed happy to be released. She stretched her hands forward so that they finished in Kushnati's lap. He grunted with satisfaction and pressed his own hands down on top of hers making it plain what she was to do. "He seems to have forgiven her," Brad smiled as Sarah commenced her attentions on the third snake.

"So how are things going for the engagement?" I asked Brad.

"Well, Lauren still doesn't know. But she's been very good. You see she's taken to wearing the chanoosh?"

"Chanoosh?" said Freddie.

"The long gown and veil of the femnyette, a 'woman not yet a wife' – that's basically any unmarried girl of marriageable age. Kushnati has a very traditional view of things; nagged her that it was inappropriate for a high born woman to disport herself in the same way as slaves and concubines. In the hills only whores uncover their bodies. She got into that outfit a day or so ago. I think she's only doing it to get a quiet life. She's just hoping he'll go away and she can have Sarah back. I think she's quite missing having her to bully, but then she always did take after her mother." Brad looked philosophical. "Still the engagement. Yeah, sure, that's all fine. Kushnati is happy aren't you?"

"Arrgn!" Kushnati concurred enthusiastically grinning toothily and lifting his glass as Sarah worked away with her hands in his lap.

"Engagement? Who's getting engaged?" We turned around to see the robed and veiled Lauren standing at the back of the room.

"Lauren," said Brad, biting his lip. "I need to have a talk with you."

She looked for a moment at Kushnati's leering grin and then, realising what was intended, yelled "No! Noooo!" She ran back into the house.

Brad looked tired. "Daughters!" he exclaimed, shrugging his shoulders. "Can't live with them, can't sell them."

"She looked pretty upset," said Freddie, "in as much as you could tell behind that - what did you call it - chanoosh."

"Yeah, She will be. I'll let her cool down a bit. Sarah, why don't you go up and help calm her down?"

Sarah reached up and removed her gag. "Yes, Emir," She said obediently. Bowing first at Kushnati, then ourselves and then Brad, she went off in the direction that Lauren had taken.

Kushnati appeared unconcerned. He waved his glass indicating his desire for another drink if he wasn't going to have Sarah to amuse him.

We stayed in the bar drinking with Kushnati for about an hour or so before Brad said. "I'd better go see how she's getting along." He was back moments later and beckoned to Clegg and myself. Kushnati was well under the influence. We slipped away, leaving him to doze.

As we left the bar, Brad hissed, "Now I really do need your help. It looks like she's run off."

Clegg gave a pained look. "Are you sure?" he said.

"I think so," said Brad. "Her room's empty. She isn't anywhere else around the place."

"What does Sarah say?" I asked.

"I can't find her either."

We followed Brad back up to Lauren's room. There didn't seem to be any sign of her. The chanoosh had been flung across the bed. The rest of the room was in what I imagined to be the normal muddle for any teenager. We all heard a quiet moan coming from Lauren's wardrobe.

Brad pulled the door open. Inside Sarah, still in her dancer's costume but bound and gagged with strips torn from Lauren's bed sheets, was trying to free herself. Together we hauled her from the cupboard and cut the ties from her wrists and ankles. Brad un-knotted the cloth that was gagging her. She spat another wad of cloth from her mouth. It was a pair of panties; Lauren's I assumed. "Oh, thank you," she gasped. "It was Lauren. She attacked me. She put some clothes in a rucksack and pushed me in here."

"Do you know where she's gone?" Brad was concerned, though whether for his daughter's well being or for his own problem with Kushnati I couldn't tell. Sarah shook her head disconsolately. He turned to Freddie. "You have to help me with this," he said. "Kushnati will be furious if we can't go through with the engagement ceremony."

Clegg looked thoughtful. "I hate doing this sort of off-the-cuff thing but I'll do what I can," he said. "Can you say what she was wearing?"

Brad looked down at the discarded chanoosh. "Well," he said.

"A pair of white jeans and a dark sort of khaki tank top." Sarah chipped in. "She had a grey sweater with her and some regular denim jeans that she put in her bag and the rucksack - that was a sort of muddy green colour."

"Thank you, Sarah," said Freddie, "that's most helpful."

"Oh!" exclaimed Sarah realising that she had almost certainly given Freddie essential information that would lead to Lauren's recapture. She just hoped no one mentioned to Lauren who had told him.

Freddie and Brad wandered off, Clegg, chatting into his mobile phone. I felt a bit spare. Sarah was busily tidying up the torn up sheets and clearing the muddle left by Lauren. Seeing that the Emir had gone she turned to me. "Please," she said, please. You must get me my old job back. Get Harry to take me back, please."

"You know I can't do that, Sarah," I said.

"But it's awful here. All the other slaves hate me because of the Cindy thing and the torture room and Lauren treats me like dirt. Koresh is horrible. I mean he can't help being old but he smells so and what's worse he's obsessed with sex but he can't do anything about it. I had my hands in his lap then and it made no difference. It'll be awful if I have to stay with him and Lauren. You have to take me away. Please!"

"Sarah, you're a slave. You have to put up with it. Harry isn't going to take you back if the Emir doesn't want to release you. If you carry on like this the Emir will have you back in the dungeon for more training and you'll find that difficult. I suggest you make the best of it. Work out how to keep Koresh amused. If you can do that he'll be happy and Lauren will be too. Why don't you go back down to the bar and see what you can do for him?"

Sarah looked at me for a moment and then looked as though she had decided that I was right. "Thank you for your advice, Sir," she said. "I shall do just as you suggest."

I watched as she rearranged her costume and fastened her veil back across her face. She gave a deep curtsy and headed off back downstairs. She didn't know her rental to the Emir was going to finish soon. There didn't seem to be any point in telling her.

Chapter 65 : Looking For Lauren

Harry turned out a small team to go hunting Lauren. He'd been trying to bring on a new set of "cadets" as he called them. All girls under twenty, Harry thought they'd be helpful for collecting the increasing number of eighteen to twenty year olds we were being asked to find.

Four of them were sent off with a list of some of the places that the Emir knew Lauren used; a couple of photographs and Sarah's description of the way that Lauren was dressed. Harry told them just to report in when they'd found her but I could tell he wasn't confident that they wouldn't try to pick her up themselves.

I was with Harry when he got the phone call saying they'd found her. We hopped into his Land Rover and headed off through the Worcestershire countryside, following the directions from Harry's team.

We turned off the main road into a car park beside a large metal framed building. "The Music Barn" the sign said. At two o'clock in the afternoon it was deserted.

A teenage girl, one of Harry's team I assumed, skate boarded towards us across the car park. She skidded to a halt inches from the car, stood on the tail of her board and flipped it up to catch it in her hands as she dismounted. Harry opened the window on his door. "Yo!" she announced in greeting. Suddenly I was finding it difficult to remember that I was only about 10 year's older than she was.

"So you found her?"

"Yepp."

The new arrival obviously had as broad a vocabulary as her quarry.

"You wanna tell me about it? Or are we just going to applaud the skateboarding?"

She looked sulky. "She's around the back."

"OK, what do we need to do to pick her up?"

"Nah, don't bother. We done that."

"Jaycee, I said just find her. I said don't touch her."

"She'd have sussed us, the time you took. We took her easy. That's what we're supposed to be for isn't it?"

"When I say so. Not just when you feel like it."

"Whatever."

She must be getting on famously with Lauren, I thought. Harry looked pensive. "OK, let's talk about it later. Do we go with you or are you gonna bring her out here?"

Jaycee sucked on her teeth and looked back towards the building. She gestured with her head towards the side of the building, got back on her skateboard and headed off. We followed in the Land Rover. Beside the building was a overgrown track and at the back of that was a derelict brick hut, its windows without glass, its door hanging loosely from one hinge. Jaycee disappeared inside. Harry backed the Land Rover up to the hut and we followed her inside.

Jaycee was waiting for us with two of her pals. Sitting in the floor, wrists and ankles bound and with a rucksack pulled down over her head as a hood was a girl I assumed to be Lauren. She was only wearing one of her two trainers. Harry pointed down at Lauren's bare foot. "Loose ends," he said to Jaycee and her pals. "I've told you about that. We don't leave loose ends. Where's the other shoe?"

Jaycee laughed and pulled the rucksack clear of Lauren's head, showing the other trainer jammed toe first into the poor girl's mouth and tied there as a gag. Lauren shook her head trying to dislodge the shoe but without effect. Her complaints became progressively more excited and animal like as Harry grinned and congratulated Jaycee and the others.

Harry and I pulled Lauren to her feet. Together we picked her up and pushed her into the back of the Land Rover before wrapping her in a tarpaulin. "Thanks, Jaycee," said Harry. "Good job."

"Fair 'nuff," said the girl, evidently pleased by the compliment. "Hey is it true we snatched Hettie Van Voom?"

"Yeah, sure. Part of the same job."

"Excellent!" said Jaycee. "Sorry I missed that one. She is just sooo cool. Do we get to prep her?"

"Sorry, Jaycee, she's being delivered today." Jaycee looked disappointed. Comparing her pale, spotty, complexion, ratted hair, ripped jeans and cropped t-top with Hettie's immaculate appearance she seemed like an unlikely admirer but this business

throws up some strange people. Jaycee and her pals grabbed their skateboards and piled into the back of the Land Rover around the helpless Lauren. We dropped them off at the railway station and headed off with Lauren towards the castle.

As we drove the Land Rover back, with Lauren secure in the back under a tarpaulin, I chatted with Harry about Sarah and her problems. As I suspected he wasn't interested in doing anything for her, Cindy was proving to be just as useful. I asked him about Tricia. She'd been bending my ear about taking a lead role on a collection. Harry was blunt. "She'll get to go lead when I think she's ready. You wouldn't want any different would you?"

"Nuhuh," I said. "Your call is good enough for me." And it was. If Harry didn't think she was ready then it wouldn't be good for the collection and it wouldn't be good for Tricia either. Anyway I wasn't about to put my neck out for her with Harry.

Lauren started to kick up a fuss in the back. The trainer gag kept the noise down but it was still irritating. "Fancy some music?" said Harry. I nodded. He pushed the on switch on the Land Rover's CD player. Lead Zeppelin poured out of the speakers. It drowned out Lauren's grunting but that was about all that could be said for it. My taste goes more for Northern Soul.

We drove up to the Emir's place. He was waiting at the door. Harry and I carried Lauren, helpless, kicking and wrapped in the tarpaulin, inside.

Brad helped us to get her untied. Even after we took the gag off her she stayed silent.

"Lauren, we need to discuss this," said Brad. Lauren took no notice. He snipped through the plastic ties around her ankles and her wrists. Lauren sat on the floor hunched up and scowling at her father. "Come on," Brad said, gripping Lauren's arm and helping her to her feet. "Let's go somewhere quieter." He turned to Harry and me. "Thanks guys," he said. "Lauren and I need to chat. Why don't you get yourselves a beer, Freddie and Kushnati are in the bar."

I spent about half an hour with Kushnati, Clegg, and Harry but it was soon obvious that Kushnati was getting restless waiting for the return of his fiancée to be. I agreed to look for Brad and Lauren.

I bumped into one of Brad's guards in the corridor. He said they were down in the dungeon but Brad didn't want to be interrupted. I slipped into a gallery that looked down into the dungeon to wait for an opportunity to get them to come back to the bar. Lauren was over at one side, swinging her legs under the chair she was sitting on. Brad was dividing his attention between talking to his daughter and tightening straps that were holding Femke onto the rack. Alongside them Greetje had been tied to the rim of the great wooden wheel. Both Femke and Greetje were moaning in fear.

"Why wouldn't you talk to me?" Brad was asking his daughter.

"He's gross. He's old and he's gross. How could you think I'll marry him?"

"Lauren, sometimes it's a good idea to take a little bit of pain for a greater good." Brad turned his attentions to Greetje, tightening her straps. "Like these ladies are going to discover for tormenting Sarah."

"I won't do it, Dad."

"Think about it. You'll be the wife of a council member; practically royalty. OK, Kolin isn't the greatest place on the planet but you can still get MTV there. You'd have your own slaves; a councillor's wife wouldn't be expected to lift a finger. Besides how long can he live?" Brad tugged on the bar that started to stretch Femke on the rack. "You shouldn't have been quite so willing to amuse Mr Koresh, Femke dear," he said. "I think you should have come to find me." Femke gasped as the rack began to pull against her arms and legs. Brad turned back to Lauren. "But if you won't go..."

Lauren watched fascinated as Femke tried to pull against the effects of the rack. Brad went across to Greetje and started to winch the wheel she was tied to clear of the floor. Her squeals became louder with each creak of the winch and clank of the chain. As her belly lifted from the floor and she took the weight of her body on the straps around her wrists and ankles she gave out a deep groan.

"My own slaves?" Lauren asked. "Couldn't I do that here? I mean I'm old enough to have my own and you've let me use Sarah."

"It's different here, Lauren. Or back in the States. There's too many people who think that sort of thing is primitive and – what did you call Kushnati – gross. I can only do it because of my diplomatic immunity and a lot of money and help from Clegg. Even then, I'm not sure we're going to be able to keep it going. Sure you could go on borrowing slaves but it would be a long time before you could really have your own here." Femke and Greetje were both groaning. Lauren got up from the seat and wandered across to look at them more closely.

"But he is gross. I mean the smell. And, well, in bed?"

"From what I hear the Emir won't be bothering you much in the bedroom. You could probably persuade him to let you have one of the young tribesmen to keep you amused. He's happy with the occasional grope and plenty of beer. And if you had your own slave to divert him...."

"You'd let me have one? As my own for real slave? Really Dad?"

Brad leant on the lever of Femke's rack again, she yelled. Lauren's eyes were brighter than ever. "Why not? If it would help. Not Sarah, though, she's going back to Clegg. Have one of the others." Greetje groaned and wriggled setting the wheel swinging on its supporting chain.

"Oh Dad!" Lauren exclaimed and ran forward, throwing her arms around his neck. She gave him one kiss after another.

"Hey," he said. "Am I forgiven then?"

"I'll do it," said Lauren.

"Kushnati wanted to go through the formalities today, you know."

"Yeah, I guessed," said Lauren. "Well, why not? Unless you want to play with these some more?" She gestured at Femke and Greetje. "Ooo, I couldn't have these two could I?"

"Why not?" said Brad. Lauren clapped her hands in delight. "I'll get one of the guards to let them down." Femke and Greetje moaned begging to be freed but still dreading their fate at the hands of Sarah.

"Let me get dressed, though," said Lauren. "I want to do it properly. I've looked it up. I'm supposed to wear a chanoosh. I intend to be a proper Kushtian councillor's wife."

"That's wonderful, Lauren," Brad said.

"No problem," Lauren said with a giggle. "Have you any idea what some of those ladies get up to?"

I headed back to the bar without bothering Brad. It was obvious that they'd be along shortly. We just had time to get Kushnati's present for Brad off of the van and stowed in the next room before Brad reappeared, leading his daughter by the hand. Clad in her chanoosh, she presented a perfect picture of Kushtian submissive womanhood with her eyes cast to the floor and her hands clasped modestly in front of her.

"Mr Koresh," Brad said. "I believe you have something to say."

Kushnati got to his feet unsteadily. He'd been drinking consistently for quite a while. He belched. He spoke carefully, evidently having memorised the English words. "Emir, I wish to take your daughter as my wife."

"Head Koresh," Brad responded with equal formality. He brought out a set of ceremonial manacles joined by a heavy chain. From where I was standing they looked as though they were made of gold. I later found out that they were. "Take my daughter as your wife," he said as he fastened first Laurens' left wrist and then her right. "Care for her as your favourite horse or hawk." He took Laurens hand and brought it together with Kushnati's gnarled fingers. "Let everyone here witness that this girl gives no word against this match." Lauren could have been gagged beneath the veil of the chanoosh but in fact she wasn't.

She hugged her father and then hugged Kushnati, saying, "I look forward to becoming your wife, Head Koresh."

Kushnati grunted his appreciation. "Your daughter, my wife," he said. He turned to Brad. "Emir, please accept this gift as a token of my esteem for your daughter." He clapped his hands. Two of Brad's guards emerged from the next room pushing a large white box on a trolley. The box was tied with a huge purple satin ribbon and bow. Brad spoke his thanks to Kushnati and tugged at the ribbon. It fell loose. Lifting the lid of the box, Brad saw immediately what was inside. Laid out, full length, and wedged onto the box by cream, silk-covered, packing was Hettie Van Voom.

Brad was evidently delighted. "Head Koresh," he said. "I'm overwhelmed. A remarkable gift indeed. Thaknarish. Thank you. Thaknarish." The two guards helped get Hettie from the box.

Kushnati smiled. "Arrgn," he said. "Please enjoy this. Think of it not as losing a daughter but gaining a woman."

Hettie was drugged. Not unconscious but with only limited awareness of her surroundings. She presented a perfect, fetishised, female image. She wore a purple silk corset that exactly matched the ribbon of the box, long silk gloves that stretched over her elbows, stilt heeled platform soled shoes in a glossy patent leather, a narrow velvet band around her throat and a large ball gag in her mouth; all in the same purple. As she was helped to her feet, Brad was visibly delighted by what he saw. The corset cinched her waist, the combination of her well developed breasts and the engineering of the bra she wore gave her a cleavage that invited close inspection. Her legs, clad in the finest silk stockings, were made more shapely by the height of her heels.

Freddie, impressed as ever by the technologies developed by Rick's team, stepped forward. "Brad," he said, "you'll like this." He held up a small phial of liquid. "This allows you to use your new slave as a doll. When she is dosed with this, you can simply position her as you wish and she will stay in place." He walked up to Hettie, carefully repositioning her, bending her at the knees and so her backside stuck out. He moved her arms so that one was above her head apparently waving while the other pressed a finger to her pursed lips. She stood motionless, holding the position.

"Fantastic," said Brad, "Better & better."

From the ways that Hettie's eyes were flickering it was clear that she was aware of what was happening but had no control over her movements.

Sarah was watching the proceedings from the back of the room. She'd been brought in wearing the same costume that she had worn to dance for Kushnati. "Isn't it romantic," she said to me. "I would never have thought that Lauren would agree to this but it just goes to show."

I grunted in a noncommittal way.

"I can't imagine what persuaded her to go through with this and to go to Kushtia. But I'll be honest," she dropped her voice to a whisper, "I'm not sorry to see her go. I'm not sure who was worse, her or Kushnati."

I didn't say anything. I was pretty sure we'd have something disagreeable lined up for her as soon as the engagement ceremony was finished.

The Emir and Kushnati were embracing. Lauren was standing quietly by. She leant across to her father and whispered something to him. He listened and then beckoned Sarah to join them. As she reached them he took her wrists and clipped her shackles to her collar. Unable to use her hands she was helpless to prevent Lauren pulling aside her Sarah's veil to allow her to push one of Harry's gel gags into her mouth. In a moment the expanding gel had silenced her. I saw Brad explaining something to Kushnati as Lauren clipped a leash to Femke and Greetje's collars. Brad and Kushnati walked towards me together with Lauren dragging her newly acquired slaves. As they passed me they gave me a pleading look and a gagged moan. Brad beckoned me to follow.

At the back of the house, the transport crates was waiting for Femke and Toos. Beside it there were a pair of small wooden trestles. As we reached it, Brad took Femke and bent her forward over the first wooden trestle, clipping a short length of chain to her collar so that she was held, head down, her backside in the air. He walked behind her and fastened her ankle cuffs to the legs of the trestle, fixing her helpless and exposed.

With Femke fixed in place, Greetje was treated the same way. Sarah emerged from the house carrying a small metal bucket on a tripod stand. I recognised it from the dungeon. From the care she took and the way the air was shimmering above the bucket, it was obviously hot. As she walked by me I could see that the bucket contained red hot coals. She put it down beside Femke and went back into the house. "Kushnati," Brad was saying. "I know that these girls are to be my wife's slaves but of course they must carry your mark as part of your household."

Lauren tried to interrupt. "Shouldn't they have a mark for me?" Femke was trying to struggle free from the trestle.

Kushnati laughed, evidently amused by the girl's naivety. "No," said her father. "It's all rather complicated, Kushtian laws of property and all that. Don't worry about it."

Sarah returned carrying a velvet cushion. As she got to the group, Brad reached out and picked a long handled device from the cushion. He plunged the end of it into the bucket of hot coals. The two Dutch girls, guessing what was about to happen became still more animated in their attempts to free themselves.

The gag was not sufficient to silence the piercing scream as Brad pressed the red hot iron against Femke's left buttock. It was loud enough to throw a crowd of rooks into the sky from a nearby line of trees, cawing in response. The hiss of scorching flesh could still be heard as the noise of the rooks and Femke's gagged whimperings fell away. Brad pulled the brand away causing Femke to scream again and leaving the raw pattern of two interlocked K's, for Kushnati Koresh, etched into her buttock. The whole thing was repeated with Greetje. At the end the smell of burnt flesh and the gagged screams of the girls filled the air around them. Brad tossed the brand back into the bucket of coals and reached forward to shake Kushnati's hand.

"Arrgn" the chief said in acceptance and unfastened the two from their trestles to lead them staggering in pain towards the transport crate. Kushnati, Lauren, Femke and Greetje were ready for their journey to Kushtia. For Femke and Greetje, at least the sedative they were given for their journey would have eased the pain of their brands.

Elly took Sarah to one side. "You're coming back to the Prep Centre," she said. In spite of her gag Sarah's gratitude was plain.

"I'd wait until you get there before you are too effusive in your thanks," she said. "We've got some interesting programmes to put you through." I wasn't sure how well Sarah would respond but Elly, Freddy and I had agreed that it was probably the best step for her.

Brad caught up with me before I left.

"Well, that all seemed to work out," I said.

"Yes, fine, Brad responded. "Thanks."

"You said you wanted to talk about the National Geographic article."

"Oh, yes. Look, you were right with your advice, like I said. The fuss died away pretty quickly. There was some sensational coverage in the press but like you said, they've got bored and moved on. The odd thing is that some other people haven't. Here." He turned to his desk and pulled a wad of papers from it. "These are copies of some of them," he said. "The originals have gone back to the Foreign Office in Kolin. There are more. All pretty much the same."

I looked at the papers. Letters, perhaps twenty or thirty, all of them from women all saying pretty much the same thing. Kushtia sounded like an ideal society, one in which women were valued as women. Was there any opportunity for a woman to

come and live in Kushtia as a Kushtian woman? How could a woman become a Kushtian bride? Was it possible to work in Kushtia?

I looked at the addresses; UK, France, Germany, USA; all were represented.

"It looks like you'll be able to have your pick," I said. "You won't be needing us to pick up slaves if they are volunteering."

"Not the same thing, Larry as well you know. But we are going to work on some of this. We're thinking about running a sort of cultural experience programme – you know 'learn something of this very different society'. Just the sort of thing for gap year students." Brad gave a leer that would have been worthy of his new son in law. "I thought you ought to know though, just in case you heard about it and thought someone else was pooping in your patch."

"Thanks Brad," I said. "I'm sure there's no problem from our side. Let us know if you need any help."

"I will, Larry, don't worry," he said and I left him.

I was chatting to Clegg later on. I told him about the "cultural experience programme". He looked a bit disbelieving at first and then seemed to think about it. He didn't say anything that gave away his views on it. "Plus I over heard Brad say something that might interest you," I said. "He seemed to think there might be some problems with keeping his operation here in the UK going."

Clegg gave a quiet smile. "I wondered how long it would take for it to get back to him," he said. "I've been having some words with the Kalinin. Brad's great fun and he's a good customer but, well, discreet isn't a word that he uses much. I've been worried that he might start attracting attention."

"How come now?"

"Well, normally it wouldn't be a problem; there'd be a few folk for the Kushtian's to pay off and no one would be bothered. It's just that some of Elly's contacts suggest that the police and security services are getting a bit more concerned lately about the trafficking of women for sex. Planning some sort of crack down."

"That'll be more of a problem for us than Brad, won't it?"

Freddie shook his head. "No, it's not our side of it that they are interested in. They don't believe there's any sort of export traffic, they think it's all the other way. They're much more concerned about imports."

"The Treasury worried about the balance of trade deficit again?" I joked.

Freddie smiled. "No, no. It's much more the fact that Johnny Foreigner might be disrupting the status quo in the sex industry. Might even be exposing the lower classes to it and that would never do! Tsk, tsk!" He was grinning. "I'd come to understand that Freddie didn't much care for the way the British establishment kept its pleasures to itself. "So they're out looking for foreign interests that might be part of a sex slave trafficking network."

"And the castle would fall into that category?"

"Mmm," said Freddie. "I think it might. Too conspicuous. And in the wrong place. Out in the countryside like that, attracts too much attention. If you want to run something like that you need to put it where no one will notice. Somewhere busy, somewhere crowded."

"Like the Prep Centre?"

"Exactly. Anyway the Kalinin was pretty understanding. He's not seen much in the way of results from Brad's operation so he's going to get the Trade Minister to recall him."

I finally managed to talk to Freddie about my idea for a "voluntary slave" operation. I'd been thinking about it for a while. The experiences with Kelly had given me the idea in the first place and the Kushtian experience following the article in National Geographic seemed to indicate that there might be something in it.

Freddie looked as though he was taking it on board but it's always hard to tell with him. He said he'd think about it. I reckoned that meant I hadn't made a good enough case.

Chapter 66 : Room Service

"The London Garrick, Drury Lane," Kelly's text had said.

I'd spent half an hour wandering around the public areas and worked out a plan for a bit of fun. It wasn't a big place, there was the usual lobby, stairs up, lifts, a couple of phone booths. Off to the right, a small bar. I sat in a coffee shop across the road and watched her arrive, trundling her case in through the front door. I gave her time to check in.

"Meet you for a drink?" I texted. "7:30 in the bar?"

"Fine," she came back. "CU. Sounds tame though!!"

I looked at my watch. It was only five. I had plenty of time to pick up some things. I flagged down a cab. "Brewer Street," I said. I knew a few places in Soho where I might get what I wanted.

I got back to the hotel just after half past seven. Kelly was sure to be in the bar. The lobby was pretty quiet. I walked around to an alcove just behind the phone booths and sat down with the small back pack with my toys on my lap. I phoned the hotel on my mobile. "I'd like to talk to Miss Kelly Rollins I'm supposed to be meeting her in the bar."

"If you'll hold on, I'll find her for you," the receptionist said helpfully.

A few moments later I heard a voice saying, "The courtesy phones are over their Miss Rollins, I'll put the call through on the far one." Very convenient, I thought. I heard Kelly's voice as she picked up the courtesy phone. "Hello?" she said. "Who's there?"

"Go to the lift," I said quietly but insistently. "Don't look around." I heard her gulp as she put down the phone.

As she walked up to the lift I put my bag over my shoulder and stepped up close behind her. I had a knife hidden in the palm of my hand. I let her feel it prick against her back. She gave a whimper. "Let's go upstairs," I said, quietly. I let her call the lift, standing close behind her all the time. The doors slid open three people got out and brushed past us, I let her feel the knife again, put my other hand on her back and guided her forward into the empty lift. She pushed the button for her floor. We rode up, her facing the doors, me close behind her. The lift didn't stop until we reached the fifth. Kelly led the way, still at knife point along the corridor. We passed a service cart and a couple of housemaids. I gave her a prick as we went by to remind her to behave.

We reached her room. She took out her key card and slipped it into the slot. As the green light came on, I grabbed the door handle, wrenched it open and pushed her through. She tripped on the door sill as she went in and fell down, sprawling across the floor of the room.

"Stay down there," I hissed, "and get on your face. Put your hands behind your head. I grabbed the 'do not disturb' sign from the door handle, hung it on the outside and pushed the door shut. I tipped out my bag of toys onto the floor beside Kelly and started by pulling the ski mask over my face. Of course she knew it was me but it seemed more fun like that. Then came the gag, a thick rubber plug that I pushed between her lips and past her teeth into her mouth. The plug was held on a broad leather strap that covered almost the whole of the lower half of her face. She grunted as I fastened the buckle to hold it in place, pushing the plug deep into her mouth. I pulled her wrists down behind her, not being too gentle. A pair of leather cuffs linked by a short chain served to keep them locked together behind her back.

I rolled her over. I could see her eyes were already bright with arousal. She was breathing heavily, through her nose, humming softly behind the gag.

I took some time to look her over. I guess she'd come straight from what ever she'd been doing - she looked like she was dressed for work. She was wearing a fairly plain grey dress with a pattern of small flowers on it. Some sort of silky material. I'm no expert. Dark grey tights. Grey suede shoes. Low heels, nothing flash. She was obviously enjoying me looking her over from behind the mask, she grunted and wriggled trying her wrists against the cuffs. I put out a hand to cup one of her breasts. She tried to pull away, not keen to let her assailant take advantage of her.

I took that as a cue. There was a seam running down the front of the dress. I grabbed either side of her v-neckline and tugged. The stitches parted easily enough. She was squealing in distress now. I guess I should have checked to see if she had another dress with her but it was too late. It ripped clean through to the hem. I pushed aside the two torn halves. She might have been mad but her nipples were perking up nicely beneath the silk of her grey bra.

That was my next target. I took the knife and sliced through the material between the two cups, exposing her breasts. I'd bought a couple of nipple clamps and took this opportunity to clip them in place. She whimpered as I tightened them.

I looked down at her knickers, a damp stain was spreading from her crotch. I pulled down her tights, smiling at the way her soaking cunt signalled her excitement. I reached into my bag and pulled out the small vibrator I'd acquired. I pushed it in, turned it on and pulled her pants and tights back up. She was wriggling more than ever now. I ripped a strip of material from her dress, gripped her ankles in one hand and tied them together. Now she was wriggling more than ever before; grunting with pleasure and frustration into her gag.

"I fancy a drink," I said. She gave a squeal. I picked up the room's key card and headed to the door. I pulled off my mask before I went outside. I figured it wasn't too smart to appear in the corridor like that.

I didn't take too long but I always think it's a shame to hurry a beer – especially at London hotel prices. When I got back Kelly was pretty distracted. She whimpered as I stripped off everything except the ski mask. She yelped as I took off her nipple clamps, groaned as I pulled the vibrator from her and bucked her body as I took my cock and fucked her.

As the two of us came, I was pleased that she had the gag on. There's such a thing as not disturbing the other guests, I feel.

Afterwards we lay together, still coupled but motionless; sweating but silent. She shook her head and grunted. I took it that she'd like the gag taken off and obliged.

"Bastard, bastard, bastard," she smiled. "Where did you get that stuff? Or were you doing more at the Fetish Fair than you owned up to?"

"Kelly, we're less than a mile from the kinkiest shops in London."

"Oh, yes. I was forgetting. In which case you were very restrained."

"I thought you were the one that was restrained," I said with a smirk.

"Whips and chains are fine but lay off the jokes!" she said laughing. "Now are you going to take these cuffs off me and buy me a drink?"

"Sure, if you've got something else to wear." She nodded. I freed her and we each of us showered. She pulled on a sweater and pair of slacks, not bothering with underwear.

"You're going to have to take me shopping," she said, "you're wrecking my wardrobe."

"No problem," I said, "I saw some very fetching fashions in Brewer Street."

"I was thinking something other than PVC, rubber or leather," she said. "Now come on, are we going to have that drink?"

We headed on down to the bar. It was quiet. We were the only people there apart from a barman who seemed more interested in the football match going showing on the TV screen that hung down in one corner of the room. We got our drinks and made ourselves comfortable in one corner. Kelly curled up on the couch, tucking her legs underneath her. She had a relaxed air about her, smiling, her hair loose, her V-necked sweater clinging precariously to one shoulder. I just about managed to keep my hands off her.

"This is a lot of fun, Larry," she said. I sensed there was a 'but' coming. "But."

We had a long chat. It was clear that while she enjoyed what we got up to, she didn't like the way it was working; - the two of us just fetching up occasionally as and when one or the other felt like some pervy sex. She thought she was looking for something more permanent; just as much oriented to the world of BDSM, but just more permanent.

I could see ways in which I could make it very permanent indeed for her, but I didn't think that would be fair. Besides with Sukie and Rachel to worry about I couldn't see how I could make a bigger commitment to Kelly, right now.

The evening ended up with one of those tense, quiet, times. Each of us was staring into our drink. She had shredded a paper napkin into tiny strips in the ashtray.

"I'm sorry, Kelly," I started, "It's not..."

"If you dare say, 'its not you it's me' then I swear I will take you upstairs and use those cuffs and ball gag on you." She managed a grin and I smiled back.

"You're right," I said. "Look, I can't step up to what you need right now. Maybe in the future. Who knows? I enjoy what we do. A lot. But I'm not ready to go any further right now. I'm sorry if you think I've been unfair."

She shook her head. "No, Larry, no. I guess I've just had a few too many dishonest relationships and the stuff we get up to; well, I'd just like to be doing that every night. Still, one of the girls from the Munch wrote off to the Kushtian Embassy – wants to go out there as a concubine, can you believe? I couldn't do that. So I can hardly complain, can I?"

I shrugged. I was puzzled by the reference to the Kushtian's but then I remembered the letters that Brad had shown me. We were both looking glum.

She drained the last of her drink. "Oh, come on," she said. "I'm not leaving things like this."

"I guess the convention is that I say, 'we can still be friends, right?' isn't it?"

"Yepp. And I say, 'of course, we're both grown up' don't I?" There was a sparkle in her eyes.

"We can still be friends, right?" I said.

She looked at me for a moment. "No," she said. I looked puzzled for a moment. "But you can still come around and fuck me at gun point though." She laughed.

"I've only got the knife, at the moment," I said smiling.

"That'll do," she said, getting to her feet. We both laughed and headed for the lift. If it was going to be the last time at least we would make the best of it.

Chapter 67 : Programme Development

When I got back to the Centre, Sukie was busy getting the evening meal ready. She said Rachel was down in the programme training room so I thought I'd go and see how she was getting on.

As I arrived, she was just finishing her session. Naked, she was sitting up on one of the two leather covered couches with a broad grin on her face.

Rachel waved as she saw me through the window of the treatment room and went back to disconnecting herself from the wires that both delivered the stimuli and monitored her response.

She hopped down from the couch as I went through the door. She ran across to me and threw her arms around me. "Mmm," she said. "You came back. Can we play now?"

"Rachel, you just finished a programme session," I said with a grin. "You should have had enough pleasure for now!"

"Enough?" she said with a smile on her face. "I'm not sure I know that word. What else can I do, then?"

I had a few projects in mind for her. We chatted about them for a while - she sat on the couch sucking provocatively on a pale lemon dildo; me standing by, still in my office suit. By the end of our talk she had at least been distracted from the dildo by the idea of pleasing me by getting some writing done. Mind you it had been a close run thing. It had been hard to keep my mind on what I wanted to get done watching her as she slid the yellow plastic dildo backwards and forwards between her lips as I talked through what I wanted. In the end we both laughed. She pulled on one of the loose smocks that she wore most of the time now, smiled and headed off in search of her lap top.

The Doc appeared just as Rachel was leaving. Rachel smiled at her and disappeared. "She seems OK," I said to the Doc.

She nodded, cautiously. "Yes, she seems to have recovered. As long as she avoids the substances that trigger the attacks she should be all right. And she's got back into the programme. Her responses are every bit as good as they were before the attack, about the same as the others too."

"Is that what you'd expect? I mean isn't there a difference a willing participant and one that is - well - forced?"

"She's doing fine. There is a difference although it's not as much as you might think. Brian's family were hardly leaping at the opportunity to take part but they all progressed at about the same rate as Rachel, the mother and sister especially. The two daughters took longer to get started but after the initial resistance they soon caught up. With Rachel she's been getting on fine allowing for the time out."

Harry put his head around the door. "Can I have a word?" he said. The Doc waved and went out.

"Sure," I said. "What is it?"

"There's a couple of things. Firstly, Sarah, I'm a bit worried that she got off lightly over the whole Cindy thing. I want to make sure she really doesn't forget that she was out of order on that."

"Of course. She's finished with the current round of training sessions so it won't hurt if you need to have access to her for a few weeks."

"Great, thanks," Harry said.

"What was the other thing?"

Harry looked a bit bashful. "Umm, you're going to think this is a bit odd," he said. "Do you and Kelly want to go out on a date?"

"A date?"

"Yeah. You remember that barmaid I'd picked up with?" I nodded. "Well she sort of says, 'how come I never get to meet any of your friends, and....' You know how it is."

"Wouldn't it be better if I brought one of the girls from here? Tricia maybe," then I remembered our last evening together, it hadn't been a great pleasure for either of us, "Or Eva?"

"Maybe. I'd just thought Kelly sounded pretty normal from what you'd said and maybe it would work?"

"Well, I could have a word with her but its not really a 'going on dates' sort of relationship." Harry looked puzzled. "Its more a 'going in the bedroom and shagging ourselves stupid' sort of relationship."

"Oh," said Harry. I guess I was a bit unfair. There wasn't much else he could say.

"Look, I really don't think it would be a good idea with Kelly. Let's try and set something up with Tricia .She's looking for a way to get into your good books, isn't she?" Harry nodded. "She's been nagging me about trying to get a lead on an operation, is I can't imagine she hasn't been trying to butter you up as well."

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Still she's going to get her chance so maybe she'll back off a bit. We could try that if you think it'll work."

"Sure Harry," I said. "Tricia will be fine about it." Leastways, I hoped she would. "And I'll send Sarah up to see you about the other stuff."

"Thanks," said Harry, "and don't be too gentle with her. I want to make an impression."

I went and found Sarah. She was sitting in one of the training rooms going through some of the material for the next training programme. She looked up as I came in. "Hi, Larry," she said brightly. "Anything I can do?"

"Yes," I said coldly. "You can remember your position here. And you can get stripped off."

"What?" she asked, puzzled by my manner.

"You heard," I said. Evidently dismayed, she started to strip off her blouse and skirt. I turned towards her. "Quicker than that, #06.085," I snapped using Sarah's slave number.

Sarah looked startled. "Sorry, Sir," she said, quickly finishing her task.

"Right," I said. "Over by the wall. Hands on your head. Quick!" Sarah, surprised by my brusqueness, complied. I picked up the phone, to call a guard. "Can you come and take this one down to the cells, please. And you'd better bring restraints."

When they arrived, they were pretty rough with her. Not realising quite what was happening, Sarah struggled at first as they grabbed her arms, wrestling her to her knees.

"Please, you don't need to do this!" she was shaking her head as they dragged her arms down. She was forced into a heavy canvas straight jacket, her arms crossed across her body and then strapped down so that she couldn't move. A strap passed down between her legs and up between her buttocks to fasten to the back of the jacket. Sarah squealed as they jerked the strap tight. One of the guards held a plug gag out towards me. I nodded.

"No!" yelled Sarah. "Noooo oughhghgm." The guard pushed the plug gag home, filling her mouth and fixing it in place with straps behind her head. Sarah was shaking her head in confusion.

"Put her on a short chain in one of the cells," I said. I knew what that would mean – she wouldn't be able to move for more than a foot. "She'll stay that way until her case is reviewed." Sarah, puzzled by her change of fortunes, was led away.

I was set to spend a very agreeable evening with Sukie and Rachel. Normally Sukie did most of the domestic stuff around the flat but after dinner, Rachel insisted that she was going to clear things away and told Sukie and me to go and relax.

By the time she came back, Sukie and I were sprawled on the couch, Sam Cooke on the stereo. Rachell was carrying a tray, she knelt down beside us. "I'm the help, tonight," she said, passing a wine glass to Sukie and then to me. She opened the bottle and poured us each a glass. She sat back on her heels, smiling, as together we toasted her in thanks.

Our amusements were interrupted by a telephone call. It was Steve Glennis. "Larry," he called. "Hope I'm not disturbing you."

I grunted. "No problem, Steve," I said.

He took the hint. "I'll keep it short," he said. "I just wanted to say that this Lady M is one nice piece. You know what it's like here on the Island. She's taken over running the household for me, got the other slaves running around like she's the lady of the manor."

"I guess she is," I responded. "How's the carriage driving?"

"First class. I'd have her over to Meadowlands for the Hambletonian if I could."

"I'm sure she'd pass muster but there might be some comment about what was between the shafts," I said, thinking back to the pony girls that Steve kept in his stables.

Even over the phone I could hear Steve's wry chuckle. "Yes but she's having a good effect on the stock. You should have seen her down in the training ring this morning putting one of them through her paces on the lunge rein."

From what I'd seen of Lady M, the thought of her in tight jodhpurs and riding boots was an agreeable one. "I'd have liked to have seen that," I said.

"Yeah. Well, you need to come over some time, see how the markets are developing over here, that sort of thing."

"Uhhuh," I said, intrigued by where this might lead. "Let me think about when I could get over, Steve," I said.

"OK," said Steve. "Don't leave it too long though."

Chapter 68 : Russian Roulette

Steve's idea sounded attractive. I could see that I could free up some time in a couple of weeks or so but I wasn't sure whether I could justify the trip. I thought I'd talk to Freddie about it first.

If I had thought that Tricia getting her chance as a lead collector would improve her humour I was mistaken. She'd been as pleased as anything when she told me that Harry had said she could finally run lead on a collection. She'd been nagging him (and me) for what seemed like months. But now she seemed less than happy with the challenge.

"Look, just let me get on with it, will you?" Tricia wasn't in the best of moods. I'd made the mistake of offering some unsolicited advice and I was getting my ears bent for my trouble. I knew she wanted to make a good showing but I'd thought it might help if we discussed it. Wrong, evidently.

"OK, OK," I said. "I didn't mean to interfere, I just..."

"Well, just don't she growled and headed off to the other end of the office.

She was still simmering when I stopped by her desk later that afternoon. "Larry," she said, "I'm doing this myself. I don't need your help and I don't want to talk about it. You stick to your account management and marketing and I'll stick to what I'm good at. I don't tell you how to run the clients so don't tell me how to plan a pick up."

"Sure," I said, "Look I don't want to argue about this. Why don't we grab a drink later?"

She shook her head. "Nuh-uh," she grunted turning back to her pile of research reports, "I'm going to be busy. I just don't want to be distracted right now."

Cindy came teetering over on heels high so sharp you wanted to keep your feet out of the way of hers and put another pile of reports down on Tricia's desk. "See what I have to go through," Tricia growled, to no one in particular, "and he wants to go for a drink."

I left her to it feeling more than a bit aggrieved. As I went out I passed Sarah. Harry had decided that she needed a few weeks on menial tasks just to remind her of her real status. They'd put her in an ill fitting overall, shackles on her ankles and wrists, plug gag in her mouth. Dressed like that she was available for any dismal task that was needed around the office. As I left she was on her knees with a scrubbing brush, cleaning up some spilled coffee under one of the desks. She sat back on her heels as I went by but suddenly realised she was supposed not to look up and cast her eyes down again. She set back to her scrubbing. Harry's approach was obviously having an impact.

I didn't see Tricia for a couple of days but I did bump into Eva in the canteen. "How did Tricia's pick up going?" I asked her.

"OK, I guess for a first time. The target's coming into reception just about now, do you want to see?"

Well, Tricia hadn't asked me but I was interested so I thought I'd go look.

Tricia turned up driving a regular Clegg Meat Products truck. She had one of the other girls up front with her. The two of them were grinning as they climbed down from the truck's cab. "Job done," Tricia called out, more for Eva's benefit than for mine, I felt. "One very talented mathematician to help out Sebastian's team, cleanly lifted and stowed in the back. Brought her lap top along too, so no doubt there's lots of useful research stuff on there she'll be able to carry on working with."

Eva opened up the back of the truck. Tricia's target was in the back still unconscious. A pale skinned girl with dark hair, she was maybe twenty two or twenty three years old, I guessed. Black jeans and a pale muddy green top. She didn't look anything special, but then I thought neither had Jackie, the girl I'd helped pick up on my very first mission with Harry. You couldn't always tell much from looks, these days it was as likely she'd been snatched because of the college course she'd completed. "Come on Miss Oblumov," Tricia smirked, "let's get you settled in a nice comfy cell."

One of the guards was carrying Tricia's target off the truck, Tricia had grabbed her laptop case and was carrying it aloft like a trophy. Eva, bent down to pick up the captive's handbag that had been tossed in beside her. "Didn't you say this girl was Ukrainian?" she asked.

"Sure," said Tricia, "straight out of Kiev University, over here studying at Imperial College."

"Oh," said Eva, "I just wondered why she had a Russian Federation flag on her bag that's all." Sure enough, hanging from one of the straps, was a small replica of the Russian flag with its white, blue and red stripes.

"How should I know?" said Tricia aggressively, determined to let nothing detract from her triumph. "The Prep team can work that one out. I've done my job." She grabbed the bag from Eva and stalked off after her captive.

Eva had felt there was something odd about things at that point. I was with Sebastian when he discovered what it was.

"Look," he said. "Pointing to the screen of the captive's lap top. Here's her email account, krysta.oblumov@lse.ac.uk, plenty of correspondence on her research, plenty of emails back and forth to friends in the Ukraine – see all the .co.ua addressees? But

here," he opened up another window, "is another on-line identity alana.kustensky@gorkinet.ru. Lots of family correspondence, personal stuff, emails to a boyfriend in Volgograd, no work stuff at all. Our little collection isn't all she seems."

"Tell me I didn't hear the name Kustensky just then." It was Freddie's voice. He was standing in the doorway.

Seb looked up. "Err, 'fraid so, boss," he said.

"Oh great." I didn't think he was being enthusiastic. "I want a summary of everything you've got on this pick up on my desk in thirty minutes and I want to see whoever responsible for this collection in my office at the same time." He stormed off. Tricia looked puzzled.

She was looking abashed when I saw her an hour later.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"Nothing I can't fix," she said scowling and stalked off.

She might have thought she could fix it but obviously Freddie didn't. He called me in an hour later. "You're the man for PR," he said. "How do we sort this out?"

"I don't know," I said, "I don't really understand the problem except this girl isn't who we thought she was when we picked her up."

"The problem isn't who she isn't, the problem is who she is. Or rather who her daddy is."

"And daddy is?"

"Kustensky," he said. I looked blank. "Anatoly Kustensky."

"Ah," I said, recognising the name finally. "Of football, oil and gas fame."

"Football, oil, gas and one or two businesses not so different from our own in the general area of the old Russian Empire."

"So we have inadvertently picked up his daughter."

"Uh, huh"

"He's not going to be pleased."

"Almost certainly. And of course he wasn't terribly happy with us before – Kushtia being really part of their old sphere of influence in his mind."

"Ah."

"Yes," said Freddie. "Ah, it most certainly is."

"Well my PR advice would be to seize the initiative, contact him directly and explain what happened. I'd get Alana out of her cell and into more comfortable accommodation and suggest that you and he get together so he can be reunited with her as soon as possible."

"Well, it's a start. I'm not sure he'll respond to just an 'I'm terribly sorry, old man,' but I guess we can try. Mind you apologising isn't really my style."

"No," I said. "That's why he just might believe you." Clegg just grunted and looked thoughtful.

I saw Tricia shortly afterwards. "You just had to stick your nose in didn't you? You couldn't just leave it to me to sort out?"

"Hang on," I said. "Clegg called me in. What am I supposed to do? Tell him to get lost because you're being precious about your first mission?"

"Precious! I am not being precious. This wasn't my fault."

"Nobody said it was, Trish. But if Freddie asks me to help then I have to help, don't I?"

"Why can't he trust me to sort it out?"

"Because it looks like you cocked it up."

"Oh, great! So now you're blaming me, too."

"Trish, that's not what I said."

"Oh! Oh, just fuck off. Go and shag your little island girl. Or take a turn with the writer. Just stay away from me." She grabbed her things and ran off. I didn't feel inclined to follow her.

She didn't look any the more pleased to see me when we turned up in Clegg's office two days later to meet with Mr. Kustensky. His daughter was sitting in one of Clegg's comfortable armchairs. They'd found her some clean clothes and she'd had a comfortable room in the area we usually used for entertaining customers. Clegg was sitting behind his desk, looking pensive as he asked the two of us to sit down. Elly was there too, looking as inscrutable as ever. Alana dealt Tricia a poisonous glance. Tricia at least had the grace to look embarrassed. She was wearing a dark blue trouser suit over a white top. I'd suggested to Clegg that something sober and professional would be best. She wasn't talking to me. Moments later Kustensky was shown in.

"Anatoly," Clegg beamed getting to his feet and proffering a hand.

The massive Russian looked at it and ignored it. "Clegg, Ms Grant," he acknowledged. He took no notice of Tricia and myself but turned to his daughter. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Da," she replied. Kustensky grunted and took a seat at Clegg's suggestion.

"Mr Kustensky, I just wish to extend my most heartfelt apologies for the mix up over your daughter." Kustensky looked unimpressed. I could see that Elly was watching him closely, "It was entirely our fault and we should of course have realised through our research that what we thought was a legitimate target was, in fact, off-limits. I can only seek to assure you that it was completely inadvertent. The person responsible is here," he gestured towards Tricia, "and wishes to add her own apologies."

I could imagine the conversation that had gone on between Tricia and Clegg but in fairness to her she managed to make it sound sincere. "Mr Kustensky," she said, "this was completely my fault. I missed details in our original evaluation that would have led us to realise the identity of your daughter. I can only add my apologies to those of Mr Clegg. We have done everything to ensure your daughter's comfort once we realised the situation, as I am sure she will confirm."

Alana gave a short nod of agreement. Kustensky turned to Clegg. "Well," he said. "That seems fair. I accept your apologies. No hard feelings as you British say." Clegg smiled. Tricia looked relieved. Elly was still watching with an impassive stare. "There is however, the issue of compensation," Kustensky went on.

"Compensation?" queried Clegg. Elly began to look concerned.

"Yes," said Kustensky. "The disruption to my daughter's education. The emotional stress. My own time in having to come here. Most inconvenient."

"I see," said Clegg, warily. "I can understand your point of view. What do you propose?"

"Well, Mr Clegg." Kustensky leant forward across the desk and brought his hands together. "Your organisation is respected, well respected. You are known not to employ incompetents. You should not allow the thought that might be the case to prosper. I suggest that I take this young lady here," he pointed to Tricia, "as compensation. You will be seen to have acted decisively. The person responsible will be seen to have paid appropriately. I will have an asset that I can realise. I am prepared to take the risk on the financial implications."

"That's ridiculous," said Tricia getting to her feet, looking towards Clegg for support and then becoming increasingly concerned as she saw it was not there. Elly simply shook her head at Tricia.

"Oh, I don't think so," said Clegg, pulling a pistol from his desk drawer and pointing it straight at her. "It seems like a most reasonable arrangement to me. I know I've invested heavily in your training Tricia, dear, but sometimes you have to know not to let bad money follow good." He turned towards me. "Be a good chap and put something around the girl's wrists will you, Larry old boy," he said.

"No, Larry," Tricia begged, "you can't."

I was in a quandary. We'd had a good thing going for a while but after all it had been Trish that had been the one to back away. And I didn't want to argue with Clegg or Kustensky. "Sorry Trish," I said, reaching for the pair of handcuffs that sat on Clegg's desk and snapped them around Tricia's wrists. Elly seemed to relax.

Alana looked approving. "She grabbed me. That one. She used the drugs," she said, gesturing at Tricia as she struggled against the cuffs. "Now she'll see how it feels. Here," she pulled a scarf from her handbag and tossed it to me. "For a gag. We won't want to listen to her complaints on our way back." I put a knot in the middle of the scarf and ignoring Tricia's pleading looks jammed it into her mouth. She gasped and groaned, I suspected with both pain and betrayal, as I jerked the scarf tight to knot it behind her head. Alana got up and gripped Tricia by the arm.

Kustensky got to his feet. This time he extended his hand. "Freddie," he said.

Clegg responded grasping the Russian's hand in both of his. "Anatoly," he replied.

"I'm pleased we settled this amicably," Kustensky said. "Maybe we should talk more."

"Of course," said Clegg. "I'll see this young lady is shipped on." Alana looked disappointed that she wouldn't be taking Tricia with her. "You'll understand that we'll want to help her to lose any memories that she may have of her work here. There may be some other damage but nothing that will prevent you from using her as a sexual toy or a domestic. In fact the programme we have here will make her very suitable for the former if that's something you can find a use for." Tricia's struggles became all the more acute.

"I understand, Clegg. You must protect your organisation and if this asset has proved unreliable she can only be used for menial tasks anyway. Honour is satisfied in any respect. We also need to talk, about other matters, I think. You are busy with some old friends of ours."

"The Kushtians?" said Clegg. "They approached us, you know."

"I'm sure. I'm sure. Our old colonies are perhaps more willing to look for new friends than to remember their old ones. I'm sure you have the same problems."

"Anatoly, you are right. There are places, once pink on the map, that seem to have forgotten those that might be best able to help them."

"I thought so. There are some parts of Africa where we might be able to take a role not open to you any more. Some cooperative ventures might be possible. You would acquire in Europe or UK we would sell in some of the central and southern African states. Would that make sense?"

Clegg looked towards Elly, evidently taking her deadpan look for support. "It could, Anatoly, it could. We're more in the client specific markets these days anyway. Not so much in general sales, we'd be happy to talk about different ways of doing things.."

"Good. I'll arrange a conversation between us and Constanza. She's keen to be part of this too."

"OK," said Freddie, carefully. "Can you give us any tips on dealing with the Kushtians?"

Anatoly laughed as he got to his feet. "Sell to them if you want but don't trust them and never try to work with them. Too greedy, too careless. They've lived in the past for too long. Maybe they'll change or maybe the past will come around again but for those of us that must live in the present they don't make good bedfellows." Elly's face betrayed a flicker of an 'I told you so' expression. "Oh and stay away from their women," he said, "sell them all that you like but never take one for your own. Trust me, I know from experience." Alana gave him a poisonous look. For some reason, it made me suspect that her mother might have been Kushtian.

At that, Anatoly left taking his daughter with him. Clegg called for one of the guards. He looked surprised to see Tricia struggling and grunting but he didn't hesitate when Clegg told him to take her down to the cells. She whimpered as she was hustled away.

Clegg followed them out, leaving Elly and me behind. Elly sat down behind Clegg's desk. As she did so she pulled a small automatic pistol from behind her where it had been tucked into the waistband of her trousers. She checked it, flicked the safety catch on, and put it down on the desk. "You made a good call," she said, smiling at me.

"Call?" I said.

"Over Tricia. I wasn't sure if you would. I thought there might be some sentimental attachment that might make things difficult." I didn't say anything. "I wonder if it would have been different if it had been Sukie or Rachel."

"Perhaps," I said slowly. "But, then, I feel responsible for them. They are here because of me. Tricia wasn't. She chose this game."

"And what do you think about this game? You chose it too, didn't you?"

"Yes," I acknowledged. "But it's different to how I thought it would turn out I guess."

"You're not the only one," Elly said. "but I need to talk to Freddie about that."

Chapter 69 : Conference Call

Tricia's downfall caused some consternation in the organisation for a while. Nobody likes to see a colleague suddenly taken out like that. On the other hand most people seemed to have had a belly full of having their ears bent by Tricia's constant, "Why won't they let me lead a collection?" so the general view was that she had it coming to her.

Harry and Rick were pretty nervous in case Freddie came gunning for them too. After all it had been Harry's call, in the end to give Tricia the lead on that job and Rick's team had done the intelligence gathering. In the end I guess, Freddie decided that it was better to have them in place worrying about things than to try to change things around.

I saw Tricia after they'd been working on her for only a few days. She was being put through her paces down in one of the training rooms. The combination of the drugs and the mistreatment she was going through had taken its toll already. Anatoly had said he intended to use her as a housemaid at their summer dacha. Freddie had thought she should be delivered in a state where she was fully equipped to perform her required role as well as having no recollection of her work for his business. She'd been put into a maid's uniform, black dress, white apron and cap. Her trainer was sitting in an armchair while Tricia served him a drink. I looked in on them. Tricia didn't respond to my arrival. Her blank look and the dribble of drool from the corner of her slack mouth provided all the evidence that was needed of the ruthlessness of the way in which she was being prepared for Kustensky. Freddie had warned that there might be some damage. As far as I could see, it was more a question of whether she'd even be able to function in the limited way that we'd promised. From the way she looked it was surprising that she could manage to walk and hold a tray. I found it pretty distressing to see her like that, but I still didn't think that there was much I could have done about it, once Freddie (and, presumably, Elly) had decided to cut their losses over her. I was just glad that it hadn't involved Sukie or Rachel. That would have been a harder call to make.

Freddie was busy. He and Elly had been talking together a lot. It was obvious from what Elly had said that she wasn't happy with how things were going with the business. I'd mentioned the conversation that I had had with Steve and we'd agreed that I'd follow that up if I got a chance. Then Freddie told me that he and Elly had agreed on moving things forward with Anatoly. I sat in on a telephone conference with the two of them, Anatoly and Constanza.

Constanza kicked things off. "Things seem to have been a bit difficult for you lately, Freddie," she began. "I mean the business with Lady M and now poor Alana. Not what I'd have thought from your operation."

"I think you'll find," Clegg said slowly, "that there have been rather fewer problems with my operation than with yours, Constanza dear. Let's see, there was that concert pianist whose fingers you managed to break during the collection process and I seem to recall that there was a religious sect that was not so happy with the idea of receiving a new priestess that was only almost a virgin. This is a risky business, Constanza, we all make mistakes."

"Hmm," cut in Anatoly. "If you two can avoid the bickering we might get a little further. Let me explain my current thinking. You two run perfectly adequate collection and preparation operations." It sounded as though Anatoly almost heard Clegg's grin of satisfaction and I could imagine Constanza's querulously raised eyebrow. "At least most of the time, that is. Constanza, your expertise is in Europe, you don't understand the UK. Clegg, you are as proficient in the UK as Constanza is in mainland Europe. I'd like the two of you to work together. The areas that my organisation covers have a great appetite for product from western Europe. It's not practical for me to source it myself – Clegg you know how conspicuous some of my team would look in London - but I would like to have some reliable partners, people I can work with on a continuing basis."

"I'm not sure, Anatoly," Constanza began. "We're not in a volume business, any more than Clegg is. You've seen the sort of work we do. Most of it is custom collection to order."

"That's very much the way for us too, Anatoly," Clegg agreed. "Almost all of what we are doing is very specific these days. We've turned off the old operations that picked up girls on spec. I don't think we'd be very well set up to fill the cages of some Georgian sex camp."

I watched Elly wince. She wasn't always comfortable with Clegg's prejudices about foreigners.

"I think, Freddie," Anatoly came back in measured tones, "that you have a rather out of date view of my clients. We are not talking about high volume but high quality. There's a lot of money here and a great interest in acquiring 'toys' as my clients call them."

"Toys?" said Clegg.

"Yes, it's rather a different product from what you've been used to supplying. I sometimes think that the Europeans have lost all subtlety, your barbarian origins are reasserting themselves. The approach to slave owning there is often so brutal. Constanza, tell me, do you ever take product back for resale?"

"You know we don't, Anatoly. It's too often damaged. We leave the resale market for others. If we've picked it and prepped it we can speak for it. Otherwise, someone else can take the risk."

Clegg joined in. "She's right Anatoly. It's a costly business, looking for new collections all the time, but most of the customers can't be relied on to keep them in anything like original condition."

"Well," said Anatoly, "I understand that. But why is it? I'll tell you. It's because your customers are brutes. And Clegg, you must know the Kushtian's are the worst." Clegg grunted. "Now, my client base is rather different. They are looking for

something that they can care for and enjoy. It's a very good life for those that are purchased. They lose their freedom, of course, but apart from that they have a very comfortable life. They have a rather unique relationship with their new owners and we retain a continuing interest in their well being. The owners all understand that they must not mistreat their toys – the consequences for that are unfortunate for the owner. But on the other side the owner is provided with a sexually delightful companion. We find that requests are often for more mature women than is the case in other sectors. Forty plus year olds seem to be highly desired and well suited to the role of toys."

"And what does that mean for us?" Clegg seemed wary. I had my own thoughts. As far as I could tell it meant lower volumes with less repeat business, higher end user prices but lower margins because we'd be shipping through Anatoly's operation and I didn't imagine he'd be doing it for the love of it.

Anatoly spoke slowly. "I suggest it will mean simply some additional business to your regular activities. You will be concerned about margins and volumes I am sure." Elly leant forward towards the speakerphone, she had obviously picked up on the same problem that I had. "That is not a point on which you should concern yourself, the premium on this product line is more than sufficient to cover the expenses of both my organisation and yours, whichever of you is contributing. I am quite happy to pursue an open book on accounting for these items. As to volumes, well, it's just additional sales, isn't it? These are opportunities you would not normally reach. It's marginal business for you, additional coverage for your research teams, taking up unused capacity in your Prep activities and so on."

Clegg leant forward to the speakerphone. "Could you excuse us for a minute, Anatoly?" He said.

"Sure," said the Russian.

Clegg clicked the mute switch. "What do we think?"

Elly spoke first. "I don't trust him. Not one inch. But it's additional business and we could do with it to help cover overheads. As long as we don't invest additionally. And we don't have to work with Constanza directly."

The reference to Constanza puzzled me. Clegg had seemed quite sanguine about their encounters. Their exchanges seemed to have an amiable nature. Of course, I then thought, that might well be what Elly had concerns about. Clegg turned to me. "Larry?" he said.

"I think it's a bit of a distraction and I'd be surprised if it turns out to be genuinely marginal business. You always end up needing more resources in my experience. On the other hand, it fits with our aims to move up-market in terms of product and client if we believe what Anatoly says about 'toys'. Plus I've been worried by how much the Kushtian volumes have been dominating what we've been doing. If they went away suddenly for any reason we'd be in serious cash flow problems, I suspect. I suppose my view is we should do it but keep our eyes open and carry on trying to develop other routes to market or product lines."

Clegg sat back. "All right," he said. "I think we're agreed. Let's go back on the line." He flicked up the mute switch. The sound of Constanza and Anatoly chuckling after an exchanged joke came through the speaker. "Sorry for that," said Clegg.

"Don't worry," said Constanza, "I was just asking Anatoly how his daughter was."

Clegg looked irritated. Elly put out a hand to his arm as if to say, "Its not worth it." Clegg grunted. "I'm sure she's fine. Isn't she, Anatoly?"

"Of course, Freddie, of course," Anatoly came back. "Do you think I would be asking you to collect and prep high value items if she'd come to any harm? In fact, but don't tell her I told you, I think you gave her rather an easy ride. Her story of collection and confinement told me your people had the right methods for this sort of product."

Clegg looked rather self satisfied. Elly gave him a "you're being flattered, be careful" look.

Anatoly went on. "Well, Constanza is keen to participate? Can I assume that you are too, Clegg?"

"Keen is too strong a word, Anatoly," Clegg responded. "Willing would be better. Let's see how it goes. But you can count us in, at least initially."

"You're too much of a sceptic, Freddie," Constanza's voice came in.

"Maybe," said Clegg. "I just feel happier that way."

"All right," said Anatoly. "I will set things up with my team. I assume you can make available suitable communication channels to allow us to specify our requirements. My legal team will put together a distribution collaboration agreement."

"You'd better let me see that, Anatoly," said Elly.

"Of course," said Anatoly.

"Still spending your time with your head in contracts?" said Constanza.

"Still spending yours with your head in men's laps?" snapped Elly in an uncharacteristic momentary loss of control. Clegg coughed and looked sheepish. Elly looked as if she regretted saying it.

Anatoly cut in. "Well that's all from my side," he said. "I expect we'll all speak again soon."

The line went dead. Freddie turned to me and said, "I want to understand more about these 'toys'. The way Glennis treats his stable is the nearest thing I've heard of to that. Didn't you say you were going to see him?" I nodded. "Well, I think you should make it sooner than later." I left Elly and Freddie together. It sounded like they had some unfinished business to discuss.

Chapter 70 : Colonial Ambitions

Rick was still busy refining the sexualisation and pleasure programme. Harry was using the Tricia debacle as an excuse to get all of his team to re-run some of the basic operations drills. As he said, after the problems with Lady Marchmont, and now this, there was room for improvement, to say the least.

Life with Sukie and Rachel carried on much as before. Sukie seemed content in her role. Rachel had taken on the sexualisation programme with enthusiasm and her writing was better than ever.

I was trying to set up a trip to see Steve Glennis but in the mean time business carried on as usual. Clegg had been contacted by another of his chums who was looking for a more personal contact. With Brian now long out of the picture, Clegg had asked me to follow it up.

I was sitting in the Long Room at Lords. Out on the pitch the England team were 127 for 7 in the first session of the final day needing another 230 runs to avoid an innings defeat by the Australians and the loss of the Ashes. With the best will in the world it was looking like a bad day for English cricket. There was a collective groan from the crowd around the ground outside and a ripple of polite applause. 127 for 8, I assumed.

The door at the far end of the room swung open and an elderly man in wheel chair barged his way through and headed towards me. "Ross?" he asked as he pulled to a halt alongside me. I nodded. "Good he said glad you're on time. Do sit down."

He was in his late seventies I guessed wearing pale flannel trousers and a striped blazer. He wore a tie that had the air of a demented snake caught in an act of strangulation. It carried the blood and vomit stripes of the Marylebone Cricket Club.

I felt I ought to apologise for interrupting his enjoyment of the game at a crucial moment.

"Enjoyment?" he snorted. "There's more fun to be had sticking your head in a wasps nest. Completely useless bunch. No backbone. No fibre." He held his hand out. "Colonel Snell," he said, "My friends call me 'basher'. You can too."

"Unusual nickname, 'basher'. Cricket? Bit of a batsman were you? Army days?" I said.

"No," said Snell. "Before that. School days. Some of my friends seemed to think I had an inordinate fondness for the masturbatory arts. Quite right of course. It's kept me fit for the past sixty years. Can't complain can I?"

I was regretting asking. I was keen to change the subject. "Mr Clegg said you had a possible project for us."

"Yes," Basher replied, "Do you never feel a little cheated? As though your rightful legacy has been usurped by others?"

I shook my head, I really didn't have much of an idea what he was on about.

"You see this?" He pointed to a large world globe beside the case that held the tiny urn that the collective endeavours of the two teams on the field were currently directed towards. "In my youth a large part of this was coloured pink. The British Empire, young man, the British Empire. Just think, we ruled a quarter of the globe. And what thanks do we have for it now?"

I tried to look sympathetic. I wasn't at all clear what these rants had to do with the job we were being asked to take on.

"None!" He barked, prodding at the globe with his stick. "None at all. And they have the gall to beat us at our own games. Football. Cricket. Golf. All given to the world by the British. And the weak kneed government does nothing about our national teams. And to what avail? I ask you? Ha! The occasional success, perhaps, but it's the exception. Mark my words!"

The club steward was looking concerned at my guest's mistreatment of the globe.

"Never mind Barry, my young fellow, we'll show them."

"Its Larry," I said correcting him.

"Precisely. Barry. I'm no longer a young man, Barry, want to find some companionship for my old age."

"I see, a woman of mature years perhaps," I suggested, "someone to bring cheer in your autumn years."

"Pah, stuff and nonsense!" he exploded. "I said I wasn't young not that I was decrepit. No, I'm looking for some young girls to amuse me. Take my mind off my aches and pains. Give me something to do on the long dark winter evenings if you know what I mean?" he gave me a lascivious leer. "I may be in a wheel chair but just because my legs don't work, don't imagine that everything below the waist is non-functional. Constant use, that's what's kept it working. Constant use!"

Well who was I to judge? "I'm sure we have something suitable in stock," I said.

"Shouldn't think so," he said. "I'm a man of particular tastes."

In my experience "particular tastes" usually turned out to be a euphemism for "raving pervert" but again the more specialised the tastes, the more opportunity for us to add value and the better our fee. I said, "And those tastes are?"

"I wish to rebuild the Empire." I raised my eyebrows. "On a small scale to be sure," he said seeing my astonishment, "but rebuild it I shall." He dropped his voice. "A stable of young ladies from each corner of the Empire. A dozen young women – a dozen mind not some nasty, continental, decimal ten. All of them, under twenty five say. Brought back under the rightful rule of a scion of the United Kingdom."

"I see," I said, "So what Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India, South Africa,..."

"Yes, all of those. Malaya, naturally, Hong Kong, Rhodesia, Kenya, Nigeria. And of course from the biggest colony of all."

"Sorry," I said, puzzled, "I thought we'd covered the main ones."

"You omitted the American Colonies."

"What? The USA?"

"I don't recognise that term. That fool George's fault He lost the lot. Should have held on to it. Think what the Empire would be like today! But yes we must have at least one representative of the Thirteen Colonies – New York, Carolina, Massachusetts Bay, somewhere like that."

"Ah," I said. "You realise, of course that this will be an expensive project. I mean we'd be talking one and half, two million, ah." I caught myself in time, "no, at least a million pounds sterling."

"Not a problem young man," he replied, looking relieved that I had avoided the use of the word "dollars".

"You don't feel that this could prove something of a strain? I mean a man of your years. So many young women?"

"I may be in a wheel chair, young Barry but I'm not in my grave just yet. I'm more than able to provide them with the care and attention that they deserve. People forget that the home country had a great responsibility to care for those of its subject territories. These young ladies will be well cared for, you need not worry. It might help if some of them had some nursing skills though. Just to be practical."

"OK, now perhaps we can talk about how we should manage the project. Normally these days we'd let you advise us on requirements, comment on our plans and so on through our web site but I guess we could..."

He interrupted. "I'm happy with a computer. Just give me the url the log-on i.d. and a password." He could see I was non-plussed. "Listen my boy," he said, "if you knew how difficult it was to get hold of pornography in my youth you'd realise that coming to grips with Mr Gates' abominations is a breeze compared with the benefits provided. I'm perfectly at home on the Internet."

I thought about Basher. It seemed he was much closer to Kushnati and the Kushtians than to Anatoly's vision of a toy owner. I was pretty clear that if we did find him the girls he wanted we'd not be able to re-sell them.

Chapter 71 : Island Jaunt

While Harry and Rick set up the colonial collection I arranged to take my trip to see Steve.

I felt I should let Kelly know that I wasn't going to be around for a while and the night I was due to leave I wasn't far from her place so I thought I'd drop in. I tried her mobile a couple of times but didn't get a reply.

I got to her house. It looked as if she was there. The car was outside and there were lights on. I rang the bell. There wasn't any answer but I was sure I could hear people moving around inside. I rang the bell again, longer this time. Eventually through the frosted glass of the front door I saw someone coming.

Kelly opened the door. Dressed in a black polo and slacks she looked pretty hot, but she didn't seem too happy to see me. "Oh," she said, "It's you."

"Hmm," I said. "Not a great welcome. Shall I go away?"

Kelly looked apologetic and a little embarrassed. "Sorry," she said and then laughed. "It's just Oh look, come on in, you'll get the picture." She led the way up the hall. I shut the door behind me.

We got to the living room and I saw what she was embarrassed about. Sprawled on her living room floor were two helplessly bound and gagged women. "This is Larry, a friend of mine," Kelly said to the two of them. "Don't worry, he's cool with this."

From the looks on their faces I didn't think they were.

"Larry, this is Brianna," Kelly pointed to a hog-tied red head, rolling from side to side on the floor as she struggled against the ropes that tied her wrists, ankles, knees and elbows. Her mouth was filled with a knot tied into the middle of a scarf that was gagging her but she was still able to communicate that she wasn't happy with my arrival. "and this is Sue." Alongside the red head, a girl with short blond hair was struggling with her own bonds. Both were fully clothed; Sue in a pale blue dress, Brianna in brown trousers and a cream sweater. Kelly turned back to me. "Do you want some tea," she asked impishly. I nodded. She said, "Have a seat, I won't be a minute."

I sat down on the couch, Kelly's two captive friends struggling and mewling at my feet. Kelly was evidently quite proficient in her use of ropes. Neither of the girls showed much sign of being able to get free.

True to her word, Kelly didn't take long. She emerged from the kitchen with two mugs of tea. She sat down on the couch alongside me.

"I didn't have you down for doing the tying," I said.

"It's not ideal," said Kelly. "We take turns." Brianna and Sue looked distressed that Kelly was discussing things but they couldn't really object. "I'm going to be in real trouble when it's their go after this." Brianna gave her an affirming nod. "Still what the hell." She leant forward and rolled Sue over on her face. As she sat back on the couch with her tea, she put her feet on Sue's bottom, using her as a foot stool. The girl gave a muffled whimper of protest. "Now, what can I do for you?" Kelly asked.

"I don't know that it's the best time," I said, nodding to the two girls that were still struggling on the floor. "I'm going to be away for a while, so I thought I'd come and say to look after yourself while I'm away."

"That's nice," said Kelly. "It's a shame though. Maybe you could have come around and tie all three of us up." Brianna and Sue took to grunting their protests.

"Sounds like you have some persuading to do," I said, though the idea of the three of them, trussed up for fun had a considerable appeal. "Look, I'll leave you to this. I'll give you a call when I get back."

Kelly looked down at the two helpless girls. "Yeah," she said, "It's probably best. I'll see you out."

We walked out to the hall together. As I stopped at the door I kissed her. She kissed me back, enthusiastically. "I meant what I said about the three of us," she said. "They will have so got off on this, you know."

"And I meant what I said about look after yourself," I replied. "I'm not sure how long I'll be away."

"You look after yourself too, then," she said, and we parted.

The flight out to Barbados was uneventful – just how I like them. The security routines at the airport were particularly tedious, especially since I knew that a container was going out, with a couple of girls doped and helpless, in the hold of the same aircraft that I was sitting in. "Did you pack your bags yourself, sir?" : "Yes." : "Does your checked baggage contain any of the following prohibited items?" : "No, but there is a 24 year old blonde and a 30 year old brunette that you might be interested in....." Customs and Immigration at Grantley Adams International were no problem. Then it was just a short taxi ride down to Bridgetown Harbour in order to meet up with Steve's seaplane.

The pilot put the Beaver down close to the pier as we taxied in I could see someone waiting in the dusk as the sun set. I climbed out of the plane, grabbed my bag from the back seat – no helpless mewling female cargo this time – and stepped across from the Beaver's float and on to the wooden jetty.

"Hi," said a voice. "You must be Larry. Steve asked me to meet you."

I looked up from my bag to see the broad smile of Lady Marchmont. She extended a hand and I reached forward to take it. "Hi," I said, puzzled somewhat to see her walking around without at least some sign of restraints. She was wearing the shortest of denim cut-offs and a sleeveless denim shirt tied off under her tits. There were no cuffs, collars, or shackles that I could see and nowhere to hide them either.

"Leave the bag, I'll get someone to get it later," she said. She peered at me. "Have we met before?"

I felt honesty was the best policy. "Mmm," I said. "You were in hospital in Switzerland and wearing rather a lot of bandages."

"Of course. You were pushing the trolley. How did things turn out for those nurses? They weren't too terrible to me."

I had to confess that I had no idea. The last time I had seen them was when Harry and I had left them hogtied and grunting into bandage wad gags on the bed at the clinic. I guessed that Constanza would have been fairly un-amused with them but I didn't really know.

I walked back up the jetty with Lady M. Steve emerged from the house as we got to the edge of the lawn. Lady M took off towards him at a run and threw her arms around him. Steve had just managed to disentangle himself by the time I reached the veranda. He put his hand out. "Larry," he called. "Good to see you again. Thought you'd like to see Angela too."

I nodded.

"You'll need a drink." It wasn't a question and he knew I didn't need to answer. "Get us a couple of rum punches, hun," he said patting Angela's backside. She wagged a finger at him disapprovingly but laughed and disappeared into the house. Steve watched her go. "Now that," he said, "has to be one of the best purchases, I've made."

"I'm glad she's a success," I said sitting myself down in one of the cane chairs. The view from the veranda looked out to the ocean where the sky at the horizon was fading from dark gold into purple as the last remnants of the sunset disappeared. "She seems to have adjusted to her new life remarkably quickly. I thought she might be wearing a collar at least."

"She's an intelligent woman. I explained how things were. She knows that she can go anywhere she likes on the island. She has a lot of freedom here but she knows that there is no way off for her and that if she tried it could be very detrimental to her health. On the other hand she is treated well. Freddie shared with me some of your thoughts on the sexualisation programme. We're using something similar for Angela on a much smaller scale of course but it seems to work. She's very receptive to those ideas and she's now only too eager to please. I think she's had a long time of only pleasing herself. She's glad of the change."

Angela reappeared from the house carrying a tray with three fruit and alcohol laden glasses. She put the tray on the table between us and curled up on the floor beside Steve, resting her head against Steve's thigh. Steve reached down to toy with her hair with one hand while he picked up his drink with the other. I joined him.

We sat there, not talking, just enjoying the early evening. Steve and Angela looked relaxed and comfortable with one another. I downed the last of my punch. "I'll turn in if that's OK," I said.

"Sure," said Steve. "I know what it's like. We've got an early start tomorrow. There's a few folk coming in for the meeting. You're in the end room. Can you find it?"

"Yes," I said, "I remember." Mainly what I remembered was that it was where I had first encountered Sukie, It seemed that Steve had a benign influence on the women he acquired. I waved them goodnight and headed off into the house.

The room was just as it was before, the large fan turning slowly in the ceiling, the white louvered shutters propped on by a rattan chair. My bag had been unpacked and my things put away. I tossed my clothes on a chair and fell into bed.

I must have laid awake for twenty minutes or so before I started to doze off so it was through a half asleep haze that I heard the door to my room open.

It was Angela. "Steve thought you might need some help to get to sleep," she said. I blinked my eyes into focus. The light from the hall outside, shining through the doorway, threw her into silhouette. It was clear that she was naked. Suddenly I didn't feel quite as sleepy.

"That would be great," I said turning back the bed sheet to invite her in. She slid into the bed alongside me, her hands on my chest, stroking and running her fingers across my arms.

Although she was naked, I soon realised that almost every part of her body appeared to be adorned with some jewelled ornament. On her head she wore a chain that held a drop pearl in the centre of her forehead. Her neck was encircled by a choker necklace with eight strands of pearls, her arms and ankles carried bracelets and bangles. In each of three piercings in either ear she wore neat gold hoops, those to the front slightly smaller than those to the back. It was as if Steve was presenting her as a gift while showing the regard with which he held her, making the gift more precious still.

Her love making was as generous as it was creative, fired with the same energy and will to please that Rachel and Sukie showed. Rather than taking my mind off things, I ended up feeling homesick. At the end we both fell asleep, her head against my chest.

Chapter 72 : Island Ideas

The following day started early. I heard the drone of aircraft engines as the sun started to stream through the slats of the shutters. Angela had gone. I pushed back the shutters expecting to see the Beaver winging in but instead it was a Twin Otter, its two turbo props whining as it banked around to make its approach into the bay.

Steve put his head around my door. "We're going to start with some breakfast on the veranda, if that's OK," he said.

I nodded, took a quick shower, pulled on a shirt and a pair of slacks and headed off to join him.

Steve and Angela were already there with their guests when I reached the veranda. I recognised two of them from my last trip, Narod Jesper and Daphne Challis, the other three were new to me. Steve introduced them. One woman, two men, all Americans. They'd each brought their own slaves - five girls shackled and chained together by their collars were being led shuffling up the path from the jetty.

"Well, hi everybody. Thanks for coming over. I'm sure you'll have a good few days but I hope you won't mind if we spend this morning on some business. Some of you will have met Larry here," Daphne and Jesper nodded, "but for those that haven't he's working with a bunch of Brits who are pretty good at sourcing the sort of amusements we all hold dear. I thought it would be useful to give him some first hand input on how you guys see things going."

The column of shackled girls arrived at the house, looking uncertain about their surroundings. Their neck chains removed they each knelt beside their owners. Each equally well trained, they knew not to interrupt proceedings.

Jesper kicked things off. He talked about how he had sourced the half dozen slaves he now had in his collection and complained about how difficult it was to get slaves with specific skills. He didn't seem to know what we'd been doing on customised pick up but there was no real reason why he should, we hadn't tried to promote what we'd done in the States. I talked a bit about the stuff that Rick had done with the web site and all of Steve's guests seemed interested. The others chipped in their experiences. Daphne had had some problems with training new intake and some of the preparation techniques being used in the States sounded a bit primitive compared with what we were doing.

There were, however, two themes that the group kept coming back to; toys and new sources.

They were all agreed that the old idea of slaves for house work was disappearing. What was the point of keeping slaves for housework, was the general conclusion. Once you take into account the security costs they are expensive compared with hiring in and they need too much attention. There might be an argument for slaves for agricultural work but why not just use the right machinery. What they wanted slaves for was recreation, for fun. Sometimes (mostly) sexual but sometimes just for companionship. OK some of the recreation might be a bit extreme – one of the women's eyes really lit up as she described the delight she felt keeping her slave caged under her bed while she fucked one of her male lovers – but it was recreation nevertheless. They also agreed that they were keeping toys for longer than they had kept slaves before. It took time to find a good one and it wasn't just a question of the slave's skills and looks but once you found one you tended to hang on to them.

Daphne was holding forth about her experiences. Narod was looking bored, stroking the hair of the girl kneeling beside him. Angela and two of Steve's house-slaves arrived with drinks. I hadn't realised it but most of the morning had already gone. I tried to pull the discussion back to the second point at issue, new sources.

"This one," Narod said, patting the girl at his side, "is a good example. I found you in cyber space didn't I, pet?" The girl nodded. "She was looking to be owned, looking to be kept and cared for. Of course, she was maybe looking for something not quite as permanent as she has found but she has at least found that." The girl looked around at the others. She was kneeling, sitting on her haunches beside Narod. She looked a little embarrassed as she toyed with the chain that ran between her wrists. I could see that she bore a tattoo with the letters N and J entwined together on her right shoulder. "Now the good thing," Narod went on, "is that this young lady was very cheap to acquire. But," he stopped. "And it's a big but. I've had to prep and train her myself. That's a big job and I've not done a lot of it. I'd far rather be able to acquire willing source through the current channels, properly prepped and trained but just starting with a willing source. Do you see?"

I nodded. What he was saying fitted in with some of my own prejudices.

The others dived in as well. Each outlining their own experiences of trying to use so-called "willing" sources. By the end of it I could see that there were opportunities for us, if we wanted to follow them up.

Chapter 73 : Colonial Collection

I got back to the UK to find complete chaos at Heathrow Airport. The place was stuffed full of armed police. They even had armoured troop carriers lurking around the airport roads. Nobody was saying anything about what was going on. A security alert was the best I could get anyone to admit to. The main focus seemed to be on international departures and I didn't have any trouble getting out of the airport once we'd been able to find a gate for our aircraft – with no international flights leaving, the place was filling up.

It was the following morning when I heard what had been going on. Allegedly British intelligence had received a tip off from "a credible source" that Chechen terrorists intended to attack an aircraft leaving the UK for Russia.

Wherever that tip off came from, it sounded like they hadn't found anything or that nothing had been really intended or whoever was planning the attack had been scared off. It was only later that evening that I learned that one very large piece of excrement had come into contact with rotating blades.

"Kremlin Deny Naked Girl Kidnap" the headline on billboards outside the underground station said when I emerged from the office. I picked up a copy of the London Evening News. According to the article the SVR, Russia's foreign intelligence service, successors to the KGB, had denied any involvement in a plot to transport a drugged and naked woman out of the UK in an airline cargo container. The woman had allegedly been discovered during the anti-terrorist alert following a baggage and cargo search of an aircraft flying to St Petersburg. The British Government had refused to comment on security issues, seemingly bouncing the press between the security services, the police, the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office, the Department of Transport and the CAA without anyone giving them enough to confirm their suspicions.

My first reaction was, "bollocks." It was obviously Tricia. She'd been due for shipping while I was in the Caribbean.

I had a message from Freddie, which seemed to confirm my thoughts. "Don't bother about the current excitement," it said. "I'm calling in a few favours."

By the next day even the Government had given up, trying to avoid commenting. The Daily Mirror had found that a girl had been admitted to hospital near Stansted airport. According to The Mirror, Stansted was handling a lot of cargo traffic to Russia; ATRAN Cargo Airlines, a spin off from Aeroflot, was running transports out of there. Interviews with doctors suggested that the girl was in a seriously confused state, apparently mentally disturbed, and with no memory of her identity. The paper had even managed a shot of the cargo container – or at least a cargo container – it was taken from so far away that in reality it could have been any of a hundred containers lying around at the airport. The questioning caption, "Was This Russian Girl's Flying Prison?" probably deserved the answer, "Maybe", "No," or at best "Who can tell?" but that wasn't the point.

I tried to reach Freddie and then Elly but I couldn't get through to either of them. When I found out where they were, I guess I wasn't surprised to learn that they had flown out for a meeting with Anatoly.

I didn't think there was much I could do about it, anyway. If there was anything about Tricia's trip to point to us, then I didn't think our first problem was going to be "what is the right PR spin to put on this?"

I spoke to Rick, He didn't think we had too much to worry about. "First," he said, "she has zero awareness of what's happened to her. Freddie had been really keen to get a deep burn on anything that might relate to her life with us, especially after he found out that she'd had a briefing from my lot that should have told her the target was a problem. He got quite cross when he found out she'd had the set of email intercepts from the Kustensky email as well as the Oblumov one. Tricia had somehow buried them at the bottom of her files. After that Freddie was pretty insistent that she got the works. We were really worried about whether she'd actually be able to function when she got to the other end."

"And second?"

"Second; it's not one of our containers."

How come?" I asked.

"Anatoly wanted to use one of his own. Said it would make it easier getting clearance at the other end. Plus Freddie had agreed with Anatoly that she should be shipped FOB anyway. His team picked her up from the Prep Centre, we just handed her over naked and clean."

"Is that going to cause difficulty for him?"

"His boys over here are hopping mad but after that business with Litvinenko they reckon that MI5 and the SVR are going to be tripping over each other enough to keep Anatoly out of the picture."

"So what's the word on the Chechens? Was this genuine? Where did the tip off come from?"

"Nobody on Anatoly's team is saying, even if they've got any idea. My take is that its one of four possibilities. Either it was a genuine security alert and we were just unlucky. Or someone here didn't want to see Tricia go. Or someone's trying to trip Anatoly up. Or someone's trying to make us look dumb."

"I don't buy the second," I said. "Nobody seemed that bothered and there would be too big a risk that it would come whistling back into our organisation. Any of the others could be right."

"And I can think of at least one person that might be interested in making us look dumb."

"Who?" I said.

"Constanza," Rick said. "Got to cherchez the old femme, that's my thought. She'll be wanting to cream off as much as she can from the Russian Toy contracts and she'll still be pissed about Lady Marchmont."

It sounded plausible to me but I didn't have any more evidence than the Daily Mirror did. Still, that wouldn't stop rumours spreading around the organisation any more than it stopped newspapers writing good stories.

I disentangled my self from Rick and went to talk to Harry about the pick up of the girls for Basher. He didn't see any reason to put a hold on it so everything was going ahead as planned.

I'm not sure who had come up with the idea. Maybe it just sprang out of the stuff we'd been doing with video generally and the sting behind the All Spice pick up all those months ago. Anyway we'd worked out a plan for the Colonial Collection as it was becoming known.

I needed to brief Clegg about my trip but I guessed that he would have plenty on his plates for a while so I sat in on Colonial Collection to kill some time until he got back.

Harry ran the briefing session personally. It was a resource-intensive project but then we were planning to lift twelve girls in one go and that wasn't something even Harry's team did that often. We'd got the house set up and we'd sent out the invitations. We just had to wait for the girls to turn up.

Harry ran through the photos we had of each of the targets. The research team had chosen them using the basic database that we had already built up plus some custom work at Heathrow and Gatwick airports. We'd been able to tap into the CCTV coverage of international arrivals and some judicious monitoring around the time of landings from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and so on, we had been able to identify a number of possibles. That had been followed up by our conventional surveillance and target screening before any of the girls was approached.

We'd kept Basher updated through the web site; he'd been involving himself enthusiastically all the way along. Sebastian showed me the log of his emails. "Like the look of that one." "She'll do." "Try to find one with longer legs." "Mylene – ha, with tits like that they should call her Melons ☺" "Like the idea of Miss Monique Devent : General Wolf had the right idea about French Canadians!!!"

Finally we had an agreed list for the next step. "It's the opportunity of a lifetime," the canvassers had said. "Imagine, Big Brother - but on a global scale. It's a reality show syndicated live around the world; right across the English speaking world. It's a passport to instant, worldwide, fame." We'd come up with the idea of 'International House' – a TV show that put girls from arrange of cultures and countries together in one house for two months. The real hook for viewers was that the whole thing was going to be kept secret until everyone was already in the house and the programme was about to start; that way (we said), we'd build up a real cult status among those that get into it from day 1.

We showed the girls the promotional material that we planned to use once the programme started. "The International House – 12 House Mates – 12 Nations – One World - One Winner" the ads said. We made a big thing of the housemates being part of a demonstration of the ways in which different cultures could get along. That was why they were their by invitation, we said. But also, it must be said, we didn't under emphasis the opportunity for global TV exposure or the \$250,000 prize money. We only needed 18 approaches to get our 12 house mates. (The other six are on a list back in the Prep Centre somewhere, it seemed a shame to waste the research. We told them afterwards that the whole idea had fallen through).

With the lift team briefed we headed off to the house. We'd set it up with a few (not very well).hidden cameras for the girls to find but the basic premise was that it was a normal London house, except that the girls would have no access to the outside world. They'd been told to tell people they'd be away for two months but they absolutely couldn't tell anyone where they were going: that would have made them ineligible for the prize.,

They started to turn up in the middle of the afternoon by 4 o'clock, as requested, they were all assembled in the house's living room. Even the dimmest of them worked out there was something strange from the start; there were thirteen of them. We'd put Eva in as part of the team to oil the wheels.

We were monitoring their discussions from the Porta-Cabin that had been installed in the garden as a studio.

"Hey, I'm Mylene," one of the taller girls said smiling and giving a wave to the others. "I guess I'm representing 'Oz if we're all from different places."

The others all pitched in with their names and their home countries. "Tsai Lin – Hong Kong,,"; Angie – Canada, Lucy – New Zealand, Eva – I'm from the UK, and so on.

Angie mentioned the odd number of participants first of all. "Weren't there supposed to be twelve of us?" she said.

Yes, you're right," cut in Eva, "that's odd. Maybe another country signed up for broadcasting rights or something and insisted on having a representative."

"Yeah, could be," said Mylene, "or it could be part of whatever's going to go on here. You don't think they are just going to turn the cameras on and leave us to get on with it do you? There will be all sorts of weird things going on before the winner gets out of here, believe me."

All of the girls looked up as Harry entered the living room in his role of master of ceremonies. "Good afternoon, ladies," he said, in his most avuncular tone. "As we discussed in your briefing sessions you'll have a day before the cameras are turned on."

"Like we believe that," the microphones picked up Mylene muttering beneath her breath. In the control room one of the sound engineers gave me a thumbs up sign, "See, pick up is sensitive enough," he smirked.

We'd invited Basher along too. Well, not so much invited as acquiesced in his instance to be there. Harry had not been keen, Basher had said he wanted to be sure they'd be alright when he saw them in the flesh. I was worried in case he wanted to reject any then but he claimed that wasn't the case. In the end we'd compromised ; he could turn up for the girl's arrival but he'd go before we did the lift. "Colonel Snell here is representing our main UK sponsor," Harry explained introducing Basher. He beamed at the girls from his wheel chair. "I'm sure you'll join me in thanking him and his organisation for making this show possible." The girls smiled tolerantly but without much enthusiasm.

Basher grinned back. "It's a great treat to have you all here," he said. "Such a delight to have representatives of some many places." He pointed to one of the girls. "You. Where are you from?"

A dark haired, rather studious looking girl responded, "Boston, Colonel," in a quiet New England accent.

"Ah," said Snell, "excellent. Our representative from the Province of Massachusetts Bay." The girl looked puzzled at this reference to her home's old colonial name. "Well, stay away from the tea my dear. And you others, "Rhodesia," the girl from Zimbabwe looked affronted, "The Malay States, and you dear where are you from?"

"Dahka, Colonel," the girl said politely.

"Ah, yes, East Pakistan," Basher responded cheerily.

"We call it Bangladesh, now, Sir," the girl said. "We are an independent country, no longer part of Pakistan."

"Hmm, too popular an idea, independence," Basher said. "You'll soon find out you need to depend on each other and on the mother country too."

I looked along the line of girls. Basher's intervention was clearly disturbing them and he was in danger of spooking one or more of our house mates. I decided to interrupt. "Well, Colonel," I said, "we need to get things going."

Basher span his wheel chair around. "Quite, quite, Barry, my lad," he beamed. You get these young gels started off. Don't mind my ramblings."

Mylene, the Aussie girl walked across the room to join Eva. As she passed Basher's wheel chair, she seemed to jump about six inches into the air before landing again clutching her backside. She gave Basher an accusatory look as she joined the other girls. I thought I saw the trace of a smirk across Basher's face for an instant before it resumed its normal impassive stare. I overheard Mylene hiss under her breath to one of the others, "He's a real pervert. I caught him staring at my backside when I was looking in the mirror earlier on. And he's always got his hands in his pockets, I'm sure he's playing with himself. He makes my flesh creep."

Harry went on with the introduction. "So you'll be able to have a relaxing evening, get yourselves settled in, choose your room mates – you'll be sharing four to a room – and get yourselves a meal. There's plenty of food in the pantry and you'll find plenty of drink as well. Now, I'm going to leave you to get on with things. Don't forget you can use the 'Speak To The World' room at any time if you want to talk to any of us. Remember this show is all about showing how well people from different parts of the world can get along together. Whoever wins, I'm sure you'll all want to be seen as ambassadors for your countries but whatever happens I hope you all have a great time. Enjoy yourselves."

There was a small ripple of applause from some of the girls. Harry smiled and asked if there were any questions. There weren't. "Well, I leave you to it then," he said. "Good luck."

Chapter 74 : Colonial Reality

Harry was sat at the bank of CCTV monitors watching the girls in the house. He looked bored. There wasn't much going on. The girls had all had a good go at the drinks cupboard and now they were sleeping it off. "Do people actually watch this stuff on their televisions?" Harry asked.

I nodded. "Yepp. It's pretty popular in the real world. But then getting to vote someone out on a reality show is probably the closest a lot of people get to having the sort of control over someone else that our clients take for granted. Maybe the desire for 'ownership' is more deeply seated than we know."

"Given the choice between a dozen sleeping women and your ideas of philosophy, I think I'll go with the women," he said, turning back to the monitors.

I felt he was being a bit unkind but it had been a long day. "I'm not sure I understand why you don't just scoop them up straight away," I said.

"It would be easier," said Harry, "but I'm pursuing a cock-up prevention programme on this one. Given that they've been told to tell no one where they've gone we're just going to sit on the house for a few days to make sure that they really have been good girls and that there aren't any tabloid journalists sniffing around for a story."

Basher was getting impatient. We managed to pacify him by letting him have tapes of some of the sessions in the "Speak To The World" room where the girls poured out their hearts and their innermost thoughts and fears to the camera. I could imagine Basher would be watching them with only one hand on the TV remote.

As it was we waited a week, just to give the Sundays their chance too, but there wasn't a sniff. Harry's team had been checking out their homes too and it all looked O.K. The pick up itself we organised so that we could take them one at a time. I guess we could have walked in with machine guns at the ready but there's always a risk that something will go wrong and Harry likes safer approaches.

The girls had been used to having some sort of competition in the afternoons. The first few days they'd won access to a case of wine on one night, the use of a CD player for an evening on another and a fancy party on a third.

For this task we'd installed a tube that ran from their lounge through to a hidden internal room and they had been told that they had to decide which order they would go through the tube. They'd all been given uniform, short-sleeved, white shirt-waister dresses with their country's logo embroidered on the breast pocket. "No prizes for guessing why we've got these," Angie said as she looked at how short the skirt of her dress was. "They'll be looking for great arse shots as we crawl into that pipe, won't they?"

One girl was to go as soon as the first green light came on. Then a red light would come on until it was time for the next to and so on. There was more debate than I'd expected. It turned out that Mylene was quite claustrophobic and the others had to persuade her that she really had to do it or they'd lose out on whatever treat the producers had in store for them.

As a result Mylene was the first to go into the tube and the first to emerge into the hidden room. Once she started exploring that she found a door to another room. As she went through into the dark room beyond, the door slammed shut and locked behind her and she was grabbed by some of Harry's team. Within moments she was handcuffed, ball gagged, ankle shackled and carried out. The others followed, each crawling into the tube when the green light came on. Eva was the fourth one through but, of course, avoided the reception that the others had to endure.

At the end of half an hour all twelve girls were wriggling helplessly, standing up, chained by the neck in the trailer that they had thought contained the program's broadcast equipment.

Eva wheeled Basher up a ramp and into the trailer. The girls' distress and agitation became even more evident as they realised not only that they had been abducted but who had commissioned their kidnapping. The fact that he was grinning like a five year old child in a candy store probably didn't help.

Basher waved Eva away and wheeled himself along the line inspecting each of the girls closely in turn. He stopped alongside Mylene.

Basher reached up to the right breast of the girl standing beside his wheel chair. "You will excuse me, my dear," he said, "my eye sight is not what it used to be." He ran his fingers lightly across the embroidered badge on her breast pocket. She flinched involuntarily at his touch earning a rap from his stick across her shins. He resumed his touching, eventually deciding that the embroidered form represented a kangaroo. "Ah," he said, "the Australian representative. You're going to be suffering for the prowess of your cricketers, I am afraid, my dear. And by the way," he reached up again groping at the girls full breasts, "you can get used to me touching you young lady, I've no intention of letting a pair of tits like these go to waste."

He grunted with satisfaction and moved off along the line. Each of the girls suffered some indignity or other at Basher's hands. Tsai Linn, worst of all, was almost stripped of her dress by the enthusiastic, orgiastic Snell. "Very nice," he commented when he had got to the end. "I can hardly wait for you to finish your preparation work. Oh by the way, I'd like them all to be blondes by the time they are delivered. I much prefer blondes."

"Basher," I said, "that might be a bit of a challenge for the representatives from Hong Kong, Nigeria, India, and Pakistan mightn't it?"

"Don't worry about it looking too natural," Basher smirked, "I've always quite liked a tarty look on a girl. I'm sure you'll manage it." He rolled his chair down the ramp and out of the trailer. We hitched up the trailer and headed off to the Prep Centre. Some of Harry's team stayed behind to clear up in the house.

Chapter 75 : An Offer You Might Refuse

The preparation of Basher's colonial harem was well under way. I was back in the Whitechapel office. I finally got a chance, albeit fleeting, to talk to Clegg.

"How was the meeting with Anatoly?" I asked. "Is there anything I need to do?"

Freddie shook his head. "No," he said. "we are clean as far as I can tell. Elly had a conversation her contact in the National Crime Squad to try to get a fix on what's going on. Apparently, in the best tradition of detective novels, the police are baffled. The press have lost interest since as far as they can tell there's no evidence of any government cover up or incompetence and that's the only thing they seem to want to write about. Beside the story is all of two weeks old; so what chance is there of anyone remembering it?"

"And how's Anatoly?"

"Spitting mad - but not at us. I reckon he half thinks there might have been a genuine Chechen plot but he's also worried because the container malfunctioned."

"Malfunctioned?"

"Yes. Anatoly's got his transport containers tricked up so if you open them the wrong way they dump a lethal dose into the veins of whosoever happens to be inside. Tricia should be dead by all accounts. Anatoly's relieved we think she was completely wiped and worried in case he's got a bad apple in his own team."

"What's your view?"

Clegg looked impassive. He sucked in his breath slowly and shook his head.

"Constanza?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm sure she would never consider such a thing." It was Elly's voice. She had come into the office behind me. She managed to say it in a way that made me think that she felt Constanza might well be guilty of considering such a thing and then doing something after the considering.

Freddie took the opportunity to use the interruption to change the subject. "How was the visit to Steve?"

I filled him in on the trip. He actually seemed a bit more interested than I expected but I didn't get very far on tying him down to doing anything about it. I felt a bit frustrated that I wasn't getting anywhere with our discussions. Elly just smiled as I left Freddie's office. "Don't worry," she said, "he'll take it on board. He just likes to think things through."

I was back in my office when the phone rang. "Hi," said Brad when I picked up the phone. The line was crackly and Brad's voice sounded as though there were several socks spliced into the wires between him and me.

"I wondered if we could have a chat. The Trade Minister has had some thoughts and he thinks your business could help us. Why don't you come over? He's got some time at the end of the week if you're free."

"When you say come over, you're not talking about the Castle are you?" I asked, sensing that even allowing for the usual problems with telephones here, the British Telecom were unlikely to have found a way on incorporating a two second time lag between London and Worcestershire.

"Ah, no, Kolin actually. Don't worry about the trip, there's an air force transport leaving Stansted tomorrow if you can be on it."

I wasn't sure that Kushtian military aviation was likely to be any better than the civil sort but at least there wouldn't be any pretence at comfort and security would probably be more than adequate. "Sure," I said. I was happy to oblige, particularly if it led to some more business. I told Sukie and Rachel that I would be away again for a few days, both of them looked worried. I tried to reassure them, Elly agreed to keep an eye on them while I was away and that seemed to comfort them. Ownership is a real responsibility. I didn't think I could just send them down to the cells as though they were being kennelled and besides, Rachel had work to do.

The Kushtian Air Force flight was, well, an experience. It wasn't quite as bad as I thought when I walked up the ramp at the back of the Ilyushin 76 into its cavernous hold, half empty, half filled with crates of indeterminate origin. I was staring around looking for something that resembled a seat and beginning to think I'd have to do the flight standing up or propped against a crate when a voice called from the front of the hold.

"Mr Ross? This way please."

I walked the length of the aircraft's hold. A woman in the blue serge uniform of the Kushtian Air Force stood at the foot of a short metal ladder. She gestured for me to climb it.

At the top of the ladder I became more encouraged. A cabin with some twenty seats in it had been built into the front of the hold behind the flight deck. It looked a great deal more luxurious than I would normally have expected for a military aircraft.

The reclining seats looked as if they had been bought by the Kushtians the last time that Virgin refitted their first class cabin. At least I might get a reasonable sleep. A smiling officer emerged from the flight deck. "Mr Ross, welcome," he said. "We'll be taking off shortly. Do take a seat. Anywhere you like."

"Just me?" I asked.

The officer nodded. "Yes," he said. "Don't worry though. We'll try to look after you. Aerina Kolanka Kuslanis will take care of anything you need."

I chose a seat about half way back in the cabin and strapped myself in. Kolanka – I assumed that Aerina was her rank rather than her first name – appeared at the top of the ladder and closed the hatch. She smiled at me and took her place on a fold down jump-seat beside the flight deck door. As she tightened the straps of her harness I could see that beneath her uniform jacket was a body of interesting possibility. The engines fired into life with a cough and splutter that did little to encourage belief that they would keep going until we reached Kushtia. Aerina Kuslanis seemed unconcerned, however, and I took some comfort from that.

The flight was largely uneventful. Kolanka proved immune to such charms as I could muster. Her uniform remained depressingly well buttoned up for the entire flight.

When I got there, Brad and the Trade Minister were sitting waiting for me in the lounge. Brad suggested that we go through to the pool bar. "I hope you enjoyed your trip here," the Minister said.

"It was fine," I said, "the Kushtian Air Force seems to have its operations well organised."

"Yes," he said. "At least the transport."

"And how is the economic development programme going?"

"Quite well, I think. Up to a point. The Emir here has found a number of companies that it will prove most beneficial for us to work with and of course our relationship with your business has worked very much as we had hoped."

"I'm glad things are working out well, Minister. Can I ask how the last concubine we arranged for your use has turned out?"

The Minister chuckled. "Ah, yes, your diplomatic baggage! Miss Argyll, wasn't she called?" I nodded. The last I had seen of Cora Argyll was sitting shackled and gagged in a cell under the Minister's House. "She has proved most accommodating after her initial reservations had been overcome. I have found her to be a most useful diversion from the cares of office." I smiled. "But how are you? You managed to avoid the attentions of those that were seeking to disturb your operations?"

"I did indeed, Minister. All is resolved." I looked across at the pool, two girls, naked except for their collars, were swimming back and forth with two rather over weight men. "And the Emir's facility is proving an asset?"

"Somewhat," said the Minister. "It has been useful to get us started but I believe we will be suspending our operations there. Let us just say we are learning more about the niceties of international trade and we would not wish to be felt to be trampling on local cultural differences. Still, I understand you were able to provide some excellent staff. Those two for example," he pointed to the girls in the pool, "have been a great help." I realised it was Karen and Peta, the two volley ball players. "Very athletic; most capable entertainers of those we wish to influence. They are here to learn a little of true Kushtian culture first hand. They too came by Air Force jet, but with less comfortable accommodation than your own." I thought back to the crates arrayed in the hold of the Ilyushin and wondered whether there had been any on my flight. They hadn't looked as though they were as well equipped as Clegg and Anatoly's cargo containers.

Brad waved to the bar, to get us some drinks. Greetje Van Bruijn came teetering across wearing stilt-high heels, her collar and nothing else. Each of us asked for a beer and she disappeared to get them. "Such a nice arse," said Brad appreciatively.

"How's your engagement present from Kushnati?" I asked.

Brad gave a self satisfied grin. "Let's just say I'm enjoying playing with a doll for the first time in my life."

"And Lauren? How's she coping with Kushtia."

"Ha, more like how's Kushtia coping with her," the Minister interjected.

Brad looked embarrassed. "My daughter has yet to adopt all of the ways of Kushtian women," he said diplomatically.

"There are suggestions of terrible scandals," the Minister said conspiratorially with a smile. "The corridors of every council members offices are buzzing with gossip about her flagrant infidelity. It has quite cheered the place up."

Greetje reappeared with the drinks. Brad clicked his fingers to indicate she should kneel between us. He balanced the tray on her back, she made a convenient table.

"Like you said Brad, daughters are a rule to themselves. Still what was it you wanted to discuss?"

Brad looked at the Minister who seemed to indicate that he should take the lead. "Well Larry," he began, "There's three projects that are going to need support. Firstly Kushtia is now trying to encourage inward investment from Japan and other

Far Eastern countries. One of the incentives that they planning to offer Japanese businessmen is access to certain special hotels, run by slaves, where room service takes on a new meaning. We've learned a lot operating this place. We'll mainly use Kushtian girls for the staff but we'll want a number of western girls for entertainment purposes and Brits seem like as good a bet as any."

I didn't see any problem with that. I was thinking back to the files that we had found in Cindy's car. There had been half a dozen of them that had been young and female buyers of sports cars. From what I remembered of them they'd be ideal. And Cindy had been meticulous in building up a profile of each of her clients. Rick couldn't have done a better job. She'd also made a note of who it was that was actually paying for the car; husband, boyfriend, doting father.

"The other opportunity we've spotted is the whole off-shore call centre business. Plenty of British firms seem keen to outsource their call centre operations. We reckon that we can use girls from there as a way of providing low cost off-shore resources while still offering native English speakers as a way of ensuring good customer service. You know how it is with some of these off-shore call centres, you get to know pretty quickly that you're talking to a foreign country and people don't like it. Of course they'll need some fairly heavy preparation, being on the telephone to the outside world, you see."

I liked the idea but it seemed completely reckless to me. Unless they were going to prep their operators to the point of catatonia the whole thing would be too risky and if they did then the girls would just sound like robots. On the other hand maybe that wouldn't be so different from some of the call centres I'd encountered. Maybe there was something in it; I'd got irritated myself by talking to people who just didn't seem to understand what I was on about. On the other hand it sounded like the volumes might be greater than we were interested in getting involved in even if it was feasible. "What's the third project?" I said.

"Well, it's an extension of the outsourcing idea," Brad began.

The Trade Minister interrupted. "We wish to make sure that Kushtia benefits from the digital age. Kushtia must build a knowledge economy," he said. "There is an explosion in technology. Unfortunately our universities have been late to recognise this but we cannot wait. If we do not act we will be overtaken by others in our region."

"So what do you intend."

"We will build a software factory. We intend to provide a software development service based in Kushtia with very advantageous labour rates. I think there are sufficient companies that will not ask too many questions about how we provide our resources if they can get the work done at the cheapest costs. We understand that you have had some experience in doing something similar."

I thought back to Sebastian's collection of 'web slaves' and nodded.

"Do you think that Clegg Enterprises can source the necessary products?"

"Well," I said, "in principal, yes. I wouldn't want you to feel that we weren't interested in helping with this. On the other hand, it will depend on the volumes. You know that we are mainly working with low volume, high value projects these days. We will need to look at how we deal with this. It might be better for one of our associate companies to handle this." I was worried by the idea of high volume / low value work but I didn't want to turn them down flat. "I am assuming that you are seeking females for these tasks?"

"Indeed," said the Minister. "We understand how to manage women in Kushtia as you know. These projects simply represent a logical extension of one of what I believe you marketing people call our core competencies." The Minister smirked.

"I am sure you will create a completely unique working environment for your recruits," I said. By now I was becoming increasingly convinced that the Kushtians had gone completely mad.

The Trade Minister smiled. "Yes," he said. "That's why I have another proposition. But for you; personally." I looked puzzled. "This programme will create a large pool of foreign labour within Kushtia," he said. "We are most anxious to see that our culture is not diluted, not contaminated, by this influx. There is a benefit from low cost labour of course but we wish to avoid the problems of westernisation that could arise from so many of these girls being brought to our country. We want to appoint someone as Director of Overseas Resources; someone to take a role in ensuring that our incomers become well adapted to Kushtian ways. We think you could perform that role for us. You would also have responsibility for oversight of the UNESCO cultural transfer programme."

I was flattered and said so, but I was uncertain about the idea, even if I had been looking for another job. "I'm not sure I see it as a problem and, in any case, surely a Kushtian would be better for that role," I said. "Someone that is clearly identified with your own culture."

"No," said Brad, adding his weight to the argument. "What this needs is an outsider to champion the Kushtian way. I'd consider it myself but I'm only just getting things set up here and besides, I'm a Kushtian really by blood."

"So many slaves together may find ways to hang on to their old culture. To cling to dreams of their previous lives. That will not help our projects. Consider it," said the Minister. "You could bring your wife. You do have a wife?" I shook my head. "No matter. Your concubines then. Perhaps you'll find a good Kushtian girl."

"I'll think about it," I said. "But I'm not sure if it's what I want to do."

Chapter 76 : Party Time

Brad was standing at the front of the room holding forth to the assembled crowd. Since I knew most of them the effusive introduction was unnecessary but none the less welcome.

It was good to see them again. The Trade Minister had Cora Argyll in tow, literally. Cora was hardly recognisable. Wearing a long, full skirt but naked from the waist up, her entire torso, arms, face and shaven head were covered with elaborate tattoos. The Trade Minister was leading her by a chain that ran to a ring set in the septum of her nose. It was only as she came alongside that I saw that the piercing had itself been set with a silver grommet to prevent the ring causing damage. I asked the Minister about the designs on her body.

"Do you know about the Pythork?" he asked.

I searched my memory and eventually remembered the incident at the Castle. "The ritual snake dance?"

"Yes. For us it is a potent symbol. A symbol of life and regeneration. In the eastern countryside the barren nature of the land means there are few snakes. They tattoo their women this way to summon their spirit. These are their traditional designs."

I looked more closely at the swirling patterns that curled around Cora's body. There were indeed stylised snakes, intricately wound about each other like the patterns on some Saxon illuminated manuscript. Forked tongues twined around each of her cheeks. The head of a cobra was pictured on her forehead, its tongue reaching down to the tip of her nose.

Cora knelt, docile, beside the Minister. "Did you discover her reasons for conspiring to abduct you?" he asked. I nodded but felt unwilling to share them. There was little pointing washing the Clegg Organisation's dirty linen with its customers. "Yes," I said. "It is all resolved now."

The Minister smiled respecting my discretion.

"Is this the sort of thing you're looking to develop with your cultural transfer programme?" I asked.

The Minister chuckled. "Nothing so extreme, my friend," he said, "or at least as far as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation is concerned. We are hopeful of getting funding for our programme. They are beginning to understand the importance of protecting endangered cultures, just as World Wildlife Fund seeks to protect endangered species. Let's say we are hopeful."

The Kalinin's son was there as well but with Emma and Ginger instead of Victoria as I had expected. "Most extraordinary," he confided in me. "There has been some scandal about my wife, Victoria. It is rumoured she has been involved in most exceptional activities. That some members of the council have indulged in the most shameful acts with her. We thought it best if she stayed out of the public eye for a while." He winked. "But I am sure that all will be shown to have been above board."

"You think she will be shown to be innocent?"

"Innocent is not a word I would use about Victoria," he laughed. "Let us say she will be shown merely to have indulged the perverse demands of a few corrupt individuals, fearful that failing to accommodate her husband's colleagues would jeopardise his position. After all no woman would initiate such actions."

"Do you know what the greatest scandal is?" Emma asked.

"I dread to think."

"Victoria is rumoured to have fitted herself with an artificial penis and to have used it to perform a sexual act upon one of the members of the Council."

"Don't be absurd, Emma," the Kalinin's son chided but with a smile at me. "Such a thing is nonsense. How could it be? What nonsense you women gossip about."

At the far end of the room sat Kushnati Koresh, his new wife in attendance. Lauren was dressed demurely, sitting quietly beside her husband while he raucously grabbed at drink and food from passing serving girls. She even seemed accepting of his grabbing at the girls as well. She saw me, spoke to her husband and walked slowly across to where I was standing beside the Kalinin's son.

Emma laughed. "You will need to speak to her first," she said. "No Kushtian woman will speak first to a man."

"Lauren," I said, accepting my cue. "How is married life?"

Lauren relaxed and smiled impishly, the proprieties having been observed. "Let's say that the wedding vows still have enough loopholes to let me have some fun. And some of Kushnati's tribe have turned out to be really rather good companions. Very healthy, very physical, very much fun. They don't speak much English of course and my Kushtian is still not good but we manage to get by. I'm learning a lot."

I didn't think she just meant the language.

"And how are your personal slaves?" I said, thinking of Toos and Femke.

"Working their little butts off," Lauren smirked. "Keeps them too tired to think about trying to get into the pants of any of the bucks around the place. They look after me pretty good though – they've worked out that's the way for as quiet a life as they're going to get. Plus," she said, "and this bit is a real hoot, Kushnati's letting his tongue hang out for them."

"How is that good?"

Lauren looked around conspiratorially. "Let's say unrequited passion is not good for the old man's blood pressure and for a husband to take advantage of his wife's slave girl would be a great disgrace. Sometimes you can see the red mist rising in his eyes! I'm looking forward to the inheritance." She waved her fingers at her husband. "Gotta go see the gimmer," she said, "time to start working on his blood pressure." She smoothed down her tunic to show off her figure and grinned when she saw the effect it had on her husband. "See you!"

I watched as she slid back across the room to where her husband was waiting. "That doesn't sound like my understanding of the Kushtian laws of inheritance," I said to the Kalinin's son.

"I think you are right my friend," he said, "but it will suit some for a vacancy to appear in the Elders and perhaps there are those that have misled Kushnati's wife in order to serve their own ends."

I was beginning to understand more about Kushtian politics but I needed to get back to London.

Chapter 77 : Futures & Options

I felt that I really had to talk to Freddie before I made a decision. I mean he had brought me into the business, albeit in a rather underhand way, and he'd given me a lot of support. He'd arranged for us to meet at the club where he'd first suggested that I might join his team.

As I walked in I saw Colonel Snell in his wheelchair scooting across the lobby in the direction of the lift. He skidded the chair to a halt and swung around to face me. "Garry!" he boomed (a memory for names and indeed discretion, I suspect were not his strongest attributes). "Good to see you, young man. Clegg's leant me a couple of rooms here while I'm in town."

"Hullo," I said. "how are things in the colonies?"

Snell grinned conspiratorially. "As they should be, young man, as they should be! Here, help me up to my room, will you?"

I thought he was well able to manage but he seemed keen for me to accompany him. I pushed his chair into the lift. He prodded the button for the fourth floor with the end of his walking stick. The ancient lift gave a shudder and started upwards with a whine of an electric motor and a hiss of cable. It stopped at the fourth floor without taking the trouble to slow down first. Snell's chair bounced and fell back with a thump. He didn't seem bothered. I pushed him out of the lift and took the route indicated by the gestures of his stick down the corridor. Confronted by one of the club's room maids, he waved her aside with the stick. "Stand clear, girl," he bellowed. "Coming through!"

The suite that Clegg had provided for Snell was comfortably appointed but its main feature was the tableau provided by the three helpless members of Snell's colonial harem. Mylene was there, tied kneeling by the side of Basher's bed; naked from the waist up, mouth wrenched wide by a Hodgkinson gag. Ropes tied around the base of her tits had forced them into the shape of distended globes; the nipples bruised and reddened. On Basher's bedside table were the implements responsible for the tortured look of her tits, clamps, pinchers and a pair of pin wheels. Basher wheeled across to beside Mylene. She squealed at his approach. He responded by widening her gag another notch. "I fear your team just took another three wickets, my dear," he said, causing her to squeal more and wriggle against the ropes that held her; she evidently knew that good news for the Australian cricket team was bad news for her. "You'll have to take the consequences of that in a little while."

Kneeling on the other side of the bed, Angie, the Canadian, was trussed to a wooden frame. She was still wearing a short white dress like that all the girls had been dressed in when they were in the International House; after a few weeks of wear, it was now dirty and torn. Although ropes held her firmly against the frame her arms stretched out across the bed, her wrists shackled and joined by a short length of chain. From the way she was positioned and the array of oils, gels and creams on the table beside her, it was obvious that Angie's main role was to provide Basher with his regular doses of masturbation.

A third girl stood beside the bed. Basher waved towards her. "Did you meet my little kiwi?" he said. "Makes a very good little waitress, don't you, Lucy my dear?" The slight, dark eyed, girl nodded warily, prevented from answering by the ball gag that filled her mouth. Basher turned back towards me, "I'm sure she'll manage to atone for the faults of her countryman."

"Countryman?" I asked, knowing that this would only lead to another diatribe from the xenophobic Snell.

"Jackson, Peter Jackson," Basher said with a sneer. "Has the nerve to take an English story and high-jack it to the southern hemisphere. Tolkien's part of our cultural legacy," he snapped, "what's a New Zealander doing filming it down there? He should have brought it here. Heaven knows his parents were English! Disgraceful." He seemed to calm down a little. "Can she get you a drink?"

I shook my head, "Sorry Basher, I can't stop," I said. "I'm seeing Freddie."

"Fair enough," said Snell. "Tell him I'm happy with this lot and thanks for the rooms. Now help me up on to the bed, can you?"

I leant him my arm and allowed him to lever himself up from his chair and onto the bed. Lucy went to draw the covers over him. He waved his hand. "No, no," he said. "Just unzip my trousers and put some baby oil on her hands," he nodded towards the helpless Angie. "I feel in need of a little relaxation before I turn my attentions to Mylene here."

"I'll leave you to it," I said, waving to Basher. He nodded and lay back on the bed to receive the ministrations of the girls.

I made my way down to the room that Freddie was using. Elly was there too.

I explained about the Minister's offer. I'd expected him to be pretty angry. I mean, I've never liked customers poaching my staff. Instead his response was measured, thoughtful. "Hmm," he said, putting the ball back into my court. "What do *you* want to do?"

"Well, Freddie," I said. "On the face of it, it's a great opportunity. I've got on well with all the people that I've met there and, if I'm blunt, it offers me a lifestyle I couldn't hope to maintain here. I mean I know you've been very supportive over Sukie and Rachel but I'm realistic enough to know that we can't sustain that sort of indulgence here, even though I enjoy it. On the other hand I would hate to leave Sukie and Rachel here, they depend on me, I think and it seems unkind to walk away from them. Plus, of course, everyone here has been great. I know what it can be like having a new face come in with new ideas but everyone's been great."

"Brian excepted," Clegg chipped in. Elly gave him a look that I guessed was intended to say "get over it."

"Yes," I said, "Brian excepted."

The desert menu appeared. I'm not a fan but Clegg rubbed his hands, summoning up a sticky toffee pudding. Elly raised an eyebrow but joined him by ordering a mango sorbet. "Do you want to hear my take on this," she said.

Clegg turned towards her. "Of course," he said. I nodded too.

"Larry, you're disposable."

"Well, thanks," I said, "I know what that means around here."

"No, don't get me wrong. You've put the business on a course. It's quite capable of following it through. The sales guys are taking an account managed approach now, research support that, the Search & Snatch service is up and running. You've done what Freddie brought you in to do."

Clegg looked thoughtful as he weighed Elly's point. His pudding appeared and provided a distraction.

Freddie went on. "Let me give you my view, Larry. I've been pretty happy with what you've done. But Elly's right, the business probably doesn't need someone with your talents now. We could make do with someone less qualified. Probably not even 'voluntary' if you know what I mean. In some ways I'd be happy to see you working for one of our customers and I think you've earned the right to make the choice. The only problem is that I had another idea. But if that's what you want to do....."

I was intrigued. "Another idea?" I asked.

"Mmm," said Freddie. "Do you remember something you talked to me about a while back? You'd hooked up with some girl after a practice run. What was her name?"

"Kelly," I said.

"That working?" Freddie asked. I pulled a face. "Uh huh. Oh, well. You said something about there might be an emerging opportunity for 'voluntary' slaves; ones we wouldn't need to abduct."

"Yeah, sure," I said. My main recollection was that Freddie hadn't seemed very interested, I hadn't raised it again until my report of the trip to see Steve and then I imagined it had got forgotten in all the business over Tricia being discovered in the container at Stansted.

"Well, I did some thinking about it. There was the feed back from Steve's meeting and the things that are going on in Kushtia with their cultural programme was interesting too. I think it's something we need to explore. It could be an opportunity, it could be a threat. Hard to tell yet, I guess. Anyway I wanted to see if we could explore it a bit but I don't want to do it inside the business. Too many conflicts of interest. I want to set up something at arm's length. Close enough to keep an eye on it, separate enough for it not to get disrupted by other interests. I thought you might like to run it."

"Run it?" I said. "Me?"

"Why not? You have a good grasp of what makes sense and what doesn't. You can keep the numbers on track. You'd have some support on the financials but you'd have day to day control. You'd report into FCE Group board of course."

"Well it sounds interesting," I said. "Starting from scratch?"

"Not quite. We've identified a possible business that we might bring in to the Group to provide us with a starting position," Elly dumped a folder labelled 'Project Willing' on the desk. "Small business set up by an entrepreneurial lawyer in one of the university towns."

"Dreadful what some of these lawyers get up to," Clegg smirked at Elly.

She gave him a look of tolerant amusement. I remembered that was her background too. "She's got half a dozen girls under contract, small network of clients, interesting approaches to recruitment and promoting the service. I've done due diligence on the contracts, they're pretty solid and they'd allow the owner to novate them in the event of change of ownership of the business."

"So we thought we might make a take over play for them," said Freddie.

Something about the way he said it made me think that his idea of a take over wasn't quite what the normal practices of corporate governance would encompass. "Freddie, does this 'take over' involve the lady entrepreneur finding herself wrapped in rope and enjoying Rick's hospitality in the Prep Centre?"

Freddie looked pained. Elly grinned. "Larry, Larry," Freddie said, "You know I like to have a controlling interest in things."

"Don't you think we should try a conversation first? Just to see if she's interested? She might need the funding, might be grateful of some support." I saw Elly give Freddie an 'I told you so' look.

"Do I take it that means you'll do this?" Freddie said. "Rather than swanning off to Kushtia?"

I picked up the folder and thumbed through it. I had to admit that the idea of running my own operation sounded appealing. "I need Rachel and Sukie for support," I said.

"I think we might be able to do that," said Freddie.

"And we do it legitimately," Freddie looked uncomfortable, "at least until we've come to the conclusion there's no alternative."

"OK," said Freddie reluctantly. I saw Elly grin.

We had a deal.

Chapter 78 : Hail & Farewell

"I feel a bit of a fraud," I said looking out at the crowd of people that had turned up. "After all I'm not really leaving. Well not to go far."

"No, I know," said Freddie, "but it's good to have an excuse to get everyone together and let them have some fun. Look, it's your leaving party, enjoy it."

We'd borrowed Brad's castle for the event. Brad was back in Kushtia full time now and Freddie had arranged to look after the property for him in his absence. We'd brought stock down from the Prep Centre to help out and most of the team were there. Even Elly turned up, which I took as a great compliment. She just never came to events like this.

Brian's family and some of the other stock had been put down into the cells for the amusement of any that wanted to take advantage of the opportunity. As usual it seemed like it was the accountants and the HR people that were queuing up for a turn. Fair enough, I guess, they don't get many perks on their side of the business. Rick had put a few of the guards down there to keep an eye on things but that was more about protecting the girls than preventing any trouble..

I saw two faces that I recognised - Rebecca and Amanda had been acquired from Constanza (I suspected mainly with the aim of giving Freddie some insights in Constanza's operations and possibly getting some intelligence about the business with Tricia) and had been pressed into waitressing duties. At least some of their flight attendant skills were still being put to use. Close up I wasn't too impressed with the surgery that Constanza had put them through. Sure the surgeon had got the slanted eyes all right and the breast reduction had meant they could wear the cheong sam with a measure of authenticity but the overall effect was a bit weird. They just looked like an uncomfortable mixture of Asiatic and western features to me. I wasn't sure how Constanza could complain about the barbarity of some owners and then do something like that. Still, they'd been her property then, I suppose and they seemed happy enough as they wound their way through the crowd carrying trays of drinks and snacks. Tricia could have helped out too if she'd still been there, I guess.

I caught myself thinking about the Rebecca, Amanda and Tricia. They were all women that I'd shared a bed with at some time, now hopelessly enslaved, physically abused, or mentally scarred. I supposed that I ought to have felt some guilt about their situation, although Amanda was the only one that I had been actually involved in kidnapping. Somehow it just seemed part of the day to day job now. I counted up the number of women I'd been involved in abducting. I made it 47. It sounded like a lot but then I thought it had been almost a year. I stopped again. It was a lot. However long it had been, it was a lot.

Sarah, on the other hand, was there. Harry brought her into the room, leading her on a leash that linked to her collar. She was smiling cheerfully as she stepped along behind him in impossibly high heels and a skirt so tight that she seemed only to be able to move her legs below the knees. Harry turned to talk to her. As he did so, I realised that there must have been some reconciliation between the two of them that I had missed out on while I was away in Barbados and Kushtia. She had obviously finished her sexualisation and pleasure programme and it looked like Harry was interested in the result.

Rachel and Sukie were standing together at the side of the room. It looked to me as though they were having fun too. I went across to talk to them. I'd told them that things would be OK; that I'd carry on looking out for them in the new job. Rachel was looking forward to helping. Sukie had just seemed grateful she wasn't going to be turned away or sold again. Now the two of them looked happy. Sukie was sitting holding Rachel's hand. "It's been a strange year," I said.

Rachel turned to me, "It's not a bad story. Maybe you should write it down. I could help you."

I thought she was probably right.

The only one that wasn't there was Tricia. At least, she wasn't there in person. Laying on a chair at the side of the room was a copy of the Daily Mirror. Its front page was filled with a grainy photograph taken with a telephoto lens. A solitary figure could be made out against a background of trees in some sort of garden or park. In spite of the way that her head was hunched down, it looked like Tricia to me. The caption said "Container Girl : No Hope Of Identification Says Hospital". I read the story below the photograph. The paper's reporters had tracked down the mental hospital where the girl found in the Russian aircraft was being cared for. Sources on the medical team said that there had been no progress in either getting the girl to identify herself or discovering anything about her. Security services were still allegedly interested in talking to members of the Russian foreign intelligence service. A police source felt the girl was probably Russian, their favoured explanation was that she was a dissident, asylum seeker that had slipped into the UK somehow and was now being repatriated in a rather extreme way. The Russians had declined to comment. I thought it was only a while before the police put out a full face shot and someone recognised her. Freddie had said that wouldn't be a problem, like all of Harry's team she didn't have a link to her past as far as the organisation was concerned. I wondered how they'd break the links for me if they ever needed to.

I dropped the paper back on to the chair. Freddie called everyone to order and was kind enough to say a few words. I ended up feeling a bit embarrassed, I felt he made too much of the difference I'd made but there was a warm round of applause at the end so I guess that the rest of the team didn't feel he had over egged it.

Harry stood up to add his contribution. That was even more embarrassing as he chose to recall some of the more amusing episodes of my life with Clegg Enterprises. I'd have been happier if he hadn't bothered to remember Rachel and the keyboard, but she was good enough to smile about it too.

I got to thank everyone. I didn't say much more than that. I always reckon these things go on too long.

Finally Freddie got up and said, "As a last word before you all go off and get stuck into the drink and the food, I've got one more announcement to make. Larry's moving on to pastures new, fortunately within Clegg Enterprises but we want to carry on with his ideas and approach. Larry's been a great help in helping us to identify a suitable successor and I'd like to introduce you to her now...."

On cue, two of Rick's guards wrestled a girl through the door into the middle of the room. She had a sack over her head but from the familiar sound of grunting and mummphing it was pretty obvious she was gagged. Beneath the sack, the captive woman was obviously attractively built. Her blouse was torn a bit and so was her straight skirt but she hadn't been subdued by her experience, she was still trying to kick out at the guards as they pulled the bag from her head. As the bag came free it revealed a mass of long ash blonde hair and a pair of grey eyes looking out furiously from above the strips of grey tape that plastered the lower half of her face. She shook her head and looked around in disbelief at the assembled crowd and the round of applause that she received. As soon as she saw me she started struggling even more. I hadn't seen her for quite a while. We'd worked together about five years ago when I'd just been starting out in marketing management and she was a trainee marketing exec. We'd gone on to work for competitors. Some of the stuff she'd done had given us a bit of trouble. She was good at what she did. It would be interesting to see how she adapted to some new markets and new products.

The way that they'd taped her arms with the strips around her elbows and around her body under her tits emphasised her well configured chest. The way she was struggling did nothing to prevent everyone appreciating it.

Harry said to me, "Hey, she's got a nice body. Certainly a better shape than her predecessor. She's going to fit in well around here." Sarah smiled at Harry's enthusiasm. He went on, "Only thing is Freddie didn't give us a name. Who is our new colleague?"

"Oh, I said, that's the best part of it."

He looked blank.

"Well, it couldn't be anything else, really. Harry, meet, Sally."

Even Rick gave me a pained look as the guards hustled the confused and squealing girl away. Harry grunted and led Sarah off in search of a drink. Sukie, Rachel and I did the same thing. There would be plenty of work soon enough but for the evening at least we thought we'd enjoy ourselves. And then there'd always be some market research to do with Kelly.

It hadn't been a bad year. For me at any rate.

+++ THE END +++

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