

Donald Trump, a Playboy Model, and a System for Concealing Infidelity

By [Ronan Farrow](#)

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One woman's account of clandestine meetings, financial transactions, and legal pacts designed to hide an extramarital affair.

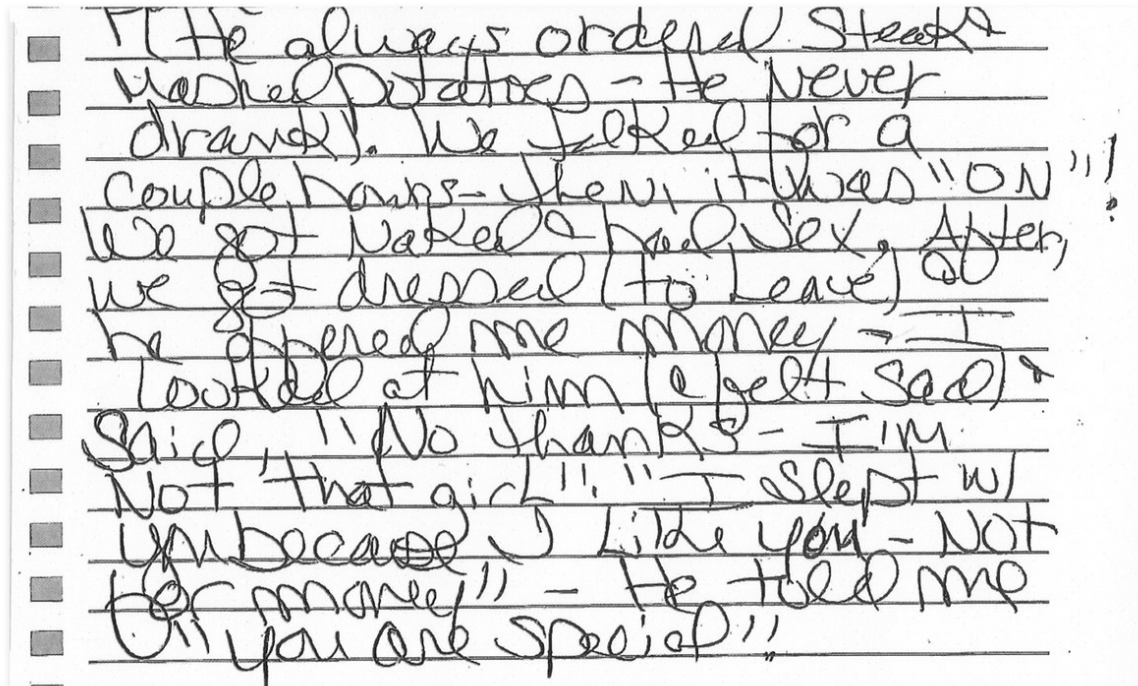


At right, from the top, David Pecker, the chairman of American Media, Inc., the publisher of the National Enquirer; Karen McDougal, a former Playmate of the Year; Donald Trump; and Dylan Howard, A.M.I.'s chief content officer.

Illustration by Oliver Munday; Source Photographs: Jesse Grant / WireImage / Getty (McDougal); Mark Peterson / Redux for The New Yorker (Pecker); Jamie Squire / Getty (Trump); Lucas Jackson / Reuters (Howard)

In June, 2006, Donald Trump taped an episode of his reality-television show, “The Apprentice,” at the Playboy Mansion, in Los Angeles. Hugh Hefner, Playboy’s publisher, threw a pool party for the show’s contestants with dozens of current and former Playmates, including Karen McDougal, a slim brunette who had been named Playmate of the Year, eight years earlier. In 2001, the magazine’s readers voted her runner-up for “Playmate of the ’90s,” behind Pamela Anderson. At the time of the party, Trump had been married to the Slovenian model Melania Knauss for less than two years; their son, Barron, was a few months old. Trump seemed uninhibited by his new family obligations. McDougal later wrote that Trump “immediately took a liking to me, kept talking to me - telling me how beautiful I was, etc. It was so obvious that a Playmate Promotions exec said, ‘Wow, he was all over you - I think you could be his next wife.’ ”

Trump and McDougal began an affair, which McDougal later memorialized in an eight-page, handwritten document provided to *The New Yorker* by John Crawford, a friend of McDougal's. When I showed McDougal the document, she expressed surprise that I had obtained it but confirmed that the handwriting was her own.



■ He always ordered Steak
■ washed potatoes - He never
■ drank. We talked for a
■ couple hours - then it was "ON"
■ We got naked & had sex. After
■ we got dressed (to leave) he
■ offered me money - I
■ looked at him (I felt sad) &
■ said, "No thanks - I'm
■ not that girl." "I slept w/
■ you because I like you - NOT
■ for money" - He told me
■ "You are special"

The interactions that McDougal outlines in the document share striking similarities with the stories of other women who claim to have had sexual relationships with Trump, or who have accused him of propositioning them for sex or sexually harassing them. McDougal describes their affair as entirely consensual. But her account provides a detailed look at how Trump and his allies used clandestine hotel-room meetings, payoffs, and complex legal agreements to keep affairs—sometimes multiple affairs he carried out simultaneously—out of the press.

On November 4, 2016, four days before the election, [the Wall Street Journal reported](#) that American Media, Inc., the publisher of the *National Enquirer*, had paid a hundred and fifty thousand dollars for exclusive rights to McDougal's story, which it never ran. Purchasing a story in order to bury it is a practice that many in the tabloid industry call "catch and kill." This is a favorite tactic of the C.E.O. and chairman of A.M.I., David Pecker, who describes the President as "[a personal friend](#)." As part of the agreement, A.M.I. consented to publish a regular aging-and-fitness column by McDougal. After Trump won the Presidency, however, A.M.I.'s promises largely went unfulfilled, according to McDougal. Last month, [the Journal reported](#) that Trump's personal lawyer had negotiated a separate

agreement just before the election with an adult-film actress named Stephanie Clifford, whose screen name is Stormy Daniels, which barred her from discussing her own affair with Trump. Since then, A.M.I. has repeatedly approached McDougal about extending her contract.

McDougal, in her first on-the-record comments about A.M.I.'s handling of her story, declined to discuss the details of her relationship with Trump, for fear of violating the agreement she reached with the company. She did say, however, that she regretted signing the contract. "It took my rights away," McDougal told me. "At this point I feel I can't talk about anything without getting into trouble, because I don't know what I'm allowed to talk about. I'm afraid to even mention his name."

A White House spokesperson said in a statement that Trump denies having had an affair with McDougal: "This is an old story that is just more fake news. The President says he never had a relationship with McDougal." A.M.I. said that an amendment to McDougal's contract—signed after Trump won the election—allowed her to "respond to legitimate press inquiries" regarding the affair. The company said that it did not print the story because it did not find it credible.

Six former A.M.I. employees told me that Pecker routinely makes catch-and-kill arrangements like the one reached with McDougal. "We had stories and we bought them knowing full well they were never going to run," Jerry George, a former A.M.I. senior editor who worked at the company for more than twenty-five years, told me. George said that Pecker protected Trump. "Pecker really considered him a friend," George told me. "We never printed a word about Trump without his approval." Maxine Page, who worked at A.M.I. on and off from 2002 to 2012, including as an executive editor at one of the company's Web sites, said that Pecker also used the unpublished stories as "leverage" over some celebrities in order to pressure them to pose for his magazines or feed him stories. Several former employees said that these celebrities included Arnold Schwarzenegger, as reported by [Los Angeles Magazine](#), and [Tiger Woods](#). (Schwarzenegger, through an attorney, denied this claim. Woods did not respond to requests for comment.) "Even though they're just tabloids, just rags, it's still a cause of concern," Page said. "In theory, you would think that Trump has all the power in that relationship, but in fact Pecker has the power—he has the power to run these stories. He knows where the bodies are buried."

As the pool party at the Playboy Mansion came to an end, Trump asked for McDougal's telephone number. For McDougal, who grew up in a small town in Michigan and worked as a preschool teacher before beginning her modelling career, such advances were not unusual. John Crawford, McDougal's friend, who also helped broker her deal with A.M.I., said that Trump was "another powerful guy hitting on her, a gal who's paid to be at work." Trump and McDougal began talking frequently on the phone, and soon had what McDougal described as their first date: dinner in a private bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel. McDougal wrote that Trump impressed her. "I was so nervous! I was into his intelligence + charm. Such a polite man," she wrote. "We talked for a couple hours – then, it was "ON"! We got naked +

had sex.” As McDougal was getting dressed to leave, Trump did something that surprised her. “He offered me money,” she wrote. “I looked at him (+ felt sad) + said, ‘No thanks - I’m not ‘that girl.’ I slept w/you because I like you - NOT for money’ - He told me ‘you are special.’ ”

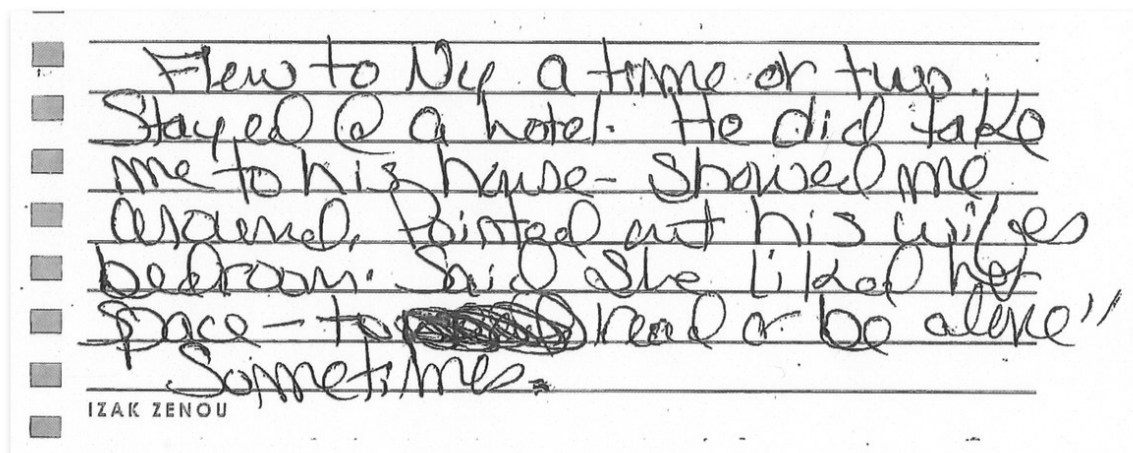
Afterward, McDougal wrote, she “went to see him every time he was in LA (which was a lot).” Trump, she said, always stayed in the same bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel and ordered the same meal—steak and mashed potatoes—and never drank. McDougal’s account is consistent with other descriptions of Trump’s behavior. Last month, *In Touch Weekly* published an interview conducted in 2011 with Stephanie Clifford in which she revealed that during a relationship with Trump she met him for dinner at a bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel, where Trump insisted they watch “Shark Week” on the Discovery Channel. Summer Zervos, a former contestant on “The Apprentice,” alleged that Trump assaulted her at a private dinner meeting, in December of 2007, at a bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Trump, Zervos has claimed, kissed her, groped her breast, and suggested that they lie down to “watch some telly-telly.” After Zervos rebuffed Trump’s advances, she said that he “began thrusting his genitals” against her. (Zervos recently sued Trump for defamation after he denied her account.) All three women say that they were escorted to a bungalow at the hotel by a Trump bodyguard, whom two of the women have identified as Keith Schiller. After Trump was elected, Schiller was appointed director of Oval Office Operations and deputy assistant to the President. Last September, John Kelly, acting as the new chief of staff, removed Schiller from the White House posts. (Schiller did not respond to a request for comment.)

Over the course of the affair, Trump flew McDougal to public events across the country but hid the fact that he paid for her travel. “No paper trails for him,” she wrote. “In fact, every time I flew to meet him, I booked/paid for flight + hotel + he reimbursed me.” In July, 2006, McDougal joined Trump at the American Century Celebrity Golf Championship, at the Edgewood Resort, on Lake Tahoe. At a party there, she and Trump sat in a booth with the New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees, and Trump told her that Brees had recognized her, remarking, “Baby, you’re popular.” (Brees, through a spokesman, denied meeting Trump or McDougal at the event.) At another California golf event, Trump told McDougal that Tiger Woods had asked who she was. Trump, she recalled, warned her “to stay away from that one, LOL.”

During the Lake Tahoe tournament, McDougal and Trump had sex, she wrote. He also allegedly began a sexual relationship with Clifford at the event. (A representative for Clifford did not respond to requests for comment.) In the 2011 interview with *In Touch Weekly*, Clifford said that Trump didn’t use a condom and didn’t mention sleeping with anyone else. Another adult-film actress, whose screen name is Alana Evans, claimed that Trump invited her to join them in his hotel room that weekend. A third adult-film performer, known as Jessica Drake, alleged that Trump asked her to his hotel room, met her and two women she brought with her in pajamas, and then “grabbed each of us tightly in a hug and kissed each one of us without asking for permission.” He then offered Drake ten thousand dollars in

exchange for her company. (Trump denied the incident.) A week after the golf tournament, McDougal joined Trump at the fifty-fifth Miss Universe contest, in Los Angeles. She sat near him, and later attended an after-party where she met celebrities. Trump also set aside tickets for Clifford, as he did at a later vodka launch that both women attended.

During Trump's relationship with McDougal, she wrote, he introduced her to members of his family and took her to his private residences. At a January, 2007, launch party in Los Angeles for Trump's now-defunct liquor brand, Trump Vodka, McDougal, who was photographed entering the event, recalled sitting at a table with Kim Kardashian, Trump, Donald Trump, Jr., and Trump, Jr.'s wife, Vanessa, who was pregnant. At one point, Trump held a party for "The Apprentice" at the Playboy Mansion, and McDougal worked as a costumed Playboy bunny. "We took pics together, alone + with his family," McDougal wrote. She recalled that Trump said he had asked his son Eric "who he thought was the most beautiful girl here + Eric pointed me. Mr. T said 'He has great taste' + we laughed!" Trump gave McDougal tours of Trump Tower and his Bedminster, New Jersey, golf club. In Trump Tower, McDougal wrote, Trump pointed out Melania's separate bedroom. He "said she liked her space," McDougal wrote, "to read or be alone."



McDougal's account, like those of Clifford and other women who have described Trump's advances, conveys a man preoccupied with his image. McDougal recalled that Trump would often send her articles about him or his daughter, as well as signed books and sun visors from his golf courses. Clifford recalled Trump remarking that she and [Ivanka](#) were similar and proudly showing her a copy of a "money magazine" with his image on the cover.

Trump also promised to buy McDougal an apartment in New York as a Christmas present. Clifford, likewise, said that Trump promised to buy her a condo in Tampa. For Trump, showing off real estate and other branded products was sometimes a prelude to sexual advances. Zervos and a real-estate investor named Rachel Crooks have both claimed that Trump kissed them on the mouth during professional

encounters at Trump Tower. Four other women have claimed that Trump forcibly touched or kissed them during tours or events at [Mar-a-Lago](#), his property in Palm Beach, Florida. (Trump has denied any wrongdoing pertaining to the women.)

McDougal ended the relationship in April, 2007, after nine months. According to Crawford, the breakup was prompted in part by McDougal's feelings of guilt. "She couldn't look at herself in the mirror anymore," Crawford said. "And she was concerned about what her mother thought of her." The decision was reinforced by a series of comments Trump made that McDougal found disrespectful, according to several of her friends. When she raised her concern about her mother's disapproval to Trump, he replied, "What, that old hag?" (McDougal, hurt, pointed out that Trump and her mother were close in age.) On the night of the Miss Universe pageant McDougal attended, McDougal and a friend rode with Trump in his limousine and the friend mentioned a relationship she had had with an African-American man. According to multiple sources, Trump remarked that the friend liked "the big black dick" and began commenting on her attractiveness and breast size. The interactions angered the friend and deeply offended McDougal.

Speaking carefully for fear of legal reprisal, McDougal responded to questions about whether she felt guilty about the affair, as her friends suggested, by saying that she had found God in the last several years and regretted parts of her past. "This is a new me," she told me. "If I could go back and do a lot of things differently, I definitely would."

McDougal readily admitted that she voluntarily sold the rights to her story, but she and sources close to her insisted that the way the sale unfolded was exploitative. Crawford told me that selling McDougal's story was his idea, and that he first raised it when she was living with him, in 2016. "She and I were sitting at the house, and I'm watching him on television," Crawford said, referring to Trump. "I said, 'You know, if you had a physical relationship with him, that could be worth something about now.' And I looked at her and she had that guilty look on her face."

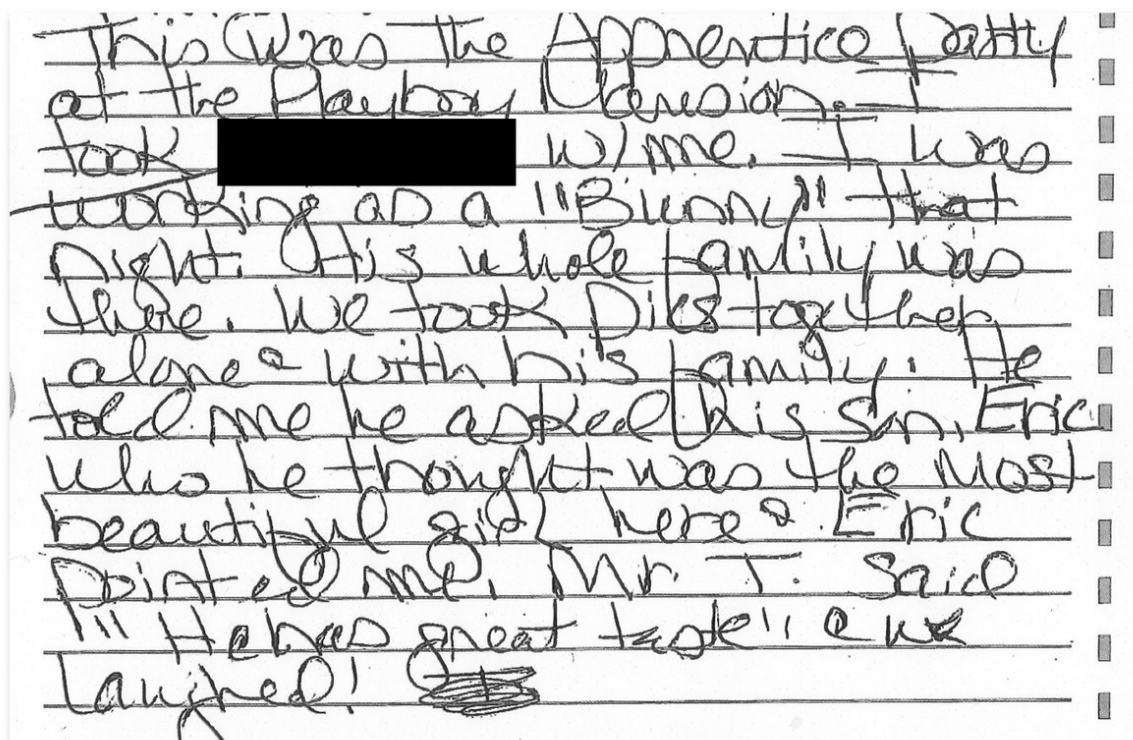
McDougal, who says she is a Republican, told me that she was reluctant at first to tell her story, because she feared that other Trump supporters might accuse her of fabricating it, or might even harm her or her family. She also said that she didn't want to get involved in the heated Presidential contest. "I didn't want to influence anybody's election," she told me. "I didn't want death threats on my head." Crawford was only able to persuade her to consider speaking about the relationship after a former friend of McDougal's began posting about the affair on social media. "I didn't want someone else telling stories and getting all the details wrong," McDougal said.

Crawford called a friend who had worked in the adult-film industry who he thought might have media connections, and asked whether a story about Trump having an affair would "be worth something." That friend, Crawford recalled, was "like a hobo on a ham sandwich" and contacted an attorney named Keith M. Davidson, who also had contacts in the adult-film industry and ties to media companies, including A.M.I.

Davidson had developed a track record of selling salacious stories. A slide show on the clients page of his Web site includes Sara Leal, who claimed to have slept with the actor Ashton Kutcher while he was married to Demi Moore. Davidson told Crawford that McDougal's story would be worth "millions." (Davidson did not respond to a request for comment.)

Dozens of pages of e-mails, texts, and legal documents obtained by *The New Yorker* reveal how the transaction evolved. Davidson got in touch with A.M.I., and on June 20, 2016, he and McDougal met Dylan Howard, A.M.I.'s chief content officer. E-mails between Howard and Davidson show that A.M.I. initially had little interest in the story. Crawford said that A.M.I.'s first offer was ten thousand dollars.

After Trump won the Republican nomination, however, A.M.I. increased its offer. In an August, 2016, e-mail exchange, Davidson encouraged McDougal to sign the deal. McDougal, worried that she would be prevented from talking about a Presidential nominee, asked questions about the nuances of the contract. Davidson responded, "If you deny, you are safe." He added, "We really do need to get this signed and wrapped up..."



This was the Appendice party
at the Playboy Mansion. I
took [REDACTED] w/me. I was
working as a "Bunny" that
night. His whole family was
there. We took pics together
alone with his family. He
told me he asked his son, Eric
who he thought was the most
beautiful girl here. Eric
pointed me. Mr. T. said
"He has great taste!" & we
laughed!

McDougal, who has a new lawyer, Carol Heller, told me that she did not understand the scope of the agreement when she signed it. "I knew that I couldn't talk about any alleged affair with any married man, but I didn't really understand the whole content of what I gave up," she told me.

On August 5, 2016, McDougal signed a limited life-story rights agreement granting A.M.I. exclusive ownership of her account of any romantic, personal, or physical relationship she has ever had with any “then-married man.” Her retainer with Davidson makes explicit that the man in question was Donald Trump. In exchange, A.M.I. agreed to pay her a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The three men involved in the deal—Davidson, Crawford, and their intermediary in the adult-film industry—took forty-five per cent of the payment as fees, leaving McDougal with a total of eighty-two thousand five hundred dollars, billing records from Davidson’s office show. “I feel let down,” McDougal told me. “I’m the one who took it, so it’s my fault, too. But I didn’t understand the full parameters of it.” McDougal terminated her representation by Davidson, but a photograph of McDougal in a bathing suit is still featured prominently on his Web site—according to McDougal, without her permission. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that, two months after McDougal signed the agreement with A.M.I., Davidson negotiated a nondisclosure agreement between Clifford and Trump’s longtime personal lawyer and fixer, Michael Cohen, for a hundred and thirty thousand dollars. (On Tuesday, [Cohen told the Times](#) that he had facilitated the deal with Daniels and paid the money out of his own pocket. Cohen did not respond to a request for comment.)

As voters went to the polls on Election Day, Howard and A.M.I.’s general counsel were on the phone with McDougal and a law firm representing her, promising to boost McDougal’s career and offering to employ a publicist to help her handle interviews. E-mails show that, a year into the contract, the company suggested it might collaborate with McDougal on a skin-care line and a documentary devoted to a medical cause that she cares about, neither of which has come about. The initial contract also called for A.M.I. to publish regular columns by McDougal on aging and wellness, and to “prominently feature” her on two magazine covers. She has appeared on one cover and is in discussions about another, but in the past seventeen months the company has published only a fraction of the almost one hundred promised columns. “They blew her off for a long time,” Crawford said. A.M.I. said that McDougal had not delivered the promised columns.

A.M.I. responded quickly, however, when journalists tried to interview McDougal. In May, 2017, *The New Yorker*’s Jeffrey Toobin, who was writing [a profile of David Pecker](#), asked McDougal for comment about her relationships with A.M.I. and Trump. Howard, of A.M.I., working with a publicist retained by the company, forwarded McDougal a draft response with the subject line “SEND THIS.” In August, 2017, Pecker flew McDougal to New York and the two had lunch, during which he thanked her for her loyalty. A few days later, Howard followed up by e-mail, summarizing the plans that had been discussed, including the possibility of McDougal hosting A.M.I.’s coverage of awards shows such as the Golden Globes, Grammys, and Oscars. None of that work materialized. (A.M.I. said that those conversations related to future contracts, not her current one.)

A.M.I.’s interest in McDougal seemed to increase after news broke of Trump’s alleged affair with Clifford. Howard sent an e-mail suggesting that McDougal undergo

media training, and a few days later suggested that she could host coverage of the Emmys for *OK! Magazine*. In an e-mail on January 30th, A.M.I.'s general counsel, Cameron Stracher, talked about renewing her contract and putting her on a new magazine cover. The subject line of the e-mail read, "McDougal contract extension." Crawford told me, "They got worried that she was going to start talking again, and they came running to her."

Several people close to McDougal argued that such untold stories could be used as leverage against the President. "I'm sixty-two years old," Crawford said. "I know how the world goes round." Without commenting on Trump specifically, McDougal conceded that she had a growing awareness of the broader implications of the President's situation. "Someone in a high position that controls our country, if they can influence him," she said, "it's a big deal." In a statement, A.M.I. denied that it had any leverage over Trump: "The suggestion that AMI holds any influence over the President of the United States, while flattering, is laughable."

McDougal fears that A.M.I. will retaliate for her public comments by seeking financial damages in a private arbitration process mandated by a clause of her contract. But she said that changes in her life and the emergence of the [#MeToo](#) moment had prompted her to speak. In January, 2017, McDougal had her breast implants removed, citing declining health that she believed to be connected to the implants. McDougal said that confronting illness, and embracing a cause she wanted to speak about, made her feel increasingly conflicted about the moral compromises of silence. "As I was sick and feeling like I was dying and bedridden, all I could do was pray to live. But now I pray to live right, and make right with the wrongs that I have done," she told me. McDougal also cited the actions of women who have come forward in recent months to describe abuses by high-profile men. "I know it's a different circumstance," she said, "but I just think I feel braver." McDougal told me that she hoped speaking out might convince others to wait before signing agreements like hers. "Every girl who speaks," she said, "is paving the way for another."

Due to editing errors, an earlier version of this story misstated the legal name of the adult-film actress Alana Evans and the publication that first reported allegations that A.M.I. used unpublished stories as leverage over Arnold Schwarzenegger. The number of published McDougal columns has also been updated.