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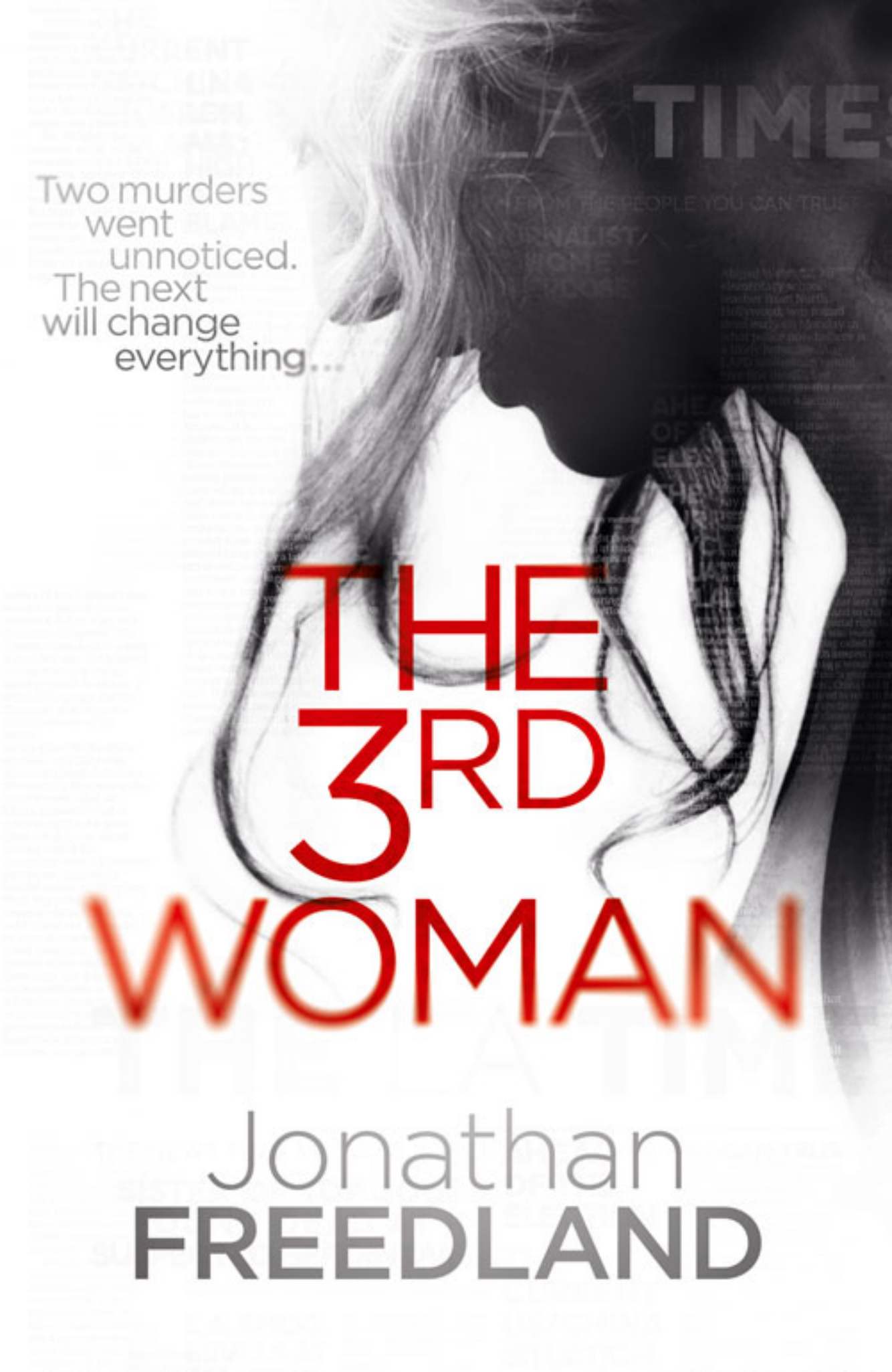
The 3rd Woman

Written by Jonathan Freedland

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Two murders went unnoticed. The next will change everything...
THE 3RD WOMAN
Jonathan FREEDLAND

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Prologue

It was the last day of January and the New Year was approaching. The city of Los Angeles had been winding down for more than a week. The only place still humming was the airport, as the expats headed home, crossing the ocean to see devoted fathers, doting mothers and the occasional abandoned wife. Offices were closing early: with no one on the end of the phone and no deals to be made, there was little point staying open. It was the second break in six weeks, but this one felt less wanted and somehow involuntary, the way a city falls quiet during a strike or a national day of mourning. Still, the red lanterns hanging from the lampposts and trees gave the city some welcome cheer, especially after dark.

Not that it gave her much comfort. The night had never been her time. She had always been a child of the early mornings, up with the sun. She lost interest in the sky once it was no longer blue. She was the same now, even in winter, running out into the morning as soon as it had broken.

Which was another reason why she hated having to do this. Working in this place was bad enough, but the time was worse. These were hours meant for sleep.

But she managed to be cheery to the girls when she said goodbye, throwing her clothes into a tote bag and slinging it

over her shoulder in a single, well-practised movement. She gave the guy on the door a smile too even though her jaw felt strained from a night spent in a fixed expression of delight.

Walking to her car out in the lot, she kept her eyes down. She had learned that lesson early enough. Avoid eye contact inside if you could, but never, ever meet anyone's eye once you were outside.

She aimed the key fob at the car door but it made a useless, dull click. Three more goes, three more empty clicks. The battery on the damn thing was fading. Opening the car door manually, she got in, taking care to lock the door after her.

The drive back was quicker than usual, thanks to the New Year emptiness. She put on a music station, playing oldies, and tried to forget her evening's work. She looked in her rear-view mirror occasionally, but besides the smog there was precious little to see.

At the apartment building, she had her key in hand and the entrance door opened smoothly. Too tired to close it after her, she let it swing slowly shut. All the same, something made her glance over her shoulder but in the dark she saw nothing. This was why she hated working late at night: she was always jumping at shadows.

When the elevator opened on her floor and she nudged the key into the apartment's front door, he was ready for her. She had heard no sound, her first awareness of his presence being the gloved hand over her mouth. Her nostrils sought out the air denied to her mouth, filling instantly with the scent of unwashed leather and sweat. Worse was the breath. The urgent, hot breath of a stranger against her neck, then dispersing around it, as if enveloping her.

She tried to call out. Not a scream but a word. If her mouth had not been gagged it might have come out as 'What?'

All of that was in the first second. But now, in the moments that followed, there was time for fear. It sped through her, throbbing out from her heart through her veins, into her brain,

which seemed to be filling with flashing red and yellow, and then into her legs, which became light and unsteady. But she did not fall. He had her in his grip.

She felt him use his weight to push the apartment door, already unlocked, wide open, his shove splintering wood off the frame. Once she was bundled inside, he closed the door – deliberately not letting it slam.

Now the scream rose, trying to force its way through her chest and into her throat, but it came up against the leather hand and seemed to be pushed back into her. She felt his left hand leave her shoulder and move, as if checking for something.

Instinctively she tried to wriggle free, but his right arm was too strong. It held her in place, sealing her mouth at the same time.

Now she heard a ripping noise: had he torn her clothes? The first, primeval, terror had been of death, that this man would kill her. But the second fear, coming in instant pursuit, was the horror that he would push his brute body into hers. She made a wordless calculation, a bargain almost: she would withstand a rape if he would let her live.

But the sound she had heard was not of torn clothing. She saw his left hand hover in front of her face, a piece of wide, silver-coloured masking tape spanned between its fingers. Expertly, he placed it over her mouth, leaving not so much as a split-second in which she could emit a sound.

Now he grabbed her wrists, containing them both in the grasp of a single hand. Still behind her, still not letting her glimpse his face, he pushed her towards the centre of the room, in front of the couch. He shoved the coffee table out of the way with one foot, then tripped her from behind, so that she was face down on the carpet with pressure on her back, a knee holding her in position.

This is it, she thought. *He'll rip my clothes off now and do it here, like this*. She told herself to send her mind elsewhere,

so that she could survive what was to follow. *Live through this*, she thought. *You can*. She closed her eyes and tried to shut down. *Live through this.*

But he had not finished his preparations. A strip of black cloth was placed over her eyes, then tied at the back. Next, this man – whose face she had not seen, whose voice she had not heard – flipped her over, firmly but not roughly. Perhaps he had sensed that her strategy for survival was to co-operate.

One wrist was pulled above her head, so that she looked like a child demanding the teacher's attention. A moment later, the wrist was encircled by a kind of plastic bracelet. Loose at first, but then she heard that distinctive zipping sound she remembered from childhood, the sound of a hardware-store cable tie. Her father would use them to bundle loose wires together, keeping them neat behind the TV set; they were impossible to break, he said. Now this man did the same to her right wrist. She was lying on the floor, gagged and blindfolded, with both her arms stretched upward and tied to a single leg of the couch.

She willed her mind to transport itself somewhere else. But the fear was making her teeth chatter. Nausea was working its way up from her stomach and into her mouth. *Please God, let this be over. Let this end, please God.*

It was all happening so fast, so . . . efficiently. There was no rage in this man's actions, just purpose and method, as if this were a safety drill and he was following an established procedure. One of his hands was now on her right arm, except the touch was not the rough leather she had felt over her mouth. It was light, just a fingertip, but not human skin. Sightless, she could not be sure of the material, but the hand was close enough to her face that she could smell it. It was latex. The man was wearing latex gloves. Now a new terror seized her.

He gripped her wrist again and then she felt it, the sharp puncture of a needle plunged into her right arm. She cried

out, hearing only the sound of a muffled exclamation that seemed to come from somewhere else entirely.

And then, in an instant, the fear melted away, to be replaced by a rapid, tingling rush, a wave of blissful comfort. She felt no pain at all, just a deep, wide, unexpected happiness. When the tape was removed from her mouth, she let out no scream. Perhaps she had succeeded in sending herself far away after all, onto the Malibu beach at dawn, where the sand was kissed by sun. Or into a clear-blue ocean. Or into a hammock on a desert island in the South Pacific. Or into a cabin in mid-winter, the amber glow warming her as she lay on the rug before a fire that popped and crackled.

She heard the distant sound of the cable tie being cut loose, its job now done. She sensed the blindfold coming away from her face. But she felt no urge to open her eyes or move her arms, even though she was now free. Every nerve, every synapse, from her toes to her fingernails, was dedicated instead to passing messages of pleasure to her brain. Her system was flooded with goodness; she was a crowd assembling on the mountain top at the moment of the Rapture, every face grinning with delight.

Now she felt the lightest, most fleeting sensation between her legs. A hand was peeling back her underwear. Something brushed against her. It did not penetrate. It did not even bother her. Rather something still and smooth was resting there, against her most intimate place. She felt her skin kissed by silk petals.

A second passed and she was in the sealed, safe hiding place before any of that, floating in the fluid that could nourish her and support her and where no one could disturb her. She was in her mother's womb, utterly content, breathing only love and love and love.

Chapter 1

Normally Madison Webb liked January. If you grew up used to golden California sun, winter could be a welcome novelty. The cold – not that it ever got truly cold in LA – made your nerves tingle, made you feel alive.

Not this January, though. She had spent the month confined to a place of steel and blank, windowless walls, one of those rare corners of LA compelled to operate throughout the Chinese New Year. It never stopped, day or night. She had been working here for three weeks, twenty shifts straight, taking her place alongside the scores of seamstresses hunched over their machines. Though the word 'seamstresses' was misleading. As Maddy would be explaining to the LA public very soon, the word suggested some ancient, artisan skill, while in reality she and the other women were on an assembly line, in place solely to mind the devices, ensuring the fabric was placed squarely in the slot and letting the pre-programmed, robotic arm do the rest. They were glorified machine parts themselves.

Except that machines, as she would put it in the first in a series of undercover reports on life in an LA sweatshop, would be treated better than these people, who had to stand at their work-stations for hours on end, raising their hands for a

bathroom break, surrendering their phones as they arrived, lest they surreptitiously try to photograph this dingy basement where, starved of natural light and illuminated by a few naked lightbulbs, she felt her eyesight degraded by the day.

Being deprived of her phone had presented the most obvious obstacle, Maddy reflected now, as she fed a stretch of denim through the roller, ensuring its edges aligned before it submitted to the stitching needle. She had worked with Katharine Hu, the resident tech-genius in the office and Maddy's best friend there, to devise a concealed camera. Its lens was in the form of a button on her shirt. From there, it transmitted by means of a tiny wire to a digital recorder taped into the small of her back. It did the job well, giving a wide-angled view of everything she faced: turn 360 degrees and she could sweep the whole place. It picked up snatches of conversation with her fellow seamstresses and with Walker, the foreman – including a choice moment as he instructed one 'bitch' to get back to work.

With nearly two hundred hours of recordings, she knew she had enough to run a story that would have serious impact. The camera had caught in full the incident nearly a week ago when Walker had denied one of Maddy's co-workers a bathroom break, despite repeated requests. The woman's pleas had grown desperate, but he just bellowed at her, 'How many times do I have to say it, *shabi*? You been on your break already today.' He used that word often, but calling a woman a cunt in a room full of other women represented an escalation all the same.

When the other workers started yelling, Walker reached for the night-stick that completed his pseudo-military, brown-and-beige polyester uniform, the kind worn by private security guards in supermarkets. He didn't use the weapon but the threat of it was enough. The crying woman collapsed at the sight of it. A moment or two later a pool of liquid spread from her. At first they thought it was the urine she had been struggling to contain. But even in this light they could see it

was blood. One of the older women understood. 'That poor child,' she said, though whether she was referring to the woman or the baby she had just miscarried, Maddy could not tell. She had been near enough to film the whole scene. Edited, it would appear alongside the first article in the series.

She was writing in her head at this very moment, mentally typing out what would be the second section of the main piece. Everyone knew already that sweatshops like this one were rife across California, providing cheap labour, thanks mainly to migrants who had dashed across the Mexican border in the dead of night, to make or finish goods for the US or Latin American markets. That wasn't news. *LA Times* readers knew why it had happened too: these days the big Chinese corporations found it cheaper to make goods in LA than in Beijing or Shanghai, now that their own workers cost so much. What people didn't know was what it was actually *like* inside one of these dumps. That was her job. The stats and the economics she'd leave to the bean-counters on the business desk. What would get this story noticed was the human element, the unseen workers who were actually paying the price. Oh, that sounded quite good. Maybe she should use that in the intro. *The unseen workers—*

There was a coughing noise, not especially loud but insistent. It came from the woman opposite her on the production belt, an artificial throat-clearing designed to catch her attention. '*What?*' Madison mouthed. She glanced up at her machine, looking for a red light, warning of a malfunction. Her co-worker raised her eyebrows, indicating something about Maddy's appearance.

She looked down. Emerging from the third buttonhole of her shirt was a tiny piglet's tail of wire.

She tried to tuck it away, but it was too late. In four large strides, Walker had covered the distance between them – lumbering and unfit, but bulky enough to loom over her, filling the space around her.

'You give me that. Right now.'

'Give you what?' Maddy could hear her heart banging in her chest.

'You don't want to give me any *taidu* now, I warn you. Give it to me.'

'What, a loose thread on my shirt? You're ordering me to remove my clothes now, is that it, Walker? I'm not sure that's allowed.'

'Just give it to me and I'll tell you what's allowed.'

That he spoke quietly only made her more frightened. His everyday mode was shouting. This, he knew – and therefore she knew and all the women standing and watching, in silence, knew – was more serious.

She made an instant decision, or rather her hand made it before her brain could consider it. In a single movement, she yanked out the tiny camera and dropped it to the floor, crunching it underfoot the second it hit.

The foreman fell to his knees, trying to pick up the pieces: not an easy manoeuvre for a man his size. She watched, frozen, as the tiny fragments of now-shattered electronics collected in his palm. It was clear that he understood what they were. That was why he had not shouted. He had suspected the instant he caught sight of the wire. Recording device. His instructions must have been absolute: they were not tolerated under any circumstances.

Now, as he pulled himself up, she had a split-second to calculate. She had already got three weeks of material, downloaded from the camera each night and, thanks to Katharine, safely backed up. Even today's footage was preserved, held on the recorder strapped to her back, regardless of the electronic debris on the floor. There was nothing to be gained from attempting to stay here, from coming up with some bullshit explanation for the now-extinct gadget. What would she say? And, she knew, she would be saying it to someone other than Walker. There was only one thing she could do.

Swiftly, she grabbed the security tag that hung around the foreman's neck like a pendant, whipped it off and turned around and ran, past the work benches, heading for the stairs. She touched Walker's tag against the electronic panel the way she'd seen him release the women for their rationed visits to the bathroom.

'Stop right there, bitch!' Walker was shouting. 'You stop right there.' He was coming after her, the thud of each footstep getting louder. The door beeped. She tugged at it, but the handle wouldn't open. She held the damn card against the panel once more and this time, at last, the little light turned green, accompanied by another short, sharp and friendlier beep. She opened the door and stepped through.

But Walker had been fast, so that now his hand reached through and grabbed at her shoulder. He was strong, but she had one advantage. She swivelled to face him, grabbed the door and used all of her strength to slam it shut. His arm was caught between the door and the frame. He let out a loud yowl of pain and the arm retracted. She slammed the door again, hearing the reassuring click that meant it was electronically sealed.

Leaping up the stairs two at a time, she clutched at the rail as she reached the first landing and pulled herself onto the next flight, seeing daylight ahead. She would only have a few seconds. Walker was bound to have alerted security in reception by now.

Maddy was in the short corridor that led to the entrance of the building. From the outside it resembled nothing more than a low-rent import–export office. That was in her article, too. If you walked past it, you'd never know what horrors lay beneath.

She breathed deep, realizing she had no idea what to do next. She couldn't breeze out, not from here. Workers were allowed to exit only at prescribed times. They would stop her; they'd call down to Walker; they'd start checking the

computer. She needed to think of something. Her head was pounding now. And she could hear sounds coming from below. Had Walker got the downstairs door open?

She had the merest inkling of a plan, no more than an instinct. Flinging the door open, her voice rising with panic, she bellowed at the man and woman manning the front desk. 'It's Walker! I think he's having a heart attack. Come quick!'

The pair sat frozen in that second of paralysis that strikes in every crisis. Maddy had seen it before. 'Come on!' she shouted. 'I think he might be dying.'

Now they jumped up, barrelling past her to get down the stairs. 'I'll call for an ambulance!' she shouted after them.

She had only a second to look behind the desk, at the grid of cubby-holes where they kept the women's confiscated phones. *Shit.* She couldn't see hers. She thought of simply rushing out there and then, but she'd be lost without it. Besides, if they found it once she'd gone, they'd instantly know who she was and what she'd been working on.

Commotion downstairs. They'd be back up here any second. She moved her eye along the slots one last time, trying to be methodical while her head was about to explode. *Calm, calm, calm*, she told herself. But it was a lie.

Then at last, the recognizable shape, the distinct colour of the case, lurking in the corner of the second last row. She grabbed it and rushed out of the door, into the open air.

The sound of the freeway was loud but unimaginably welcome. She had no idea how she would get away from here. She could hardly wait for a bus. Besides, she had left her wallet downstairs, tucked inside her now-abandoned bag.

As she began running towards the noise of the traffic, working out who she would call first – her editor to say they should run the story tonight or Katharine to apologize for the broken camera – she realized that she had only one thing on her besides her phone. She unclenched her fist to see Walker's pass now clammy in her hand. Good, she thought.

His photo ID would complement her article nicely: 'The brute behind the brutality.'

Seven hours later the story was ready to go, including a paragraph or two on her ejection from the sweatshop and accompanied online by several segments of video, with greatest prominence given to the miscarriage episode. 'How LA sweatshop conditions can mean the difference between life and death.' Use of the Walker photo had taken up nearly an hour's back-and-forth with the news editor. Howard Burke had worried about naming an individual.

'Fine to go after the company, Madison, but you're calling this guy a sadist.'

'That's because he *is* a sadist, Howard.'

'Yes, but even sadists can sue.'

'So let him sue! He'll lose. We have video of him causing a woman to lose her baby. Jeez, Howard, you're such—'

'What, Maddy? What am I "such a"? And tread carefully here, because this story is not going anywhere till I say so.'

There was a silence between them, a stand-off of several seconds broken by her.

'Asshole.'

'Excuse me?'

'You're such an asshole. That's what I was going to say. Before you interrupted me.'

The exchange that followed could be heard at the other end of the open-plan office.

Burke's frustration overflowing, he drove his fist through an office partition, which newsroom historians recorded was the second time he had performed that feat – the first some four years earlier, also prompted by a clash with Madison Webb.

It took the intervention of the executive editor herself to broker a compromise. Jane Goldstein summoned Maddy into her office, making her wait while she took evidence from

Howard over by the newsdesk. Clearly she had decided it was too risky to have them both in the same room at once.

It gave Maddy time to look at the boss's power wall, which was a departure from the usual ego mural. Instead of photos with assorted political bigwigs and worthies, Goldstein had displayed a series of framed front pages of the biggest story she – or any other American reporter since Ed Murrow – had ever covered. She'd won a stack of Pulitzers, back when that had been the name of the biggest prize in US journalism.

Maddy's phone vibrated. A message from a burnt-out former colleague who had left the *Times* to join a company in Encino making educational films.

Hey Maddy. Greetings from the slow lane. Am attaching my latest, for what it's worth. Not exactly Stanley Kubrick, but I'd love any feedback. We've been told to aim at Junior High level. The brief is to explain the origins of the 'situation', in as neutral a way as possible. Nothing loaded. Tell me anything you think needs changing, especially script. You're the writer!

With no sign of Goldstein, Maddy dutifully clicked the play button. From her phone's small speaker, the voiceover – deep, mid-Western, reliable – began.

The story starts on Capitol Hill. Congress had gathered to raise the 'debt ceiling', the amount of money the American government is allowed to borrow each year. But Congress couldn't agree. There was footage of the then-Speaker, banging his gavel, failing to bring order to the chamber.

After that, lenders around the world began to worry that a loan to America was a bad bet. The country's 'credit rating' began to slip, downgraded from double A-plus to double A and then to letters of the alphabet no one ever expected to see alongside a dollar sign. That came with a neat little graphic animation, the A turning to B turning to C. *But then the crisis deepened.*

On screen was a single word in bold, black capital letters:

DEFAULT. The voiceover continued. *The United States had to admit it couldn't pay the interest on the money it owed to, among others, China. In official language, the US Treasury announced a default on one of its bonds.*

Now there were images of Tiananmen Square. *Beijing had been prepared to tolerate that once, but when the deadlock in Congress threatened a second American default, China came down hard.* A shot of the *LA Times* front page of the time.

Maddy hit the pause button and splayed her fingers to zoom in on the image. She could just make out the byline: a young Jane Goldstein. The headline was stark:

China's Message to US: 'Enough is enough'

A copy of that same front page was here now, framed and on Goldstein's wall.

At the time the People's Republic of China was America's largest creditor, the country that lent it the most money. And so China insisted it had a special right to be paid back what it was owed. Beijing called for 'certainty' over US interest payments, insisting it would accept nothing less than 'a guaranteed revenue stream'. China said it was not prepared to wait in line behind other creditors – or even behind other claims on American tax dollars, such as defence or education. From now on, said Beijing, interest payments to China would have to be America's number one priority.

Maddy imagined the kids in class watching this story unfold. The voice, calm and reassuring, was taking them through the events that had shaped the country, and the times, they had grown up in.

But China was not prepared to leave the matter of repayment up to America. Beijing demanded the right to take the money it was owed at source. America had little option but

to say yes. There followed a clip of an exhausted US official emerging from late night talks saying, 'If China doesn't get what it wants, if it deems the US a bad risk, there'll be no country on earth willing to lend to us, except at extortionate rates.'

Experts declared that the entire American way of life – fuelled by debt for decades – was at risk. And so America accepted China's demand and granted the People's Republic direct access to its most regular stream of revenue: the custom duties it levied on goods coming into the US. From now on, a slice of that money would be handed over to Beijing the instant it was received.

But there was a problem: Beijing's demand for a Chinese presence in the so-called 'string of pearls' along the American west coast – the ports of San Diego, Los Angeles, Long Beach and San Francisco. China insisted such a presence was essential if it was to monitor import traffic effectively.

Now came a short, dubbed clip of a Beijing official saying, 'For this customs arrangement to work, the People's Republic needs to be assured it is receiving its rightful allocation, no more and no less.'

The US government said no. It insisted a physical presence was a 'red line'. Finally, after days of negotiation, the two sides reached a compromise. A small delegation of Chinese customs officials would be based on Port Authority premises – including in Los Angeles – but this presence would, the US government insisted, be only 'symbolic'.

Archive footage of a CBS News broadcast from a few months after that agreement, reporting Chinese claims of smuggling and tax-dodging by American firms, crimes they suspected were tolerated, if not encouraged, by the US authorities. *Beijing began to demand an increase in the number of Chinese inspectors based in Los Angeles and the other 'string of pearl' ports. Each demand was resisted at first by the US authorities – but each one was met in the end.*

Next came pictures of the notorious Summer Riots, a sequence that had been played a thousand times on TV news in the US and around the world. A group of Chinese customs men surrounded by an angry American crowd; the LAPD trying to hold back the mob, struggling and eventually failing. The narrator took up the story. *On that turbulent night, several rioters armed with clubs broke through, eventually killing two Chinese customs officers. The two men were lynched. The fallout was immediate. Washington acceded to Beijing's request that the People's Republic of China be allowed to protect its own people.* The film ended with the White House spokesperson insisting that no more than 'a light, private security detail' would be sent from China to LA and the other 'pearls'.

Maddy smiled a mirthless smile: everyone knew how that had turned out.

She was halfway through a reply to her former colleague – 'Think that covers all the bases' followed by a winking emoticon – when she looked up to see the editor striding in, three words into her sentence before she got through the door.

'OK, we run the Walker picture tomorrow.'

Short, roundish and in her mid-fifties, her hair a solid, unapologetic white, Goldstein exuded impatience. Her eyes, her posture said, *Come on, come on, get to the point*, even before you had said a word. Still, Maddy risked a redundant question. 'So not tonight?'

'Correct. Walker remains unnamed tonight. Maybe tomorrow too. Depends on the re-act to the first piece.'

'But—'

Goldstein peered over her spectacles in a way that drew instant silence from Maddy. 'You have thirty minutes to make any final changes – and I mean *final,* Madison – and then you're going to get the fuck out of this office, am I clear? You will not hang around and get up to your usual tricks, *capisce*?'

Maddy nodded.

'No looking over the desk's shoulder while they write the headlines, no arguing about the wording of a fucking caption, no getting in the way. Do we understand each other?'

Maddy managed a 'Yes'.

'Good. To recapitulate: the suck-ups on Gawker might think you're the greatest investigative journalist in America, but I do not want you within a three-mile radius of this office.'

Maddy was about to say a word in her defence, but Goldstein's solution actually made good sense: if a story went big, you needed to have a follow-up ready for the next day. Naming Walker and publishing his photo ID on day two would prove that they – she – had not used up all their ammo in the first raid. That Goldstein was perhaps one of a tiny handful of people on the *LA Times* she truly respected Maddy did not admit as a factor. She murmured a thank you and headed out – wholly unaware that when she next set foot in that office, her life – and the life of this city – would have turned upside down.