

## Soft Spot

By Thomas Faughnan

Cole had done the girl. Draper didn't know all the details but it had happened a couple years ago, before Cole had disappeared. She was like all the other girls Mr. D kept on his arm, young and blond, more tits than brains, usually they rotated in and out without incident but something had gone wrong with this one. The other guys talked; she had heard or seen something she shouldn't have, she was screwing around on the side, Mr. D caught her with her hand in the cookie jar – but nobody knew the truth except for Mr. D and Cole. Maybe not even Cole. The thing that stuck with Draper was the image of her leaving the club with Cole that night, looking back and waving with her fingers like a little girl going off to her first day of school.

Mr. D's current flavor of the month was more of the same; the long blond hair, the peaches-and-cream complexion and the tits, but Draper found her different from the rest. Her name was Kimmy, and she had something none one of the other girls had. Personality, Draper guessed. She didn't say much when she was at one of the clubs with Mr. D and all the guys. Mr. D didn't keep girls like her around for their conversational skills, but when Draper was alone with her at a table while Mr. D took care of business in the back room or in the car driving her somewhere for Mr. D., she showed herself to be smart and funny. She talked a lot about her family back in the mid-west and asked about his family. Not much to tell there, one drunken uncle up in the Matanuska Valley. Draper thought she was sweet.

Not that Draper knew from sweet. In the early eighties he'd come back to Anchorage from Washington State with a blown knee and a revoked scholarship and was introduced to Mr. D. Mr. D owned a string of dive bars and strip joints down on Fourth Avenue and he liked hanging around with ex-jocks. He remembered Draper from his days as a two time All-State linebacker. There were parties, drugs, booze and girls, plenty of girls. But the ride wasn't free. One day Mr. D asked him if he'd mind leaning on a guy that was behind on the vig, the next week it was someone who had welshed on a bet. And Draper had been with Mr. D. since then. He learned to manage the clubs, oversaw the bookmaking and the prostitution, collected the protection money from the other bars on the avenue and made sure Mr. D got his cut of everything that moved downtown.

He'd gotten tired of the parties the drugs and the booze a long time ago and the girls all had that hard, mercenary edge that women in the business always wound up with, sharp as a finely honed knife. When Cole was still around he would needle Draper about what he did with all his money. "You live in a shitty little apartment," he would say, "you don't chase broads, you don't blow it up your nose, you ain't a lush. Where the hell does it go?" Draper would just say, with a straight face, that he sent it all to Sally Struthers. Cole used to worry more about his money than he did.

The truth was, Draper had most of the money he had earned over the past twenty years stashed in a metal suitcase behind a board in his closet. He had figured out early he was in a business where he was more likely to get an ounce of lead than a gold watch as a parting gift. He'd held on to a nice slice of everything that came in, the paltry salary Mr. D paid him so he'd have something to show the IRS every year, his cut of the take from

the bookmaking, the strip clubs and the whores and the skim. Don't forget the skim. Skimming was more of an art than a science, everyone expected you to do it but the trick was not to get greedy. Unfortunately there was no handbook to follow. Draper figured that was what happened to Cole, got greedy on the skim and Mr. D brought in some outside talent to pull his plug or, more likely, Cole felt the heat and beat feet before the axe fell. Draper didn't obsess about the money, didn't take it out and count it every night like Scrooge in his counting house, but he figured he had managed to hold onto about fifty-K a year over the twenty years and rough math told him that added up to a million dollars. Stacked in neat little packets of one hundred dollar bills it fit nicely into the case and weighed just over twenty pounds.

Since Cole's departure Draper had become Mr. D's right hand man, his most trusted employee. He took care of the sensitive situations, decided what could be resolved with tact and what required muscle and provided a layer of insulation between Mr. D and his street operations. So he was not surprised when he was summoned to the boss's house on a Sunday morning. He should have been monitoring the ongoing football games – watching the lines the payouts and the pick-ups – but when Mr. D called, you came. Mr. D looked like he'd had a rough night. The few wispy gray hairs remaining on his head, usually combed meticulously across his bald pate, were in a twisted clump over one ear and he wasn't wearing his top dentures, which made his face look shrunken and old. His robe was partially open to display a heavy gold chain lying against his scrawny hairless chest.

He motioned Draper to take a seat. "We got a situation," he said. Draper didn't say anything. There was nothing to say until he knew what the situation was. Mr. D hawked up some phlegm, then dabbed his lip with a linen napkin. "My old pal Rudy was over last night, Jesus did we get drunk. Started talking about old times, the pipeline days," he smiled while he spoke, with his teeth out it was not an attractive sight. "You shoulda been here then, pal. It was fucking unbelievable. Twenty-thousand welders and construction workers walking into the clubs, every one with a pocketful of hundred dollar bills and a hard-on. We were hauling money around in wheelbarrows. So one night Rudy and me's sitting in the Velvet Crib and these two yokels from Bumfuck, Oklahoma walk in with a string of girls and start shopping their tail around the bar like it's some kind of Saturday market and they'd bought a fucking booth. My own club, can you believe it?" Mr. D paused to sip coffee out of a delicate porcelain cup. "So me and Rudy go over and buy the hillbillies a drink and tell them, you know, when you come onto someone else's turf there's a certain protocol needs to be followed. Protocol," he laughed. "That was Rudy's word, I love it. So they ask, 'what's protocol?' and we say come on out back and we'll show you. Took the two of 'em out in the alley and beat 'em with baseball bats, dumped their bodies in the landfill." Mr. D met Draper's eyes. "It was a tough town, pal, real wild west shit. You had to do what you had to do to protect your territory."

Draper nodded impassively.

"Anyway," Mr. D went on, "last night me and Rudy's hammering down the scotch and laughing about those two assholes and what happened. After Rudy leaves I head to bed and the broad, who I thought was sleeping, is sitting up reading a magazine "

"Kimmy?" Draper asked. He didn't like where the conversation was heading. Tension began gathering in his stomach.

Mr. D looked at him blankly. “Of course Kimmy. Who the hell else I been banging the past few months?”

Draper shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Think she heard?”

“Every word. I come in and she looks up and says, ‘Sounds like you guys were a couple of real cowboys back then.’” Mr. D took another sip of coffee. “Looks right at me and says that, doesn’t even pretend she didn’t hear.”

Draper crossed one leg over the other and fixed his stare on the empty scotch bottle. Twenty-five year old Highland single malt, it read. Couple of years older than the girl. “Kimmy’s a good kid,” he said finally.

“Goddamn right she’s a good kid,” Mr. D agreed. “But the stuff she heard, we’re not talking about fixing parking tickets here. Johnny Law gets their hands on her and squeeze that information out and they prosecute it federally they could strap me into the chair and wire my balls up to two thousand volts. There ain’t no statute of limitations on murder.”

Draper was pretty sure they didn’t use the electric chair anymore, but he guessed that wasn’t the point of the discussion.

Mr. D looked out the dining room’s big bay window at a few yellow birch leaves trickling down on a light breeze. “I’m sorry as hell about this, pal,” he brought his eyes back to Drapers. “But I can’t have her walking around.”

Draper felt the knot in his stomach spread up through his chest and shoulders. He had no qualms about violence, he had knocked a lot of deadbeats around over the years as warnings and even dropped the hammer on a few that didn’t take the warnings seriously, but they were all men and all in the life. They knew what it meant when they took the loan or placed the bet. He had no compunctions about what he had done to them. Kimmy was just a kid.

“She’s got family back east,” Draper said.

Mr. D shook his head. “If you’re not up to this,” he said as he shifted his gaze back outside, “I can bring somebody up from Seattle.”

“I’m good,” Draper said. “I’ll take care of it.” He uncrossed his legs and stood.

“Tonight,” Mr. D said.

Draper nodded.

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Draper went downtown to check on the bookmaking operation. The early games were just about over and the haul looked good. There would be a flurry of activity as people rushed to get bets in on the late games then the big rush as everyone tried to get well on the Sunday night game. When the afternoon games kicked off and things died down, Draper wandered into the bar and got a drink – one inch of bourbon in a rocks glass, neat. The bartender, who had never seen Draper drink anything stronger than cola, did a double-take but poured it like he was told. Draper swirled the viscous amber whiskey in the glass and took a whiff. He could smell the sweet corn it had been distilled from and the charred oak barrels it had been aged in. The aromatics were inviting and the refraction of the back bar’s dim lights through the bourbon was mesmerizing as he tipped the glass and sipped. He savored the subtle burn as it went down. Draper couldn’t afford

to get shitfaced, but one drink wouldn't hurt, just something to ease the tension and take the edge off.

Draper had a daughter about Kimmy's age. In the early years he had a fling with a dark haired Cajun girl from one of the clubs, a barmaid not a dancer. She had come up pregnant and told Draper all she wanted from him was enough money to get back to her family in Louisiana. Cole warned him it was a scam. "She probably told the same story to eight or ten guys," he said. But Draper had given her the money. Cole just shook his head when he told him, "Looks like you got a soft spot for the broads buddy." Six months later one of the other barmaids had received a postcard from Baton Rouge; the woman had given birth to a seven pound-two ounce baby girl. That was the last Draper had heard of his daughter. He hoped she had grown up happy. He hoped she was popular and attractive, maybe even married with a child of her own by now. He hoped all that but he didn't know. What he did know was that if she were in trouble he would want someone to help her if they could.

By the end of the first quarter, Draper had finished his drink and made a decision. When he left the club later that night with Kimmy, he was going to put her on a plane back east. If he remembered right she said her family was somewhere in western Michigan, closer to Chicago than Detroit. She could fly direct from Anchorage to Chicago and disappear. He knew the decision was irrevocable. You couldn't cross Mr. D one day and come back the next day and say you were sorry. Once it was done it was done and he would have to leave town right behind her. He thought he might drift down to Louisiana and hire someone to find his daughter, not to try to insinuate himself into her life but just to get a look at her from a distance. Maybe lend a hand if she needed it. Then he thought Florida didn't sound all bad, lots sunshine and sandy beaches. Winter was coming and he was tired of the cold.

Draper picked up Mr. D and Kimmy just after four o'clock. Mr. D was back on his game, hair combed, teeth in, fresh suit with a crisp white shirt, tie knotted perfectly at his throat. Kimmy sat next to him in the back seat wearing a short skirt and a low-cut blouse. Mr. D liked it that way. "If you got it, flaunt it," was Mr. D's mantra to the girls. "How was the action today?" he asked when they were rolling.

"Real good," Draper said. "Had a push on the Miami-Jets game but the 'Hawks took it up the ass out in Pittsburgh." Seattle was the closest thing Anchorage had to a home team and the suckers tended to bet them with their hearts instead of their heads. It was good for business.

"Good," Mr. D nodded. "I got a thing down in Girdwood tonight. I'm gonna have J.J. run me down there around eight and I need you to get Kimmy back to the house for me."

"Sure thing," Draper answered. Nice, it explained why she'd be leaving the club with him and gave Mr. D an alibi if things went south.

"Why can't I tag along?" Draper heard Kimmy ask.

"It's gonna be all business," Mr. D shook his head and patted a bare thigh. "You'd be bored shitless in less than ten minutes." The club was packed. All four big screen televisions were tuned to the football game and the room alternated between collective cheers and groans, depending on where people had their money. Draper and Kimmy sat at a table with some of the other guys while Mr. D worked the room like a good host, chatting up old friends and the high-rollers, signaling the bar for rounds of

drinks to be put on his tab. The game ended just before eight with the visiting team, a two and a half point dog, kicking a field goal on the first drive of overtime. Bank for the house.

Draper felt Mr. D standing behind him. "Me and J.J. are taking off for Girdwood," he announced to the table. He gave Draper's shoulder a paternal squeeze. "You be sure to get my girl home safe." As soon as he was gone, Draper looked across the table at Kimmy; she had some kind of fizzy pink drink in front of her and a cell phone pressed to her ear.

"Drink up," he said.

"Can't I have one more?" she asked, turning the big doe eyes on him as she clapped the phone shut.

"No."

She pouted like a petulant child. "Can I at least make one more phone call before we leave? Please, Daddy?" she mocked him.

"Two minutes," said Draper. She rolled her eyes and stepped away from the table to a quieter part of the bar.

Out on the street, Draper wheeled the big Chrysler through Fourth Avenue and headed east on Fifth, away from Mr. D's house. A black sedan followed. He could feel Kimmy looking at him. "I'm not taking you home," he said. "I'm taking you to my place."

"Draper," she said.

He shook his head. "I'm not going to fuck you," he said. "Can you go back home? Back to Michigan?" he asked.

"To Benton Harbor?" she said. "I guess, I mean..." she stopped. "Does this have something to do with last night?"

Draper nodded.

"Doesn't Solly know I would never tell anyone what I heard?"

"He's not operating on what he thinks you would do," Draper explained. "He's looking at what you could do."

"So he has you putting me on a plane back to Michigan?" she asked.

Draper didn't say anything.

"Oh, my God," she whispered when the realization hit her. "You're not supposed to put me on a plane, you're supposed to..." She began to cry.

"Here's what we're going to do," Draper said. "I put you on a red-eye to Chicago, you get there you have someone, a friend or a relative, come down and pick you up. Don't book another flight out of Chicago and don't rent a car. Do you have any money?"

She shook her head. "Sol always paid for everything," she said between sobs.

"Alright," Draper said. "I can give you enough to hold you over for a while. Most importantly, listen to me, most importantly don't ever come back up here and never try to contact anybody you know up here."

"Not even you?" she sniffed, laying a tender hand on Draper's shoulder.

"I won't be here." He found himself smiling when he said it.

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Draper told her to wait in the living room while he went to retrieve his money from its hiding spot in the closet. He dug a switchblade knife he had taken off a young soldier in one of the clubs years ago out of his dresser drawer and flicked the seven inch blade open. He used the blade to pry off the faceboard above the closet shelf and reached into the space. His hand had just closed around the suitcase handle when he heard the door swing open behind him.

“I asked you to wait...”

“You been holding out on Sally Struthers, buddy?” Draper recognized Cole’s voice immediately. It was as distinctive as the next sound; a bullet being racked into the chamber of an automatic. “Put the pig-sticker down on the dresser.” Draper did as he was told. “Now take the money out real nice and slow for me.” Cole chuckled, “I warned you about that soft spot, Draper, told you...”

Draper didn’t hesitate. He tightened his grip on the handle of the case and swung it behind him with as much torque as he could manage from the position he was in. It connected and he heard Cole grunt and go down hard on the floor. Draper looked down at Cole, the metal corner of the case had opened a two inch gash above his right eye and blood ran down his cheek. He pulled a pillow off the bed and held it over Cole’s face while he fired two muffled rounds into his head, then dropped the pistol next to the body. When he stood up and turned around, Kimmy was only inches from him. She was smiling but it wasn’t a little girl smile, it was hard and mercenary, sharp as the edge of a finely honed knife. She looked down at Cole’s body on the floor.

“Thanks,” she said, “for narrowing the split.”

Draper felt the seven inch blade slip in once, twice, then again, just below his ribcage, right in the soft spot.

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