

THE
WAR
MERCHANTS



Gregg Feistman

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For my family

*“Behind Every Great Fortune, There is a
Crime”*

—Honore de Balzac

*“The capitalists will sell us the rope with which
we'll hang them.”*

—V.I. Lenin

“War is just a racket...”

—Excerpt from a 1933 speech delivered by
Major General Smedley Butler, USMC

Prologue

FRANCE, 1944

Standing on a hillock across from an isolated woods, SS Colonel Wilhelm Krabbe knew that every person in front of him would die tonight.

He watched a small group of men go in and out of the caves. Soldiers were stationed around them, some guarding the workers, while others stood along the perimeter of the little encampment in case of an unexpected enemy patrol. Soldiers within the encampment prodded the workers along as they carried heavy cases and bulky wooden crates along the muddy ground and into the caves, returning empty-handed a few minutes later. Unloading the trucks was backbreaking work—but then again, for the poor souls who were doing it, it meant another few hours of life.

Their fate was sealed of course, as soon as they finished their work, and they probably knew it. It couldn't be helped. This special secret assignment was given to Krabbe by Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring himself. Göring told him there was no one else he trusted—and as an order from the Reichsmarschall, but more importantly, as one ex-Luftwaffe man to another, Krabbe could hardly refuse, no matter how much he despised the man. With his boasting and incompetence, Göring had almost single-handedly driven a once-mighty and proud air power into the ground.

I just don't see the point of all this, Krabbe thought. The German army had been decimated on the Eastern Front and was in full retreat, with the Russians hot on their heels. And now that the Americans had landed on the Normandy beaches and were fighting their way across France, it was plain to see the war was lost. Pulling valuable fighting men off the front lines to feed Göring's ego was repugnant to the proud soldier and fighter pilot in Krabbe. But lately, many things had become repugnant to him. And that was why, when he was given this assignment, he had talked to his half-brother Karl first.

The sound of a lone plane high overhead made Krabbe look up. He tried peering through the low gray clouds. Whether it was friend or foe didn't matter. He only envied the pilot. Cocking an ear and listening to the engine note, he identified the type of plane.

Oh, to be flying again, or even engaged in combat!

How long had it been? It was why he had joined the air force all those many years ago—for a love of flying. For a moment, he flashed back to the heady days of flight school and then 1938, '39 and '40, when he and his brother pilots had owned the skies. It had all changed of course, after the Battle of Britain. So many good men, now almost all gone. And his beloved Luftwaffe was a dying remnant of what it had once been. Hitler and that fat pig had started the decline, and the American bombers had pretty much finished it. As he stood on the hill, it felt like several lifetimes ago. He pulled his greatcoat tighter to ward off the unexpected chill. The plane circled and then droned off as Krabbe's attention shifted back to his men.

A sudden commotion caught his attention. One of the laborers, bone thin and ragged, had slipped in the mud, dropping a crate. With a loud crack, the impact had split a corner of the crate open and some of the contents had spilled out. For a moment, both prisoners and soldiers gazed in awe at the sight of so much gold, jewelry, and other valuables. There was a great deal of shouting. One of the soldiers, a corporal, kicked the man in the head as he lay on the ground, while another raised his rifle and took aim.

Idiots.

"Captain!" Krabbe roared.

Instantly, everyone froze. A young SS officer scrambled into view below Krabbe and looked up.

"Herr Colonel?"

"Control your men! Have they no brains at all?"

"Colonel?" the captain answered, sounding confused.

Krabbe ignored him and spoke directly to the corporal and the private who was about to shoot the man now groaning and cowering in the mud.

“You two!”

Immediately, both men came to attention.

“Herr Oberst!” the corporal replied.

“Just what were you planning to do?”

“This dog slipped in the mud, interrupting the operation, Herr Oberst.”

“So you decided to kick him, delaying the operation further?”

Krabbe didn’t wait for a reply, but spoke to the private. “And you? You were going to shoot him?” The private was turning pale. “If you had shot him, private, who would then carry the crate?”

A moment of silence passed. Then, “Well?”

“I did not stop to think of that, Herr Oberst,” the man said meekly.

“Obviously not. Let him up and get back to work. And all of you, seal that crate!”

The worker scrambled to his feet and began putting the treasures back into the crate. Krabbe turned his attention back to the captain.

“Krieger,” he said, waving his hand. “Up here.”

The captain scrambled and slipped his way up to where Krabbe was standing, the gravel and dirt giving way under his boots. He almost lost his balance several times. Arriving breathless, he saluted Krabbe.

“My sincere apologies, Colonel. You were quite right to stop that. The men will be disciplined.”

“Discipline them by working them, Krieger. Have them unload the trucks as well.”

If Krieger was surprised, he didn’t show it. “Jawohl, Herr Colonel.”

“We’ve stayed here too long as it is, waiting for those damned trucks to arrive. We need to be finished here by dark and be on our way. It’s too dangerous to stay around.”

“Dangerous, Colonel?”

“That plane flying over a minute ago. It wasn’t one of ours.”

Krieger was about to ask if the colonel was sure, but as his eyes fell on the Knight’s Cross with oak leaves at his throat and the Distinguished Flying Cross, he knew better than to ask. Krabbe was a strange kind of SS Colonel. A former Luftwaffe ace, he was a true hero of the Reich. He’d been transferred to the SS and moved up in rank, awarded with certain privileges and “special” duties for the Reichsmarschall. The flaunting of his Luftwaffe past with the wearing

of his numerous aviation medals bordered on violating SS protocol. And yet Krieger knew no one had ever said anything, even in private. And there was a streak of compassion in Krabbe that showed itself at the oddest times. A proud and highly decorated veteran, no one could possibly question his loyalty or his courage, but all the same, it was very strange indeed. Obviously, Krabbe had very high political connections, and being so influential, he could be useful to an ambitious officer like Krieger.

“We will be finished on time, Colonel. I promise. I know how important this mission is to you. And to the Reichsmarschall.”

Krabbe studied the young captain. Krieger was a poster boy for the Hitler youth, with his blue eyes and fair hair. According to his file, he'd been just that. He'd seen a fair amount of combat and taken part in some rather ruthless campaigns, including the razing of a Polish ghetto or two. All in all, a model SS officer, the future of a Germany that was in its earliest death throes.

“Is that so?” Krabbe asked.

Krieger met his gaze.

“It is my hope Herr Colonel, that you will see fit to mention my assistance in your report to Berlin.”

At least he's honest. To a point. “And why is that?”

“It would be an honor to serve under you again, sir.”

“And further your own career, eh Krieger?”

The captain stood ramrod straight.

“I have no ambition other than to serve the glorious Fatherland and our beloved Führer to the best of my abilities, sir.”

Right out of the manual. Krabbe realized then he had misjudged the young officer. *Damn it, Willie, where is your focus?*

But he knew exactly where it was—in Liechtenstein with Karl. Even though everything started here with the private orders regarding these trucks and crates, it was too dangerous to think about that now. He had to give his full attention to this officer, find out what his real agenda was.

“Of course, Captain. I didn't mean to sound like I doubted you.”

The captain seemed to relax a little.

Good.

“Tell me, Captain. Now that the Allies have landed, what do you think will happen in the war?”

“We will be victorious, sir!”

“Really? How do you know? The Allies outnumber us in men and machines. Their bombers are devastating our industry back home, and

they own the skies. Our armies on the Eastern Front are in shambles. The truth is, Krieger, they have damaged our ability to carry on.”

Now Krieger did look surprised. “With all due respect, Herr Oberst, that is almost defeatist talk. What you say may be true, for you undoubtedly have greater access to information than I. But the armies aligned against us do not possess the heart of the German soldier. We will stand and fight until the reinforcements our beloved Führer has promised us arrive. Then we will drive them back into the sea. We will prove once and for all the superiority of the German people.”

“If, as you say, we are superior, then how do you explain our mission here?”

“Colonel?”

“Why use a group of valued soldiers to move truckloads of heavy crates and boxes into the mountains? Why not have them fighting on the front lines instead?”

“I’m sure it is vitally important to the war effort, Herr Colonel, or our superiors would not have issued these orders. I trust in them completely,” he said with complete serenity.

A true believer, Krabbe realized with sudden clarity and a little sadness. *If only you knew them as I do*, Krieger. He gave the captain a smile.

“Of course, as do I. Still, wouldn’t you rather be fighting the enemy?”

“I have fought the enemies of Germany, both inside and outside the Reich. It is my honor to do so and I pray I will continue to, until my last breath.”

“You would die for Germany?”

“Of course. It is the duty of every soldier to die for his country. I can think of no greater honor.”

Krabbe smiled broadly. *You may very well get your wish, Captain*. “Excellent, Captain, excellent. Perhaps I shall recommend you for my staff when we get back to Berlin after all.”

Krieger looked as if he had just glimpsed heaven itself. “I never dared to voice that hope aloud, Herr Oberst...”

“Well, we shall see. Return to your duties. And Krieger, I want you to personally check on the arrangements to seal the cave when we are done here. I have faith in you that nothing will go wrong, and I want to make sure I put that in my report to Berlin.”

Now Krieger didn’t even try to hide his pride. “Everything will be accomplished to your total satisfaction, Colonel. However, sir, if I may ask one question?”

“Yes?”

“The workers?”

Krabbe sighed inwardly. He knew this question would come, but he saw no other answer to give, none at all. “There are to be no witnesses, Captain Krieger.”

Kreiger’s eyes shone. “Jawohl, Herr Oberst.” He saluted with a stiff right arm. “Heil Hitler!”

Krabbe waved a salute back and watched the captain make his way back down the hillside with haste, scattering pebbles and dirt as he went.

The saddest part of it all. The flower of the next generation of German youth, corrupted by the madman in Berlin. You could have had a bright future in the world after the war is over; young man. A world the few of us are preparing for right now. But there’ll be no place for you and your ideas after the bombs have stopped falling. The war will end and the world will begin to rebuild.

Krabbe checked his watch. Three hours to go before darkness and the caves to be sealed. He looked at the men struggling with the heavy crates. They had formed a ragged assembly line, which seemed to be more efficient. *At least someone’s finally thinking. Maybe we can speed this up a bit.*

Krabbe would order all the men to check the fuses to make sure everything was set. And once they were all inside, he would push the button himself and walk away. After all, there were to be *no* witnesses. Yes, they were Göring’s orders, but Göring wasn’t here in France, hadn’t been to the beaches and hedgerows the last couple of months, like Krabbe had. Göring couldn’t see what would be happening very soon. Couldn’t see there would be no stopping the Allies from reaching Germany from the East and the West, no matter how many divisions Hitler thought he had. All those fools did was sit in the Reichstag, reading reports. Reports from a doomed war in an obsolete, corrupt, and decadent empire.

The vision was now towards the future. It was a vision of Krabbe and Karl and a handful of associates who could wring success from disaster. Not success in this war—it was much too late for that. But success for after the war. Whether it was jumping from a burning Messerschmitt and making his way back through enemy lines without getting caught, or surviving the political intrigue rampant in Berlin, Krabbe had always survived, always knew he would. And he would survive 1944, 1945, and for however long it took afterwards. What he and Karl planned depended on it.

LIECHTENSTEIN, FALL, 1944

Dr. Karl Dietrich Schorer strode in from the sidewalk and through the imposing doors of the Liechtenstein Bank. Switching his briefcase between hands, he brushed the snow off the shoulders of his cashmere coat, ignored the customers and bank employees under the curved vaulted ceiling on the ground floor, and walked directly to the white marble stairs recessed in the back. He preferred taking the stairs to the elevators, part of a lifetime regime of exercise. At fifty-one, he had the trim athletic build of a man ten years younger. In the last year, his dark hair had just started to turn silver, which he thought made him look distinguished. He'd found there were many women in Austria, Switzerland, and Germany who had agreed. And not just the older ones. Of course, it could have been his obvious wealth and position of power that drew them to him, but whatever the reason, he had always taken advantage of whatever offer was made. He often marveled at the amount of information a newly sexually satisfied woman would reveal about their employers, relatives, or even their husbands. He'd used this information to become even more powerful.

He reached the third floor landing and paused to remove his overcoat and hat. While doing so, he concentrated on his heartbeat. It was still normal. He smiled to himself and pushed open the door to the carpeted hallway. There was only one office on this floor, its dark brown unmarked wooden door placed in the exact center of adequately, but not overly lit, gray painted walls. It was the only office he ever visited. He opened the door without knocking and walked in.

As he entered, an older woman rose from behind a large orderly desk facing the door. She wore a plain, dark-gray dress with a high collar covering her extremely thin frame and hiding whatever shape she might have. Her gray hair was pulled back into a severe bun. She wore very little makeup on her long pinched face, and gray glasses that hid plain brown eyes. Perhaps she had been somewhat attractive once, but whenever Schorer saw her, the word "austere" immediately came to mind. Her thin lips greeted him with a smile.

"Herr Doktor Schorer, how nice to see you again," she said evenly. "Please let me take your coat and I'll tell the director you're here."

He surrendered his coat and hat and she went into a tiny alcove around the corner. Back in a minute, she walked to the closed door in the back of the small reception area, knocked, and went in, closing it behind her. A few seconds later, she emerged.

“The director will see you in a moment. I’ll have your customary refreshment prepared as well.”

“Thank you, Fräulein Hubbard. I only wish I had someone like you assisting me all the time.”

“You’re much too kind, but I could never leave the director.”

Schorer was about to reply he was sure she couldn’t when the door behind her opened and Gerhardt Dunst came out.

Dunst was even thinner than his secretary was, practically emaciated. In his late sixties or early seventies, his balding head was surrounded by a crown of thin gray hair. Watery blue eyes were spaced evenly on his long face, alongside a long nose, and he peered out from behind thick eyeglasses. His skin was smooth but his complexion was of someone who rarely saw sunshine, or even daylight. He was dressed in a medium gray suit of the finest wool, expertly tailored, with a white shirt and plain black tie. He extended a bony hand.

“Herr Doktor Schorer, welcome,” he said in a thin reedy voice. “I trust you’ve gotten somewhat accustomed to our snowy alpine weather by now.”

Schorer shook the thin hand, and as always, was amazed by the strength of the grip. It was like having your hand caught in a vice.

“I am very much accustomed to your weather and your hospitality, Herr Director,” he said, taking his hand back and unconsciously flexing it. “I enjoy your country and the hospitality of your people very much.”

“It pleases me to hear you say so, Herr Schorer. Our country may be small, wedged in as it were between Austria and Switzerland, but you and those you represent are always some of our most valued clients. Please, won’t you come in?” he said, motioning to his office. “Martine has prepared your usual.”

Schorer could smell the aroma of fine hot chocolate and followed his nose. On a small serving table near the desk sat a Spode china set with cups and saucers. As the men entered the room, Dunst poured two cups of the steaming brew and handed one to Schorer. He sat behind his massive ebony desk while Schorer relaxed in an oversized leather winged chair, facing him, his briefcase beside him. The lighting was subdued and a steady ticking came from the priceless antique clock on the far mantelpiece, behind and above the director’s head.

Schorer raised the delicate cup to his lips and took a sip, letting the hot bitter sweetness luxuriate in his mouth and on his tongue before swallowing.

“Did you know that chocolate was once considered so valuable that it was used in parts of the world as currency?” Dunst asked.

Schorer smiled. “Perhaps the world should go to a chocolate standard. It would make things so much easier to understand. Gold, diamonds, securities...” He shook his head. “Those things are so abstract. By themselves, they mean nothing, assigned value only because someone perceives there is value in them. And wars fought for political reasons soon lose their meaning. Even one man’s ambition...but chocolate...a war fought over fine chocolate, now that would be something even the common man could appreciate.”

Dunst smiled, revealing two rows of perfectly white teeth, obviously false. “An interesting idea, a chocolate standard. Perhaps I’ll mention it at the next Directors meeting. So Mein Herr Doktor, what can I do for you today?”

Schorer put the cup and saucer down and got to business. “I’ve been doing business with your institution for some time now.”

“Several years, yes, since before the start of the war.”

“And your institution has prospered during that time, in part, because of the business I conduct.”

Dunst looked at him blankly. “Yes.”

“Then should I request a minor change in our current agreement, you would honor it?”

“Herr Schorer, you are a most valued client. If you wish to make some adjustment, I’m sure we can accommodate you. I trust however, that you are not displeased with the services we have provided for you over the years?”

“On the contrary Herr Director, it is precisely because I have been satisfied with your services that I come to you now.”

“I’m gratified to hear it. How may I be of further help?”

Schorer bent down and lifted his black leather briefcase to his lap. He dialed the combination, unfastened the sterling silver Nazi eagle clasp, pushed the small caliber handgun aside and drew out a thick folder of papers that lay under it. Closing the briefcase, he put it on the floor once more.

“Here is signed authorization to redirect some funds in existing accounts. In addition, a substantial deposit of gold and other valuables will be made to this institution very soon. This deposit is to be a private one, separate and distinct from those that already reside here. It is only for the most limited access, the details of which are spelled out in these documents. Only myself and one other person in the entire world know these instructions. Once you read them, you will

become the third person. And that is the maximum possible limit, Herr Director.”

“As you know,” Dunst stated, “our secrecy laws are some of the strictest in the world, even stricter than our more famous neighbors in Switzerland. And within my country, our institution is one of the most secret of all. We pride ourselves on complete privacy. And as you additionally know, only a handful of our clients have access to my services personally.” He looked at Schorer evenly. “It is because of my attention to detail that you and a handful of others return to this office.”

“I have full confidence in you. But even Fräulein Hubbard, whom I know is your most trusted assistant in all matters, must have no knowledge of these transactions.”

“If that is your wish, than it shall be so. May I see the papers, please?”

Schorer handed him a set of bound papers from the file. Dunst read them in silence for several minutes. If he was surprised at the amounts noted and the signatures, he hid it well.

“This is quite a substantial sum of money,” he did finally say, looking at Schorer, “even by our standards. And the arrangements are...somewhat unusual.”

“Even by your standards?”

Dunst smiled thinly. “Of course, the authorizations are all proper.”

“It is time to look ahead, Herr Director.”

“Herr Doktor?”

“The war is lost. I realize that may sound strange to you, coming from the deputy head of the German national treasury—but above all, you and I are businessmen. And now that the Allies have landed and are progressing across Europe, this war has turned into a bad business investment for many concerned parties.”

Dunst merely waited.

“Wars such as these are quickly becoming obsolete. There will always be armed conflicts, of course. The real genius will be to continue business through them. Although that’s been accomplished before, there are certain...interested parties who would like the parameters of this form of business to change. The arrangement you will undertake for us will be the foundation for those changes.”

“You realize of course, that I cannot do anything illegal,” Dunst stated flatly.

“When you examine the papers more closely, Herr Director, you’ll find that everything to be done is proper.”

“Of course. I did not mean to suggest—”

Schorer waved his hand dismissively. “You were just protecting yourself—and your valuable institution. I would have done the same.”

“I’m glad you understand. I must say, Herr Schorer, you have a most...interesting view of what is happening in the world militarily. I’m not sure your country’s leadership would agree with you. What of the Fascist ideal?”

“This war, fought by and for Fascists, will only end badly for Germany, I am certain of that now. The Fascist ideal will remain no more than that, I’m afraid. However, it is with economic fascism that the future lies. Out of the ruins will come a great movement that will reshape the future of mankind. And this,” he motioned to the papers, “will be its start. True to the ideals of what has become a corrupted model.”

“If you’ll forgive me for saying so, Mein Herr, that is dangerous talk coming from someone in your position.”

“On the whole, Herr Director, what I said to you could quite probably get me shot if I were in Berlin. But I am here, outside of Germany. And I intend to stay here.”

Dunst raised one eyebrow. *It’s probably the most emotion the man ever shows*, thought Schorer. “In Liechtenstein?”

“Possibly. Or at least in this area. Residence in a neutral country could be advantageous once the shooting stops.”

“Well, I wish you luck. I will examine the papers more thoroughly and call you tomorrow on the matter. Will that do?”

“That will be fine.”

Schorer drained the last of his chocolate and stood.

“Thank you for the refreshment. And your attention, not to mention your discretion.”

“Not at all.” Dunst stood and walked him to the door. “Until tomorrow.”

They shook hands and Schorer left his office. He gathered his coat and hat in the anteroom, bade Fräulein Hubbard good day and left. By the time he put his coat on and reached the street, the snow had stopped, but the wind had increased. He checked his watch and decided a late lunch would be in order.

Nothing to do now but wait until Dunst’s phone call tomorrow anyway, he thought as he crossed the street and made his way to a café he knew of a block away. Once that happened, everything would be set on this end. The next step would be up to Wilhelm. If that was successful, he too could come to Liechtenstein. Then all they’d have to do

is sit back and wait out the end of the war. The opportunities would be apparent soon enough, they both knew.

Just stay alive, Willie, damn you. Just stay alive, he thought as he strode down the street.

THE PRESENT

Malcolm Boyd sat, staring at nothing. *I'm bored, even here in South Beach.*

South Beach in the early morning is a quiet strip of outdoor cafés, sun-bathed restored art deco façades, and shops with a mix of locals and the handful of curious tourists who had always heard of and seen glossy pictures of the place, but had never visited before. But when the sun went down, South Beach really became its decadent self, with the honeyed, over-scented wafts of perfumes, colognes and the freshly washed skin of beautiful, well-built women and even more beautiful, even more well-built men. All there to see, be seen, and perhaps sample one another in all kinds of intoxicating mixes. Of course, ever since the designer Versace had been gunned down one sunny morning by a crazed male prostitute, people had become more suspect of South Beach. But at night, the old feelings of drink, lust, sex, and pure voyeurism still took over and held court. South Beach was a lot of things: fun, cheesy, dynamic, classic, sexy, and bold. The one thing it wasn't was boring.

Boyd swallowed the last of his overpriced cappuccino, left his patio table at The Newsstand, and walked across the street to the beach, newspaper tucked under his arm. Already the sun burned brightly, and

Boyd slipped on his Revos to cut the glare. Walking a little bit, he just tried to kill time until the top of the hour. *That's why I'm in South Beach*, he reminded himself. His partners, even his Board of Directors, couldn't understand why he had to suddenly fly to Miami, but then he never had shared his secrets while building his media business empire. Boyd's vision had played out exactly as he had planned. *Even the fucking analysts finally caught on, eventually.*

If Malcolm Boyd went somewhere suddenly or disappeared from view for a while, the odds were better than even something was brewing. Something that in all probability would make someone somewhere very, very rich. And certainly, that included Boyd himself. As a result, those around Boyd gave up trying to figure him out. They just watched him. And then bet large sums on what he might or might not do. Even if it was nothing.

Let 'em. They have no idea just what to watch for. Which, of course, was the whole idea.

Right now, Boyd was doing the watching. Across the street, in the portico of a contemporary-looking restaurant, a fashion photo shoot was going on. Nothing unusual about that. South Beach's locations were often the site of many fashion photo layouts, with models, photographers, art directors and stylists from all over the world descending on this strip of sand at the south end of Miami Beach. It would probably surprise most people who glanced through the fashion magazines how many times locations in South Beach are used repeatedly. A good photographer could shoot the same model at the same site from a slightly different angle and make it look like two entirely different places.

Boyd sat on a bench and opened his paper. At the same time he watched the photo shoot in progress. A typical shoot. The photo assistants running around trying to look important, the art directors trying to *be* important by arguing with the photographer, the clothes stylists fretting over which incredibly expensive outfit to go with next, the makeup stylists fretting over their handiwork on the blank canvas that was some mom and dad's poor young girl—and of course, the object of everyone's attention, the model herself.

This one got even Boyd's attention. Six foot tall at least, with a tan carefully nurtured. Long dark hair, full lips, high cheekbones (*de rigueur* for a fashion model, of course), and a body aerobic instructors would kill for. And the bikini she had on looked about two sizes too small. The girl looked flawless. Of course, good lighting and makeup will make just about any seventeen-year-old look good, Boyd

thought. But this one he guessed was a few years beyond seventeen. And watching her, he could tell she was a professional. And he could appreciate a professional in any endeavor.

He found women interesting, a pleasant diversion from time to time—and occasionally, even charming—but not something to take a lot of attention away from other aspects of his life. Serious relationships were out of the question, of course. It always amazed him that women found him attractive, sometimes even before they knew how much money he had. He took care of himself of course, and was in great shape. But he'd never considered himself movie-star handsome, although several women in his past had told him he could have had a film career.

I don't think so. There are much better things to do in this world than pretending to be someone you're not, no matter how much some young MBA idiot in a designer suit in Hollywood is willing to pay you.

The girl was sitting in one of those tall canvas director's chairs now, he noticed. Probably on break while the camera was reloaded and the lights were adjusted. He also noticed she was noticing him. He checked his Rolex—ten minutes to go. He stared at the first article in the paper, not really paying attention to it.

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Boyd had first caught the model's attention as he'd left the restaurant and walked across the street. She was used to onlookers staring at her while she worked, but for some reason this one caught her eye. *Now there's a handsome man.* Early to mid-forties, she guessed. Expensive linen sports jacket, tasteful silk shirt, and cream pants with expensive shoes. And those Revos were perfect on him. *Definitely not a tourist.* A man with style. Some local celebrity, perhaps. *I wonder who he is, why he's sitting on a bench at—what, nine in the morning? A morning stroll on the beach while the wife and kids sleep in? A few minutes of solitude before going into the office? From the way he's dressed, he's either a successful entrepreneur, or a drug dealer.* Which in Miami was really the same thing. Obviously, he was waiting for someone or something. *The rest of the world's at work by now.* She decided he wasn't a drug dealer. *They're not usually up and around this early.*

“Marissa, are you ready?”

Her attention snapped back. “I've been ready, Charles. I'm waiting for you,” she said to the photographer.

“Don’t get bitchy, darling. The morning’s only half over. Are you PMSing today?” asked the makeup artist.

“Fuck you, Steven.”

“Tonight, with any luck at all. Of course, you’re not my type, darling.”

God, what a pain in the ass he was. If he wasn’t the best damned makeup artist in the business, she’d put her self-defense courses to use and kick his man-loving ass all over the beach. It never bothered her that he was a flaming gay. She’d been in this business too long; that was a non-issue with her. What bothered her was he always had to have the last word. So damned smug.

“Can we please get back to work?” Charles asked.

“Of course,” she said. She really did like working with him. “Make me look good, Charles.”

“I always do,” he replied. And he did too, she knew. “Just a couple more, then we’ll do a change.”

Nodding, she stood up and turned it on. If jumper cables could have been hooked up to her smile, she could have powered the neon making up so much of nighttime South Beach for an entire evening. Even the crew noticed. She was sure the stranger on the bench noticed it, too. *Good.*

“Wow, that’s great!” Charles said. “Oh baby!” he almost moaned.

Click brrr, click brrr, click brrr went the camera and its motor drive as he quickly filled his digital image card.

“That’s terrific, Marissa! The best you’ve given me this morning. God, the magazine’s gonna love this. Okay, change.”

That was her cue. With a deft motion, she reached back with one hand, and unhooked the bikini top. She waited a fraction of a second until the stranger looked up at her and then slipped it off in full view of everyone. The photo crew could’ve cared less—they’d been with countless models before and had seen everything. But she caught the stranger’s eye, held his gaze for a moment and then gave him a lewd wink. Just a trace of surprise crossed his face. *Pretty cool customer.* Most men would have been on their knees panting by now. It’d be a shame if he were gay. *I wonder who he is and how I meet him.* Just then a cellular phone rang.

Well, that’s somewhat interesting, he thought passively in the second before his phone rang. The girl’s breasts were certainly full and firm, but what intrigued him even more was the complete lack of tan lines on her torso. Obviously, one had to be a bit of an exhibitionist to be a model. And this one sunbathed in the nude, or at least topless.

Surprisingly, he found himself aroused. Well, she was beautiful. And the wink *was* erotic. He smiled inwardly. Kudos to her for getting his attention.

§ § § § § §

When the phone rang, he instantly dismissed thoughts of the girl. He focused all of his considerable mental powers on the phone—a very special phone, with a very special, very private number. Only one person had this number. And Boyd had never met them. Ever.

Hitting the ON button, he held the phone to his ear. A mechanical voice, like those annoying computer solicitations that interrupt other people's dinner said, "Mango's, eleven o'clock tonight." The connection broke.

Four words, he mused. It was rarely more. *Well, nothing else to do but wait until tonight*. Putting the phone away, he folded his paper and stood up, glancing at the photo shoot. The girl had changed into a short black cocktail dress with a plunging neckline and high heels. She was performing for the camera and didn't seem to notice him anymore.

Just as well, he thought. He really didn't want to be bothered.

§ § § § § §

Mango's was a new club on South Beach, just a few doors away from the Colony Hotel, one of the more favored and photographed art deco hotels. Outside, a line of fashionably dressed partygoers waited to get in. Boyd, of course, had already been let in. It had been prearranged.

Stationing himself at a corner of the bar, he took in most of the room. The decor was typical of this kind of place. Faux tropical, heavy on Latin influences, with dim enough lighting to lose yourself if you wanted, or make your companion look better than they might in the daytime. Of course, one could always find the brightly lit bar. It was an old story, he told himself. People always want what they can't have, that's why there's a line outside. Let 'em build up a thirst and sense of anticipation, then assault the senses with sound, lights, and the moving shadows of toned bodies. Sex, or the promise of it, sold and always will.

Sipping his one and only vodka martini of the evening (didn't want to appear out of place, he told himself), he watched and waited. He wasn't sure for what or whom, but he knew somehow a message would be sent to him. An offhand remark, an overheard piece of con-

versation, even odd change left on the bar. Over the years, it had never been the same thing twice, no matter where he was in the world. Just *something* would get his attention. Whatever it was, it would dictate his course of action.

The bodies on the dance floor were jammed tight, pulsing to the pounding Cuban rhythms. *Christ, I wonder how much they're making just on the booze and spandex in this one club.* There were buttocks, breasts and bulges galore, but of course, everyone was too cool to appear obvious. That too, was part of the game. Sometimes the best place to hide things is where everyone will look.

"Excuse me," a female voice said beside him.

Turning, he saw a tall brunette trying to get the bartender's attention. It was the model from this morning's photo shoot, dressed in the black cocktail dress he'd last seen her in. Up close, it seemed the neckline plunged deeper than he remembered from across the street.

"Excuse me," she said again, louder. The bartender ignored her. "Son of a bitch!"

Marissa had had a lousy day. What started off well in the morning turned to disaster by afternoon. The art director couldn't decide what he wanted and kept everyone waiting. Outfits that were supposed to arrive by a certain time hadn't. By midday, everyone had had it, and the sunlight was too direct anyway. With a few hours' break, she had gone back to the hotel room for a nap. The late-afternoon shoot was called off for some reason, and everyone had scattered to hook up, or just be on their own. And on her own was exactly what she was. Her boyfriend had dumped her the month before; she was out of town, out of sorts, and feeling a little lonely.

Determined not to spend the night in her hotel room watching TV, and borrowing the low-cut black dress from the shoot, she had picked this club. After finishing her makeup and slipping on the high heels, she had examined herself in the mirror, determined that she'd stand out even among the hedonists, and went out by herself.

A casual conversation with one of the photo assistants had prompted the stranger from the morning to reenter her mind. The assistant, a native Miamian whom she had never met before, had suggested this club might be the kind of place men like him might go to. He'd even bet her a hundred bucks she'd find him. For some reason, she'd accepted the bet. *Who knows, maybe I'll just bump into him. Even if I don't, I can always say I did and pick up an easy hundred.* This shoot was getting to be less and less fun, but the bet at least put some interest into the week. *And what if I do run into him? He was*

really good-looking. A casual fuck wouldn't be out of the question. But now she was thirsty and the bartender was ignoring her.

"Can you believe this guy?" she asked to no one in particular.

"Pardon me," Boyd said to the bartender in a voice conveying authority. Looking up, the bartender came over. "The lady would like a drink."

"Thank you," she said, turning. Her eyes widened in recognition.

"God, it's you!" she said. She'd found him! *The easiest hundred I ever made.* Then, embarrassed, she stammered, "I mean, I mean..."

"What would you like?" Boyd asked her.

"Um, Grey Goose with lime, please." Nodding, the bartender went away. "You're the man on the bench, right?" she asked, immediately feeling incredibly dumb.

"If by that you mean, did I watch your photo shoot this morning, the answer's yes."

She collected herself, look into his brown eyes, and put out her hand.

"Marissa," a professional again. "Marissa Boucher."

"Malcolm Boyd," he replied neutrally and shook. Her hand was warm. "I admired the way you worked this morning."

"Oh?" she asked.

"You're a professional. And you're very good."

"You can tell?"

"I've been around a few models before."

I'll bet you have. He could have been a model himself, with a little work.

"It was a bitch of a day. The photographer couldn't get the lighting he wanted, the stylists kept fussing, and they kept changing their minds on which outfits they wanted me in. The afternoon session got called off and no one knows what's planned for tomorrow."

"So what brings you here?"

"Well, everyone else made plans and I was damned if I was going to spend a night in South Beach watching mindless television in my hotel room. I told them when they decided what they wanted tomorrow and when they needed me, let me know. Do I sound like too much of a bitch?"

"Not at all," he replied. "Good fashion models work hard for their money."

"Are you in the business?" she asked.

"I'm in publishing and media." *Among other things.*

"What do you publish?"

“Magazines, books, other stuff. Some Internet.”

“I’m impressed,” she said. *And how.*

The bartender returned with her drink and he paid for it with a fifty.

“That’s not necessary,” she said.

“I know.”

Hmmmm.

“Have you been a model long?” he asked.

“About ten years,” she replied.

“That’s impressive.”

“What do you mean?”

“The fashion and glamour business isn’t noted for its longevity.”

“True, but the good ones stick around.”

“And you’re one of the good ones.”

“You said so yourself.”

Quick. There must be a brain behind the lovely face. Ten years is a long time in a business that truly eats its young. Looks fade or go out of style. And then there are the million temptations in studios, on locations, and elsewhere in a world built on a falsehood. For those who aren’t prepared or grounded enough in the real world to be able to tell the difference, when the illusions slip away, there’s often nothing left.

“So you enjoy it,” he said, more of a statement than a question.

“It pays the bills and it pays them very well,” she replied. “I’ve worked damn hard to get to this level. Besides, I get paid to go all over the world. I’ve got the chance to do it, and I’m taking it.”

Me too, he thought, *but not for the same reasons.*

“That’s the same dress from this morning, isn’t it?”

“You’ve got a good memory, Malcolm. Or are you just especially observant?”

“A little of both,” he confessed.

She took half a step back. “So do you approve?” she asked, modeling it for him.

“It’s very flattering.” Which was true.

Very cool, Malcolm. I think I like you.

“It’s not mine, I borrowed it from this morning. I have to be careful not to mess it up, of course.”

“Is it hard staying in shape?” he asked. “Or is that a rude question?”

“No. And yes, it is when you love chocolate.”

He chuckled as the bartender returned with his change, leaving two twenties and five ones on the bar for a twelve-dollar drink and walked

away. He noticed. Clever. Well, nothing more for tonight. He turned back to her. As the conversation continued, it became quickly obvious she was in no rush to leave the bar. He learned she grew up in the Midwest, lost both parents in a car accident, and after graduating high school decided to try and capitalize on her looks. That led her to New York where she quickly caught the attention of some of the top modeling agencies. In a lot of ways, her story was typical. In a lot of ways, it was lucky, too.

After a while, she said, “so Malcolm, what’s your story?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, suddenly on edge.

“Married?”

He relaxed. “Nope.”

“Lying?”

“Nope.”

She sipped her drink and stared at him for a long minute over the rim of the glass. Dark hair, strong jaw. No wedding ring or tan line around the finger, but that didn’t mean anything these days. He seemed sincere, *but then, they often do. Still, I did run into him. Lucky me. What the hell, let’s see where this goes. Sure beats a lonely hotel room. And fuck Steve and the others. I’ll get wherever I’m supposed to get to when I get there.*

“I believe you,” she said finally.

“Good,” he said.

“Are you from Miami?”

“No. I just flew in on business.”

“Publishing business.”

“Yes,” he lied.

“And when do you leave?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, tomorrow.”

“I see,” she said. She seemed to be thinking something over.

“Where are you staying?”

“I have an estate in Coral Gables.”

“An estate?” she asked, impressed.

“Well, the company does.” *Dumb. Still, it’s unlikely she’d know where to look.* And even if she did, the company owning the estate was a shell within a shell within a shell. Sharper minds than this one had tried to uncover who owned what and failed. Many times.

“I guess publishing’s a good business, eh Malcolm?”

“It can be,” he replied. “What about you?”

“Here in South Beach. Have to be up early and on the beach for work, you know.”

“Starting at dawn?”

She shrugged. “Ordinarily, but they couldn’t decide when we start tomorrow, so I told them to leave me a message at the hotel. Hopefully, I’ll be able to sleep in. You *do* know the fashion business, don’t you?”

He smiled. A likable girl. Nowhere near his standards of course, but until the rest of the message was transmitted, he had no place to go and all night to get there.

They talked a little while longer as he pretended to sip his drink and she had a few more. He was careful not to seem too interested, which made her wonder even more. He was also carefully generic in his answers to her questions. It was an old talent of his, used so often it was second nature: talk enough to keep ’em interested, but never give away anything useful.

Finally, she decided she was tired of waiting and moved close, pressing her lips against his ear.

“You know, I’ve never been in a private estate in Coral Gables,” she said huskily. Her lips lingered.

Her full breasts pressed on his arm and he could smell her perfume. An ordinary man would have found the moment intoxicating. But Boyd was in control, always. He turned and faced her, inches apart.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t bring you there. It’s company policy. No outsiders.”

“Policy?” she asked. “Who decided that?”

“I did,” he answered.

“What, are you the boss or something?”

He smiled. “Something like that.”

“What if I were an insider?” she asked.

“But you’re not.”

“If you made the policy, you could make me an insider, couldn’t you?”

She sure was trying. And it’s not just the alcohol. Maybe she’s just horny.

“C’mon Malcolm, don’t make me beg.”

“Pardon?”

“Let’s go to your estate.”

He shook his head. “It’s a nice thought, Marissa, but I really can’t.”

“Don’t you like me?”

“Yes.” Which was true. “But...”

“But we’ve only just met, right?”

“That’s part of it.”

“And there’s someone else, right? Maybe not a wife, but someone? Or is it that you don’t like girls?”

He smiled ruefully. “No, I like girls, honest. And there isn’t anyone else. It’s just...”

“I’m not an insider,” she completed it for him.

“Yes. I’m sorry if that doesn’t make a lot of sense, it’s just the way it is.”

She raised her chin and narrowed her eyes at him.

“Well, if I can’t be an insider at your place, maybe you can be an insider at mine.” She closed in and licked his lips.

“That’s an interesting phrase,” he replied.

God, this guy’s playing at being a tough one, and I’ve put up with fucking mind games all day. She decided to drop the pretense.

“Look Malcolm, I find you attractive as hell and I think you find me that way too, even if you’re trying hard not to let on. You say you’re in publishing, you’re obviously successful, and you’re here alone. So am I. I’ve had a shitty day. We’re both away from home and we’re both grownups. You’ve got me intrigued, okay? Now, I don’t know if you’ve lied to me the whole time we’ve been talking or not. And frankly, tonight I don’t care. I worked hard today, had to put up with a lot of assholes, but I’m making a lot of money this week and I’m ready to leave and do a little celebrating. And I want to do it with you. Are you interested or not?”

“You’re direct, I’ll say that.”

“Decision time, pal.”

He was instantly alert. It was one of his favorite phrases, whether consulting with a trusted staff member on a business move, or just to himself when major decisions had to be made. It was his own idiosyncratic way of psyching himself up. No one dared use the phrase when talking to him, only when he addressed someone else. It was a very deep part of his psyche no one knew about. Almost no one. So, Marissa was more than just a pretty face. Finding out just how much more suddenly got a lot more interesting. He set his jaw.

“Okay, let’s go.” He grabbed her hand and pulled. They quickly made their way out of the club and onto the street. “Which way?” he asked.

“Jesus, Malcolm, I said I was ready to go, but I meant leave like normal people, not get my arm ripped off!”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you. Are you all right?” He seemed to be genuinely concerned.

“Is this an act?” she asked.

“Is what an act?”

“A minute ago, you practically carried me out of there. Now you’re concerned about me. Which is it?”

“I’m truly sorry if I hurt you. I didn’t mean to. If you’ve changed your mind about me coming with you, I’ll understand.”

And if you do, I’ll follow you anyway to find out what I need to know.

“No, I haven’t changed my mind. Just be a little more gentle, that’s all. I mean, I like it rough sometimes, just not out here, okay?”

“Okay.”

She grabbed his hand and they walked two blocks to her hotel. Neither spoke. They rode the elevator to the third floor where she led him to her room. She unlocked the door and pulled him in, closing the door with her foot. Before he stopped moving, she was on him, kissing him hungrily, stabbing his mouth with her tongue, searching, straining. His fingers found the clasp to her dress, undid it, and unzipped her.

“Careful,” she said, her mouth on his. “It isn’t mine, remember?”

He laughed as it slid down her, gathering at her ankles. She stepped out of it, standing naked except for a black thong. Her breasts were magnificent, he thought, even more so close-up. She removed his jacket and shirt, rubbed her chest against his, and unbuckled his belt. As her hands fumbled, he stiffened. She grabbed him with both hands.

“Wow,” she said. “Is that you?”

He nodded.

She unzipped his pants, knelt, licked and sucked. He stared straight ahead and remembered the phrase she used in the club.

“Marissa, you’re flashing.”

“What?” she mumbled, her mouth full.

“Your phone.”

She turned and saw the message light blinking.

“Aw shit,” she said and stood up, walking over to the nightstand in her thong and high heels. Pressing a button, she listened for a moment, hung up turned to him and shrugged. “I don’t have to work in the morning. It’s gonna rain.”

She eyes wandered down and she smiled, seeing him still erect. “Now, where was I?” she asked, walking towards him.

He stopped her. “I have to ask you something.”

She looked disappointed. “Why’d you stop me? I was just getting started. And you’re great to go down on.”

“I need to know something.”

“I’ve been tested, if that’s what you want to know.”

He realized she meant AIDS. “It’s not, but I’m glad to hear it. I’m clean too.”

“Good,” she said, close enough now, her fingertips gently stroking him.

“I need to know why you used that phrase in the club.”

Her fingers stopped. “What phrase?”

“Decision time, pal.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Who told you to say that to me?”

She looked at him, startled. “How did you know someone told me?”

“Just answer me, please. It’s important.”

She walked away from him and stood by the foot of the bed. In her thong and heels, she looked like she had stepped out of a lingerie catalog, which in a way she had. She put her hands on her hips and thrust her chest out.

“After the photo shoot this morning, one of the guys on the crew came up to me. He noticed that I saw you, and bet me a hundred bucks that I’d run into you again. He said that if I did, I should drop that phrase in conversation. I looked at him like he was nuts, but I ran into you and remembered what he said. So I got curious and tried it. It’s obviously gotten your attention. So what’s it mean? A code phrase, right? What are you, a drug dealer?”

“No.”

“Don’t bullshit me, Malcolm.”

“I’m not a dealer, Marissa.”

“A cop, then?”

“No.”

“DEA, FBI, what?”

“None of those, I swear. It’s just a phrase I use a lot in business. Normally, I’m the one saying it, not having it being said to, that’s all.”

“And you’re all bent out of shape because I said it to you?”

“No, not really.” And he really wasn’t. The rest of the message had been delivered. Decision time was coming again. Soon. He’d learn what the factors were and which parties were involved soon enough. For now it was enough to know a decision would be called for. He looked at Marissa again. Poor kid—she was just the innocent courier.

She had no idea she'd even told him anything. Which of course was by design. She'd done her job without even knowing a job had been done. And for a measly hundred bucks. Well, she deserved more. Much more. He reached down and fumbled in his jacket.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He found his pen. "I want you to write down your address."

"Why?"

"When I come to New York next time."

"Hey look, I gotta tell you, I'm really not in the mood for any relationship right now. My boyfriend dumped me last month and men aren't my favorite species these days."

"Then why am I here?" he asked.

"Because I think you're sexy and I want you."

"So this is a one-night stand," he said.

"Got a problem with that? Men have been doing it to us forever. Or are you one of those overly sensitive types?"

He almost laughed. "I guess this means the sexual revolution has come full circle. Well, for what it's worth, Marissa, I think you're sexy too."

"Most men do. Some women too. Listen, I'm not a whore. I don't do this for money. This is just about what I want tonight. If you really want my address, you can have it. But I'm not expecting to hear from you, okay?"

"Okay, but you never know," he replied.

She wrote down her address and phone number and gave them to him. He put it on top of his jacket. Then she peeled off her thong and laid back on the bed, still wearing the heels.

"Now, about what I want," she said, looking at him with a wicked grin.

"Yes?"

She spread her legs in front of him. "Come over here and fuck me." And he did.

§ § § § § §

Early the next morning, Boyd was on his way to the airport. Sitting in the back of the black stretch limo and watching the traffic, he mused about last night and smiled. Marissa had been insatiable in the beginning, and her experience showed, but he had surprised her with his stamina. She practically begged him to finally stop and let her get some sleep, claiming exhaustion and achiness. So he'd dressed and left silently. The last sound he heard her make was the heavy deep

breathing of pure sleep. Making his way downstairs, the limo was waiting at the curb for him, of course, his bags in the trunk.

On the piece of paper she had written for him, he found her address, reached forward for the phone, and dialed a number in Manhattan.

“Voice identification, Boyd.”

“Identification confirmed,” an anonymous voice replied.

“Transfer \$100,000 to the account of Marissa Boucher, 210 East 86th Street, Apartment 3C, New York City. Make it anonymous.”

“Understood.” The connection was broken.

He sat back. *It's nice to reward people for a job well done.*

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