

## Professionally Embarrassed

In the morning, Maggie is seated in the hotel restaurant sipping coffee after her breakfast. The restaurant is abuzz. Besides the normal guests, the diners include the UN Moogh Affairs delegates. They all look decidedly seedy from the cocktail party last night.

Maggie retrieves her smartphone and opens the Moogh App to check on the photos that usually get posted on the social media section after such events. There are dozens of photos showing a swish affair with a big buffet, a chocolate fountain and copious amounts of alcohol.

There is a photo of Maxine schmoozing UN delegates, the way that she does. There is a picture of a crowd in rapt attention listening to an old military man. Next to him, tall and angular, is another man in military uniform. Maggie recognizes them as the Big General and his Chief of Staff. She flicks through a few more of the photos, familiarizing herself with the diverse array of people who make their living from the Moogh.

There are dozens of photos arranged chronologically, and it is possible to see the progression of the evening into the night. In the early photos, everyone looks formal and stiff. However, as the night progresses, there are noticeable changes. The neckties are looser, the grins are bigger, there is more haughty laughter and people placing their hands on other people's shoulders.

Maggie wonders whether this might be the basis for an interesting story, about how the Moogh and some booze brings people together. Then she halts these thoughts and her jaw drops open. "What the f..."

In the sequence of photos, sometime around 10 pm, Perrin somehow makes a show at the party. One minute there's no sign of him and the next, he seems to show up in nearly every frame. Typically, he's got a drink in his hand – seeming like a different drink in each photo – and his mouth is open jabbering. He's doing that thing he does where he talks rapidly with different people and they explode in laughter, patting him on the back as if he is suddenly part of the family or the inner circle.

"Ughhh!" Maggie drops the smartphone on the table like it were charged with electricity. She glares around the restaurant at all the UN Moogh Affairs staffers who are suddenly hiding a dirty secret from her.

"How the f\*\*k?" she mutters through gritted teeth. How come he was invited to the party? What's going on? Then a dark thought comes to her, and she retrieves the smartphone from the table and continues searching the images.

It is 11 pm and Perrin has his arm around a senior UN bureaucrat who seems decidedly worse for wear. The bureaucrat is looking at the floor while

Perrin, sharp-eyed and clearly in charge of his destiny, whispers in his ear. Another photo shows Perrin standing next to the Big General. This time, Perrin's mouth is shut, and the Chief of Staff is eyeing him mistrustfully.

And then! The picture she had been dreading!

It has passed midnight now, and the party has thinned out. In the foreground of the picture is one of the beautiful people in a sleek cut cocktail dress drinking from a glass of champagne. Immediately behind her stand Perrin and Maxine. It is an odd scene, Maxine has her hand on his shoulder and is talking directly into his ear. Perrin is intently concentrating, almost with a grimace as if he is trying to understand something complicated and important. Another photo, later in the sequence, shows Perrin and Maxine eyeing each other. It is almost as if they share something that no one else knows, and they are confirming that each is committed to keeping the secret.

Maggie scrolls to the end of the photo shoot. There are more pictures of Perrin stirring the pot. The very final picture is at three in the morning. The hall is empty apart from hotel staff cleaning up. Perrin is standing at the buffet, feeding. He is holding a glass of champagne and stuffing his face with tiger prawns dipped in what looks like thousand island dressing.

Maggie is stunned. She lays the phone on the table, feeling as if her brain were short circuiting. "How could... Why...? Who...?" she is so incensed that she can't even think a proper question.

Then, just to throw fuel on the sparking wires inside her brain, Perrin enters the restaurant and wanders over to her table. He has rings under his eyes, most certainly from alcohol abuse and all those prawns he stole.

"Hi, Paprika," he says, lightly. "Hey, what's the matter."

For a moment, Maggie is stunned and incapable of speech. She doesn't know how to communicate or what to say first. Eventually it blurts out, "Did have a good night?"

"I had an awesome night. Can I sit down?" he indicates the seat opposite.

"Oh, why don't you sit here instead?" she stands and points to her seat.

"Given that you have taken over all my other roles."

"Don't be melodramatic." Perrin sits across the table eyeing her with a knowing look. "You need to check your messages, Paprika."

"You didn't think to invite me to the cocktail party last night?"

"I did think to invite you," says Perrin, eyeing her, wearily.

"Well it would have been nice if I'd received the invitation."

"Paprika, listen to me, you have not been betrayed." Perrin lays his hands on the table, palms upwards as if demonstrate she could trust what he was about to say. "This is how it went. I harangued the dude from Moogh

Affairs to put you and me – you and me – on the invite list. As soon as we were on the list, I went to get the imprimatur from Maxine, doing my politics, you know. She said that she was delighted that you were on the list, so I called you, but it rang out. So I texted you with the details, and I even came down and banged on your door. I couldn't raise you, I assumed you were out, so I stuck a note under your door." Perrin glances at Maggie's purse on the table with the corner of a white envelope sticking out the top. He shakes his head and then swivels around in his seat and raises his hand to get the attention of a waitress.

Maggie growls, feeling outsmarted and thinks it through. She remembers when her phone rang last night. She was sitting up in bed, writing on her laptop when the call came. She saw it was Perrin calling and tossed the phone to the foot of the bed. When the text message came through it was out of reach, so she ignored it. And when the knock came at the door, she was half asleep and lay there wishing that whoever it was would just go away. In the morning, she saw the note, picked it up and shoved it in her purse. The purse that is on the table next to her with the white envelope sticking out the top.

Perrin orders his coffee and then looks at the envelope and then to Maggie. She takes the envelope and opens it. The note inside is hand written in a style as exaggerated as Perrin's voice. "Paprika! We're in. Cocktail party. You're on the list."

Maggie folds the letter and slides it back into the envelope. She mutters something under her breath. "You shouldn't have gone without me."

"I shouldn't have gone without you?" says Perrin, exasperated. "I did think about that for a second. Then I thought that the Moogh Desk is on the verge of getting closed down and one way to keep it going is to find some news that gets eyes on the page."

Maggie softens, feeling exhausted at being so pent up. "And how are you going with that?"

"Well, I learned that some poor mug who lives near here lost his house gambling Moogh Coin through the app. Says he wants to blow up moogh.org. I am going to interview him. What are you doing today?"

"I am going to follow up on the scientists who were looking for heavy metals in the Moogh fur," says Maggie, thinking that Perrin's story is infinitely more interesting than hers.

"Well, let's hope that they have made a groundbreaking discovery. We might be out of the woods then."