

MAFIA DOLLS: PROLOGUE  
AND FIRST THREE  
CHAPTERS

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for Departmental Honors in  
the Department of English  
Texas Christian University  
Fort Worth, Texas

May 5<sup>th</sup> 2014

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AND FIRST THREE  
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ABSTRACT

This creative project contains the prologue and first three chapters of *Mafia Dolls*, a novel about power.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my project supervisor, Dr. Rima Abunasser, for as all the time she has dedicated to my work in the past year and her insightful and heartening comments. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Professor Alex Lemon and Dr. Thomas J. Walsh, for their help, time, encouragement and feedback; I could not have asked for a better committee.

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## INTRODUCTION: THE STORY BEHIND THE NOVEL

For my Departmental Honors creative project I am presenting the prologue and first three chapters of what will eventually become a novel. In this essay, I will go over the project, some its main themes, and the challenges I faced when writing these chapters.

The protagonist to this story is Ada, a 17 year old who controls all the female schools in her city, other than the slums. In the first chapter the reader find out Ada's power consolidates through her supply of drugs, test banks, and favors or through black mail and violence. As the chapter continues, the reader also discovers that Ada not only has an unlimited source of money at her disposal, but that she's also a politician's daughter. It seems then, that Ada has an envied life. As the story progresses, though, the reader learns that there are some people that are not happy with Ada's power. By the end of the third chapter, they are certain that someone is threatening Ada's "reign."

It will be of no surprise to the reader that the main theme of this novel is power. In fact, the question that brought this work to existence was: "how far would someone go to maintain his or her power?" For that reason, it was important for me that the story started when Ada was already at the top. Additionally, placing the point of action at Ada's power heist allows the reader to observe the price Ada has had to pay for that power.

Somehow, whenever one writes a piece on a woman in power they end up discussing gender in one way or another. This was purely non-intentional. Since the very beginning, I knew that the main character had to be a young woman. I wanted the readers to be shocked with the main character's brutality and I knew that if the character were a middle-aged male, the effect would not be as disturbing. However and, although power

does affect both men and women and the main theme is not gender-oriented, we do see that Ada's gender does play a role in her actions. On the one hand, Ada is able to use her femininity to emphasize her innocence and leave adults unsuspecting of her corruptness. On the other, because she is a female teenager, very few adults, Matt being one of them, take her seriously, which is something that she will struggle with throughout the novel.

Aside from power and gender, there are other smaller themes that can be seen in these chapters. One of them deals with media and perspective. In the eyes of the media, Ada is not only a good girl but also, further into the novel, someone to look up to. Similarly to Ada, her father is a figure that is highly popular among the country's citizens and his good image is solely thanks to the media. At the same time, story wise, Ada is more interesting when she is bad. If she were real or the world found out about her dealings, the attention from the media would increase but society would reject her.

Another interesting theme that can be seen in these chapters and continues throughout the novel is the idea of beauty. As the reader goes through the chapters, he or she knows that some people are attractive or good-looking, and yet none of the characters have any physical descriptions that reveal the characters' hair color, weigh, height, constitution, ethnicity...etc. In fact, for all the reader knows, Ada and Tom, some of the most desirable characters, could be short and overweight, which would defy the standards of beauty. At the same time, the lack of detailed physical descriptions was also important to me because I wanted my readers to be able to identify with the characters, and therefore strengthen my argument that we are all vulnerable to power, regardless of who we are and what we look like.

This last point leads me to the challenges in writing this piece. Obviously, creating an image of each character without describing what they looked like was a challenge, but I solved it by describing the way they spoke, their body languages, their stares...etc. Another challenge I faced was picking the right narrator for the story. Initially, this work was a multi-perspective piece. However, I worried that the audience would not sympathize enough with Ada when I wanted them to do so, so I decided for the narrator to follow Ada exclusively throughout the story. My other big challenges focused more on writing and plot technicalities: fleshing out scenes, cutting unnecessary details, sharpening dialogue, raising the stakes, creating tension...etc, which I think have been solved in this final piece.

Overall, this project was probably one of the most challenging things I have ever written, but also the most satisfactory. I have very much enjoyed writing this story and creating the characters in it and only hope my readers receive as much pleasure from reading this as I have from writing it.



## PROLOGUE

With one of her friends dead and the others disappeared from the map, she had no choice but to pack her bags and leave the city. There were only two other people who had witnessed the past events: one of them had been sadistically mutilated; the other had been blamed for the mutilation and was making time in jail.

A medley of feelings had taken over her body since she saw the news. She felt relief to see that she was out of the loop; that all of her mistakes had been erased and there was no one left to point a finger at her, but she was unable to ignore the shiver down her back, or the invisible force tightening onto her guts.

It only took her thirty minutes to pack everything she needed before she burst through her building's back door. As she rushed down the street, she stopped, her face turning pale. Had she packed her tickets? A wave of panic chilled her blood. She dropped her back pack on top of her carry on and searched its contents thoroughly. When she felt the familiar touch of soft cardboard in her hands, her face returned to its usual color. Then she jerked the tickets out of the bag and slid them into her jacket's side pocket. Once her backpack pressed against her back again, she resumed her walking. As she did, she thought about the note she had left her parents and asked herself if she should have given them more information.

"No," she said, she couldn't afford to be found by the wrong people. Besides, her parents had never given her much attention anyway; she wasn't even sure if they would miss her. Maybe. Either way, it was too late to find out. It was time for her to start a new life, which was exactly what she needed.

She had been a good girl, once; a genuinely nice girl who had been a little insecure at times, but always fought for what she believed in. She knew she had lost that somewhere on the way to becoming one of the most powerful girls in the city, and she had been happy to give it up. It was a necessary sacrifice. She just never thought that sacrifice would turn her into what she was: A killer.

She flinched. Was she really a killer? She couldn't be blamed for everything that had happened in the past month. She had only defended herself; fought against injustice, and all that. The dead body had just been collateral damage. She hadn't even been the direct cause of its death.

But she did need the clean slate. She needed a new name. Something fancy like Stella, she thought, then she would find a cheap place to stay temporarily and get a job as a waitress or something, earning as much money as possible until a better opportunity came up. She would then move to another place to begin her real life. A life in a small house in a peaceful and friendly town where she would meet her perfect man, who would swear to protect her from anything that ever came to get her. Anything or anyone.

Her eyes fell to the pendant that hanged loose around her neck. She passed her thumb over it, and sighed. She could always sell it. She was sure it could earn her a couple of big bucks, but could she really let go of it after all the blood it had cost?

A honk dragged her back to reality. She had almost crossed the road on red. She looked at her watch and looked towards the direction of the bus station, calculating the time she would have to get there on time. As soon as the light turned green she sped up her pace.

"I can be there in twenty minutes."

The bus left in thirty. She was good.

The sound of her steps resounded through the grey empty streets on that cold Sunday morning, followed by her shadow; her thoughts, her only company. Again, her mind drifted into her imagined future. She tried to visualize the face of her future lover; the man who would save her from all evil; the man who would give the calm and simple life she now yearned like a junkie craving his next hit.

She heard a screech, then a loud thump, and before she could look around, she was thrown into the air, like her father used to do when she was little. She felt herself floating like a feather, and smiled. Soon, the same force that pushed her up summoned her back down. Her eyes widened, her smile faded, and a parade of images flashed before her as her hopes for her future life slipped through her fingers. There was a loud crack; then, it all went black.

And then, there was silence.

## CHAPTER ONE

Ada reclined her back on her desk chair and fiddled with the head of a white gold lion pendant that hanged loose around her neck. Her dull stare was directed towards her computer screen as she revised a paper she had to submit later that day. The paper had been written by a girl from her school who owed her a favor, but still needed a few edits to sound like herself. A few steps away from her, Connie sat on one of the study room's couches, scribbling in a leather-bound notebook. Tara and April sat on the room's Persian carpet, waiting for Connie to speak again.

“How many amphetamines did you supply this week?”

Tara looked at crumpled a piece of paper she had taken from an old designer purse.

“404 pills at our school. 47,850 total.”

Connie wrote in the notebook again. She asked Tara if there had been any increased in the people to pills ratio. Tara scratched the polish from one of her already chipped nails, then drifted her attention back to Connie. The ratio remained 7 pills per person, but the demand was getting higher. Connie assented and made a note in the book, when she looked at the girls she did so with her usual serenity.

“Can you meet the demands?”

April and Tara nodded at unison. Connie continued writing and Tara resumed picking on her nail polish.

“What about X?”

April observed Tara's movements before she decided to speak. She gave Connie a shy smile.

“We’re killing it. The past weekends we’ve given 100 smartees, and they want more.”

Her eyes met with Tara, who gave her a subtle nod.

“The druggies are also asking for M”

Connie sighed and shook her head.

“We only supply X in low doses to a selective group. M is too much of a risk.”

Tara stood up.

“Dude, but we could make so much money from that. I can get an unlimited supply from the slums and we can sell it for a little more.”

The girls turned to Ada. Ada looked up from the screen, unconcerned, and shook her head. It was one thing to get druggies distracted with drugs, but she didn’t want all the people in her schools turned into drug addicts. Amphetamines were different; it resulted in good grades, which helped the schools’ reputation. Tara grumbled something but sat down on the floor in silence when Ada shot her a warning stare. She busied herself with her nail polish, and Ada’s eyes returned to her paper.

Connie resumed her writing and changed the topic of conversation to the test banks. Both Tara and April were in constant communication with Gordon, Ada’s personal IT guy, who had hacked into all the teachers’ computers in order to access every exam they would ever make. So far, all was going well, but there was a teacher in the school by the Haves Park that was starting to suspect something. Connie proposed getting him into an accident and the girls looked at Ada again. Ada shook her head. There were better and less bloody ways to deal with a stubborn teacher.

“I’ll take care of it.”

Ada's eyes returned to the screen and the other girls continued with the reports. The next on the agenda were the favors. April and Tara got out small writing pads from their purses and began to recite the names of the people who had acquired pills, drugs, or tests in exchange of favors. Connie opened another leather-bound notebook and inscribed each name under the right category. As soon as they were done, Connie stood up and placed the notebooks on Ada's desk, waiting to be dismissed. Ada grabbed the first notebook and flipped through the last pages.

“Is there anything else?”

April stood up.

“A girl in our school was roofied on Saturday.”

Ada frowned.

“Sylvia Clark. She's asked me for an audience.”

Ada eye's shifted to Connie. She asked her in a glazing tone why she was hearing about that now. Connie blinked a few times. She explained she was as caught off by it as everyone else. Ada snapped at her.

“You're supposed to know about this before anyone else, Connie. For fuck's sake, you're my right hand.”

Connie uttered an apology, unmoved. Ada rolled her eyes and looked at April again.

“Becky takes care of audiences, not you. So tell her to talk to her. You and Tara find out who the hell is responsible for that. Now.”

April nodded while Tara stood up. Ada scrutinized each of the girls' expressions.

“Ladies, you are dismissed. I'll see you tonight.”

Tara was the first to walk out the room, followed by April. Connie continued standing in front of Ada's desk.

"Becky's waiting outside."

Ada slid her chair towards the desk. She told Connie to invite Becky in and remain on the couch.

A few minutes later Becky, her personally appointed assistant, rustled the insides of her beaten up designer tote bag, a hand me down gift from Ada. After a few seconds Ada sighed and exchanged glances with Connie before her eyes darted back to Becky.

"I'm waiting, Becky."

Becky got out a book and placed it on Ada's desk but, when she saw Ada's cold expression, she put it back in her bag.

Ada's arctic voice cut the tense air.

"Can you remind me again why you didn't put it somewhere more accessible?"

Becky panicked Her arms stopped all movements, dropping her bag to the floor.

"Uh...I--"

"Don't talk, just give me the damn recording."

Becky resumed her rifling and gave a triumphant squeak when she got a small electronic pen from her bag. She walked towards Ada and handed it to her with the outmost care, as if it were made of a light slippery glass that could burst into pieces at any moment, then she waited for her instructions.

Ada opened one of the drawers of her desk and got out a small electronic notebook. Without it, the pen was useless. She pressed the pen's tip on a menu symbol followed by the 'ok' symbol and the recording began to play. Ada and Becky remained in

the room in silence and soon two young female voices began to converse in what seemed to be a bathroom. The voices had decided to skip class and were commenting on each others looks, followed by what they did that weekend and their plans for the weekend after that. Finally the voices began to talk about the weekend gossip and one of them mentioned Ada's name. Ada paused the recording and stared at Becky whose eyes were fixed on the carpet.

"Do you know who these girls are?"

"I-I think it's Patrice Renaul and Chelsea Hamock."

"Do you have any evidence?"

"I-I asked around. It was their bathroom time."

Ada's eyes shifted to Connie who nodded in corroboration. Ada nodded and rubbed her chin while in thought. It wasn't unordinary for girls to gossip in the bathroom, but no one ever gossiped about her.

"Thank you, Becky. You can leave now."

Becky walked away mumbling a shy goodbye. As soon as the door of the room was closed again, Ada resumed playing the recording.

"I saw her at the party, she was like such a slut. Like she slept with two guys in one night, that's like super slutty. She probably does drugs too."

"Pat-don't"

There was a momentary silence.

"Don't what?"

"Don't say those things about her. She's done a lot for our school."

The other voice snorted. Ada leaned in closer.



“Like what? Give us a life time supply of drugs?”

The voice was hushed by the other.

“You don’t kn—“

“Everybody knows she’s behind all that. I bet she’s also behind Sylvia’s roofing.

Ugh, I could so much better than her.”

Ada glared at Connie, whose eyes fell to the floor. At least she was aware of her screw up.

“Seriously Pat, stop.”

The previous voice laughed.

"Or what? She'll come out of the mirror and slash my throat?"

There was another silence before the voice continued.

"Don't be retarded. She doesn't even show up to school for like anything. Like, I'm sure she's pushing someone down the stairs, like right now, like that girl. I don't know why she hasn't gotten expelled already, like seriously."

Ada paused the recording and turned her head towards Connie.

“Who the hell is this girl and why does she think she can say those things about me?”

Connie typed a few letters on her smart phone.

“Looks like she’s Greg Renaul’s daughter.”

Ada rolled her eyes. Of course the daughter of her father's campaign opponent would try to bash her image. If Patrice was the viper she appeared to be, her next step would be campaigning to be a leader in the school. The thought amused Ada, until she remembered the accusations Patrice had just made about her. It wasn't the drugs nor the

claims about her promiscuity—everybody knew Ada was a clean virgin, but if word got out that she had allowed for a girl from her schools to get roofied, her image could be tarnished, and that was something she couldn't risk. She was their savior, after all, or so she needed them to believe.

"Do I know her?"

Connie scrolled through some pictures she had found in a social media site.

"She was that girl at Tom's party wearing that fugly dress and was interrupting you and Tom all the time. She's kind of known in school because of her dad, but mostly wannabe. I don't even know how she got into Tom's party, she'd be lucky to be considered D list."

A vague memory of a blurry face appeared in Ada's mind, the dress she remembered.

"Great. You can leave now."

Connie stood up and nodded towards Ada. As soon as Connie closed the door behind her, Ada resumed playing the recording until it was over. For a few minutes, Patrice continued to trash Ada but she was silenced by the other girl, who threatened to leave if Patrice continued talking. Patrice surrendered to the other girl's demands and switched the conversation to her latest acquisitions during her latest shopping spree. When the room was silent again, Ada pressed the intercom in her desk to ask Mara, the maid, to draw her a warm bath. She opened a secret drawer and linked her laptop to a masking device that erased all her computer tracks as they happened. She logged into a private account she had, invisible to any radars. She clicked on a couple of links and typed a few code words until her screen displayed an empty hotel room with a direct shot

of the bed. Ada smiled, and logged off her secret account. She grabbed the special device, the leather-bound notebooks and the recording pen, and hid them inside the secret drawer, then she walked to her bedroom and waited for Mara to announce her bath was ready.

As soon as she submerged herself in the bubbling waters of her artisan bathtub she thought about the meeting she had had with her officials that day. It had been 2 years since the last roofie incident, but if people were starting to talk about it, she had to work fast. There was only one problem: she had no clue as to who would be behind it. Ada observed her pruning palms. She was going to take care of the roofie incident, but while her officials gathered all the information, she would take care of Patrice and that teacher. Ada thought about the conversation she had heard and wondered how far Patrice had tried to stain her image. She had most likely not gone too far or Becky would have known, but she couldn't take any risks. She needed to exterminate her problem and, now that she had checked the camera was working, she knew exactly how.

Ada got out of the bath and walked over to her walk-in closet to pick an outfit for the night. She considered her options from a rack holding her newest clubbing outfits; she could wear something tight and short with long sleeves and a conservative neck, but the clubs were always hot and sweat stains were anything but attractive. She sighed. What she really wanted to wear was a pair of fitted pants and a loose top, but it was always harder to persuade men when she didn't flaunt her bare legs. Ada shrugged and settled on a one-shoulder long sleeve short cocktail dress with pearl beading. There was only one other step left: make-up. Enough to cover her blemishes but not too much to make her look like she was desperate; eye shadow and blush were always tricky.

When Ada finished applying her favorite shade of rouge lipstick, she jumped at the familiar gut-wrenching sound of the double basses of Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet Op.64 No.13. She whispered a strong curse, and walked over to her study where her phone was vibrating its way around the table. When she read Tom's name, her lips spread into a sly grin.

“Look at that, I was just thinking of you.”

Thomas Bonberceau was the city's Casanova. He belonged to one the wealthiest families in the country and luxuriated in consuming woman after woman. Tom had a magnetic smile, but it was his innocent stare that allowed his experienced hands slip off countless panties. He was a devil with an angel's face and Ada knew it well. She and him had grown up together, which made her one of the few girls in the city with the capacity to friend-zone him. Tom purred from the other side of the line.

“Really? What were you thinking?”

Although Tom was Ada's age, his voice was unusually deep and lacked the awkward cracking squeaks most boys his age had.

Ada sat behind her desk and leaned back on her chair. “I feel really bad about what happened at your last party. That you didn't get the... fun, that you wanted.”

There was silence on the other line. When she noticed Tom's breathing getting heavier, she continued.

“Tom, you deserve better, especially since you're such a great... friend. So, I've decided to make it up to you.”

“You're having sex with me?”

Ada laughed. “As if. But... I have heard of this girl who's very much into you and

will definitely do the deed. It just so happens that I have a key to a room in a very discreet hotel.”

“You serious?” Tom's chirps were almost endearing.

Ada was silent for a few seconds. There were very few times she wasn't. Tom's tone smoothed on the other side of the line.

“I *was* pretty bummed when I didn't have sex that night...”

She smirked; she had him right where she wanted.

“I know Tom; I feel so very bad. Please accept the room key and have all the fun you deserve tonight. Hell, get kinky if you want. I'm sure she'll do anything for you.”

Tom chuckled.

“What's her name?”

The words came out like sweet poison.

“Patrice Renault.”

She heard Tom mumble her name a few times and pictured him typing her name on his phone, his thumbs pressing one key at a time.

“Hey, I think I got her number already. She was one of the girls that wrote herself in my phone book.”

Ada tried to sound surprised, but the tone in her voice remained expressionless.

“There you go. It's meant to be. Just one thing, Tom. I have heard that she's a little proud, so don't tell her I told you anything about her.”

She felt Tom grin on the other side.

“Tell me what?”

Ada let her weight fall smoothly on her desk chair. She told him about her plans

for the night and promised to have lunch at his place sometime soon. Once she informed him where he could pick up the key, she ended the call. She saw the time on her cell phone and curled her upper lip in disgust; she didn't want to leave the house yet, but Tara's inevitable bickering about Ada's tardiness would not make Ada's additional time at home worth it. She grabbed the same clutch she had used the previous weekend and walked out of the room, checking its contents.

"Lip gloss, eyeliner, house keys, credit card, fake ID..."

She stopped for a second and let out a curse, then trotted to her study.

Ten minutes later, Ada was going down the elevator of her building with her clutch in one hand and a white, sealed envelope with Tom's name on another. She gave the envelope to the concierge and waited for him to call her a cab.

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When Ada arrived at *Le Con*, the club to be seen in that month, Tara and April were already waiting for her. She checked her the girls' outfits and was pleased to see that, although some of their clothes still looked cheap, they had learned how to hide better their relative poverty. Ada noticed Tara's scornful expression.

"Dude, what took you forever?"

Ada stared into Tara's gaze, "That's none of your business."

Tara opened her mouth to reply, but Ada raised her hand signaling her to be quiet. She had noticed Tara's outspokenness increase in last couple of months and was not happy about it, especially if her complaints fell into the ears of girls like Patrice. When Ada spoke, she used her usual lifeless tone, but her stare was acidic.

"If you don't want to wait, then go inside without me."

Tara scoffed.

“We can’t get in without you.”

Ada’s smile was cut-throat.

“Exactly.”

Tara's gaze was steady against Ada’s piercing eyes, both ignoring the thickening air between them. April took a hasty step between the two and pleaded with them to get out of the street and go to *Stock* instead, the girls' playground bar.

"Le Con is probably empty still."

Ada agreed. She took a step away from Tara, without taking her eyes off her, and led the way to the alley where the bar was located. April followed her, but not without nudging Tara in the arm first.

*Stock* was a small bar only a block away from *Le Con*. The bar was not particularly chic but it was a very convenient, low-key place where people didn’t need to shout over the music to engage in conversation. The decoration was highly inspired by movies of the Old West and, on special events, the manager would hire female dancers in period dress to dance on the bar like they would have done in a saloon back in the days. *Stock* was the bar everybody knew but nobody actually went to, which gave the girls the opportunity to act in any way they wanted without worrying about people finding out. What happened in *Stock*, stayed in *Stock*.

Once inside, the girls passed a set of swinging wooden doors and were welcomed by the smell of cigars and liquor. There was a big crowd of men surrounding the bar and a couple of groups of mixed sexes by the tables nearby, but the booths on the corners were still open. The girls slithered through the crowd, looking at the faces of the men

they passed by. Once at the booth, they scrutinized those who had drawn their initial attention, observing not only their fashion taste, but also the quality of their apparel and their drink choices. That night, the girls had slim pickings. The men to woman ratio still played in their favor, but few men had noticed them walk inside, which meant free drinks would be harder to come by.

Ada observed Tara and April study their possible victims. Unlike her, they did not have as much money at their direct disposal, so they mostly looked for easy preys that would buy them drinks in exchange for conversation. Ada, on the other hand, did it for kicks; she could have bought the whole bar if she would have wanted.

April and Tara called out their targets, using the men's hair and garments as identifiers. April wasn't feeling the night so she settled on a man wearing an expensive-looking watch who was drinking a beer by himself at one of the counter's corners. Tara, on the other hand, felt adventurous and picked a man in a suit she had overheard order a glass of a very expensive Scotch. Ada scanned the crowd one more time until her eyes lingered on a familiar face. The sight of him turned her pale. She stood up and grabbed her clutch.

"Ladies, have fun. I'm leaving."

When she saw the girls' expectant expressions, she rolled her eyes.

"Just be in the line at midnight."

Ada glanced towards face and sighed in relief at the realization that he had not noticed her. She strode out of the bar with her back to the crowd and bumped into the guy who was trying to get in. Their eyes met for a second before Ada recognized the guy and lowered her head in panic, as she excused herself out of his arms. She stormed out of the



bar into the dim alley and prayed the guy had not recognized her.

“Ada?Ada! Wait up!”

His rasped voiced echoed behind her as she cursed the chances of running into two people she knew at one of the most anonymous bars in the city. His rushed steps chasing after her forced Ada to come to a stop. She could only run away from the past for so long, especially when wearing pumps.

As soon as she saw his face, her stomach clenched. He was not necessarily handsome but all the people who had met him agreed that he had a special attractiveness. It could have been his confidence, his charisma, or the way he dressed, but there was something about him that made everyone take a second look. Ada straightened her dress and forced a smile.

"How are you, George?"

George's soft eyes widened. He took a step back and huffed.

“Is that all you're gonna say?”

Ada closed her arms, her smile fading. “What were you expecting?”

George rubbed the back of his neck, his tone more factual than sentimental.

“Sorry would be nice.”

Ada glanced at him. She didn't know whether to laugh or feel sorry for him. George's eyes penetrated hers and, for a second, Ada thought she would not be able to hold her gaze. Finally she sighed.

“It wasn't meant to be. I'm sorry.”

What she really meant was that she hadn't wanted to take the risk to be with him.

When George and Ada had met, almost a year ago, she had assumed he was a

wealthy man with hippie ambitions. However, after a couple of dates, she learned that he was not pretending to live a simple lifestyle, but that he actually couldn't afford anything else. Soon after that, she stopped answering his messages and cut all ties with him without ever looking back.

George nodded and turned away from Ada. She let out a long sigh and thought of the things she would have lost if she had chosen a life with him. Her hand grasped onto her pendant: money and power. Money *and* Power.

Ada released the pendant from her hand and continued her escape.

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The handles of her watch had not struck midnight yet but the line at *Le Con* was nearly a block long. She walked past all the people to the beginning of the line and greeted John, the head bouncer.

The first night they met, a year or so ago, John asked her for her ID and she gave him her fake one. When John asked her about her age and the date she was born, Ada looked up to meet his eyes and, with her best innocent expression, told him she was too young to remember. Afterwards, once John stopped laughing, she asked him about his. Ever since that day, they were friends. John always got Ada and whomever she wanted in for free. In exchange, Ada tipped him well and always made an appearance at all the clubs he worked for.

Ada chatted with John and checked out the people trying to get in. She could spot in a second who was eligible and who wasn't and, despite a lucky few, most people in line didn't make the cut. As Ada had learned long ago, the people important enough always cut the line.

At quarter past midnight Ada's phone began to ring. Her first caller was Connie. She had skipped out their hunting time to spend time with her boyfriend and was now on her way to the club. Just like Connie's parents, Ada was not fond of Connie's new boyfriend, Jeff. He was trouble. Ada had made no secret about her thoughts towards Jeff: if their affair was ever discovered, Ada would banish Connie from her posse, which would consequently drop her to Z-list status. Connie had worked hard for her current status and had just gotten promoted to her actual position; Ada knew she wouldn't let anything threaten it.

"Connie is coming in a few minutes."

Ada saw John smiling out of the corner of her eye.

"You know, if she ever breaks up with her boyfriend, I could get you two together..."

John's eyes sparked, but before he could speak, Ada felt her phone buzz again. She rolled her eyes and answered the call.

"Hi A-da, I just wanted you to remind you of the compromises, like you told me to."

Ada gave John a nod and told Becky to give her the names. John took out a small notepad from his pocket and a pen, scribbling the names Ada said out loud. The names usually belonged to people she owed favors to or had exchanged favors in exchange of a free entrance into a club. Ada never understood the motives of the latter, but she had never experienced being denied from any venue.

"Same favors?" he asked her.

Ada ended the call and shook her head.

"No. Gordon gets to go inside the VIP room, the others are only allowed in for tonight."

John nodded. He placed the notepad and pen in his pocket and looked at Ada. There was a hint of curiosity in his eyes.

"Could you really hook me up with Connie?"

A sly grin extended across her face. She could do anything she wanted.

"I could. I haven't decided yet if I want to make a business of that."

John observed the crowd waiting behind the velvet rope and lowered the tone in his voice to a whisper loud enough for Ada's ears.

"I'd be your loyal customer and I wouldn't be the only one."

Ada giggled, not because it was funny, but because she knew it was true. Her phone rang again.

"Oh my God, Ada, thank God you got this. I swear I'm going to kill this guy."

The voice belonged to Natalie, one of the leaders of the schools she managed and an old friend. She was having trouble getting into a club. Ada told Natalie to hand the bouncer the phone. When he asked who was on the other line, her words turned sharp as knives.

"This is Ada di Calimeri. The girl who gave you this phone is walking into the club."

Natalie thanked her and ended the call.

At that moment Ada saw Connie walk over to her and she silenced her phone. She looked around to see if April and Tara were nearby, but she could not see them anywhere. She called April first and was surprised when she didn't answer. She called her again but

to no success. Then she called Tara with the same results. Ada pressed her lips together in frustration. Being late was forgivable, but not answering her calls was severely punishable. Everybody in her circle knew that. After a long pause, she smirked. If the girls had better things to do than be on time, maybe they should spend the night occupied with those things instead.

After Connie greeted Ada, John let the girls in. Ada signaled Connie to go first and when she was alone with John, she walked closer to him, her smile already revealing she was up to no good.

“Do you remember those two girls who normally come with us here?”

John nodded, allowing Ada to continue.

“I don’t think they should be allowed in tonight, do you?”

John smiled.

“No ma’am. The club is full.”

Ada smiled and slipped a hundred-dollar bill into his pocket.

“Thank you, John.”

Ada crossed the club’s doors and looked around to see the people in attendance, then met Connie at the cloakroom. Connie’s tone was neither curious, nor suspicious when she spoke. If anything, it seemed automated, as if her thoughts were somewhere else.

“You took your time walking in.”

Ada leaned by the wall, watching Connie go through the money in her wallet.

“I was just taking care of something.”

Connie handed a few bills to the woman behind the cloakroom counter while her

eyes drifted to Ada.

“What did you do?”

Ada shrugged.

“I just made sure Tara and April learned a lesson about punctuality.”

Connie shook her head in disapproval.

“Ada, whatever Tara’s done, it’s not a big deal. You can’t grind people like Tara all the time. There’s only so much she can take.”

Ada took Connie’s arm and strutted towards the VIP area, her thumb rubbing her pendant.

"I'm the most powerful girl in the city, Connie. I can do whatever I want."

## CHAPTER TWO

The bronzing bodies of Ada and Connie were the only ones populating *Kerriam's* west exterior pool. *The Kerriam Country Club* was the city's most exclusive country club. It was routine for Ada to spend her Saturday mornings there, but that day she invited Connie to join her. Although it was only 11 a.m., the girls were already celebrating Connie's promotion with the club's specialty: Sex on the Beach.

“By the way, did you miss any calls from Tara and April?”

Ada shook her head, her eyes closed behind her designer sunglasses. She had blocked their numbers from her phone for the night. Connie continued.

“I talked to April this morning and she says Tara's really mad.”

Ada took a sip of her drink and placed it back on the narrow wooden armrest of her tanning chair. Unless Tara was mad at herself for being late, she didn't care.

“Whatever. Now she'll be where I tell her to be exactly when I tell her.”

Connie rolled her body to face Ada.

“So you're not going to talk to her?”

Ada scoffed. She opened her eyes and turned her head to face Connie.

“And tell her what? I'm sorry you're a dumbass? She's learned her lesson, and I have more important things to do.”

Connie shrugged. Ada turned to face her.

“If you have any more stupid remarks you can go and drown yourself in the pool right now. I didn't promote you to frown on my methods.”

Connie apologized and Ada faced the sun again. She thought about encouraging Connie to fulfill her request, but she was saved by the buzz of her phone. Ada looked at

the caller ID as she answered the call.

“Did you have a good night?”

She heard Tom chuckle.

“I did. She was very kinky.”

Her lips twisted into a mischievous smile. She knew the kinkier the content, the better the tape.

“Good. I’m glad to hear it.”

“Do you want the details?”

Ada laughed. If the hidden camera had worked as well as it had in the past, she would have a sex tape waiting for her at home. The details were unnecessary.

“That’s fine,” she said, “I want the key back, though.”

“Yeah, I was calling you to let you know I left it with the concierge.”

Ada thanked him and chatted for a couple of minutes about her plans for the day. She told him she was free for the day but had to attend a boring party that night, if only to make an appearance. Tom invited her to spend the rest of day at his house, but she declined. She wasn’t in the mood of leaving the Country Club yet. She asked him about his plans. Tom was going to play pool and watch a sports game with some of his school friends, but wasn’t too excited about it. For a second, Ada considered inviting him to join her and Connie but then dismissed the thought. She could still need to discuss other business matters with Connie. Tom’s voice continued to flow from the other side of the line. He told her he had no plans for the next day. Ada murmured an assent and promised him they would get together sometime soon to play pool. When she ended the call, she found Connie looking at her in anticipation. Ada revealed that Patrice Renaul had a sex



tape and took a few moments to enjoy the thrill of Connie's reaction. By the end of the week the whole school, and its neighbors, would know about the tape's existence.

"So, do you have it?"

Ada's tone sobered.

"Of course I don't. Why would I have something like that?"

Connie shrugged.

"She is the daughter of your father's rival. Her sex tape will destroy her family's reputation."

Connie's insight reminded her why she had picked Connie to be her new right hand. Ada tried not to smile.

"It could also make her famous." She took a sip of her drink, "Either way, I'm not risking child pornography charges because of that whore."

A shadow blocked Ada's face from the Sun.

"OMG, Ada, is that you?"

Ada lowered her sunglasses, staring at the girl standing in front of her. She gave her a genuine smile.

"Bee! What are you doing here?"

Ada got up from her chair and hugged her old friend. Apparently, Bee, who was a year older than her, had just graduated from boarding school and her parents had had no choice but to bring her back to the city. Ada broke away from their hug and asked her about her plans. Bee hanged her arm around Ada's shoulders and let her eyes wander to the cloudless sky. Without losing her playful smile, she faced Ada and informed her she was going to dedicate a year to ultimate partying and sleeping around with whomever she

wanted; then she would go to college, or something. Ada chortled. She hugged Bee again and invited her to sit with them. She was glad boarding school had not been able to change her friend. Bee sat at the feet of Ada's chair and introduced herself to Connie, who smiled politely at her. She then turned to face Ada.

“OMG so I get back and guess what Mom tells me?”

Bee's energetic tone ignited Ada to sit up, ready to be amused.

“What?”

She wiggled in her seat, making herself more comfortable.

“She's totally sad that you don't go over for dinner on Thursdays since I left.”

Ada tilted her head back in a laugh. It was no secret that Mrs. Beaufiles, Bee's mother, treated Ada like a daughter, but sometimes she took that role too seriously. Bee shook her head in defeat but continued smiling as she talked.

“I've told her a million times that all those times you were my guest, but she totally feels like you would have still been welcomed even if I was at boarding school, which is totally weird.”

Ada nodded.

“Yes, she's told me a few times, but I've told her that it wouldn't be the same without you.”

“Well, duh. How are your parents by the way?”

Ada shrugged, leaning back on the recliner and spoke in her usual monotonous tone.

“Same as always. Father is running for office, again, and Mother still spends her time organizing fundraisers.”

Bee, whose eyes had gotten lost in the garden surrounding the pool, returned her attention to Ada.

“OMG, Ada I’m so happy to be back. I can’t wait to see everybody tonight. What are you wearing, by the way? Because it’s going to be out in the grass.”

Ada frowned, lowering her sunglasses.

“What do you mean?”

Bee tilted her head to the side. She told Ada she was throwing a welcome home party and that she had sent her an invitation a couple of weeks ago. The invitation had been RSVP, but she knew Ada never RSVPd to anything, so Bee told her she had figured Ada would just meet her at her flat, a few floors down from her penthouse, and go there together, like they had always done with parties in the past. When Ada didn’t reply, Bee rested her hand on Ada’s ankle and gave her a pleading stare.

“OMG, pleeeaaase tell me you’re coming, I already told a bunch of people you were. It’ll be really awkward if they think I lied.”

Ada shrugged. She pushed her sunglasses back to the bridge of her nose and leaned back.

“Fine. I’ll be there.”

Bee clapped her hands together in excitement. Ada noticed Connie look up from the corner of her eye.

“So we’re not going to the Diamonds party in the end?”

Ada turned to look at Connie, whose eyes were wide in surprise.

“I’m not, but you are.”

Connie made an awkward face. She met Ada’s eyes and straightened her back.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to make it.”

Ada arched an eyebrow, amused. It wasn't often people told her they couldn't do something she told them to. The mocking hostility in her tone, thickened the ambiance.

“Do you have anything better to do?”

Connie took a few seconds to reply. Despite the increasing tension, her tone appeared calm and collected.

“I was going to tell you earlier but I forgot.” She glanced at Bee and then continued, "My boyfriend kind of got this room at this really nice place and I thought since you were going—”

Ada’s expression hardened.

"I'm not anymore."

Ada sat up. Her severe stare propelled Connie to make a short pause.

"But..."

Ada lifted her hand.

"No."

Connie sighed, and Ada turned her head to face the sun again.

"You can leave after you make an appearance at the party," she paused and noticed her almost empty glass. "I didn't give you your position to do what you want. I did it so you would do what I want."

Connie stared at Ada and huffed

“You could just send Tara and April.”

Ada pressed her lips together. She thought about drowning Connie herself, but instead took a deep breath. Her hand played with the pendant.

“That's not an event for them. They wouldn't know who to talk to,” she flagged a staff member, frowning. “Are you intentionally trying to piss me off or are you just having a very stupid day?”

Connie turned away from Ada, her hands fiddling with her hair, “No, no. I just—” she paused for a second and dropped her hands to the chair, “I just don't want to go by myself.”

Ada laughed for a few seconds. She pointed her empty glass to the young staff member trotting over towards them and made sure her next words were biting: “And that's why you'll never be on my level: You lack balls.”

She noticed Bee stand up and run after the staff member, probably to order a drink herself.

It wasn't until the girls were halfway done with their second round of drinks that Connie spoke again.

“Do you mind if go home now? My parents want me to have lunch with them at this new restaurant.”

Ada looked at her watch. It was 1:00pm.

“Fine. You can leave.”

Connie shook Bee's hand and gave a nod to Ada, then she picked up her things and left. Bee lay on the empty chair.

“This is so not the best place to drink cocktails. Do you want to go to *Kwut* in like an hour? I heard it's totally fab, and they serve lunch.”

Ada nodded.

A few minutes later, Bee rolled towards Ada to ask her about Connie.

“What’s her deal, anyway? She seems weird.”

Ada sighed. Connie was a weird girl, but that morning she had been particularly weird.

“She’s having a stupid day; it happens to her sometimes.”

Bee’s eyes were still on Ada.

“Is she cool or something?”

Ada shrugged.

“She’s nouveau-riche.”

Bee's stare turned blank. She asked if they weren't new money either. Ada rolled her eyes. She told her it wasn't the same thing because their parents had not born poor, just their grandparents. Bee nodded in agreement.

"Besides, our grandparents are successful businessmen, her father just earned a couple of million by making energy out of horse shit."

Bee wrinkled her face in disgust while Ada extended her right hand to check her dark cherry-polished nails. She knew her own father had risen to power through blackmail, sudden disappearances, and distortion of the news. However, only Ada, and maybe her mother, were aware of it. To the rest of the world, Ada's father was the son of the man who created the ultimate nuclear weapon, which people believed would be used to bring freedom but instead caused many wars—all of which benefitted Ada's grandfather; a man who went to one of the country's top universities, then law school and then got into politics where he became inexplicably popular in a very short amount of time; a man who had been voted into office by a roaring majority. It may have been true that Ada's family did not own clean money, but it was far better than dealing with actual

dirt, especially when no one knew how dirty their money really was.

Once Ada felt the sun's rays drying up her skin, she told Bee to get her things and get ready to leave. The girls walked over to the Club's changing room where they took a quick shower and changed into their city clothes. When they were finished, they walked out to the entrance of the club where Ada greeted Boris, her chauffeur, and told Bee to get in her car. As the car drove away, a young man screamed Ada's name, but the car's motor muffled his voice and Ada was unable to hear it.

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When Ada and Bee arrived at *Kwut*, they were escorted by the maître to one of the restaurant's best tables, situated next to one of the windows with the best views of the city's center. A few minutes after being seated, while the girls scrutinized the menus, a tall man, far older than the girls, in an expensive-looking suit walked over to their table. Ada stood up from her chair as soon as she saw Mr. Golem coming and greeted him with a warm handshake and an innocent smile.

"Is your father in the city today? I would like to meet with him."

Ada shook her head without breaking her smile, speaking in a sweeter tone than usual.

"He's in some paradisiac island with my mother."

Mr. Golem nodded.

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

Ada scrutinized the man's body language. His hands were fiddling, his eyes never rested on an object for long. It was clear he was nervous, and she could only think of one reason why. A week ago, some petty journalist had written an article about her father's

affairs and had found one woman willing to spill the beans. Fortunately for her father, the woman had turned out to be a phony, but the rumors hadn't evaporated and her father's publicists had encouraged him and her mother to take a trip and let some paparazzi take some pictures of them looking more in love than ever. Ada could understand why Mr. Golem was nervous. He was one of her father's biggest investors; he needed to know the matter was under control.

"I'm not sure. Last time I talked to my mom, they were about to go scuba diving. She was really excited."

Mr. Golem nodded thoughtfully.

"Dad promised me he would help me with my homework on Sunday, though. So I think he should be back by then."

Part of that statement was true. Ada's father had given her a Powerpoint with all the names, pictures and relevant information of all his sponsors and had told them to have them memorized by Sunday, when he would personally test her knowledge.

"Ah, that's right, you're a senior now, aren't you?"

Mr. Golem asked her where she wanted to go to college. Ada only had one college in mind, but her father wanted her to take a gap year to go to some God-forsaken country, stricken by war or poverty or both, and pretend to take care of starving children. Whether she actually did some work or spent the year locked inside a 5 star resort, he did not care, so long as the public thought she was the next Mother Theresa.

"I might take a year off and dedicate that time to a philanthropy."

Mr. Golem raised his eyebrows and commended Ada for her giving attitude. Ada thanked him with feigned modesty and exchanged some pleasantries with him before he



returned to his table and noticed Bee's baffled frown when she sat back in her chair.

“OMG Ada you’re taking a year off for charity? Why?”

Ada shrugged, her smile already faded into her expressionless face.

“I want to make a difference in the world.”

Bee laughed while Ada tried to remain serious. At that moment, she felt her phone vibrate. It was a text message. Ada read the name of the sender and flipped her phone face down. When her meandering eyes' met Bee's frown, she let out a resigned sigh and forced herself to read the message. Matt Prinsur, her ex-boyfriend, whom she once thought was the love of her life, needed to see her.

One of last times Ada had seen Matt Prinsur had been the first time she had ever cried because of a man. They had been laying together in one of the living room's couches, their hands entwined together as they watched one of Ada's favorite movies, *The Godfather*. Matt had slid away from her to go to the bathroom, leaving Ada to watch the movie by herself. Soon after, she felt the couch vibrate and realized Matt's cell phone had fallen from his back pocket. She had been planning on leaving it on the coffee table, but when her eyes lingered on the screen she saw someone had sent him a picture of someone's breasts. Her first reaction had been to laugh, thinking it was probably one of Matt's friends being a pig, but when she had read the sender's name, her expression had sobered. The sender had been a woman, and from their previous texts, the picture belonged to her. When Matt had come back, Ada had handed him his phone and had told him to leave her house. That night, she had cried herself to sleep.

“OMG, I bet he wants you guys to get back together. When are you seeing him?”

Bee's words brought Ada back to the restaurant. Ada took a bite of sashimi.

“I’m not.”

Bee dropped her palms to the table, startled.

“But you guys were like the perfect couple. I can’t even remember why you guys broke up.”

Ada swallowed the contents in her mouth and took another bite.

“He had to study abroad for two years. I don’t do long distance.”

There was some truth to that statement. Two days after Ada saw the picture, she and Matt agreed on an excuse for their break-up that wouldn’t tarnish Ada’s reputation. The excuse involved him going abroad to study, which he had to do either way for his major. Fortunately for Ada, Matt didn’t have to be threatened to know she would make his life hell if anyone ever found out he had cheated on her and, so far, no one had.

“But he’s back now, right? Like he still has a year but he can do it here. So you guys can be together again.”

“No.”

She felt Bee’s inquiring stare and rolled her eyes.

"We were over a long time ago, Bee."

Bee opened her mouth. Ada intervened.

"And that's enough talk about this topic."

Bee and Ada ate their food in silence while Ada thought about Matt's message, unable to dissolve the knot that had formed in her stomach. Bee commented on Ada’s poor appetite, but Ada dismissed the comment, claiming she needed to have a flat stomach for that night. As soon as she mentioned Bee's party, the conversation flowed again, mostly on Bee's side. She talked about all the decorations she had come up with

for the event, the people she had invited, the dress she had picked...Ada nodded and smiled to everything Bee said but couldn't focus in what she was saying. Once the girls were finished, they paid the bill, leaving a very generous tip, and shared a taxi to their building.

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That night the country club was lively. White tents in the main garden and ice sculptures of exotic animals decorated the open bars. 20 waiters served cold champagne and hors d'oeuvres. There was a red carpet at the main entrance and a photographer to make all the guests feel like celebrities. The girls' arrival, just like everything else at the party, had been prepared with the outmost detail in order for the girls to make the perfect entrance.

A black town car stopped in front of the carpet. A few seconds later, a man in a suit got out of the driver's seat and opened the door to the back seats. Ada was the first one to emerge, her movements depicting all the grace she had been taught to portray. She had chosen a short emerald tunic made of silk she had set eyes on during the latest fashion week, her pendant always hanging from her neck. Bee followed soon after with cruder movements, wearing a tight short white satin dress combined with leopard printed wedges.

As they walked the carpet to the main tent, Ada felt the attendees' eyes on her. When she scanned the crowd she found that it was full of many of her acquaintances, like all the parties she attended were; in the end, the circle of the elite was a small one and they all went to the same places like mosquitoes following a light. She gave nods of recognition to some of the people that waved at her, a polite smile to others, and bluntly

ignored those she deemed unworthy of her time.

After parading herself through the garden, she walked to the bar and ordered a cosmopolitan, then she sat in an empty table on the corner and waited for some of the guests to approach her.

The first ones to sit down were the leaders of the schools Ada controlled. On a usual party night, the leaders would always talk about the guests and any events that had taken place before Ada's entrance. That night though, Ada had decided to not wait until her individual meetings with each member and asked them about any incidents that had taken place in the past weekends. The girls exchanged concerned glances, but reported no incidences of any kind. Ada nodded and then proceeded to listen to the leaders' information. As the girls talked, Ada noticed a familiar face in the crowd. He was wearing a velvet suit and his face was somewhat scruffier, but he was still the same Matt she had fallen for two years ago. For a second, it seemed his eyes were going to meet hers. She looked away and tried to focus on the table's conversation. Bridget, the leader of the school by the Haves Parks was complaining about a teacher there. Ada assumed it was the same one Tara had spoken of the previous day, and told her she was aware of the problem.

Ada's eyes wondered out of her table again. She noticed that a line had already formed to talk to her. She dismissed the leaders with a final note to keep them updated with any incidents, and invited the first person in the line, a girl she didn't know, to sit at the table with her.

Before the girl was able to introduce herself, Ada called Becky and put her on speakerphone to take notes, then she motioned the girl to begin. Her name was Vivian,

and she was extremely grateful for a moment of Ada's time. Ada nodded and Vivian continued. She told Ada that she was a good girl who got good grades and had decided to date a guy who wasn't good and never got good grades.

"I thought I could change him" she whimpered with her droopy eyes focused on the table's white mantle, "but I couldn't, so I broke up with him."

Ada remained unmoved. Vivian leaned closer to her, whispering with a trembling voice.

"Now he's telling me he has a couple of pictures of us having sex and he's going to show them to everybody. He says if I do what he wants I'm safe, but I can't risk it. I need to get into a top college. I need to or my life is over."

Ada rubbed her chin in thought. It would take Gordon long to hack into the guy's phone and find something to black mail him with in exchange of the pictures. After that, the girl would owe Ada a favor and if she didn't deliver she would have the pictures to black mail herself. It was good business. When she told the girl she would take her case the girl thanked her again and again.

"I'm forever in your debt, Ada."

Ada's eyes wandered off into the crowd as she dismissed Vivian and invited the next person to sit with her. She spotted Bee talking and flirting with one of her exes, but Matt seemed to have vanished.

Peter, a student at Tom's rival school, sat comfortably on the chair Vivian had vacated. He complimented Ada on her looks and slid his hand on top of Ada's. Ada's cold glare jolted Peter's hand away. She told him to go straight to the point. Peter leaned towards her. He told her his school was looking for more supplies and wanted to know if

Ada could provide. Ada shook her head. Supplies, their key word for drugs, were limited and she had made a deal with James, who still ran the all-male schools, that she would not be the one supplying anything to his schools. However, what she could do is organize more events involving Peter's school and Crystal's, another leader, whose school was the biggest drug consumer. If his boys happened to have access to drugs at one of those parties, then there wasn't much she could do about it. Ada proposed to Peter mixing his school with Crystal's but in exchange, he would owe her a favor; a big one. Peter accepted, seeming to understand what she had planned. He thanked her and offered to express his gratitude with an invitation to his yacht, but Ada dismissed him with a wave. The line was getting longer.

Once Peter was off the chair, another girl sat down. The girl, whose name she didn't retain, just wanted to pay her respects and offer to be of help anytime she needed her. Although it was usual for both girls and boys to pay respects to her, Ada was surprised someone would offer to give a favor for free, so when she dismissed the girl, she told Becky to write down her name aside. A girl like that could always be useful to her in the future.

A few more people approached her to pay her respects, until Clarissa, the daughter of one of her father's sponsors sat on the chair. Ada gently rolled her wrist, motioning Clarissa to begin, while her eyes found Matt again. He was talking to a girl she didn't know. She was leaning on him a lot, he was smiling. Ada looked away and tried to focus on Clarissa, who was talking about her boyfriend, or ex-boyfriend. Ada's eyes shifted back to Matt, he was still talking to the girl and now they were both laughing.

“He cheated on me, Ada. I'm so mad.”

Ada's cold eyes met Clarissa's watery ones, as Clarissa continued talking.

"He was texting with five other girls on the side, Ada. Five! And all that time he was telling me how he wanted us to go to college together and get married afterwards. I hate him."

Ada felt a weird rush of feelings inside her as Clarissa continued talking. Clarissa's boyfriend was an ass and she was going to take care of it. Once Clarissa finished her petition, Ada told her she would help her, Clarissa let out a sigh of relief and smiled appreciatively.

"Thank you *so much*, Ada. I have your back for whatever you want."

Ada forced a smile and dismissed her. Before she invited the next person to sit, she instructed Becky to remind her to tell Gordon to ruin the life of Clarissa's ex-boyfriend. Becky seemed to struggle with words on the other side of the line.

"B-uuut S-s-s-he o-on-only w-w-wa-nts the r-r-ri-ng he g-g-ave her b-b-b-ack."

Ada glared at her device.

"Fine, then get that back too. But I want that fucker's life ruined."

Becky didn't say anything. Before Ada could invite the next person to sit, she saw Matt cut the line, and sit next to her. His smug expression as charming as his tone.

"How you doing feisty one?"

Ada looked at the line of people, who were staring at Matt with either contempt or curiosity, and told Matt to clear the chair. Matt didn't move. He said he needed to talk to her. Ada's tone was more stern when she told him to leave a second time. Matt leaned back and parted his legs, grounding his shoes to the grass.

"I'm only leaving if you drag me out."

Ada fiddled with her pendant and scrutinized his expression. Matt was not one to make a scandal, but he was also a man of his word. She rolled her eyes and told the people waiting that she was finished with business for the moment. The line dispersed soon after and Ada led a pleased-looking Matt to the Rose Garden.

As soon as Ada made sure they were alone in the garden she slapped the side of his arm. The echo of the slap got lost in the darkness of the night. Ada fought to disguise the anger in her tone.

“How dare you make a dumbass of me in front of those people?”

Matt walked closer to her. Close enough for her to appreciate the hints of wood and grass of his cologne. The same one that permeated on the t-shirts she used to sleep in on the nights they slept separately. Despite her hitting him, he was looking at her with a good-humored smile. That smile made her want to hit him again.

“Come on, it’s not a big deal. They knew we were a couple a year ago.”

Ada glared at him. He never thought her businesses were a big deal. He was a college guy; high-school matters were below him. She crossed her arms together.

“What are you doing here? What do you want?”

Matt tried to reply, but Ada’s phone silenced him. She looked at the caller ID and sent it to voice mail. Connie could wait. Matt’s smile faded. Ada crossed her arms. His silence nettled her.

“I miss you like crazy, Ada.”

Ada felt her heart burst against her chest. Of course he had missed her like crazy. She wanted to punch him and hurt him, but instead, she had to fight the triumphant smile that wanted to break across her face. No matter what Matt said, she had to be strong. Her



phone buzzed again and she answered it in a beat. It was Connie, calling her again. She was rambling on about something regarding a phone call. Apparently, someone had found out Connie was dating Johnny and was trying to get Connie to tell him or her— Connie had not been able to tell because of a voice distortioning device— any dirt on Ada in exchange of their silence.

Ada turned away from Matt, her eyes falling to her pendant. She didn't really care about Connie and Johnny, but if someone was sniffing around for dirt on her, then she had to get involved. Accidentally or not, whoever had threatened Connie, had indirectly threatened Ada. Unlike Connie, though, Ada had the means to fight back. On the other end of the line, Connie was silent, waiting for a command. Ada told her to send Gordon all the information she had. She would take care of it from there.

Once she ended the call, Ada turned towards Matt. His eyes were set on her, in the same way they used to be whenever he saw her walk into her penthouse's waiting hall, ready to go on one of their dates.

“Let's get back together and start over. What do you say?”

Ada bit her lip. Maybe she still had feelings for him, but she couldn't trust him. He was closer to her now. She could feel the warmth of his hand resting on the side of her arm. If she didn't take a step back, she knew that he would kiss her. She didn't move.

“You cheated on me.”

Matt looked down and sighed. He admitted he had, but claimed to have changed. He promised Ada he would be fully committed to her and would make up for his screw up every day until she thought he had done enough. The offer was tempting. Matt leaned in for a kiss but, as soon as his lips brushed hers, the image of him

laughing with that girl flowed into her mind. Ada pushed him away. There was surprise in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

In her head both Matt and the girl were still laughing. For all she knew they could have been laughing at her. The thought made her blood boil.

“Who the hell do you think you are? And why are you trying to manipulate me?”

Matt frowned. Ada took a step away from him but he took hold of her arm.

"I wouldn't do that, Ada. You know me."

Ada cleared her throat in an attempt to prevent her voice from breaking and snatched her arm away from his soft grip.

"No Matt. I don't."

Matt walked closer to her but Ada turned her back to him and walked away, her pace quickening with each step until she found herself trotting away from the small rose garden. As soon as she saw the first tent she stopped and looked back. Matt was nowhere to be seen. She took a deep breath. She had made the right choice. She took another breath and walked towards the tent with the same elegance she had exited it.

As she did, one of the waiters approached Ada with a tray of drinks. Ada downed a flute of champagne and got a hold of another one to drink on her ride back home. She was done for the night.

### CHAPTER THREE

"Time to wake up, Miss."

Ada blinked a few times before she was able to see Mara. She was wearing the clean cut navy blue maid uniform with white collars. Her face possessed the serious expression she always wore. Ada stretched her arms towards the ceiling with a grunt. Mara didn't move.

"Your guest is in the dinning room, miss."

Ada's arms dropped. She never had any business visits that early in the day, not even from Connie or Becky, and Bee was probably too hungover to be awake.

Ada tried to piece the night's events together. She could not remember exactly how she had gotten home. She knew she had run into Tom on her way out and that they had decided to get drunk somewhere, but everything else was blurry. Something stirred inside Ada, as she looked around and inside her bed for any evidence of Tom or worse, a stranger, spending the night with her. Then she realized; she would have known. She dismissed Mara and told her to have her breakfast ready for her at the dinning room, canceling her routine breakfast in bed weekend, and rolled out of her king-sized bed one step at a time.

"What are you doing here?" She asked as soon as she opened the dining room doors and saw her guest gulping down a glass of fresh squeezed orange juice.

Tom jumped from his seat. He was wearing an oversized sports t-shirt someone had once given to Ada and a pair of boxers. It was clear he had spent the night, but Ada couldn't remember why.

"Shit, Ada. You almost gave me a heart attack."

She walked over to the table and sat next to him. When she looked at him again, she noticed a new bruise, still swollen, surrounding his right eye.

"That's not an answer."

Tom finished chewing the piece of pancake he had just put in his mouth.

"You invited me."

Ada arched her eyebrows in skepticism. She never invited men to her house after a party, unless they were her boyfriends. She let Tom finish the glass of juice he was drinking and demanded an explanation. Tom shrugged and told her the whole story.

Last night Tom needed to leave the party in a hurry. That part, she remembered. He had run into one of his one-night stands, and she was clinging onto him like a parasite, so his only choice had been to bail. That night waiting time for a taxi had been an hour, and his parents were using the chauffeur. When he saw Ada walk into her town car he begged her for help and she invited him in. As they had driven away, Ada had drowned a glass of champagne and proposed going to some random club to get drunk and dance. Tom had accepted. Ada remembered spending a lot of the time in the car with Tom, drinking whatever was available from it's mini bar, but after that, there was a big black gap.

"What happened next?"

Tom got hold of his phone. He swallowed the remains of the bite he had chewed and spoke matter-of-factly.

"We found a club and danced on the dance floor until it closed. I think we were the only ones there. Here, look at the pictures."

He handed his phone to Ada. She examined each photo in detail. The club wasn't

any place she could recognize, which relieved her. If it was an unknown place, she would have been able to remain anonymous. Ada deleted the photos as she saw them and then handed Tom his phone back. The memory of the club and its cigarette smell began to come back to her. Tom continued with the story.

Ada's chauffeur was going to drop off Tom at his house first but when they got closer to Tom's building they saw that the streets to get there had been closed because of an accident. Tom had thanked Ada for the ride assuring her he could walk from there, but Ada had insisted he was too drunk to function and that he had to spend the night at her place. Tom accepted the invitation.

Ada looked at Tom's bruise again. When their eyes met, he pointed at her.

"You gave me that."

She frowned for a second, but then laughed.

"Why would you think I was going to have sex with you?"

Tom spoke with a hint of defensiveness in his tone.

"You gave me all the signals."

Ada continued laughing, her laugh so hysterical it soon rubbed off on Tom.

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"OMG, Ada! You should've totally had sex with him."

Bee's voice bounced inside the glass walls of Ada's private gym. Ada slowed down her running pace on the treadmill. She noticed Bee's disappointed stare reflected in the mirrored glass, but said nothing.

"You have to do it with someone eventually."

Ada laughed, almost skipping the rhythm of her jog. Eventually.

"Aren't you curious or anything?"

Ada lowered the speed to a fast walking pace. Bee did the same.

"Of course, but I'd rather wait."

Ada used the towel in front of her to dry the drips of sweat from her face while Bee shook her head.

"It's totally not as huge as you think it is."

"It is to men."

Bee laughed.

"So not true."

Ada stopped the treadmill and rested her back against a sidearm, the towel hanging from one of her shoulders.

"If I gave you a toothpick right now, what would you do with it?"

Bee pressed the stop button of the machine and walked into a halt.

"Throw it away or something, I guess."

Ada turned away from Bee and walked to the mini fridge in the room.

"Why?"

She handed Bee a bottle of water. Bee drowned half of the bottle's content and exhaled.

"I don't know, I don't care about it."

She offered the bottle to Ada but Ada shook her head. Bee shrugged and finished it's contents. Ada took Bee's empty bottle and waved once it in front of her.

"Which is why you would throw it away," she said as she dropped the bottle into the trashcan. "There are millions of toothpicks that do the same thing, plus, if you use it,

you're only going to use it once. But what if I gave you this necklace?"

Ada showed Bee her lion pendant, a gift from the leaders of her schools as a token of respect and recognition of her absolute power.

"Would you treasure this?"

Bee nodded and followed Ada to where the mats had been laid for them. Ada continued talking.

"That's because everybody wants this. It's unique, like a trophy, and its possession would mean something."

She leaned closer to Bee, flaunting her necklace, and asked her which one she would rather have. Bee smiled.

"Well, duh, the necklace."

Both girls sat on their mats. Ada returned the smile.

"Exactly."

Bee stretched one of her legs.

"But what has this to do with men?"

Ada stretched the opposite leg

"That's what we are to guys, Bee: Toothpicks and Trophies."

Ada's words propelled Bee to shake her head.

"Then why even use a toothpick? It makes no sense."

Ada shrugged and stretched the other leg.

"Because it gives them, and us, status. There can't be trophies without toothpicks."

Bee spread her legs open and winked at Ada.

“But toothpicks could be trophies if all trophies became toothpicks.”

Ada shook her head. She leaned her back on the mat and turned her head towards Bee, who leaned her body side ways.

“Toothpicks will never be trophies, Bee. It’s how our society works. There will always be one person who’s less into sex than another and she will be made righteous and virtuous by society. Not because she’s making an effort, but because she accidentally makes herself unattainable. That increases the demand for her.”

“Well, yeah, but if she’s bad at sex or won’t have it often the guy will go seeking for a toothpick. Needs beat want.”

For a second, Matt’s image came to her mind, but she dismissed it. Bee leaned back to face the ceiling and continued.

“And if you’re good at sex or marketing, you can totally be a trophy.”

Ada nodded.

“Yes, but only so much and for so long. Nobody wants a third-hand car, let alone a toothpick. No matter the marketing.”

Bee shook her head.

“Things are totally different now, Ada. Just look at the TV and movies. We are encouraged to show our bodies and be more open about sex and our sexuality and all that. We can totally use sex in our favor now.”

Ada jeered with skepticism.

“Yes, and make home-made porn too. But tell me something: of all the eligible bachelors we know, how many of those are planning on marrying a porn star? Or even a girl who’s had a lot of sex?”



Bee was silent. Ada let out a sigh.

“Toothpicks and trophies, Bee; toothpicks and trophies.”

Bee stretched her arms and grunted.

“You might be right on that, but I can totally tell you from experience that none of those bachelors are worth the night. The DJ I had sex with last night, on the other hand, was worth millions.”

Ada roared a laugh, Bee sat up.

“Sex is not really about toothpicks and trophies, Ada. It’s about power. But power is empty and stupid; it stops you from enjoying life. So I say, find a man you like and have sex with him when you want to have sex. People will only care if you care.”

Ada sighed in defeat. Bee was an outsider and didn’t care to remain any different so long as people showed up to her parties, which they did. She could drift far away from the norms and nobody would complain, but Ada was a leader, and leaders needed to fulfill certain expectations if they wanted the public’s approval.

A few more minutes into their stretching, Ada heard her phone ring. She stood up from the matt and answered the call. A distorted voice greeted her:

"There was a girl in our town,  
Flaunting a beautiful crown,  
Chop, chop, did the blade go,  
then her head fell to the ground."

Ada looked at the caller ID and rolled her eyes. The lunatics' numbers were always blocked.

"You've got to be kidding me."

The caller appeared to hesitate.

"Ch-op, chop, did the blade go..."

"Let me tell you something, dumbass: whoever you are; you don't scare me."

The caller paused, as if startled, but continued soon after.

"You better hide, your days are coming to an end."

Ada let out a heart-felt laugh.

"Or what? You'll kill me with forced rhymes? You are calling me from an blocked number and you are using a voice distorter. You know what that means? That you should be the one running, because when I find you, you'll learn the true meaning of fear."

The caller hung up and Ada started the treadmill again, ignoring Bee's inquisitive stare.

"Who was that?"

Ada shrugged, ignoring Bee's concerned look.

"Some dumbass thinking they can threaten me."

Bee took her hands to her chest.

"OMG. That's scary."

Ada shook her head. A gun pointed to her head was scary; a threat from a popularity wannabe was her daily bread since she had gained full control of all the schools. The previous girl who had threatened her had spent two months in the hospital with 10 broken bones and a broken face from accidentally falling down the stairs. The fate of the latest caller would not be any different.

"It's probably some delusional girl thinking she can scare the shit out of me. I'll

just have to make an example out of her and move on."

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After the girls' workout and catch-up session, Ada said goodbye to Bee and walked into her study room. She had not thought about it at first, but once she had started the treadmill again, she had remembered that Connie had also gotten a call from a distorted voice. Connie's caller had wanted to know Ada's dirt and hers had called to threaten her. It couldn't have been a coincidence.

Ada sat down behind her desk and logged into her computer to access her tracking program.

"Son of a..."

Ada stared at the screen with a blank expression. She stood up to grab her phone and speed-dialed a number. A few seconds later, the voice of a young man greeted her with enthusiasm. Ada went straight to the point.

"Gordon, are you or are you not the best hacker in the city?"

"I am, that's why you hire me."

"Then how come someone managed to slip past my supposedly infallible tracking system?"

The other end of the line was silent. Ada leaned on her white teak desk and rested her hand on one its corner's golden motifs.

"I'm waiting for an explanation, Gordon."

"That can't be."

She fought to keep a calm tone.

"It is, and I am not happy."

"Then the person has to be a pro."

Ada frowned.

"What do you mean?"

Gordon sighed

"I mean that whoever did that is an expert with computers and tracking devices. Nobody else could have done it."

Ada took a deep breath; her eyes fixated on the room's celeste walls.

"Can you find out who did it?"

Gordon was silent again. On the other side of the line, Ada heard him press the keys on his computer board frantically. The typing stopped.

"I'm not sure. I'm still working on Connie's call, but something's weird. I'll figure it out, Ada, don't worry. I'm still your man."

"You better be." She ran her finger across the desk's grey leather surface and paused, "could this have been done by any of your people?"

Gordon assured her it was impossible. He was aware of the skills the other hackers in the country and knew no one but him would have been able to outsmart Ada's new tracking program. Ada pressed her lips together.

"Just fix it and find out who called me. Now."

She gave him the information he needed to track the caller and ended the call. She then reclined her back on the chair and fiddled with her necklace. There couldn't be that many people who could outsmart Gordon's tracking system. And if there were, they would have to be from outside the country, or else Gordon would know them. There was only one problem: Ada had no enemies outside the country, which meant someone must

have hired the hacker. She could safely tell, then, that her caller had money. She could also predict that he or she was stupid, suicidal or overly confident about their success.

Patrice's name flashed in front of Ada. She had the money, and the motivation.

Ada sat behind her desk again. She plugged the masking device and accessed the footage from the secret camera she had placed in the hotel room at the Lux. She opened the latest archived video and fast-forwarded it until she saw Patrice and Tom making out on top of the bed. Resting her chin between her thumb and index finger, Ada let the video play for a few minutes. Tom was drunk, but Patrice seemed sober and determined. It was obvious that Tom was her ultimate goal and all she had to do to get him was to give him the night of his life.

Soon the fast-moving bodies were naked. Ada made a grimace and did not stop forwarding until both of them lay on the bed for two minutes without moving. She opened her secret drawer again and looked for a small computer chip. She placed it in the computer's chip rack and downloaded the video. When the download was done she sent the video to her phone and placed the chip back in the drawer, then she speed dialed another number on her phone.

"I have some businesses to do tomorrow, Boris. I want you to drop me off at school at 8:45 and pick me up at noon."

"Yes ma'am."

Ada's phone beeped to let her know she had a called on the other line. Ada ended her call to Boris and switched to the other line.

"Hey, girl. I have a problem."

Ada sighed. She was looking forward to a slow Sunday. The caller was Megan, a

leader at one of the schools. She was calling Ada because one of the girls in her grade had caught her with drugs and was threatening to tell the school's headmaster. Ada frowned.

"Why can't you take care of that? You're the leader of the school, Megan. The head should she eating from your palm." She noticed Megan tense on the other side of the line. She confessed that she no longer had the favor of her school's head master. Ada pressed her lips together. She grabbed a post-it and a pen and asked for the name of the girl, then she asked Megan to gather all the dirt she had on her and send it to Ada before she came to her house three hours from then.

Ada called Becky.

"What do you know about a girl called Gabrielle Donelly?"

Becky only took a second to reply. Gabrielle was the same age as Ada and had recently been transferred to Megan's school. She had also asked for an audience with Ada. Ada leaned back.

"Why didn't I know about this?"

"I-I-I..."

Ada's tone sobered.

"Spit it out Becky."

"I t-told you about it. Y-you said y-you were busy."

"I'm not anymore. Tell her to come over."

Ada heard Becky scribbling something on the other side of the line. Becky asked her when she would want Gabrielle to be at her house. Ada frowned and then shook her head. She thought she had made it clear.

"Now."

She called Gordon again to send her all the information he could gather about Gabrielle. Ten minutes later Ada laid back on the classical padded white chaise-lounge in her bedroom, scrolling through all the information Gordon had sent to her phone. Once she had seen all she thought necessary she walked to her study room, sat behind her desk, and pressed the intercom button.

"Mara, let them in."

A minute later, Becky and Gabrielle were standing in front of Ada. Ada dismissed Becky and told Gabrielle to sit down.

"I'm listening."

Gabrielle introduced herself, her voice denoting an intimidated respect, and thanked Ada for the opportunity to meet with her. Ada looked at her watch but motioned Gabrielle to keep talking.

"I'm concerned with the job Megan is doing at our school."

Ada focused on Gabrielle.

"Why?"

Gabrielle told Ada about Megan's performance as leader. She had already caught Megan snorting coke in the bathroom twice, both times in plain sight. Another time, she had also seen Megan force a girl consume amphetamines to improve the girl's grades. She only gave tests to those she liked and bullied the girls she didn't and when Gabrielle tried to stand up against her, Megan threatened to push her out a window. Ada listened patiently to Gabrielle's statements and then raised her palm.

"Do you have any proof of this?"

Gabrielle nodded and handed Ada a piece of paper. Ada took the paper and scanned it. It was a list of rules with a signature at the bottom. She placed the piece of paper to the side and directed her attention again to Gabrielle.

"What do you want?"

Gabrielle's eyes had wandered off to a painting hanging behind Ada. It was a portrait of an innocent-looking Ada in a summer dress, sitting on a baroque armchair with her legs crossed to the side and her hands resting on knees. Gabrielle's eyes returned to Ada's.

"I want a position at the top."

Ada smiled, amused. Everybody always wanted a position on top, but few were worthy of it.

"You need to fight for a position like that."

Gabrielle dug a folder out of her purse and handed it to Ada.

"I did my research."

Ada opened the folder and skimmed the pages inside it. She placed the folder on the side of her desk, where she had placed the piece of paper. The evidence of Megan's decadence as a leader was overwhelming.

"I'll look into this and let you know of my decision."

Ada dismissed her.

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"Why is this the first time I hear about this?"

Ada looked at the bowed heads of the three girls standing in front of her desk. Megan had chosen them to help manage the school, and had given them positions similar



to the one's in Ada's posse, but with less responsibilities.

"Megan has us terrorized, Ada," jumped in one of the girls in a quivering voice.  
"She told us you wouldn't believe us."

Ada stood up. She walked towards the girl and lifted her chin. The girl's eyes were red and her pupils dilated. The girl kept her gaze focused on the wall, her body quivering at Ada's touch.

"She's been monitoring everything we do. She probably knows we're here now."

Ada dropped her hand and glared at the girl.

"Are you in charge of the school's drug supply?"

The girl nodded fervently.

"How many lines have you snorted today?"

The girl was silent. Ada slapped her.

"The drugs are not for you, dumbass."

She then turned to the other two girls.

"Are you two on drugs?"

"I'm not," said the third one in the midst of the silence.

Ada scrutinized the girl's face as she circled around her. She was the girl who had offered her a free favor at Bee's party. She pointed at the first two girls and ordered them to wait outside. When Ada was alone with the third girl she sat back on her chair and began to speak again.

"You come to me to pay your respects and you offer me a free favor, but you don't tell me that the leader of one of my schools and her posse are snorting drugs. Why?"

The girl looked at Ada for a moment and then looked away again.

“I didn’t have any proof. It would have been my word against hers.”

“And you didn’t think I would ask Megan to get tested for drugs.”

The girl shook her head.

“It wouldn’t have mattered. She makes other girls pee in cups and then saves the urine in a fridge. I’ve seen it.”

Ada rubbed her chin. She told the girl to sit down and give her an honest opinion of how she thought Megan could run the school better. The girl spoke fast but clear enough for Ada to understand everything. When the girl finished talking Ada nodded thoughtfully.

"I like your ideas."

She pointed a finger at her and the girl reminded her of her name.

"Your name is not going to work, though. From now on you'll be Pris."

At that moment the girls heard hurried knocks on the door. When Ada invited the person to come in, a shy Becky slid her head through the door. Her face reflected sheer panic.

"Ada, Megan is here to see you. I told her to wait but—"

Megan pushed Becky inside, following her close by and shouted her words at Ada.

"What's all of this conspiring?"

Ada gave Megan a warning look. Megan stiffened but signaled Pris to stand up. When Pris saw Ada shaking her head she remained where she was. Megan looked at Ada with incredulity, her mouth almost open, but Ada just stared at her with a dead calm, her

tone was as expressionless as usual.

"Becky, Pris, wait outside until I call you."

Becky and Pris slid out of the room. Once they closed the door behind them, Ada signaled Megan to sit where Pris had been sitting before. Megan let her body's weight drop to the seat. When she spoke, Ada noticed the contained anger in her tone.

"What's this all about, girl? I thought we were friends."

Ada handed Megan the piece of paper Gabrielle had given her earlier and observed her friend's reaction. Megan scanned the document; her expression was dead serious.

"I have a really good explanation for this."

Ada crossed her arms together.

"I'm listening."

"I was just making sure everybody knew what the rules were. What's wrong with that?"

The tone in Ada's voice raised a few notes.

"You are providing evidence."

The room was silent for a moment. Ada took a deep breath and continued.

"Why do you think I don't have constant rebellions in the schools?"

Megan pouted in doubt. Ada rolled her eyes.

"Because they think I make them happy, they think they need me. If it weren't for me, overachievers wouldn't have study drugs, druggies wouldn't have recreational drugs, and the schools would be filled with bullies. And the only thing I ask in exchange are favors and the loss of some privileges as a token of gratefulness for my generosity. But if

you go around bullying people and taking their drugs what do you think happens?"

Again, there was silence.

"I'll tell you what happens. People stop having something to lose and they want their freedom and power back. And that is very inconvenient for me."

"But girl..." Megan spoke with calculated pace, thinking her words carefully before she muttered each one of them, "I've seen you bully girls a lot of times—"

"Not openly and only when necessary." Ada's tone had not changed, "You left evidence, Megan and disregarded your relations with the one person who could save your ass, the head master. How could you be so stupid?"

Megan's words blasted out of her mouth. She explained to Ada that she had all the teachers under her sleeve. She was also very close to the head of the parents committee and knew no one would question her methods. Ada stood up and leaned on her desk, facing Megan.

"Your system is weak, Megan. You only need one person to bring it down."

Megan protested, claiming Gabrielle was unable to shake it. Ada grabbed the folder Gabrielle had given her earlier and used it to hit Megan on the back of her head.

"She already has."

Ada handed Megan the folder and paced around the room, while Megan flipped through the pages.

"She has more dirt on you than you do on her."

Megan tsked, "it's not like she's clean."

"Fine, let me rephrase: She has better researching skills than you do."

Megan's hands began to shake as she looked deeper into the folder. Ada stopped

by one of the shelves and adjusted the trophies in it until they were lined up perfectly, then she turned to face Megan.

"I'm taking you off your position Megan. You're not fit for this job anymore."

"Girl, I—"

Ada motioned her to close her mouth.

"I'm not kicking you out of our social circle. All these years that we have been friends you have been one of my most loyal girls, but I cannot afford to lose a school. I need a strong and confident girl leading the sheep without them thinking they're being led; not a ruthless coke-head causing chaos and revolutions. However, your anger is very useful to me. So think of your new title as a promotion."

She sat back on the chair and continued, "From now on you'll be my name protector, which means you'll be the one taking measures on anyone who talks about me behind my back."

A devious smile appeared in Megan's face.

"Do I get to beat up people?"

Ada returned the smile.

"You get to do whatever you want so long as it's effective at stopping people from talking crap about me."

Ada paused for a moment and scanned Megan's face.

"Don't kill anyone, though. There's no fun in that."

Megan lowered her head in a nod and walked out of the room once Ada dismissed her. Ada heard a knock on the door again and watched Becky's face appear through the creak.

"You're still here?"

Becky blinked a few times.

"Y-you told us to wait."

Ada's cell phone rang. She was about to send the call to voicemail but, when she read who was calling her, she instantly answered. The deep and smooth voice of a young man whispered to her ear.

"She's been asking for you."

Ada nodded and informed the person on the other side of the line she would be on her way. As soon as she ended the call she told Becky to leave her home and take all other people with her.

"W-what about—"

Ada's darting glare silenced Becky's mumbles.

"I'm not seeing anyone else. I'll resume any pending business later tonight or tomorrow."

Becky mumbled her usual goodbyes and sped out of Ada's study room. Ada locked the door behind Becky and walked out of the room through the doors that led to her bedroom. As soon as she was there she treaded to her walk-in closet and opened a cardboard box she had hidden in a corner. She pulled up her carefully styled hair into a messy bun, and grabbed a natural haired wig, a different color from her own hair, and put it on with denoted skill. She used a few bobby pins that she found in the box to secure the wig and grabbed the make-up kit inside the box before she sat in front of her dressing table.

Once there, she put on a light foundation and stippled her face with freckles.

When her make-up was done she got a pair of colored eye-lenses and placed them on her eyes. Ada blinked twice and looked at her reflection, observing the stranger she knew so well.

She closed the kit and left it back in the box after grabbing a pile of gently folded clothes and a small bag pack. She switched her summer dress for loose pants and a white wife-beater, her designer sandals for worn out sneakers and dropped her wallet into her backpack.

Ten minutes later, Ada exited building through the service doors that led to an empty alley and sped to the nearest bus stop.

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“Keira.”

Ada turned around and smiled genuinely at the man that greeted her. He gave her a warm hug, like he always did on their encounters, but as soon as their hug broke, her smile faded.

“How’s Elisabeth, Xavier?”

Xavier looked at her without losing his smile. Ada relaxed. If there had been something wrong with Elisabeth, she would have seen it in his face.

“She’s doing ok, she’s having a rough day and asked for you.”

Ada looked away and nodded in thought. Elisabeth had been asking for her a lot in the past months.

“Can I see her?”

Xavier passed his hand through his hair, his bright smile fading.

“We had to give her a sedative.”

Ada shook her head in disappointment. Xavier did not try to defend himself, he didn't need to; Ada knew he too was against sedating residents, but there was nothing they could do. After a short silence, Xavier invited her to go on a walk with him.

Ada hesitated. She wanted to catch up with Xavier, like they always did whenever she went to visit Elisabeth, but she wanted to do the routinely coffee at the center's café, where she would be close to her. Xavier held one of her hands and informed her he had a beeper. If Elisabeth woke up, he would know.

Ada and Xavier remained silent at first, as they walked around the center's extensive garden. The place had originally been a spiritual retreat but was later bought by Ada's parents to be turned into a place for young adults and children with special problems. Ada called it "the rejects retreat" because it was where all the rich and powerful parents sent the kids they did not want to acknowledge to the public.

While they walked, Ada crossed paths with many of center's residents, most of whom were patients. She noticed their dozed expressions and wondered if they were naturally relaxed or had been forcefully sedated. Ada asked Xavier about the patients and whether or not they caused any problems. Xavier shook his head. Some were troublesome at first, but their negative attitudes never lasted long. He told her the center was a good place to live in; the education was excellent and the "guests" always had someone at their disposition. The more Ada walked through the garden, the more she understood what Xavier was telling her. Besides, from an extensive garden shaded by large trees, the center also had a conditioned gym with the latest technology and separate rooms for yoga, ballet, pilates, and other sports, a stable and a horse track, and two Olympic-sized swimming pools; one exterior and the other interior.



Ada was the first one to break the silence. She asked Xavier if her parents had visited Elisabeth. He shook his head. The last time they had come had been a couple of months ago.

"Maybe you could try talking them"

Xavier turned to her, loosening the clasp from his hand.

"I can try, but they don't even know me."

Ada rubbed his arm with tenderness.

"They know you care about her."

Xavier smiled at her. For a second, Ada imagined their bodies pulling into each other, but when his beeper started to buzz, all thoughts regarding Xavier vanished.

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"Eli!"

Ada closed the door behind her and gave a long hug to the girl who called her name. She was the pure trace of her reflection. Ada apologized for not getting there earlier but Elisabeth just remained silent with a ecstatic smile on her face.

"You have to come without your wig Ady, that way Xavier can see how you really look like."

Ada laughed while both girls sat on Elisabeth's fluffed neon-pink carpet.

"I think he has enough with one of us, he would go crazy if he found out we were two."

Elisabeth giggled, then her eyes dropped to the carpet and her smile faded.

"He knows about you Ady. He sees you in the news, but he thinks you're a bad sister because you never come visit. Why can't I tell him it's you?"

Ada leaned on Elisabeth. She looked at the baby pink walls that surrounded them and sighed.

"I'm not supposed to be here Eli, they have strict orders not to let me in."

"But why?"

Ada remained silent and Elisabeth crossed her arms, pouting.

"It's not fair"

Ada hugged Elisabeth again. She told her things would change as soon as they were of age. Until then, she had to stay in the centre. A puerile smile spread across Elisabeth's face. She proposed using Ada's costume to leave the center for a day. Ada shook her head. Escaping a center was never that easy.

"Will you promise me something Ady?"

Ada nodded and Elisabeth asked her to go on a trip with her once they turned 18. Ada asked her where she wanted to go. Elisabeth lay on the carpet.

"Somewhere away. Where mom and dad won't get mad at us for spending time together."

The girls sat in silence for a moment, wondering if such a place existed, but then Ada jumped up and walked over to Elisabeth's library.

"Let's decide on a place now."

Ada looked around the lilac shelves for an Atlas and found it hidden in between a fables and a history book. She opened the book in the middle and placed it on the carpet.

"How about this place?" asked Elisabeth as she pointed to a continent.

Ada made a face of disgust.

"That's too remote Eli, and I hate mosquitoes."

Elisabeth made a small growl and removed her finger from the page. Ada stared at her while deep in thought, then she smiled.

"How about we travel the whole world? Like Phileas Fog."

Elisabeth looked at Ada wide-eyed.

"Could we really do that Ady?"

Ada's gaze dropped to the book.

"I'll find a way."

Elisabeth jumped from her place and did a victory dance. Ada laughed and, at Elisabeth's insistence joined her. Both girls, then, jumped on Elisabeth's bed to test who had the most energy. Elisabeth won, as always. Once Ada's body fell on the bed in defeat, Elisabeth proposed watching a movie together. Ada looked at her watch and then at her sister and nodded. Elisabeth ran to the shelf to get out her favorite Disney movie whilst Ada dropped her feet to the ground and lay on the rug. Ada felt her phone vibrate and got it out; it was a text message. Ada skimmed the text and pressed her lips together; then she looked at her watch again and sighed.

"I'll have to leave in an hour, Eli, so don't pick a long one."

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When Ada arrived back to her penthouse, she entered through the service door and walked over to a small storage room. She stripped off her clothes, took off her wig and put on a robe she had left in a bag at the room. She stuffed all her costume items in the bag and walked towards her room. Becky, Pris and Gabrielle were lined up in the corridor outside her study room. She walked past them without acknowledging them but left the door of the room open behind her. Once she was behind her desk, she placed her

bag under her chair and told the girls to walk in.

"Let's make this quick. I'm bored with this already."

The girls nodded without making a sound. Ada gazed at Pris.

"You will take over Megan."

Pris nodded, her face serious while Ada's gaze moved towards Gabrielle.

"You will be her second in command"

Gabrielle nodded, revealing a weak smile across her face. Ada directed her eyes to Becky.

"And you will instruct them on all the policies and whatever else they need to know,"

Becky nodded fervently.

"Now leave."

As she watched them walk away, Ada felt the bag vibrate at her feet and remembered she had forgotten to retrieve her phone from the pocket of her pants. She dropped the bag on the desk and answered the call.

"What?" she asked, not bothering to look at the caller's ID.

Ada recognized Gordon's voice right away.

"I got good news and bad news."

She stood silent for a few seconds. She heard Gordon gulp and imagined him tensing on the other side of the line. His voice croaked.

"Ada? Are you there?"

Ada rolled her eyes

"Spit it out."

Gordon cleared his throat

"Well, the good news is that I found who called Connie."

Ada felt a spark light a fire within her.

"And the bad?"

Gordon paused.

"You're not gonna like who it was."