Stiffkey Blues

A Norfolk Tale

By

Freddie Clegg
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All characters fictitious.

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With friendly apologies to the folks at the “Tales of the Veils” web site – which is of course nothing like Eastern Promise, but gave me the idea for this story.
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Chapter 1: The Request

Freddie Clegg was standing on the loading dock as the cage was rolled out. The cages were an improvement on the crates, he thought. Easier to keep an eye on the merchandise, less risk of damage in transit with the new designs and much more secure. The team had done a good job on building these.

The naked girl inside was probably not as impressed. However, the way that she restrained inside the cage coupled with the results of her training, the trauma resulting from her abduction and abuse at the hands of Clegg’s ‘trainers’, and the drugs that had been administered to reduce the stress of her journey meant that there was little chance of her showing her feelings.

Clegg watched as the steel frame rolled by on its four castors. The girl was held quite firmly, unable to shift within the cage which, in any case, was barely larger than her crouched form. Her head was locked in a padded frame so that she faced the floor. The frame was fixed to the inside of the cage allowing only the slightest movement. Although Freddie couldn’t see it he knew that her mouth was filled with a hard rubber plug that kept her silent and held in place the tube through which she would be fed and watered during the course of her journey.

Her arms were strapped tightly against her sides, clipped to broad leather belts that were padlocked around her waist, thighs and chest. Her wrists were shackled to her thighs, her hands enclosed in the locked, finger-less, gloves that made certain that there was nothing she could do to gain her freedom. Her belts in turn were linked by chains to the frame of the cage fixing her within the confined space and holding the weight of her upper body so that her knees and feet rested only lightly on the bars of the cage beneath her. They too were belted and chained so that the girl hung, immovable and silent within her cage.

As the cage passed, Freddie could see that the girl was also held in place by the twin plugs that were bolted to the rear bars of the cage and penetrated her arse and her cunt. Freddie wasn’t the only one that was watching. Three other girls lay, helpless and silenced, cocooned in plastic wrapping that secured them and, at the same time prevented the occasional abrasions that were otherwise the inevitable consequence of transport. Each of them was stretched out on a metal shelf on racking to one side of the dock. They were watching, convinced – rightly – that their fate was to follow the girl in the cage.

Freddie liked to come down to the dock sometimes. It was easy to get caught up in the mundane, day-to-day details of the business; the accounting, the problems with staff, the competitors. Here, though, was where the business made its money. Secure shipments, quality merchandise, for customers that appreciated the care with which the girls were selected, collected and trained.

It was almost a shame to see this one go, she’d proved to be a quick learner and an accomplished practitioner of the arts that would be such an asset in her new life. There were several of his staff, Freddie knew, that would have liked to keep her around. But, like most of the girls these days, she had been a commissioned collection, a particular girl for a particular customer. You didn’t get the chance to be sentimental about the stock.

Things have moved on, Freddie thought. The business didn’t use auctions so much now. Sure this was a more profitable way of working but he still missed the cut and thrust that came from buyers competing for a particularly attractive piece. “Maybe I need to rethink that side of things,” he said to himself.

The cage was being rolled out onto a truck as a car pulled up alongside it. The driver got out and waved to Freddie as he did so.

“Hi, Harry,” Freddie responded. “How did it go?”

Harry held up his hand, thumb making a circle with his forefinger in a sign of approval. He headed to the rear of the car and opened the trunk. A girl lay inside struggling impotently against the strips of tape that bound her arms, legs and body. Even with her head hooded she had realised that the trunk had been opened and she squealed from behind what Freddie knew was a tape strip gag as Harry leant forward to help her sit up. “Which one was this?” Freddie thought. They had gone through the list of activities at the management meeting last week but he couldn’t for the life of him remember which of their clients the girl was destined for.
It didn't matter though. The systems would take care of it. She'd be booked in, numbered and tagged. They had got used to handling the volume of business. He couldn't remember the last time that they had made a mistake.

Harry had the girl over his shoulder, her taped legs kicking as he carried her up the steps from the car park onto the loading dock.

“The ride hasn't discouraged her, then?” said Freddie.

“No,” said Harry patting the girl’s backside affectionately, “she’s still quite frisky, but that’s all to the good.”

There were more squeals from inside the hood, earning the girl a less playful tap on her backside.

As Harry carried the girl away a voice called to Freddie from the far side of the loading dock. “Mr Clegg, it’s the telephone,” a pneumatic looking girl in a tight skirt and high heels said. “It’s one of the Kushtians. I didn’t get his name, I'm afraid. K – something, I think.”

Freddie waved in acknowledgement. Sarah did a reasonable job, he thought, but sometimes she wasn’t as thorough as he’d like. ‘K-something’ could be anyone in the upper parts of Kushtian society. He wondered if she’d lost some of her secretarial skills as a result of her slave training and sexual conditioning. “Still,” Freddie thought, as he watched her arse wiggle away from him as she walked back into the offices, “you can’t have everything.”

Clegg took the call in the small office beside the loading dock. He recognised the voice at once. The Kalinin of Kushtia, the country’s recently installed head of state, was one of his best customers.

“Kalinin,” Freddie said. “A pleasure. I hope all is well with you.”

“Indeed, indeed,” the Kalinin’s voice came through strongly over the noise on the crackly line. “How can I help you?” Freddie knew enough of the Kalinin to know that this was unlikely to be a social call.

“Story tellers,” the Kalinin said. “For my son. He spends too much time with the television, too much time with his foolish computer games. He needs more human diversions, his wives do what they can but I suspect he tires of them or that they spend too much time on the politics of the harem. He should have one for each weekday. The weekends, he can spend time with his wives.”

“Story tellers? That's not a usual request,” Freddie said, trying to think how on earth he might satisfy the Kalinin’s desire. “And five of them?”

“Exactly. And sufficiently beguiling to divert my son.”

Freddie knew what that meant; ideally red headed but if push came to shove, wearing a skirt and still breathing. “Leave it with me, your Excellency,” Freddie responded. “I'm sure we can help.”

He put the phone down wondering where they were going to find five Scheherazade’s. Still he thought to himself, that's half of the fun.
Chapter 2: Webscape

Freddie Clegg was watching Connie Mbazu as she laid yet another stroke with her flogger across the naked girl's back.

The girl, ungagged so that Connie could hear her every response, whimpered and bit her lower lip. Another stroke followed, harder this time, throwing the girl forward against the pull of the chains that held her hands high over her head.

Clegg admired the precision with which Connie carried out her work. It was hard to imagine how the stripes could be more evenly spaced, more precisely parallel or how the welts could be more equally raw.

After the fifth stroke she stopped. The girl was sobbing, her head bowed, sweating with the strain of hanging from her shackles and the beating. Connie picked up the spiked wheel from a side table arrayed with a surprising array of steel implements that looked as though they were surgical instruments but had a very different purpose. She approached the girl who looked down at the needle like spikes as the Doctor brought it closer to her breast. "Please," she begged, please what do you want me to do? I'll do anything? What do you want me to do?"

"Do, dear?" Connie responded. "What do I want you to do? To get used to it, of course! This is nothing to what your new owners will expect. You have to be ready. You have to get used to it. Now, do your best for Connie. Please."

The girl squealed, exclaiming "Nooo!" as Connie came nearer.

Regretfully, Freddie interrupted the proceedings. He didn’t like to disturb Connie’s activities. He knew that her methods depended on orchestrating a crescendo of sensation in her subjects. An unplanned pause would only disturb the rhythm.

On the other hand she had obviously only just started and a short period for the girl hanging in her shackles, wondering what might happen next, would probably contribute something. Connie looked up seeing Freddie and sensing that she was needed. She stopped the pin wheel a fraction of an inch from the girl’s nipple. "Soon," she said to the girl. "Soon." She turned away, put the pin wheel down and walked back to Freddie. The girl sagged in the grip of her shackles and watched the two of them, seeming almost disappointed that her ordeal had been delayed.

"What is it, boss?" Connie said.

Freddie beckoned her out into the corridor. "Can I just have a chat with you, Harry and Rick about the Kalinin’s request? It’s just that Rick has come up with an opportunity. We need to be quick off the mark though and you know how I hate rushing things. I want to be sure we aren’t taking any unnecessary risks. Harry has things set and ready to go but I want us all to be happy."

Connie nodded. "Our friend in there will keep warm for a while," she said. "I was thinking I needed a cup of tea anyway."

Freddie raised an eyebrow. A tea break? Even he was sometimes surprised by the matter of fact way that his team approached their work. The two of them headed off towards an office where Rick and Harry, Freddie’s operations director, were already waiting.

The four of them sat around the office table. "Rick," said Freddie, "perhaps you can lead off on this."

Rick nodded and passed around photo copies of a print out of a half a dozen pages from a web site. "The Kalinin is looking for storytellers. As you know we track web sites of possible interest and we’ve been following this one, largely because it came up in some routine searches we do on keywords like ‘Kushtia’, ‘slavery’, and so on. They’ve had quite a thread going on in their forum about the whole Cultural Exchange Programme thing and it hasn’t been the usual ‘Oh! Oh! Human Rights!’ stuff either. Anyway we wondered if this might be a route to finding some story tellers – they’ve got quite an active group of authors and some of the stuff is quite literate. Anyway, cut to the chase, we’ve identified a group that might fit requirements as far as their story telling ability and physical attributes are concerned and a collection
opportunity. The only problem is that the timescales are a bit like Sarah’s skirts, somewhere between way
too tight and far too tight.” Rick smirked. Freddie waited patiently. He was used to Rick’s jokes. He found
the best way to deal with them was to let them wash over him.

Freddie flicked through the printouts of pages from Eastern Promise. “We are actually talking about
women are we?” he said. “My feeling was that most of the contributors to these sites turn out to be middle
aged, balding men.”

“Not in this case. We’ve followed up on the on-line research with some fieldwork and we’ve got these.” He
passed around a series of photographs. “Fatima – or as you see her here Madeleine Roth – is one of the
site’s founders together with ‘First Concubine’ – Krysta Collins.”

Freddie felt the pictures were encouraging. As always with the surveillance pictures it was difficult to be
sure. Some of them were blurred and grainy but it was clear that Roth and Collins had the qualities that
would appeal to the Kalinin’s son. Freddie’s years of experience allowed him to assess a possible
acquisition quickly. Of course there were other factors that governed their choices but he felt he had a
sixth sense that told him ‘yes, this one’. Anyway, one thing was clear, they certainly weren’t balding men.

Freddie looked down at the transcript of one of the stories that ‘Fatima’ had posted. “She lay, face down
and arms outstretched, at the door to the Prince’s chamber for what seemed like hours. The cool tiles of
the room pressed against her naked belly. ‘Approach,’ the Prince ordered and his latest slave slid forward
like a snake across the floor towards the sound of his voice.”

Well, Freddie thought, if those are her fantasies, she’s soon going to get the opportunity to live them out.

“So that’s two,” said Freddie. “What about the others? Have you got a plan for a collection? Are these two
cleared for impediments?”

Impediments, thought Harry, that’s an Elly word, straight out of her legal frameworks. Still it was important
that they knew about any husbands, boyfriends, dependent relatives or other unnecessary complications.

Rick nodded. “Nothing complicated. Usual family links, both have parents living and the usual set of work
colleagues. They’ve both been fairly secretive about their on-line personas and that goes for these other
two girls too.” Rick dealt out another pair of photographs. “These two are known as ‘The Sheik’s Dancer’
and ‘Kismet22’ on Eastern Promise.” Freddie flipped each of the photos over. They both carried the file
label that Rick’s research people added. ‘Angela Dark’ and ‘Celia Best’ the labels said.

“OK,” said Freddie. “You’ve even managed a red-head with Ms Best by the look of it.” Freddie was
pleased by that; he knew the enthusiasms of the Kalinin’s son.

“I can’t vouch for the authenticity,” said Rick. “There’s only so much research you can do from a distance.”

Freddie flicked through the photos again. He looked across at Connie and Harry. They seemed happy
enough. “They look OK,” Freddie said, “But we’re looking for five, don’t forget.”

“Uh huh,” said Rick. “This bunch are all off for a few days shared writing next week-end. Harry and I
thought this would give us a good collection opportunity. First of all it was just going to be four of them but
now there’s another one and that will make our five. The only problem is that we don’t know much about
her.”

He dealt another pair of photographs. “Penelope Trating, posts as ‘Yasmin’ on the board.”

In one ‘Yasmin’ appeared in full eastern splendour, wearing a burkah, her face veiled. It didn’t allow much
of a judgement to be made about her looks. The other photograph made it easier to judge Penny’s
appearance but it was scarcely less bizarre. She looked as though she had stepped out of 1962; heavily
lacquered bee-hive hair, dark rimmed spectacles and eye make up that made her look like a panda.

“She’s a strange girl, this one,” Rick went on. “It’s like she’s living her life almost fifty years on. You only
ever see her in this sort of fashion.”

Freddie looked at the girl’s outfit. Smartly tailored, skirt just short of knee length, round collared jacket, low
heels on her shoes. The image shot him straight back to his adolescence. It was a strange sensation - the
same way that a half forgotten scent or a snatch of a music track could suddenly pitch you into the same
sensations that you felt at fourteen or fifteen with all the sense of confusion that he’d felt at the time and all
the difficulty he felt about what he was and why he was who he was. Sixty-two, he thought, that was
before Miranda. Before he knew anything about this. Before …..

“Freddie? Are you OK?” Rick interrupted his thoughts.

Freddie was suddenly aware that he hadn’t been paying attention. “Yeah, sure. Sorry about that. Just
thinking about something else. What were you saying?”

“We’ve really not been able to find out much about her. She’s a librarian, lives on her own, that’s about it.”

Freddie took another look at the photograph. “Sounds OK,” he said tossing it back onto the table. “I don’t
suppose the Kalinin is bothered by her fashion sense. You’d better get on with it.”
Chapter 3: Harry’s Barge

Harry took his seat on the river bus from Westminster Pier. The boat was, unsurprisingly for the middle of October, almost deserted. Harry scowled out at the afternoon gloom. He didn’t see why this meeting couldn’t be in a pub. It would have been warmer.

A non-descript, rather short man with thinning sandy hair put his head into the boat’s saloon. He looked around a few times attempting to appear nonchalant but looking more furtive by the moment. The shabby overcoat and down at heel shoes appeared ostentatiously scruffy. Harry wondered why he used him.

There was no one else in the saloon and barely anyone else on the boat but the man advanced on Harry as if the eyes of the entire KBG, CIA and SIS were on him. He sat down on the seat immediately behind Harry.

“Reg,” Harry said, “wouldn’t this be easier if we could see each other.”

Reg paused for a moment, looked around again, shrugged, stood up and sat down beside Harry. “You can’t be too careful,” he said.

No, thought Harry, you can’t be too careful but you can be too bloody irritating for words. It was the downside of working with Reginald Tobin. The obsessive secrecy, the penchant for methods that belonged in a John le Carré or Len Deighton novel; they all just made it more difficult to have a normal conversation.

“We have five items of merchandise that need collecting.” Harry knew that Reg would appreciate the oblique terminology.

“Would this be for onward shipment to your distribution centre?” Reg leant forward after looking from side to side. The more care he takes, thought Harry, the more furtive he looks. The boat was now in the middle of the river. No one had come in to the cabin. They passed under Waterloo Bridge.

“Yes. We’d want you to take care of packaging, of course and provide some sort of distraction activity just to make sure the removal of the items in question does not cause undue excitement.”

Reg nodded, sagely. “And would this be a local arrangement or are we talking about importation?”

Importation! As if, Harry thought. It would be quite a while before anyone in the UK could afford the luxury of importing product. One thing the credit crunch had fucked up for Clegg’s business was the home market. Still at least the falling pound was helping to keep export sales up. He shook his head. “No,” he said, “Norfolk.”

Reg’s face looked gloomy, evidently disappointed that the job did not involve some travel to warmer climes. “Very flat, Norfolk,” he said in flat tones that betrayed his black country origins.

Harry knew how to cheer him up. He passed him photographs of the five girls. “The county perhaps,” he said, “but not these young ladies.”

Reg fished a pair of spectacles from his jacket pocket and peered at the photographs with enthusiasm. “Reasonable. Very reasonable,” he said, running a finger across each picture in turn as if somehow the pictures had been embossed with the girls’ features. “I am sure I will be able to oblige.”

Harry really didn’t like working with Reg. All of Harry’s associates enjoyed their work – it wasn’t the sort of thing you could do otherwise - but Reg seemed enthusiastic in a way that wasn’t quite, well, right. He half expected to find Reg’s sticky paw marks on the girls’ features. “I am sure I will be able to oblige.”

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“Suppose so.” Reg seemed reluctant to share the pleasure. “Assuming she can get the time off. They’re busy up at the factory, she tells me. Still the way things are going she can use a few extra notes.”
The boat drew up to Blackfriars Pier. “Ah’ll get me trine beck,” Reg relapsed into his impenetrable Dudley accent as he got to his feet.

Harry just about understood him. The train back to Wolverhampton would have him there by six o’clock. Just in nice time for a mug of tea and whatever it was they ate in the wastes of the West Midlands, Harry thought. He wasn’t a big fan of anywhere outside of London.

“Let me know if you need any help,” said Harry, not expecting him to ask for any.

“Should be orl roight,” Reg smiled. “Nice to have a few days by the seaside. And you always manage to find such nice girls for me to meet.”

Harry watched him as he left the boat. Harry was heading on down river to Tower Pier so he could walk up to the Whitechapel offices. At least this was all under way now.
Chapter 4: Storyboard

Madeleine Roth, posting under the name of Fatima, was putting the last touches to her daily blog. Eastern Promise, the web site she ran with a number of her friends, took up most of her spare time. She and Krista Collins had founded the site almost three years earlier as way of publishing their fantasies of life in the east, veiled and enslaved as part of some potentate’s harem.

Over the years they had created a series of stories. They, in turn, had attracted other, like-minded, authors and those that shared their interests posting on the site’s message boards or contributing their own tales.

This weekend, though, she wouldn’t have much time for posting. She, Krista and three of the others that had contributed to Eastern Promise had agreed to meet up for a couple of days in a cottage in the Norfolk. Well it wasn’t the mysterious east, Madeleine thought but at least it was the east of England.

Madeleine wasn’t sure whose idea it had been but now that the time had come she was looking forward to it. It was a cottage that Krysta had found out about. Set way out on the edge of a stretch of marshes along the North Norfolk coast, it would offer them all a chance to get away from work, share their thoughts and enthusiasms and maybe do some writing as well. The weather didn’t look promising and Madeleine knew that Norfolk could be bleak but she didn’t care. It was going to be fun.

The sound of a car’s horn announced Krysta’s arrival. She and Madeleine had known each other for years. They shared the fantasies that led them to set up Eastern Promise and they’d collaborated on the site’s most successful tales.

Madeleine threw her bag into the back of the car and the two of them set off through the suburbs of North London. As they slowed for a set of traffic lights passing through Walthamstow it began to rain. Krysta peered out over the steering wheel. "Well, it’s hardly Baghdad," Krysta said.

Madeleine smiled. "Well perhaps this is our magic carpet."

"A Volkswagen Magic Carpet!" Krysta laughed in turn.

"At least it would solve the energy crisis."

The suburbs gave way to the Essex countryside, Essex to Cambridgeshire and Cambridgeshire eventually to Norfolk.

They began the last stage of their drive, working their way slowly through the gloomy evening along narrow country lanes to their final destination. It was dark when they reached their destination and Krysta’s Volkswagen pulled in through an open white gate that hung from a brick and flint pillar. She drove up a short length of gravel drive and swung around, passing beside a battered Land Rover and a small sailing dinghy on a launching trailer. As Krysta turned the car again, Madeleine could see enough of where they were headed in the car’s headlights to exclaim, "That’s not a cottage. It’s a windmill!"

Krysta laughed. "Isn’t it fantastic? I was sure you’d love it. It’s not a mill though: it’s a pump. The land is pretty close to sea level here, it’s only the pumps that keep it from flooding. But come on inside. If we go up to the top the views are terrific."

Together they climbed the steps of the ladders that led up to the mill’s cap. A wooden gallery circled the tower of the mill close to its top. They stepped out onto the gallery, just below the point where the heavy wooden beam carried the wind pump’s sails, holding them suspended over the dark, wide spaces of the marsh lands that stretched away to the coast. They could see the moonlight reflected in the sea half a mile away but between them and it the marshes were pitch black. There wasn’t another light to be seen that way apart from a faint green glow as a tiny boat puttered its way eastwards some way off-shore. In fact the only lights they could see were those of Stiffkey – "Stoo-key" Krysta had told Madeleine it was pronounced – a small village a couple of miles away.

The sails of the mill were still. They seemed regretful, Madeleine thought, saddened that they weren’t slicing through the wind. The wind, however, seemed to be slicing through her coat with no difficulty whatsoever. "It’s wonderful. But it’s cold," Madeleine said. “Let’s go back in.”
“Fair enough,” said Krysta as she led the way inside. “But it is fantastic isn’t it. Tell me you love it.”

A few minutes later they were in the warm. Pump Cottage, a small brick and flint, tile roofed, building was tucked in beside the great brick tower of the pump. The living room was small but cosy. The kitchen led straight off it, built as an afterthought on the back of the building. Beside that another room served as a dining room.

“It’s going to be a bit crowded, isn’t it?” said Madeleine. “With five of us?”

“Well, there are three rooms upstairs so some of us are going to have to double up or we’ll have to use downstairs for sleeping too.”

“Or the pump tower.”

“Now that wouldn’t be my idea of a place to sleep. Too many bats. Not to mention the mice and the rats from the ditches.”

“Brr,” said Madeleine. “Not my idea, either, then. I guess we’ll all manage in here.”

“Well, we’ve got the place to ourselves tonight. I thought we could go shopping in Fakenham tomorrow morning and get some food. The others will be turning up in the afternoon.

‘The others’ were three of the other authors on the site. Madeleine and Krysta had met Angela Dark and Celia Best at an earlier event when they had all fetched up in London at the “Power of the Eastern Idea” exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum. It was the success of that meeting that had led Krysta to suggest this get together.

The last of the five was a relative newcomer to Eastern Promise, Penelope Trating had started sending her stories in about three months earlier. She had been welcomed enthusiastically by the site’s readers. Her tales, written under the pen name of ‘Yasmin’, seemed to convey a deep feeling for the world they were all trying to evoke, although some felt that some of her subjects trod a little too near the site’s boundaries in the areas of what was acceptable in sex and violence. She defended them saying that there was nothing in them that couldn’t be seen portrayed on television a lot more graphically most nights. Most of the other readers felt obliged to agree, and besides they enjoyed them.

“Have you given any thought to what we’re going to do?” said Madeleine. “I mean we’re miles from anywhere and there’s nothing outside except marshes.”

“Exactly. It’s peaceful and quiet. We’ll all be able to write. I thought we’d have a sort of workshop session where we exchange ideas about some of the things we’re working on. And if all else fails we’ll have to work our way through the wine that’s stacked up in a cupboard in the kitchen.”

“What a disaster!” Madeleine laughed. “That seems like an ideal way to finish the evening now.”

Krista grinned back. “Sounds good to me,” she said and went in search of a bottle, two glasses and a corkscrew.

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Krysta and Madeleine woke with well deserved headaches the following morning. The rain had cleared through leaving a bright, sunny morning that at least gave the girls an excuse for the dark glasses they put on to spare themselves the worst of the brightness.

In Fakenham they fortified themselves with coffee before venturing in to a supermarket. The shop was small by London standards but still seemed to have most of the things they needed to keep them fed over the weekend. They got back to the cottage half an hour before Angela and Celia turned up in Angela’s Peugeot 206, the roof down so that they could enjoy the sunshine which, according to the weather forecast was the last that they would see that week-end.

Krysta and Madeleine spilled out of the cottage to greet them as the Peugeot pulled up. “It’s fantastic,” Celia called, pointing at the tower of the pump. “All it needs is an onion dome instead of the cap and we could pretend it’s a minaret!”
“Not sure how the denizens of Norfolk would take to that,” Krysta laughed. “They still think multi-culturalism means putting up with people from Lincolnshire.”

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The afternoon gave the four girls a chance to enjoy the sunshine with a walk along the raised path that ran beside the ditch leading down to the coast. At the end, the path ran between a few low dunes and down onto a deserted, sandy, windswept beach. They stood there for only a few minutes delighting in the emptiness of the place.

“It’s beautiful,” said Celia.

“But it is cold!” Madeliene responded. The others agreed and headed back to the warmth of the cottage.

“Well those dunes weren’t really too much like the Sahara,” Celia said. “But I want to get into the mood for writing. I’m going to change.”

She reappeared a few minutes later, wearing a long dark robe and with her face veiled by a niqaab, her wide, dark brown eyes somehow made all the more arresting by being her only visible feature. She squatted down in one corner of the room, balanced her laptop on a pile of cushions. She opened the laptop and began to type, losing herself in her concentration, oblivious to the other three preparing that evening’s meal.

It was only when Madeleine called her, saying that they were all about to eat, that she snapped herself out of the imaginary world she was creating. She was delighted to find that the others had joined her in Arab dress. While Celia wore her abaya and niqaab, Madeliene was in jilbab and hijab while Krysta and Angela had got themselves up like harem slaves in full belly dancing regalia. It was funny, Madeliene thought. She, Celia and Angela looked nothing like the typical middle-eastern woman. With their pale complexions, especially Celia with her ginger hair and freckles, they could never look anything other than the Northern Europeans that they were. Krysta was different though. Her black hair, dark eyes and sallow skin could easily be middle-Eastern. And she had the fuller figure that Madeleine always associated with the denizens of a potentate’s harem. In the end though it didn’t matter what they looked like, it was the fantasies that they shared which were important.

The four of them sat down on cushions to enjoy the dishes that Madeleine had cooked up. Raiding her Moroccan cookbook she’d found a recipe for a lamb tagine with apricots and prunes. She served it with a coriander flavoured couscous. The rest of the girls agreed that it was delicious.

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“How’s your latest story coming along.” Madeleine and Celia were chatting in the lounge after dinner.

“OK I think. I think I’ve managed to build in a couple of plot twists that will amuse people and Princess Arana manages to get herself into some more exciting scrapes.”

Madeleine was pleased. Celia’s tales about Princess Arana, a sort of harem detective that solved crimes like the disappearance of the Sultan’s favourite pet monkey, were very popular on the site, always attracting plenty of comments and reviews, especially if Arana’s “scrapes” involved her getting tied up in some way or other.

“That’s good. I’m a bit stuck with mine, I’ve really been blocked since that last story. I just don’t seem to be able to come up with ideas at the moment.”

“It’s something Penny never seems short of.”

“No you’re right. Although some of her stuff is a bit strong for me.”

“The sex or the violence?”

“Well, both really. And the violent sex!”
“And the bondage. There’s so much of it. Chains and ropes. Her poor heroine barely goes a page without finding herself in some sort of helpless situation.”

“Well a lot of the readers like it. Let’s face it for a lot of people the attraction of the East is the idea of sexual slavery and some of your stories have had their moments too.” Madeleine recalled how one tale had Princess Arana roped across the back of the villain’s camel as he tried to flee the palace across the desert. It had attracted record responses, especially when the Princess had almost fallen for the villain’s seductive charms while she was chained to a palm tree during an overnight stop at an oasis.

“Mm? Well, fair enough I guess but it seems a bit heavy to me that’s all.” Celia sometimes felt a bit prudish, but she didn’t see why she had to like everything that was submitted to the site.

“Well, there you are, perhaps the role of sex and violence on the site could be a topic for debate over the week-end?”

Celia didn’t respond but she did look up at the sound of car tyres crunching on gravel. “Well, I guess that this must be Penny now.”

Angela looked out through the living room’s small front window. Krysta’s comments should have prepared her but nevertheless she was surprised to see a rather old fashioned looking saloon car draw up towing the smallest caravan that Angela had ever seen.

Penny wound down the window of her peppermint-green, A-plate, Ford 105E Anglia and waved to Angela. She stopped the car and climbed out, smiling happily as the rest of the girls emerged from the cottage.

“Hullo Penny, welcome,” Krysta said. “You found us all right then. Does that have satnav?”

Penny laughed. “Oh no, nothing so up to date.”

Up to date was certainly a not description that could be applied to Penelope Trating, Celia thought as she saw her standing beside the car. She was wearing a lemon yellow suit with a straight knee length skirt and a short jacket with a contrasting Peter Pan collar in white. She had matching yellow low heeled shoes and a pillbox hat perched on top of her bouffant, lacquered, hair. She clutched a small white handbag in front of her, almost defensively as she peered uncertainly back at the girls.

Madeleine was determined to overcome any shyness that Penny might feel. “Well, you’re here that’s the most important thing. It’s really great you could join us. We’ve all enjoyed your stories. It’s so good to see you for real.”

Penny seemed to relax a bit, encouraged by the warmth of the greeting. “Well, I’m pleased to be here too. It’s lovely to meet you all.”

“That caravan is extraordinary,” Angela enthused peering at the tiny cream trailer that the Anglia had towed in. “It’s so small. Can you really use it?”

“Oh yes,” Penny responded. “I use it a lot. It’s an Eriba; they’re German. I thought I’d bring it because Krysta said the cottage would be crowded. I’ll sleep in it out here.”

“You don’t have to,” Krysta responded, “there’s room enough. We can all squeeze in.”

“No, it’s all right. Really. I quite like having my own space. I mean I don’t want to be stand-offish or anything but well, maybe I’m just funny that way.”

“Don’t worry. Nobody minds,” Madeleine cut in. “But only if you show us inside.”

“Well there’s enough room for me,” smiled Penny, “but you’re right, it’s not really much good for throwing parties.”
“You’ve got your record player though,” Krysta pointed. Perched on the tiny table at the front end of the caravan was a Dansette portable record player. Beside it a small, rexine covered, case held a collection of 45rpm, 7” vinyl, singles. “Can I look?” Penny passed the case across. Krysta thumbed through the faded paper sleeves that held Penny’s precious collection. “Wow! You could start your own golden oldies station with these,” Krysta said.

Angela leaning over her shoulder read out a roll call of the artists on each the disks, “Neil Sedaka, Helen Shapiro, Dion, Ketty Lester, Little Eva, Dusty Springfield.”

“Oh, that one’s not right!” Penny interrupted.

“I think she’s fantastic,” disagreed Celia. “What’s this? ‘Just a Little Lovin’. Wasn’t that on ‘Dusty in Memphis’?”

Penny gave an embarrassed nod but then perked up, pleased that anyone should share her taste in music. “Yes,” she said, “and that’s what’s wrong with it. It was 1969, I mean it’s too late really but I can’t resist her voice and it’s such a soulful album. All the others are tracks from 1962.”

“So you really do try to keep things authentic?”

“Oh yes,” said Penny, “No iPod, no FM radio, no Internet. It seems to me like it was a better world. Why shouldn’t I live in it?”
Chapter 5: Fieldwork

In Mill Cottage, Angela was looking out of the window at the top of the stairway. The view stretched across the cottage’s small garden and beyond to the great, broad, expanse of marsh that divided them from the low ridge of the sand dunes fringing the beach a mile away. A small group was making its way along the bank beside the ditch that ran from the mill towards the sea. “Who do you think they are?” she said to Krysta, who was coming up the stairs behind her.

Krysta peered over her shoulder. “Hmm,” she said, “raincoats, binoculars… Well, they’re either a bunch of perverts or, more likely, twitchers.”

“Twitchers?”

“Sorry; bird watchers. We get a lot of them along the coast here. Looking for the latest rarity blown in from the North Sea. There’s a hide further along The Drain.” She pointed along the ditch that ran beside the cottage and on down to the coast. “They are probably off down there.”

“Oh, right. Seems a bit late though. It will be dark in an hour or so.”

“There’s no accounting for twitchers,” Krysta said. “If they hear there’s something unusual around they’ll be dozens of them turning up in no time. Mind you it’s more likely they’re installing themselves so they can catch the last of the birds flying in at sunset.”

“Well, rather than me. It looks cold out there. What are we doing this evening?”

“I think we were planning to get together in a minute or two downstairs and decide. I think Celia fancies a trip along the coast to a pub, but I’m not sure about the others.”

“OK I’ll be right down, I’ll just drop this off,” said Angela, waving her notebook as she headed off to her room.

When Angela got down to the living room, Celia, Madeleine, Krysta and Penny were all sitting deep in conversation. “Looks like there’s two schools of thought,” Madeleine said. “Celia fancies a trip out. Krysta and I are hoping to work on a new story together. I think Penny wants to stay here too?” Penny nodded. “But Celia doesn’t really want to go out on her own.” Celia nodded too.

“Well,” said Angela. “I don’t mind a trip out if you want a companion.”

From the bird watcher’s hide on the marsh two pairs of binoculars were focussed on the cottage rather than on any of the wildlife. They watched as two of the girls emerged from the house got into a car and drove off. They watched as another of the girls walked down the garden and into the summer house that was perched between the garden and the marsh. Reg turned to Deirdre. “Coop a taiy?” he said holding up a thermos flask. She nodded it was cold in the hide and they still had a while to wait. They watched as the sun began to slip towards the horizon. Then it was time to move.

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Madeleine was the first one to fall victim to the attention of Reg and Deirdre. It was sunset, she had been sitting in the summer house at the end of the garden enjoying the last of the afternoon’s sun as it glinted on the water of the ditches and ponds of the marsh. She was jotting down ideas for her next story, wrestling with a particularly irritating piece of plot that had her heroine smuggling herself into the prince’s palace where she was determined to join his harem.

As she emerged from the summer house the sun, low in the sky, was dazzling. She didn’t see the black garbed figure approach her from behind, where he had been hidden by the summer house. The first that she knew of the assault was when a heavy cloth was clamped over her mouth and she felt herself being spun around and dragged behind the summer house. She tried to strike out but her assailant had gripped her so that her arms were clamped to her sides. The strength of her attacker carried her forward towards the wind pump tower. The cloth over her mouth half stifled her and she was finding it harder and harder to breathe, partly the result of panic and partly the effect of the grip of her attacker.
She was pushed to the floor and while one hand gripped her wrists behind her she felt something being tied across her mouth, cramming the heavy cloth back into her throat. Ropes were being pulled around her wrists and, at the same time, her ankles. Two attackers, she thought, terrified.

"Is that gag alright?" one of them asked.

"Yeah, sure," responded the other. A woman's voice this time. "That cable tie will keep the cloth wadded in. She won't make much noise."

Madeleine moaned in an attempt to prove them wrong. She didn't succeed. All that came out was a muffled, garbled, grunt.

Her assailants hadn't finished though. More ropes were tied around her as she was rolled this way and that. Her elbows were pulled almost together behind her back. More rope locked her arms against her body. More bound her knees – in spite of her struggles and squeals as the man pushed his hand between her legs to thread the rope through. Then, worst of all, there was the painful jerk as her wrists and ankles were pulled closely together by more rope tied between them.

"Stick her down there out of the way," the woman said and Madeleine felt herself lifted and then lowered into a concrete lined channel that ran across the floor.

Hogtied as she was she felt hardly able to move. She certainly couldn't get out of the three foot deep trench. Her attackers looked down at her – evidently satisfied with their work - and then left.

Madeleine lay terrified and alone. Stupid though she knew it was, all she could think of was Krysta's words about bats and rats.

Madeleine wasn't alone for long, though. A few minutes later a mewling and sound of overturning boxes accompanied Krysta as she was bundled, kicking and struggling, into the pump house by the two masked attackers. Krysta too had been bound and gagged, a cloth wadded into her mouth like Madeleine's and a cable tie jerked cruelly across her mouth to keep it in place, ropes around her body and, Madeleine assumed, wrists. The two masked figures pushed Krysta across to one of the iron pillars that held up the upper floor of the building. Ignoring Madeleine’s grunts of protest they set to work. Ropes fixed Krysta to the pillar.

"Come on, hurry up!" the woman urged as the man knotted off the ropes fixing Krysta's ankles to the pillar and the two hurried out.

Krysta grunted into her gag as she saw her friend trussed as helplessly as she herself was. She tried to struggle free wriggling against the topes that held her to the pillar and flexing her fingers behind her back to try to get at the knots that kept her captive.

As Krysta wriggled she managed to at least bend her knees swivelling around, trying to get some pressure on the ropes around her waist. As she did so she banged her knee painfully against a metal bar, knocking it away from her.

As the bar swung away a grinding and creaking sound caused both girls to stop their struggles. From high above them the noise grew as the sails of the pump began to turn and Krysta realised that in her struggles she had knocked off the brake that kept the mill silent.

Her first reaction was to be pleased. Perhaps someone would notice and come to their rescue but then she heard Madeleine squealing with a panic stricken intensity.

She looked across to where Madeleine was laying, helplessly hog-tied. She could see what Madeleine could. At the far end of the channel a rusted rod had started to rotate, driven, apparently by the action of the sails. As it did so a series of gears, cranks and levers began slowly but inexorably to lift what looked like a small door through the wall of the pump house at the end of the concrete channel. Water started to spill around the edge of the door. Madeleine had realised that she was tied up in one of the pump's sluices and that as the door opened the channel that she was in would be filled with water as the pump lifted water out of the marsh. Madeleine’s squeals were now being drowned out by the creaking of the pump’s mechanism as the sails gathered pace in the wind. The door at the end of the sluice was open now and Madeleine and Krysta could hear the first gasps of the pump as its cylinders cycled, building suction and dragging the cold marsh water into its innards ready to spew it out again along the sluice.
The pump coughed a gallon or two of water into the sluice. Even that was enough to drench Madeleine as it spilled down across her. She tried to struggle upright as the second cycle of the pump lifted a larger quantity of water and dumped it into the sluice. The third cycle knocked her down with its force. The fourth swept down over her, icy cold, knocking the breath from her and leaving her gasping.

It was at that moment that their two captors reappeared. The woman, seeing Madeleine’s predicament, reached down and dragged her from the sluice as another, bigger, drenching hammered down the sluice.

The man, seeing how Krysta had dislodged the wind pump’s brake snorted, “Silly cow!” and pulled on the lever. A groaning, wrenching, sound signalled the slowing of the sails and the sigh of the pump and the splash of the water in the sluice began to slow too.
Chapter 6: Penny’s Predicament

Penny was wondering what on earth was going on. She and Krysta had been chatting. Krysta had been admiring her dress – a candy-striped, seersucker, shirtwaister with a stand-up collar. Then they’d been discussing her latest story. Penny had described how her heroine was going to be enslaved by a man she had long admired. She was particularly pleased with a scene that she had just finished where her heroine found herself handcuffed and forced to wait on her captor and then, when she protested about his treatment of her, she was gagged with a ball that he pushed into her mouth over the niqaab she was wearing. It was only when she finished that Krysta realised she hadn’t seen Madeleine for a while. She looked out of the back window of the cottage. She said, “That’s funny. Maddy isn’t in the summer house. Where has she got to? I’ll see if I can find her. We ought to think about some food, I guess.”

Penny said, “Fine,” and Krysta had gone out to the garden.

There had been that thumping noise, like Krysta had knocked over some of the tomato boxes that were stacked by the path and then, after a while, the sound of the wind pump. Penny had looked out to see what was happening just as the sails ground to a halt. Now everything was quiet again but there wasn’t any sign of Krysta or Madeleine returning.

Penny suddenly felt very lonely.

She thought she heard a knock at the front door. Hoping it was Angela or Celia, Penny dashed out into the hall and opened it. There was no one there. Telling herself she must have imagined, it she went back to the living room.

As she went into the room she was suddenly seized from behind, a gloved hand clamped over her mouth. For an instant she felt as though she had been transported to one of her own stories but the terror of the situation broke through as something sharp pricked against her ribs and a voice hissed, “Keep very still and quiet if you don’t want to be hurt. All right?”

Penny whimpered “Mmm” into the glove.

“All right. So put your hands up slowly and turn around.”

Penny did as she was told and found herself facing a woman dressed in a black all in one suit and wearing a ski mask. For a moment she wondered if this was some game that the others had cooked up but this woman was slimmer and shorter than any of her week-end companions.

The woman was holding a broad bladed knife pointing at Penny’s belly. With her other hand she held out a wad of cloth. “Push this in your mouth,” she ordered.

Penny knew what to do. She’d tried it often enough in her own self-bondage games. ‘Research for the stories’ she had told herself it was but none of her “research” had prepared her for the frightening reality of her current situation. She crammed the cloth into her mouth, the dry, stuffing sensation at once familiar and frightening. She finished and raised her hands again, feeling foolish as she stood there, white cloth spilling from her mouth.

“How take this cable tie and pull it around your mouth to keep the cloth in,” Penny took the strip of plastic. “And pull it tight or I’ll do it for you.”

As Penny pulled on the cable tie another masked, black clad figure, appeared. “I’ll take her upstairs,” a male voice said.

Penny looked around panic stricken.

“Don’t worry, he’s not after your virtue,” the woman said.

“Come on,” the man said impatiently, grabbing Penny by the arm and pushing her towards the stairs. She staggered and half fell up the stairs, keeping her hands up in a show of surrender, not wanting to do anything to antagonise her attackers.
He pushed her through the first door at the top of the stairs – Madeleine and Krysta’s room.

“On the bed, face down, hands behind you,” he ordered.

Penny felt faint with fright. The whole thing was made worse by the fact that scenes such as this had featured so often in her fantasies. The reality was more terrifying than anything she had imagined, though. She felt the man kneel astride her and pull her wrists together. A ripping noise was followed by the feel of tape being strapped around her wrists and a crushing sensation in her fingers as he taped those as well. The man followed up with the same treatment to her ankles and above her knees, catching her skirt in the tape. He went on with more below her knees and then around her chest, locking her arms against her sides. He rolled Penny over onto her back and plastered more tape across her mouth, over the cable tie and the mouth stuffing cloth.

As he finished, Penny heard a low whistle from down stairs. The man looked up in response and then said, “OK, stay there,” before he got off the bed and left her.

Penny tried to struggle against the tape that held her, groaning ineffectually into her gag, but it held her more tightly than she had ever managed to bind herself. She told herself to be calm. After all in many of her stories the helpless victim managed to struggle free from bonds just like these. It didn’t take her long to discover that, in that respect, her writing had most certainly been fiction. After only a few minutes efforts, soaked in sweat, she sank back against the bed, defeated and desperately scared.
Chapter 7: Return From The Pub

Madeleine was shivering, cold and wet, on the floor of the pump tower. She had been half drowned by her terrifying experience in the sluice and while the woman that had pulled her from the water had taken the trouble to wrap her in some old sacking, her clothes were still soaking wet and she was shivering with cold. She had been dragged over to one of the other pillars and tied against it, to stop her, as the woman had said, getting into any more trouble.

Krysta had been rewarded for the struggles that dislodged the brake with a rope around her neck holding her head back against her pillar. Intended to discourage her from further efforts to free herself, it was working, Madeleine could see the terrified look on Krysta’s face as she stood hardly daring to move less she choke herself.

Their attackers had left them about fifteen minutes before. Now Madeleine could hear the sound of Celia’s car returning as she and Angela got back from the pub. Madeleine first thought she should try to attract their attention; then feared that it would only warn their attacker; then that Celia and Angela represented their only hope of freedom. And where was Penny? Had she been seized as well or had she somehow managed to escape?

The slamming of Angela’s car doors told Madeleine that if she was to try to attract attention it had to be now. In desperation she tried to cry out but her gag was no less effective for having been jammed in her mouth for half an hour or more. There was no sign that she had been heard.

“Spooky noises!” Angela exclaimed as she and Celia headed for the door of the cottage.

“What WAS that? It sounded like some strange bird or something. Could be an owl, I guess. We’ll ask Krysta; she’ll know,” Celia said as she opened the door.

The two girls stepped through the door into the dark of the lounge. As Angela fumbled for the light switch Celia pushed the door shut.

Before she could turn the light on, Angela felt someone grip her hand, spin her around and pulled her backwards. She collided with whoever it was that had grabbed her as a hand clamped over her mouth. Thinking that Penny was attempting to recreate some of her stories she was perhaps less panicked than she should have been.

Celia was experiencing something similar. As the door swung shut, she too had been gripped with cry-stifling efficiency.

It was only when the lights came on and the two girls realised that their masked and black clad captors were not any of their other week-end companions, that the terror began.

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Angela was wrestled face down to the floor in spite of her struggles. The weight of her assailant laying on her back pushed her down hard against the floor as a man’s voice hissed, “Keep fooking quiet”. With the man’s gloved hand firmly over her lips she could do little else as the man pushed the barrel of a pistol where she could see it. “And fooking still too,” he snarled as he slid the pistol around to press it against the back of her neck.

Celia was treated no less harshly. Her captor, span her around and slammed her back against the wall, knocking the breath from her. By the time she had recovered, she was staring into grey emotionless eyes, a gloved hand was clamped over her mouth and the wide blade of a knife was pricking against the underside of her chin. “Very still, ducks,” a woman’s voice said, “Very still and very, very quiet.”

Celia whimpered behind the woman’s gloved hand and was rewarded with the order to “Open wide!” Leather fingers pushed between her lips and pressed a wad of cloth between them stuffing her mouth full. “Don’t try to spit that out.”

Celia looked across at Angela. She could see her eyes wide in terror, white cloth spilling from her mouth like some rabid froth. She knew that she looked just the same. Somehow she felt guilty for Angela’s
situation. It wasn’t her fault, she knew but she felt guilty just the same. All she could hope, as Angela did, was that heir attackers would take whatever they had come for and then leave. Unfortunately for them both, this was just what their attackers intended.

They set to work securing the girls’ wrists and ankles with broad strips of tape satisfying themselves that their limbs were locked hopelessly immobile before adding tape to their mouths and across pads over their eyes. Only then did the masked man and woman feel able to relax.

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Reg Tobin allowed himself a grunt of satisfaction. The girls were, as planned, trussed, silenced and blindfolded. He pulled the ski mask from his face, glad to remove it, his skin sweaty and prickly beneath it.

Deirdre did the same. They looked at each other. It hadn’t been too bad, so far. The business with the girl in the mill – which one was it? oh, yes, Madeleine – had been a disruption but not a problem in the end.

Reg looked out through the cottage window. He stared longingly at the Anglia and the Eriba connected up behind it. Deirdre knew what he was thinking. She shook her head. That wasn’t in the plan. Reg acknowledged her admonishment with a grunt and a shrug of his shoulders. What was in the plan was to take the Land Rover and tow the sailing dinghy on its trailer down to the nearby slipway.

Deirdre went to fetch the Land Rover while Reg unzipped the tarpaulin that covered the boat. He went in to the mill first of all and then into the cottage returning each time with one of the girls over his shoulder. One by one he threaded them through the gap in the tarpaulin, sliding their helpless forms down into the well of the dinghy. He didn’t bother with a sedative, they weren’t going very far.

Deidre arrived back with the Land Rover and together they hitched up the launching trailer, bringing muffled squeals from the girls as the movement added to their sense of panic. The two climbed into the Land Rover and drove off.

Under the dinghy’s tarpaulin, the girl’s bounced against one another and the wooden inside of the dinghy’s clinker built hull as the Land Rover crunched down the uneven drive that led to Mill Cottage.

At the nearby slipway, the girl’s distress became heightened as they realised the boat was being launched. Lapping water and the drop in temperature as the boat slid into the waters of the North Sea told them they were being set afloat. Their cries of panic, still stifled by the wadding, the cable ties and the tape, sounded like an alarmed flock of marsh birds. The sound fell away as the boat drifted off with the last of the ebb tide.

They couldn’t know, of course, that a darkened launch was waiting a way off shore to take them in tow for a few miles out to sea before taking them on board and cutting the dinghy adrift..

Reg and Deirdre climbed out of the Land Rover being careful to leave their foot prints only where they would be washed away as the tide turned.

They watched the dinghy slip away and then headed back to their own car, their work for the week-end completed.
“Freddie, can you come down to Prep Reception for a minute, There’s something I’d like you to look at.” Connie Mbazu’s voice seemed tense, Freddie thought.

As he stepped out of his office, Sarah bustling along behind him, Freddie was concerned. The Norfolk pick up had been hastily organised and whatever was concerning Connie almost certainly meant trouble.

Prep Reception, where the new arrivals first started to realise the nature of the organisation whose hands they had fallen into, was the usual scene of barely contained panic, terror and distress. As Freddie arrived the eyes of the latest group of captives swung toward him and Sarah.

Sarah knew from her own experiences what they were feeling now. ‘Another one! How many of these people are there? And none of them wear masks. Don’t they care that I’ll recognise them? What does that say about my fate?’

All five of the girls were there. There was the normal disarray. The tape that had silenced all five had been changed for the heavy rubber ball gags that were used as standard for the first few days in the Centre and the girls were all either whimpering, groaning in discomfort or grunting angrily as they rolled around on the floor of the room.

Connie’s people had started stripping two of them. Madeleine and Celia were almost naked. The first step for new arrivals was always to cut their clothes from them. They’d had a long debate, Freddie remembered, when they changed the procedure from forcing the girls to strip. Some had thought that the new way stamped the authority of the Centre on the girls more quickly, others that the old way got the girls used to taking orders sooner. There had been a lot of argument about the change. It hadn’t made any difference, as it turned out, and this way was certainly quicker.

Madeleine and Celia were laying on the tattered remnants of their clothes, their dresses sliced through from hem to neck, bras and panties cut away as well. Madeleine, her knees and ankles still taped together as they had been for her journey to the centre, was trying to wriggle away from beside where Freddie was standing. Freddie looked down, almost compassionately, she really should save her effort, was his first thought. But then, as he saw the way her breasts jiggled with her struggling, perhaps she shouldn’t.

Connie was standing beside the helpless Penny who was laid on the floor still with much of the tape that Reg has used to bind her in place.

“Problem?” said Freddie.

“Possibly,” said Connie, pursing her lips. “It depends on what you think about this.” As she said it she took hold of Penny’s heavily lacquered hair and pulled. A wig came away in her hands, showing a shaved scalp beneath. She pulled open Penny’s blouse and sliced through the strip of cloth that joined the cups of her bra. As the bra fell open, two wads of padding fell away revealing a flat, male, chest beneath.

Freddie looked down at where the skirt of Penny’s shirt-waister had already been unbuttoned to the waist. “I suppose I don’t have to ask what you found under there,” he said, sounding depressed.

Connie gave a resigned look. “Rather more than you’d normally expect beneath the skirt of one of our guests,” she said.

“All right,” said Freddie. He thought for a moment. ‘Penny’ looked backwards and forwards between Freddie and Connie. He didn’t look any less distressed than the rest of the collection from Norfolk. Freddie came to a decision. “Just sort him out with the others and then we’ll all have a chat about what to do about the customer. I’ll get the team together.”

Freddie was fuming as he headed back towards his office. This was just the sort of thing that happened when you did things in a hurry. He was going to talk to Harry and Rick, and they weren’t going to enjoy it one bit.

But then ‘Penny’ wasn’t enjoying things either. His clothes had been cut off just as the clothes had been cut from the women. Connie’s team weren’t any rougher on him than on the rest, but they weren’t any
gentler either. Madeleine was sitting on the floor, where she had been left. As his wrists were locked in shackles behind his back, just like Madeleine and the others, the girls saw the truth about the person they’d known as ‘Penny’ and ‘Yasmin’.

Connie picked up the wig and perched it back on the head of the helpless ‘Penny’. As he looked up at her, she smiled down at him. “Don’t worry,” she said, “we’ll see you’re treated just like the rest of the girls.” She looked across at the two guards waiting. “Put them on the pegs for a while. I’ve got a meeting to go to.” She stalked off as the two guards stubbed out cigarettes and turned to their charges.

Krysta was the first to be taken out. Two guards gripped her arms and pulled her to her feet, half pulling half dragging her from the room. The look on her face showed the terror she felt. If she was upset by discovering Penny’s masculinity she wasn’t showing it. She had more important things to worry about.

“The Pegs” as Connie had called them were in the next room. ‘Penny’ felt himself wrestled through the door by the guards in spite of his struggles.

“Now be a good girl,” one of them said. Penny would have been annoyed by the sarcasm if they hadn’t used the same tone to Krysta.

Along the long wall of the room a series of curved metal rods jutted out from the wall at about waist level. Each one curved down in a hook-like shape until it turned up again to finish with a large phallic projection. At the far end, Penny could see that Krysta had been impaled with one of these pegs in her cunt before her ankles had been shackled to rings in the floor spreading her legs wide apart and preventing her from freeing herself from the penetration of the peg. A chain ran from her wrists to a ring high up on the wall, pulled tight so that her upper torso was tipped forward.

“Guess we’ll have to use the other hole for this one,” one of the guards laughed as they pulled Penny to his place alongside Krysta. While the first guard reset the angle of the peg by adjusting the rod at its mounting plate on the wall, the other shackled Penny’s ankles in the same way as Krysta. “Now I’d back on to this real easy,” the guard said as he gripped Penny by the shoulders and held him firmly. Penny felt the prod of the greased end of the phallus against his arse as the other guard swung the rod up slowly between his legs and pushed it home. Together with the way that his legs were spread he was unable to move and once the adjustment for the peg was screwed down tightly at the wall bracket he was fixed quite rigidly. Distracted by the sensation of the plug in his arse, Penny forgot about the last part of the guard’s plan until he suddenly felt his arms being pulled up behind him as a chain rattled over a ring behind him. As he was bent forward, he could see nothing but the floor in front of him and, by turning his head, the distressed face of a similarly captive Krysta, her mouth distended by her ball gag, spilling drool to the floor between her feet.

One by one the others followed Penny and Krysta into the room until all five were skewered on their pegs and left, whimpering and struggling to keep themselves steady in an attempt to minimise their discomfort. “Connie will be along to see to you later,” the first guard said.

None of the five captives thought that this was anything to look forward to.
Chapter 9: Freddie’s Meeting

Harry, Connie and Rick were sitting on one side of the table. Freddie and Elly sat facing them.

Freddie was sitting with his eyes closed, his hands folded on top of the open file of research on the table in front of him. He was very still, very quiet. It gave the other three no comfort at all that he wasn’t pacing up and down furious at the turn of events on the Norfolk collection.

He took a slow breath. "OK," he said calmly. "Who wants to start?"

"Me, I guess," said Rick, sheepishly. There were tow things he learned about this sort of situation working for Freddie. The first was that safest thing was to be completely honest and the second was that this was no time for jokes. "We missed it. I’ve been back over the surveillance tapes and the intelligence and there’s nothing to suggest that ‘Penny’ was anything other than she, sorry, he seemed. An ideal target, no real social group, kept herself to herself, quite a private person."

"And now we know why!" Freddie snapped.

Elly looked at him as much as to say, "That won’t help."

"I suppose if we’d had more time for research we might have found something but, for heaven’s sake, he’s living as ‘Penny’ twenty four seven. I’m not convinced that a few more days’ surveillance would have made any difference. It’s a lesson to learn though."

"Mmm," said Freddie, abstracted. "And Harry? No one noticed on collection?"

"Come on Freddie, you know how it is. Sure we focus on making sure we’ve got the right person and that’s what we did. They spent quite a while scoping the venue and they had plenty of opportunity to make sure that the target checked with the briefing so they went ahead. After that, well, you know I don’t encourage the team to play around with the pick ups unless they’ve got plenty of time and somewhere secure – it’s too much of a distraction. If you want me to tell them to lift the skirt of ever girl they pick up there won’t be too many complaints but I don’t think it would be a good idea, frankly."

"But no one noticed?"

"No, Freddie, no one noticed. From what was said at the debrief, the team had very little trouble with her. Sorry him. There wasn’t anything rough so they didn’t get to grips with him at all. I can’t see how they would have seen it unless they were looking. I guess another time we’ll be looking out for something like this, especially with a specimen as exotic as Miss Trating. But, anyway, what would you have had them do? Leave the delightful Penny behind? I don’t think so."

Freddie looked thoughtful for a moment. He turned towards Elly. "What’s your take on this?"

Elly sat quietly for a minute looking at Rick and Harry in a way that made them feel even less comfortable than Freddie’s scowls had done. Finally she spoke. "I’m not sure it matters," she said, bluntly. "The Kalinin wanted five story tellers. You’ve got five story tellers. Far be it for me to comment on anyone’s sexuality but maybe the Kalinin’s son might find Miss Trating an interesting novelty. I think you should follow some of Larry’s advice. What did he used to say? ‘When in doubt ask the customer.’ That’s probably a good maxim here. If he’s happy and Connie thinks Penny can be properly prepped then why should we worry?"

Freddie considered her words. The furrows on his forehead seemed to say, "This isn’t fair, there’s been a cock-up and someone deserves a bollocking but I can’t quite see who it should be." Instead he turned to Connie. "Can he be prepped?"

Harry and Rick, sensing that Freddie was going to take Elly’s advice, breathed a little easier.

Connie leant forward. "No reason why not," she said. "We might have to adapt the sexualisation programme a bit and I might need a few extra pieces of equipment - things not in my armoury, so to speak – but otherwise I’m sure that Penny is as amenable to re-orientation as any of our other guests. Anyway I thought you said the Kalinin didn’t want too much prep work done on them."
“Hmm? Oh. Yes, that’s right,” said Freddie. “Well never let it be said I wasn’t prepared to celebrate diversity in the work place. I’ll talk to the Kalinin. You’d better start working with our friend on the basis that we’ll find a home for him.”

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By the time Connie returned to their room, the captives, skewered on their “pegs”, were more than pleased to see her. All five were groaning with discomfort from the position in which they were trapped. Connie smiled with quiet satisfaction, confident that their treatment was making them all the more amenable to the training that was soon to start. Two of her team each took two of the four girls to start their ‘re-orientation’ as Freddie’s people euphemistically called it. Connie had decided to deal with Penny personally.

Connie loosened off the bolts that held the curved hook for Penny’s butt plug in place and pulled it clear from his backside. As she did so he sank back on his heels giving a relieved gasp into his gag. When Connie released the chain that stretched his arms behind him he fell forward to his knees, grunting with relief.

“Very good,” said Connie, “You’re on your knees just as I was about to ask, I can see that you are going to be anxious to please me.

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“Five women are feared drowned after a drunken house party boat trip tragedy” read the article in the Eastern Daily Press, giving an account of how their Land Rover and launching trailer had been found at a slipway near the cottage they had been using for the week end.

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Deirdre took Reg’s call on her mobile. “I’ve had the final receipts through,” he said obliquely. “I’ll leave details at the usual place.”

“Reg, I haven’t got time for all that,” Deirdre looked skyward for inspiration. “I’m not fiddling around with yellow chalk, playing ‘Moscow Rules’ and hopping from one place to another. Why don’t you just buy me a coffee in town after work?”

Disappointed, Reg agreed. Deirdre obviously didn’t understand the security risks, he thought. It was ridiculous but he supposed it would be safe enough, if he kept a good look out.

Deirdre got off the bus in Lichfield Street and walked up to Queen Square. She ducked into the coffee shop on the corner. With no sign of Reg she bought her own coffee and sat down to wait.

She finished her coffee. Reg was late. It was another ten minutes before he finally appeared, slipping into the shop and getting a tea before sitting down at the next table with his back to her. Irritated, seeing that Reg certainly wasn’t about to buy one, Deirdre got herself another coffee. Ignoring his shifty behaviour she joined him at his table.

The barista looked across at them. She saw this sort of thing all the time, she thought; middle aged couples, annoyed with one another, hopping from table to table each hoping the other was going to apologise for whatever it was they were supposed to have done.

Reg scowled at Deirdre. “This isn’t safe,” he hissed.

“You’re late,” Deirdre ignored his warning.

“I had to make sure you weren’t followed,” he responded.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Deirdre, exasperated, exclaimed. “Just give me the envelope.” She’d worked with Harry, or whatever his real name was, and he didn’t seem to think all this was necessary.

Reg reached down to tie his shoe and while bent over slipped a package into Deirdre’s shopping bag from a pocket inside his coat. He sat up again. “It’s a bit short,” he said.
“Why? I thought we had – what would you say – ‘delivered the packages as required.’ What’s the problem?”

“One of the packages wasn’t according to specification. They’re saying we should have checked.”

“Checked what? We picked up exactly what we were asked to.”

The barista looked across again at the middle aged couple. It was obviously a tense conversation. One of them would be storming out in righteous indignation at any moment, she thought.

“One of the girls,” Reg said. Deirdre looked puzzled. “She wasn’t very girly. As in, not a girl at all.”

“The one in the caravan?” Deirdre said. Reg nodded. “I should have guessed.”

“Well I didn’t. I don’t see it’s our fault either. Why would we have known?”

“I looked at her record collection. She’s supposed to be a girl, infatuated with the sounds of 1962.”

“And?”

“No Frank Ifield, no Mat Monroe, no Bobby Darin, no Cliff Richard, not one bloody male singer. And you should hear my mum go on about them! The sixties weren’t all psychedelia and beat groups, you know.”

“Yeah, all right. Well we’re ten percent light.”

“I can live with that. I’m more worried about the factory at the moment. They’re talking about putting us on short time. Any chance of more work from this lot? I can’t imagine they’re affected by the credit crunch.”

“Dunno,” said Reg, “Harry was pretty glum but then he’s probably out of pocket too. He seemed to think there might be another job soon.”

“Fair enough,” said Deirdre. “In that case, do you want another cup of tea?”
Chapter 10: Customer Feedback

Freddie sat down at his laptop and clipped the web cam to the top of the screen. He preferred dealing with clients face to face but he just couldn’t face the trip to Kushtia and the Kalinin had been happy for them to meet electronically. Kushtia might be a primitive society, Freddie thought, but they were happy enough to use technology where it suited them. He had asked Harry to sit in, just in case there were any problems that they needed to go fix.

The video conferencing window flicked open. Freddie found himself staring at the slightly out-of-focus, bearded, face of the Kushtian president.

“Kalinin,” Freddie said. “You’re looking well.”

“Well, thank you Freddie.

“I wanted to make sure you were happy with your purchases.”

“Indeed Freddie, indeed. These are a very good solution to my problem. They are having the desired effect; keeping my son amused. And they have had a good effect on his wives as well. You know how it is, a little more competition…”

“I thought you were concerned about harem politics, Kalinin,” Freddie said.

“Of course, of course. But I don’t mind if the politics remain inside the seragla.” A pair of pudgy fingers reached towards the Kalinin’s web cam. He swivelled it so that it was pointing out across the room. “Perhaps you remember Victoria?”

Freddie grunted. It was best to be polite but he couldn’t be expected to keep track of all these women, he felt. He vaguely remembered her, one of Larry’s early contributions to the business, he thought. On the far side of the room, the Kalinin’s son was sprawled on a couch, enjoying the favours of a woman whose head was buried in his lap. Between the couch and the camera, a girl dressed in a shimmering black silk version of Kushtian traditional costume had a girl trussed cruelly and wriggling at her feet. Freddie at least recalled that the helpless girl was one of the ones that he’d just shipped.

“She can be such a bully,” the amusement in the Kalinin’s voice was evident. “Poor Madeleine! I am not sure what she has done to cause offence but she will soon learn that there is a hierarchy here in the seragla that must be respected.”

The Kalinin’s son reached forward to stroke the hair of the girl that was busily fellating him. As she lifted her head in response, Freddie saw it was one of the others that he’d just shipped. Harry peered over his shoulder, “That’s Krysta,” he said. “That’s good. Connie will be pleased. She said that Krysta was finding that sort of thing difficult.”

Freddie smiled. It was surprising how soon their charges overcame their reluctance to do things that they thought difficult.

Behind the Kalinin, over by the wall, Freddie could see another figure, a woman naked except for her veil, her arms shackled to a ring set in the wall high above her head. She was struggling with the futile desperation that Freddie so often saw in their more resilient guests. As she shook her head in frustration her veil swung clear of her face for a moment and Freddie saw her mouth filled not with the traditional Kushtian moaungf but a bright red ball gag. Sad, Freddie thought, to see the old ways going. Celia, almost as if she sensed she was being observed, growled behind her gag and scowled at the camera.

The Kalinin leant towards the screen cam and adopted a confidential tone, “Of course we cannot avoid harem politics but this way keeps it in the family, so to speak.”

As the Kalinin sat back, Freddie felt able to ask about Penny. “And how are things working out with Ms Trating? I must apologise about the confusion there.”

“No need, Freddie, no need. You must not worry so much about these matters of detail.” Freddie had often been accused of getting too involved with the detail of his business but even so he found it hard to believe
that whether one of his shipments was male or female was a detail. The Kalinin continued, “She is what she wishes to be. That is sufficient for us. She is like hijra or pavaiyaa in India, there is a tradition of such things there. Not here perhaps in Kushtia, such things were frowned on by the Russians but human nature is what it is.”

“And your son’s view of this?”

“He seems unconcerned. That is as it should be. For myself, I am happy for him to be enjoying the favours of his wives and concubines in whatever way. He seems as happy to fuck Penny as any of the others; as content for her to fellate him as the rest. It keeps him distracted from other, more disruptive issues.”

“But Penny, I think, was not in any respect homosexual. I think she was simply a transvestite.”

“I am sure you are right, Freddie. But, of course, once one gives oneself up to life in the seragla not everything will turn out as you desire. All of the girls here have had to adapt to their new lives in one way or another, Penny has had a few more challenges than the others perhaps but he is coping.” Freddie saw the Kalinin turn his head. “Ah, here he comes now.”

The Kalinin reached back to the web cam and twisted it around. Freddie saw a figure push back the curtains on the far side of the room and enter.

Penny appeared looking for all the world as though she had stepped off the poster for “Breakfast at Tiffany’s”. Of course the sleek black evening gown and elbow length gloves were made to look a little odd by the veil she wore pulled across her face. Even so, Holly Golightly would no doubt have approved.

The Kalinin nodded towards Penny, “I indulge myself a little here and also I indulge our friend. I met my first wife in 1962. Penny wishes to recreate that look and who am I to interfere?” He leant confidentially close to the web-cam. “My son knows nothing of the time. Some of the truly great movies! My wife and I spent many happy hours in the theatre. Of course, it was in my father’s palace but there were some moments of privacy nevertheless.”

Freddie relaxed. The Kalinin seemed genuinely unconcerned by Penny’s gender. Indeed, if anything it seemed to have turned out better than the Kalinin had expected. That was the funny thing about customers; you never really knew how they would react to things. Freddie leant forward towards the web cam. “Well,” he said, “I’m glad things have worked out. I must confess, that I thought it might have been difficult; Penny being a man and all.”

The Kalinin grinned looked over his shoulder and smiled as Penny picked up a tray of sweet meats and brought them to his side. He nodded to Freddie. “Never mind,” he said. “nobody’s perfect.”

< THE END >

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