

SIMON JENNER



ETHAN JUSTICE

ORIGINS

A Private Investigator Series

Origins

Ethan Justice - A Private Investigator Series

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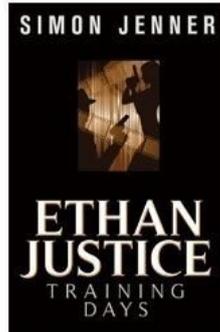
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Prologue

I REMIND MY captive of the need for obedience by stubbing out my cigarette on his forehead. The smell of singeing skin is exquisite. He is tightly gagged to prevent the noise from escaping his detached home. His screams are merely loud groans that die inside these walls. The bouncing wooden chair settles as his energy levels deplete, welts red and angry where rope has rubbed against ankles and wrists.

“Are you ready to talk?” I ask.

He nods his head urgently. The pain has done the trick. Compliance will spare him pain. He understands.

“Tell me everything you know about Bradshaw and his invention,” I say, pulling up a matching chair and sitting opposite him, taking hold of the spittle-soaked material wrapped tightly around his mouth. “If you make a noise, you will die.”

He nods his understanding, and I unwind the makeshift gag.

“Talk.”

He is a pen-pusher and doesn't understand the science behind Bradshaw's invention, but my breath quickens at the power he describes. I see vengeance unfolding before my eyes as he continues, without further encouragement, to stammer out Bradshaw's address. I sense truth behind wide-eyed fear, but I need an angle.

“What's Bradshaw's weakness?”

He jerks back in the chair. “What?”

“Little boys, little girls, drugs ... what's his poison?”

“I've ... I've heard ... he gambles heavily,” he splutters. “Owes more than he can pay.”

Perfect. It's enough, and I should be moving on. I pat him on the head and reapply the gag. He begins to fidget as he ponders my next move. I walk to my black gym bag and remove the hatchet, slapping it against my free palm. It is cold and heavy. I need to know for sure that he has spoken the truth.

“Place your little finger flat on the arm of the chair,” I say, pointing to his left hand.

The chair jumps, and the groans return, his eyes fixed on the hatchet. I twist his balled fist sideways so his little finger is against the arm. His mind will not allow his hand to open up and release the finger.

“It's a finger or the whole hand,” I tell him, raising the hatchet. “Your choice.”

The finger creeps out, and I bring down the axe before he has time to retract it. His eyes close as the cutting edge meets the digit halfway down. The small axe buries itself into the hard wood beneath. The chair shakes and creaks, like it might fall apart, as he thrashes from side to side, tears streaming from his eyes and leaping from his cheeks. I doubt he has ever experienced real pain before. He is lucky I can't hang around to educate him.

I place my foot between his legs, pressing down on the chair, keeping it planted to the floor. “When I come back, I want you to nod if all you have told me is true. Shake your head and you will have a chance to correct your mistake without further pain.” I lean down until our faces are close, and I smell the cold sweat that drips from his brow. I feel his shakes travel into the chair and up my leg. I smile. “If I doubt your nod, then I will take another finger, and we'll try again. Understand?”

He nods, red eyes blinking, face slack and drooping in defeat.

In the kitchen I open up the gas valves of the hob and oven, setting the boiler to spark in fifteen minutes. It is an easy adjustment, one that will not survive the explosion and subsequent fire. A deliberate nod greets me as I walk back into the lounge.

I exhale through pursed lips, sorry to be leaving so soon, but I have taken too much of a risk already. There will be other opportunities. I collect my things and leave, confident that the fire will cover my trail and darkness my departure.

It is time to start the dance with Bradshaw.

1: Sunday 18th September, 13:30

JOHN SMITH WAS sitting alone in his parents' dining room, a shrine to designer opulence. What was taking so long? Where were his parents and sister? Where was the delicious smelling roast lamb?

Three loud raps at the front door aroused his curiosity.

Adelaine House was at the end of a two hundred yard gated driveway which required authorised entry. John would have heard if the intercom system had been used, so it had to be somebody with the code - Uncle Michael perhaps ... or his best friend, Mark Bradshaw.¹

Thank God. Now he would have an ally at the table, and his parents would lay off the subject of his career, or more correctly, the lack of one.

John heard his father greet Mark at the door.

"Good to see you, Mark. How's the world of finance treating you?"

"Pretty good, thanks, Adam. Is John here?"

"Yes but..." his father's voice dropped to a whisper. As still as he could be, John strained his ears but was unable to hear. He had an uneasy feeling that he was being kept out of the loop on something.

"Got it," Mark said finally, in a failed attempt at whispering in baritone. "We'll put him straight."

John's stomach sank, and his appetite plummeted with it.

*

Thirty minutes later a thick and heavy silence blended with the smells of the steaming cuisine laid in front of John. He had so far parried every attempt at small talk with short, sharp, not-to-be-followed answers. The others shared knowing glances when they thought John's attention was elsewhere. He had hardly touched his appetizer and was equally unable to appreciate the main course.

John rested his head on his hand as he guided a roast potato around a lamb island and through a moat of gravy with his silver fork. He raised his eyes from his plate.

"Come on then," he said. "Let's get on with it."

City whiz Mark, wearing a dark power suit as always, was sitting opposite John and next to Rachel, John's sister. Rachel had left home over a year ago when she was twenty-two. She had purchased her own property with an obscene mortgage, met by a more obscene salary at one of the larger prestigious fashion houses. For the life of him, he could never remember which one.

Mark looked to his left, past Rachel to John's father at the head of the table. Adam Smith nodded and Mark cleared his throat as if addressing a board meeting.

"Listen, John, we're all a bit concerned about you."

Here it was. Time to duck out. John stood up and glared at Mark. "Not you too. I thought you were my friend."

"That's why we asked him here." His mother, sitting to his right, tugged his shirt, and he half expected her to tell him to tuck it in - but she didn't. "Don't blame Mark. He took a great deal of convincing to come here today."

His mother was such a drama queen. "Look, Mark, forgive me if I don't want to be a super-preened city stiff like you. I can't believe you've let them rope you into this."

Rachel, dressed in a figure-hugging, high-fashion, pink dress of her own design, dabbed her matching lips with her napkin. At least she wasn't wearing a ridiculous hat today. "Jonathan, Mum and Dad just want the best for you. For Christ's sake, you've got a maths degree from Oxford, and you're working as a clerk in an office."

"Don't call me Jonathan." Pretty and successful, Rachel had it all. Why did she have to be such a huge pain in the arse? "What the hell use are *your* services to the world, Rachel? Created any new designs for the third world recently? Let's give the starving some street cred, why don't we?"

John's father raised his hand. "John, leave your sister alone, and sit down, please."

"Forget it, Dad. I know I'm a disappointment to you all, but it's my life, and I'm living it my way." John turned to leave.

"If you don't sit down, son, we're taking your flat back."

John froze. "You'd do that?"

"It's in our name."

"You'd really take my home?"

"Jonathan," his mother said, "you're thirty-two, and you dress like you're seventeen. We have given you every advantage. Why can't you just use them?"

John turned back to face his detractors. "I support myself," he said to no one in particular. Why had he said that? He braced himself.

His father made fists with his hands as they sat by his plate. "We pay your rates and utility bills and don't charge you rent. Just how is that supporting yourself?" He gestured to Mark whose pock-scarred face, the result of acute teenage acne, looked decidedly uncomfortable. "Mark here lives in Kensington and makes a seven figure salary. You, on the other hand, make ... I don't know? Are you into five figures yet?"

Yes, of course they thought Mark was wonderful, but they didn't know of his out-of-control gambling problem or his fondness for high-class prostitutes. He wasn't the saint they thought him to be. Boy, could John tell them some stories, and by coming here the turncoat would deserve it - but he couldn't do that to his only real friend. Besides, it changed nothing. What they were saying was all true. John was a waster. He knew it, Mark knew it and his family knew it.

"Another banker, that's just what the world needs," he said under his breath as he returned to sit at the table. He had lost. It was time for damage control.

John nudged at his potato with his fork, but it had taken on too much gravy and fell apart. "What do you want?"

"We'll give you six months," his father said, again gesturing to Mark. "We were going to make it three, but Mark told us six was fairer. It's the eighteenth of September. Why don't we agree to a deadline of the end of March?"

Mark had his uses after all. How would John celebrate Christmas properly if he had a proper job to hold down?

"How about twelve months?"

"Not a chance."

"And who's going to turf me out?" John poked his mother's shoulder. "What would the neighbours say, Mum? Just think of all the gossip."

His mother's cheeks reddened, and she shifted in her chair. "Adam?"

His father banged his fist on the table, shaking the cutlery. "I'll sell it for next to nothing to a slum landlord if that makes you pull your finger out."

"Calm down, dear." His mother took hold of his father's hand. "Remember your heart."

John jerked back in his chair as if someone had pushed him. "What? What about your heart, Dad?"

Adam Smith shook his head and squeezed his wife's hand. "It's nothing. You know how your mum fusses."

Elaine Smith snatched her hand back. "You call quadruple bypass surgery fussing?"

John turned to Mark who shrugged. He looked over to Rachel who nodded. His attention returned to his father. "Dad?" His father avoided eye contact by looking over to Rachel. This was all becoming too much. "Will somebody please tell me what's going on?"

"Your father needed emergency surgery after a massive heart attack two months ago," began Mrs. Smith. "If we hadn't been able to pay for the operation privately, he'd be dead."

John couldn't believe what he was hearing. "But Dad's always been so ... healthy? He's only fifty-four."

His mother continued, ignoring her son's interruption. "Anyway, ever since the operation, he's been worried sick about what's going to become of you if he dies. He wouldn't tell you, but he lies awake at night trying to come up with ways of getting you back on track. The stress will eventually kill him and..."

"Really, Elaine, please..." his father complained, eyes wandering around the room, anywhere but on John.

"No, Adam, it has to be said."

Nobody could do disappointed better than his mother - not even Rachel, although she was catching up. "You're killing your father, Jonathan." Her hand rose to her forehead. "Can't you see that?"

Despite the added drama, the message hit home hard and deep. *A heart attack - Jesus Christ.* "Why didn't you call me?"

Elaine Smith looked her son squarely in the face. "Because seeing you might have killed him."

*

On Monday morning John called work to tell them he was sick. He feigned a weak voice as it seemed only proper to play the part. It was his first instance of sickness in the two years he had been with the company, and regardless of his lowly position, he had always performed his clerical duties to the highest standard. At least he was his father's son in one regard.

Discovering a new vocation within six months sounded relatively straightforward for a man with an honours degree from Oxford University. He needed to brainstorm his options, and as he always thought better with a drink inside him, he sat in his - no, in his *parents'* - flat, with a notepad and a half bottle of cheap Scotch whisky.

By Friday lunch time, his notepad contained one underlined word:

Ideas

His bin contained seven empty scotch bottles. For the last five days, he had not shaved, hardly eaten and slept on the sofa, certain that inspiration was only another drink away. At that point he decided there was a serious flaw in his reasoning and called Mark for assistance. Mark suggested that they meet at a sports bar named 'Dribbles' in Soho, where they always went when Mark had a large bet on a football match. Didn't Mark see the irony in not even liking football? Maybe he could convince Mark to give up gambling to support him in his career-launching endeavours. It was as like as the long odds his best friend insisted on chucking his offensive salary away on.

John spent the remainder of the afternoon preparing to go out, dragging himself through all of the necessary recovery procedures until only his eyes displayed the toll his body had paid for the week of worthless brainstorming.

*

At eight o'clock Dribbles was already overflowing outside with customers who had arrived prepared with thick coats and scarves. The idea of drinking cold beer outside in the dark, beneath overcast skies, was lost on John. Fortunately Mark was a regular big spender, and there was always a table made available to him.

Ten large television screens were intermittently spaced and tuned in to various silenced sporting events. Katy Perry was singing her lungs out about kissing a girl and it tasting of cherry Chap Stick. Tonight the VIP table was in a private corner of the massive, wooden-floored bar, and their waitress was an attractive Spanish woman in her mid-twenties with shoulder-length black hair and smooth olive skin.

"*Como estás, Mark?*" she said, guiding them to their bar-height table with two high wooden stools.

"*Muy bien gracias, Carmen, y tu?*"

“*Yo tambien, gracias. Buscas mujeres?*” She patted Mark’s behind as he mounted the stool.
“*Quieres que llamo a Christos?*”

Mark smiled. “*Quizás luego.*”

John had witnessed the ritual many times before, but this was the first time he had met Carmen. John took his seat and ordered a Corona. Mark suggested whisky chasers, but the thought of more Scotch made John feel nauseous.

Mark was six feet four inches tall so had nearly four inches of extra body to house the abundant alcohol they would undoubtedly consume. Mark scrutinized Carmen’s bottom as she ambled away to collect their beers, chatting to other regulars as she went, some taking advantage of the overcrowded floor space to make ‘accidental’ contact. She didn’t seem to mind.

“Is she ... you know?” John asked.

Mark grinned. “Available for hire?”

Despite his skin blemishes, Mark was handsome and had plenty of women chasing after his affections. He was slim, tall, dressed in expensive Savile Row suits and had the most important criterion in bundles: he was rich. However, Mark detested the act of romancing and figured it a complete waste of his valuable time, preferring one-night stands with gorgeous high-class escorts. John could see the attraction but unfortunately found the unknown history of their abundant clientele too much to stomach. Besides, he didn’t have the funds to pay for such indulgent and risky treats.

“Yes. Is she one of your regulars?” John asked, as Carmen disappeared into the thick of the Friday night crowd.

“No. I think she might be available, but she’s not my type. Too short for me.”

John thought about that for a moment. Five feet two versus six feet four. He had never considered height as an issue between two potential mates, but as he unintentionally pictured Mark and Carmen in his mind, the likely problems became clearer. He grimaced.

“It’s a sixty-nine thing, old boy,” added Mark, in case John hadn’t quite cottoned on.

“I get it. Please don’t say another word. I already swallowed down some sick.”

“Are you interested?” enquired Mark, eyebrows raised, mouth stretched into a smirk. “My treat. You’re worse with women than I am. Call it a celebratory gift to start your new life.”

“No, you’re all right, thanks. I promised my hand that I wouldn’t cheat on it.”

Mark laughed and snorted in that way that only came with old money.

“Mark, pack that racket in, or you’ll get us into a fight. Some of us peasants don’t appreciate the Sloane Ranger snort.”

Embarrassed, Mark stopped abruptly and pointed at John. “Listen here, Smith, I know for a fact that your father sold his firm for upwards of fifteen million.”

“It’s got nothing to do with the money. My dad’s the first in his family to have any. Besides, I won’t get a penny unless I join the professional classes.”

“So have you anything in mind?”

“No. I’ve wasted a week trying to think of something that interested me. All I managed to do was feel sick, grow a beard and develop chronic B.O.”

“Sounds like a civil service job might suit you.”

“Very good.” John took his bottle of Corona from the outstretched hand of Carmen. She had beautiful brown eyes. “You should tell my dad that one. He hates civil servants.”

“I think he told it to me.”

Ice cold Corona ran from the corner of John’s mouth as he failed to laugh and keep his lips together at the same time. “You bastard,” John said, brushing the liquid from his blue polo shirt before it soaked through. “This is my best shirt.”

“Now I know why they call this place ‘Dribbles’,” Mark said. “Anyway, what’s this about best

shirt? I thought that was your *only* shirt.”

“Like I said, ‘You bastard’.”

John looked up from his beer-dampened shirt to see that Mark was whispering into Carmen’s ear. A moment later she was gone, but there was more of a purpose to her stride. What was he up to?

John grabbed his friend by the suit lapels. “I hope you haven’t done anything stupid.”

Mark raised both hands from the table, palms facing John. “Me? Never.” A look of triumph spread across his face, like he’d won one of his ludicrous bets. “I’ve got it.”

Pulling his arms back, John shook his head. “Go on,” he said.

“Do you remember when Spunk Eyes Spencer attacked me in the playground, when we were about sixteen?”

“Yeah, wasn’t it because you called him Spunk Eyes?”

Mark considered this for a moment. “Yes, I suppose it must have been. Anyway, you took him down like you were born to it.”

“What’s your point?”

“I’ll never forget the look in your eyes as you faced off. It was like you were on a roller coaster ride, caught up in excitement and exhilaration, not a flicker of fear to be seen.”

John took a swig from his bottle and swallowed, enjoying the memory of pulling Anthony Spencer from on top of Mark as Spunk Eyes swung fist after fist into his best friend’s face. He had enjoyed seeing the fear in the bully’s eyes. “I’m a bit old to be a boxer.”

“What about the police?”

“Are you serious?”

“I don’t mean the boys in blue. I’m talking about your secret service types. They earn six-figure salaries, and you could get that look back.”

“And they don’t exist.”

“Believe me, John, they exist all right. I can’t believe I never thought of it before. Leave it with me, and I’ll see if I can set something up.”

Mark raised his bottle, and John did the same, toasting to resolving his future. Like Mark knew anyone in a secret police unit. But the thought of telling his mother he carried a gun and shot people for a living did widen his grin somewhat.

“So we’ve sorted out my career path, what do we do now?”

“Let’s get absolutely fucking trollied.” Mark’s suggestion threw him into a fit of posh snorts, so loud that a few disapproving stares gravitated their way. John stared them all right back.

“I’ll drink to that,” he said.

2: Saturday 24th September, 06:30

JOHN SMITH LAY on his back in his bed, staring into the blackness. No light had appeared through the cigarette hole in the thick velvet curtains signalling it wasn't even seven o'clock yet. He closed his eyes and tried to remember the events from last night. A week on Scotch and a night of God only knew how many Coronas had taken its toll on his cognitive powers. Oh yes, he was going to become a secret agent, and then he and Mark had gotten pissed.

"What time is it?" said a sleepy, female voice.

John shot up, grabbed the duvet with both hands and pulled it to his chest. His heart pounded, and his skin tingled with goose bumps. Movement had not been kind to his head. He looked over to his left, but the room was still pitch black. Anyway he worked it, his head came back to the same conclusion. There was a woman in his bed.

"What the...?"

"Heh, stop stealing all the covers, chummy," said the silky voice. "That's no way to treat a guest. A soft hand slid under the duvet and onto his bare chest, stroking him in slow circles. "I'm yours till eight if you want to go again."

John felt around and banged on the lamp at his bedside. The room lit up and he blinked rapidly as he fought to focus his eyes on the warm, wriggling body that was attempting to clamp on to him. Her words percolated in his brain while he gazed down at the slender, naked frame. She was truly spectacular: hardly twenty, long dark hair, pale smooth skin and the mischievous face of a wayward angel. She was way out of his league. The soft hand crept towards his crotch just as his brain caught up with reality.

"You're a prostitute?" he exclaimed, sliding off the bed, taking the duvet with him and wrapping around himself like fluffy, makeshift armour. With a few feet between them, the young woman's beauty was blatant and decidedly distracting. "You're a prostitute," he repeated, not sure what else to say.

Chocolate brown eyes glistened and tears formed in their corners as his guest crossed her legs, folded her arms and bent awkwardly over in an attempt to cover her newly found modesty. "I'm an escort actually, not a prostitute, and I don't do anything I don't want to."

John could not handle a crying woman - prostitute, escort or otherwise. For Superman it was Kryptonite, for some it was fingernails on a blackboard, but for John it was a woman's tears. The more tears, the more John fell apart.

"Don't cry," he pleaded. "I don't care what you do. I've got every respect for prostitutes." He saw the corners of her mouth drop further, and the tears began to flow. "I mean escorts. Please... please... please don't cry." But cry she did, and how. He racked his brain for the right words to stem the tide and end his pain. Any lie would do. "My sister is an escort. It's in my family, why would it bother me?"

Her eyes narrowed and lingered on him, perhaps testing whether his statement would crumble under the glare of her teary vision. He held her gaze. His lie was working. "You're only my second client," she said, wiping her eyes and looking around the room for her clothes. "You seemed really nice."

With the pounding in John's head relegated to a low priority, the memory of the night began to surface. Mark had lost his bet on the football match and had seemed somewhat dejected until Carmen the Spanish waitress, had arrived with a friend - Samantha or something? John had hit it off immediately with Carmen's friend, which should have been a clue the size of a skyscraper, but he had been drunk so he should cut himself a little slack. She had come home with him - the same woman

who was now crouching on his oversized bed, searching the room for her clothes.

Taking care not to drop the covers, John knelt and retrieved the woman's clothes from under the bed. She would never have found them without moving, and she wasn't going anywhere until she could adequately cover herself. He passed the items to her with a trembling hand. Was that the whisky or the fact he had a beautiful, naked woman on his bed? Most likely the latter. He turned his back to her, allowing her some privacy to dress. He noticed the light appearing through the hole in the curtain. Seven o'clock had been and gone.

"We seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot," he said. "I remember that we chatted and kissed and that Mark took off, but I honestly didn't know about..." How did he say this without eliciting further histrionics? He needed to mind his choice of words. "I didn't know about ... you know?"

"Forget about it," she said, dismissively. "You were off your face. Your buddy thought you could do with cheering up. Do you even remember my name?"

"Samantha is it? Sorry," he said. "I can barely remember my own."

"You can turn around now," she said.

John turned and was surprised to find her standing in front of him with her hand held out. She stood about an inch above him in black high heels and a black mini dress. The mischievous look had gone, leaving just the face of a dark-haired angel.

"I'm Savannah," she said.

"Yeah right," John said. He extended his hand to meet hers. It really was the softest of hands, and he felt a pleasant tingle shoot up his arm when they touched. "I'm John Smith," he said.

"Yeah right," she said. "Look, if you could just pay me the thousand pounds ... *John Smith* ..." she gave a huge grin like there was something funny about the name, "... then I'll be off."

John caught his breath. "Didn't Mark take care of that?"

"No, he said you were loaded and wouldn't hear of it."

"This is a joke, right?"

"Am I smiling?"

She wasn't, but she was still stunning. It must be a con. Mark was the city financier, the money man, Mr Fat Wallet. He was a joker but not of the practical kind. He was way too sophisticated for that.

"I'll call Mark," he threatened.

"Well make it quick," she said, looking around the room. "I need to go."

John grabbed the cordless phone from the bedside table and speed-dialled his best friend.

"Yes," the voice was sharp and edgy. It didn't sound like Mark at all.

"Mark?" John said.

"Oh it's you. What is it? I'm in the middle of something."

"Good morning to you too."

"John, I don't have time for games," said Mark. "What is it you want?"

"You set me up with a prost ... a girl." Phew, that was close. "Now she says I owe her a thousand pounds."

"Yes. Your parents are right. You're a waste of space. I thought this might give you the kick up the arse you so badly need." Mark hung up.

John's head thumped like his heart was inside it. He stared at the handset open mouthed. Mark had never spoken to him like that before. Yes, he'd made fun of John's adversity to success and yes, he'd turned up at his parents' house last Sunday in an intervention style attack on his lifestyle - but this? The voice was Mark's, but the behaviour was not that of his best friend.

"Told you," she said.

John shook his head and exhaled. His head didn't appreciate the movement.

“Arghh! This can’t be right.” What was up with Mark? He let out a huge sigh, holding his head with one hand to ensure it didn’t move. Mark could wait. John had more immediate issues. “How much do I really owe you?”

“A thousand, like I already said.”

John shook his head slowly as he looked her up and down, sizing up the threat. She seemed way too nice for this situation. It was all just a big joke. Had they even had sex? He had been way too drunk to remember, and he’d yet to manage drunk and penetration at the same time. She was something else though. In her case, he may well have just gone the extra mile. None of his thoughts made any difference because he didn’t have a thousand pounds, and what could she do about it anyway?

“I don’t have it,” he said. He held out his upturned palms as if this proved how poor he was. The duvet fell to the floor leaving him totally exposed.

“Nice,” she said, taking her time to look John up and down, “but I’ll still need the cash.”

He fell to the floor and pulled the duvet up to his waist. “I really don’t have it,” he said, trying to appear unruffled as he looked up at her. He hesitated before saying, “You really liked what you saw?”

She bit her bottom lip and rolled her eyes. “Look, John Smith, I don’t do the threatening, I’m just the talent.” She reached into a small black purse, which John hadn’t noticed against the matching dress, and passed him a business card. “Call me within forty-eight hours when you’ve got the cash, or my boss will break your legs.”

John stared at the card blankly. “But...?”

Before he could form a coherent sentence, Savannah Jones of Aphrodite’s Angels had left the building.

3: Saturday 24th September, 08:00

JOHN COULD NOT get back to sleep. He was dog-tired, but his spinning mind prevented a return to slumber. What had Mark got him into?

For three hours he paced around the spacious flat in a pair of black boxers, swearing under his breath at his predicament, kicking anything in his path. Damn Mark. John never lectured him about the thousands he blew on gambling, so what gave Mark the right to interfere with his life? Some bloody friend. Where could he get a thousand pounds in forty-eight hours? He wouldn't be paid for another six days and there was a salary advance and an overdraft to cover, leaving a few hundred over for essentials at best.

Recent events with his family meant they were unlikely to assist without a good explanation, and no matter how many ways he played out the scene in his head, it didn't end well. Besides, the thought of begging his parents or Rachel for money turned his stomach. His sister was daddy's girl through and through. The voice might be shriller but the message would be the same: you got yourself into this mess, so you find a way to get yourself out of it. No, it had to be Mark or a local money lender, and a loan shark would put him effectively back to where he was, he reckoned he was stuck with Mark.

His huffing, puffing and expletives were scarily interrupted by the occasional thought of the long legged Savannah. He couldn't recall ever having been so taken by a person's natural beauty before. And those eyes! Had she really liked what she saw, or was it all part of the service? Why had he asked? He must have appeared so lame. She had seemed incredibly nice for a prostitute. He guessed people expected a lot for a thousand pounds - and why shouldn't they? Some of them might even work hard for it. He wondered how long it would take him to save up for another night and whether she would agree not to sleep with anyone else until then? Probably not, he concluded.

At 11.00 A.M. he gave up thinking and headed to the wet room for a shower. After ten minutes of sixteen individual jets of hot pressurised water massaging his every muscle, he was a new man. He admired himself in the full-length mirror. Not bad for thirty-two, considering he hadn't exercised since university. A little muscle mass had deserted him, but at least it hadn't turned to fat. He jumped on the scales which measured him at just over twelve and a half stones with eighteen percent body fat. At half an inch over six feet, he reckoned they were pretty good stats. Savannah could do worse.

John changed into a pair of tatty old blue jeans, a red t-shirt, baggy green GAP hoodie and a pair of Nike black Air Max trainers bought recently on his credit card. They had been a steal at just under a fifth of a night with Savannah. As usual he skipped breakfast.

*

Two tubes later he was standing outside Mark's apartment block in South Kensington. The streets were bustling with the rich and the even richer. Most pedestrians carried designer umbrellas of varying lengths and colours despite the predictions of the weathermen for a late summer day. Not surprisingly, the sky, grey and overcast, threatened rain or worse. Did anyone believe the weather forecast anymore? John glanced along the line of residents' neatly parked cars which followed the curve of the avenue, and as usual didn't spot a car that cost less than fifty thousand pounds.

Doormen in various uniforms, complete with hats, many like the trained monkeys sat on top of the barrel organs of yesteryear, stood outside blocks of exorbitantly priced apartments. This wasn't the most expensive post code in London but it was right up there. Of course, Mark's apartment was the penthouse. How much did a flat have to cost to be considered an apartment? Wasn't an apartment just an Americanism for flat? The rich and their obsession with labels, John mused as he dialled Mark's mobile. The pickup was immediate.

"Where are you?" asked Mark.

“Outside,” John said. “Can you tell the concierge to let me up? Last time he refused and told the doorman to never let me back in.”

Mark sounded pissed off. “Why are you here?”

“Come on, you posh bastard. You owe me after that stunt you pulled.” John put on his best aristocratic accent. “Tell Parkes that Lord John Smith is here.”

“You’re such a child. I’ll instruct him when I’m done.”

“Or you could say, ‘let my friend in’. Try talking like the rest of the human race, why don’t you?” John disconnected the call. They were like chalk and cheese all right. Sure they’d gone to the same elite school, but they were worlds apart in every other way. And yet the tie between them was strong, and neither one had ever managed to explain it. It was what it was, and despite the possibly bone-threatening position Mark had left him in, John would do just about anything for him. Once he’d coughed up the thousand pounds, of course.

John watched yellow leaves fall from the oaks, beeches and silver birches which were prevalent along the exclusive avenue. The light breeze seemed distinctly autumnal, carrying a chill which his hoodie failed to deflect. As the leaves fell in a lazy, pendulum-style motion, he was reminded of his failure to take hold of his own life, which too seemed on a downward path to nowhere.

Five minutes later, Parkes emerged from the building and headed towards John at a brisk pace. This didn’t bode well. He wore the same bus-red uniform as the doorman but had a more elaborate hat. Perks of the job, John supposed. As he approached, he opened his mouth to speak but John beat him to it.

“All right, Parker?” John said.

“It’s Parkes,” he said. “My name is Parkes.”

He was a tall, muscular man of about forty years old with a pronounced black widow’s peak which he hid beneath the hat. The head gear was a half-height, black top hat with a bus-red band to match the uniform, giving him the appearance of a circus ringmaster. Parkes had been a thorn in John’s side since Mark had moved into the block fifteen months ago, always making entry to his friend’s apartment difficult for him. Mark had told John that Parkes was ex-military, but he didn’t believe a word of it. John had never taken to orders well: at school, at home and especially from a steroid-pumped attendant.

“Wasn’t that what I said?” asked John.

“No.”

“Nice hat. Got enough saved for the hair transplant yet? Can I come in now?”

“Mr Bradshaw is unavailable.”

“No, he isn’t,” John said. “I spoke to him less than ten minutes ago. You were supposed to be telling the doorman to let me in. What the hell is going on?”

Parkes rubbed his mouth with a white-gloved hand and leaned forward so his face was close to John’s.

“Don’t take that tone with me, Smith,” he said through clenched teeth. “I could break you like a twig.”

What was with all the threats today? Parkes seemed overly nervous and antagonistic. John pushed Parkes away, both palms thumping into the bigger man’s chest. Parkes grunted as the air left his lungs and stumbled backwards to keep from falling, arms rotating like two erratic windmills as he sought balance. Passersby turned their heads as they continued to walk, interested, but not wanting to be involved. While the concierge considered his next move, John called Mark once again - it went straight to voicemail - strange.

He redialled Mark’s mobile again as Parkes cursed under his breath at the numerous passersby with nothing better to do than stare. Voicemail again. John considered taking a run at the entrance to

the apartment block, but Parkes was built to block, and it didn't appear an even contest. But Mark could be in trouble, and John needed the money to keep his legs intact. Looking into the concierge's eyes John shrugged, turned on his heels and started to walk away.

Five short paces later, John spun around and charged.

The diversion had worked. Parkes was already heading back to the entrance. Unfortunately, Parkes's colleague, the doorman, had spotted John and screamed. John reached the concierge at full pelt, just as he turned in reaction to the warning. Dipping and turning his left shoulder, John caught Parkes full in the chest sending him backwards for the second time, only this time directly into the doorman. Both figures tumbled to the paved ground beneath the maroon cloth canopy of the apartments in a tangled heap. Onlookers gaped in astonishment, but John didn't hang around to explain, continuing forward from the collision, on and into the apartment building.

John ran through the overly large reception area where Parkes should have been on duty and launched himself into the single lift which was open, waiting like a sideways mechanical mouth to swallow him. He stabbed the top red button for the penthouse several times, and after a few 'come ons', the doors closed smoothly and the lift began its ascent. He bent over, hands on his knees for support, gasping for air as his cardiovascular system struggled to provide his muscles with sufficient oxygen. Perhaps he should have taken a bit better care of himself.

The lift chimed and opened, revealing Mark's solid wooden doors directly opposite. John immediately picked up the cylindrical bin from inside the lift and placed it between the doors, just like he had seen in a movie. He rolled the cylinder sideways into position so it sat in the crack between the lift and the adjoining floor. Anyone who followed him would be forced to take the stairwell. As expected, the lift doors chomped repeatedly on the bin and failed to close. John jumped over the obstruction and made for Mark's doors. He rang Mark's bell with his right hand and banged on the doors with his other fist.

"Mark! Mark! Are you there, Mark?" John shouted, not caring who heard him. He paused and put his ear to the cold wood of the door. There was a definite sound of a door closing. With a two-step run up, he rammed the same shoulder he had hit Parkes with, into the doors. Pain shot through his shoulder as his bone collided with the hard wood, and he rebounded from the impact. *God that hurt.* He wasn't going to get through the door as easily as he had gone past the concierge.

He looked around for something heavy enough to use as a makeshift battering ram, but there was nothing but a fire hose in the tall, narrow corridor, and the lift's bin was in use and far too light. While searching, he noticed the red 'break in case of fire' box to the left of the lift which he promptly smashed with his elbow, sending an ear-piercing, two-tone wail throughout the building.

Resisting the urge to cover his ears, John charged the door once more, again bouncing back in pain like a rubber ball off a brick wall. He leaned with his back against the door, panting from exhaustion and the adrenaline rush. Jesus, what was he supposed to do? Where was an axe when you needed one? He felt rather than heard the click from the locking mechanism behind him, and the right-hand door twitched slightly inwards. John kicked the door as he turned and rushed into the spacious entrance hall. Empty.

"Mark, where are you?"

John eased his way along the high-ceilinged hall. Nothing looked out of place. The Chinese art from several dynasties, which John disliked, was perfectly hung on maroon walls. As always, the place looked spotless and smelt of disinfectant. This was clearly no robbery. All of the doors were shut, which again, was not unlike Mark. Maybe he'd left by the fire escape. But why?

John ran straight ahead to the far end of the hall and flung open the solid oak door to the lounge. An instant draft hit John, telling him that the window to the stairs on the outside of the building was open. He dashed to the window and leaned out. The metal staircase vibrated with the sound of hurried

footsteps.

“Mark, is that you?”

John stuck his head out further but the staircase hindered his view. Rather than wait to see who appeared at the bottom, he decided his time would be better spent checking the rest of the flat. If it was his friend descending the outside stairs, then Mark was safe and if it wasn't, then John was safe. He didn't give it another thought and took one quick look around the lounge before heading for Mark's study.

It wasn't rocket science. The study was the place where Mark would work or place bets online - therefore he almost lived in there. John strode to the second door on the left, turned the ornate handle and pushed it open. The windowless room was dimly lit by an overturned desk lamp, and it was impossible to make out any detail. John's heart banged like a bass drum as he reached behind him to turn on the main light. The sight in front of him brought foul-tasting bile to his throat.

*

In a small coffee house on Kensington High Street, Herb Johnson was regretting his decision to allow his partner to return to work so soon after injury.

Four months earlier, in a botched raid on a suspected terrorist's residence, Max Wilson had taken a bullet meant for Johnson. Wilson had subsequently declined psychological counselling and requested immediate return to work after his release from Earthguard's private hospital. While Wilson was physically mended, it was clear to Johnson that the mental side of recovery was lagging far behind. The guy had always been a rock and Johnson owed him, but they were off mission and he needed to get Wilson back to current business.

He looked his stocky, pug-faced partner in the eyes.

“So what are we doing here, Max? We're supposed to be keeping watch on Bradshaw.”

Wilson looked like a well-dressed boxer and spoke like a BBC newsreader. Johnson could never get his head around the anomaly. “Bradshaw's one of us. I've known him for years. I'd be less surprised if HQ suspected you,” Wilson said.

“That's not the point. It's what he's developed that makes him a risk. Answer my question. What are we doing here?”

“I just got the feeling that you weren't happy with my work since my return,” the stocky man said.

Johnson clenched his teeth. “And that's why you took us away from our observation points? We could be canned for this.”

“We couldn't talk face to face from fifty yards apart.”

The thought of messing up on the job was tying Johnson's stomach in knots. “Other than staying in contact while we observe, we shouldn't be talking at all. Tell me what's on your mind, and let's get back to work.”

Wilson shrugged. “I miss my old job.”

Johnson shuffled his chair forward and lowered his voice to a venomous growl. “For fuck's sake, Max. You know we can't talk about our pasts or our personal lives. Are you trying to put us out of work?”

Shoulders a body builder would have died for slumped. “My wife died last week while I was in hospital.”

The senior Earthguard agent looked around the bustling coffee shop. It wasn't unusual for an agent to be kept under surveillance after a considerable period of inactivity. Thankfully, he didn't see anything. He felt for the big fool, but his hands were tied. He had to follow procedure.

“Don't say another word, Max, or I'll be forced to report in to the controller.” Johnson leaned in a little further. “Look, Buddy, I owe you big time, but this is my livelihood you're messing with. We work together, not play together. You know the rules. If you've got problems, then take the

counselling on offer.”

Wilson rubbed his flat nose, the result of many blows, most on the job since they had been paired up a month over five years ago. London guard was one of the most sought after agent posts. A paltry two operatives covered a sprawling city rife with infinitely varying beliefs and an abundance of high profile targets. Most in the international field considered it second only to Washington, and Johnson was the first American to land the post. The pay and benefits were substantial. And his bull of a partner was about to blow it for them both. Wilson’s bottom lip trembled.

“My daughter...”

Johnson reached inside his thick dark coat for his phone. “One more word, Max...”

“All right. You can’t help. Forget it. I should never have tried.” Wilson stood up and threw a ten pound note on the table. “Back to work then.”

As Johnson rose, a good ten inches further than Wilson, his phone vibrated ominously inside his jacket. He had a bad feeling.

“Johnson,” he answered.

“We’re getting some activity on the satellite from your subject’s location. Is everything okay, Agent Johnson?”

Johnson’s worst fears had been realised.

*

John doubled over as if hit in the stomach by an invisible force. He couldn’t breathe, and his empty stomach searched for content to eject. Retching dryly, he fell to his knees.

Mark was slumped forward in his chair, his upper body resting on the surface of the desk. The side of his face was lying in a pool of blood. A Chinese letter opener skewered his left hand into the top of his head like he was patting himself. The end of his little finger and half of his thumb lay in front of Mark’s open eyes in their own small pool of thick red body fluid. The ivory handle of a huge dagger, which John recognised as one of Mark’s collection, protruded from the centre of his friend’s back. There was no life evident in the eyes. John didn’t need to have seen a lifeless body before to know that his best friend was dead.

Documents were scattered all around Mark’s body, some in the spreading pool of blood which crept towards the front edge of his expansive antique desk. John looked on, unable to take his eyes away, unable to fathom the scene in front of him. His eyes remained glued as Mark’s blood flowed over the desk’s edge like molten lava, splashing freely on the sixteenth century Persian rug. Knowing Mark’s fondness and unreasonable over protectiveness of the rug, John’s first instinct was to stop the blood flow onto the almost paisley-like, patterned carpet.

He noticed Mark’s outstretched right arm with hand still clutching the door entry remote control like he was trying to hand it to somebody. Pointing it at the door like a TV remote perhaps? No, John remembered Mark explaining that it didn’t work like that, although he couldn’t remember exactly how it *did* work. Mark was always boasting about his high-tech security system. Fat lot of good it had done him.

John pushed himself upright and steadied his shaking legs by grabbing the edge of the desk, taking care to miss the parts wet with his friend’s blood. Intrigued by the pointing arm being at odds with the rest of the body, John gently took the hand and began to pull away the fingers around the remote. He expected a cold and vice-like death grip, but each digit was still warm and came away easily. John removed the remote and laid it on the desk. In Mark’s palm was a small, folded piece of paper stuck to the skin. John peeled it away and began to unfold it when he heard footsteps entering the apartment. Instinctively, he slid the paper into the waistband of his underpants, hoping that it wouldn’t slip down.

John turned slowly around to see two dark-coated men and a fireman, who had presumably responded to the alarm which had now ceased. The policemen appeared remarkably composed

considering a dash up eight flights of stairs. Despite their matching attire, the two officers could not have been more different. ~~The short one was in his late forties with the face and build of a well-battered heavyweight boxer. The other man was basketball-player tall but solidly built and most definitely in charge.~~

Parkes, eyes shiny with indignation, hand raised, forefinger pointing accusingly at John, spoke first.

“That’s him,” he said, panting like a dehydrated dog. “He’s the one I was telling you about.”

“This isn’t what it looks like,” said John, knowing that it didn’t look good.

4: Saturday 24th September, 12:42

SAVANNAH JONES SIPPED at her cup of lukewarm herbal tea in a booth of a small Pizza Hut in Shepherd's Bush, wishing she'd changed clothes before arriving. She had thought her small, damp-ridden bedsit would not provide the uplift in spirit she so longingly craved. Instead she had spent the last four hours at Hammersmith tube station on a fixed stool making a tall 'Americano' coffee last well beyond its intended lifespan. The pimply teenage boy who worked the concession stand had seemed glad of the company and hadn't pressured her to order more or to move on.

Savannah sipped again at her tea. It truly was disgusting. She allowed the liquid to fall out of her mouth and back into the cup without swallowing. Why hadn't she ordered a coffee?

The red plastic, high-backed double seats gave her some protection from the eyes of the few other customers who, sitting down for an early lunch, could surely tell how she made her unsavoury living. She looked and felt like a whore. Goddamn it, she was a whore, or a prostitute as John Smith had called her.

John Smith! She wondered why he'd withheld his real name. Maybe he'd known the bill for her services was his and blamed his friend to escape payment. Perhaps he'd rumbled her lack of confidence and figured she was easily cheated out of her fee. His place was big, and she knew that a Chiswick address didn't come without a big price tag. No doubt she'd screwed up. She had much to learn.

Savannah had known the world of escorting would be seedy, but her friend Amy, who had recommended Aphrodite's Angels, said it would soon pay off her debts and give her the chance she badly needed to work her life out. Work for a month and then jack it in, she had told her. One day and two clients later and she had collected the grand sum of fifty pounds, fifty percent of which she owed to her new boss, Christos the Greek, who was already over ten minutes late. Not much of a living from an hour and a night's work.

She banged the cup down harder than she meant to, splashing straw-coloured liquid over the red paper tablecloth. It smelt worse than it tasted.

"What's up, Sweetie?" said a voice from behind.

Savannah went rigid but somehow convinced her muscles to relax before Christos seated himself against the wall, directly opposite his latest employee. She needed to appear calm, collected and unruffled.

As always he was dressed completely in black: jeans, sweatshirt, trainers and brand new leather bomber jacket. For a forty-five year old, his look was not cool. He was of average height, stocky but not fat, with dyed black hair slicked back with a wet-look hair care product. He had a large broad nose on a chubby face which, along with his irregular shaving habit, had given rise to the 'Christos the Greek' moniker - at least that was Amy's version.

Apparently, his real name was Christopher, born and bred in East London, and he had never been overseas. He had a faint but distinctive smell about him which Savannah guessed was the hair gel, but could equally have been a deodorant failing to mask a hygiene issue.

She needed her wits about her, to act like it had all been a walk in the park. So far her boss had been nothing but kind, full of helpful advice, and she had no reason to think he'd changed overnight. After all, she was new and had to learn the ropes.

"So how'd your first night go, Sweetie?"

She looked into his eyes. They were dark slits on a face which yesterday had radiated red-faced joviality like an out of season Santa. Not today. Even the high-pitched, cheeky boy, Cockney patter had lost its previous charm and carried with it an element of threat.

“Not so good,” she said. “I’m sure things will get better though.”

Christos didn’t move, his hands remaining under the table, his eyelids closing further until the slits were almost gone. “Helen told me you had two clients. I ain’t great at maths but I reckon that makes two grand. A grand for you and one for me.”

It was no wonder the clients never saw behind the scenes at Aphrodite’s Angels. A high-class escort agency needed a ‘smooth as silk operator’ on the front desk. In this case it was Helen, Christos’s wife. On the rough diamond scale, Christos was at the far end of the rough. Savannah was rapidly suspecting that his diamond side had also been a facade. She cursed at Amy under her breath.

“What was that?” snapped Christos, his shovel-like hands slamming down onto the table sending the condiments momentarily airborne. “You giving me shit?”

Damn. This was all going to Hell and fast. *Placate him Savannah, placate him.* She dug into her small purse and handed him three ten pound notes across the table. “That’s over half of what I earned.”

His big, clumsy hand reached out, grabbed the money and tucked it into the inside pocket of his jacket. Moving quicker than Savannah could have anticipated, the same hand grabbed her wrist and yanked her closer to him. He leaned in the rest of the way, and she felt the warmth of a breath so rancid she swore she could taste it in her mouth.

“Explain yourself,” he said.

Savannah tugged her arm, trying to get free, but his grip was too tight.

“You’re hurting me,” she said, looking around, hoping that someone else might notice her plight. She thought about screaming, but her need to see the matter through outweighed her distress - but only just.

“Explain yourself,” he repeated with added spittle which travelled the short distance onto her face.

“Okay, okay. I screwed up. What can I say?”

“I want details.”

“The first one at the Dorchester, short and skinny, over from Italy for business...”

“Ricardo,” Christos elaborated. “Go on, what happened?”

Savannah felt her face flush. It was bad enough she had to go through last night, let alone tell this foul-breathed bully about it.

“He didn’t have any condoms, and I wasn’t having sex without protection.”

“You didn’t take condoms with you?”

“I’m new to this,” she said, trying again to pull away. “Get off me, will you?”

Christos didn’t budge an inch. “Carry on, darlin’.”

She wanted to cry, but she would not let this bastard have the satisfaction. She clenched her teeth together, dug deep for resolve and hissed back at Christos hoping her breath stank as bad as his. “He wanted to do it without, but I said no, so I agreed to get him off by hand as long as he put a sock on it.”

Christos laughed in her face, long and loud. It was a laugh that contained genuine humour, and for a few seconds Savannah believed she had defused the situation. “He looked so miserable while I was doing it I didn’t think I could accept the fee,” she added.

Christos stopped laughing, his face settling into contemplation. “He’s Italian. They always look miserable when they have sex. They think it makes them look macho. They should wear black like me and smile when they fuck, those miserable bastards.” He pulled her closer so that his nose pushed hard into her cheekbone. “So he offered to pay you?”

“Y...y...yes, but I only took fifty for my time.” *Don’t cry Savannah, she told herself. You’ll never do this again or have to talk to a piece of filth like this again. You can wait tables or clean floors, but you’ll never have to be treated like this ever again. Get it over with, and get on with your life.*

This had all been a huge mistake. What filthy, sordid and violent world had she entered? What had

she been thinking? She didn't know if he suspected that she was about to scream or break down, but he released her and she sat back as far as the seat would allow. He shook his head when she wiped off his saliva from her face with her bare arm.

"Okay, so that's one," he said, a little less tension in his voice. "What happened with the other yo picked up in the sports bar, the yuppie?"

"He said that it was his friend's idea and that he had no money."

Christos chewed on a thumbnail a while before responding. "You gave him the talk?"

"Yes, that I was just the talent and he had to pay or you'd break his legs." She could still smell the saliva on her face. She shuddered.

"What's his name?"

As she spoke the name, she braced herself for the backlash. "John ... Smith, he said it was."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" he roared. "Do I look like I won't break *your* legs right here, right now?"

He didn't. He looked like a snorting bull about to charge, like he knew no other way to deal with the situation that confronted him. Savannah bit down on the soft inside of both lips and concentrated on the pain. She felt a trickle of blood inside her mouth and the taste of metal. If she ran, Amy would tell Christos where to find her. She had a few words for Amy of her own, if she made it out on unbroken legs.

A uniformed waitress in her mid-twenties with long blonde hair and blue eyes walked up to their booth and stopped. She was pretty but not so pretty that she'd turn heads, and the way she savagely chewed gum did nothing to enhance her looks. She appeared most unimpressed with their behaviour.

"My boss says to be quiet or leave," she said in an East European accent, making 'leave' sound more like 'leaf'.

Christos gave the waitress a menacing stare, all slit eyes and snarling teeth. "Mind your business."

"It is ... how do you say ... your funeral?" replied the waitress, seeming even more unimpressed, in a way that were at all possible.

Christos stared at the woman in disbelief, his mouth agape and his eyes wider than Savannah had seen before. She noticed the fine edge of a contact lens in one eye as he turned and looked up to face the waitress. She wondered how he managed to get them into those tiny openings.

"We'll be done in two minutes," Christos said, almost politely and entirely devoid of his Cockney accent.

"Good." The waitress turned and walked away.

Christos exhaled. "Did you see that? That bird's Russian, part of the Russian mob over here in London. You mess with their bitches and they'll cut off your dick and ram it down your throat. You either suffocate or bleed to death. Either way your last taste before you die is your own blood and piss."

A joke about his penis size not being sufficient to block his airway popped into Savannah's head, but she thought better of sharing it with him. Although the thought of him dying that way did bump her resolve back up a notch. "Are we done now?" she asked.

Christos leaned over once again, and she backed up so much she almost stood up.

"Don't worry darling, I'm not going to make a scene in front of the Russians."

She slid back down into the seat. "So what now?"

He glanced around him before lowering his voice to a whisper. "Our business will be over when you pay me my grand. If I don't have it in two days, I'll sell you to the Arabs who will fuck your tight little arsehole until you can shit melons without wincing. Are we clear?"

Savannah's lips trembled and, unable to speak, she meekly nodded her head. Christos got up and left.

The East European waitress returned to the booth, a concerned expression on her face, no sign of the chewing gum.

Savannah was glad of the company. The young woman had unnerved Christos, and that gave Savannah a sense of security.

The waitress sat down exactly where Christos the Greek had been. She placed her hand on top of Savannah's. "You work as whore for this man ... no?"

Savannah said nothing. Her stomach sank.

"I can get you better rates. We meet later ... yes?"

Savannah jumped up and ran out of the Pizza Hut, sending her herbal tea cup crashing to the floor. She needed to find John Smith - like now.

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