My Friends Told Me About You (Tube)

by TheAstronomyMod

Summary

"Imagine your Tumblr icon reading your fan fiction about them." Now imagine your icon reading it, getting really, really angry about it, and it spiralling out into a massive argument. Imagine subverting common fan fiction tropes by meeting your icon and discovering that actually you LOATHE one another.

Margaret MacConnor lives an ordinary fannish life, obsessing about pop stars, writing fan fiction on AO3, watching movies and Box Sets of popular television programmes, and doing podcasts and vlogs with her equally geeky and pop culture-obsessed friends. Until one day the man she has been writing fan fiction about discovers her fan fiction, and turns her life upside down.

Carlos Dengler, reclusive "reformed" rock star, destroyed the cult of his own celebrity, and retired from playing bass for Interpol to go back to school, and become a stage actor. But he becomes obsessed with a fan fiction serial, and is slowly drawn into an intrigue with its creator.

A story about fandom and fannish life, into which a rock star crashes. It is deliberately written within the form of a 'City Girl Novel'. Oh, and it also features Benedict Cumberbatch in his pants.
At 4 in the morning, my iPhone buzzed me awake with the distinctive ding! of a new email. For fucks sake, had I forgotten to turn off the ringer again? Reaching out into the cold air from beneath my toasty duvet, I switched it to silent and tried to will myself back to sleep, but curiosity was too strong. Alright, alright, I will never get back to sleep until I see who it's from. I opened one eye and slid my email open, rewarded with that glowing blue dot that fed my compulsive and slightly dysfunctional relationship with the internet.

A comment from AO3! Aw, now I was never going to sleep now until I'd read it, otherwise I would stay awake all night, buzzing with turmoil as I wondered if it was fan mail, hate mail or just some comment spam. Opening the other eye, I fussed with my phone until the familiar red text appeared in my inbox.

You disgust me, you obscene child. First of all, how dare you! To play with the details of a man's private life for your own sport and titilation... Have you no consideration for my feelings, at all? This is revolting, publishing this... this degrading teenage fangirl jerk-off fantasy for the adulation of your little teengirl peers, no doubt. If you do this to your supposed favorite bands, what horrors have you left for your worst enemies? I am a genuine human being, with genuine human emotions as real as yours, and this obscene abomination degrades me... and yourself.

I rolled my eyes, then glared at my iPhone, as if to say 'you woke me... for this?' Dumb hate mail from some outraged middle aged man who could not stand the idea that lowly women were getting their icky fangirl cooties all over his favourite fandom with our disgusting, icky fan fiction. Suck it, comic book store guy, I thought to myself, and was about to drop back into slumber, when my eye was caught by the name attached to the disgruntled comment.

Carlos Dengler.

No way. No, that had to be a joke - no doubt Alice or Evie having a joke at my expense after too many bottles of wine down the pub. That said, it was a distinctly unfriendly time of the morning for drunken after-pub shenanigans by two women I knew had to get up in the morning to go to work. But I was wide awake now, my nerves jangling, and I knew there was no way I was going to be back asleep before my alarm rang at 6.30. Giving up on sleep, I slouched my way to the kitchen, made myself a cup of tea then climbed back into bed, hauling my laptop in with me, to log onto the internet properly and examine the comment in context.

The comment was on Chapter 8 of Exquisite Corpse, a ridiculous vampire fantasy sex romp I'd written for a laugh with an American friend of mine. Chapter 8, huh? So this mysterious reader had persisted quite some time with the 'obscene abomination', it seemed. Oh. Wait. If memory served, Chapter 8 was that chapter, the really problematic one where the thinly veiled Victorian aristocrat, Baron Von D'Engler, raped, sucked the blood and then wrung the neck of an unfortunate servant. My co-writer, the Scarlet Pimp, and I had worked hard to make it the right mix of both shocking in its sudden violence, and yet darkly comic, with hints of The Hunger and Andy Warhol's Blood For Dracula woven through the plot, along with ridiculous allusions to Marx, Foucault and Piketty until we'd both been crying with laughter as we published it. So maybe it was a bit gory, but for fucks sake, it was a vampire parody. You can't have a vampire story without spilling a little blood!

I read the comment again, scanning it for clues. This was one of the few times that I felt nostalgic...
for the old LiveJournal system where so many of us fan fiction writers had first published our stories - the Track IP Address function came in invaluable in telling whether you were dealing with a complete stranger, a friend yanking your chain or an old, familiar troll. Archive Of Our Own gave you nothing to go on. I fired messages off to Sunita, Evie and Alice, knowing full well that none of them could resist the ping if they were still lurking online to see the effect of their little joke, but there was no reply from any of them. Maybe they were innocent, and asleep - as I should have been.

So the time zone pointed to an American - as did the spelling and slang. Favorite? Well, Alice was American, and still lapsed in spelling, despite having lived in London for 8 years. Jerk-off? My friends - even Alice - would have said wank or even fap. I clicked the name, Carlos Dengler, and realised he had gone through the hassle of making a profile to leave the comment. Whoever he was, he wanted to be noticed, maybe even wanted a reply, if he'd gone to the trouble of registering his email with AO3. And suddenly, I was angry. That comment treated me as if I were a child!

Well, fine. Whoever he was, he'd have his reply alright. I had years of experience defending and justifying my slightly weird hobby.

First of all, sir, I am not a child. A lady never tells her age, but trust me, I was born during the 70s, and I am a professional woman with a job and a career and a mortgage. I'm guessing that this worries you even more than if I were a child - because if there's one thing that scares the shit out of guys like you, it's the idea that there are grown women who are perfectly comfortable expressing their sexuality and their desires without the slightest hint of shame.

Second, no one forced you to read this - and I notice that in your outrage, you managed to read eight chapters of this 'abomination'! There are some things that I find obscene in this life: the international politics of Americans; the domination of our culture by competitive sport; the unequal distribution of wealth; cruelty to animals and young children. The unfettered gratification of sexual tastes I do not share in *fiction* is a thing it is far easier to ignore than to allow to bother me. I kindly suggest you do the same, sir.

And lastly, as to the way I treat my favourite bands and favourite works of art and favourite pieces of ephemeral pop culture: I believe, passionately, in the folk tradition. We live in a time and place where our cultural icons, our national narratives and myths are all owned by corporations. Corporations who would like us to passively consume their products without ever interrogating or responding or even engaging. I resist this with every fibre of my being! Fan Fiction is my way of talking back to Culture. It is my way of engaging, or interacting, of turning a forced monologue into a multi-voiced conversation. I fail to see how Fan Fiction is really any different to a remix or a cover in music; a commentary or critique in fiction; the relationship of a satirical play to current events. This is not about the band, and the people in it, it is about *me*. You have no right to criticise. Now good day to you, sir.

But the time I'd finished typing and polishing and adding just the right amount of patronising pique to my invective, it was 5.30. My mouse hovered over the 'comment' button for several minutes, as doubt gently rocked my mind. I'd been having this argument in one form or another since 1994, when I first logged onto the internet and discovered for the first time that hundreds, if not thousands, of other people shared my 'weird hobby' (and, unfortunately, also discovered how
threatened others were by it). It was such a familiar argument I could rehearse it in my sleep, so the
doubt was not about that. The doubt clouding my mind was more along the lines of... what if this
really was the actual flesh and blood Carlos Dengler?

Oh come on, it almost certainly was not. If it was not actually Suni or Evie, no doubt it was
someone I knew from Tumblr, just lining up to rattle me. And if it was actually Carlos, well...
Well, that self-googling arsehole deserved whatever he got for quitting and then nearly splitting up
a band I loved. But there was no way it could possibly Carlos. He hadn't just quit playing bass for
Interpol in 2010, he had quit the Internet, quit 'celebrity' and quite possibly quit public life itself,
except for a few strange art films self-released through YouTube. The idea was absurd. There was
no way it was Carlos.

I hit comment before I could lose my nerve, then headed for the shower, and a much needed
second cup of tea.

Sunita's text hit me first, halfway through breakfast, as she was always the most excitable (not to
mention gullible) of the gang. 'no way! omg what if it really is carlos? this could be the most
amazing scoop for our podcast! can i vlog it l8r 2day y/n?'

'no way,' I texted back almost immediately. 'there is no way we are putting this on the vlog or the
podcast. it's clearly someone having a joke on me.'

Alice's text arrived next, laconic and suspicious. 'duuuuuude, u totally have SUCH a spring in the
middle of ur back and someone just wound u up so tight. y even give this idiot the time of day? u
know the routine: DELETE AND BLOCK!'

'I dunno. I guess whoever it was, he just hit a nerve, OK? In the future, I will remember: Do what
Alice recommends. Alice is always right.'

Evie's answer, perpetually late, and perpetually defensive, arrived just as I was getting on the bus.
'Who the fuck is Carlos Dengler? But, to be frank, I am actually slightly offended that you would
accuse me of leaving this comment. I, unlike your secret admirer, actually know how to spell the
word 'obscene!''

I spent the rest of the bus ride composing a massive email in reply, explaining about the band,
Interpol, explaining all about their minimalist, reverb-drenched music, about their impeccable
fashion sense and cut-glass styling and inscrutable semi-surreal lyrics. But mostly, explaining
about their distinctively dressed and completely pretentious, yet somehow oddly hilarious bass
player, and how he had spent so long building up a cult of personality unrivalled since Bowie in its
sheer theatricality - extreme hairstyle changes and nazi gags included - before smashing his own
celebrity like a hated fairground mirror, then mysteriously resigning and disappearing, at the
height of their fame. Trust me, I could talk about Interpol for England.

Evie's reply was short, but to the point. 'OK, I guess now I finally understand that kind of glazed
look that you get in your eye whenever I try to explain the Marvel Comics Universe to you.'

By half an hour into my workday, I had completely forgotten the comment. One of the guys from
Compliance asked for some help setting up some pattern recognition software, and I spent most of
the day analysing webtrends for mentions of malware and phishing attacks. By the afternoon, we
had built up the appropriate tag-cloud and were monitoring Russian hacker activity aimed at a
multi-national in Canary Wharf. I fired off a couple of emails to Comms to spur a press release,
then finished up the appropriate regulatory report and passed it on to Judicial. A good day's work,
and a satisfying game of Cat and Mouse, all in the service of the Good Guys. Damn, I loved my job
sometimes.
I was too tired to read on the bus home, so I plugged my headphones into my iPad and searched on YouTube to watch a couple of episodes of a new anime that Evie had been raving about. Then my email dinged with a notification of a new Resident Advisor mix from an Irish DJ who was starting to catch a bit of hype, so I downloaded it, hoping to listen to it while I cooked dinner. But as I climbed off the bus and walked past the mini-Sainsburys, the lure of another ready-meal proved too strong. There was a two for one meal-deal that included Sag Paneer, and though I knew my own home-cooked Sag Paneer was way better than the store-bought stuff, you could not argue with two for £5, especially when it cut out a 40-minute wait for the rice to cook. So I got home and flopped down on the sofa with my microwaved dinner and a nice glass of wine, and the dulcet tones of some Hauntological Vapourwave echoing around my flat.

My iPhone pinged on the sofa beside me - OK, I knew it was a lazy bad habit to check my phone during dinner, but one email wouldn't kill me. A reminder from Sunita that we were recording the podcast on Thursday evening, at her flat. As if we hadn't been recording podcasts on Thursday evening for the past 6 years! But from the slightly snippy comment at the bottom of the email, I realised that the reminder of the start time was more for Evie's benefit than mine, and chortled.

Two minutes later, another email pinged. A slightly wounded reply from Evie, saying she was not a child, she was a busy Public Defender, and it was not her fault if her cases sometimes overran, and being late was not a personal insult, it was an unavoidable consequence of the importance of her work as a civil servant and so on and so forth in Evie's slightly beleaguered tone. I nearly laughed aloud.

Ping! Not even thirty seconds until the email from Alice, telling Evie to open a can of sit down and shut the hell up because if she had to wait until the pizza got cold one more time, she was going to serve her own ass with a side order of fries and onion rings, so help her god. To be honest, Alice's colourful American colloquialisms were half the reason we loved having her on the podcast, but Evie was from Hull and could certainly give as good as she could get. I looked forward to the next round, knowing Evie to be an absolute champion swearer, to the point where we sometimes had to wonder if we would have to bleep her out to avoid complaints about her language on the next podcast.

Ping! If this was Evie, this was going to be good... Oh shit.

Archive Of Our Own: Carlos Dengler replied to your comment on Exquisite Corpse

The bottom dropped out of my stomach as I clicked on the message. Shit, this one was long, too long to display properly in the body of the email, and a suddenly sensible voice in the back of my head told me to sit down and finish my dinner before reading it, because wow, did he seem to have a bee in his bonnet about something. But the Sag Paneer did not as seem as tasty as before, and the wine was not as sweet, and when the expected reply from Evie pinged in my inbox, I was too agitated to read her gruff Northern response to Alice's Bronx-cheer cheek. I finished dinner, cleared away the plates, then hauled my laptop to the sofa and plugged in.

My apologies, madam, for misjudging your age. I assumed, perhaps mistakenly, that since the majority of hormonal outbursts of desire for my person originated from adolescents, that your blatant insinuations as to the nature of your lusts originated from someone of a similar immature and puerile stature - or at least mentality. If youth is not the excuse for such shameless behaviour, I am more offended, not less. You should be old enough to know better!

I do not live in a bubble; I am certainly aware of the hoobaloo surrounding the
cultural phenomenon of middle aged women projected their thwarted desires and withered sexuality into homosexual fantasies regarding such figures as Kirk and Spock, or Sherlock and Holmes. But you mistake one critical difference between the former, and what you are subjecting me to. Holmes and Spock are fictional characters. I am not merely a myth, I am not a 'cultural icon' or a 'national narrative'. There is a human being behind these images you are playing with so casually, a human being with a heart, and a pride, and the capacity to feel hurt and deeply offended by the ways in which you have depicted me. I am not a toy for the gratification of your sexual pleasure; I am not some fictional character to toss about the streams of your fancy like Woolfe's Orlando. I am a stranger to you, but a person with friends, and with family, and with relationships of my own to be disturbed and insulted by these fabrications of yours.

You are right; I did read eight chapters of this filth before I felt compelled to protest. Clearly, you are possessed of some small literary talent, for storytelling and building narrative and a sense of suspense and anticipation. Which makes it all the more shocking and worrying that *this* is the end to which you choose to utilize those abilities! What have I ever done to you, "Pace Is The Trick", to deserve this treatment? Apart from being involved with the writing and performance of some music you claim to love, while abusing its creator so badly? Answer me that, please, madam!

Madam! As if! I blinked at the screen, then started to laugh. I supposed I had deserved that, with the patronising 'sir' I'd lead with. But thwarted? Withered? Blatant insinuations? My god, don't flatter yourself, mate! Wait, did he really think that I wanted to fuck him, because I'd written him as an amoral vampire raping and despoiling peasants, for the amusement of my young friend in California? The ego on this guy! Fighting tears of laughter, I poured myself another glass of wine, and sat down at the laptop.

Watson, my dear Dengler. Sherlock's partner is called Watson. Here, I thought you were supposed to be an educated man, and you mistake the names of the most celebrated partnership in literature!

First of all, you flatter yourself in presuming that a sexual interest lead to my using your archetypical image in my story. Withered and thwarted you may think this, but I am interested in ideas far more than I am interested in physicality. To put it bluntly - your body, your person holds little interest for me. But your image, your media representation, the cult of celebrity you initially cloaked yourself in, and then abandoned as if it were a mere chrysalis, that interests me, even intrigues me. The questions I ask are far more nuanced than a simple declaration of 'lust'. I am asking questions about the nature of Evil. You played with notions of Evil both in your work, and in your stage image. To dress as a Nazi, a Russian Gangster, a frontier gunslinger, a Victorian Vampire onstage - all of these are almost cartoon representations of Evil. What does it mean to be evil - to be moral, or immoral? But a Vampire is neither moral nor immoral, it is amoral, and that is what holds the fascination. In Foucault, to be immoral is not merely to participate in this specific sexual deviance or that - it is to be ruled by one's passions to the point of losing one's own self control. To be mastered by one's own desires, rather than the master of oneself. Is not a Vampire a person who has surrendered utterly to his animal nature, his lust for blood, literal or figurative?
So, you ask, sir. What did you do to deserve this? You asked questions, in your art, and your self presentation. I contrived to answer them, in mine.

You claim you are not a fiction, not a myth, but I'm sorry; I invoke Barthes here and Le Mort D'Auteur. This is not *about* you. This is about your Public Image as an archetypical Rock Star. I no more conflate your public image with your physical and emotional person than I conflate an actor with the role that they play. Celebrity is manufactured by consent in an interplay between idol and fan. You are the author of a Mythos called Carlos D, but not the owner. The fabrication of 'Carlos D' is assembled within the mind of the reader - the observer - in this case, me.

The ideas are much larger than you, and have been fed and grown and altered partly by the press, but much more by us, the fans. Rock Stars are a silver screen onto which fans project their own ideas - about beauty, about desire, about creativity, about power, about control, and yes, about evil. I am sorry if this punctures your ego, sir, but I am not the slightest bit interested in silver screens. I am interested in the flickering images which are projected onto them by the audience - most of which are assembled in the minds and brains of the people in that audience at the rate of 24 frames per second or whatever.

I am sorry if my actions have hurt you (if, indeed, you are who you say you are). But these stories were not created for your eyes, or for your benefit. You have, of course, the right not to read them, as I suggested before! But you forfeited the right to demand that questions that you pose, in your art, not be answered or interrogated the moment that you thrust your face, your music, your art into the public realm.

This time I did not hesitate to hit the submit button. He had riled me, both with his impertinent assumptions and his catty remarks about my age. For a moment, I was tempted to go back and edit, and change that 'I'm sorry if my actions have hurt you' to a snide non-apology of something like 'I'm sorry if you were offended'. It was outrageous how he flattered himself at my expense. As if I wanted to fuck some washed-up former rock star with a penchant for play-acting outrage. As fucking if!

I hung about online for about half an hour after posting it, endlessly hitting refresh on AO3, even as I mucked about on Tumblr. A few desultory posts, some reblogs, some signal boosts later, and nothing had turned up in reply. There was a part of me that was almost disappointed, like I wanted him to come back and argue with me, tell me I was wrong, counter my arguments, you know, like the other girls did on our podcast. The play of wits and the struggle to best one another intellectually was half of the fun of doing it, though we all made sure to drink away any bruised feelings afterwards, so that it all stayed fun. But then again, if he didn't counter me, that meant I won. That meant I'd beaten him, this random internet hater - because, come on, I was not arrogant enough to believe that the real Carlos Dengler had nothing better to do with his time than argue with me. But still, I was faintly intrigued that anyone would really go to these lengths to pretend to be him. But finally I gave up and went to bed, exhausted from missing half a night's sleep the day before.

The next morning, I overslept and barely had the chance to check my email over a rushed breakfast. Nothing from my mysterious correspondent in the inbox. Work was exceptionally busy, as Judicial had come back with more data requests to pursue the Russian Hacker case, and I spent most of the day running complex algorithms and tricky bits of data analysis. When I checked my email, fleetingly, at lunch, there was still nothing. I felt a tiny spike of disappointment that he had
given up so easily, but was distracted by another email from Sunita, asking that I pick up a bottle of wine before coming over that evening. I made a note of it, and made a brief detour to Vinopolis for a nice Merlot on the walk back to London Bridge Station.

Sunita greeted me warmly as I arrived at her flat in Kentish Town, then squealed a little bit as she saw the bottle. "Ooh, this is nice! I've got the usual box of old plonk on top of the fridge, but let's get started on this before Alice and Evie arrive to swill down the whole thing in one go."

I thought it tactless to point out that it was usually Suni doing the wine-hogging, but still, I rescued the bottle after she'd poured our glasses, and put the rest aside for our expected friends. "Cheers," I said, knocking my glass against hers, as we both comically, exaggeratedly opened our eyes and stared at one another, then collapsed laughing. A couple of years previously, Alice had told us that it meant 'seven years' bad sex' if anyone failed to make eye contact while clinking wineglasses, and the in-joke had just caught on.

"So," Sunita ventured. "Have you heard any more from your mysterious outraged bassist since your last exchange last night?" All three of my friends now seemed to be watching my AO3 profile like hawks, fascinated to see how the situation developed.

My hand twitched towards my phone, but there was nothing in my inbox except a few notifications of new Tumblr followers. "No."

"Shame," she said, then extended her hand.

"Awww... no, not until Alice and Evie get here..." I protested, loathe to be separated from my tiny electronic friend, but Sunita stood firm.

"Rules are rules. We all agreed. No devices during Four Birds and a Box Set night."

Moaning and rolling my eyes, I let myself be parted from my iPhone, but soon enough Alice was knocking at the door and bounding up the stairs, surrendering her own Android to Sunita's outstretched palm. Ringers off and phones locked away in the bedroom, that was the deal.

"Is Evie not here? Oh come on, I'm starving!" She eyed the waiting pizzas on the counter with blatant lust. "Just whack them in the oven, I'm sure she'll be here by the time they're cooked, and if not... well, she should learn to get here on time!"

"I heard that," snorted Evie, banging the door closed behind her and huffing and puffing up the stairs. "Now quit your cavilling, I'm on time, so help me god and the Metropolitan Police."

Sunita put on a CD, and the four of us sprawled across the living room, drinking wine, munching pizza and gossiping and catching up. It wasn't as if the four of us didn't talk every single day - by email, by Tumblr or by Twitter or Facebook - and yet there still seemed to be an inexhaustible flow of news to be announced, speculation to be shared, and titbits of gossip and drama to be exchanged. Alice kept us up to date with her ongoing running feud with a rival lecturer at the university where she lectured, while Sunita gushed on and on about the crush she was nursing on one of the other developers at her job, and Evie kept up a running tab of which judges and QCs she suspected of conspiring against her cases. Alice and Evie both had long-term relationships to be endlessly problematised and complained over, while Sunita and I were perpetually single, and shared our dating disasters and Tinder travails.

And then, once the pizza was finished and the dishes were cleared away, Sunita poured us all one glass of wine and one glass of water each, then set up the four microphones and fixed them to our lapels. "Give me a line-check," she directed to each of us in turn, fiddling with her Mac's input
controllers to get us all balanced.

"Hi, I'm Alice. I'm the resident film buff with Four Birds and a Box Set, and I'll be guiding you through this week's new cinematic and DVD releases, as well as upcoming events you won't want to miss, on the BBC, Sky and iPlayer."

"Ey up, I'm Evie. I am your expert on comic books and graphic novels, and this week, I have something really exciting for you - special news about the new Kieron Gillen series, which we will be talking about later, in greater detail."

My turn. "Margaret here. I've got all your news about music in London this week - live bands, DJs, events, as well as a run-down on the week's best new releases, plus some excellent new mixes from around the web, and of course the weekly Soundcloud hall of shame." In the background, Sunita triggered a sound effect of booing and hissing and consternation that she'd sampled off some Bollywood comedy. Honestly, Sunita's insane samples were half the joy of the program, and never failed to set us off giggling, no matter how professional we were pretending to be.

"And I'm Sunita," she suddenly blurted out, realising that she'd almost forgotten to introduce herself. "I'm your host, every week on Four Birds and a Box Set, as well as your correspondent from the thrilling, fast-paced world of games development."

So for the next hour and a half, the four of us riffed off one another, ad libbed, and read out little pieces we had prepared earlier about our various specialities. Although the podcast was only 40 minutes - officially the exact same length as Sunita's commute, she claimed - we always recorded an hour and a half, and then cut out the ums and the ahs and the jokes that failed and the awkward silences. Not that there were many awkward silences any more. After 6 years of podcasting and video blogging together, we seemed to have developed our own little in-jokes and allusions, and odd communal sing-songs we lapsed into whenever particular topics came up. We weren't the most professional podcasters in the world, or the most slick, but I was always surprised, upon listening to the playback, how warm and funny we came off, even when we were ripping the piss out of each other.

Once the podcast was down, we sat down together and compared notes, and figured which had been the best bits of each others' segments, and the show in general. Then, with our ad-libs turned into a cohesive narrative, we sat down, by ourselves, or more commonly in pairs, in front of a video-camera and recorded a 5-minute vlog version of the podcast to stick on YouTube. Originally, the videos were supposed to be just ads for the longer podcast download, but the shorter - and possibly more slapstick - format had picked up its own viewership. We had started uploading little bite-sized vlogs over the course of the week, and over the past year, the YouTube ad revenue had almost started paying for the hosting space for our website. Our own fandom had at last started paying for itself - or perhaps started eating itself, depending on your viewpoint.

After recording was done, we always swore we were going to go straight home and get a good night's sleep so that we weren't wrecked at work the next day, but we never did. Sunita would open another bottle of wine, and Evie would put on a DVD, and the party would grow more and more raucous, until at the last minute, Alice and I would remember that neither of us actually lived there, and make a dash for the last tube. Several times, we had mistimed it, and ended up flipping coins for the lumpy sofa or the freezing cold floor.

That night, fortunately, we remembered at just about 11 on the dot, retrieved our phones and trudged out to the Northern Line. When our train came, we were still bickering faintly about the names of the robots in The Forbidden Planet and The Black Hole, resolving to look it up on Wikipedia as soon as we came above ground at London Bridge to transfer to the overground.
"Robby the Robot was in Forbidden Planet, Maximilian was in The Black Hole," Alice crowed with triumph as we stood in the large waiting area, waiting for our connections to be announced. She was waiting for the express to New Cross while I was trying to catch something headed towards either Herne Hill or Tulse Hill. "Repeat after me: Alice is always right."

"OK, OK," I conceded. "But that Interpol remix we were talking about - it's definitely by Mmoths, not by Burial."

Alice smirked at me from under her twist-out. "Speaking of which, have you heard from a certain bassist again?"

Like I hadn't been teased about it enough during the podcast - and I'd made Evie swear to edit those bits out! - she just couldn't resist getting in one last dig. But as my train wasn't due for another ten minutes, I dug in my jacket pocket and retrieved my iPhone, flicking through the email that had accumulated over the evening. "No, I haven't," I sighed, wondering why it was that I actually felt slightly disappointed by that.

"Oh well, there's my train. I gotta run!" Alice embraced me quickly, kissed me on the cheek and broke into a trot.

"Send my love to Robert!" I called after her as she disappeared behind the gate, then flicked through my iPhone to bring up the comment thread on AO3. Had I been too rough with him? Too rude? Maybe that 'sorry if my actions have hurt you but I have no intention of stopping' bit could have used some sugar coating. Ah well, it probably wasn't him anyway, and I had wasted my time arguing with some dumb hater. My train had finally arrived, so I found a seat and flicked idly through Tumblr, made a couple of snippy 'my god do Thameslink trains ever run on time to Herne Hill or is the whole line just cursed?' tweets on Twitter, and reblogged Sunita's announcement that the next Four Birds and a Box Set would be out as usual on Friday afternoon.

Evie was lucky, in that she had Friday mornings off, so she could sleep off her hangover and edit the latest podcast before going in to work to cover the late shift for what she called 'Midnight Drunk Court'. I was not so lucky, and was faced with a pounding hangover, and a frenzied rush to make it to work on time. I grabbed a takeaway breakfast on my walk from the bus stop, and ate it at my desk, blearily rubbing my eyes as I checked my work email - no major crises, thank god - then logged onto my personal gmail. My eye went straight to the new message at the top.

Archive Of Our Own: Carlos Dengler replied to your comment on Exquisite Corpse

Oh, fuck. I was not in the mood for this. Not now. Really, I should have left it until after work, should ideally have left it until after I had gone home and got a decent night's sleep and slept off my hangover and restored my sense of humour. But no, I couldn't help it, I compulsively opened the email and read the new comment in its entirety. The first thing that confronted me was my own name - not even my screen name or my AO3 author name, as I used "Pace Is The Trick" for all of my Interpol fan fiction, and "The Morgon Ambassador" for all of my Space Station Nebuchadnezzar stories. What the fucking fuck?

Margaret from Four Birds and a Box Set sat on the N68 bus to Herne Hill, clutching the exceptional South African Merlot she had purchased earlier at Vinopolis. She cackled as she leafed her way through The Cliff Notes Guide To Post-Modernism, looking for more ersatz philosophy to twist into justification for her favorite hobby. Her favorite hobby, of course, being ruining the lives of any unfortunate men whose 'celebrity' she deemed interesting enough to 'interrogate' with her depraved and
disgusting sexual imagination. For sexual imagination was all she had to go on these
days, her last few dates from OK Cupid and Tinder having ended in disaster,
embarrassment, and a considered re-evaluation of whether heterosexuality was really
for her, or if she should pursue her rampant lesbian crush on Tilda Swinton. If
lesbianism was the way forward, which was certainly in alignment with her Marxist
Feminist principles, she certainly had a choice of lush beauties from her fellow
Vloggers at Four Birds and a Box Set!

Do I need to go on, or have I made my point perfectly clear?

Carlos.
Chapter 2

My face flushed as I found my eyes involuntarily watering with embarrassment at Carlos' stalky little doxxing prank. I hated it, how when I got really, really angry, I often found myself crying, when really I wanted to scream and break something. It made me feel weak and incapable, when really, I was a seething, fist-clenched whirlwind of fury. How dare he! How absolutely dare he! I wanted to flee, to hide myself in the loo until I stopped crying, and figured out what the hell to do, but I knew I had to take action, and fast. Who knew how long that comment had just been sitting out there, for anyone to read? It hadn't been there when I checked my email at London Bridge at half eleven the previous night! I checked the timestamp - just after midnight, UK time. 7pm in New York, which meant late afternoon in California. 4BAABS's fans were not limited to London - geeks all over the world had taken to tuning in, and man, some of our fans were obsessive enough to have alerts set up to tell them whenever we updated YouTube, the podcast, our Tumblrs, anything.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I hated logging onto AO3 from work - I mean, my bosses were pretty cool with my using the web as much as I liked, and were quite relaxed about adult oriented material, considering the nature of the stuff we investigated. But I did not want that shit showing up on my browser history at work. But still. It came down to logging on at work and having it being captured in our internet log - or having my name, my local bus route, even my favourite wine shop out there broadcast for anyone who could google my name and 'Four Birds and a Box Set'. I logged onto AO3 and swiftly deleted the comment, though I made damn sure to save the email. Was there a way to send a private message to another AO3 member using their email? There had to be! I found the button on his profile, and typed out a message angrily.

OK, you've proved your point - your point being that whoever you are, you're an arsehole and a stalker! There was no reason to doxx me like that. I'm not even a celebrity; I'm just some dumb fan with a podcast that has a few thousand followers. I told you, if you're that offended by the stories, just don't read them.
Margaret

This time, it was like he was online waiting for me. A message came back by the time I'd gone to the ladies' room and washed my face to try and staunch the flow of furious tears.

Oh, I'm sorry if you were offended by my little work of art. Maybe you should try not reading my comments?
Carlos.

That little fucking shit! Emails flew fast and furious after that.

It's not anything like the same! The stories I wrote were fantasies - were total fiction. No one believes that you are a 90 year old Austrian vampire that lives in a castle in a made-up country that doesn't even exist. But you felt like you had to broadcast not just
my home, but my bus route, and shops I frequent? Do you have any idea how
dangerous that could be? Where the fuck did you get that information from, anyway?
I've very carefully kept any personal identifying information off AO3.
Margaret

I know enough to know how to google links. You post updates to AO3 on your
Tumblr, so I found your Tumblr, which told me your politics, your favorite movie
actress and the name of your podcast. Once I had the name of your podcast, finding
your twitter was easy. Maybe you should think twice about not broadcasting
information like where you live, and what bus you take, and what wine you drink, on
Twitter, if you don't want people knowing and utilizing that information.
Carlos.

Staring at the computer screen, I felt myself chilled to the bone. I was normally so careful to keep
my real name and my IRL identity so separate from my online life. My Tumblr and my twitter and
AO3 profile all had completely separate names! I spent so much time working with the nebulous
area of data protection at work, that I knew better than to have a public Facebook profile, or
advertise any personal information on websites like Google Plus and Linked In. And here this
weirdo - this total stranger - had just excavated personal details of my life with the same ease I read
liner notes. I felt... well, I felt vulnerable and more than slightly violated. And I hated feeling that
way. Fighting back tears, and hunching down below the level of the desk partitions, praying that no
one noticed how upset I was, I pounded furiously at my keyboard, though for once, I was lost for
words.

It is nothing like the same thing and you know it!
M

And what makes you think you're so fucking special, then, madam?
C.

It's not that I think I'm special, it's the *kind* of information you included, and the
intent. My stories are speculation, fantasy, not truth. And they have a purpose - a
purpose other than simply to hurt someone.
M

You don't think it's hurtful to make fun of my 'Habsburg Chin'?
C.

Abruptly, I felt the tension drain out of me, risking the edge of a smile as I wiped away a sniffle
with my shirtsleeve. Was *that* what this was about? I hadn't actually hurt him, I had just wounded
his substantial rock star pride a little?
You *do* have a massive chin, mate.
M

You only *wish* I was your mate! And I'll have you know, my agent thinks my chin is one of my more distinguishing features.
C.

Dude, your chin is so large it could single-handedly have re-militarised the Rhineland.
M

This is the level of your discourse? Smears on my appearance, and Nazi jokes? Where is the great postmodern cultural commentator now, madam?
C.

You're the one who keeps writing back. Good day to you, sir.
M

After that, there was radio silence for several minutes, so I decided that I had scored a palpable hit, chalked it up as a win, and quietly excused myself to retreat to the loo to properly blow my nose, wash my face, and try to restore my battered equanimity. I normally didn't stoop to such low tactics, but something about the guy - whoever he was - just wound me the fuck up.

On my way back from the loo, Joan from Finance accosted me, asking if she could get an expenses estimate for the Russian Hacker complaint, and then as soon as I sat down, Hardip in Compliance wanted to know if we could use the webtrends data analysis to track down some Spyware they were interested in. So it was another busy day, lunch eaten at my desk as I careened down another internet wormhole tracing down another particularly nasty Android worm that stole credit card details by tracking keypad clicks on smartphones. My job was the kind of thing I could never in a million years have explained to my Mother, but my god, when things like this kicked off, it was fascinating. I would have stayed there the rest of the night, watching the thing spread across Europe's mobile networks in realtime, but my iPhone pinged at 5.20.

'U have not forgotten," Sunita texted. "U did promise to come with me to middle-aged hipster speed-dating in Hoxditch tonight.'

I groaned aloud. I had, of course, completely forgotten. Fuck - if I'd remembered, I'd at least have remembered to dress a little better, but I'd just thrown on a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt with a waistcoat over the top to raise it from 'total dirtbag' to 'IT casual'. Digging around in my desk, I located the black silk button-down shirt I kept in the office for emergencies, in case I ever had to present evidence before a Tribunal at the last minute. There was an emergency tie in there, too - not one of the pretty paisley Liberty ties I normally favoured, but a conservative black and white striped tie that passed for professional in business meetings. Retreating to the loo again, I brushed my hair and smeared on a bit of mascara to try and tidy myself up, but there was no hiding the fact...
that I had been up past midnight at least twice this week.

There was another text message waiting for me. "Margo where are u? If u ditch me this evening I will end u, I swear 2 god.'

'I'm coming, I'm coming," I texted back quickly. 'I just had to change because I did not want 2 face the third degree over how scruffy my clothes are. C U @ the Queen in half an hour. x'

As I logged onto the TFL website to check whether it was quicker to walk, take the bus or the new Overground, I heard my phone ping again. Oh, for fucks sake, Suni, a little less hassling and a little more letting me get on with things, and I might make it by six. But as I picked up my phone, I saw it was not the text that had dinged, but the email.

Archive Of Our Own: New Private Message from: Carlos Dengler

I knew I should not have opened it. I knew I should not have risked my job yet again by logging back onto AO3 at work. I knew that if I let myself get caught up in Carlos Being Wrong On The Internet, that I would be there all night, and I would never get out in time to meet Sunita at the Queen of Hoxditch. And still, like the addicted fool I was, I found myself logging back on for Round 3 (or Round 4, I was losing track) of our little flamewar.

Yet the message I found waiting for me stopped me in my tracks.

Margaret. You are correct. I could have chosen at any point, to stop reading the stories. I did not. Therefore, I am as much to blame for my reaction as you. But the truth is, I could not stop reading the stories, even had I wanted to - and I didn't want to. I got hooked. The comments other readers have left on your stories indicate that this is a common predicament.

A few days ago, an old friend sent me the link to your story, Sudden-Onset Celebrity, saying that she thought it was something I might enjoy. She was right; I started reading, and quickly found myself swept up in the plot, the characters, the memories of the NYC I knew in the 90s. I thought nothing in the world could ever make me feel nostalgia for that desperate world of the unsigned musician, and yet your story brought it all back, the excitement, the hope, the burgeoning dreams. I identified so strongly with the character of Dieter Finkel, it was like looking into a warped mirror. I know you explicitly stated that he was a fictional character based only loosely on my former band, and more on other people you had known, but his arrogance tempered with vulnerability, his charisma and intellect tinged with deep insecurity... I felt I knew him, and intimately. He was drawn with such sensitivity and grace that I forgave the lapses, and even the awful homoerotic subplot made a certain kind of sense. I gobbled the whole thing down, all 300,000 words, in just over two days, stopping only for meals and sleep.

When I was finished - despite the unexpected happy ending - I felt almost bereft, as if I'd lost a friend. On one level I had to laugh - your Daniel Asheton is absolutely nothing like the Dan Kessler I knew. But he felt like someone I had known, or at least wanted to know. So I plunged on. I read The Deep Field in a delicious daze. At first I identified strongly with Alex Jones, the romantic anti-hero, of course - and then found myself drawn deeper and deeper into empathy with Kate Gordon, until halfway through the second instalment, I found myself hopelessly in love with her, and actually shouting at the laptop screen with every poor life choice she made, even as I
understood why she was making them. I don't think you can quite understand the significance, if I tell you - it made me miss being in a band, both the camaraderie and the backstabbing personal politics. She even made me miss playing the bass guitar. And I *loathe* the bass.

So you can imagine my surprise and disappointment, when I opened up Exquisite Corpse, and saw my own name, but not drawn with empathy and refinement as your other characters, but cast as a monster, a grotesque caricature. I was hurt, and deeply, that you could paint others with such sensitivity, and yet render me such a joke.

I want you to understand; I am not opposed to your art or your oeuvre. To be honest, I was captivated by your heady mix of pop culture and highbrow cultural criticism allusions. I normally do my best to avoid any kind of music journalism - insert your own joke about dancing to celebrate architecture - but something about your stories caught me, hooked me, landed me, until I found myself wondering about you. You must have been in a band at one time yourself, to write with such precision about soundchecks and recording studios. I felt I knew you; which is why I felt so personally betrayed by your 'Baron Von D'Engler'.

Consider this an olive branch, madam, and a genuine request to understand why you treated me as you did, rather than a mere condemnation.

Yours sincerely,
Carlos.

I blinked a few times, unable to fully comprehend what I was reading. Had that creepy arsehole just given me a *compliment*?" He hated my stories, he thought they were 'disgusting' and 'degrading' and 'grotesque' and yet he couldn't stop reading them, because he identified so strongly with the characters? What a fucking mind-fuck. Half of me wanted to sit down and immediately start composing a reply telling him that his mind-games would not work on me, and whoever he was, could he please just leave me alone and respect my privacy. The other half of me was intrigued, wanted to sit down and show this email to one of my friends - either Alice, with her suspicious mind, or Evie, with her penetrating lawyer's logic - and ask, look, what the fuck do you think this is really about?

But as I pulled my chair closer to the desk to bring up gmail, a ding sounded, and a glowing green rectangle appeared on my iPhone's lock screen. A text from Sunita: 'Where. The hell. Are you. This place is overloaded with creepy banker types. If U don't get here in the next 10, I swear to god I will give *your* phone number to the next Jemble who asks for my digits.'

I looked at the email from Carlos, then looked at the text from my best friend. Fuck. With a heavy heart, I shut down the computer, texted back that I had been delayed at work, then grabbed my coat and was on my way.

With the help of the 47 bus and the East London line, I made it to Shoreditch in a record 17 minutes and slunk in through the door of the Queen of Hoxditch only half an hour late. Sunita had not exaggerated - she was indeed cornered on a comfortable sofa, surrounded by a bevy of incredibly drunk City Boys in ugly, ill-tailored suits that probably cost more than I made in a month. Although, I did notice a half-emptied bottle of Dom Perignon or two on the table in front of them, so Sunita hadn't been doing too badly out of the imposition. But still, she caught my eye with an expression of abject loathing and mouthed "Help! Me!" as I approached.
Sunita just had that effect on men, no matter where she went. She was tiny - maybe five foot nothing in her bare feet - and her huge, brown startled-fawn eyes, ringed heavily with black lashes, just gave off a kind of 'rescue me' bat-signal to every idiot in a ten metre radius. And she was dressed to kill tonight, in a low-cut dress that flattered her rather plump figure, and made the most of her generous bosom and hourglass waist, matched with a slightly kinky pair of black riding boots that came up to her knees.

But as I approached, she caught my eye, then distinctly said, aloud "Look, do any of you know what time the next train to Wimbledon leaves?" That had long been a private in-joke between us. Any time either of us mentioned the word 'Wimbledon' in a dating environment, that meant the other one had got to get us out of that conversation, and fast. For a moment, I almost laughed at her predicament, and was tempted to leave her to her new admirers, but then loyalty tugged me to action.

"Excuse me. Are you hitting on my girlfriend?" I announced gruffly, pulling myself up to my full height as I pushed my way between them. Clearly, it was a risk to take that kind of action with a bunch of pissed-up bankers, but the intimidation bluff worked. For some reason, I was never quite their idea of saucy lesbo action. "I'm sorry, but could you please leave? Nita, you are in trouble when we get home."

"Ooh, I hope so," tittered Sunita, camping it up a bit, and for a second it looked like there was almost going to be trouble, as one of the banker-boys started to snicker and give her the eye again. But I moved closer to him, hands on my hips, jaw set, and tapped the toe of my motorcycle boots impatiently as I glared at him, and he, too, backed down and slunk off. "You enjoyed that, didn't you?" she laughed, as I picked up the remnants of the bottle of DP and flopped down beside her on the faux-leather couch.

"Maybe," I giggled, swigging down the expensive champagne - now lukewarm, unfortunately, but fuck it. I couldn't afford DP on my salary.

"You didn't even try, with your clothes, did you?" she tutted, adjusting my tie to loosen it slightly.

"I tried a lot; this is my good court shirt!" I protested, tightening my tie again. "I mean, it's not like I'm going to meet the love of my life at a fucking 80s-indie-rock-themed Speed Dating event in fucking Shoreditch, am I?"

"You're never going to meet anyone with that attitude, love," Sunita snapped back, sounding for an instant almost exactly like her mother.

"Fine with me. I got Bauhaus B-sides and I got Space Station Nebuchadnezzar box sets. What do I need a bloke for? Just one more thing to clutter up the flat."

"You don't fool me," sighed Suni, rehearsing the by-now completely familiar argument. "I know there's a big bruised romantic lurking under the cynical exterior."

"Nope, under the cynical exterior, there is an even more cynical and withered and thwarted heart lurking below." I winced as I realised I was echoing Carlos' words, and quickly pushed him out of my thoughts.

"I don't believe you," said Sunita, steering me up out of our comfortable sofa and guiding me towards the stairs, where an awkward looking queue of hopeful middle aged dads were trying to recapture their youths in faded Smiths T-shirts and too-tight leather jackets. "You know what your problem with men is?"
"I don't care but I know you're going to tell me anyway."

"You intimidate the hell out of them. You're too intense, too competitive, too ambitious, too know-it-all, too... too."

"So I should make myself less interesting, less clever in case men find that threatening and just generally... less. Thank you, 200 years of feminism. Now I can sleep easy," I sneered, rolling my eyes.

Rolling her own eyes back at me, Sunita tapped her fingernails against her arms impatiently and shifted her weight from boot to boot as if trying to work out which angle best suited her rather too-short legs. But already, she was losing interest in me and scoping out the rest of the queue, checking out both the 'merchandise' on display - the sad dads in leather jackets - and the competition. At least it was somewhat reassuring that everyone else was also in the late 30s and early 40s, although one of the dads looked to be pushing 50 at the youngest, and oh Christ, of course that was the one staring at me. I glared right back until he had the dignity to look away. But a pair of the dads had approached Sunita - I mean, already! In the bloody queue, no less.

"Are you here for 80s-indie-dating?" the scruffier dad asked. "I wasn't sure if we were in the right place."

As I fought the urge to tell him, no, we were lined up to check out the latest Speed Metal sensation from Argentina, Sunita smiled sweetly and told him "I believe it is, or I'm in the wrong place, too."

"I find it hard to believe that a lady as lovely as yourself would be reduced to speed-dating," scruffy dad opened with, and it took every fibre of my being not to groan aloud.

"Ah, you're very kind," Sunita simpered and blushed a little bit, playing with one curl of her cascading brunette hair - Sunita, who I had seen rip one of the directors of EA Europe a new asshole for not offering enough female characters options on one of their most popular games. Simpered. And though the guy she was flirting with was particularly unattractive, I realised her game when I spotted the far more attractive and well-preserved friend that he had come with. Oh Christ, no. Two of them, two of us? I was not playing this game. "So what do you do for a living," she asked, twirling her hair some more. "If it's not against the rules to do a little... preliminary getting-to-know-one-another, before the event?"

"I work in upper level management for a large national supermarket chain. It doesn't sound that interesting, but it's, uh... lucrative and financially rewarding enough."

Not that interesting? It makes my eyes bleed with boredom just thinking about it, I wanted to counter, but Sunita smiled like her teeth had been rubbed with Vaseline. "Really? I suppose you could get me a discount on my internet grocery order?" she asked brightly, and both of them chuckled a bit. Gag me.

"May be... And what about you? Do you work?"

"Oh, I just have a little job in the Games Industry..." Sunita shrugged.

"Games Industry... what, like gambling, or like videogames?" scruffy dad asked, brightening slightly.

"Videogames. I... uh... Oh, it's just a little thing in the PR Department, promoting new releases and the like," Sunita lied, and I gasped aloud as I turned to confront her, but she elbowed me before I could leap to counter her. For f**ks sake, Sunita was a senior developer with a dozen years'
experience of coding. 'Little job in the PR department'? My arse!

Abruptly, my senses tingled, and I felt a weird invasion of my personal space. As I stepped back a few inches to evaluate, I realised that well preserved dad was actually playing with my tie. "Nice tie," he said, observing me carefully from under long eyelashes. He wasn't really bad-looking, though most definitely not my type, and he still had all of his own teeth and most of his hair, but speed dating event or not, touching me without my permission like that, that bothered me.

"Thank you," I almost snarled, seizing it back from him.

"So I suppose I ought to ask you what you do for a living," he continued.

"I'm a lion-tamer, actually," I announced casually.

He laughed. "You're quite funny. No, what are you, really?"

I stared at him, hard, feeling bored and impatient already, a dangerous combination, and some devil overtook my better judgement. "Alright, you got me. I'm a sheep-farmer by trade. In the Outer Hebrides. I just came down to London so Suni wouldn't have to go to this thing alone."

A slight look of relief crossed well preserved dad's face. "Well, to be honest, I'm only really here as moral support for Bill, myself. He's perpetually single, and needs a bit of encouragement or he'd never go out. I'm, uh... actually I'm engaged to be married, next year."

It wasn't like I was disappointed. I'd had no hopes for the guy myself, but maybe my inner sense of justice was offended. "Well, you're going to be a barrel of fun at speed dating, then."

"Oh, hey," he replied, his eyes flashing with mischief. "There's nothing that says I can't have a little fun at one of these things!"

That little devil in charge of my judgement seized hold of the gears and threw them into overdrive. "Oh, I like a little fun myself. You know what the most fun part of being a sheep farmer is?" I cocked my head and raised an eyebrow, smiling back at him mischievously.

"And what would that be?" He moved closer again, though I tucked my tie away to keep him from grabbing at it.

"What I really love is a good old castration party. We gather together all the frolicking young males - ah, the ones we're going to let live past their first year, that is - and then we gather them together in a barn, hog-tie them so they can't move, then we bind this really sharp cord, ever so tightly, around their testicles. After a couple of weeks of them running around like that, their balls just turn blue and drop off, in the field. It's fantastic fertiliser for the grass, you know - though I hear in some Eastern European countries, they gather them up, as they're supposed to be a delicacy to eat, sheep's balls."

It was worth it. It was worth every excruciatingly awkward exchange of the rest of the evening, just for the look of horror on well preserved dad's face.

Sunita hadn't even heard the whole exchange, but she was still giving me shit about it, even on the bus ride back to the Overground. Sunita, of course, had done very well out of the evening, coming home with a fistful of phone numbers, examining the frankly embarrassing little chart that detailed which of the bachelors had offered her their phone numbers.

"Well, 7 out of 8 bachelors isn't bad," Sunita purred. "Everyone except Jim... which one was Jim. Wait, was he the ancient wrinkly who loved Iggy Pop's plastic trousers a bit too much?"
"No. Jim was the well-preserved dad," I smirked. "It must have been when you told him your special dinner party dish was lamb biryani. I think he has a sheep allergy."

"So how many phone numbers did you get?"

"None," I announced proudly.

"What?" She seized my sheet and stared at it in disbelief. "Even that scary woman who smelled faintly of cats and cared just that bit too much about Morrissey managed to get at least one phone number. Though I do feel sorry for her if she gets stuck on a date with that horribly boring middle manager at Sainsburys... How did you get no phone numbers. Oh christ, look at your answers to the quiz. No wonder."

"What? My answers are great."

"Name your favourite 80s indie-rock lyric and see if your partner can identify the song and the band: 'Something small falls out of your mouth and we laugh. Just a piece of new meat in a clean room.' Margo, honestly." She shook her head at me despairingly.

"What? It is my favourite lyric. And not one person got it. A Hundred Years by The Cure, off Pornography. Best opening track of an album, ever."

"That is it! I give up on you!" snorted Suni, as she stood up to get off the bus at the High Street, though I was staying on to London Bridge again. "You are going to be single until you are 100, die alone and be eaten by Alsatians!"

"Good!" I shouted back as she disappeared down the stairs. "I love dogs! Dogs are way better than people. I could turn and live with animals..."

I was in a fairly good mood when I got home, still buzzing from the half-price drinks, but as I walked in the door and flung my jacket and bag on top of the coat rack, my eyes caught suddenly on the laptop left casually out on the sofa. Archive Of Our Own. Carlos. I felt a sudden odd swooping feeling in my stomach as I remembered that weird, abruptly ingratiating email of the afternoon. No, I was certainly not drunk enough to handle this, so I trudged through into the kitchen and found another glass of wine. Then I sat down on the sofa, and read my way through his bizarre 'olive branch' email. Really, I should have just fired back something facetious, something bitchy and sharp, but I had exhausted just about all of my bitchiness and sharpness at the speed dating event. So I hit reply, and gave him tired and disillusioned and slightly drunk, instead.

Carlos. I am glad that my other stories brought you some small amusement. This is their intended purpose, and I am always pleased to hear that they have touched people in some way. Of course everyone loves and responds to Dieter; he’s a loveable rogue, an unfettered id who gets all the best lines and is allowed to speak aloud all of the urges that the rest of us feel, but never dare to express. Similarly, Kate Gordon - all id, no filter.

I suppose at this point, you expect me to confess to my past: yes, back in the 90s, I spent 3 or 4 years in a BritPop band so minor we had barely 2 singles and a Peel session to our name. (Even Google has pretty much forgotten us, it seems, which feels like an accomplishment in and of itself.) If the 'Ludlow St' of Sudden-Onset Celebrity feels so familiar, it's because it was based so heavily on the Camden Town of my own 1996. I have no answers for you, all my nostalgia is false, borrowed.
But here is where I warn you: do not mistake the art for the artist, this is a schoolboy error. I am not Kate Gordon - or Dieter Finkel - I am not that witty, that charming, or that beautiful. Your first assessment was correct; I am a withered and thwarted middle aged woman rewriting my own past the way I wished it had happened, not the way it did. You want an explanation for 'Baron Von D'Engler'? I suppose in a way, he is my own dark mirror. In direct contradiction of what I've just told you (and something I hope you, as a trained actor, understand) as a writer, I make my characters *appear* so alive by imbuing them with some part of my own personality. Into the Baron went all of my weariness, my age, my ennui, my eternal dissatisfaction with certain aspects of my life. If he's not a likeable character, maybe it's because I don't like myself very much sometimes.

I think it's probably better if we don't carry on a conversation on this topic. There is the capacity for too many bruised feelings and crossed wires. It's impossible to explain, even to other writers sometimes, what fiction is, and how it works. How a character can both be and not-be oneself or another at the same time, like some sub-atomic quantum weirdness? Except the reader's interpretation and projection does not crystallise a true reality into being, but only creates another, equally valid possible reality. The "I" of the story both is, and is not, me. The "He" both is, and is not, you. I'm sorry; I lack the words to adequately explain. I don't think we should continue talking. So goodbye, kind sir.

Margaret

I read the email over half a dozen times before I had the courage to send it. And then I collapsed into bed. In the morning, there was one more email, but I did not need to log onto AO3 to see more.

I understand, though I wish you felt a different way, as I feel I understand you perfectly. But I will respect your wishes, and not trouble you again. Thank you for the explanation. I remain, your humble servant, etc.

C.
I had a pleasant enough weekend. On Saturday morning, I met Alice and Robert for brunch in New Cross, then spent the afternoon wandering around the market in Greenwich. I liked Robert, he was a solid, thoughtful, dependable bloke, and it warmed my heart how completely respectful - perhaps even worshipful - he was towards Alice, whether her friends were around or not. British guys and American girls - I knew it was a cliché, how much they were supposed to be attracted to one another. (American guys and British girls - that, however, always seemed like a disaster.) However, in their case, the bond seemed to be genuine. But I'll be honest, spending hours at a time with a happily besotted married couple was something I tried to limit my exposure to, especially considering my experiences of the past few days.

It was actually quite a relief to get on a train to Hollywood Green Cinema, all the way at the other end of London, to meet Evie for the Saturday afternoon two for one special on cheesy superhero films.

"Aw, it's such a shame Alice didn't want to join us," she said, slightly snidely, when I told her where I'd been all afternoon.

"You're very funny," I replied flatly, not wanting to be caught up in their quibbles, friendly or not. Alice might have been a massive film buff, and was obsessed with cult films, art films and international cinema, but really, she drew the line at a Hollywood blockbuster like The Winter Soldier. Discretely, I changed the subject. "How's Harry?"

Evie rolled her eyes and sighed deeply. "He's alright. Same old, same old." Same old was a problem - Evie and Harry were one of those couples who seemed to have stayed together for so long that their long history of tangled resentments seemed to be the only thing they had in common any more. But I knew better than to question her any further. "Shall we get chocolate or beer - or both?"

"Ugh, I don't even want to look at a beer after the week I've had. Chocolate, please."

"Yeah, alright," nodded Evie. "And then I need to stop by the Ladies' to find some towels to sit on during the film, because oh my god, Bucky fucking Barnes..."

I burst out laughing as we picked out the smallest box of Revels - which was still larger than the size of my head - and joined the queue for the register. "I thought you were in love with Steve Rogers last week."

"I was... but then I read the most amazing Hurt/Comfort fic on AO3 a few days ago, and oh my god, I am so... did you ever read one of those AU fics that just totally changes your entire perception of a character?"

"Ugh, I don't even want to talk about AO3 right now," I groaned.

"Oh yeah..." As we reached the counter, I tried to hand a ten pound note to the cashier, but Evie pushed it out of the way and insisted on paying for the lot. "Whatever happened with that mystery Carlos guy. Did you ever hear back from him - or work out who it really was?"

"Wow, that one got really weird really fast," I sighed, as we found our way upstairs and pushed our way to the front of the cinema, so close that we were almost resting our eyeballs on the screen - another thing that would have irritated Alice, who always preferred to watch films from exactly
halfway back. As we settled into our spots, I filled her in on the most recent activity with my AO3 admirer.

Evie narrowed her eyes as she tried to process the events of the past week. "So you're telling me - after insulting you, accusing you of insulting him, stalking you and then doxxing you - he suddenly decides he wants to be your best friend because he's in love with one of your OCs?"

"I know, right?" I shrugged, barely believing it was real myself. "Fucked up. I'm as surprised as you are."

"When you've worked in the judicial system as long as I have, nothing surprises you any more. Men are all fucked up. It's not their fault, I mean, they're basically lied to their entire lives by patriarchy, until they take out their frustrations that the world isn't the way they were taught it should be on the women around them, but yeah. Fucked up."

"Thank you, Germaine Greer," I quipped.

"Hey, if I were you, I'd be filing for a restraining order right now."

"He lives in New York, Eve. What's he gonna do?" I snorted.

"Firstly, what proof do you have that he is actually who he says he is? Sounds like he's awfully familiar with the London bus system for a guy who supposedly lives in New York. Secondly, if he is, as you suspect, an international rock star..."

"Former international rock star. He retired, rather dramatically, from 'celebrity' about four years ago."

"Still, what is to stop him from turning up in London, if he gets a real bee in his bonnet about you?"

"I know, let me call Interpol." I mimed using my mobile. "Hello, Interpol? I'd like you to make an international arrest; I'm being cyber-stalked by a member of Interpol."

"Former member of Interpol," Evie pointed out helpfully, with her lawyer's sense of accuracy. "But come on, I'm serious. You know I deal with these kinds of cases all the time. Just last month, we had a case where a woman responded to a guy's request for the time at a bus stop - that's all! Just told him, it's twenty past eleven - and he decided that she was in love with him, and stalked her from house to house, job to job for six years, before we finally got him behind bars."

I stared at her, aghast. "You know, there are times when I wish I knew less about your job. It might make it easier for me to like the world, and the men in it more. But... come on. Just because this stuff happens to some people doesn't mean you have to live your entire life in fear of it happening to you. I mean, I deal with some of the nastiest beasties in the online world - I spend my whole day digging out hackers and malware and spyworms. Doesn't mean I don't fuck up and occasionally post my bus route or my favourite wine shop on Twitter."

"And look where that got you. An former American rock star for a stalker."

"Technically, he's not stalking me. After that last email, where I told him I didn't think it would be... constructive for either of us to continue the conversation, he did actually apologise, give up and leave me alone."

"Yeah, well if you hear the slightest whisper out of him, ever again, you let me know, OK..." But her voice was cut off as the theatre lights dimmed, and the screen started showing previews in
anticipation of the main event. "Ooh! Ooh, Bucky Barnes!" whimpered Evie beside me, followed closely by "Ah, Steve... Steve, Steve... aaaaaah."

Later that evening, after four hours of absolutely enjoyable trash, we spilled out into the cool evening air of Wood Green, and decided to catch a bus down to Green Lanes to get Turkish food. Harry, of course, had texted to ask if he could join us, but Evie told him to get lost, and go out with his football mates, and leave us to our girls' night out.

"I'm not even sure why you have a boyfriend sometimes," I told Evie as we caved in and ordered half a carafe of sweet Turkish wine.

"Are you kidding?" I see what you and Sunita go through, on OKC and Tinder and 80s-indie-speed-dating-nights. Why the hell would I willingly subject myself to that?"

"Because it's better than spending the rest of your life with someone you don't even like?"

"I like Harry just fine. I just like him... not to come along on our girls' out nights. Anyway, let's not talk about Harry any further than we have to. I'm curious... can you show me a picture of this former American rock star stalker?"

I knew she was deliberately changing the subject, but I shrugged, pulled out my iPhone and started to GIS for Interpol (band). Almost immediately, Evie poked a stubby finger towards an old Our Love To Admire era photo shoot where Paul, inexplicably, was dressed as a tennis ace, Olympics medallion and all. "Ooh, who's he? He's Steve Rogers adjacent... please tell me that he's not your stalker."

I loaded the full picture, looking down into Carlos' slightly disgruntled, slightly arrogant face, distorted by that ugly moustache. Even as far back as OLTA, it was obvious from their expressions that the fun had gone out of it, for him. "Nope. Guess again."

Evie studied them with her careful, even, solicitor's gaze. "That one," she pronounced, the tip of her finger tracing the hideous moustache. "I'm right, am I not? Never trust a man with dodgy facial hair, he's always got something to hide."

"I'll remind you of that, the next time you want to drag me to a Wolverine film."

"Wolverine's sideburns are hot," she pronounced. "Kinda like this Steve Rogers adjacent blond in the white. Who is he?"

"The singer. He has an unfortunate name."

"And an unfortunate dress sense." Evie's lips curled up in a tight smile. "I always like the singers. I think it's the exhibitionist thing, with frontmen. But I could have sworn moustache man here was the frontman. He just has that kind of look about him, that awkwardly ostentatious way of dressing."

"Everyone thinks that. But nope, he's the bassist."

"The John Taylor of the band," Evie observed. "I see." Now Evie's conception of rock music, truly, had not moved on since 1995. All archetypes came back to two bands for her - Duran Duran and Take That, though truly, she had almost entirely lost interest in music after Robbie left Take That.

"Does he look like the kind of guy that would stalk a girl across two continents?" I shrugged. Funnily enough, I had thought that looking at the photo would make me feel weird, but oddly, it made me convinced I had made the right decision in ending the conversation. The man in the
comments and emails, he had been enough of an irritant to get under my skin, occupy my thoughts and make me wonder about him. But Carlos Dengler, this pretentious fool with an ill-advised moustache and a bad bolo tie, I knew him instantly as no real threat to my peace of mind. Not interested.

Evie squinted at the photo, then nodded sharply. "Frankly, I don't trust anyone."

"Come on, a guy that famous could get anyone he wanted. Girls just throw themselves at blokes in bands. Why would he hassle someone as clearly disinterested as me?"

"But that's the problem. Tossers like that? Massive entitlement issues. They just can't comprehend the idea that someone could say no to them. They're the worst. Seriously, Margo, if you have any trouble with him, let me know. Listen, I know judges. I can speed along the process of getting a restraining order."

"Yeah, and I have been hearing all about your troubled relationship with the various judges of London for about five years now," I teased. "If I needed a restraining order quickly, you are the last solicitor I would go to."

"Hey, I do not have a problem with the judges themselves. My problem is that fucking... old boys' club that they form when they get together with the QCs, like you know they have just had lunch together at their private club, and you don't even get a look-in on your case."

"Your problem is not actually QCs. Your problem is, that you are fundamentally jealous of QCs. I do not understand why you do not just go for the training, and go through the networking to become a Barrister yourself."

"Do you have any idea how long it takes to become a Barrister?" Evie huffed.

"I know it'll take half the time if you start now, than if you wait another five years, hemming and hawing and huffing over how long it takes."

"Alright, alright, I'll look into the courses on Monday."

"No you won't. You'll get caught up in whatever crisis you end up firefighting at work, and you'll forget all about it. Put a reminder in your phone, and look into it tomorrow, when you're working off your hangover, and you'll have nothing better to do," I teased.

I spent my own Sunday in bed with the laptop on my knees, drinking tea, eating buttery toast and staring at the blank page at the end of the RTF of Exquisite Corpse. My co-writer had emailed it over at some ungodly hour of the morning, Californian time, and I looked forward to chortling with fiendish glee over his latest contribution, before adding several pages of my own. But I felt stuck, totally stalled, unable to write the character of the Baron with quite the malevolent joy I had before. I could no longer see him as a fun, ridiculous cartoon character to play with. Reading him, I saw only the limitations and distortions that had offended Carlos, perhaps rightly. The writing just wouldn't come, the prose felt lumpen and heavy in my hands.

Curse that asshole for spoiling my fun! Connecting to my wifi, I pointed my laptop's browser at AO3, and re-read those last two odd emails from Carlos, then read my reply. Wait, come back, I wanted to protest. I didn't mean it like that. Maybe I do want to talk about it with you, why I made him such an asshole, why I treated him like a toy for my own amusement, and why I'm having such trouble with him now. But it's hard to work that trick, to put on someone's skin like a mask, and walk around inside it in some creepy literary trick, when you've spent so much time arguing with someone on the internet that they've started to seem like a genuine human being, rather than a
mythical archetype to don like a superhero costume.

After an hour of staring at an empty text editor, I gave up, and fetched my Space Station Nebuchadnezzar box set, flipping through the discs until I found the episode I had been looking through. The villain of the first two seasons - a disgruntled diplomat turned reluctant freedom fighter, after the invasion of his homeworld - had totally freaked out on strange alien drugs, hallucinogens which functioned to boost telepathic abilities and take the user on a wild joyride through another's mind. While on this crazy psychedelic trip, he had attacked the rival diplomat whose planet had invaded his, only to be interrupted by the sudden appearance of a genuine religious vision - a prophet from his planet's distant past, telling him to abandon hatred and concentrate on saving his people.

Me and the 4BAABB girls, we had all argued for hours over what, exactly, the vision had meant, replaying the scene over and over, especially the reveal at the end, where it was insinuated that the ambassador for one of the other alien species, vastly older and more advanced than the others, had planted the vision deliberately. It functioned as the turning point for the character's story arc, as he turned from terrorist into great spiritual leader, eventually penning the religious tome for the next generation.

Now I knew that I was no freedom fighter, and Carlos was no vision, but I felt troubled by the events of the past week, in a way I couldn't easily shake. Finally, when the episode was over, I emailed my co-writer and told him - 'you can put your chapter up now, it's fine. But if you have any other plot bunnies lying around for the next couple of chapters, go ahead and write them, because I am blocked.'

'You're kidding. You, Ms. 15,000 Words-A-Day? You're blocked? Never thought I'd see the day!' my co-writer, known as The Scarlet Pimp, wrote back a few minutes later.

'I get blocked,' I told him. 'Everybody gets blocked sometimes.'

About ten minutes later, there was another email from The Scarlet Pimp in my inbox with the title 'holy fucking shit.' I opened it with a sinking heart, suddenly realising I had forgotten to tell him about our little visitor to our story - I'd just assumed that comment notifications went to all of writers on any given work, not just the author of the specific chapter.

'I've uploaded it, but... Pace, have you been promoting our story anywhere? Like on your podcast or something?'

'Hell no,' I replied. 'There's fannish life, and then there's *fannish fan fiction* life, and never the twain shall meet.'

'Any ideas why our read count has suddenly shot up overnight, then?'

'oh fuck....'

I logged onto AO3 with an aching feeling in my chest. The last time I'd looked at it - to answer Carlos' comment - it had still been hovering around the 500 reads mark, pretty respectable for a small indie-music bandom, if I might say so myself, but nothing major by AO3 standards. The read count now stood at 25,293. And in the time between my staring, gobsmacked at that read count on my dashboard, and my clicking into the story itself to see if there were any new comments, it had risen to 25,438. There was only one additional comment, but it told me everything I needed to know: 'Anonymous: LOL, Carlos, is that really u?'

Oh, fuck you, Carlos, I muttered to myself, panicking vaguely, even as my mind went into
automatic. Change the settings - disable commenting, freeze existing comments. There was no fucking way I wanted my email overrun by mad comments from crazy Interpol fangirls all night. My iPhone pinged, and I cringed at the sound, but a quick check revealed that it was only The Scarlet Pimp.

'what the fuck is going on, Pace? why did u just turn off commenting!'  

'look at the comments on chapter 8,' I shot back, mentally cursing that fucking asshole, Carlos. So much for the polite facade - it seemed if he couldn't get me to speak to him directly, he would set his entire fan club on me?

'i am looking at the comments on chapter 8. u seem to have had an entire flame war with carlos d, and u didn't see fit to tell me? u didn't INVITE me?'

'I'm sorry, Scarlet. I kinda had other things on my mind. And I honestly didn't realise you weren't getting the notifications, too.' Come to think of it, it did strike me as odd that Scarlet hadn't even mentioned the flame thread, let alone joined in. Scarlet was the one with the massive fan-boner for Carlos D. He was, in fact, the one that had started the whole vampire fan fiction idea off, back on Tumblr, after finding a publicity shot of Carlos, half-naked, dressed as Doctor Frankenfurter for a student production of the Rocky Horror Picture Show.

'holy shit. he read our fic - and HATED it? i don't kno whether to be insulted or amused. hell, i kinda want to get a twibbon and stick it on all my social media - 'OFFICIALLY HATED BY CARLOS D.' that's gotta have some major interpol cred.'

Scarlet was taking it better than I was expecting, but for some reason, I decided to leave out the other half of the story - the bit about the stalking, and then the lengthier but politer conversation after that. I couldn't accurately say what made me do it - maybe I wanted to spare him something, preserve his fandom in its first flush, protect him from the knowledge of what a true arsehole Carlos Dengler could really be. But the other half - the half I didn't want to admit. Maybe, really, I was jealous of Scarlet - jealous of his youth, jealous of his popularity on Tumblr and AO3 - and wanted to keep this tiny compliment from a pop star to myself.

'You know what, Scarlet, maybe we should lay off publishing any further chapters, until we get to the bottom of what's going on?'

'Are you kidding? u don't want to capitalize on our newfound success, and our amazing exposure? this is officially the best thing that's ever happened to me on the internet!'  

'I'm just going to leave it for a couple of days, OK?' I shot back, and logged off my email before he could write back to protest. I went back and read that last email from Carlos, the one where he'd promised to leave me alone, and shook my head despairingly at the screen. "You fucking arsehole," I said aloud to the plain, dark red font of his text. For a terrible moment, I was tempted to shoot off an angry reply to him... but no. That was probably exactly what he wanted. I'll show you, Mr Dengler, I thought to myself, and went to bed, though I knew I wasn't going to get much sleep that night.

I was a wreck at work the next day. I didn't even want to look at my inbox. There were a dozen messages in there from fans who had discovered that although they couldn't reply to comments on Exquisite Corpse, they could still leave comments on my other stories, most of them some vapid variant on 'CARLOS I LOVE YOUUUUUUU!!!!" or 'CARLOS U WANKER GET FUCKED & GO DIE IN A FIRE!!!!!!' Jesus Christ, I'd known Interpol fans were kind of intense from Tumblr, but this just made me feel really, deeply weird. No wonder the guy was such a paranoiac ego case, with that kind of treatment as part of his ordinary life.
At lunchtime, I finally decided to risk it, and logged onto AO3 for the third time in as many days, praying that the other IT staff weren't going to check the web manifest too carefully. Most of the time, they trusted us that whatever dodgy stuff we were going after was part of our jobs - and our jobs often involved pursuing some very dodgy parts of the deepweb indeed! - but there was no way I could justify spending so much work time on a fan fiction archive. In fact, when I'd been recruited, I had signed some very complicated legal papers promising that I would do nothing online to bring my employer, or the government agency that signed our mandate, into disrepute. Now I wasn't a legal expert, but I was not entirely sure how much repute dodgy sexual fantasies involving casting former rock stars as rapacious vampires seriously involved.

Swiftly, I started going through the new comments, just mass deleting any screen name I didn't recognise. When I was nearly finished, I suddenly saw my Direct Messages inbox ping. Oh fuck. If the indie-rock hordes had worked out how to register for the site and send me DMs, I was going to have to delete my account. But my stomach flip-flopped when I saw the name in my inbox.

Margaret. I cannot believe I trusted you enough to actually attempt to have a normal, dignified conversation with you. And this is how you repay me? Kindly unlock your account so I can delete those messages, *immediately*!
Carlos.

I shot back another DM, furious.

Me? You think *I* did this? Fuck you, you utter arsehole, and call off your zombie groupie army, then maybe I will start to think about letting you anywhere near my work ever again!
M

What are you talking about? You sold me out to Brooklyn Vegan - you and your little vlogger mates. I had nothing to do with this. I am the victim here. Now delete those messages this instant!
C.

I took a deep breath, and opened the homepage of Brooklyn Vegan, to see the news item displayed proudly at the top. "Interpol's Carlos D Breaks Internet Silence To Feud With Vloggers on Fan Fiction Archive" it declared, so I clicked the link, feeling the bottom drop out of my stomach.

'The weird world of fan fiction is one of the oddest corners of online fandom. Wizards from Harry Potter rub shoulders with superheroes from the Marvel Universe, while pop stars engage in kinky goings on with everyone from the Star Trek crew to Roy Orbison and a roll of cling-film. (Don't ask. Google it if you don't believe it.) But in the last episode of popular British Vlog, Four Birds And A Box Set, it was revealed that none other than Interpol's erstwhile bassist had taken an angry stance against a depiction of himself as a Victorian Vampire, written by AO3 user 'Pace Is The Trick', later revealed to be none other than Margo, the music correspondent from 4BAABS.
What the fuck? I fired off an angry email to Evie, demanding to know if she had edited out all of the jokes they'd made about Carlos at my expense, as I had fucking asked. And then I got back onto AO3.

You have Ruined. My. Life. Carlos. Like it wasn't bad enough, doxing me on AO3, where I could simply delete it - now you've doxxed me to Brooklyn Vegan? Do you understand that though this might wound your pride, this shit could cost me my fucking job?

M

You think I did this? Are you crazy? Take! Those! Comments! Down! If you didn't do this, then I am totally getting on the blower to my lawyer and having them serve Brooklyn Vegan with a writ. But get those comments down. Immediately!

C.

Gritting my teeth, and knowing that I'd pay for this when Scarlet woke up, I took not just the comments, but the whole story offline, then deliberately orphaned it, cutting it adrift into the fandom ether of abandoned stories so that Scarlet could not just revive it when he woke up.

As I waited for the changes to take effect, an email dropped into my inbox from Evie. 'Oh my god, I am so, so sorry. I honestly thought I got them all. I went through this week's podcast, and edited out every last one, but I forgot the Vlog. It went up on YouTube with Sunita making a dumb joke about video game developers who can't take criticism, like Carlos Dengler self-googling his way through vampire stories on AO3. I should have caught that. You can kill me when you see me; it's totally my fault.'

'It's not your fault,' I wrote back. 'But it got reported on Brooklyn Vegan, and it has... well, it has ruined my life.'

'I know this kinda sucks for you,' Evie replied about half a minute later. 'But the exposure... bloody hell, the podcast just leapt from 20k subscribers to 50k over night!'

I was so angry at her priorities that I couldn't even respond to her, logging back on to AO3 to see first, that the hit counts were now suddenly going up on all my other stories, and then, that I had another DM in my inbox.

Thank you for finally removing the comments. I've spoken to Interpol's manager, my former publicist and my lawyer, and they will make sure that BV prints a full retraction, saying that they were taken in by a clever impostor. I will, I hope understandably, be deleting this account as soon as you acknowledge receipt of this email. If you wish to speak further, you can reach me on thepandamystery@gmail.com

C.

I've got your email, and I understand. I'll most likely be deactivating my account for a while, too. So if you want to write to me, you can reach me on
And with a heavy heart, I downloaded the entire text of our DM conversation into a word document, and saved it to my C:\ drive, praying that no one in the IT department ever examined my hard drive that carefully. And then I put my AO3 account on hiatus, hiding every single one of my stories, under all my pseuds, and deactivating all of the notices before logging out and changing the password, deleting the notice mail with the new password as soon as it arrived in my account. Some day, maybe I could go back and reactivate the account by requesting a new password, but at that point in time, I felt so vulnerable, so exposed, that I never wanted to go on the internet again.

I emailed a copy of the text file with all of the emails from Carlos to my gmail, then scrubbed all proof of its existence off my work computer. Carefully, I flushed my whole internet history, emptied my cache, and then - and this was a sackable offence - went into the log and carefully deleted the entries for internet usage between 13.00 and 13.45, as if I'd never been on the internet over lunchtime at all. At that point, Carlos' entire existence was something I wanted to scrub my entire life free of.

I had only 15 minutes left of my lunch hour, but I was still too wound up to eat, staring at my desktop in horror, trying to figure out how my life had gone careening out of my control quite so fast. I was a computer programmer from a sleepy suburb in South London. The high point of my life in the year before this had been winning free tickets to see Lindstrom at Fabric. And now all this was happening? I wanted to put my head down on the desk and hide away. Oh shit - an email notification drifted across my desktop - that had better not be Joan or Hardip wanting some data analysis now-now-now, as my head was still completely messed up over all of this.

I opened my Outlook and froze when I saw the name at the top of my inbox. Carlos A. Dengler. No. How the fuck had he got this email? Bloody fucking Hell, the fuckwit was harder to get rid of than herpes! I had given him my gmail address. I had deliberately given him my gmail address. Hadn't I? I didn't want to dig out that text file of our email correspondence to prove it, but... oh shit. Suddenly, I realised what had happened. I had spent the past several months signing up for dodgy marketing mailing lists with my work address, trying to catch an internet scamster from Birmingham. And every time, I had to override the autocorrect spellchecker that kept coming up when I typed my email address in. So now, when I started to type 'm.macconnor...' into anything, it must have automatically supplied my work email.

Oh, kill me. Just kill me now. Carlos Dengler, this creepy rock star guy that I still didn't entirely trust not to have sold me out to Brooklyn Vegan, he now knew where I worked?
Chapter 4

With a heavy heart, I opened my work email.

Margaret. You will be pleased to know that the publicist from Matador Records has just been in contact to say that Brooklyn Vegan will be publishing a full retraction and apology in about twenty minutes, and removing the detail linking you to your screen name on AO3. I am deeply sorry for any damage to your professional reputation, and I apologise unreservedly for my absolutely absurd assumption that you had any part in it.

But I must say, you did not need to take your other stories down, on my account. In fact, I mourn slightly for the loss of the novels which brought me so much enjoyment. I wish there were a way that you could have preserved them, but I understand your decision, and deeply regret my part in it. If you ever decide to post them again, please let me know, and share the new address, so that I can enjoy them again.

Until then, please accept my humblest apologies.

Your servant,
Carlos.

For fuckssake. I was starting to wonder if the bloke was either a manic depressive, or a heavy coke abuser from the way he seemed to swing from flaming rage to grovelling, abject apology and total reasonableness within the course of an hour or two. It was unnerving, and to be honest, I suspected I actually preferred Carlos in his full-on temper tantrum mode. I felt like I knew where I stood with that guy. The reasonable, contrite Carlos... there seemed something phony about him. Or maybe I just preferred him when he was in full on drama queen mode? Maybe, in an odd way, I found him funnier?

Another email had come in on top, from Hardip, saying as soon as I was off lunch, could I please come over and see him? But I had to get that email from Carlos out of my inbox before anyone saw it. So I opened it, hit reply, and laboriously typed in the address of my gmail account by hand, clicking away the suggested correction to my work email.

Carlos - I'm very sorry, but I've given you my work email by mistake. I will answer all of your questions this evening, but please can you send all future emails to the gmail account I've CC:d in.
Thank you,
M

Margaret MacConnor
Senior Data Analyst
SackTheHackers.org.uk
0870 555 1337
Suite 27, Green Ginger House
Not even 30 seconds later, another email dropped into my inbox from the same address, conveniently CC:d into my gmail.

Ms MacConnor! Senior Data Analyst! What an impressive job title, madam. Since you say you will answer all of my questions when you get home (what luck! you never have before) please start with this one: what on earth is a 'senior data analyst' - it sounds like something out of The Matrix. I await your no doubt elucidating answer with baited breath!

Your humble servant, etc
Carlos Andres Dengler
Senior Thespian Technician
Tisch School, NYU
Yadda Yadda Yadda
Blah blah blah
etc. and so forth
For ever and ever amen.

I narrowed my eyes at the computer screen, cursing that annoying man's vexatious very existence, until I realised what had happened. Oh shit. All of our work correspondence went out with the full block of our work signature. And now this sodding, shitting, sod-bollocks-mad rock star stalker had not just my work email address, but my work address. Maybe I would need to call Evie and get that injunction after all. At that moment, I wanted to sink through the floor and be done with Carlos Dengler and his exasperating emails forever.

Hardip's brief took much longer than expected, so I was tied up in the meeting for the rest of the afternoon. I did my best to make a start on the code, but feeling feathery and light-headed from skipping lunch, my mind was just not on it. I could hear the dings, one after another from my iPhone, safely tucked away in the bag beneath my desk, and tried not to imagine what they might be.

Carlos, of course. I didn't trust him not to bombard my gmail inbox with a steady stream of irritating emails. Evie, wanting to know what had happened. Someone from Brooklyn Vegan, no doubt, wanting to get a statement from me, about being taken in by some con-man pretending to be the former bassist from Interpol. And Scarlet - oh fucking god, Scarlet! I had forgotten to warn The Scarlet Pimp after taking the story down. I fielded his panicked email first, while still on the bus home.

Paaaaace! What the fuck have you done? Our story is gone - in fact your whole fucking AO3 account looks like it's gone. I just saw the story on Brooklyn Vegan. What happened? So that guy on AO3 wasn't the real Carlos after all? Well, duh! I could spot his fake-ass schtick a mile away. I bet the real Carlos D can *spell* a lot better than he can. And then Matador Records and the real Carlos D got lawyers on
the case? Did they force you to take your whole account down? That's so fucking unfair. Me and a couple of other people from Tumblr are prepared to clusterfuck Matador's twitter account until they let you put your site back up. Let me know how you are. I'm worried about you, Pace.

XOXO, ~~Scarlet~~

I smiled at the phone's screen, feeling his concern even through the thousands of miles and 8-hour time difference between London and California. I wrestled with my conscience for a bit, then just decided to go along with what he already believed. I wouldn't even have to lie about it, just not bother to contradict what he had already surmised.

Dude! I appreciate your concern, but it's fine. Really, I just want this whole thing to die down for a bit. I'll lie low until it all blows over, then I'll start another AO3 account. I suppose it's a good excuse to get a new screen name from the new album, after all. I should thank the real Dengler. Don't worry about me. But do not - repeat DO NOT - go after Matador's twitter. They did nothing wrong, they're just protecting their artist, and really... it's fine. I'm just glad that the truth is out there now, so none of us got taken in.

XO, Pace Is The Trick

I hated lying, but honestly, trying to piece my way through the explanation would have been worse. Then I dealt with the email from Brooklyn Vegan. Before I answered that, I went and checked out both the amended story and the apology/retraction. True, the amended story had now removed both my name, and the name/link to my AO3 article, but they had not removed the fact that one of the 4BAABS girls had been involved in an altercation involving fan fiction. That irritated me, but I did notice that although the YouTube ink had been taken down, the link to our podcast had not been removed. Well, that would please Evie and Sunita, if the uptick in subscriptions continued.

The retraction, that was weirder. There was a rather formal apology for having been taken in by the 'impostor', followed by a rather bizarre litany of internet foolishness that Carlos Dengler had been the target of, over the years. I started reading the complicated story of the CarlosDHasHerpes blogspot, a poison-pen letter from a supposedly cuckolded boyfriend who claimed that Carlos had infected him, through his girlfriend, with an STI after a backstage assignation. The blog had appeared, spread like the clap, and then been mysteriously removed under pressure from Matador's lawyers. So it seemed like this man had form for strong-arming unpleasantness off the web?

By the time I got home, I was feeling distinctly unsettled. What proof did I have, after all, that the man I had been conversing with was the real Carlos Dengler? First, I emailed back the guy from Brooklyn Vegan, and said that I was uninterested in releasing any kind of statement, either about fan fiction, or my experiences with the Fake Dengler, but that the next edition of Four Birds And A Box Set would be coming out as normal that Friday, and we would probably have some jokes about the whole experience, if anyone wanted to check out our podcast and our YouTube Channel. Might as well get the plug in, right?

Then I opened the email containing the whole text file of my entire conversation with the mysterious man, and read it, from beginning to end. And then I googled. The first thing I found
was his student profile and CV at the Tisch School. So that was accurate enough - but then again, if that was the first result that popped up in Google, anyone could unearth that information. And to add to my disquiet, there was a completely different gmail account listed as his contact. I meandered my way through old interviews, bits of writing he had done for the Guardian and other magazines. That jaunty, arrogant facetiousness and word-vomit loquaciousness, that was exactly the same. But then again, hadn't I poured through these interviews myself, in attempting to put together a personality and almost logorrheic voice for my character of Dieter in Sudden-Onset Celebrity? If I could do it, anyone with half a brain could do it, and whoever I was talking to, as aggravating as he was, was obviously very clever, though perhaps a little too clever by half. But the Matador thing! Clearly Carlos, or someone from Interpol had got onto Matador about the article. But the nagging doubt would not leave my mind. There was only one way to be sure - I would have to ask him for proof.

My good sir. I'm afraid that you inadvertently know rather too much about me now for this to remain a game. I am going to have to stop and ask you for some proof of who you actually are, before I continue this conversation any further. If you refuse to provide proof, then I'm sure that the good people at Brooklyn Vegan would love to have the email address of the Fake Carlos D who caused them such trouble earlier this week. This is not a threat, just an exercise of caution. If you are who you say you are, you have no need to worry.

Kind regards,
M

There was radio silence for about half an hour after that last email, and I started to wonder if I should set a deadline, after which I would have to find the nerve to really turn my files over to Brooklyn Vegan or anyone else should he fail the test. But did I really want to catch him out as a fake? Or had I grown oddly attached to the conceit that I was, truly, speaking to the former bassist of one of my favourite bands?

The ping of the email, when it finally arrived, caught me by surprise as I was paging through old Interpol fan sites on Tumblr, peering into the face of this preening, arrogant peacock in the tailored suits and Eastern European army uniforms, trying to find some trace of the man with whom I had been conversing.

Madam! I completely understand your caution, and I have endeavored my best to provide you with the proof that you required. But! Disaster! I neglected to take into account the time difference between New York and London, and I'm afraid that when I dialed the number in your previous email, I was dismayed to discover my error in timing, and forced to leave my message with the after hours answering machine at your office. But at least, now, I know what your voice sounds like, and tomorrow morning, you will hear mine. In the meantime, please accept this photo as a poor substitute.

The actual real flesh and blood Carlos D, or something that still occasionally passes for him, I promise
C.
The attachment hovered in a grey box above the body of the message. Too many near-misses with abject filth emailed to me by various fannish friends (the most frequent offender being The Scarlet Pimp) had made me disable the preview function as soon as I learned how. But, there it was, waiting for me to open the box and find out the truth. Either final proof, or the revelation of my gullibility. So why was I just gazing at the grey box like a mail bomb instead of clicking on it to download it, and why were my hands shaking so badly?

No, this was ridiculous. I clicked the virus scan, then when that was complete, downloaded the photo. It opened automatically in Preview without my even asking, surprising me before I could even properly identify the image.

He was older than I was expecting, his face thinner with age and slightly more careworn, but it was still recognisably the same man as the arrogant and mischievous doe-eyed young buck in the photographs from the internet. Carlos Dengler. Oh my giddy aunt, all along, I really had been conversing with the pop star I had been composing sick sexual fantasies about only a few weeks before, for the amusement of a young gay man in San Francisco.

It was only then that I noticed what he was actually holding, proudly, clutched to his chest, like a shield. A paperback of the collection of Roland Barthes’ essays that included Mort De L’Auteur, as if to prove that he had remembered the entire conversation from start to finish - or to prove that he was the same man who had had the conversation, and it was not just a borrowed selfie stolen from the internet.

The man in the photo was even smirking at me. Well, no, smirking was the wrong word for what he was doing. It was a hesitant, maybe even slightly shy smile, as if he was actually nervous about how his prank would be received, an effect heightened by the small, round wire-rimmed spectacles perched on his long, slightly aquiline nose. His clothes were casual, unexpectedly studenty, even - a pair of faded black jeans, a plain T-shirt under an unconstructed black blazer. His hair, formerly always dyed black and slicked back from his head in a slightly fascist side-part, had been allowed to return to its natural, wavy, dark brown curls, rising gently off the crown of his head, though it looked like he was receding a tiny bit at the temples.

But it was definitely his expression that took me most by surprise. Those thin lips, that I had always thought of as arrogant, or even cruel - in repose, there was something so tentative, almost helpless about them. Although his face was obviously older, his expression looked somehow younger, as if there were some kind of little-boy-lost to him. But then I caught myself, and thought about the terrible things that had come out of that mouth over the years, the shockingly egotistic, self-important and conceited soundbites that had emerged from those thin, hesitant lips, and I shook my head. Appearances could always be deceiving. I would have to watch my step.

Mr. Dengler. So we meet at last. Thank you for the photo; I appreciate the joke. I will answer your questions, then. Data Analysis is... well, it's a kind of glorified pattern recognition, using elementary SQL code and a series of algorithms. I search internet usage data for things that look wrong. Hacker attacks, viruses, malware, hijacks.

You're a bit right with the Matrix allusion. They show up as anomalies in otherwise consistent streams of data, and I train computers to look for them. That is my real job; the one that pays the mortgage.

As to why I closed down my AO3 account and removed my stories. You know, I had been tempting fate for too long, really. As Four Birds and a Box Set grew more
successful, and I got more Tumblr followers, there was always the chance that something like this was going to happen. I do appreciate your compliments, but I think it's time for that part of my life to retire. After all, you retired from 'celebrity' once yourself. I'm sure I'll put them up again somewhere when this has calmed down; the bug is too strong in me to quit forever. But for now, Pace must retire.

Kind regards,
Margaret

The next email came back almost immediately.

Margaret! Madam, if we are to continue conversing - which I admit, I am finding rather more pleasant now you are being slightly more polite to me - I have my own request to make. I would like to see with whom *I* am conversing. I could, I suppose, watch your vlog. But between men and women, the gift of one selfie is commonly returned with another, not to put too fine a point on it.

Your humble servant, etc.
C

A selfie? Oh Christ, I had let myself in for this with that demand for the truth. He was well within his rights to ask for one in return. And here I had wanted to keep the fantasy going for just a little bit longer, that I was not an ugly, mannish, weird-looking woman staring 40 in the face. I hated even showing my face in the vlogs, and generally stuck to hiding behind a wall of hair - provoking a long-running 'Cousin It' joke with the other girls. 'Just lie about your age,' Sunita always pushed me, when she was pestering me to join up with another internet dating service. 'And don't put 39 - 39 on a website always means you're about 43. Lie and say you're 38, or better yet, 37. You'll get more replies that way.' And I would growl that I would prefer to get less replies, thank you, if that meant my appeal was more selective, and then be pestered into putting on mascara and maybe a bit of powder for a photo.

Hang on, what the hell did I care if Carlos sodding Dengler thought I was young and pretty or not? I had no intention of dating the man whatsoever, and this vanity, it was beneath me. But nevertheless, I still heeded Sunita's advice, and took myself off to the bathroom to fix my hair, and dab a bit of mascara on my eyelashes before snapping the selfie in Photobooth. I was still in my work clothes, but that would just have to do, as there was no way I was shallow enough to change my outfit for some weirdo former rock star that I was in no way interested in, at all. But as I was passing my bookshelves on the way back to the living room, I caught sight of the title of a book, and grabbed it, to hold that in front of me, to continue our little in-jokes. Michel Foucault - The Uses Of Pleasure. Complete with a fairly saucy Grecian Urn on the cover.

I took some test shots in Photobooth, posed a couple of times with my glasses, then a couple of times without, then decided I couldn't stand the sight of myself squinting at the screen to locate the shoot button, and put them back on. I swished my fringe first one way, then the other, did a ridiculous impression of a duckface, then accidentally knocked the shoot button while I was still laughing a bit over the duckface. Actually, hang on. That one looked better than the posed shots, to be honest, as it looked far more natural.
Granted, it was probably a better photo of my flat than of myself - the oxblood leather sofa, the high Victorian ceilings, the rows and rows of bookshelves groaning with paperbacks and odd objects d'art I'd accumulated over the years. But wasn't the point of a selfie, really, to show as much about your personality as you did your visage? But the woman in the photo, dressed in her customary 'soft butch' work outfit of button-down shirt, floral Liberty tie and fitted waistcoat, she actually looked a lot like my own mental image of myself. The smirk of mischief in my eyes, the bitchy comment half-dancing on my lips, the mussed mid-length hair that never would stay tidy, a nondescript dark colour somewhere between brown and auburn, but with a dashing Mrs Robinson blonde streak down the part - to hide the incipient grey at my temples, of course.

'Carlos: for your pleasure' I typed in the message box, referencing the Foucault, and hit send before I could lose my nerve.

There was a nerve-wracking wait for the next email, as I wavered on the edge of insecurity. Was that it, was I never going to hear from him again, now that I had actually got quite accustomed to - even amused by - his presence in my inbox? But just as I was about to give up and go to bed, his name appeared in my inbox, with another attachment, another selfie.

So that was what had taken all the time - it was a carefully posed shot of his apartment, where he had clearly hit shoot with the usual 3-second delay, and then cycled across the floor to stand proudly by his own bookshelves, as the bicycle was still clenched between his thighs. I admit, I was dying of curiosity, but I couldn't make out any of the titles of his books, so I amused myself by quizzically examining the details of his apartment - the wooden floors, the high ceilings, the minimal decor, apart from the bookshelves - Ikea Billys, of course, mark of the impoverished intellectual - and those distinctive New York windows with the fire escape beyond. I was about to reply something charming, when I spied the accompanying message, and nearly completely lost my temper.

Margo, I had no idea you were so cute! I should have watched your YouTube channel before being drawn into this entire debate! I would have been far less offended at reading your perverted sex fantasies about how much you fancy me, had I known how attractive you really were.

Your humble servant awaits your pleasure,
C

Cute? Was the man trying to irritate me? Never in a thousand years, had I ever aspired to look cute. If ever a man called my pretty or beautiful - not that anyone ever dared - I just dismissed them as a liar. But cute? He was obviously just deliberately winding me up. And that was before I'd even got to yet another sly reference to his bizarre delusion that I fancied him.

Furious and offended, I stomped back to the bookshelves hoping to find a copy of Germaine Greer's The Female Eunuch, but on impulse, I grabbed something even better - Valerie Solanis' The S.C.U.M. Manifesto. Holding that up in front of my absolutely shocked and horrified face, I snapped a photo, and sent it back with the somewhat irate message 'Get over yourself! I do not fucking fancy you, mate. M'

A minute and a half later, a reply came back, with Carlos perched on his sofa, legs crossed, a disbelieving eyebrow cocked as he perused 'Methinks The Lady Doth Protest Too Much: A New Look At Female Roles In Shakespeare.'
'Margaret, my dear. As you yourself once pointed out, you keep writing me back! C'

I didn't bother with a selfie this time, too angry to feed his ego any further.

Carlos - I keep writing you back because you are the single most vexatious, annoying, maddening and exasperating creature I have ever had the misfortune to come across on the entire internet, and that is counting the GamerGate losers that troll our website and YouTube comments every time Sunita says something facetious about ethics in games journalism. I know this is hard to comprehend, but I would not sleep with you, not to save my life, not to save the species, not even if we were trapped together in a popular long-running science fiction serial with an episode where everyone was driven half mad with desire by sexy Vulcan space-pollen. I do. not. fancy. you. M

Well, why not? It's obvious from your writing that you find me attractive. I just find it deeply suspicious that you exert so much effort telling me how much you don't fancy me, when you write reams of porn - sorry! erotic fan fiction - suggesting that you do. I dislike mendaciousness, and you are nothing if not mendacious on this matter. C.

For a start, get over yourself, because my friend Scarlet wrote most of the sex scenes. If you're really desperate for a shag, I know an attractive young gay man in San Francisco who would be happy to oblige. It is not me!

But more importantly, fiction is fiction, Carlos. Fantasy is not reality, and handsome is as handsome does. I've heard too many stories about you. You've fucked and fucked over too many people. People I even know, and I haven't been in NYC in a decade! You've fucked too many girls in relationships. You've fucked too many vastly underage and vulnerable teenage girls. Too many stories about you taking advantage of impressionable, starstruck 16 year olds. I don't think that I have a single friend in the music scene or the Interpol fandom that doesn't have some story about despicable activity, usually involving sex or drugs - or both - with regards to you. So no, Carlos. I have far too much respect for myself to ever go there, no matter how handsome you think you are (despite all evidence of your mountainously huge Habsburg Chin!) M

There was quite a gap after that email, and for a horrible moment, I wondered if perhaps I had finally gone too far. But really, that ego, those arrogant assumptions that every woman was gagging for him. He wound me up, just too too much, and I could not let that slide. Alice was right; I did have a giant wind-up screw in the middle of my back, and for some reason this Dengler fellow knew exactly how to tighten it. I refreshed my inbox again and again. An email from Evie appeared. Another note from Scarlet. I ignored them both, knowing that it was irresponsible of me to disregard my friends - in fact lie to my friends in one of those cases - but I was genuinely worried that I had, finally, pushed him too far, and driven him off. But finally, just as my stomach was starting to crawl with horrible beasties of the imagination, his name flashed at the top of my inbox
Wow. OK, I suppose perhaps I deserved that. I am guilty of... yes, I suppose every single one of the moral lapses with which I am charged. But I am no longer the man that chose those courses of action, though I suppose I will carry their consequences with me for the rest of my life, in body as well as reputation.

Would it prove the slightest mitigation in my defence, if I were to tell you that I was in the grips of crippling self esteem issues, and a rampant and out of control cocaine addiction, when I did all of those things you so rightly accuse me of? Both of which, I have now (I hope successfully) sought treatment for.

Could you forgive me, then?- C.

It's not a case of needing forgiveness, Carlos. I'm not your confessor, or your therapist. I am not appointing myself your personal conscience, I am never playing that role for anyone ever again. But since you ask, well, no, I don't think it mitigates it. In fact, it worries me that you hold up your substance abuse issues as some kind of excuse - or even justification - for those actions, instead of taking responsibility for them. - M

I did not *ask* you to be my conscience or my confessor. I have need of neither, and especially from near total strangers. But. Well, at least we know where we stand now. I thought I had taken responsibility for my actions, in my third sentence, but... Well, after reading your stories, with those morally complex characters, and their morally ambiguous motivations and life choices - I supposed I just never figured you for such a puritan. - C.

A puritan, no. But a moralist? How could you read those stories and not realise that I was deeply obsessed with morality and ethics, and the consequences of personal choices, and the ways in which human beings hurt and destroy one another and themselves by disregarding the consequences of their actions? It's what I was saying - god was it only days ago now? It feels like weeks. But it's what Foucault was writing of, when describing Classical Greek morality - it was not specific actions (homosexuality or whatever) that concerned them. It was the inability of a free adult man to govern his own desires and appetites. Either in the case of a man, who, like a city which has bad laws, has submitted himself to a dangerous or damaging set of ethics. Or, like the city which has laws but is unable to enforce them, because his ability to control himself is compromised. - M

Do you really want to get into a discussion of Platonic ethics with a man who has an actual degree in Philosophy? Are you doing this deliberately, because you know how much I loathe Platonism and especially The Republic? If you must know the truth, I was very much the former. I chose a deliberate path of Hedonism, willingly and knowingly, believing that it would make me happy. I was wrong. I don't *blame* my
addiction for the decisions I made; it is neither an excuse nor a justification. But my
dependency prevented me from truly seeing the damage I was causing myself and others,
on account of that 'poor moral framework' that I chose. I make no excuses for my past,
but neither do I pretend I never did those things, or that I didn't have reasons to do
them. Now. Do you still want to continue this conversation, knowing what you know
about me? - C.

I don't know, Carlos. I don't get if you're the kind of guy who flirts out of habit or
intent, but I need you to know that it's going nowhere, and in fact your constant
insinuations irritate me greatly. Do you still want to continue this conversation,
knowing that it will never lead to a romantic or sexual relationship? - M

For crying out loud! What kind of asshole do you think I am? - C.

The question still stands - M

Of course I do! No, I keep writing back, because I've nothing better to do with my
afternoons than debate Foucault with erotic novelists. (Actually, this is not strictly a
lie. I am, as actors euphemistically put it, 'resting' between auditions at the moment.)

Look, madam, you answered my, albeit flippant, questions of this afternoon. Let's try
to start this conversation again. I owe you at least one clear shot. The chance to ask
any question you want to know of me, and I will answer, truthfully, to the best of my
ability. Are you game? - C.

A million questions raced through my mind, some of them evil, some of them filthy. So, did you
ever fuck Paul Banks during one of those cocaine binges? Wow, I would kill just to see the look on
his face, it would be worth everything, even if he never spoke to me again, just to retaliate for his
improprieties of earlier. But no, that wasn't really what I cared about. I was curious about his
decision to leave the band, but it felt like that had been covered in excruciating detail by his
bandmates, and nothing he had to add would be at all illuminating. I was curious about what he'd
said about how different 'his Dan Kessler' had been from my character, but really... you know
what? I didn't want to be disillusioned. I was still a fan of Interpol. After the last couple of
exchanges, I thought it might come off as too pretentious if I asked him who his favourite
philosopher was, if he hated Plato so much, and decided not to risk it. Especially since that was the
kind of 'getting to know you' question that Sunita castigated me for using at, oh, I dunno... 80s-
indie-speed-dating events. What did she always do, in order to seem like such a bubbling
conversationalist. She just asked people questions about themselves - their jobs, their... Oh. OK.
That was an idea.

So. My question - why acting? You always seemed like you were far more interested
in soundtracks, in texture, in emotional mood-setting and arrangement, than in
performance. In fact, I was left with the distinct impression that you loathed both
touring and performing live. Granted, you always had great comic timing, especially in
interviews. But I always thought you would be far more likely to end up scoring films
- or even directing, or screen writing - rather than performing in them. I'd never have
marked you for an actor. So why acting?

And after sending that email, I finally exercised some self-control over my own compulsive
internet abuse, and turned the laptop off and went to bed. A long email was waiting for me in the
morning, and I read it first, quickly, over breakfast, and then again, slowly, on the bus ride into
work.

That's a good question, Margaret, and not one I feel I can ever give you a satisfying
answer to. (Though, that said, I am pleased that you picked up on my sense of humour!
A great many people miss that, with... disappointing results.) I could give you the
standard answers that acting students are always encouraged to give, something about
a 'calling'; some nonsense about the 'grand tradition of the theatre' (always said with
the kind of hushed reverence reserved for speaking of royalty); some pretentious
thespian bullshit, but hey... oh fuck it, I've gone my entire life without worrying too
much about being called 'pretentious' and I certainly don't plan on starting now!

Why acting. Put simply. Do you know that feeling, when you're reading a really good
book - or watching an awesome film - and you totally lose yourself? That feeling of
being completely engrossed, absolutely captivated, to the point where you are no
longer conscious of yourself or your surroundings, you are just living the text inside
your own head. Well, acting, when it's done right, is like that, except you get to stay
conscious the whole time. It's like lucid dreaming, in a way. You are both aware of
being a character in a story, while simultaneous being completely and totally swept up
in it to the point where you believe it.

And at the same time, that feeling of total identification and empathy, where you
experience for a few hours, what it's like to be a completely different person from
yourself? Something you said the other day, that I really related to, in a way that
almost shocked. When talking about why you wrote your 'Baron Denlger' as such an
asshole, you said 'maybe I don't like myself very much sometimes'. This is a painful
confession to make, but myself? Sometimes I don't like myself very much, either. It's
funny how so many of my friends say I have the self regard of an elephant, or even go
so far as to call me pompous and self-important. (Didn't I just say something about
'pretentious' a minute ago? That same knee-jerk fear of being accused of it, just for
trying to be true to my inner thoughts.) But I feel so much of the time the complete
opposite. I have spent my whole life searching. But sometimes I don't know if I'm
searching to be more completely and authentically myself - or if I just desperately
want to be someone else.

Music used to be my escape, but music stopped working. I got bored of music - or
maybe music got bored of me. It stopped having the same kick. When I was younger, I
used to get a massive adrenaline rush from going on stage, every damn time,
regardless of whether we were playing Brownie's or Madison Square Garden. One day,
that stopped. And never came back. All the hassle of being in a band, the never-ending
touring, the impossibility of a social life. The way that, when I was trapped in a
tourbus in Nebraska or Iowa or somewhere, I missed New York as keenly as a physical craving. None of that is worth it if you don't get that adrenaline kick. So I stopped doing music. And when I stopped doing music for long enough... it left me. I am... *bereft* of music.

But acting - losing myself in a character or a story - getting to experience becoming another human being, another me, the discipline of it, letting a script become so familiar that it just pours through it until it is completely natural... I feel most myself, when I am playing someone else. Creating characters, inhabiting their personalities like you inhabit their clothes, it is quite the most intoxicating artform. It is the same adrenaline spike, the same physical kick. It's not the same sharp, cocaine-like high that musical performance used to give, it's not as intense, not the same kind of spike. But it's a more long-lasting, satisfying pleasure, the kind that comes from intense discipline. And one that so far, does not have those crazy come-downs afterwards, either.

I feel I have talked at you for too long, and this is at risk of becoming as long as one of your epic novels. But it was an interesting question, beautifully phrased, and I thank you for it.

Carlos.

The next eight hours of work were a vaguely surreal, dreamlike experience. My body sat in my chair, at my computer, and programmed code and responded to requests from colleagues. But my mind was unable to do anything except chew over that email in excruciating details.

It certainly didn't help, to sit down at my desk first thing, and see the New Message light blinking on my phone. For a moment, I almost forgot, and was actually surprised to hear an American accent, sharp and slightly nasal. "Hiii. Uh... Well, hello Margaret MacConnor's voicemail. I seem to have made a minor miscalculation with the time zones. I guess you went home from work. Uh... anyway. This is Carlos..." He said it with a pronounced American accent. *Carlos Dengler. The, uh... how was it you had it? The annoying, exasperating and vexatious Baron Von D'Engler with the prognathous chin large enough to 're-occupy the Rhineland', was it?* A laugh, more a chuckle, really, that was probably meant to sound slightly self deprecatory, but sounded slightly sinister in that ugly American accent. "I suppose I will have to proceed to plan B. Bye!" And the message snapped off abruptly.

I played it again, trying to put together the playful intellectual banter of his emails with that nasal voice and that accent. I wasn't very good with American accents, granted, I struggled to tell more than the basic East Coast versus West Coast versus Deep South. But his accent definitely grated, like the American equivalent of flat Estuary vowels. There was more than a touch of Ken Livingstone to it. Before I could get weird and play it again, I quickly deleted it and purged my ansaphone. But that didn't stop me from going back and reading the email again.

I wasn't sure how to respond to it, to be honest. This honest, open, slightly vulnerable Carlos, he scared me a little. Was this a confession that he was almost painfully self aware of how he careened between arrogant flippancy and grovelling vulnerability? Or was it just another ploy for sympathy? One minute, he talked of wanting to lose himself and get away from his own personality, the next he was making grandiose sweeping statement about being 'bereft of music' like a first class prima donna. Or was he just trying to be funny again? It was the kind of comment that, had he said it in an interview with a wry smile and a subtle arch of his eyebrow, would have
had me rolling with laughter. But if he meant it, it was the kind of comment I wanted to punch in the smug fucking face.
When I finally got home, I opened up my gmail and stared at it for a very long time before starting to type. And over the course of the next few weeks, a long, delicate conversation unfolded.

I suppose here is where I ought to make a confession. I do not understand the art of acting. I can barely appreciate it when it is done well, or really recognise when it is done badly. It's not an art that I have any fundamental understanding of ~how it works~. And I don't even mean that in a technical sense - for instance, I don't know how to conduct an orchestra, or paint with an airbrush, and I'm not sure I could ever even learn, but I do feel like I grasp the basic technique of approximately how those things are accomplished.

Acting is a mystery, a black box to me. I don't have a clue what makes one person a good actor and another terrible; what makes one a comic natural and another a ham. And I recognise that this is an odd thing for someone to say who has so many friends who are film buffs, and in fact co-presents videoblogs and podcasts of which movies are a major part, but: my friends laugh and call me 'film deaf'. In the same way that non-musical people are tone deaf. Like... I am capable of enjoying films if one is presented to me, but could not tell you why. I lack basic discernment and require constant guidance. I don't know if this is because most of the films I've found on my own are bad films, and bored me enough not to be interested in exploring. (While my friends have exceptionally good taste and take the time to find things are interesting?)

There are some pursuits that I understand implicitly why some people would sacrifice their lives to practice (for example, I have a friend who, last year, quit her job to spend the winter on a rocky island in the North Atlantic with no amenities, so that she can concentrate on writing - and I not only understand the urge, but I am actually jealous.) But there are other pursuits where I can only take someone's word that it makes them happy. Acting is one of those. Does it make you happy?

I don't know if you are joking or not when you talk about being 'bereft of music' - comic timing is something that's so hard to establish in emails. It seems like there is such a predictable path of disillusionment with regards to being a professional musician. For some, the sacrifices are worth it. For some, the peripatetic lifestyle is a bonus, not a problem (a feature, not a bug, as I'd say in my job). I don't know what happened to me. It used to be an urge, for music, so strong that I could not resist it. Songs would shake me out of bed, rattling around in my head, dying to be born, and pester me until I sat down and took the time to commit them, to paper or to 4-track. When I stopped having someone (a band) to write songs for, I stopped writing them down. They dribbled for a bit, like a leaky tap, then dried up. I'm still not sure if that's a relief, or if I am still, as you put it... bereft? But I often feel like it must have been something that was very important to me, because of how much time I spent writing about musicians, and about the process of making music, and the political aspects of being in a band, and the structural aspects of the music industry. I could never quit that fascination, as easily as I quit music.

I suppose writing is just the same compulsion, transformed. Stories now shake me out of bed. Plot points that come to me in the middle of the night, and I have to scribble
down before they fade. Dialogue that comes to me on the bus. The characters I write, they come to life and walk around inside my head, they bug me when I try to concentrate on other things, they crowd around me as I pound the keys of my laptop, demanding to be born. It's not a question of enjoying it or not enjoying it (though, I suppose I do enjoy it, in the same way one enjoys masturbation) it's a question of needing to do it. (If you ever hear the words: "I don't write because I want to; I write because I *must*" come out of my head, then slap me. That *is* pretentious.)

It's probably a similar thing to what you describe - the feeling of absolutely losing yourself in another human being. People think authors are these godlike creators, but I think we're probably more like actors. Vessels through which other lives flow. (Unless I've vastly misunderstood acting. You'll assuredly tell me all the ways in which I'm wrong, no doubt! (I quite believe that telling me I'm wrong is fast becoming one of your favourite hobbies!)) Sometimes I think stories are just a thing that *happens* to me, rather than things I consciously choose to create. It's not like painting a picture or snapping a photograph. The fuckers bend and weave and bob all over the place, and your characters refuse to conform to the plots you have planned for them... and I'm sounding like a complete mentalist, aren't I? On one level, being a writer is the perfect sphere for the god complex, for the complete control freak. On another, it is completely surrendering yourself to something almost totally out of your control. If you are a decent enough writer, if you have created your characters skilfully enough, if you have enough of a grasp of them in your head, you do nothing but sit back and let them get on with it.

I'm sorry, I seem to have rambled completely off the point here. This is not a question you asked, and you've told me so much about yourself, and all I've done is ramble about my boring self.

M

Holy shit, woman. Do you not realise, what it is to say to someone like me, this thing about being 'film deaf' and unable to tell the difference between good acting and bad acting? Your emails are a strange combination of things I agree with so thoroughly I want to hug you and buy you a drink - and things I disagree with so violently that I want to seize you by the arms and shake you! This is going to be a repetition of that argument about The Republic, isn't it, where you inflame me with something absolutely infuriating to goad me into abandoning my responsibilities to write back and set you straight. Or perhaps that is the point! Provoking me is your favorite hobby, like telling you that you are RONG! on the Internet is mine! Perhaps you are fishing, and you realise what utter catnip this is to me; that I now want to come back with 50 films you should watch, in order to truly *understand* both cinema and acting as artforms. Do you have Netflix? I will set you up a queue, and then we will discuss what you have watched. (If I suggest that I be the professor, and you play the student, a la Educating Rita, you will give me that very stern look over the top of your glasses, won't you? Which... if I'm honest, is all the more incentive to elicit it!)

Margaret, I think you understand acting better than you realize. Because between what you describe in this email - and what you said in an email last week, where you said you imbue your characters with just enough of yourself to make them believable - you are describing almost exactly The Method. It's one of the various schools of acting that we were taught - and quite one of my favorites, too. That the actor digs into her or
himself, examines their own experiences and emotional lives, and one does not play the character so much as one *lives* the character, moment to moment, afresh each night.

It's quite one of my favourite techniques - yet also one of the hardest to get right, and the easiest to go very wrong. It requires - don't you dare bring up Foucault again - huge amounts of discipline and self-control to do something which is essentially *losing* oneself. Because it necessarily entails digging up through deep emotions, and often trauma. Staying in character in that way can be quite dangerous for the weak ego. It's quite seductive to just *stay* in character. Myself, I have undergone several years of therapy, so I am, at this point, quite comfortable with confronting my emotions, but some of the other people on my course found it difficult and even traumatic. (It also requires a huge amount of trust in your director, for asking these emotions and experiences of you.) And again, that tension you describe between being the actor (a necessarily active role - the same root, to act!) and surrendering oneself, a passive experience. I'm sure there's a metaphor in there something - learning to ride a bicycle, learning to fly, learning what it's like to lose control in order to learn what one's boundaries really are... Ah, see! My years of hedonism did have a purpose after all, I knew they weren't completely wasted.

(That's a joke, by the way.) ((Though, that said, maybe it isn't, deep down?)) I suspect you do the same thing, to be honest. Especially when your sense of humor grows *so* caustic. (That's not a complaint, by the way. I do appreciate caustic humor, dark humor and even black humor. Well, so long as I'm not the butt of it.) But humor is a mask, isn't it? A distancing technique. I want to talk on this more later, but first there is a question far more pressing...

Does acting make me happy? How on earth can I say? "Am I happy?" was a question that I wrestled with for five years, with my therapist. And never got an answer. I don't think that a permanent, definitive answer is possible, to that question. Happiness is a transitory emotion. It comes; it goes. With small victories and minor frustrations. What acting does is, it makes me feel *right*. I can express it no better than that. I feel like I am doing what I am meant to be doing. I feel like I am interacting with people who are stimulating and exciting and bring out the best in me. But it is, also, the source of a great many frustrations in my life.

Speaking of which, I have an audition to prepare for, and as enjoyable as I am finding it, shouting at you, I must go and study.

I await your next email, as ever, your humble servant etc.

Carlos.

Carlos, I won't send you a long email today as work is very busy, and we are recording the podcast tonight. But I just wanted to hit a couple of things swiftly before sending a more considered email at the weekend.

1) We don't have Netflix in the UK. But if you have a suggestion or two for films, I can look for them on DVD.

2) What do you mean by 'humour is a mask'? Humour is a weapon.

I would say good luck with the audition, but I know you actors are a superstitious lot.
No Netflix? How do you *live*?!? Alright, I will recommend two films, both screwball comedies from 1940, that I suspect will appeal to you very much. One is His Girl Friday, starring Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell. The other is The Philadelphia Story, starring Grant and Katharine Hepburn. I think they will both appeal to your fiery temperament and feminist ideals. The 'smart-talking dame' of the 1940s is an archetype I very much admire - and it's one that you remind me of a great deal, at times. (And I'll be honest; Hepburn is one of my favourite actors. Favourite women, period.)

Humor as a weapon? I suppose in certain circumstances, it can be. Humor as cruelty. But I was thinking of other kinds of humor. Sometimes self-deprecating humour can be used to cover arrogance. Sometimes seemingly arrogant humour can be used to cover chasms of self-esteem. But that's why I want you to watch those screwball comedies, where barbed humour is a mask used to cover highly sublimated sexuality.

Anyway, I must flit to my audition. I look forward to this longer mail, anon...
C.

Yes, I am emailing you on the bus to Sunita's, and I recognise how absurd that is. But this is fundamentally important. All humour is a weapon. ALL of it. The only difference is the directionality of where it is pointed - if it punches up, or punches down. - M

Auditions are running late, as always. I'm going to challenge you on that - what about absurd humor? Surreal humor? Humor that relies not on cruelty but on the unexpected juxtaposition of nonsensical elements. Oops, there's the casting agent - it's my turn now. - C.

What makes a juxtaposition unexpected? Context. What makes an element 'nonsense'? Context. Context always contains power relations. Shit, Sunita is going to make me hand over my iPhone when I get to her house. - M

"No, come on," insisted Sunita, holding out her hand for the offending smartphone. "You know the rules. No checking email or text messages on 4BAABS Night."

"Just let me..." I typed the last sentence explaining my absence from the argument to Carlos, hit send, closed my email and locked my screen so Sunita couldn't snoop. "Alright. I'm done." I felt a deep twinge of regret as she tossed the harbinger of those intense spiralling conversations into her kitchen drawer.

"Who the hell are you texting so furiously, anyway?" Sunita's eyes lit up as she detected gossip. "Have you met somebody?"
"Absolutely not. It's nothing like that," I insisted defensively, feeling my hackles go up at the mere suggestion that what I was doing with Carlos could in any way come under the boundaries of 'meeting' 'someone'. Before she could vocalise that slightly suspicious eyebrow-raise, I went on the attack instead. "What about you? Did any of those Indie-Speed-Dating blokes come to anything?"

"Ach!" Sunita rolled her eyes extravagantly. "I had one date with the one who seemed most promising, both in person and in email... but then he took me to a sportsbar. And not just any sportsbar, but one where they were showing a bloody Man U game. Can you imagine?"

"Ugh," I agreed. "Dating a Man U fan? No one's that desperate."

"I know, right? And what a lazy, bad option! Honestly, if it's your first date, put in a little effort, if you please. Fair enough if it's someone you've just met off Tinder or whatever, you can just grab a quick coffee, no effort required. But when it's your first proper date, with someone you have already met in the flesh, and established that there is an interest... For crying out loud, show me the respect of arranging something - or at least somewhere - nice!"

"What was he thinking," I shrugged, digging in my bag for the plonk. "Shall I open the wine?"

"Yeah, go on." But Sunita still had news to impart. "But I had a fairly interesting OKC date last night. Not a total loser for once - actually quite good-looking, which was nice. But the most awful, tedious job as a dental assistant. Looking in people's mouths all day. Can you imagine?"

"Frankly, no. Life's too short for boring dates. I suppose you made your excuses and split after the first drink, or did you get trapped?"

Sunita looked at me like I was mad. "God no. I went back to his and banged him. Like I'm going to let good dick go to waste, just because he was a bit boring. I suppose he might do for the occasional fuck buddy if I get on a dry spell for too long. It had, after all, been nearly two months!"

I nearly spit my drink out. Sunita considered two months without sex a 'dry spell'? I wondered what on earth she would make of my two years and counting. "How's work?" I asked, changing the subject deftly.

"Awful. Stuck in development hell. We've got a new project manager who, apparently, cannot stand the idea that people might want male characters available as romantic options, as opposed to just play options. I didn't even want to broach the topic of the 'bisexual patch' I developed for cross gender play. His eyes would probably have popped out of his head at the thought of two of the male leads having a good snog. Ah well, I might save it for an Easter Egg."

We were interrupted by the clatter of Doc Martens up the stairs as Evie came home. "So you're alive," she drawled as she saw me. "Do you not answer your emails any more?"

"I'm sorry," I only half-lied. "It's been really, really busy at work. The Russian hackers are refusing to recognise the authority of a UK-based agency, they want to take it to the EU courts, so... Things have been kinda nuts."

Sunita gave me a look of pure disbelief as she handed Evie a glass of Vinopolis' finest. "She does, however, have the time to email some mystery correspondent so important she was still pounding her iPhone as she walked up the stairs. If you ask me, I think she's having an internet romance."

"Ha!" I ejaculated, in almost pure outrage, before quickly correcting my course. "If you must know, I was emailing the Scarlet Pimp. My co-writer on a couple of stories on AO3?" That was a total fabrication; Scarlet's email had been waiting unanswered nearly as long as Evie's had.
"Speaking of which, did you ever hear any more about that fake... Policeman on AO3?" Sunita waved her hand about, trying to remember the band's name.

"Nope," I said quickly. "And before you accuse me of having an affair with the Scarlet Pimp, he's gay as a fruitbat, don't worry."

"The Scarlet Pimp?" Evie piped up. "As in the guy who does all that Mulder-Scully M-Preg smut? Totally bi, at least for Dana Scully."

"It's not like that," I told her quickly, making a mental note to email Scarlet as soon as I got home, in case Evie actually knew Scarlet, and decided to double check the story. "Anyway, I figured, why email as I knew I'd just be seeing you tonight. What's up, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"I wanted to tell you that I looked into that Barrister thing. It turns out that my office actually has a mentoring program designed to fast-track applicants from a public defence background. There's even funding available, that I qualify for if I commit to certain programmes. I was going to apply for it, except..." Her voice trailed off in a distant sigh.

"Except what? That sounds amazing. If you apply now, will you make the deadline to start next semester?" I enthused, trying to cover my guilt for not catching up on this via email.

"Except, as Harry pointed out, it's a huge time commitment. The training takes years, and I will have to balance my current job, and night-school, and these new programs..."

"So what? You do it for a couple of years, but it'll be worth it when you see the end result."

"Well... Harry rightly pointed out that I already spend pretty much 2 nights a week on 4BAABS stuff, plus one late night Midnight Drunk Court. School would be 3 nights a week, which leaves exactly 1 night for... couple time."

"That is a problem," Sunita considered "It'd be different if you lived together, and you saw each other before breakfast. But this could put a severe crimp in your sex life."

"Suni, they've been together 8 years. Even one night a week might be extravagant at this point," I teased.

"Excuse me," growled Evie, unamused. "But also, the expense of it. Yeah, I qualify for some funding, but it's still going to be a strain. Not just tuition, but books, fees... all kinds of unforeseen expenses. They are not cheap. Harry did point out that we are both supposed to be saving up to buy a house together."

"Oh," I replied somewhat more snidely than I intended. "If he's so keen on saving, then how is it he can afford to go to the pub three times a week - oh, and afford a season ticket at QPR? That is not cheap, either!"

"He earns twice as much as I do," Evie squirmed.

"So he can save twice as much as you, and cover the difference while you do your Masters. Seems only fair," I pointed out. "When you're a QC, you'll be making crazy money!"

Evie fell silent, fidgeting with her fingernails as she considered this. "Yeah, I'll probably be making more money than him."

That piqued Sunita's pride. "If that's what this is about, then do tell him to fuck off." Said the girl who lied and told her dates that she had 'just a little PR job in the games industry' rather than
confess to being a senior dev.

But before the argument could really come to a head, the doorbell rang, and Sunita dashed off down the stairs to let Alice in. I exchanged glances with Evie, but some darkness in her eye warned me not to pursue this line any further. "Are you gonna do it?"

Her eyes were still dark. "I don't know. What do you think?"

"You know what I think. I think you should."

"Even if it costs me..."

But she never got to finish that thought, as Alice came bustling into the kitchen, weighed down with paper bags full of steaming food. "Guys, it was my turn to provide food, so I stopped at the Jerk Truck. I really hope you like spicy..."

"Bring it on," said Sunita, as she dug in the cupboards for plates and cutlery, then carried it all through into the living room.

"Alice," I ventured. "This is a bit of a weird question, but I just wondered if I could borrow some DVDs off you - or at least, if you have the DVDs I'm looking for."

"Sure... if I have them." Clearing a space, she started to parcel out steaming trays of rice and greens to go with the jerk chicken. "What are you looking for?"

It wasn't as if I hadn't memorised every word of Carlos' emails. "Um, The Philadelphia Story and... His Girl Friday?"

"Oh my god, yes. Those are total classics!" Alice's face lit up when she talked about the Golden Era of Cinema. "Those are some of my favourite films - but what the hell are you doing, watching... Romances?"

"They're not romances," I protested. "I was under the impression that they were Screwball Comedies."

"Oh yes, they are. But they are very definitely love stories. Hey, I'm not complaining, I just didn't think that was your thing. If you want to borrow them, come over Saturday afternoon and I'll hook you up. Or... if you want to make an evening, we could watch them over dinner?"

I frowned. Saturday evening was the time I had set aside to really sit down and get to the bottom of Carlos' frustrating, annoying argument about acting and writing and creativity. "I, uh..."

"If you have plans, I could mark papers on Saturday and we could do it on Sunday," Alice offered."

"Maybe she has a date. I told you there was some hot romance going on with all that furious texting," Sunita chirped.

"I do not have a date!" I snapped, rather too hastily, then turned to Alice. "Saturday evening is great. I'll bring wine and desert."

Once we got dinner, and a couple of bottles of wine down us, the podcast got underway, with the usual mix of banter and wit. The music section, I'm afraid, was slightly hastily thrown together, gleaned quickly at lunchtime from the briefest survey of mail-outs, and a bit too heavily dependent on the Corsica Rooms - which looked, admittedly, great that weekend. But Alice and Evie, thankfully, dove in and picked up the slack with a spirited debate about whether Benedict
Cumberbatch was becoming overexposed or not with the announcement that he was starring in Dr Strange. Alice, an unrepentant Cumberbitch, could not get enough of the weird-looking dude, while Evie generally thought the man was a repulsive irritant who hadn't been in a decent film since To The Ends Of The Earth - and that was all down to Jared Harris. So the pair of them went off on their usual tangent, in colourful language, to say the least, while Sunita and I tried hard not to collapse with laughter.

When I finally staggered out of their house at twenty past eleven, I was relieved to see the familiar blue glowing dot in my inbox, as Alice hailed a cab to take us both as far as London Bridge.

Margaret, I do understand that you are the world's biggest Foucault fangirl, but please. Not everything is always about 'power structures'. XO, C.

I couldn't help it. Even knowing that I was being horribly rude to Alice, I could not stop myself from firing back.

Foucault is not even my favourite post-structuralist, let alone my favourite philosopher. But he's right about one thing. Power structures permeate everything. There is no 'outside' to power. How did the audition go? -M

"I'm so sorry," I said quietly, tucking my phone back into my bag. "That was... um, important."

"I dunno. That doesn't look like an 'important work email' face," Alice observed wryly.

"Oh, it wasn't work." I tried hard to keep from blushing.

"I'm starting to think that Sunita is right, and maybe you are having a secret internet romance."

"It is not an internet romance," I insisted. "It's more like an internet..."

"Flirtation?" Alice teased.

"No." I couldn't stop my voice from taking on a slightly beleaguered tone. "Did you ever meet someone who was so infuriating, so annoying, so absolutely completely RONG on every single count that you cannot stop yourself from getting dragged into stupid argument after stupid argument until you're not even sure what you were arguing about in the first place?"

"Oh yes." Alice nodded sagely. "My first year of teaching, when I was still a Grad Student at Columbia, I had this nightmare transfer student, who used to sit right up front, and contradict me about everything. About philosophy, about politics, about economics, about... you name it, he would fight me on it, like he thought maybe he should be teaching the class, instead of me. I knew that I should just let him be, stop paying attention to him, engage the other students in the class more, instead of letting him dominate the discussion. But he was just so infuriating, it was like I couldn't help myself, getting dragged into another altercation with him."

"Oh my god, that sounds awful. How did you handle it? What happened in the end?"
Alice smiled, her eyes twinkling. "I married him."

"What? Robert was your student? Isn't that against the rules?"

"For the five months he was in my class, we did nothing more than argue. The next semester, he requested to be transferred to a different professor. I was so relieved, to be rid of him but also slightly disappointed. But then he turned up at my office during consultation hours, and asked me out to dinner. All that arguing turned to real passion." She shrugged lightly, but smiled so affectionately as she retold the story, that I started to wonder. Deep in my bag, my phone let out a muffled ding. "Are you gonna answer that?"

"I don't want to be rude."

"Don't worry. I've seen enough screwball comedies to know how this one ends. Answer it, I can see it all over your face."

"You're wrong, it's not what you think," I protested, even as I dug in my bag.

I don't know. I never know how auditions go while I'm in the moment, until I get the callback - or the polite 'thanks but no thanks' text. The ones I feel most confident that I absolutely nailed, they're often the ones that I miss. And the ones I feel most torn up and conflicted and 'I totally blew that' - those are the ones where I get a callback the next day. So I know better than to try to predict.

Anyway. Go on, then. Tell me who your favorite philosopher is. If you say Plato, I swear to god, I will actually throttle you. - C.

Not even close. Mary Midgley. - M

Never heard of her. Googling. - C.

Oh my god! Finally, a gap in the almost omniscient philosophical erudition of the great Carlos Dengler? Will wonders never cease! - M

"Come on, your share is twelve bucks," Alice announced, dragging me out of my email inbox.

I looked up, startled to be at London Bridge already. "Oh? In that case, I'll just give you eight quid, or whatever the current exchange rate is," I teased.

"Oh fuck off, you know what I meant." We parted with hugs and promises to meet again on Saturday, as Alice ran for the New Cross train, and I strolled expectantly down to platform 14 to await the last Tulse Hill train.
At lunchtime the next day, I did my best to clear my inbox of the emails from neglected friends. I read Evie's email carefully, opening and perusing the links she had sent me. Although I didn't entirely understand the gist of what the courses and mentoring programmes were offering, I could certainly tell that it looked like a fantastic deal.

Evie, this looks amazing. This is such an opportunity. If you don't at least apply for this, I will never speak to you again, I swear to god!!!! What do you have to lose by applying? I know you, you're trying to talk yourself out of something you really want to do, by telling yourself you haven't got a chance. And reading this, it's pretty clear you have a really *good* chance - and you're just using this Harry thing as an excuse not to go for it. Don't do that. Once you have the offer in hand, it will be a lot easier to convince Harry - and yourself!!! XO, M

Thanks for the pep talk, but it's too late. I've missed the application deadline. - E

You have not! I just checked. The application has to be in, a week Monday. - M

That's nowhere near enough time. There's all sorts of information that has to be assembled, I have to come up with two references, my school record... I don't even know where my diploma is! - E

Just sit down and do it this weekend; treat it like a case you have to file this week, and throw your back into it. You told me you know judges who owe you favours. Call in those favours. Now. I'm sure when you explain what it's for, they'll be understanding. Just go and ask, OK? - M

Alright, I'll do it. Think of me while you're partying with Alice. x

Then I turned to the emails from Scarlet. I opened the first to find an attachment - oh shit, he had sent me the next chapter of Exquisite Corpse. Shit!

Don't worry, I've put it up again on AO3 under a new pseud and a fake title. I told Tumblr where I'd moved it to and linked, but don't worry, I haven't tagged it, and it's locked to only AO3 users only. Brooklyn Vegan will never find it now, mwah hah hah hah! ~~Scarlet~~
OK, I guess you totally hated it, since I've not heard from you. Or are you too cool to talk to the likes of trash like me, since you got all Tumblr Famous? (Just kidding! Honest! Just wondering where you are.) ~~Scarlet~~

OK, I'm starting to get a little freaked out now. You haven't even updated your Tumblr all week! That is totally unlike you. Can you just write and let me know you're OK because I do not even know how to get hold of the UK police? ~~Scarlet~~

Scarlet, I am so, so sorry. Work has just been crazy this week. I haven't really had internet time at all. I barely had time to record 4BAABS this week, what with the Russian case and everything. But this weekend, I swear, I will sit down and edit your chapter. Though I am sure it is fine, give or take a few instances of comma abuse! Can't wait to read it. XO, Pace

When I got home, I downloaded Scarlet's manuscript and poured myself a glass of wine, with every intention of working on the story, but there was a new email from Carlos at the top of my inbox again.

I never said I was omniscient with regards to philosophy. Just that it was ill-advised to engage me on matters of Platonic ethics. Tell me about Mary Midgley. Wikipedia reckons she's an Ethicist? You and your morality again, huh. - C.

Yes, me and my morality again. She's amazing. What she is brilliant at is applying both considered philosophical approach and clear, lucid writing, to the latest developments in Science and Technology. She completely wipes the floor with currently ~popular~ thinkers a la Dawkins and Hitchens - especially Dawkins, who she swats as casually as a fly, pillorying him not just for bad philosophy, but for a total lack of understanding of recent developments in science itself. Now go and find a copy of Beast and Man or Evolution As A Religion, and don't pester me again until I've finished answering your last email! - M

Yes, ma'am! And is this instruction accompanied with another of those ferocious Katharine Hepburn glares, possibly over the top of your glasses? - C

I glared at the screen, almost prickling with annoyance, but with the glass of wine half finished, I was feeling slightly bold. I put my glasses back on, pushed them halfway down my nose, then loaded up photobooth and took a selfie glowering positively malevolently over the tops of the frames. But when I looked at the result, I was amused to discover I didn't actually look that fierce - the glint of mischief twisted my lips into a faint smile that belied the scowl. Oh, sod it. I wasn't
spending all night taking selfies for Carlos. I had emails to answer. So I sent it back with a brief message saying:

Don't push your luck - M

Not more than two minutes later, my inbox pinged again, a photo attached in reply.

We are died, dead. Both of us, beast and man. - C

When I opened the attachment, there was the familiar long, narrow body of Carlos, draped across his sofa, hand clutched to his head dramatically, as if in imitation of the Death of Chatterton. But there, lying on his chest, paws crossed, head cocked slightly as if vaguely alarmed at his master's antics, lay the most adorable dog I had ever seen. OK, I'll admit it. Something twisted in me, there and then. Maybe it's that English disease - the most reserved, cold-hearted, emotionally unexpressive Britisher will instantly become a soppy, mewling, babytalking mess when confronted with a canine. But it was a very cute dog.

Oh, my. I dig your handsome housemate! What a cutie. Too bad about the ugly bloke he's using for a pillow, though. Can't you do something about him? Bringing the neighbourhood down a bit. - M

I know, right? Unfortunately the ugly pillow came with the apartment. Gaius is most inconvenienced by the way said ugly pillow keeps moving to use his smartphone, so we shall let you be for a bit. Answer my long email, dammit. - C.

We were talking about humour, and there you go again. I suppose you could claim that self-depreceating humour has no power dynamic to it. But I do the same thing myself. Get in the barb against myself before anyone else can - yes, I'm ugly, unattractive, rude, a complete bitch, and pretentious to boot. But if I get those barbs in first, that defuses the power dynamics of anyone who tries to use those same 'jokes' against me in earnest. You cannot hurt me with flaws I admit. You would, I suppose see that as a mask - or a distancing technique. It is still about power. Passive aggression is still aggression, even if harder to identify it as such.

I mean, this is where it gets complicated with Barthes. Talking about authorial intention is not the same thing as talking about context. You can strip the authorial intention from a piece of work, and view it as text assembled and contextualised in the mind of the reader - but you can never divide it from context. Just shift whether the important context is the context of the work-producer, or the context of the work-consumer. The speaker or the listener. There is no such thing as a pure text, pure language, because there is no such thing as pure reader without context. (Unless one
mistakes language itself for context, rather than a tool for expressing context - a mistake I sometimes wonder if Barthes is prey to, in some of his earlier writing.) It's interesting, if it's shifting the balance of whose context is important.

And I suppose this is exactly what I mean, with regards to acting. I can read a play like a novel, just words and a few stage directions, and supply the rest of the context - facial features, expressions, clothes, set, intonation, everything - inside my head. Because that's how I'm used to reading a novel. The skill of a writer is making that world come alive within the reader's head through clever use of language and descriptions.

(But! And this is one of the things I argue with a friend - well, my co-writer. You know him as the "Scarlet Pimp" who was the other author working on that Exquisite Corpse story you hated so much. Scarlet is a professional writer of erotica. I am a (very much amateur) writer of literature. We argue constantly about description and its role. He is used to describing purely physical actions - thrusts, penetrations and the like - performed by bodies which are deliberately kept vague. I suspect for two reasons - partly because too much 'poetry' distracts from the porn, as Anais Nin was chastised. But much more because erotica is written for an audience that wants to read about acts. The details about those bodies involved are not just distracting, but they limit the appeal to the audience. Make one of the thrusting young men blond, and you will alienate a reader who prefers brunets. Leave the characteristics out, and the reader can project their own ideal fantasy figure into the scenario. But fiction is necessarily different - personalities and motivations suddenly are required to drive actions. So many of those descriptive aspects are shortcuts for character. Clothing, especially, is a gift to the writer! It's not just shallow. Clothing is shorthand for not just personal style, but for class, for context, for culture and subculture, even historical period. I don't need to tell *you* that clothing is a language!)

But! (Sorry for the digression.) My problem with acting. Acting... the casting of a specific actor for a role sweeps aside all of the context that was provided by the canny reader, and replaces it - often permanently - with a single vision. Yes, I'm aware that a good actor is supposed to disappear into a role. But it's so distracting seeing the actor, rather than the character, if the actor is already known to you. Anyone portraying Sherlock Holmes that is not Basil Rathbone is just some young whippersnapper - or worse, Benedict Cumberbatch - dressed up in his clothes. It's distracting. And you will hate me for this, but I do have to wonder if I will ever be able to watch you onstage, and see you as the character you are performing, rather than "oh, that's Carlos Dengler" because your face is so distinctive and you are so recognisable. I'm probably insulting you horribly, and casting aspersions on your talents and skills. The problem is, I admit, in my head. It's my film-deafness. My performance-deafness, rather, I suppose.

I must confess, I find it strangely disconcerting, just how easily you casually drop talk about 'your therapist' into a conversation. I suppose this is me being terribly English again. I do remember when I visited New York, being shocked how I'd be having coffee with someone, and they'd just casually announce, "Oh, must go. Time for my analyst appointment!" like they were a character in a Woody Allen film. One doesn't expect people to really behave like that! (But there it is, again, that conflation of film and reality. Characters in Woody Allen films go to analysts. It's not a thing that real *people* do.) Are you... well, are you... alright? I lack the vocabulary for this, so you must guide me. I don't know what to ask, if I should say "are you cured?" or "are you sane now?" or "are you in remission?" or what to say!
Well. Whatever it is that you went into therapy to accomplish, I hope that you are that.

First, I wish to counter your claims that you are ugly, that you are unattractive, rude, a bitch, or completely pretentious. Well - rude, perhaps, but that is part of your rough charm, madam. (Or maybe your rudeness is just you 'being English' and ours are only ever cultural misunderstandings!) ((That was a joke, by the way.)) I say this not as someone who is responding to passive aggressive pleas for attention, or as someone who wishes to curry favour with you. I say this, as a heterosexual man, looking at a woman. I find your physical appearance beautiful. I understand that we are not interested in one another as sexual partners, but this makes my assessment more sincere: I have nothing to gain by it.

I have never believed in conventional standards of 'beauty'. I am well aware of all the things that our society demands women be - thin, young, passive, feminine - to be considered attractive. But when it come to visceral desire - lust, for lack of a better word (as someone who speaks so casually of writing 'erotica' (something I find perhaps as shocking as you find my casual mentions of therapy) I hope you understand my usage of this term in the abstract) - it is far more about how a woman holds herself, about her poise, her confidence, how she inhabits her own body, than how closely her body conforms to societal standards. I hope you do not take what I say next in a spirit other than it is intended. But there are those, who would see those facets of yourself about which you are so passive-aggressively defensive - your sharp, Katharine Hepburn glare, your solid, almost statuesque body, your forthright honesty and bluntness, your willingness to argue, your caustic sense of humour - who would see those as aspects to treasure, rather than reasons to dismiss you. They are your features, not bugs, as you so charmingly told me last week.

And now, having paid you some small compliment, I am now going to scream at you for an hour about how little you understand the acting profession, you bothersome, galling demon sent from hell to try my patience. Do you understand that a recorded piece of music is not the same as a written score? Or are you one of those people who insists that you have no need of a recording of Handel's Messiah or Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture because you can read music, thank you very much, and you are perfectly capable of perusing the score and hearing the music in your own head? (And before you even try to raise this issue - no, a play is not the same thing as a film. The same way that going to see a band perform live is not the same thing as listening to a CD!) I'm sure, from reading your novels, that your imagination is excellent. But a play is as different a thing from a novel as a full orchestral performance, sitting in Carnegie Hall, is from reading lifeless black lines of notation on a score. If you disagree with that, then I'm sorry, but we have no more to talk about!

Which is rather a shame, because I feel right now that we have so much to talk about. These email conversations are frustrating, because often your asides as interesting as the straight replies you are giving me. (Not that your replies are ever straight, really, and invariably raise more questions than they answer!) The difference between erotic writing and literature, I must confess, I had never really considered. When I must take recourse to porn, I tend to rely on the strictly visual variety. But when I think about it, well, I do prefer brunettes to blondes - but it is easy enough to find another video or image, rather than be distracted by the wrong color hair. (That said, if I could find *any* porn at all, that actually featured pubic hair, I would be a happier and more
fulfilled man than I currently am. But perhaps it's best if we do not get into my frustrations.) I suppose erotic writing is different from literary writing because it fulfils a different purpose. But I must confess Anais Nin did little for me; descriptions of men's hats floating away or whatever did not arouse my libido.

But now I want to go back and read your prose again, to try and recall how you handled sex scenes. I don't really remember if they were more erotic, or more literary, but I remember them feeling very *real*. Sometimes funny, sometimes awkward (Kate Gordon and her tourbus bunkbed acrobatics! Good god, how I laughed at that. It brought back some memories.) And sometimes, yes, intensely hot and horny. I just always got the feeling that *sex* with Kate Gordon would be so much fun, no matter how careless she was as a *lover*. But you've taken them offline, so now I can't.

Now. Yes, people in New York really go to therapy. Including me. I don't know if I will ever be sane. Or 'cured'. ('In remission' is cancer, my dear, which I, thankfully, have never had.) But it has made me better able to communicate my needs, get along with other people, and otherwise generally exist as a human being in relationships with other people. It is probably thanks to my therapist that I am just calmly telling you that you are completely wrong about acting and the theatre, instead of losing my temper, or sulking and refusing to talk to you at all. (But you are still wrong.) But I suppose that asking whether I am 'alright' in that curious, halting way could be read either as a sign that you are afraid of me, and want to know that I am reasonably safe and not an axe murderer. Or it could mean that you are starting to care about me, to the point of expressing concern or at least good-wishes for my general well-being.

Thanks to therapy, I will evaluate it in the less defensive manner, and read it as the latter. I am well. I hope that you are well, too, my dear.

- C.

I felt my stomach lurch and me knees give out as I read it. Oh Carlos, no, no, no. Don't you start hitting on me again, please, not when I've started to actually kind of... like you. I couldn't stand it.

Something had clearly gone wrong, some kind of wires had been crossed. Maybe because I talked so easily about erotica and porn - for fucks sake, it was just what I did. I always forgot, when I wasn't talking to women (or men that were queer), how carefully I had to watch my step. That sense of male entitlement, constantly, that a woman's sexuality never exists for her own pleasure or benefit. It is always a display for a watching male. But I didn't want to have to stop talking to Carlos. And I didn't even really want to stop talking to Carlos about sex - well, not about sex, but about creativity and performance and writing and erotics. This was just the stuff I was interested in! Why did men always have to take it the wrong way?

I didn't buy it, that whole "I have nothing to gain by complimenting you" thing. His words of praise made my skin tingle in a way that didn't exactly feel comfortable. But that 'rude' thing - well, that at least sounded like Carlos. But maybe that was it? I was rude to Carlos, and quite frequently, but mostly through disagreeing with him. It was a thing that I had often found men doing - especially men who thought of themselves as good-looking, and were accustomed to female attention. If a man flirted with a woman - if he yanked that 'you're so beautiful when you're angry' chain - it was a way of reducing a woman to a flat, 2-dimensional object, to be judged solely on her qualities of attractiveness. If diffused and defused the power of her intellectual arguments, to render her a receptacle for Beauty, and no more. And it infuriated me and perhaps even personally insulted me, coming from Carlos - Carlos who I had actually come to see as an intellectual equal and sparring partner.
Well. I decided to heed the hint and soft-pedal the next email, though it was still short and to-the-point.

Carlos, my good sir. I find it very hard to believe that you have a difficult time finding fulfillment, well, specifically of the sexual kind. Don't you have a girlfriend? And if you do not, I am quite sure that it is very easy for you to find accommodating women with whom to have an arrangement. (My friend Sunita, rather lyrically, calls them Fuckbuddies. I'm sure New Yorkers have their own vernacular.) This, I feel, would be a better use of your time than flirting with me. - M

To be perfectly frank, madam, actually, no. I do not currently have a girlfriend. And though you are probably right, and it is a long time since I have found it difficult to find, as you put it (I don't care for your friend's language) 'accommodating women', I am not currently in the market for such arrangements.

I know what you think of me. I know who you think I am. I am not that person any more; I have not been that person in about 5 years, maybe more. I made mistakes, in the past. I hurt people I would rather not have hurt; I alienated people I would rather have continued to have in my life. One of the reasons I gave up touring was because I no longer wanted to be exposed to that lifestyle, and those temptations. I had at last, in short, found a reason to stay at home for.

My ex-partner is a very private person, so for reasons of expedience, I shall call her 'Cindy'. (It was in fact, my 'Cindy' who sent me the link to Sudden-Onset Celebrity. She knows me too well.) When we met, Cindy had heard all about me through the NYC grapevine; she even knew some of the 'accommodating women' I had behaved so badly towards. But she didn't turn me down flat; she told me that I could change. She gave me a space in which I could change. She told me that she expected the road to be rocky, and she expected that I would make mistakes, but as hard as I tried not to err, she would try just as hard to forgive me. I found I rapidly lost the urge to err. I discovered that I could be kind and considerate. I discovered that I could be less self-centred and cruel. Because she did not ask perfect faithfulness from me, in fact, she suggested that we practice something she called consensual non-monogamy, I discovered that I could, in fact, be chaste.

We were lovers for four years. We were very happy. She encouraged me to act, to go back to school to pursue acting professionally. I encouraged her in her chosen career. (She is a costume designer, so yes, I am intimately familiar with the idea of the language of clothing.) And after four years, when we had started to outgrow one another, she asked if we could end it, and I agreed. It was a revelation. I won't say it didn't hurt; of course it hurt. Separations hurt, and more than that, letting go of the dream that our liaison could last forever, that hurt. But there was no drama, no recriminations, no slammed doors or shouting matches. We parted as friends. And I don't mean that in the way that men always say that, to maintain their innocence and absolve their faults. I mean that we are friends. We email regularly, we keep up on Facebook, she comes to my plays, I go to brunch with her and her new partner about once a month or so. It's all very civilized.

It was, as I said, a revelation. It set a new standard, both for the behavior I found
myself capable of, and the kind of relationship that I expected to be in. I never want to be in a relationship that isn't like that, ever again. Perhaps it was meeting the right kind of person. Perhaps it was me finally being at a stage of my life where I could behave like a responsible adult. More likely it was a combination of the two. So I am not throwing myself into something careless, and undoing all that good work.

I am certain you don't believe me. I'm certain that you are the kind of woman who checks under beds for illicit lovers and sees groupies lurking in every cupboard. That kind of relationship is not good for me. Distrust breeds distrust. So, though I have freely admitted: I find your looks, and more importantly, your quicksilver mind very, very attractive, I know that you would offer the kind of relationship that would be very, very wrong for me. You accused me, before, of being conceited, arrogant, and told me to 'get over myself' for teasing you that writing erotic fiction about someone meant that you might want to sleep with that person. Well, J'accuse, Margaret. I suspect you of no small arrogance, for continuing to believe that I want to seduce you, despite all evidence that you would be very, very bad for me.

I am sorry if this hurts you. I take a risk in telling you the truth. But trust breeds trust. You are right, I do enjoy flirting, especially with clever women. But it's important to me, that you know where *I* stand.

Carlos.

I was not attracted to Carlos. I knew that with every fibre of my being. I no more wanted a relationship with him than I wanted to rip off my clothes and leap naked into a sewer outfall. So why did I feel so... insulted, by his simple assertion that he and I would be disastrous in a relationship together? I agreed with him, for fucks sake! So why did it feel like such a slap in the face? Did I not want to let go of the idea that Carlos was pursuing me? That someone - even someone I didn't particularly like - wanted to pursue me? It wasn't as if I had a million other options knocking down the door.

How stupid of me. How careless, to allow myself the hope of something. Oh, knock it off, Margaret, I told myself. Stop looking for the cloud in every silver lining. An internationally successful rock star just told you that he found you - and especially your mind - very attractive. Only you could find a reason to twist this into a reason to never ever trust men ever again in your life. (If you ever trusted them in the first place - which you didn't.)

I forced myself to open up my gmail and type his name in the to: box.

Carlos, your story is beautiful. It makes me ache, and I wish I were a skilful enough writer to capture in a novel, the emotional expressiveness you have shown in 4 brief paragraphs. It doesn't hurt, because I agree with you, and have done since day one. But it piques my pride, more than a little. And now I feel bereft, and a little lied to, because for a few weeks now, I got to believe in the flattering illusion that an artist whose work I admired, was actually interested in me.

I will not be around much this weekend. I have a friend's novel to subedit. And then I am actually going round a friend's house to watch the films that you recommended to me. So give me time to lick my wounds, recover my bruised ego, and I will come back to you with what I learned about ACTING.
Margaret, I did not lie. I am interested. I remain interested. Just not in romance. Now I, too, need to go and spend some time with the "IRL" friends that I have been neglecting, in favour of the seductive ping of the inbox. - C.
It was, in fact, good for me to have a weekend off the internet. Alice didn't quite pull a Sunita and demand that I hand my iPhone to her for safekeeping, but she did tell me to turn the ringer off and leave it in my bag. We had one of those enormous American meals - chicken-fried steak with mashed potatoes and greens - that made my stomach groan, then sat down to watch the movies.

Robert roared with laughter as Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell absolutely demolished one another with bon mots and witty repartee. "This was us, this was absolutely us," he chortled, leaning over to squeeze his wife's hand. "Swap the newspaper for the Cultural Studies Departments of two major metropolitan universities, and that is absolutely, one hundred percent us."

"But you two adore each other," I pointed out, pouring out the dregs of the last bottle of wine. "You are the happiest couple I know."

"Well, thank you," laughed Alice, tweaking her husband's foot affectionately. "But I do believe that one of the reasons we get on so well together is that we both love to argue. Not bicker, but actually, properly, argue. Debate. We don't just sit and read the newspaper on Saturday morning. We sit and read the newspaper out loud to one another and thrash out what it means."

"Oh no," contradicted Robert. "I read, you thrash. You wouldn't even let me have the Guardian any more because it winds you up too much."

"I can't stand hypocrisy, you know I can't. I far prefer what you so lovingly call the Torygraph, because they, at least, are absolutely honest about their agenda. It's all about money and power and privilege. The Guardian, they dress it all up in this lovely leftist, woolly language, but it's money and power and privilege that likes to pretend that it is something cuddly and cute because it's wrapped in a rain-forest friendly wrapper that pretends to wring its hands over the very situations that its readers perpetuate. I can't stand The Guardian! Of all the British institutions that annoy me the most..."

"But it is a British Institution!" insisted Robert. "It never claimed to be a leftist paper. It claims to be a Middle Class paper. It represents the interests of the Chattering Classes, the educated middle classes. Keeping up the appearance of being engaged and being socially conscious is one of the fundamental principles of..."

"It's hypocrisy! It's complete and blatant, mendacious hypocrisy!" Alice thundered. "On the front page there will be an article about the eradication of the Brazilian Rain Forest, and then in the Magazine section there will be a massive 'buy this for your home' feature exhorting you to show your love of exotic timber by buying this £8000 wardrobe of Brazilian Rainforest Teak, sourced from god knows where..."

"Guys, guys," I interrupted. "Shall I go and carve the Viennetta, while you maybe line up the next movie?"

"Oh yes, yes, let me help you find some dishes," offered Robert helpfully, as Alice moved towards the home entertainment centre.

"Were you really a student of Alice's?" I probed, when we were alone in the kitchen.

"I was," he admitted. "She always was a magnificent lecturer."

"Wasn't that a bit naughty?"
"Well, perhaps. But I was a mature student, so it wasn't like I was some kid. I think that might have been what annoyed me so much, at first. That here was this girl, only two years older than myself, and she was a PhD candidate teaching classes already, while I was back at being a Freshman again." Robert grinned his crooked smile, pushing a sheaf of blond hair out of his face. "I had to hand it to her, though. I was impressed that she stood her ground. She gave as good as she got. I liked that. I think we found one another worthy opponents. That flattened out the power imbalance inherent in the student-teacher relationship."

I smiled, flipping the slightly bigger piece of the ice cream desert into his bowl. "I never knew how you two met."

"Depending on who you ask, it's either totally scandalous, or the most romantic story ever told." He smiled disarmingly, pushing his spectacles back up his nose, and for an instant, I was tempted to confess the entire story of my conversation with Carlos to him, to get a male opinion on it.

"Robert, do you think men and women can ever really be friends?" I asked carefully.

"Of course! You and I are friends, aren't we? Am I not a man?"

"You're Alice's husband. That's different."

"I wasn't aware that I was emasculated by marriage! Oh no, my wife will be so upset at my castration, albeit symbolically!" he teased.

I rolled my eyes. Never get into an argument with a psychology professor. Never. "Do you think that a man and a woman who have a fundamental sexual attraction underlying their relationship can ever really be friends?"

"That's a very different question. That depends on the maturity level of the man and woman in question, their intentions towards one another, whether they have serious commitments elsewhere, whether they have already tried a relationship that didn't work out, whether there are serious impediments to pursuing a relationship... I suppose the theme of both of the films we are watching tonight is that the answer to that question is no. Old flames are the truest flames, passion once kindled can never truly be extinguished. But perhaps that's only because The Romance is a fundamentally conservative genre. Perhaps it's just because the converse - the idea that men and women can control their impulses and treat each other as human beings - that doesn't lend itself to such a good story arc. Can you imagine The Philadelphia Story if the wedding just goes ahead and Katharine Hepburn doesn't get back together with Cary Grant..."

"Oh, thanks for spoiling it for me, Robert!"

"Oh." Suddenly Robert looked very embarrassed behind his intellectual glasses. "Well, not really. You still don't know how it happens."

Grumbling, I followed him back into the living room and sat down to watch the film. Katharine Hepburn was incandescent in it, that mixture of innocence, steely determination and crackling wit, while Cary Grant smarmed and charmed in equal measure. And Alice and I actually managed not to gripe too much about how retrograde the attitudes towards love and marriage were, opening the next bottle of wine while shrugging something about the past being a foreign country. I should have been paying to the acting, to the craft of the film, but really I just got swept up in the plot, carried away by Tracy and her awful choice of suitors. Despite my best intentions to be irritated by the film's old fashioned attitudes, Katharine Hepburn just charmed me. And that 'withering glance' of hers! What eyebrows! I resolved to practice it before sending Carlos another selfie.
On Sunday, I woke with a mild hangover that was quickly dispatched with tea and a fry-up. I had sworn I wouldn't, but I couldn't help myself as my hand twitched towards my phone to check my email. Well it was a good thing I did! Nothing from Carlos (thankfully - or disappointingly?) but there was a panicked email from Evie, asking me to look over the essay portion of her application for the QC Fast-track. I read it a few times through, corrected a couple of minor grammatical mistakes, and suggested a few additions to pad it out a bit, then sent it back to her with as much encouragement as my hangover could muster.

By then, it was early afternoon, so I opened up the manuscript of Scarlet's last chapter of Exquisite Corpse and sat down to beta-read it. OK, wow, holy shit, did that latest batch of smut ever wake me up. And yet, even as I was squirming with lust, my toes curling up with excruciating lechery at the scenes depicted in his story, something ticked over in the back of my head. How oddly unfamiliar the Baron's character read to me now. I recognised almost nothing of the man I had been conversing with, in our story. But then again, wasn't that the point? He was fiction, an invention of Scarlet's and mine to play a role in a narrative. Maybe that had been my mistake, the last time I sat down to write, and couldn't. I kept trying to reconcile the character in the story with my new knowledge of the man he had been based on, and couldn't do it. But as I read Scarlet's Baron chewing through the scenery in our campy vampire story, I saw him again as his own, independent person. And thrilled to his elegant villainy again. When Scarlet's plot left off, I picked it up again, pounding out five pages of smutty romp.

Was that a weird thing to be doing? The moment I stopped, and thought about exactly how twisted it was, the writing stopped flowing again. It had been just a laugh with Scarlet, a sort of flirtation. I had been using The Baron D'Engler's body as an instrument to ravish my way through all and sundry without compunction, but I had never before considered the feelings of the man whose body I was pretending to inhabit to do so. Standing up, I paced around the room, made myself another cup of tea and tried to put shape to my complicated feelings about Carlos. No. Carlos had made it clear; there's nothing there. Any feelings I might have had for him, or might have come
to develop with time, I needed to cast them aside and let them rot, turn them to fiction and plough them into the story like manure to make the plot grow.

So I went back, re-edited the last few paragraphs, then plunged on, well aware of exactly how twisted what I was doing truly was, but taking the knowledge of that twistedness, and braiding it back into the sinister character of the predatory Baron. It was important not to forget that. The Baron wasn't Carlos, at all. He was me. Denied an appropriate outlet for his own affections by his vampire nature, he ploughed them into twisted, unnatural ones. It was all me. I wanted to be that immoral, that rapacious, freed from the demands of the heavy weight of my conscience, that stubborn need to do what I thought of as good or proper or right, all the fucking time. The Baron didn't need to be Feminist, didn't need to be accurate or upstanding or good, he just fucked and fucked over anyone that caught his glittering ebony eye. It was, in a complicated way, oddly freeing to write The Baron. So I pushed him harder, made him more debauched, twisted him into sexual pleasures even more outrageous.

Once I'd finished the chapter, and did a brief spelling and sense check, I took a deep breath, and emailed it back to Scarlet, with the apology 'You set a high bar again, Scarlet, but I seem to have gone somewhere very quite dark with it. I'm sorry. This is deeply fucked up and weird, but it's where this story seems to be going right now. XO, Pace'

I made another cup of tea and some toast, and ate it, picking through the last sections of the previous morning's Guardian, smiling to myself as I remembered Alice and Robert bickering over it. Alice was a lot like the characters in those films we had watched - uncompromising, idealist,
high-minded - but in all the best ways. It irritated me mildly that the second film had depicted those very traits I admired most in my friends, as being somehow worthy of contempt and requiring change. It was in so many ways, a thoroughly disagreeable story. So why had we both loved it so much? Katharine Hepburn's withering stare popped into my mind, and made me smile. The physicality of her comedy, the way that she and her onscreen lovers scrapped and knocked one another out like cartoon characters. In a less gifted actor, it would have seemed uncouth, even base. But somehow Hepburn's poise, her presence, the way she could express so much emotion in a single turn of phrase, even just in the way she said the single word "hello" to each man in turn, with completely different intent - it lifted the end result far about the questionable source material to something spirited and lively that totally redeemed it.

And then it clicked. What Carlos had been trying to tell me about acting. I suddenly saw it.

I finished my slice of toast and raced back to my laptop. There was an email from Scarlet already; Christ, he read fast.

'yes. this is deeply fucked up and weird and twisted AND I FUCKING LOVE IT xoxo ~Scarlet~~'

'Can't wait to read what you come up with next,' I told him, then typed Carlos' name into the To: box, and hammered out, all in rush, everything I had just been thinking. How he had been right, at least about Katharine Hepburn. It wasn't that I liked the story, in fact, the story irked me. But in her capable hands, the ridiculous screwball plot and retrograde romantic notions had been transformed into something charismatic, engaging and deeply appealing.

I must confess, I was disappointed that he did not respond straight away. But then I remembered the time difference, realised it was Sunday brunchtime in New York, the most crucial hour of the week for socialising, and he had, in his last email, mentioned IRL friends he had been neglecting. It was obvious it was not personal.

But when there was no reply for the length of Monday, I started to worry. I read over our last few emails, and worried if I had been too honest when I confessed to my pride being piqued - or too rough in pushing him on his romantic status at all! When did men always insist on telling you that they were 'still interested', right before they vanished out of your life forever? By Tuesday morning, when there was no response, I had given up. That was it; the entire, bizarre episode was clearly over. I went back to exchanging disgruntled emails with the 4BAABS girls as if the interlude had never happened.

On Wednesday morning, with a timestamp that indicated it was the middle of the night for him, the expected response finally arrived, with a sting in the tail that took my breath away.

Margaret. (Do you even have a nickname? I can't actually imagine you brooking anyone breaking down that mouthful into a playful pet name.) Under normal circumstances, I would crow at your sudden elucidation and conversion to my way of thinking, but I shall be kind. I am simply glad to have had a hand in your seeing the light. It is the same kind of pleasure, sharing a hitherto-unknown joy, as in my former life, when I DJ'd, and played a new audience an unfamiliar track in context, and watched them grow to love it as they danced.

But, there is another matter, slightly more urgent than the matters we have been discussing. That audition that I attended last week. Alas, I did not get the part; and I cannot even blame my inadequate preparation, as the director's feedback indicated that
I was simply physically wrong for the part. The actress they have cast for the lead is five foot nothing - my lanky frame, at 6'2", simply will not do. Alas; it happens.

Yet the experience was not a total wash-out. One door closes, another opens, and opportunities occur in the oddest forms. The director was apparently intrigued - both by me, and my back story. He wanted to recommend me for a graduate program at RADA, a hugely prestigious course for which it is an honour to even be invited - and one must be invited! - to audition. It is a working curriculum, you see, during which actors are guaranteed placements as understudies at some of the most illustrious theatres in London - the National Theatre, Shakespeare's Globe, the Old Vic.

The introduction was procured, and my audition scheduled for a week from this Thursday! (Barely time to prepare, at all, but I am a late applicant, taken entirely on a personal recommendation.) So I shall be in your fair city, and soon! I thought I might extend my visit to stay the weekend, make it pleasure as well as business. I am sorry for the short notice, but can I take you to dinner? Or even just meet you for a drink, if your social calendar is engaged.

Your humble servant, etc.

Carlos.

Oh my god. What would I do? Carlos, not as a shadowy fantasy on the internet, not as a vague presence in a blurry selfie, but a real, living, breathing, human being, in my city. What the fuck would I do? I panicked, I stalled for time, firing back an email, even as my mind reeled.

Carlos! I'm so delighted for you! That's excellent news, and I'm so proud of you. The short answer is: probably yes, but I don't know. It depends on work, on commitments, but I will do my best. Can I let you know in a few days? - M

I understand if you have previous engagements. I knew that it was short notice; I don't expect to dominate your Friday night, but anything you can spare me, a crumb of your time, an hour on Saturday afternoon to float round the Tate, I shall be grateful. But now I have to go to bed, because I have been up all night with nerves, waiting for the confirmation email to come in from RADA. RADA! It's impossible to say it without affecting an English accent. Oh, I am giddy with joy! But now I must sleep. Anon. XO, C.

No. Oh my god, no. I had to find a way to get out of it. There was no way I could meet Carlos fucking Dengler, not next week - hell, not ever. What the fuck had I got myself into? I couldn't go through with it, I would have to find a way to put him off and then delay the inevitable until he had to go home. That was the sensible place, yes. But no. Guilt flowered in my chest. If he was prolonging his brief visit until the weekend with the specific intention of meeting me, then it would be rude not to appear. But what the hell would I do with a rock star - well, a former rock star - for an evening in London? My life seemed suddenly very inadequate. I was a badly paid computer programmer with a job in the public sector. I could not produce slap-up meals, exotic nightclubs or the kind of social whirl that would impress a rock star. Lunch gleaned from the stalls.
of Herne Hill Market, a walk in Brockwell Park and maybe street food from a pop up in Brixton Village, that was more my speed.

I was out of my depth. I needed advice, and quick. But who could I turn to? I'd been lying to all of my friends for weeks. Sunita? Sunita, with her earthy pragmatism, was the one to whom we all invariably turned with our boy-based dilemmas. Except oh no, I wasn't going to position it that way. Carlos was not a boy - well, not a boy-boy. If I even mentioned it to Sunita, she would have me parcelled up like a prime steak and delivered to his hotel room with the strict instructions to get myself laid in about thirty seconds flat. There was no way I was telling Sunita. Not now - maybe not ever, if I could help it.

Evie? Evie had told me to alert her immediately if my 'rock star stalker' appeared anywhere near London. But Evie, let's face it, was paranoid. She would want an armed guard and a police patrol before she let me anywhere near Carlos. And over the past few weeks, I had got more of a sense of his personality. Yes, he was over-the-top and flamboyant and although I had got used to the way his moods shifted between grandiose and grovelling at the change of the wind... I dunno. I actually trusted him. Well, no, I didn't trust him as far as I could spit a rat with regards to any boy-based level. But for drinks and maybe dinner, an afternoon wandering around an art gallery? I knew he wasn't an axe-murderer. I could do that, without the full security-theatre production that Evie would insist upon.

Alice. Good old sensible Alice, with her intimate understanding of how irritation and annoyance could be as much a lubrication for sexual attraction as ordinary pleasant social intercourse. And Alice already knew that I was engaged in a... in a something, with a man from the internet.

Sneaking out for a 'cigarette break' (though I hadn't smoked in years) from work, I slipped my phone out of my back pocket and rang Alice from behind the building. "Hey... are you around tonight?"

"Why? What's up?"

"I need to... talk," I hedged.

"You got me on the phone now. So talk!" she laughed.

"Can't. I'm literally on a two-minute cigarette break from work."

"You don't even smoke," she observed suspiciously. "I got a shit-ton of papers to mark tonight. Is it important?"

"Kinda... yeah..."

"I need more than kinda yeah to put my third-year media studies class's grades off for another day, OK?"

"Do you remember my internet... thing?"

"Oh, your little internet romance with Mr Can't Wait Until London Bridge? Oh yeah. I remember. That still going? Wow."

"It's not a romance," I protested.

"Flirtation."

"Not even a flirtation. More a... problematic... problematisation."
"Honey, you got it bad." Her amusement at the situation was starting to piss me off.

"He's coming to London next week, alright?" I snapped.

A deep sigh, before the concession. "Alright, come meet me at the Staff Canteen at 6.30 sharp. But we can talk about Mr Problematic for an hour, an hour and a half tops before I got to get back to grading papers. Ya dig?"

"I dig. I dig it with a JCB," I sighed. Mr Problematic.

"A what?" Eight years, she had lived in London, and she still had problems with the slang.

"Massive, fuck-off industrial digger with caterpillar treads?"

"A back-hoe," Alice surmised. "I'll see you tonight."

"I'm trying really hard not to be a back-hoe or any other kind of ho, OK? That's what I need to talk to you about."

So that evening after work, I ignored the excited email in my inbox from Carlos, detailing flight times and details, and suggestions of things he might want to do or see while in London, and took the train from London Bridge down to New Cross. I met Alice in a cheap but deserted cafeteria that stank of chip-pan oil, on one of the upper floors of her university's campus centre. I bought her dinner to apologise for taking up her time - heck it was cheap enough to treat - and sat opposite her as she tried not to fiddle with the iPad on the table in front of her, still casually flicking through her students' papers as she listened.

"So, erm, I've been... kind of... lying to you guys, for the past few weeks," I explained. "But I need you to promise that you will not tell the others, before I tell you anything."

"No way." Alice's afro wobbled slightly with the force of her refusal. "I'm not promising anything until I know what this is about."

"It's not about them, it's about me. And seriously, you can not tell them," I pleaded.

"OK. But if you're lying to me, and I find out it does involve us, I am not keeping quiet. I don't play that taking sides game. Never again."

I winced slightly at the implication, but I needed to get this out of me before I exploded. "So, Mr Problematic." Alice nodded, even as she flicked and tapped and typed gently into her iPad. "Do you remember about a month ago, when I had that nonsense going on with the comments on my AO3 stories?"

"Yeah, I remember vaguely. What went down, again? Some fake-ass guy pretending to be a rock star was commenting on your stories? And Brooklyn Vegan bought the whole scam, and doxxed you on the internet?" Tap, flick, nod.

"That was the lie."

Alice stopped flicking and looked up at me. "What was the lie? I saw the story on Brooklyn Vegan, you forwarded it to us. Did you fake the whole thing, leave comments on your own stories? That's pretty fucking weird, Margo."

"No. It's weirder than that. The lie was, that it wasn't an impostor. It was my rock star alright, he just didn't want our conversation being reported on NME dot com. So we took it private. To email.
We have been emailing ever since, sometimes 2, 3 times a day."

Slowly, Alice started flicking and typing again, though she was still half looking at me from the corner of her eye. "So Mr Problematic is... your rock star?"

"Yessss," I confessed, in a drawn-out hiss.

"What was his name again?"

"Carlos. Carlos Dengler."

Type. Tap. Swipe. Tap, tap, tap. An eyebrow shot up Alice's forehead as she gazed at her iPad screen. After staring in horror at it for a few moments, she slowly twisted it around and displayed it towards me. And there, in all his glory: black shirt, red tie and armband, gun holster, Hitler Hairdo, jack boots, SS skull ring... was Carlos, his chin thrust aggressively into the air as he manhandled his bass. "This is one hell of a Problematic," she announced.

I squirmed, knowing full well what was coming. "He doesn't... dress like that any more. Look for a more recent picture."

"Huh," snorted Alice, but she did as I asked, and went back to swiping. A few swipes later, and she was giggling, turning her iPad towards me to show a moustachioed Carlos, his hair curly and natural, scowling at the camera, dressed as a 19th Century Cattle Baron, bolo tie, frock coat and all. "This. This is the same guy? The guy you're in love with?"

"I'm not in love with him," I protested. "Seriously. We just... fight. On the internet."

Flick, flick, flick... tap. The explosion of laughter from Alice's direction told me exactly what photo she had just found. "Oh. My. God. Is this a... That corset! ...those heels. OK, drag's cool. I'm down with queer theory. Well done for even standing in those platform heels, my friend. But oh my god. Oh my god, the pearls. The pearls are just..."

"He's an actor now, it was for a play," I explained defensively. "Give me that." Snatching the iPad away from her, I sifted through more photos, from the problematic to the ridiculous, wondering if I was going to have to log into my Gmail to show her the man I had been conversing with. But no, there was that photo from Humans Of New York, the slightly nervous looking scholar twisting himself into a boy-shaped knot, that hesitant, almost shy smile underneath the small, round metal-rimmed glasses. That was the man I knew. Or thought I knew. "This is what he looks like, now."

"OK, he's got a nice smile," she conceded. "But he's like a chameleon. I would never have guessed those were all the same dude." She paused as she sceptically looked up at me. "Never date an actor. Just don't. Spare yourself the pain."

"I have no intention of dating him."

"But he's coming to London next week to see you."

"No, he's coming to London next week for an audition. An acting thing. It was his idea to meet up while he's here and, I... I just..." My hands flopped around helplessly as I finally remembered my half-finished meal and started to shovel chips into my mouth to avoid speaking any further. "It's complicated."

"The best things always are." She bent down to study the text. "Nobody came to my tenth birthday party. I have a very vivid memory of helping my mother set the table, then watching through the window as the sun slowly set, before finally realising that nobody was coming. That moment pretty
much set the themes for the rest of my life," she read aloud, her harsh expression melting as she looked up at me. "Come on, there's no way you can back out of meeting him after reading that. It'd be like his tenth birthday party, all over again, if you didn't turn up. You could re-traumatise the poor guy all over again."

Wadding up my paper napkin, I threw it at Alice, who shrieked with laughter. "Fuck off," I snorted, but her laughter was too infectious for me to be angry.

"Seriously, I don't know whether I want to punch this guy or give him a hug."

"Me neither," I shrugged. "And the funny thing is, he says that's the way he feels about me. So I guess it's pretty mutual."

"I still think you should meet him, though. I think you'll kick yourself forever if you don't," Alice pronounced wisely. "What's the worst that could happen? You could spend an awkward hour in a pub with a pretentious idiot who thinks it's a good idea to dress up as a nazi onstage."

"I guess you're right. I just wanted..." I dunno. What had I wanted? Permission? "Just don't tell the other girls, OK?"

"Look, I cannot keep this under my hat forever." Alice's eyes grew wide.

"Just don't tell them until after we meet up, OK? I don't want to have to explain what's going on, until I know what it is that I am explaining."

Alice narrowed her eyes at me, leaning forward and lowering her voice. "Margo, I thought you said you weren't into this guy that way."

"I..." I started to protest 'but I'm not, then realised I could not fully commit to that. "I don't know. An abstract entity on the internet is a different matter from a human being, in the flesh, in a dark pub." Was that what I was afraid of, then? Not the idea that I would meet up with him, and loathe him - but the even more terrifying idea that I might not?

"You won't find out unless you meet him." Alice flicked the top of her iPad to check the time, then waved me away from her table. "Get out of here. I got papers to grade."

On the train home, I emailed Evie and Sunita separately, and told them that something unavoidable had come up, and I would need to cancel the next weekend's movie afternoon and drinks at the hot new vodka bar in Dalston, respectively. Then I got home, took a deep breath, and logged onto gmail on my laptop.

Hi Carlos. I have no idea if this is presumptuous of me, or not - I'm sure you have other friends in London that you'd like to see. But I've cleared my social calendar for next weekend. You can't have Thursday night, because that's 4BAABS night. But drinks on Friday night, Saturday afternoon at a gallery, Sunday brunch at Brixton Village... I am at your disposal, for as many, or as few, as you prefer. - M

Margaret, can I be greedy and say all? I don't actually know anyone else in London. My friends were all music people, and I cut all of my music world ties when I left the band. So I would be glad of the company. - C.
Carlos, I have to warn you. I'm not... Well, you see, I'm a middle-aged computer programmer from South London. I can't really whip up hip parties and exciting rock star soirees for your visit. It's gonna be pretty... chill. What I have to offer. So I am just warning you, in case you are expecting Shoreditch High-Life, that if you want that, you probably need to speak to other people and make some other arrangements. - M

Margaret, you mis-read me. Again. Shoreditch High-Life is pretty much the last expectation - or even desire - that crossed my mind. I inhabited that world, and fulfilled those roles, for ten years. I saw the backs of a lot of grand venues, and the grand entrances of a lot of trendy parties. But I don't know that I ever saw the 'real' London. This time, I want to see the 'real' London, with a real Londoner. I want to see your neighborhood pub, your Brixton Village, your local gallery. Please do not feel the need to round up exciting entertainments - or gritty urban experiences - on my account. Your company will be enough. - C.

OK, if you're sure about this! Brixton Village, I think you will like. Saturday afternoon, I will take you to... well, Dulwich Picture Gallery is the nearest to me, so I shall take you there. But Friday night... Friday night, I insist. I'm not taking you to a grotty pub. I'm taking you somewhere nice. - M

My hotel is in Bloomsbury, near RADA. But you don't need to come here; I shall come to you. In fact, *I* insist. I have been looking at this Shad Thames where you work, on the internet. It looks quaint and picturesque, like something out of Dickens. I want to meet you there. (Perhaps I also want a quick tourist jaunt around Tower Bridge, but I can do that while I wait for you.) - C.

Alright, if you insist. There's a nice little bistro called Le Pont de la Tour, right on the river. They have a wine-bar where we can have a quiet drink. I will meet you there, this Friday at 6 o'clock. Christ! You will be in London this Friday! I can't quite get my head around it. - M

Neither can I! But I find a certain symmetry, meeting you on Shad Thames, when that was where Kate Gordon and Damien had so many assignations. I tease! I tease! No need for that severe look of condemnation. But it is a source of deep amusement to me, to see how many of your fictional locations are true places in your own life. I look forward to exploring more of them! Soon! - C.

Don't get any big ideas. Or I'll force you to go to the Tate and look at the Turner Prize until your eyes bleed. - M
Sounds like heaven! Leaving for the airport now; I'll be on the plane soon, so I'll be incommunicado for the trip. I will email you to let you know I got in safely. Anon! - C.

Have a safe trip! And break a leg at your audition! Knock 'em dead. - M

I'm here! London! Bloomsbury! The British Museum! Gordon Square and Virginia Woolf! I managed to sleep on the plane, so I'm hoping I won't be too exhausted for the audition. But I'm here and I'm safe, and I shall see you soon. - C.

I was a mess all through Thursday, knowing he was so close by. I couldn't concentrate on work, watching the numbers of my reports dance on the computer screen in front of me. And I wasn't in much better shape at 4BAABS, staying oddly quiet while the other girls bantered, contributing only to my music portion - which I had researched thoroughly, with the vague fear that Carlos would demand to be taken clubbing after all.

Only Alice realised that something was up, watching me carefully with deeply amused eyes as I stuttered my way through the recording. But she was kind, and said nothing. Evie was full of beans, burbling with excitement at the news that she had passed the first selection round for the QC program, and had been scheduled for an interview and a face to face evaluation. And Sunita, well, Sunita had a new bloke - and though she kept insisting "Oh no, I can't tell you anything, it's too early days..." she kept spilling the beans on his looks (attractive), his salary (decently professional) and his cock (oh Christ, let's not get into that).

I cried off early, and slid out without waiting for Alice, knowing that she would interrogate me on the tube back to London Bridge. As it was, she caught my elbow as I passed, gave me a meaningful look, and said "Good luck, tomorrow night."

"What are you doing tomorrow night?" Sunita demanded, suddenly all suspicious over the cancelled drinks. "I thought you were unspeakably busy all weekend! Too busy to even chat."

"I am," I said mysteriously. "That's what I need good luck with." And with that, I slipped from the flat and made my way home.

Of course I didn't sleep much. And I was up at the crack of dawn, trying on and discarding outfits. I didn't want to risk anything too obvious - for a start, there was eight hours of work to get through, and then, honestly, I did not want to give Carlos the wrong idea, or make him think that I was in any way trying to impress him. And yet at the same time, yes, I did want to look good. So I slipped on a slightly dressier version of the 'court outfit' I had worn to indie-speed-dating: black cords (though the tight, form-fitting ones, not the standard baggy IT uniform cords that were starting to go bare at the knees), black silk shirt, skinny tie in a purple, gold and black Liberty print (so everyone always said my ties made me look like a lesbian? Well, maybe that would give the right 'hands off' vibe.) and of course one of my ubiquitous waistcoats. Some jewellery maybe? Clunky silver rings I usually had to take off to type. And, of course, my motorcycle boots. I threw my velvet swing-coat over the top, (yes, I know, goth as fuck, but it was that or the black raincoat that really screamed 'I own too many Echo & the Bunnymen records') and dashed to the train, cursing
my vanity for making me late, and praying that the Thameslink was even later. (Of course it was. It always was.)

And work? Work dragged, the hours seeming to slow until every second ticked by like William Blake's eternity, and the clock never seemed to move. Someone would ask me to do something important, and I would jump to it, glad of the distraction, and fire it back at them as quickly as possible - only to look at the clock and see that only 20 minutes had elapsed. I nipped out and bought a sandwich - peering down Shad Thames towards Tower Bridge, wondering how soon Carlos would be arriving for his tourist experience - but I was almost too nervous to eat it.

I opened my email and hit refresh, but with Carlos in London, there wasn't anything that really needed answering. Walking to the kitchen to make a cup of tea burned another ten minutes, and I hung around and gossiped with Investigations on the way back, but by the time I returned to my desk, it was still only half three. Oh come the fuck on, this was intolerable. It took every ounce of self control I possessed not to sit at my desk and jiggle like a small child. And then I did the foolish thing that any computer professional would do when they had 2 or 3 hours they needed to just go away: I opened TVTropes and started reading the Space Station Nebuchadnezzar page.

When I looked at my computer clock again, it said quarter to six. Oh shit! I'd vastly overshot; the office was nearly deserted. I closed all 8000 tabs I had open, shut down my computer and grabbed my things, stopping for only a few minutes in the ladies' loo to wash my face, try to brush some order into my wild hair, and then smear some mascara - oh come on, mascara didn't mean anything! it wasn't like I was trying! honestly! - across my eyes. Then I fled down Shad Thames towards the bistro where we were meeting.

Of course I was late. I took a deep breath as I stood outside, trying to regain my composure, wondering if Carlos was punctual or not. I had no idea. He struck me as the kind of guy that would either inflexibly anal, arriving ten minutes early for everything - or utterly disregarding of everybody else's time and perpetually late. But no... oh shit, there he was, perched on a stool by the bar, leaning his angular elbows against the counter as he perused a book.

For a moment, I stopped, just to stare, slightly unsettled by the odd appearance of a man I knew from magazine covers and record liner photos, in the ordinary fabric of my life. And perhaps I might have lost my nerve, and turned and run away, had he not, at that precise moment, as if noticing someone at the door, raised his head and looked precisely in my direction. Our eyes met. God, his eyes were so bright; they actually twinkled in person. That was something that photographs failed to capture. The tiny shock of recognition as both our eyes widened. He raised his eyebrows, as if to ask, is it really you? I smiled and waved, then took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

"Carlos?" I asked nervously, as I approached. As if it could really be anyone else.

"Margaret," he said, and at that moment, his whole face lit up in a smile, as if he had been waiting for me and only me, all his life, instead of just twenty minutes on a misty Friday evening.

"I hope I've not kept you waiting long..." I started to stutter, but suddenly, he extended two impossibly long, lanky arms, like the wings of some prehistoric bird, and clutched me in an unexpected embrace. Oh Christ, no. Americans. They were all so huggy. I had forgotten. Awkwardly, I struggled to free myself.

"Oh no, I came in for a cup of coffee, to warm up and get out of rain... London Bridge is very beautiful, but this is not the weather to be up so high."

"Tower Bridge," I corrected him, not sure whether to be irritated or amused by the common
tourist's error. Really, I was still trying to get used to the physicality of him, in the flesh, towering over me. Though he wasn't actually as tall as I had been expecting (oh Christ, that meant the rest of the band - especially Kessler - must have been absolute midgets) he was much, much thinner than he looked in photos, slender, almost gaunt, with a waist I wondered if I could get both hands around. But it was his thinness, oddly, that made him appear much more colossal than he really was, a wavering, willowy figure, all angles and jutting bones at the hips and elbows, that didn't quite fit onto barstools and conventional furniture. He was dressed more simply than I, a pair of dark trousers, a chocolate-striped shirt that seemed to bring out the specks of deep russet in his penetrating black eyes, with a plain black woollen cardigan over the top. His curly hair was brushed back off his face, and he was clean-shaven, but the small round spectacles were missing. I was almost disappointed, as I'd liked the spectacles.

And suddenly we seemed to simultaneously realise that we were both staring at one another, and I blushed as he lowered his eyes. "My apologies. I feel like I've seen a ghost," he said with a wry smile. "It's always odd to meet someone who dresses more like you than you do yourself, these days."

"Well, I've been dressing like this since 1989, because I'm queer. What's your excuse?"

"Queer," he pronounced disdainfully. "I remember when that was an insult shouted out of car windows, often followed by an empty beer-can. I suppose these days it's a badge of pride - that slightly attention-seeking advertisements that one is not entirely straight."

I pricked. This was not getting off to a good start, was it? "Why are queer people always defined by their straightness? Why can't it just as easily be 'not entirely homosexual'? Why can't it mean 'attracted to people, not genitals'? Or why can't it just mean, 'not adverse to a bit of dick on a physical level, but finds men emotionally revolting, and much, much, prefers the company of women, emotionally, romantically, and every other way?" It was more than I ever normally confessed to someone, especially within moments of meeting, but he really had managed to get my back up.

"Alright," Carlos conceded, spreading his birdlike hands again. "I do get it. Most of my friends are bi anyway. It doesn't bother me. Anyway. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Erm, yes. Please..." I stuttered, catching the eye of the barman who had started hovering around us when I walked in. "A pint of bitter... actually, a pint of mild, if you've got it."

The bartender poured, then looked expectantly at Carlos. "Um... aaah... Oh, a pint of Stella, please." I suppressed a smile, perhaps a little too slowly, as he caught it, and cocked an eyebrow at me. "If you say it, I will actually murder you."

"I wasn't going to say what you think," I protested. "I was going to quote Tennessee Williams and compare you to a young Brando. Honestly."

"Well." A sheepish smile broke across his face as he swung his hips gently from side to side, an oddly childlike gesture. "In that case, alright." He frowned at the unfamiliar British coins in his hand, then gave up and handed the bartender a tenner.

"Speaking of which, how was the audition?" I probed, trying to get the conversation back onto a friendly course.

"Ach!" Carlos rolled his eyes extravagantly and raised one hand to his forehead, letting his whole body collapse in a sort of shrug before waving the question away with an exaggerated handwave.
His movements weren't just theatrical, the oversized gestures of a man who lived his entire life onstage; they were actually incredibly camp. In a British man, I might have expected it, but coming from an American, it was oddly disarming. I found myself warming to him, despite myself. "Let us find a table, and I will tell you all about it."

The restaurant wasn't packed, but it was still Friday-night busy, so tables were at a premium - but luckily I spied a pair of vacant chairs just by the huge picture windows that looked out over the river. He gestured for me to take the one facing Tower Bridge, but I shook my head. "No, no, you take the one with the view. I live here, I see it all the time; you're the guest."

We settled into our seats. For a moment, he just stared at the view, captivated by the fairy-castle towers of the bridge, all lit up, with the lights of the City of London twinkling through the mist behind it. London was never quite so much itself as on a foggy November evening. "To London," he finally proposed, and we clinked our glasses against one another, and drank. "I suppose you take it for granted, living here all the time. This fairy tale view, these medieval streets..."

"Never," I shrugged, and drank again greedily, wanting the fortification of the buzz as much as to quench my thirst. "But don't change the subject." Emboldened by the ale, I reached out and prodded his arm gently, almost as much to reassure myself of his reality as to catch his attention. "How did the audition go?"

Carlos cocked his head to one side, his eyes doing that twinkling thing again as he leaned forward towards me. "Oh god... I don't know," he confessed, twitching his fingers as if searching for something. "Can you smoke in British pubs?"

I shook my head. "No, sorry. You have to go outside. There's umbrellas out there, though."

Craning his neck, Carlos observed the large smoking patio - during the summer, it was absolutely lovely out there on the river, but in the winter, granted, it looked slightly grim. "Hmmm," he observed. "Maybe I'll wait and see if the weather improves."

I refused to allow him to change the subject, staring at him evenly through my glasses. "Tell me about your audition."

"Christ, you are a fierce one. Were you by any chance a music journalist in a previous life?" he teased. But what he did next took me utterly by surprise, as he reached out his incredibly long arm across the small drinks table between us, seized my glasses from off my face, then folded them and placed them next to my pint. "That's much better, far less ferocious."

"I can't see!" I protested, too surprised to be angry.

"Good!" He smiled, a vague pale blob in the foreground. "Now I feel far less like you're judging me, sitting there casting aspersions on my character and my very soul."

"You're projecting," I told him evenly, not sure whether to laugh or not.

"I have been judged enough this week! My audition..." He repeated, returning at last to the subject. "It's difficult to tell! They kept me in there for a very long time. I did the reading I had prepared - and I felt that went fairly... auspiciously, actually. But then they asked me to read it again, but with a completely different emotional interpretation. That..." He paused dramatically for a sip of his beer, as his pint was not going down nearly as fast as mine was. "...was slightly trickier. I think I managed it, though. But then they asked me to do it yet a third time! I must confess, by this eventuality, my composure was distinctly shaken. Yet I did the reading, a third time, this time in the voice of a small, plaintive child. Very odd, I must say!"
"You? A plaintive child? I can't imagine. Petulant, yes, but..."

"Watch it," he warned, then laughed, shaking his head to toss his hair back where it was starting to slip into his face. With an imperious gesture, he flicked it away. He spoke with his hands, constantly, his fingers flicking and hovering, as if gesticulating with an imaginary cigarette. I wondered if it was a New Yorker thing. "But why must I do the audition a third time? I begged the kind young man I was reading with. 'I have come such a long way, and I am very tired, and all I would really like is to lie down underneath the bleachers and go to sleep.'"

"Alright. Very convincing."

"Indeed." Carlos raised one eyebrow and shot me a conspiratorial look that made me want to laugh aloud. Was he for real? "And then, of course they made me do a cold reading."

"They made you stand outside, on the roof."

He pulled a deliberately unamused face, rolling his head to one side. "A cold reading is like sight reading, in music. You have to perform a piece you have not prepared. It's terrifying for the actor, if it's something you've not even read. But fortunately, it was a role I was at least familiar with."

"Well?"

Holding my gaze for a moment, as his smile grew more impish, he waited just the right moment for maximum comic timing. Honestly, it was like he never switched off, never stopped performing. "Valmont, from Les Liaisons Dangereuses."

I couldn't help myself; I let out the briefest of cackles before regaining control of myself. "So appropriate."

"I knew you were going to say that." Another knowing look, as he tucked that curling forelock of hair back onto top of his head. "At least I felt mildly confident that I could do the role justice."

"Perhaps they chose it deliberately, aware of your reputation. Don't you worry about getting typecast, already?"

For a moment, that seemed to give him pause, as if he had not considered it. "I hope not." That terrifying self-confidence wavered for a second, vulnerability flashing across his face. He really had the most extraordinarily expressive eyes, every emotion reflected in turn across them. His twitching fingers reached for the small black leather messenger bag at his feet, and withdrew a cigarette, which he played with distractedly, turning it end over end with long, elegant fingers, caressing it longingly without daring to raise it to his lips. "But enough about me. I have done my utmost, and now I am at the mercy of the RADA admissions committee. For the next three days, I wish to simply not think about it, or truly, it will drive me mad."

"You know, if you want to smoke, go and have one," I told him.

Turning, he peered out into the gloom, but it had actually stopped raining, the mist lightening to a fine silver spray along the edges of the Thames. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all." I gestured for him to leave, and he picked up a long, severe, black woollen coat, and trudged outside. For the first time in twenty minutes, I breathed a deep sigh, of almost tangible relief. Christ. Carlos Dengler. Outside, the tall, gaunt figure hunched his shoulders against the cold and cupped his hands to his face as he lit his cigarette. It was undeniable that the man had a kind of presence and charisma to him, but frankly, I found him slightly exhausting. Had I really just committed to spending three days showing this over-excitable actor around London?
"Can I get you another?"

A voice spoke at my shoulder, and I turned to see the barman hovering. "Oh, yes please." Raising my glass, I drained the last inch and handed it to him, then hesitated over Carlos' glass of Stella, still half full. "Might as well get him another, too, while you're at it. Can we run a tab?"

"Sure." He paused as I dug for my credit card, to put behind the bar. "Would you like a bowl of nuts, perhaps?" I nodded. "Honey roasted or spicy chilli?"

"Spicy." When he left, I found the silence oddly reassuring, bathing in it after the constant chatter of Carlos. He certainly was one of those guys that just seemed to take up so much space in a conversation. Or was I just not keeping up my end of the deal? I hated to admit it, but I was... well, I was definitely slightly intimidated. It wasn't his fame, and certainly not his intellect, but more just his... presence. When the bartender returned, I sipped my drink and shovelled nuts into my mouth, and tried, desperately, to think of something to say to this... stranger from the internet.

When Carlos returned, rubbing his fingers together to warm himself up, he stopped for a moment, and stared at the new drink on the table between us. "I am not keeping up, am I? I had forgotten how the British drink. Like I had forgotten the British cold."

"It's not that cold tonight," I shrugged. "It's just the mist. Our climate is really quite mild, it's just the damp that makes it seem so extreme." As I droned on about the weather, Carlos did his best to down most of his first glass of Stella. "Weather and history, things we've got rather a lot of. Too much of, perhaps. Weighed down with atmospheric conditions and the burden of the past."

"Ah! That reminds me!" Shedding his coat, Carlos dug in his messenger bag before pulling out a small canvas bag, emblazoned with the logo of the Strand book shop. "I brought you a present, from New York."

"A Strand bag? Oh, why thank you... Except no one knows what that is here, so no one will be impressed by how pretentious I am being carrying it," I laughed.

"Open it." He gestured impatiently, making another valiant attempt at his pint.

Within, I found a small but thick volume, bearing the title 'The Author Is Dead; Long Live The Author: A Collection Of Essays On Semiology Beyond Barthes.' Squinting at it, I finally remembered my glasses, and picked them up and popped them back on my face.

"You've read it." His voice sounded so disappointed, I was glad to reassure him.

"I haven't. I just can't read without my glasses."

"Oh, I'm so glad! It's about... well, all of those things that you were saying about context being inescapable, and the power dynamics inherent in the reader's intent supplanting authorial intention if the author is from a marginalised group, who sets the discourse and defines the context, and, well... yadda yadda yadda, you know the rest. It's very much 'up your street', as it were. I think you'll like it."

"Thank you." I looked up with genuine gratitude, touched. And here, I thought he had forgotten the entire exchange, ignored in favour of something less obvious, more infuriating. But then again, it was odd how civil he was in person - how civil we were both being. Perhaps more alcohol was required. Come on, Margaret, you are not going to bend over and quail before a boy because his cheekbones are far more prominent in person than they had appeared in bad PhotoBooth selfies! "It's one of the hardest things to get used to, when reading philosophy. How everything is always
an answer to, or a rebuttal of, or a commentary on someone else. It makes it very hard, for an entry-level beginner to ever really get a foothold."

"Nonsense," scoffed Carlos. "It's like any other set of knowledges that build, one upon the other. You pick one piece and start exploring outward - or inward, depending on where your curiosity takes you."

"Yes, but what if you don't know where to start? It's not like maths, or physics, or something, where you can take it back to first principles, start from your axiomatic theorems, and build, layer by layer until you reach Euclidean Geometry, or Number Theory, or particle physics..."

"No, no, no, NO!" At that moment, I realised that arguing with Carlos by email, I was missing a fundamental level to the interaction. Because his physicality grew even more animated as he became excited, actually leaning forward and slapping the table, causing both his drink and the bowl of nuts to spill. As he talked, he swept the nuts into his hand, and transferred them to his mouth, barely stopping to chew. "Margaret, this is simply not true. Go far enough back, and all philosophy becomes axiomatic. Consider the great axioms! Know thyself. I think, therefore I am. To be is to do. Religion is the opium of the masses..."

"Those aren't axioms, they're aphorisms. They're complex thoughts reduced to slogans."

"They are complex thoughts distilled down to the most concise, elegant scintillae of language. Elementary particles, atomic principles of thought..."

"Bollocks," I scoffed. "You're going to be on that Richard Dawkins memetic nonsense in another minute. To distil is to simplify, is to render abstract, and strip away the nuance."

"Dawkins is nonsense because culture simply does not work that way. It's based on an outdated model of physics, to start with, that the most advanced physics has abandoned outdated particular thinking, and moved on to the concept of particle-waves. Not to mention that to treat human beings and inanimate objects as coterminous is simply absurd - culture no more has particles than pebbles and stones have motives!" Carlos was really flying now, making his points with stabs of an imaginary cigarette in the air above the table.

But I simply stared at him in disbelief. "That's Mary Midgley."

"Is it?" He stopped, mid-swoop, cocking his head to one side. "Yes, I suppose it is."

"I told you to read her," I pointed out, slightly outraged at the blatant theft.

"Oh. Well, I suppose I must thank you for that," he conceded with a smirk. "I enjoyed Evolution As A Religion immensely."

"And I must thank you for that, because that is precisely what you are doing with those aphoristic slogans. Reducing complex thoughts to philosophy-particles. And stripping the nuance and meaning - how a phrase like 'death of the author' gets twisted into something it never meant because the nuance has been lost."

"But in the educated mind, the phrase becomes simply a metonym for the more complex argument which has already been absorbed and understood. You underestimate the fascinating capability of the human mind for abstraction and symbolism..."

"It's dangerous to assume the same level of 'education'..." (I actually used air quotes when I said it aloud) "...automatically means the same symbolism. Signifiers can be polysemic - again, depending on context, depending on cultural values..."
"Oh god, here you go again with your post-structuralists!" Carlos' eyeroll this time was magnificent. "I went to NYU, in the 90s. They were all very fashionable, at that... juncture. Especially among the 'queer' crowd..." He used air-quotes right back at me. I had never seen anyone air-quote so aggressively! "I suppose that explains your love of Foucault, then. But they have their limitations, and you, Margaret, rely far too heavily upon them!"

There it was. I had been waiting for the moment he was going to twist my sexuality around and use it against me, but I shot it right back at him. "We are sitting here, in a pub, an American man, and a British woman, and you are going to try to tell me that context is unimportant, in which case, I am going to tell you to step outside and suck on a fag..."

For a split second, his face almost turned purple with outrage, until realisation dawned, and he remembered the British meaning of the word. "Touché," he sighed, settling back into his chair, one arm thrown casually across the back of it, studying me carefully as I took another triumphant swig of my beer. "My point was merely, that philosophy is structured the way it is for a reason. It is built upon layers of logic, the same as any other academic discipline, like math, like physics. Would you pick up a book by... Stephen Hawking and complain that he did not explain to you what a proton or an electron was?"

"Except for the fact that most popular science writers - like Hawking or Sagan - do start by explaining what a proton or an electron is. In philosophy, they simply don't bother. Look, I'll give you an example. I have a friend who kept saying to me, oh, if you want to understand culture in the 21st Century, you have to go back to Adorno. Go and read the Frankfurt School and Adorno, then we can have this discussion about... well, we were at that point discussing whether prefabricated pop music is inherently valueless."

"Oh, I suppose you're going to tell me that..." Another extravagant eyeroll.

"No, Carlos, don't interrupt. Let me finish. So I read Adorno. She told me to read something called something like Minimus Maxima..."

"Minima Moralia," Carlos corrected with a nod.

"Anyway, I tried to read it. And about half of it was a cranky old man complaining that the food in America wasn't as good as it had been in Frankfurt, while the other half was Adorno having a long, drawn-out, complicated argument with some fellow named Hegel. Now I haven't read Hegel, so this was essentially a complete waste of..."

"What?!" exploded Carlos, and for a second, I thought he was actually going to physically rise out of the chair to berate me, so I took that moment for a fortifying sip of ale. "You've not read Hegel? How can not have read Hegel?" He looked actually, genuinely shocked, his mouth open and his eyes wide.

I spread my hands defensively, feeling rather put on the back foot. "Why on earth would I have read Hegel?"

"How can you say that you are interested in philosophy, when you have omitted to read one of the most important and foundational... thinkers of... the entire basis and infrastructure of Western thought! I... How?!" Carlos was genuinely outraged, as if I had confessed that I had... I dunno, never tasted pesto or something marking me as an utterly philistine rube.

I sipped at my beer, before taking a sideways attack. "Have you ever read Reyner Banham?"

Carlos drew back, looking vaguely up at his eyebrows as if searching his prodigious memory, then
shook his head. "Who?"

"One of the most important and foundational thinkers, writers and designers who coined the term 'Brutalism' and wrote the book - Theory and Design in the First Machine Age - that influenced and defined the viewpoint, themes and forms of a generation of architects..."

"Now why on earth would I have read some obscure tract by some obscure architect... you're comparing apples and oranges, Margaret!" "But am I not correct, that you spent the afternoon, before you met me, visiting Tower Bridge?"

"I did..." Carlos answered cautiously, almost suspiciously, as if afraid of where I was going with this. "I went to the Tower of London, too, if you must know."

"So it's reasonable to assume that you have at least a passing interest... in architecture?"

"I do have an interest in architecture. Specifically in Gothic architecture, in which the UK, especially London, is particularly abundant. It's one of the few advantages your fair city has over my beloved New York."

"So you're able to enjoy Tower Bridge... and much other High Victorian Gothic architecture besides, without having the slightest passing acquaintance with Reyner Banham, or Brutalism, or Streets In The Sky...?"

"Yes." Carlos said heavily, almost pedantically, as if unable to fathom why I was asking such a petty and obvious question.

I finished my beer, then set down the glass upon the table, allowing the silence to grow impatient between us. "So why, then, am I unable to make head nor tale of Adorno, without having read this obscure, unrelated Hegel fellow?" I asked triumphantly.

Carlos nearly sputtered with rage. "It's... it's... nothing like the same thing! Architecture has a function, and a purpose, and an aesthetic beauty which it is possible to enjoy on layman's terms, without knowing the slightest thing about the theory."

"Wait, wait," I interjected. "You... You, of all people, are telling me that philosophy has no function or purpose?"

"No!" Carlos practically howled. "You're twisting my words and... That isn't what I..."

"Everything alright?" The barman suddenly appeared at my shoulder, eyeing Carlos with that slightly apprehensive air of bar staff wondering if a particular patron was going to be trouble.

"We're fine," I assured him. "We're just having a minor disagreement over architecture."

"We are not disagreeing over architecture, I am merely clarifying that I believe the inconsonant example of architecture to be exercising and indeed taxing the boundaries of our current debate." Carlos' nostrils flared as he regained control over himself.

"Can I get you another drink?" the barman asked, pointing at my now-empty glass.

"Oh, go on then," I shrugged, handing him the empty.

"Wait, wait, just a moment..." Carlos seized his own glass, which was still nearly two-thirds full, brought it to his mouth, and emptied the contents into his gaping maw, in one single, continuous
stream, without even stopping to breath. Then he took a deep breath, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and handed his now-empty glass to the slightly surprised bartender. "Another. Stella, if you please."

As the bartender walked away, I realised he was singing to himself. "Stella, I love you, Stella I love you... she was my catatonic sex-toy, love-joy diver..."

For a moment, the oddest expression came over Carlos' face, part pride, part disbelief, and yet behind it all, this strange haunted look, like a wild animal afraid it was about to confronted with a baying mob of hounds. But the moment passed, and the lad walked returned to the bar without further comment.

Slowly, gently, Carlos finally exhaled. I didn't realise we'd both been holding our breaths. "You know, I think I need a cigarette."

"Go on, then," I told him, leaning back in my chair as he pulled his coat around his shoulders and disappeared outside.
Chapter 9

When the bartender returned with two pints and a fresh bowl of nuts, he gestured towards Carlos' empty chair. "Your date... he looks really familiar. You guys come in here a lot?"

"I do. I work next door. But he's not been here before."

"I've got the strangest feeling I've seen him before..."

I shook my head, playing along with the game. "Nah, I think he just has one of those faces. He's just a random... from the Internet."

"Oooh." The bartender's face completely changed. "OKC date, huh? Well, if you need to fake a quick exit... just give me your phone number and I'll text you something urgent, so you can make a quick exit..." I was going to protest that there was no way in hell that Carlos and I were on anything even resembling a date, but as he made his offer, he laid his hand gently on my shoulder. I cringed internally, crossing Le Pont de la Tour off the shortening list of local bars where I could drink.

"Really, that won't be necessary, thank you," I told him, in a friendly but direct tone, glaring at the offending hand until he removed it.

"Well, I do get off my shift in another hour..." the bartender added.

I had never been quite so relieved to see a man reappear as I did when Carlos loped in through the door, shrugging off his coat. As he sat down, I pulled my chair closer to his, accidentally on-purpose nudging my foot against his as I did so. Carlos looked absolutely mystified, looking down at my leg, then up at my face quizzically, as if anticipating some trick, but the bartender at least got the message and retreated.

"Would you mind terribly, if we went somewhere else?" I ventured.

Carlos' face fell. "But I like this establishment. It's charming, and has such a picturesque view. Besides... we've just purchased fresh beverages."

"I suppose we have," I sighed, and picked up my pint. "Chin-chin."

"Chin-chin," Carlos agreed, thrusting his own towards me. That, too, was much more prominent in person that it had looked in photographs. His face really was the oddest mixture of a blocky, almost brutal ugliness, and fine-boned prettiness, depending on what angle you caught him from. He clinked his glass against mine, then started to do his best to catch up the difference between us. "You know, I've been thinking, about your false analogy between architecture and philosophy - and I am quite convinced it is false - and I believe I have located the flaw in your structural logic."

"And I'm sure you are going to tell me." Realising that the bartender had gone off to bother another table, with two unaccompanied women, I removed my leg from where I had nudged it against Carlos'. "At great length."

Carlos grinned lasciviously, raising one eyebrow as he went in for the attack, thumping the table in front of him. "A category error. An elementary category error, to compare a technical treatise, written for a specific technical audience, likely to be previously acquainted with the subject under discussion, to a populist book, written for mass appeal. Books like the Hawking - and perhaps your Midgley - are specifically written for the lay person. Volumes such as Adorno, and... what was your fellow called?"
"Banham."

"Volumes such as Adorno and Banham are written for audiences which are presumed to have an existent familiarity with the... Well, Banham no doubt assumes that he does not have to explain the existence of concrete, or foundations, or flying buttresses... while Adorno assumes that he does not have to explain the basic thrust and dynamic of Hegel's dialectics." Carlos paused to take another draught of the Stella. He had actually now passed me, and was racing his way to the bottom, as I had slowed in an attempt to keep my wits about me. "Adorno, to summarise, believed that mass produced culture was barbaric and an insult to any notions of beauty or intellect, sacrificing the demands of taste and culture to the lowest common denominator of populist appeal to fuel the capitalist profit motive. I am not entirely unsympathetic..."

"Ha!" I scoffed. "Not this again. I really cannot fight the Great Poptimism Wars of 2003 yet again, with you, this time."

"Poptimism. I've heard this word before. What does it mean? Grown men using the supposed democratisation of tastes to justify their sexual attraction to pubescent girl pop stars."

"Well, you would know about sexual attraction to pubescent girls," I snorted.

"I resent that!"

"Withdrawn," I muttered.

"This is not a court of law," Carlos reminded me.

"Look, it's a demeaning assumption - and you brought it up - the presumption that the only reason men could ever have to be interested in the artistic output of women would be purely sexual. And it's as insulting to men, to consider them incapable of aesthetic distinguishment as it is to young women, to consider that they have no artistic or musical contributions to make in their own right."

"Distinguishment," said Carlos to the bottom of his rapidly diminishing pint glass. "Is not a word."

"You know damned well what I meant."

"You, madam, are clearly a woman of distinguishment!" Carlos giggled.

"Shut up!" I kicked him, gently, under the table.

"My favourite 90s shoegaze band, Kitchens of Disguishment."

"If you don't stop, I'm going to hurt you."

"Ooh, I hope so." He raised his eyebrows so irritatingly as he leaned forward, that I kicked him again. Harder. "Ow! Are those steel toed?"

"Well, they are motorcycle boots."

He reached down with one of those immensely long arms, and caught my foot before I could strike again, studying the leatherwork carefully. "These are quite beautiful - but quite nasty, and I will thank you not to kick me with them."

"Well, stop being irritating."

"And vexatious, and annoying, and galling, aggravating, exasperating, and what else did you call me..."
"Bothersome, maddening and tiresome?" The way he was staring at me now, it was vexing, indeed, so I pulled my foot loose of his grasp and glared back at him. "I think it's time for you to go and have another cigarette."

Carlos rolled his eyes so extravagantly that I swear his eyeballs would have swivelled right up into the back of his head if they could, then made a conciliatory flourish with one hand, digging in his messenger bag with the other, for his cigarette pack and lighter. He took his beer this time, but left his coat.

*My god, woman, be careful,* I told myself, leaning back in my chair again, though I could still feel the imprint of his fingers on the back of my leg, where he had grasped me. This is not a safe man to be flirting with. As I sipped my beer, I glanced around the room, noticing how the diners had emptied out, so that now, the room was down to a party of boozing businessmen over in the dining room, the two women at the table opposite, and Carlos and myself off by the window. Perhaps we wouldn't leave after all - in fact, it probably wouldn't be a bad idea to move over to the dining room and have something to eat before we drank any more. Even the women were leaving now... wait, no. They weren't leaving, they were just getting up to go and have a cigarette outside. Really, it was at moments like that, the only person sitting in a warm dining room while everyone else shivered outside, clustered round cigarette lighters, that I was so glad I'd given up smoking.

Outside, the women fussed with their cigarettes, unable to get them lit in the stiff breeze blowing off the Thames, then approached Carlos for help. Carlos, of course, immediately brightened, and did his best, first shielding them with the wall of his body, then, when that didn't work, bending down to hold the tip of his lit cigarette against theirs, puffing away until theirs caught light. And as he stood out there, smiling and flirting and clearly trading quips with the two girls, any remote urge to flirt with him, or respond to him, that I might have been experiencing, it instantly evaporated. Don't think you're special, girl, I reminded myself as I sipped my pint. He is just like that with all women. It doesn't matter to him; he can flirt as easily with two snippy little office girls as he can with someone he supposedly shares so much in common with. Don't be fooled; don't succumb to it.

But as I watched, the annoying bartender donned his coat, and went outside, ostensibly to empty the ashtrays and collect any empty glasses, but I saw him immediately make a beeline for Carlos and the girls. It was infuriating, not being able to hear what was going on, only able to see the emotions drifting across Carlos' face. One of the girls produced a camera, and offered it towards the bartender, gesturing towards Carlos. At first, Carlos appeared clearly bemused, as if the whole scene were some kind of joke. Stepping back, he posed with the two girls. But bemusement gave way to irritation, as the bartender continued talking, and irritation to anger as the girls stepped back from him, their giggling amusement turning to wariness. And finally, Carlos stubbed out his cigarette prematurely, and came storming back into the bar, still carrying his pint glass.

"I have come to agree with you," he announced, before knocking back the last of his beer. "We should take our patronage elsewhere. Immediately."

"But my beer!" I protested, pointing to my still half-full pint.

Carlos just looked at it, picked it up, and then added that down the hatch after the first. "I'll buy you another."

As I stood up, I patted myself down, checking for my wallet. "But my credit card... I left it behind the bar to pay for our rounds."

"Well, fetch it," snapped Carlos. "Quickly. I will wait outside."

I glanced around, trying to see if there was another waiter or bartender who could settle up, but
fortunately, as soon as Carlos had exited the room, the original barman came in, his face like a stormcloud.

"I'm sorry," I ventured politely. "Could I get the check and my card back... please? My, erm... date... wants to leave."

The look of disgust on the barman's face was almost palpable as he located my card, and added up the bill. "Eighteen pounds for the drinks... plus two pounds each for the nuts..."

I opened my mouth to protest - I could have sworn the nuts were free the last time I'd come here. But upon seeing his face, I thought the better of it. "OK," I agreed, and quickly entered my PIN into the machine, taking my card before he could abscond with it again.

"Just so you know, your date has herpes," the barman blurted out as he handed me my receipt. "That's Carlos D from Interpol, and he has herpes. It's all over the fuckin' internet. Look it up."

I just stared back, with open disgust, a thousand barbs dancing on my tongue. *Herpes or not, I am still a thousand times more likely to sleep with him, than I ever would, with you - and I don't even like him!* But no. I drank here with my colleagues, came here for lunches sometimes. It wasn't worth it. So I shook my head, took my card, and walked off saying nothing.

I didn't see Carlos outside, and for a minute, I panicked, wondering if he'd run off, wondering how on earth I'd ever chase him down, an upset, drunken ex-rock star storming around Bermondsey at night. But then I caught sight of a dark figure off by the Design Museum, his back to me as he leaned against the railings, staring out into the misty Thames, across the river at the bizarre sight of the arrayed skyscrapers of the City, rising 10 or 15 floors into the sky before simply stopping, their tops obscured by the low-lying cloud, as mist rose off the river.

Walking up to him, I touched him lightly on the small of the back. He seemed too lost in thought to notice. So I patted him harder, but I hoped reassuringly, on the shoulder, distracted by the solidity of the wool of his winter coat stretched tight across his broad shoulders. "Carlos... are you alright?"

He shrugged lightly, displacing my hand. "It happens so rarely these days that it's easy to forget. I feel sometimes like I'm being haunted. Haunted by the ghost of someone I used to be, and can never quite entirely forget."

"I think in some way, we're all haunted by the ghosts of former selves, and pasts we would prefer to forget. It's just unfortunately that for you, that ghost is a little more public and a little more visible than most of us have to deal with."

Hunching against the cold and the damp, he smiled wryly, his eyes crinkling, glittering in the low light. "Ironically, it doesn't happen so much in New York any more. At home, I'm far more anonymous. I've even started riding the subway again. Put on my glasses, bury my nose in a book, no one sees me as any different from a hundred other men on a train."

I suppressed a smile, remembering how I'd seen surreptitious smartphone photographs of a bespectacled, book-reading Carlos on the Tube wing their way across Tumblr and Facebook for weeks. It still happened, but in New York, I supposed he felt comfortable enough and had enough distractions that he could choose not to notice it.

"I'm sorry. I suppose I've never had to experience it close up. I can't imagine what it must be like to live with it all the time," I said quietly, feeling guilty for even having looked at those photos on Tumblr, let alone having rebogged them with snide commentary. (Well, what did he expect? I just
had an instinctive dislike of people who put their feet on the seats of public transport.)

Carlos turned his full face towards me, as if considering me carefully. "Except you can... imagine, perfectly well. There are chapters in Sudden-Onset Celebrity where you make it explicitly clear that you have spent a great deal of time imagining, and quite perceptively."

"Alright," I conceded. "But you must have done something similar when you were a kid, watching Top Of The Pops - imagining what it would be like to be a pop star - what it would be like to go onstage, to be popular, how odd it would be, to have everybody, across the country, stare up at you, on the television, filled with admiration..."

"Admiration?" laughed Carlos. "Not so much. We didn't have Top Of The Pops in New Jersey. We had something called Solid Gold, for those few pathetic years before MTV permeated out to our suburbs. My friends and I did not look upon the pop stars performing on Solid Gold with admiration - we looked on them with contempt. Contempt heavily riddled with jealousy, I am now able to recognise. But contempt nonetheless, because we, like most disaffected teenage boys, were metalheads, and pop was beneath us. Even when we watched MTV - not Headbanger's Ball or 120 Minutes, but those dreadful heavy rotation videos that the girls all loved so much - Mötley Crüe, Poison, that sort of thing. I suppose I knew at the age 15 what I had forgotten by the age of 30, when I got to live those moments in the spotlight myself. Whatever creates admiration in one mind will always create contempt in another - the sense of I could do that better that 15 year old me felt so keenly."

"Come on, did you never feel that element of imitation, of hero-worship? You've forgotten what it was like to be young and starstruck. I know in the bands that I played in, aged about 15, that it was pure emulation. I wanted to be Kim Gordon or Peter Hook."

"I wanted to be myself," he insisted. I raised both eyebrows, disbelievingly. "Alright, Peter Hook, maybe, I'll concede. But it just seems inherent, inescapable, the element of judgement, in the adulation or opprobrium of artists, doesn't it?"

"And you call me the little moralist," I laughed.

"Aesthetic judgement, moral judgement, the frothing enjoyment that is the frisson of outrage, yes. I would say that it is impossible to consume the media construction that is celebrity with passivity," he pronounced. "And people feel compelled to express that judgement, not just about you - but also at you. At the most inopportune moments."

"Isn't that a line in one of my stories - the idea that one always thinks that becoming famous means that everybody will love you. But of course it means no such thing. It means that everyone has an opinion on you - and often not about you at all, but some strange, bizarre construction they've created and projected onto you like a silver screen - and not all of those opinions are very nice."

"Yes, you said something very similar about projection in one of your first emails to me, and honestly, that was what made me want to have a conversation with you even more acutely. I thought you of all people might understand this odd doppelganger who seems to still constantly follow me around, wreaking chaos in my personal life. Still, even on what was supposed to be a quiet night out with a friend." Agitation showed on his face, and I wondered again what the dreadful bartender had said to him, though I didn't quite dare to ask.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I offered lamely, instead of asking directly.

"Yes; No," he prevaricated. Neither answer seemed sincere.
I took my courage in my hands and decided just to dive in. "What did that bartender say to you, that upset you so much?"

"I'm not upset," he insisted, despite all evidence to the contrary. "Those office girls, they just recognised me as I lit their cigarettes. At first it was flattering - rather charming, indeed. One of them told me that Antics came out during her first year of college, and she'd had her first kiss with her college sweetheart during Slow Hands at an indie disco."

"That's quite sweet actually," I admitted, hoping that wasn't what he was upset about.

"Yes, it was, I felt touched that my music had shared this youthful escapade that was obviously so important to her."

"I would have thought moments like that made it all worthwhile."

He nodded slowly. "I don't really know what happened to make it turn sour. She added something like... Oh, I used to love that record. I haven't listened to it in years. I should dig it out. I laughed a bit at that - you know, yesterday's papers. But then her friend started going on a bit - said something like..." He thrust his hands onto his hips in imitation of a woman, and adopted what he probably fancied was a cockney accent. "...you used to be well fit, you lot did. Me and my friends, we proper fancied you, right."

I burst out laughing, more at the accent than the uncanny mimicry with which he replicated London girls' slang and speech patterns. "Come on, you weren't flattered by that? Even just a little?"

"Ten, twelve years ago, I almost certainly would have been. But as they were speaking, it became clear that this lust they had experienced in their youths, it was absolutely nothing to do with me, or who I am now. They didn't even ask what had happened to me in the intervening decade. I felt so utterly disconnected from the conversation, as if they were discussing a photograph of an actor in a magazine, that reminded them of their own youths. As if I wasn't there at all. It was just the oddest feeling, and I felt abruptly very old. Because I realised... they are the age now, that I was when I was making those records."

"We all age, Carlos. It happens to the best of us." The ego on this guy, that he seemed actually distressed that former fans hadn't asked about his current plans.

"It's not even the ageing," he observed, in a voice that sounded vaguely haunted. "When you are the person that always leaves, in a certain sense, you... stop. You are frozen in time, a memory, stunted at the instant that you left. And you tend to assume that everyone else stays the same, too. Except they don't, they get on with their lives, just without you in them... This has been happening to me since I was 9, you know. It should be familiar, I should have got used to it."

"What happened when you were 9?" I teased, wondering if this was what psychoanalysis did to New Yorkers, if it kept them forever dredging up bits of their childhoods while drunk on pseudo-dates.

"I moved," he shrugged. "From one side of New York suburbia to the other - from Queens to New Jersey. A distance of less than 50 miles - maybe two hours by public transit."

"Like moving from Kent to Camden Town," I supplied.

"Or the reverse, I imagine."

"Not far at all, but a completely different world."
"Indeed," he agreed. "I moved from a dynamic, colourful community full of aunties, where I was well known and perhaps even liked - or at least understood, and well, tolerated - to being the new kid, fat, unpopular, afflicted with acne, in a town where everyone else had known each other from birth. I used to console myself, when really miserable, that I could always go back to Queens and find my real friends. But of course, by the time I did - everyone had moved on. I still liked Slayer while they were all listening to The Cure. They no longer even remembered who I was."

Without meaning to, I laughed. "Kind of like, when you resign from a band, they don't actually fall apart without you. They just get a new bassist, go on tour, record a new album with you..."

For a moment, he looked absolutely furious, but then his face softened, and he almost smiled, only the tilt of his eyebrow revealing that I had scored a direct hit. "Yes, almost precisely like that, I suppose. When a feeling gets that deep down into the core of you, it becomes almost like a reflex. Just your default way of processing the world and the people in it."

"Even idiot girls in bars, and jealous bartenders with their nose out of joint."

That seemed to jog his memory, prompting him to resume the story, like no matter how reluctant he had been to begin, now he had started, he just had to get it out. "Well, then that bartender turned up, and they asked him to take a photograph, and theoretically I was not opposed to this request, but consequently... Well, he just got so oddly aggressive - like he was trying to show off - not even for their benefit, but for mine. Telling us - the girls - me - I don't know - about how he was in a band, a band that was so much better than Interpol. I just felt... personally... affronted by his awkward importuning."

"Well, he was a bit of a cock, granted, but... affronted? By him telling you he was in a band?"

Really, I didn't know what to make of Carlos just now. Sometimes I felt genuine pity for the obvious awkwardness of living with a public persona like an albatross around his neck, and sometimes he just seemed like the most arrogant shit about things anyone else would simply shrug off.

"Well, for a start, I have left the music industry. Permanently. I don't know why he imagined I cared about his band. It was almost like he needed me to know that he was a musician, needed me as a representative professional musician, to acknowledge his status. This man I'd never met before in my life and will never see again! But more than that, it was just his... boneheaded aggression, that he couldn't stand that these two women, unattractive though were, were still more interested in me than in him."

I laughed aloud. "Like 15 year old you would have acted, had you been confronted with the bass player from Mötley Crüe or Poison."

That raised a smile. "Perhaps." But then the smile softened. "We hate most in other people what reminds us uncomfortably of ourselves. A mirror, a projection, a silver screen."

"Shiny metal box-ness," I said, almost to myself, but Carlos turned towards me and grinned at the reference.

"I think that might just have been my favourite episode of your whole novel. Using modern art as a metaphor to highlight the importance of projection in successful rock music - the popularity it achieves reflecting through back the concerns and interests of the listener. That said, I wasn't sure why you gave me metal teeth. It's Brandon Curtis that has metal teeth, not me - or is that the joke, conflating me with my replacement?"

I shook my head slowly. "No, I was a Secret Machines fan before I was an Interpol fan. It was kind
of an inside joke. But also another metaphor. Teeth are the symbol of aggression, a weapon. Looking-glass teeth. Dieter weaponised the presumptions that other people projected upon him."

His expression slowly saddened. "To be perfectly honest, it was that chapter that first made me want to reach out to you. That inspired perhaps this perverse desire to speak to you, and force you peel back the silver screen and see me, the man underneath."

"The sheer unknowable enigma," I murmured to myself, then turned my back on the river, leaning against the railing as I studied his face, trying to work out if he truly was arrogant, or just oversensitive, vulnerable and brittle. "Who are you underneath the shiny metal box, then, Carlos Dengler?"

"That's a very good question," he mused, learning forward and testing his weight against the railing then holding onto it and leaning back unsteadily, weaving slightly as if he were drunk. "Carlos Dengler. Actor. Student. Philosopher."

I suppressed a snigger.

"Stop it," he warned, arching an eyebrow at me. "You laugh at me, but I do have a degree in Philosophy, I'll have you know, Miss I've-Never-Read-Hegel."

"I have a degree in Graphic Design. It doesn't make me a designer," I giggled, casting a look backwards towards the Design Museum, lit up all sparkling white against the darkness of the night sky. He scowled so abruptly that I felt compelled to add "I am teasing, Carlos. I don't know why you're so defensive with me."

A vaguely haunted look came back into his eyes again. "I'm sorry. It's a difficult question: who am I, and I don't need you laughing at me over my difficulty in answering it. I've spent the past four years training to be an actor, learning how to convincingly be someone else. But then again, I spent so long playing the role of this monstrous rock star that took over my life, that perhaps, even after four years without him, I still don't have an answer."

I shrugged apologetically. "If you had known what it would have been like - afterwards - would you still have signed up for it at the beginning?"

"Of course I would." He smirked at me. "What do you expect me to say - no, I would have just turned and walked away, gone off to be a career academic for the rest of my life."

"Would you really? Have been a career academic, I mean?" I probed.

He stopped to consider this, tapping his fingers against his taut lips. "I suppose I went into school with much the same delusions. I was so obstinate as a teenager, so stubborn. I could never take anything on received wisdom, I had to puzzle out everything for myself."

"Oh, and you've changed so much," I drawled.

He smirked again, his cheeks curving up into round apples. "I drove all my teachers crazy - several girlfriends, too. With this endless need to get to the bottom of things. I don't think that's ever passed."

"You should have been a data analyst, then," I teased. "You find there are always cold, hard numbers at the bottom of things."

He rolled his eyes. "Perhaps. But, as I said, I went to study Philosophy with much the same delusions as I signed with a record label to become a rock star. I thought, that if I mastered
Philosophy, that would be the end of it. I would be able to win any argument, conquer any recalcitrant opponent with the force of my logic - no, stop laughing at me, Margaret! I'm not fond of being laughed at, and this endless mockery is getting very tedious."

I couldn't contain myself; the giggles I had been suppressing overflowed into open mirth. "What a shame," I quipped, "For I dearly love to laugh." The quote slipped out of my mouth before I could even think about it, but at the moment I realised what I had said, Carlos recognised it, too, and turned towards me, half surprise, half delight, his face all full of questions. I took a deep breath and gained mastery of my giggles again, forcing my voice back to playful sarcasm. "I hope you were sorely disillusioned with that idea, Captain Logic."

He exhaled, and the moment passed. "I was lucky enough to have professors both patient and perceptive enough to teach me the error of my ways."

Shaking my head, I tried to imagine him as a desperately intelligent, but completely uncompromising teenager. "I bet you were absolutely unbearable when you were 19," I finally observed.

He smiled wryly. Just how many emotions was he able to convey with those thin but pliable lips and the curve of his nostrils? "And what about you, Margaret, how unbearable were you, as an uncompromising 18 year old design student?"

"Oh, the absolute worst," I conceded. "I failed Design 101 three times, even though it was supposed to be my major, due to my headstrong, wilful inability to deviate from my own true aesthetics, even to bend to a brief from my design teacher."

The wryness of his smile turned to wistfulness. "I think, had you studied at NYU instead of in Britain, that you and I would have been friends."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I loathed metal and metalheads with every fibre of my being. I think we'd have been mortal enemies, thanks to the endless personal politics of youth tribes."

He fell silent and stared out over the river. The mists were deepening, lowering like a pall of cloud, so that the spires of The City had almost totally disappeared, only a few blinking red lights to mark out where the hulking silhouettes of towers might lurk. Fog was rolling in, great sheets of silver-grey, as if from a smoke machine, as if time-travelling back from a black and white 30s film of quintessential, archetypical London, reproducing an eternal image of itself for our waiting eyes. After a few minutes, he turned back to me with the pure delight of a small child, the previous conversation receding like the disappearing skyscrapers. "It's astonishing... the mists in London. I had no idea."

"Like I said, the two things we really have here. Weather, and history."

Carlos turned and stared up at the building behind us, then pointed. "Weather, history, and security cameras. I don't understand why there are so many of these things in London."

I squinted up at the camera, high on the wall. "Do you know, I've stopped even noticing them. I suppose that's the point - the panopticon - to make them so ubiquitous that you no longer see them."

"It's positively Orwellian," Carlos said, stepping forward to smile and wave, exaggeratedly, at the lens. His movements were sloppy, indistinct, as if he were quite drunk - which he deserved to be, after slamming down 3 pints and a good portion of mine.
"Well, we are the country that invented 'Orwell'."

"I rather think Orwell was born, not invented," Carlos laughed.

"Oh no," I said. "Orwell was definitely invented, and if Eric Blair hadn't invented him, someone else would have had to."

But he was still peering up at the camera. "Do you think there's anyone watching?"

"I've no idea. Some of them aren't even real, they're just there as a... deterrent. Most of them go straight to video. There's got to be a building somewhere, just stacks and stacks of videos of empty streets."

"A uniquely British fetish, the voyeur, to watch and be watched, and take pleasure from the knowledge..." Abruptly Carlos had turned back to me, his dark eyes and his wide shoulders rather too close for comfort. "Shall we give them something to watch, Miss Bennett?"

I should have seen it coming, should have stepped back, out of the way. Because all of sudden, there was Carlos' face looming large, his eyes drifting closed, his mouth opening, swimming towards me like a lamprey eel, that gaping maw searching for me in the dark, searching for my own. I froze, terrified, as his mouth collided with mine, his breath moist and hot on my face in the cold, misty air. Oh god, no, was all I could think, my mind panicked as my body stood, stiff as a fortress, suffering the imprecations of his kiss.

But when he reached out to touch me, clumsily laying his arms about my waist, I felt released from the spell. Gathering my strength, I placed my arms on his chest and pushed him away with all my might. I wanted to spit, to rid my mouth of the taste of his cigarettes, the feel of him, hard and imperious against my lips. "Get off me, you oaf!"

Carlos just stood, gaping like a rube, looking completely confused. For a moment, he tried to put his hands on my shoulders, as if to calm me, but I slapped him away.

"What?" He sounded utterly mystified by my lack of interest. "But I thought..."

"You thought wrong!" I snapped. "For fuck's sake, have I done anything, in the past month, let alone this evening, that lead you to think I was the slightest bit inclined to be interested in you in that way?"

"I..." Arrogance gave way to self doubt on his face. "Um... you did touch me, earlier, with your leg? You know, the kicking. And the Pride and Prejudice quote. Were you not flirting? I definitely thought you were flirting..."

"Ugh!" I groaned, and pushed him off me again, whirling around and walking away from him down the riverfront, as quickly as I could. "The ego on you! Now I remember why I don't go out with men!"

"Margaret!" He had to break into a trot to catch up with me, dancing around in front of me, to try to impede my progress. "I'm sorry... I... Please, can we just go to another pub, sit down, have a drink, and talk about this like adults?"

"I think you've had enough to drink already," I snapped, pushing past him, which was easy enough to do, as he was slightly unsteady on his feet.

"You might be right. I am sorry. I neglected to take into account my jet lag, and British beer is always so much stronger than I assume..."
"Stella's Belgian," I pointed out, knowing I was being unreasonably pedantic, but he irritated me so much.

"Please. Don't be angry with me. It was an honest mistake. A miscalculation."

I stopped, and sighed, just outside another pub - an All Bar One, with those awful, energy inefficient heaters outside, belching their radiation into the night. "Oh, all right. If you go in and get the next round, I'll wait out here."

I sat in the dimly lit, reddish-glowing dark as Carlos went inside, rubbing my face with the back of my hand to try to rub away the sensation of his skin prickling against mine, his teeth hard against my lips.

After a long time, he finally emerged with two beers, and placed one before me, before sliding into the seat opposite. I drank, with considerable relief, but he just sat there, staring at me, his head cocked to one side, before finally just digging in his messenger bag and pulling out his cigarettes. So we sat in silence, awkward after the steady, excited, rush of conversation as he smoked, his head wreathed in swirling plumes of cigarette fumes. He watched me, I watched the river.

Finally, as he stubbed out his cigarette and raised his lager to his mouth, he spoke. "Do you hate me now." It was a statement, not a question.

"No," I sighed, staring at the box of cigarettes that lay between us. I only ever got the craving to smoke when I was drunk. Too many years of copping fags in crowded clubs as an easy conversation starter. "Do you mind if I have one?"

He laughed, dryly, without humour, and pushed the box over. I took one, and he bent forward and lit it for me. "Are we still going gallery hopping tomorrow afternoon, or am I permanent persona non grata to you after my faux pas?"

"Yes, I suppose we are. If your hangover isn't too bad." Taking a shallow drag of the cigarette, I felt a tiny burst of relief I thought I had long forgotten as the smoke hit my lungs and the nicotine hit my bloodstream. "And you agree, never to paw me again."

He smiled a thin-lipped smile, and bowed his head. "I concur."

I merely snorted, a thin, wry laugh, without humour.

Carlos sighed deeply and raised his drink to his lips, then muttered darkly. "Something small falls out of your mouth, and we laugh."

My head snapped to, as I stared at him, wondering why he'd chosen that, of all phrases. There was no way he could have known; I'd never mentioned that night on the internet. "Just a piece of new meat in a clean room," I said carefully.

He shook his head. "A prayer for something better. Please love me, meet my mother..."

"The fear takes hold," I said, feeling a smile spreading across my lips. I thought of that awful indie-rock speed dating night, of how appalled Sunita - and the Sad Dads - had been by that lyric. Oh, Carlos, why couldn't you have been one of the sad indie-dads clumsily hitting on me in a basement in Shoreditch, instead of this arrogant, brittle, pestilent rock star? "Creeping up the stairs in the dark."

"Waiting for the death blow," completed Carlos, sucking at his cigarette then expelling a wreath of smoke into the cold night air. "That... is my favourite Cure album."
"That," I replied. "Is my favourite lyric of all time." And I sighed deeply. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad after all. I looked down and tapped my cigarette against the ashtray, feeling the warm comfort of smoke bite at my nostrils as I exhaled.

But Carlos continued to stare at me, his eyes bright, possibly with fear. "Margaret," he said softly.

"What?"

"Margaret, please don't let me fuck this up. I esteem you, and I value our friendship far too much to ruin it with trivialities and misunderstandings. Can you give me the freedom to fuck up, and be forgiven my trespasses, as I forgive those who trespass against me?"

I couldn't help but smile at his conscious echo of the old fashioned liturgy. I still heard it in the voice of the old vicar at St Agnes, his voice droning against the hum of the organ - though I had ostensibly left the faith many years ago, it had never really left me. "Why does it matter to you so much, what I think? I mean, who the hell am I that you feel so judged by me?"

He shrugged, transferring his cigarette to his other hand as he dug in his pockets, searching fruitlessly for something, until realising the cigarette lighter was in front of him on the table. "I don't know. Everything we've just been talking about. On some level, I suppose I just want you to acknowledge me, as an equal. As a real human being, not some dumb rock star icon you've constructed in your head."

I looked at him like he was completely mad. Did he have any idea how backwards that sounded, that he wanted to be noticed by me? It was frankly bizarre to try to think of Carlos as just some dumb boy, who just wanted to be noticed by a girl. "Do you remember, an interview, ten years ago now, where you castigated starstruck fans for treating you as if you were just some kind of object that they wanted to be... how did you put it? Present in front of?"

Carlos rolled his eyes, but nodded.

"Is that how you see me?" I probed, trying to get to the bottom of all this weirdness that had overtaken our formerly easy conversation since we'd left Le Pont de la Tour.

"No," he insisted, his eyes widening with horror. "Not at all! To be completely sincere... I confess... if anything... perhaps it slightly annoys me that you don't act more like a fan, when you plainly are one."

That arrogant fucker! I ran my fingertips back and forth across my lips. That kiss still lingered, and for a horrible moment, I was consumed by an awful thought. It had been almost like I'd touched too close to the heart of Carlos with that conversation on the river front, and he'd tried, unsuccessfully, just to turn me into some stupid girl, into some sex-object, with that unwanted kiss. "Or is it the other way around? Have I become some object that you wish to be noticed by, to be present in front of?"

As he tapped his cigarette against the ashtray, his eyes grew cloudy with uncharacteristic self doubt. "I don't know. I'm going to have to think about that."
Chapter 10

I agreed to meet Carlos at noon the next day, at his hotel, a nondescript Georgian building near the British Museum. After asking for him at the reception desk, I was shown into a small, outside courtyard, where he sat under a glowing heat lamp, finishing his brunch in the open air, a cigarette smouldering away at his knuckle.

"How's your jet lag?" I asked politely as I sat down opposite.

"Not so bad." He shrugged as he pushed the pack of cigarettes towards me, but I shook my head and asked the waiter for a cup of coffee. I had no intention of falling back into bad habits on his account.

The waiter brought a French Press. I poured myself a cup, then freshened up Carlos' mug. "So do you have any preference, for where we go? White Cube? Serpentine? Victoria and Albert?"

He made a face. "I wasn't impressed with White Cube, and there's not much good on at the Serpentine. I thought perhaps about Malevich at the Tate Modern..." He gestured towards a Time Out next to him on the table. "...but I have a bit of an odd request. Don't take this the wrong way, but..."

"Oh no," I interrupted. "If you are tempted to say something that could be taken 'the wrong way' then do us both a favour and just don't fucking say it."

Carlos regarded me evenly from beneath his hair, but irritation flickered along the edge of his set jaw. "I'm going to say it anyway. In The Deep Field, Alex takes Kate to a museum in... Kensington? Something about steam engines, dark satanic mills and all that..." A mischievous look broke through the irritation. "I know that Steampunk is a bit of a goth cliché, but... I would love to see that."

Pushing my chair back from the table, I flashed him a disbelieving look. It was still weird enough to me, that he had read it, let alone that he had read it closely enough to remember specific incidents and details from it. "Alright, I suppose. If that's what you really want, you're the visitor. You decide."

"It's settled, then." He flashed me a smile, then gestured for the cheque. "Come on, let's get going. Oh - I just need to go up to my room to fetch my camera."

"I'll wait here."

He looked almost insulted. "Just come up to the room with me. I won't bite."

"With all due respect, that's not what you said last night." It just slipped out before I realised how smutty it sounded.

The flash of a filthy rejoinder formed for an instant on his mischievous face, but then he quashed it. "Please."

I followed him to the lift grudgingly, and trailed him back to his room. I don't really know what I had been expecting - girls, cocaine, debauchery - but it was just an ordinary hotel room, though still smelling slightly of smoke, and the unwashed body that had rested there. It wasn't unpleasant, just slightly... musky, a testosterone scent that reminded me uncomfortably of his masculinity. As Carlos collected his things, stuffing a map, a paperback and a small digital camera into his
messenger bag, I looked around nosily. Books; there were books everywhere. I picked one up - the script of an Ibsen play. His clothes were neatly tidied away, only the cardigan he had been wearing the night before left hanging on the back of a chair.

Carlos walked to the mirror, frowned at his reflection, then flicked a comb across his hair to brush it out of his face. Today, I noted, he was wearing a black button-down shirt, and looked slightly more like himself. I was the one wearing brown - brown paisley Liberty shirt with a contrasting floral tie, dark tweed waistcoat, shabby brown cords - as if we'd switched colour palettes in the night.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Ready," he agreed, and we finally set off. I breathed a slight sigh of relief as we stepped back into the corridor and he locked the door behind us.

On our walk to the tube, we fell into the now-familiar habit of desultory squabbling, over whether the British Museum was an emblem of civilisation and learning, or a thrusting great example of Empire and Cultural Appropriation. On the train, we scrapped about whether continent-straddling countries like Russian and Turkey were in Europe, conceptually or culturally. Carlos, infuriatingly, declared that since they were not in the Eurozone or on the Euro, they didn't count. I shot back that Britain wasn't on the Euro, but we were certainly in Europe. That's debatable, Carlos protested, pointing out the differences that the British themselves held between 'British' and 'Continental'. Stuff and nonsense, I countered, if you wanted a handy guide to what was 'Europe' and what wasn't, that the Eurovision Song Contest was a far better gauge than any doomed attempt at a single currency - something that, so far, seemed totally resistant to even the most Anglophile of American tastes.

Yes, but Israel competes in Eurovision, Carlos griped. There is no way that Israel is in Europe, either conceptually or culturally. Well, if we're talking about Cultural Imperialism - and the blunt, ordinary kind of imperialism at the barrel of a gun - I shot back. Anti-Semitism! Carlos snapped. Hey, I'm not the one who wore a Nazi uniform onstage for how many years?

"Not a nazi uniform, a world war one German uniform," Carlos quipped, in an almost creepily accurate portrayal of how I'd imagined Dieter Finkel to speak, and we both unexpectedly collapsed in laughter.

We emerged up into the station, then pushed our way through the crowds flocking the long tunnel between the station and the museums, Carlos' long legs and sharp elbows coming in incredibly useful for a change. By the time we emerged up into the museum, we were deep into a debate over scientific 'progress' as ingenuity versus imposition. Human beings, after all, were the only animal that had ever lived who, instead of adapting themselves to the environment, adapted the environment to suit themselves - even to the extent of destroying it.

"I thought that Mary Midgley of yours drew strict injunctions about the foolishness of trying to draw lines between beast and human," Carlos observed, staring up at the massive red wheel of the giant beam engine with almost naked lust. Unfortunately, it was not in steam, but even at rest, it was truly impressive.

"But there are so many things in which human beings are unique - though never the things which people claim. You know - using tools, language, whatever - all those things that birds or animals or primates do. But we are the only animal that murders - that kills not for food, or resource competition - but out of anger or hatred. We are the only animal that wages war."

"Insect species wage war," he pointed out. "Ants and wasps are notorious. And who says war is
such a terrible thing, anyway? I'm not defending murder, by any means. But war - conflict - does drive progress. Technological innovations - that computer system we walked by on the way in. People had been dicking around with difference engines for a hundred years, in theory, and not getting it right, but it took World War 2 and the sharpness of the need for codebreaking under combat conditions, and boom, computers explode into practice."

"So it turns out you are on the Shadow side in the Great War," I mused, then cursed myself for letting my inner geek slip out.

"Come to the Dark Side, Luke, we have cookies," he quipped right back.

I groaned. "Wrong science fiction universe."

He turned to me with a quizzical expression. "Do tell?"

"No way." I shook my head, embarrassed to have even brought up Space Station Nebuchadnezzar now.

"Something you may not have known about me is, I am actually a massive science fiction geek," he confessed. "Star Wars... changed my life."

I groaned inwardly. Why me? Why did they always find me? Why couldn't they find Sunita or Evie or someone who actually cared about their stupid Star Wars theories? "Well, I'm not, actually. I think Space Station Nebuchadnezzar is about as far as I go in that direction, and that's not even science fiction so much as... Shakespeare in outer space."

Carlos raised an immaculate eyebrow at me. "Didn't you tell me that you were a huge admirer of Ursula LeGuin?"

I glared at him. I hadn't told him, but I had posted a whole series of articles about her and interviews with her on my Tumblr only a few weeks previously. "She's not Sci-Fi. She's... speculative fiction."

"Ooh, well, la-dee-da," teased Carlos, arching his back and resting his hands on his hips. "Speculative fiction, is it?" He made a dismissive face, twisting his thin lips. "What you are, Margaret, is a snob. And you haven't even the guts to admit it."

"Look who's talking!" I snapped back.

"I am not a snob, I am discriminating in my tastes." From the crowing look on his face, he was clearly enjoying this. "Speaking of which, I'm sorry, but I need a cigarette... and probably another cup of coffee."

"Jet lag catching up on you," I teased as we returned to the street.

"Perhaps." This time, when he offered me a cigarette, I took one without even realising. He lit both of them, then looked at me questioningly. "So are you going to explain this... 'Space Station Nebuchadnezzar' to me?"

"No," I replied, irritated.

"Please?" Even his over-reliance on that word was starting to be annoying.

"It would take too long." I sucked at the cigarette, trying to finish it quickly, wishing I hadn't accepted it, but the nicotine rush was so insidious.
"We've got all afternoon." He glanced at his watch. "I'm curious." Another pause and a drag of his cigarette. "As to what could possibly be so compelling to cause Ms 'I Don't Like Sci-Fi' to be so fascinated by it."

Argh. It looked like he wasn't going to let it rest. "Well, all right... the bit I was referencing - the Shadow War - was about an interplanetary war of... philosophies, in which Humans and other races got caught up. Two ancient civilisations, unspeakably old, unspeakably powerful, with contrasting visions for the future development of the younger races. The Shadows - the bad guys - took your point of view. That conflict drives development; that war is necessary for the advancement of progress and civilisation. The other race - the Morgons - were interested in learning and development - in ethics and morality - in law and order, and constructive, collaborative progress, guided by spirituality and self knowledge."

"How boring," Carlos snorted. "But why does that remind me of someone I know?"

"Fuck you."

"I did try, last night, but you were having none of it," he delivered, with superb timing and a devastating arch of one lascivious eyebrow.

I hit him. I couldn't help myself, I just pulled back a fist and punched him square in the upper arm.

"Ow!" he protested, then grinned, rubbing his arm as if he were proud of the fact that he'd driven me to resort to physical violence. "But, you see, Margaret, this is what leads me to believe you might be repressing romantic feelings for me. You keep getting so physical with me."

"In your dreams," I told him, spotting that the traffic lights had gone red, and moving to cross Exhibition Road. "I'm going to get coffee."

He had to break into a trot to keep up with me, dodging traffic as he crossed the road behind me. I pushed my way through the museum to the cafe at the back, but the crowds were quite thick, as seemingly everyone in London had had the same idea for a chilly Saturday afternoon. I joined the queue at the coffee counter as he nosed around, looking at the piles of cakes and pastries.

"Do you want a slice of cake with your coffee?" I offered, noticing how he kept giving the eye to a particularly delicious looking black forest gateau.

"Oh no!" He shrank back into himself with an almost comical exaggerated femininity, gesturing towards the arched flatness of his stomach. "Spoil my figure. An actor constantly has to watch his waistline."

I admit; perhaps I burst out laughing a little too quickly. "Suit yourself. I'm having cream tea, but be warned, you're not having any of my scones."

"Cream tea..." sighed Carlos wistfully, still making eyes at the gateau. "I must admit the cakes here look exceptional."

"You're on holiday," I reminded him.

"Oh, go on then." He flashed me a grin like he was doing something terribly naughty, then got distracted by the stream of people trying to exit the William Morris tea room. It was like dealing with a hyperactive two-year-old who constantly got distracted by things. "Are we going to be able to be seated?"

"Well, it is busy; do you want to go and find us a table, while I wait in the queue for food?" I asked
him, pointing the way into the dining rooms. "There are three rooms, through there - each more beautiful than the next - so go and scout and see what you can find."

It took me another fifteen minutes to get up to the counter and get served, but eventually I managed to obtain one cappuccino, one cream tea and a slice of Black Forest Gateau. I pushed my way through into the main Gamble room, but of course Carlos was nowhere to be seen. Neither was he in the slightly gaudy Poynter room, with its flashy blue and white tiles. Of course, he was ensconced in the William Morris room, having commandeered a table in the corner, sitting sprawled across both chairs surveying the room as if he owned it.

His eyes lit up as I approached, as he raised his voice to a booming tone. "I feel as though I have at last found my spiritual home."

"Yes, I rather think you have," I told him, decanting beverages and cakes onto the table as he looked about, his eyes flickering greedily over the Burne-Jones paintings lining the dado. "I could totally see you as a Victorian gentleman of leisure."

"Why has no one ever brought me here before? This is... this is... divine."

I steeped my tea and looked about, trying to see it with new eyes. I'd been coming here since I was a child, and though I fully admitted the room was stunning, I was perhaps a little inured to its charms. As if to remind me of my own history, at the table next to me, sat a small girl in her Sunday best, looking as bored as only a small child forced to spend the afternoon in a museum could possibly look. I winked at her, and she stared, first at Carlos, and then at me, completely ignoring the droning of her rather conservative-looking parents.

"This is my era, this is absolutely my aesthetic," Carlos continued to enthuse. "Dark, elegant, slightly decadent..." But then he turned back to me, his voice still booming. "It doesn't seem fair. I finally meet a woman who completely understands my aesthetic... and she's a lesbian!"

I cringed, even as I saw the small girl's ears prick up, and her parents turn towards our table, horrified. "Do you mind keeping your voice down?" I said quietly, seething inside.

"What?" Carlos protested loudly. "You hardly seem like you're in the closet about it. You were just telling me last night."

I lowered my voice under the din of the cafe, forcing Carlos to quiet down to hear me. "For a start, I never said lesbian. I said queer."

"Lesbian, queer, what difference does it make," thundered Carlos, waving his hand back and forth dramatically. I wanted to sink through the floor as the family stared at us in silent censure.

I sighed deeply, putting my head into my hands. Give me strength, to get through the afternoon without murdering this man. "It means that my sexuality is mine to define, not yours, and the fact I won't sleep with you doesn't make me homosexual." I picked up my knife, and instead of plunging it straight into the heart of the tiresome actor, I split my scone and started to pile it with clotted cream.

"Why you always have to be so serious, Margaret. It's not even about sex, really. We've already established that neither of us are, actually, interested. It's about repartee and banter, and flattery and... Playing the game, Margaret. You could just play the game."

Blowing on my tea to cool it, I eyed him suspiciously. "Precisely because it does always feel like a
game, with you. A game you say you're playing, but if I ever turned around and said, yes, alright, Carlos, let's go to bed, you would be humping my leg like a desperate ferret."

He put his coffee down, looking hurt and slightly irritated. "Alright, alright, you can stop now. I'm not that desperate." I gave him a look. "I suppose I am, like most heterosexual men, just interested in the idea of lesbians."

"Oh, Christ, here we go again," I sighed, rolling my eyes. "I mean, do you actually know any lesbians, or are all your ideas of what queer women are like formed from watching porno flicks?"

"I do know some lesbians," he hedged defensively. "I used to have quite a sizeable lesbian fanbase, back in my musician days." He sounded quite proud about that. "I think it was the hair, to be honest." I suppressed a laugh and rapidly covered it with my teacup. "It's not the sexual proclivities of lesbians that interest me. After all, as a heterosexual man, I can certainly understand why someone would be sexually interested in women. It's more the idea of... how attraction works." He paused as he fiddled with his cake, cutting off a perfectly square portion. "Have you slept with other women, then?"

I nearly spat my tea out. "That's absolutely none of your business!"

Carlos grinned, looking up at me from under his thick, girlish eyelashes as he bent down to lick a bit of icing. "I'll take that particular defensiveness as a no, then."

"Fuck off," I snapped. "Not that it's any of your business, but yes. I have slept with women. Back in my college days, and sometimes in my musician days. Girls love a bass player."

"Indeed." A leer formed at that, then quickly dispersed. "What are you attracted to in women? Or, rather, is it different from what you're attracted to in men? Then again, I find the idea of being attracted to men rather... hard to stomach. Not in theory, I suppose, but in practice - just for me, personally. Penises are just... revolting, on a gut level. But if you're bisexual, are you as turned on by the sight of a cock as you are a pussy?" He wasn't even smirking now; his questions appeared to be genuinely curious. "You don't have to answer if that's an offensive question."

I looked around sketchily. The family next to us had now gone, and I felt vaguely guilty, and responsible for their departure. "Not offensive, just inappropriate."

He opened his mouth wide, pretending to be shocked, then covered it daintily with the tips of his fingers. "Oh, dooo pardon me. The venerable Victoria and Albert never did have sex, despite the 17 or however many children."

"I don't mean inappropriate for the setting - though yes, it rather is - I mean, just inappropriate for how my sexuality seems to... work," I sighed.

"Then how does it work?" His narrowed his eyes. "And don't you give me any bullshit about women being the 'less visual' sex, because I've fucked enough girls who were obsessed with my band's looks to know that's patent nonsense."

I laughed, relieved that I didn't have to have that conversation yet again, then took a deep breath, trying to put into words. "Honestly... it's not even about genitals, for me. Genitals are incidental, almost arbitrary. It's like they're just an apparatus by which one gives and receives pleasure with your partner. There are other qualities that make me desire someone, unrelated to what's in their pants."

"Such as?"
"No, you're going to twist my words, and I don't want to come off as completely shallow..."

He shrugged. "Perhaps all sexual attractive is shallow. Or, if not shallow, arbitrary. Why should fleshy lumps on the front of the chest be attractive? Why should high cheekbones considered beautiful? Why are..." He looked about the room, taking in the various Art Nouveau motifs. "Why are peacock feathers attractive to female peacocks?"

"I always thought it was actually less shallow to be attracted to things like... boots and haircuts, that a person had knowingly chosen as representative of their tastes and aesthetics, then it was to be attracted to breasts or cheekbones," I confessed.

He nodded, then slowly a saucy smile spread across his face. "Boots and haircuts, is that it, then? Is that what you're attracted to?"

I felt my face flushing to match the stained glass. "Stop it."

"Oh my god, it is, isn't it?" Looking down at our feet, he nudged my motorcycle boot with the toe of his high, black, slightly Victorian looking ankle boot. "Boots... and haircuts... oh my god, all those photos from your Tumblr - Kraftwerk, German Expressionism, 1920s Berlin, severe looking Weimar Lesbians, Radcliffe fucking Hall... it's that haircut, isn't it?"

Reaching out, he flicked my fringe with one finger, but I batted him away, feeling suddenly very exposed. "Fuck off, Carlos, that is well out of order. I've already asked you not to touch me."

"I'm not judging."

"It's a great haircut," I sniffed by way of defence.

"It is a great haircut," he agreed, smirking.

"It's also a haircut that means something. It's a Sign - both signifier and signified, with a whole host of associations. Androgyny, Modernism, European... it's an intellectual's haircut, as well as slightly queer. It's a signifier that signals a certain aesthetic, a certain lifestyle, a certain set of interests and affinities..."

But as I spoke, his face slowly fell, the amused smirk giving way to a definite sense of pique. "Margaret, I had that haircut for many years. I know exactly what it means." He paused, studying me with a slightly hurt expression. "And the best boots in New York City. So why don't you fancy me?"

"I knew this conversation was a bad idea," I snapped, and retreated into stony silence, turning my face away from him as I fussed with my tiny teapot, trying to squeeze the last drops out of the teabag. Carlos sat back, silently fuming over his coffee. For a few minutes, we drank in silence, as he slowly resumed his study of the room, the paintings, the wallpaper, his head twitching about like a bird as he tilted back to examine the gold leaf of the ceiling. I ate my scone. He took another bite of his cake as we tried very hard not to meet each other's eyes.

But it was Carlos who finally broke the ice. "This cake truly is extraordinary. Would you like to try a piece?"

"Alright," I accepted, and extended my fork to try a morsel.

"So you're not afraid, like Persephone, that if you accept a crumb of the Dark Lord's victuals, that you will be condemned to be his bride for all eternity?" he teased.
"I hardly think chocolate cake quite stands in for a pomegranate, and you, despite your affectations, are hardly the God of Hades."

"Hades was the name of the God, not the name of the place," Carlos corrected with a pedantic tsk.

"Depends which era of Greek mythology you are talking about," I pedanted right back.

And slowly, the warmth seeped back into the conversation, as we moved from Greek Myth to Pre-Raphaelite paintings, finished our cake, and went wandering off through the galleries. He loved the design collections best of all, wandering, rapt, between Arts and Crafts furniture and Constructivist poster design. Some 1920s Bauhaus typography had him in ecstasies one minute, then he was swooning over Victorian tea services ringed with Gothic fancies. That was, to be honest, the most surprising thing about him. I had expected him to be calm, cool, even jaded, completely inured to this stuff from a lifetime in New York. A Hipster, that was what I had expected, completely unimpressed by everything.

But I was surprised to discover that wasn't him at all. He experienced art like it genuinely moved him. He cooed, he gasped, he screeched like a peacock when he was really taken with something. A Japanese silk panel in black and mother of pearl. A pair of spiky, twisted, wrought-iron gates from a Gothic cathedral. A room full of Arts and Craft furniture, complete with mannequins of an 'Aesthetic' couple in matching velvet clothes. He kept pulling out his camera and snapping pictures 'for inspiration', he claimed.

"Truly, I think I was born at the wrong time," he sighed, at each new era that caught his attention.

"Honestly, I don't think so. How would you live without the Internet, and email and Google Image Search," I teased.

"Quite happily," he sighed.

"We never would have met, and my life would be a lot less irritating," I conceded.

"I see your point," he said, but then stiffened. "Actually... come to think of it, do you mind if we hit an internet cafe? I need to check my Facebook to find out if an old friend is in London tonight, or else you are stuck with me for dinner tonight."

"If it means getting rid of you early, Carlos, honey, you can use my iPad - so long as you remember to log out again afterwards."

So we found a quiet bench in the plaster-cast hall, and I sat back and stared up at the fake Victorian Trajan's Column as he tapped and fussed, trying to get into Facebook. A sad frown and a little resigned shrug as it turned out the friend from Sussex was stuck in Brighton for the night, but perhaps another evening. "Sorry, Margaret - it looks like you're stuck with me tonight."

"Oh my god, the imposition, what will I ever do with you," I drawled.

As I waited, patiently, he logged out of Facebook and logged into Gmail. Suddenly his face took on a concerned cast. "Oh hang on..."

"What, am I off the hook - please god?"

"There's an email from RADA. I thought I checked my email yesterday afternoon before I met you..." He frowned, his face growing seriously worried, but as he clicked through and read the email, he looked first surprised, then puzzled, then totally disbelieving. "This... wow. Holy shit."
"Good news or bad news?" Surely they couldn't have made a decision already.

He scanned the email one more time, then turned towards me. "They want me to come back for another audition - this time at the Old Vic?"

"The Old Vic?" My eyes lit up. "Shadow of Light - that must be exciting for an old goth like you. I guess that meant they liked you. But when?"

He positively beamed. "This Monday. As in the day after tomorrow. I better reschedule my flight... Hell, I need to get to a theatrical bookshop, and find the script, and rehearse... oh my god. There's no time... How...?"

"But that's amazing news! They wouldn't call you back if they hadn't been seriously impressed - let alone so quickly." I found myself getting actually excited for him.

"I've got to go back to the hotel... Oh god, where can I get this script? I need to make some phone calls..." he sputtered, looking really quite overwhelmed, raising his hand to his forehead and nervously fussing with his hair.

"Look, it's OK," I assured him. "You can use my mobile to call the airline. There will be an 0800 number on your ticket email. We'll get a cab to Foyle's, and find you the script. It will be fine. What play is it?"

His eyes flashed as he grinned at me. "That's what's so funny. I'll be reading for Les Liaisons Dangereuses."

We left the V&A in a hurry, then flagged down a cab outside. He borrowed my phone and rang Virgin Atlantic, who, fortunately agreed to postpone his flight for two days without charge, as the plane was already overbooked. Then he rang the hotel and asked for an extra two nights. By that point, we were at Tottenham Court Road, so I paid the cab and lead an extremely nervous and flustered Carlos up to the top floor of Foyle's to find the script. Although I could tell he was impressed with Foyle's, his eyes darting, distracted, to other interesting sections, he seized the script, paid for it, and walked out with single-minded dedication.

"Look, Margaret, would you be annoyed with me if I begged off dinner tonight. I really do need to go back to my room and learn it," he explained apologetically.

"It's fine," I assured him. To be honest, after two days, I was slightly exhausted by him, and could have done with a quiet evening myself.

"But can I ask you a big favour?" His eyes were huge, worried. "Will you run through the scenes with me a few times, tomorrow."

"I warn you, I can not act," I stuttered.

"You don't have to. You just have to hold the book, read out the other lines, check me and prompt me if I forget anything." He looked so desperate I didn't want to turn him down.

"Erm..." I hedged, trying to think if I knew anyone who would be better at this sort of thing. I knew Sunita had done amateur dramatics at Uni - but oh my god, no - there was no way I was introducing Carlos to Sunita. That would be asking for trouble.

"Look, I'll come to yours if that makes you more comfortable. I'll bring brunch..."

"You don't need to. There's a market right by Herne Hill Station."
"Alright, I'll stop and pick something up there, on the way." He turned to me, his face suddenly serious. "Please."

I didn't really know how to refuse when he begged. He used that word like it was a magic key to cover his demanding nature, but I continually gave in to it. "Alright. You can get the train from Farringdon. Ring me when you're on the way." And then I let him hug me goodbye as he loped off, back to his hotel.
I flew home, and I tidied. I mean, it wasn't really like the house was that much of a mess - alright, I was a bit anally retentive - and I didn't think that he would mind that much either way, what the place looked like, so long as I read his play. But I suppose I just wanted to make a good impression. It was years since I'd had anyone round the place - well, apart from the 4BAABS girls, and most of them had lived with me at one time or another. I hoovered, did a once-over of dusting and washed the dishes. My bedroom... well, no. There was no way he was seeing that. But I could at least put away the laundry and put some sheets on the bed in the spare bedroom.

I slept in on Sunday morning, then made myself a pot of coffee and sat down to answer my own neglected email. Sunita and Evie had accepted the white lie about being super busy at work, but Alice knew how I had spent the weekend. So there was a slightly concerned email sitting at the top of my inbox.

So. It's been two days, and no one has heard from you. Do we call the police, or do we send for the Justice of the Peace to unite you two in matrimony? I don't want to interrupt you if you're deep in holy bedlock (lord knows you probably need it.) But just drop me a line, and let me know you're OK? XO, Alice

Honestly, Alice, it's not like that. It's... well, we're friends. He's... exhausting and frustrating, and fascinating and just damn good fun. I've never met anyone before who quite gets *all* my references, whether I'm talking about Bauhaus or Barthes. But it's... It's not a sexual or a romantic thing, OK? It's a friendship thing. I mean, I'm even helping him study for his audition for Valmont this afternoon. It's that kind of friendship. Creative, intellectual, stimulating. Not sexual. - M

What, no chemistry? Oh, I hate when that happens. Someone you get on really well with, and can have great conversations with, but there's just no personal chemistry at all, no spark, no va-va-voom. I am sorry, Margo. I was really crossing my fingers for this one, for ya. XO, Alice

I frowned at my inbox. This was the problem with married friends - they were always trying to get you shacked up, even when it was totally inappropriate. But at the same time, I wanted to protest: it wasn't that we had no chemistry. If anything, we had far too much chemistry. It was way too easy to fall into a pattern of flirting with Carlos, sparking off him and even physically assaulting him just to touch him - or so he claimed. But that was the thing. It wasn't a can't, with Carlos. It was a must not.

It's not that, either, Alice. I was surprised by how much chemistry we have. You know, if it were anyone *else*, if he were just a normal person, just some guy I had met on OKC or something, I would... seriously consider it? But honestly, it's just... I
Of course it was Carlos, calling not as I expected, from Bloomsbury or Farringdon, but from the payphone outside Herne Hill Station. "You're here? Already? Oh, blimey, just give me five minutes to throw on some clothes and come and meet you. There's a bookshop just at the end of the market. If I don't see you by the stalls, I'll meet you in there."

So much for a shower and a leisurely stroll down to the market. I threw on a pair of black jeans and a striped jumper that smelled sort of remotely clean, pulled on my boots and ran down to the station. And there he was, sampling olives and buying loaves of bread at a market stall, a bag from the bookshop tucked under his arm, because of course he hadn't resisted a purchase. Another hug - I was starting to get used to them by now, no longer struggling or sticking my arms out awkardly - and a few more things to be picked up, then I lead him slowly back the scenic route to my house.

"South London is lovely," he observed, sounding actually surprised. "I was always told it was a dump. Though I suppose, to be honest, the only places I've ever been are the Brixton Academy and that grotty neighbourhood around Vauxhall where the clubs are. But this is very pleasant. Almost civilised."

"Brixton's just down that road," I pointed out, then lead him down the side of Brockwell Park.

"Never!" But as we crested the hill, he caught sight of the tower blocks. "You'd never know this was London if you didn't see that."

He was even more impressed with my flat, when I took him back, apologising for the non-existent mess.

"Well, this looks familiar!" he enthused, pointing to the bookshelf. "And I feel like I know this sofa well. But the space... and the ceilings! I somehow imagined that you all lived in miniscule little lairs in Brutalist skyscrapers, in South London, from the way you describe it. I was thinking, like, something out of Attack The Block."

"No, it's all proper Victorian gingerbread around here. Back here is the kitchen - enough space to get an actual dining room table in here. And upstairs are two bedrooms - both reasonably sized, for a change, that's very unusual in a London flat, but it was originally a house that was subdivided."

"Two bedrooms?" he asked quizzically, raising an eyebrow. "You didn't mention a housemate."

"No, I don't have a housemate," I shrugged, leading him back down to the kitchen and putting on the kettle to make coffee in the French Press, before he could ideas and ask for a guided tour of the bedrooms. He raised a dubious eyebrow at me, even as he settled himself into the kitchen table. For some time, he seemed to amuse himself, rifling nosily through the photos, postcards, ticket stubs and scraps of newsprint pinned to the corkboard about the kitchen table. It was an ever-ongoing collage, photos of people I fancied, bands I was obsessed with at the time, reminders of parties or gigs that I had enjoyed or were yet to come. But he unpinned and took down my German Expressionist Film calendar - a gift from Alice, courtesy of the BFI - and started to page through photos of Conrad Veidt, Louise Brooks and Greta Garbo.

"This is an odd thing for someone who claims to be film deaf, to have hanging in their kitchen," he observed.
"It's sort of a little joke with a friend. My friend Alice - she's well into cinema, total film buff - I used to irritate her by wearing this Bauhaus T-shirt. You know the one? It's a Bela Lugosi's Dead shirt, but it's got a picture of Conrad Veidt on it. Oh my god, it used to wind her up so much - she swears they did it on purpose, like you know those hipster-baiting shirts that have a picture of Mark E Smith saying 'Joy Division' or New Edition, saying 'New Order'?

"I read that Daniel Ash had absolutely no idea who it was; he just tore the picture out of an art textbook because he liked it so much," Carlos imparted in a gossipy tone.

"Well, Alice decided to educate me on German Expressionist cinema. And I found I really liked it - Fritz Lang, Murnau, Cabinet of Doctor Caligari, all of that kind of stuff. Even so far as some surrealist stuff - Jean Cocteau and Buñuel So, you see, I'm not totally hopeless."

"OK, now I'm impressed. You're a woman of many mysteries," he teased as I unpacked the food he had brought, and started to sort it into piles needing toasting or chopping or frying. "I'm going to know better than to believe you, next time you try to tell me you're not into something."

I would have thought, that after three days, we would have run out of things to talk about, but the more coffee we drank (and the first carafe turned into 2 more) the more argumentative we got. Talking about early cinema lead to talking about the difference between stage acting and screen acting, and how they had not entirely translated, especially on account of silent film acting requiring a whole new language of expression, derived from mime and kabuki. And that started us off arguing about technology, and about photography versus painting and black and white versus Technicolor and whether the pigments developed for colour film were racist in the skin tones they captured accurately or not. By the time we had finished breakfast, he had threatened to stop talking to me no less than three times - to which I reminded him that he would have a difficult time rehearsing his play without me - and I had managed to refrain from kicking him any more than twice. (My foot slipped, OK?)

Then we moved through into the living room, and I sat on the sofa while he paced up and down in front of my tall, narrow, Victorian windows. As he looked out across the street at the rows and rows of pointed brick houses - at least half of which seemed to be for rent or for sale.

"This might be a rude question," Carlos ventured, looking down at the For Sale signs. "But a neighbourhood like this... is it expensive??"

I laughed. "It's not rude at all. All Londoners do is talk about property prices, all day long. But to answer your question... Well. It's expensive now. It's come up quite a bit since I moved here 15 years ago - a lot of Dulwich and Brixton overspill. There's been a ton of complaints about locals being priced out, in the past few years. A lot of people who've lived in Brixton and Herne Hill for generations having to move down to Streatham or Tulse Hill. That's Zone 3, so the rent is cheaper, but you pay it back in transport."

But Carlos wasn't actually asking about the vagaries of London neighbourhoods. "If it's expensive... and you don't have a housemate... how do you afford to live here?"

I winced, and shifted uncomfortably on the sofa. OK, that was a little more intimate than I'd been expecting from a typical London house-price conversation. "Well, when I bought - like I said, about 15 years ago now - Herne Hill was still a bit tatty, so it wasn't so bad. Plus, well... when I bought this place, I had a partner. Who is now... well, no longer in the picture." That didn't hurt, not really, not any more.

Carlos turned away from the window to look at me, his face actually softened with empathy. If I'd been expecting some sort of cutting remark, he was oddly quiet. "I see."
"I did have housemates for a while. Both Evie and Alice - those are two of the girls from 4BAABS - lived with me for a time when they first moved to London." That was not a catch in my throat. "Eventually, my salary caught up with my mortgage. I decided I liked living alone too much to get another housemate."

"Aaaaah." It looked like another question was forming in those black eyes, but I cut him off before he could get even more personal.

"What about you? Do you live alone, or do you have housemates?"

"Well, apart from my beloved dog... no." A surprisingly tender and affectionate look came over his face whenever he mentioned Gaius. "When... Cindy moved out, I found I had quite lost the urge to share my space with anyone else. But in some ways, I have the best of both worlds, because I live alone, but I have tenants upstairs, with whom I'm on very friendly terms. They... water the plants when I'm away, that sort of thing."

"Tenants?" I asked. "Does that mean you own?" He nodded. "I thought everyone in New York rented."

"We all bought property, with the advance we received, when the band signed to a major label. Myself and Dan in New York, Sam in Georgia, and Paul in Panama, of all places." Noting my disbelieving glance, he shrugged. "You know that Dan Kessler's father is a financial journalist, yes? He advised us on wise investments to make with the windfall of royalties from records that had been so unexpectedly successful. It's entirely possible we might have frittered the money away otherwise. I bought the house - completely dilapidated, semi-squatted by crackheads, and yet still a bargain, as it turns out - in 2006. Possibly the best decision I ever made."

"But how on earth do you afford a mortgage on an actor's salary?" I blurted out.

Carlos laughed. "There is no mortgage. I bought outright, in a part of Upper Manhattan that was very unfashionable, even remote, when I bought, but has since been gentrified - or 'come up' as you so quaintly put it - same as you did."

"Upper Manhattan?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. So it seemed New York also suffered from the same mania for renaming areas to obscure their original associations. "You mean Harlem?"

"No, I mean Washington Heights," Carlos corrected, sounding more than slightly irked. When I looked blank, he added, "Near Fort Tryon Park?" I shook my head and looked at him blankly. "The Cloisters?"

"Oh, you mean the long, narrow, skinny bit at the top?" I asked, more to annoy him than anything else, as I was quite familiar with the general geography of Manhattan from perusing the subway map. "Is it an actual house or an apartment? I thought everyone in New York lived in high-rise apartments."

"It is a house," Carlos assured me. "There are still a few rows of old Brownstones left on the borders of Harlem and Washington Heights. It was a mess when I purchased it, but I had it refurbished into two apartments while we were on tour. The rent from my tenants covers property tax, utilities, and the like. It supports... well, not a lavish lifestyle, but a secure one. I live simply."

"You." It was hard to keep my tone from becoming sarcastic. "Live simply? I imagine your tailoring bill dwarfs my mortgage."

He shook his head. "It's funny how people always thought my clothes were designer when they
were mostly second hand, vintage, gifts from designer friends. I lived out of a suitcase for ten years. I do, believe it or not, still live simply."

"I stand corrected," I conceded, looking over the chunky black cardigan he'd been wearing for three days straight, and noticing for the first time that it was slightly threadbare at the elbows.

"And I am constantly aware that I am very lucky. Both in that I was fortunate enough to be selling a lot of records, at the end of a window during which people were still willing to pay money to own music. And in that I had access to such sensible advice. I know many former musicians - some of whom were in bands that appeared, briefly, to be far more successful than my own - who were ripped off by record companies or managers, who got into trouble with taxes, or who were simply not prudent with their earnings. Or did not realise that the proceeds of one big hit record would not be coming in forever."

"That's a very middle class notion," I teased. "Property and education, the only expensive things ever worth spending money on."

Carlos merely shrugged. "It seems very sensible to me. So yes, that's what I spent my rock star money on - property and education." I stared at him, astonished that he hadn't risen to the bait. "My parents are both office workers and immigrants, so yes, they are proud that I have made it to the middle class."

Americans! It knocked me flat out that they were just completely deaf to ribbing about class. If I'd suggested to Evie that she might be, well, a bit middle class for going to school to train to be a QC while saving up money to buy a house, she'd have filleted me. But say the same thing to Alice, and Alice would just nod and say something like 'Damn straight and proud of it.'

"Vive la difference," I muttered, adding it to a list of things that Carlos was immune to teasing about, and picked up his script. "So what scene are we doing."

"The one marked with the pink post-it note. You begin, I believe."

The difference between Carlos at play and Carlos at work was an almost unbelievable transformation. He closed his eyes, stretched, turned around and did a couple of breathing exercises. And when he turned back to face me, he was an 18th Century nobleman. His entire carriage, the way he held himself, the severe expression his face, his body language just completely changed. And when he spoke, even his intonation had changed. That American uptalk, the ugly New Jersey vowels, he shed it all, not even for one of those fake 'British' accents that Americans loved to assume when ~acting~, but for a clear, resonant, almost Shakespearian tone.

For a moment, I just stared at him, then realised that he was expecting me to answer, his face twitching, not with the playful irritation I'd grown to expect from needling Carlos, but with the genuine arrogance of a nobleman come to expect people to jump at his every word.

He was magnificent, that was the only word for it. Granted, I had only seen the film, and the role of Valmont was so closely associated in my mind with John Malkovich that I would it have thought it would be hard to see anyone else as the scheming seducer. But he seemed to have assembled an entirely new personality - well, parts of it still seemed very like Carlos - but in a twisted, slightly exaggerated sort of way. As I continued to read the lines out to him, I found myself utterly caught up in the story as he seduced his mistress. Hell, even I was starting to find myself charmed by him, responding not to Carlos, the frustrating, annoying, vexatious creature that I knew, but to this compelling new stranger with his charming words and his seductive manner. The same man, the same half-ugly, half-beautiful face with that blocky jaw and those penetrating eyes, and yet this version of the man made all the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, my toes twitching and my
thighs slightly moistening.

And then, just abruptly, he flubbed a word, completely blanked on the next line, and came crashing out of character. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, oh dammit!" he swore, the Valmont look falling from his face, and suddenly he was the thin, slightly camp New Yorker again, arching his back in that familiar way as he castigated himself, his hands flicking around his face nervously. "I'm sorry; I lost my concentration."

I lowered the script, astonished, trying to get my head around the transformation. "Do you want the next line?"

"No, no. Can we go back half a page? I need to get the flow right. If I start from the same place, I'll flub it again, and then I'll get a block. Just give me a moment..." He took a deep breath, inflated his chest and seemed to be possessed by some other spirit as he threw his shoulders back and straightened his head. He was Valmont again.

"You're... good at this," I observed, trying not to stare.

"You sound surprised?" But it was Valmont who had responded, not Carlos, and that was completely eerie. Dropping my eyes back to the page, I found my place and fed him the next line. He picked up, and seemed to seamlessly segue back into the story, smoothly running over the response that had given him so much trouble before.

When we finished the scene, he made me do it over, and then again, a third time. I made a pot of coffee, and Carlos drank that - in character, with Valmont holding the coffee cup so daintily - then we dove back into it, switching to the other scene he'd been asked to prepare.

"You memorised all of this?" I asked, astonished, as I flicked ahead through the pages to count them.

"It's not that difficult," Carlos - or was it Valmont? - shrugged. "Once you've got the character fixed in your head, it's quite easy to predict how they will respond and behave. It's like learning a song. Once you've got the rhythm and intonation of the speech down, it just flows, really."

"I'm... impressed," I confessed.

A twinkle of the eyes. That was definitely Carlos again. "So I'm not completely useless?"

"Well, not at acting, I suppose." I flicked through the pages to find my place again.

"Really, you and I should be lying in bed for this scene," he teased. That was Valmont now, slipping down to the sofa beside me with a slightly predatory air.

"Don't push your luck," I warned, and started to feed him the lines.

But it was too convincing. Almost against my will, I found myself responding to him. But was I responding to the beautifully written, perfectly crafted lines of the play, or was I responding to Carlos, or was I responding to this strange, mingled creature, half Laclos and half Carlos' theatrical imagination, inflating the aristocrat and bringing him to life? When those eyes studied me, I felt my resolve wavering, even as I felt him mentally undressing me. Those smooth lines - I knew the character was a cad, knew he was utterly wicked and irresponsible - and yet I found my pulse quickening and my breaths growing quicker, even as I was trying to dispassionately speak the lines right back to him.

By the end of the scene, his face was only inches away from mine, his arm skirting around the
back of my shoulders, his breath hot on my neck, and to be honest, I was a mess. I was legitimately *turned on*. I wanted him, this odd theatrical fabrication that I alone was witness to. But the smirk that crossed his face as he watched me writhe, that was pure Carlos. "Well, I think we'll make an actress out of you yet."

I flushed bright red. Yes. Acting. That was what I was doing. I was getting caught up in the performance and carried away by the words. What I was feeling, from the waist down, that was not real.

"Shall we go back to the top and run through it again?" I noticed that Carlos had not moved from the sofa, had not removed his hand from back of my shoulders, or his face from hovering just above mine, his thin lips looking such a pale, pearly pink as I tried hard not to stare. His cheekbones really were extraordinary, close up.

"Can you give me a minute? I think I need the loo," I blurted out, and bolted, escaping from his arms and flinging myself up the stairs, locking myself in the toilet until I could catch my breath.

I did need the loo - after all that coffee, that urge was genuine. But after I relieved myself, I had the sudden urge to take a shower, to wash myself clean of whatever had just happened. Except nothing had happened! I picked myself up and stared at myself in the mirror, my dirty hair askew, the previous day's eyeliner still not entirely rubbed from my eyelids, my lips looking oddly bruised, as if I'd been kissing. Wait, those were bite-marks, but they were from my own teeth. Had I been playing with my lips the entire time? Oh Christ, way to give the wrong impression. I washed my face and brushed my teeth in place of the desired shower, then made my way back downstairs, fearing for the worst, of what I might be capable of, if confronted with Valmont again.

But there was only Carlos. Carlos, his long frame folded into the corner of my sofa, in ratty jeans, an old black T-shirt and that lumpy cardigan, his hawk-like nose deep in the script, lips moving as if he was reciting. Carlos, gawky, awkward, and slightly camp as ever. I was safe with that guy - he meant nothing to me.

He looked up at the sound of my footsteps. "Ah! You're back. Shall we try that scene again?"

Despite my hesitation, I took a deep breath. "OK." After all, perhaps it had only been the shock of the unexpected that had twisted me around so much inside. Taking the script from him, I moved to the other end of the sofa. As he manipulated himself back into character, I risked a sneaky glance at him. "You are *very* good, you know."

A cruel smile. "Thank you. There's a lot in this character that I... Well, I won't say I relate to, but there's certainly a lot of him in a man that I used to be. I can still dig him out when needed. Plus, well... I have to confess, I mixed in a little of your absurd Baron. Plus a great deal of..." Here there was a giggle that was pure Carlos. "How I see myself reflected in your eyes."

I shot him a sharp glare.

"I think there's a part of you that would almost *like* me to be that man again."

"Dream on," I snorted.

"It would relieve you of the burden of having to be good, and pure, and having to resist me all the time, wouldn't it. If I really was just a rake and a playboy again, and I casually seduced you, just because I could." His eyes flashed, and I couldn't quite tell if that was Carlos or Valmont.

"You are *such* an egoist," I told him, even as I felt something twist in the bottom of my stomach.
But I shoved that feeling back down again, and started to feed him the lines.

This time I was steeled, this time I was prepared, and the trick did not work. It was only Carlos, I told myself, only goofy, slightly pathetic Carlos. Carlos fucking Dengler who’d had more girls balanced on the tip of dick than I’d had hot dinners. I wasn’t falling for that nonsense, oh no, not me. My reading was poor, and limp, and deliberately lifeless, but it didn't seem to matter to him. Again, he read like he meant it, he transformed himself completely, threw himself into the performance, until someone who hadn't just seem him do exactly the same trick 20 minutes earlier might almost have believed him. But not I. Certainly not I.

We rehearsed for the rest of the afternoon. We did those two scenes over, and over, and over again, until I was starting to learn some of the lines off by heart myself. He was perfect. If he didn't choke with nervous energy, he would be fine.

So we finished up, and I threw my boots back on, and we made our way down to the pub for an early evening Sunday roast, squabbling over the wine list, and the differences between bars and pubs, and the role of alcohol and intoxicants as sacraments in various worldwide religions. Arguing with Carlos had just become familiar, even reassuring, an amusing pastime rather than a genuine irritant. And I realised with a shock, as I said goodbye to him at the station, and gave him a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek, that I would genuinely miss him when he went home to New York.

"Break a leg tomorrow!" I shouted at him as he slowly climbed the stairs to the platform.

"Thanks." He winked at me, and then he was gone.

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Returning to work on Monday morning, I felt the strangest disconnect. It was almost as if I had been another person for three days, a more glamourous, exciting person who hung out with actors and rock stars - well, ex rock stars. And now I had to haul my sorry arse back to the office and program algorithms and interrogate databases, but the whole thing just felt thoroughly alien to me. I went out to grab a sandwich at lunch, but now even the familiar cobblestones of Shad Thames seemed to have been transformed. There was the restaurant where we’d sat and drank and flirted. There was the pub where we’d made up. And there was the sheltered portico with the security camera, where he had tried to kiss me. I stared at it, hardly believing any of it had been real, then made my way back to the office.

Just before I left work, an email dropped in my inbox.

Margaret. I've just left the audition, and I'm checking my email one last time to make sure my flight tomorrow is all confirmed. I've no idea how it went - I never do - but at least I didn't flub any lines. I would ask you to meet me for celebratory drinks one last time, but unfortunately, it seems my flight leaves Heathrow at 6am, so I must do my best to get an early night.

Thank you so much for the help; you've no idea how invaluable it was to me. I do not know if I would have performed so smoothly without it. And thanks again for proving such a kind, and gracious, and charming host for my weekend in London. I will
treasure cream tea in the William Morris room forever. If you are ever in New York, please let me know, and I will return the favour by showing you my favorite sights.

Your humble servant, etc.
Carlos
Chapter 12

I did my best to fall back into the routines of my old life. A text message from Evie invited me for drinks on Tuesday evening. I could tell she was bursting with news, and besides, I felt guilty for cancelling on her over the weekend, so I took a bus up to Chancery Lane to meet her in a grim lawyer pub.

"I've had a letter from the Law School," she told me, holding out a plain brown envelope in front of her.

"Have you read it?" I asked, excitedly.

"No," she squeaked. "I need you to read it, too, to prove to me that I'm not hallucinating, and I'm not seeing things. I'm too scared to look at it."

I prised open the envelope and removed the formal-looking letter with the imposing University letterhead at the top. "Dear Evelyn Barnsley. It is with great pleasure that I write to you to confirm that you have been accepted for a place in our program..." Her shriek of joy drowned out the rest of the sentence as she threw her arms around me and hugged me. "Congratulations, oh, Evie, I'm so pleased! This is so exciting!"

"I know, I know!" she squealed, wriggling in her seat, practically jumping up and down with excitement. "I can't wait to tell everyone. I'm going to ring my Mum when I get in tonight, though my brother and my Gran can wait until tomorrow morning. Should I text the girls to tell them tonight, or should I wait until we record 4BAABS?"

"Tonight," I told her. "Definitely tell them tonight. Sunita might even come out for a drink, if she's about."

"Nope, Sunita is out with the boyfriend tonight," Evie intoned seriously.

"What? It's been two weeks now. This is getting serious," I laughed. But then I stopped laughing, as I realised exactly whose reaction she had omitted to describe. "So what does Harry think of this?"

Evie's excited face almost completely frosted over. "I don't know. I haven't told him yet."

"You are planning on telling him, right?" I demanded. Evie said nothing. "You do eventually have to tell him."

"I'm not going to tell him until after I've filled in the forms, and signed on the dotted line, and completely, irrevocably committed to doing it."

"Why...?"

Her mouth was a grim line, her face completely serious. "When I told him I'd got through the first round, I thought he would be happy for me. I thought he would come round, would be supportive. But no. He told me I was making the worst mistake of my life, and that I would regret it if I went through with it."

I paused, trying to let that sink in. I always thought partners were supposed to get one another's backs. Why did it never seem to work out that way? "I think he may have just made the worst mistake of his life."
"I don't want to talk about him any more. Can we just get drunk and celebrate my good fortune?"

"Right. I'll get the next round in. Since you're called to the Bar, I'll be be called to this bar," I quipped, finished my drink, and went to fetch another two pints. As I ordered two packs of peanuts to go with them, I suddenly thought of Carlos, and wondered if he was back in New York yet, or if he was still somewhere in flight, suspended over the Atlantic.

When I got back to the table, celebratory text messages were already flooding in from the 4BAABS girls, and they were making plans for a special celebration after the podcast recording. Well, that meant I was staying over on the sofa and catching an early bus down to work, didn't it. I would have to make sure I brought a change of clothes, in that case.

But on Thursday evening, as I was walking up from the Kentish Town Thameslink, I heard my phone ringing in my bag. Thinking it was Evie or Sunita asking me to pick up some milk at the cornershop, I pulled it out, but the number was unrecognised. Still, better not to risk it in case they were having trouble with their phone line, so I hit answer.

"Hello. Is that Margaret?" A male voice, American accent.

"Yes?" I said, wondering who on earth it might be. Someone from work?

"It's me," he said, with the casual self-assurance that of course I would recognise his voice, of course I would know who he was. Oh, of course...

"Carlos?"

"I hope I haven't got the time zones wrong again? You weren't asleep were you?"

"No, sorry, I'm just walking up the main road. It was a bit noisy back there, but there - now I've turned down Sunita's street. What's up?"

"I got it." Carlos' voice was even more excited than Evie's had been the previous evening.

"You got what?" I blurted out, then realised. "The part? You got the part?"

"Yes. I got the part - Valmont. Well, understudy to Valmont. At the Old Vic. Which means... I will be accepted to RADA's graduate program. I'm going to RADA. Listen to me, I've almost got an English accent already. Raaaadah. So I'm coming back to England. Can you believe it?"

"What?" I sputtered, barely believing what I was hearing. I had reached Evie and Sunita's house, but there was no way I could go inside and surrender my mobile now, so I perched on the garden wall, straining to hear down the transatlantic line. "When? When are you coming here?"

"Next semester. January. I should come a few weeks earlier, to sort things out, but my family will want me for Christmas and the holidays... That means I've got six weeks to sort things out. Sublet my apartment... I looked into bringing Gaius, but the rabies quarantine in the UK is impossible - it's six months! So my ex has promised she will look after him while I'm away. He and her French Bulldog are so very, very attached, after all. I swear, he almost didn't want to come home with me when I went to pick him up this time!"

"You're moving to England for six months?" I repeated dumbly. Wait, I was not sure I could cope with this. Carlos in another country, that was fine. Carlos, just visiting my city for a weekend, that I could cope with. Carlos, moving to my city, for six months? I was not sure I knew how to react to this news.
"Isn't it glorious? I'm so excited! To study at RADA, to play at the Old Vic... I am beside myself! In utter transports of joy! And I do have to thank you. Without your tireless help on Sunday, I would not have been so well rehearsed."

"Glad to be of service," I stuttered, glancing at my watch. I was going to be late for the recording, but I just didn't want to get off the phone with him.

"Which brings me to another way that you might... be of service. You see, I will require a place to lodge for six months. Now, I am aware that you have an empty bedroom and no housemate, in an expensive neighbourhood..."

Suddenly I saw the underhanded motive behind that entire conversation. And here, I had been stupid enough to think that he just cared about me and my boring life. "No way. I'm sorry, but absolutely not."

"But I can pay you," Carlos persisted, as if my objection were purely mercenary. "I've been reliably informed that I can get quite a good rate for subletting out my apartment in Washington Heights... I fully expect to spend that on rent in London. I just thought that it would be nice to, well, stay with someone I knew. Since we get on so well, I thought you might be glad of the company."

I swallowed nervously. Carlos. In my flat, for six months. Exhausting, demanding, argumentative Carlos, in my house, my kitchen, stinking up the bathroom with his grooming products. Carlos, wandering about the house in advanced states of undress. Carlos, probably bringing home girls at all hours of the day and night. Absolutely, completely not. No way in hell was I putting myself through that.

"Look, I'm sorry, but I really don't think it's a good idea."

"I thought you'd be pleased!" His voice was taking on an ugly, whining tone.

"I am pleased - well, I'm pleased about you getting the part, and I'm pleased at you coming to London, and I will be happy to meet you for drinks, and for dinner, and for more strolls around galleries, but... in my house? For six months? Carlos, we'd hate each other within a week. I don't want a housemate."

"But you lived with your friends - with Alice, and with Edie..."

"Evie," I corrected. He wasn't even living with me, and he was irritating me already.

"Did you hate them after living with them?"

"Alice only stayed with me for three months, while she and her fiancé were flat-hunting. And Evie... well, just... Well, it's just different."

"Why is it different?" God, he was an annoying bugger. I mean, this was the entire reason I did not want to live with him. The man simply did not seem to know how to take no for an answer.

"Because..." I cast about wildly. "Because they're girls."

"I see." There was silence at the other end of the phone.

"Carlos, please don't be angry with me. I... I do like you and enjoy your company, and I look forward to spending more time with you, but seriously. I think it would be a terrible idea for you to live with me. Be realistic." Even as the words came out of my mouth, I couldn't quite believe I was saying them. Like, here he was imposing on me, making unreasonable demands, and I was the one
apologising for refusing?

"OK," he finally conceded, as if granting me a great favour. "I suppose... well, can you at least do me the favour of recommending a letting agent, or some agency through whom I can find a flat-share or a sublet?"

I did not want to put out that really, perhaps that should have been something he should have been pestering RADA about. "Alright. I can do that. Plus, well, you could look on Gumtree - or even AirBNB."

"Gumtree?" he asked, slightly suspiciously. "Alright. I'll give it a go. I'll email you when I have more details, I suppose."

"Please do," I said, feeling really quite guilty now, though in my head, I knew I had done nothing wrong. "And honestly, Carlos. Congratulations. I'm very proud of you, and very happy for you."

"Thank you," he said, politely, but with a slightly cold tone, as if he were still sulking. "I will speak to you soon. Goodbye."

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We didn't speak properly again for two weeks - which was perhaps odd, after the fevered correspondence of the previous months. But then again, it was the run-up to Christmas, work was insanely busy, and I was fighting two sets of conflicting demands from both of my parents, about who I was to spend which holidays with. And then again, perhaps we really did need a break from one another, having had such an intense period of acquaintance so quickly, under such strange circumstances. He had friended me on Facebook, after all, so it wasn't as if I had zero contact with one another. (Though, to be honest, I wasn't a heavy Facebook user. It was a private account I checked once a week just to keep up with relatives, rather than the compulsive constant refresh of Twitter and Tumblr. But Carlos, fortunately, did not have a Twitter or a Tumblr.) But ours was now a different kind of online friendship, the heady, spiralling philosophical arguments replaced by group invitations to brunch I couldn't hope to accept as I was on another continent, and shared photos of my niece.

Eventually, I soothed my warring parents, and agreed to spend Christmas in Kent with my mother at my brother's family home, and New Year's in Cornwall with my father and his crazy, hard-drinking hippie surfer friends. Neither side of my family approved of the other's lifestyle, and the misunderstanding was totally mutual. I wondered sometimes how my brother and I had ever been born. But eventually I told both of them that if they didn't accept my plans, I would blow both of them out, and spend the holidays celebrating Kwanzaa in New Cross with Alice and Robert. So on the 23rd, I packed the more formal half of my things into one suitcase, and the other, more scruffy and weatherbeaten half into another, then took a standing room only train down to the Weald.

I don't know how I ever survived Christmases before the advent of iPads and WiFi. My brother pontificated on child-rearing in this godless age, while my mother played with the Second Coming. My niece was very sweet, but my brother spoiled her rotten, and she was growing up to be just as demanding as he was. No, she could not use my iPad, it was not for children. So instead I sulked on a sofa, plugged into the internet, half watching Frozen out of the corner of one eye, half playing online scrabble with Evie, similarly becalmed amidst her extended family, up in Hull.
I had taken a funny photo of the family gathering - me, black-clad and sullen surrounded by my jolly, drunken family, all in brightly-coloured comedy Xmas jumpers - and posted it to Facebook with the caption 'Spot the Goth - I win.' A couple of people liked it - Alice, Carlos, my friend Reni from college - and then my email pinged.

Spot the Goth, American version - I win! - Carlos

And there, on an attachment was a remarkably similar photograph, well, in theme at least, as the bright, happy family was gathered around the living room of a modern, suburban American home, instead of my brother's decidedly English, 17th Century manor house. But slightly left of centre in the family group was a similarly black-clad, similarly imposed-upon 40 year old goth looking similarly out of place.

Christ! American consumerism! Look at the size of your present pile. This is ours, and most of the presents are for my niece. - M

Well, there are at least 20 Denglers, though it looks like there are only half a dozen MacConnors at yours? It's traditional in my family, we always gather together for lunch, and basically eat from now until we head to Midnight Mass. - C

Midnight Mass? I can't imagine you in a church! Does your head start smoking when you walk in the door? 'Mummy, it burns, it burns!' (That said, we are going to Lessons and Carols (LOL, I almost typed "Carlos" - Christmas Carlos? Is that you in that awkward family photo?) in half an hour. I wonder if I'll go to hell if I bring my iPhone and check twitter during the boring bits of the service.) - M

Do it! Do it! Christmas Carlos here would love to see an authentic English Christmas. It would make up for being stuck in Ridgewood, New Jersey for the next three days with no ride home until the weekend. But look at Gaius in this snow! He goes quite berserk, trying to catch it! - Christmas Carlos

You want authentic? Well, here we go. The parish church of St Agnes, Godwinstowe (where I was baptised). That yew in the churchyard is supposed to be at least 500 years old - M

And the inside. The choir and central nave date back to Norman times. - M
Some of the stained glass. Thought this would appeal to you. Proper Gothic! It was hidden in a local farmhouse so that it survived the Reformation - M

And here is me sneaking outside for a breather and getting caught by the curate when *he* snuck outside for a sneaky cigarette! (Don't worry - I've known Ed since we were at primary school - we won't rat on each other) - M

Absolutely charming! Like something out of another world. You've probably gone to bed by now, but as promised, here is Our Lady of Mount Carmel. A bit of a monstrosity, yes? - Christmas Carlos

The inside, unlike your restrained little Protestant chapel, has enough gilt to sink a battleship. (Also Catholic Guilt, of similarly detonating power!) - Christmas Carlos

The penitent sinner, forced to sing. (Don't get excited, the attractive young ladies photobombing me are actually my cousins.) - Christmas Carlos

Your cousins are very cute! It's quite obvious all the looks went to that side of your family. And here we are, up at the crack of dawn thanks to my niece. I need an ocean of tea after all the brandy last night - M

Socks! Just what I needed. At least they're black. - M

The goose going into the oven! We're doing crackers soon... - M

I've been ganged up on, and forced to wear a paper crown. I shall be known as Queen Margaret for the rest of the day. - Queen M

I keep forgetting you are 5 hours ahead of us. It's strange to be dragged out into the pre-dawn snow by my dog, while you are feasting on roast beast. The snow is oddly beautiful at this time of day, though, just before the dawn - C.C.

Oh! This kitchen is so warm! My Mom has the turkey going in already. Isn't she gorgeous? (My Mom, not the turkey.) - C.C.
How did such an ugly lump like you come from such a beautiful woman? (Ach, I lie. You have her eyes. They're the nicest thing about you.) Now here we are settled in for the traditional Christmas afternoon monopoly war. My brother will cheat, my sister in law will sulk, and my Mum and I will team up and wipe the floor with everyone. - M

Was that an actual compliment, Margaret? Why thank you. Presents have started being opened, but that was the nicest present yet. Anyway. How do you like my new slippers? - C.C.

A raincoat! Actually, I did ask for that, remembering that I have to spend 6 months in the English climate. Oh! Did I mention I think I've found an apartment - sorry, a flat! - in London? - C.C.

Oh, that is good news. My sofa sighs with relief. Now it's the Queen's Speech, and then I'm going upstairs for a very long nap. Tomorrow we're off for the traditional Boxing Day walk on the High Weald so I need to get my rest. - M

The High Weald? What on earth is the High Weald? We're going to the mall to watch the new Hobbit film on Boxing Day, but I swear, you actually *live* in a Tolkien novel. - Christmas Carlos

Well, look at the size of the bedroom my brother has stashed me in. It feels rather like a hobbit hole, tucked up under the eaves with the sloping ceilings I can barely stand up under! - M

This is my bedroom. I spent my teenage years moping here, listening to Joy Division, The Cure - and Slayer. Though you must understand, it's been considerably redecorated since then. It's awfully, um, pink now. - C.C.

I rather thought pink and frilly quite suited you, in your video! - M

Watch it! - Carlos (I'm not sure it's Christmas where you are much longer)

Good morning, bright and early and welcome to the High Weald! Quite the views from up here, though I may lose reception when we plunge down into the woods below. - M
Is this old beech Tolkien-esque enough for you? - M

A deep hangar, and a scar of white chalk. I swear these woods are spookier when the trees haven't any leaves on. - M

God, that is absolutely magical! Will you take me there, sometime, when I'm in England? - C

Walking on through the silent wood, I let my family fall further and further behind me on the trail as I fiddled with my phone. I scuffed my feet through massive drifts of dried leaves, and tried to imagine what this walk would be like with Carlos at my side instead of my annoying brother, his noisy child and that stupid, foolish, perpetually barking Chocolate Labrador of theirs. I kept forgetting that in a few, short weeks, he would be here. Would he know how to stay silent, respectful, or would he chatter away? Then again, at least Carlos' chatter might at least be slightly interesting. I checked my phone again, but deep down in the valley, the reception had gone.

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A few days later, I was on the all-too-familiar red-eye train down to Cornwall, leaving the dirty glass of Paddington in the pre-dawn dark, speeding across Wiltshire under a pall of cloud before the sun finally broke through at about Exeter. I had taken this train ride so many times in my life I was almost inured to the sweeping grandeur as the train rounded the Exe Estuary, then bored through a red rock headland to reach the open sea. But somehow, taking snapshots to amuse Carlos made me look at it all with fresh eyes. Alright, it really was quite stunning, and I couldn't wait to read his reaction to Isambard Kingdom Brunel's majestic bridge over the Tamar, knowing how much he loved his Victorian steampunk.

His astonished reply greeted me as I stood on the platform at St Erth, waiting for the tiny local train to St Ives. So of course I knocked his socks off with tourist snaps of the broad view as the train snaked around Carbis Bay on its single track, with miles of white-gold sand below. I was so pleased and amused by his responses that I almost forgot to be cross with my father for misjudging the train arrival time, forcing me to drag my suitcase across the harbour to find him trudging up to meet me.

Cornwall was completely different from Kent, and yet somehow the same. I slept in a tiny attic room at the top of my father's old, stone fisherman's shack, but Carlos was even more amused by this room than the 'hobbit-hole' in the Kentish manor. I sent him a picture of my tiny postcard-sized view of St Ives' harbour, the pier and the lighthouse sparkling in the distance, and he had trouble believing this was a real place. With my father, and his dodgy mates, and the new girlfriend I was not supposed to tell my mother about (Christ, hadn't they been divorced for nearly 20 years now?) all busking on the harbour wall, well, no, it didn't seem like a real place. It felt like an embarrassing dream I couldn't wait to wake up from.

But with Carlos on the other end of my smartphone, the embarrassing episodes just became
amusing anecdotes to laugh over together. I sent him a photo of my Dad dressed up in the Full Cornish, with a pirate shirt and a three-cornered hat, complete with giant feather, his ponytail utterly failing to contain the long, curly iron-grey hair streaming down his shoulders.

My god, and all this time I thought you were talking about a real human being when clearly your father is a character from a film. Now I'm not sure if that's Gandalf the Grey, or Captain Jack Sparrow, but it's clear that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. You suddenly make so much more sense now. - C

But on New Year's Eve, my father's sea-punk folk band played the Ship, and I got drunk enough not to care, drunk enough just belt those old songs along with them. And on New Year's Day, brisk, bracing, my father and I blasted out our hangovers climbing along the cliff path to Zennor, the sea crashing only yards beneath our feet. We had a swift restorative pint and a sandwich at the Tinner's Arms, then walked the Coffin Path back, over ancient stone hedges and under hawthorn bushes bent almost double by the wind, sheltering for a moment in the abandoned chapel at Tregarthen.

Carlos could not believe my photos from the Zennor hike. (Since when had I started sending photos of my every moment to Carlos? This would have to stop when he moved to England, so he didn't get the wrong idea.)

This is not a real place in England! Those twisted rocks, those winding cliffs, that's like the monumental scenery in Northern California. Can we go there, too, when I move to England? Would your family let me stay? - C.

Don't let my father catch you calling it 'England'! Cornwall is *next* to England, like Wales, according to my father and his mad Mebyon Kernow friends. You'll have to learn some sea shanties, though. And be prepared to hike through some muddy fields, as there's no road to Tregarthen. - M

By the time I returned to London, Carlos' preparations for his move to London had gone into overdrive. He kept emailing me, pestering me with weird requests - did furnished flats provide things like dishwashers - like, honestly, couldn't he find that out from the landlord he was subletting his flat from?

I agreed to let him post some heavier things to me, and I'd bring them up to the flat. Then I found myself somehow pestered to accept a delivery of a bicycle that he was shipping over, to get back and forth to class on. But when he let slip the address where he would be staying, I hit the roof. Throwing aside all caution about my long distance phone bill, I actually rang him in New York that evening.

"Butler's Wharf?" I sputtered, outraged.

"What?" said Carlos calmly, as if I rang him every day and it was a perfectly ordinary occurrence. "It's very convenient, and a beautiful neighbourhood."
"It's two blocks from where I work!" I protested.

"Yes, that was part of the appeal. I thought you could drop in for lunch, maybe have coffee on the way to work."

"And you didn't think to even ask?"

"I didn't think there would be the slightest problem. I thought you'd be delighted in fact. To be honest, it was an extremely fortuitous connection. The only other smoker's flat available for the exact period I required was all the way out in Kentish Town. I thought I might even be able to walk to the Old Vic from Bermondsey, but if I had to take a train all the way from the Kent, which you told me was way out in the countryside..."

"Kentish Town is not in Kent, it's just North of Camden, you ninny," I sputtered. "It's probably closer to RADA than Butler's Wharf is."

"Oh," Carlos said stupidly. "Well, it's too late to change now. I've signed a 6-month lease on Butler's Wharf. And I was lucky to get that - London is so ridiculously expensive that the rent on a two-bedroom apartment in New York barely covers the rent on a riverfront studio in London. But I suppose I was blinded by the promise of a Thames view, and when I saw the photos, I simply had to have it."

That stopped me short. "You have a Thames view," I said jealously.

"Apparently, you can see Tower Bridge, all lit up at night, from the balcony," Carlos crowed.

"You have a balcony."

"Just big enough for two people to eat breakfast on, according to the landlord. You are, of course, invited to be my first guest. On the condition that you come and meet me at Gatwick," he added quickly.

"I should have known you had an ulterior motive," I laughed, though the lure of a Thames balcony was strong. "Can we get a cab back, or are you going to make me take the train?"

"Well, that was rather the idea of you coming. With two of us, we can handle two suitcases on the train."

"You're such a skinflint!"

"Well, I am a penniless student, and a starving actor now!"

"A starving actor with a balcony overlooking the Thames, no less."

"The apartment - sorry, flat - is why I'm penniless, but it will be so worth it. Just wait until you see the view!"
Chapter 13

Of course I met him at Gatwick, peering through the crowds clustered round the gate to try to spot him as he cleared customs. Families returning home from their holidays. A flock of American schoolkids all with matching hats and backpacks looking completely confused at everything. And there, at last, he was, half a head above the crowd, pushing his overloaded trolley straight through the customs area with the casual confidence of a man determined not to get stopped. I waved madly as he emerged, blinking, through the doors, scanning the crowd for me, then stepped out to meet him. All around us, people were greeting one another warmly, so it seemed only natural that he threw his arms around me and pulled me into a massive bear hug. Why did I always forget how thin, almost frail, he was? I resolved then and there to hold him to those lunches, determined to feed him.

"Oh my god, what a miserable flight!" he moaned as he finally pulled away. "Turbulence, the entire crossing, I still feel quite queasy. I hate flying at the best of times, but that was excessively wretched."

I looked at him carefully, taking in the pallor of his skin, especially against his dark stubble. "You hate flying? Isn't that a bit unfortunate, with your chosen career?"

He twisted his mouth into a wry approximation of a smile. "I know, right? It used to take me a klonopin and half a bottle of wine to get me on a plane. I don't know how I survived ever doing it for a living."

"Me, too," I confessed. "Hate the fuckers. Crammed into a flying toothpaste tube with 200 people, recycled air, germs everywhere... ugh."

For a moment, he looked like he was going to throw up. "Don't remind me. I'm only just starting to feel like I can breathe again."

"Does that mean we can get a cab, then?"

He shot me a cross look. "I am determined to go native. We're taking the train."

"We'll have to ditch the trolley then," I told him, pulling one of the two massive wheelie suitcases off the cart. "Good god, what have you got in here? Did you bring your entire library with you?"

"Just some things I might need." He handed me the larger one, which was actually lighter, then followed me through the barriers to the Thameslink, peering at the automated ticket machine curiously. "Am I going to need to get one of those Oyster things?"

"You can get one in London - I might even have a spare," I offered, punching the buttons for a cheap single to London Bridge. "Have you got any British money?"

"Yes," said Carlos proudly, and pulled out a thick roll of fifty pound notes.

"Ugh, put that away before you get mugged" I sighed, and fed the machine with pound coins until it disgorged his ticket. "You will have to get those changed somewhere."

He was like a small child on the train, excited by everything, staring out the windows at the countryside sliding past, then the sedate semis of the suburbs, then the sharp, pointed rows of Victorian row-houses as we entered London. "What's that?" he demanded of Croydon, then of the Crystal Palace antennas, then the Millwall football ground. His nose was practically against the
glass as the train passed Tower Bridge, then wound around Borough Market, under the Shard to the station. I was prepared - I dragged the suitcases to the doors to push my way through, even as Carlos was still gawping.

"At least try to pretend you have been here before," I reminded him. "Many times?"

"Oh, I have!" Carlos was quite to point out. "But I dunno. It's just somehow... different. When you're in a rock band, on tour, picked up by your road manager, packed off in a taxi or a tourbus, unable to see where you're going, here for a day or two, before being whizzed off to the next date. But to move here, as a native..."

"Oi! If you're going to be a native, stand on the bloody right of the escalators, so people can walk by on the left," I chided.

"Oh! Sorry." He moved over with a slightly wicked grin, staring about him. "Hang on, is there a club down here somewhere?"

"No, I think you're thinking of Heaven, which is underneath Charing Cross Station."

Carlos stopped at the entrance to the street, looking around, confused. "I can't remember. Which way do we turn?"

"It's your home now, you better remember," I laughed, dragging his suitcase off to a halt.

"I came by bus last time, from the other side of the river. I just remember getting on the river path and walking until I saw the towers of London Bridge."

"Tower Bridge," I corrected, yet again, then sighed and took pity on him. "To the right. If you want Borough Market, go to the left. I would take you there, to pick up things for lunch, but we're already weighed down as it is." And so we set off down Tooley St. "I'll show you a shortcut thought Potters' Field. This is the M&S Food Hall, which might be your closest nice supermarket. I think there is a Coop down the other way, but this is more middle class."

"Oh god, are you going to make me learn all this weird middle class, working class, lower class crap?" sighed Carlos, extending his ample stride to keep up with me.

"You wanted to go native. You will be judged by where you shop, what you read, where you live, so you might as well make the appropriate choices," I teased.

But he stopped as we reached the end of the alleyway, and stepped out into the forecourt of City Hall, with all of The City laid out before us along the North side of the river. "I don't think I will ever get used to this."

"No," I conceded. "I've been working here for a year, and I don't think I have ever got used to it, really. Anyway, onward. It's too cold to hang about here. We can sit in the warmth of your balcony and look at the view when we get there."

We wheeled the suitcases along Shad Thames, bumping over the cobbles, then located his block of flats, even posher than I was expecting, with a plush lobby and, much to my relief, a lift. As we dragged the suitcases inside and hit the button for the 4th floor, Carlos looked at himself in the mirror, and quickly tried to fix his hair where it was curling into his face again. I suppressed a smile, and backed out into the hall as we landed at his floor.

He fussed with the keys for a bit, then finally managed to get us inside. A short hall, with a couple of doors leading off it. "Bathroom, if I remember correctly," he said.
"Loo," I corrected.

"Kitchen," said Carlos, ignoring me as he threw open the next door. OK, that was nice. I had been expecting a little tiny galley kitchen like a council flat, but this was a huge, luxury kitchen, with a floating island and even room for a small kitchen table. On the table, was an envelope, with Carlos' name written on it. I checked the fridge while he read it, and was relieved to find fresh milk and two cream buns from M&S as a welcome present.

"Oh, that reminds me," I said, digging in my bag for a box of PG Tips. "Small welcome present from me."

"Spare keys," said Carlos, and dropped the set into my hand.

"What?" I replied, confused. "What do I need these for?"

"You're the only person I know here, so I'm going to leave them with you, for safekeeping, in case I lock myself out."

I frowned at the keys, not entirely liking the implication.

But Carlos was already frowning at the kitchen counter. "There's no coffeemaker," he observed, digging in cupboards, and looking under the sink. "Oh my god, I thought this place was supposed to come fully fitted. There's no coffeemaker!"

"Relax, there's a kettle," I told him, rinsing it out and filling it. "I'm sure there's a French Press around here somewhere, and if there isn't... Oh look, there's Nescafe. You'll be fine."

Carlos shot me a look as if I'd just suggested boiling his first child and eating it. "I can't drink... Nescafe."

"Well, you're going to have to go back to Borough Market and buy what you need in a bit. But for now, will tea do?"

"I suppose it'll have to," he sulked, even as I checked the cabinets for plates, for glasses - and oh yes, mugs. Wow, there was some pretty fancy cooking equipment in this gaff. As I quickly made two cups of tea, he slouched through into the other room. "Margaret? Come and look at this."

I picked up the tea and followed him through. "Oh, sweet Jesus..." Now that was a view. Three sets of windows opened directly onto the river, and the middle one, indeed, had a small, sheltered balcony. Carlos was already outside, so I handed him his cup of tea, though it was too cold for me to join him.

"Steamboats!" he cried, with the excited agitation of a small child. "I don't remember there being steamboats moored here. Are they new?"

"No, they've been there forever. They rent them out for parties during the summer. I think it was just too dark to see them properly, the last time you were here." Also, he had been too busy trying to stick his tongue down my throat, but I didn't think it was a good idea to remind him of that.

"What a marvellous idea!" With his nose stuck into the wind like a prow, he looked upriver, then downriver, scanning for boats.

I stood sipping my own as I watched a small tug make its way under Tower Bridge, then turned to explore the rest of the flat.
It was, yes, technically, a studio, but there was one large open loft space almost as big as my bedroom and living room put together. In one corner was a bed - King Size, no doubt - but I ignored that to look at the cluster of furniture gathered around a television at the other end. There was a long, grey leather sofa which looked hopefully like it might turn into a sleeper, and a pair of two-seaters, in glittery modern fabrics, gathered around a rather showy conversation-piece glass table. I poked at the sofa, wondering how to work it. Actually, come to think of it, having a friend with his own flat on Shad Thames might come in very handy if I had to work late again. But there seemed no way to get the sofa opened, and I didn't want to risk breaking his hired furniture.

"Oi, is this a sofabed?" I asked, hoping I wouldn't sound too much like I was fishing.

"I don't thinks so. The prospectus didn't mention it being one."

"Oh," Putting my empty tea cup down on a coaster, I tried my length along the sofa. "Actually, I don't think it needs to be. I fit perfectly."

Carlos finally closed the doors and came inside, peering down at me imperiously. "Oi," he said, in a ghastly parody of my accent. "Move over."

"No," I smirked, folding my arms behind my head.

"I'll sit on you."

I shifted quickly out of the way as his rangy bulk dropped into the corner of the sofa with the best view of the river. But as I scrabbled to get balanced again, he reached out and pulled me back down against his chest, wrapping one long arm about my shoulders. For a second, I stiffened at the unfamiliar touch, but then relaxed. It was a friendly gesture of affection, not really sexual. He wasn't even looking at me, he was looking out at the river with pride and happiness.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, and I realised suddenly I was starving.

"Ravenous. We should have stopped at Borough Market."

"There are takeaway menus in the kitchen." He paused, rubbing his unshaven chin. "I wonder if they can break a fifty."

"We'll just have to order a ton of food. Hell, maybe one of them will deliver a bottle of wine as well."

"Takeaway wine," mused Carlos wistfully. "I think I like this country."

"I'll ring and order, if you go downstairs and pay," I offered.

"Deal."

So we ate curry and drank wine and watched the sun set over Tower Bridge. It was still early, but Carlos was distinctly drooping with jet lag, his eyelids heavy, with dark circles across the tops of his cheeks.

"Do you want me to go, so you can sleep?" I offered, though I wasn't much more inclined to move than he was, sprawled out across the sofa in a food coma.

"Not really, no. I've got to stay up at least until 8pm so I can start to adjust to this time zone, and you'll keep me awake with your chatter."
"Oh will I?" I laughed, digging him in the ribs. "Maybe I've got to go home and sleep, after getting up at the crack of dawn to meet your early morning flight."

"You can sleep here," Carlos offered.

"As if," I snorted.

"As you pointed out, the sofa fits you perfectly." He suddenly brightened. "And you can wake me up tomorrow morning, and take me to this Borough Market. I owe you one Sunday brunch to make up for last time."

I tried to think of a reason to protest, but the sofa was incredibly comfortable - even more so after he hauled himself to his feet and fetched a blanket from the bed. As I settled in, reaching for the remote and turning on the television, he went out to the hall and dragged his suitcases into the main room. I found a repeat of Grand Designs and settled down to watch some truly terrible architecture being built in a leafy suburb. He shuffled about, unpacking, putting his clothes into the built-in closets that lined the back walls, and leaving stacks of books on the bare bookshelf. What a strange man, that wasted so much of his luggage allowance on books! But then again, in a way I really quite admired it.

Grand Designs ended and some awful property programme started, so I switched off the telly, and turned instead to watch him carefully unfold and hang his clothes. The care he exercised, I was surprised he didn't take out a ruler to measure exactly two inches between each tailored button-down shirt.

"If you want, you can put on some music," he suggested, gesturing to a CD wallet he had left out on the entertainment centre. Well, that was swish. The DVD player, apparently, also played Blue Ray discs and CDs. Nice. But as I flipped through his CD collection, expecting, you know, Bauhaus and the Cure, instead I was confronted with CD after CD of classical music, symphonies, soundtracks, even a couple of cringeworthy Classic FM compilations. Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Haydn... hang on, what were those four familiar CD covers doing in the I section?

"Well, this is modest," I observed ironically with a raised eyebrow.

"What?" he asked. I pointed an accusatory finger at the 4 CD covers, 3 black and one blue and tan. "I helped write them, and arranged them. I performed on them. I'm proud of them. I'm not sure why that surprises you."

I don't know. I would have thought you never wanted to hear them again. Maybe I'll torture you by putting one of them on," I threatened.

He merely shrugged and folded a pair of black trousers over a hanger. "Why would that be torture. Be my guest, if it would amuse you."

"You wouldn't find it weird?"

"Why should I?" He seemed utterly nonplussed by the idea, folding a second pair of black trousers over the first.

"I dunno, I think maybe I would find it too strange for me to listen to your music, with you standing right there." Something about the whole scenario seemed awfully uncomfortable, a bit like masturbating in public.

"You're a very odd woman," he observed, shaking his head. "I thought you were a fan."
"I am a fan, but..."

"Well, go on, then. Which is your favourite?" A slightly mischievous smile twitched at his lips. "I'm genuinely curious to know."

My finger slid towards the last in the sequence, the last, odd, fractured self titled album that no one outside the hardcore fanbase seemed to like much. "That one."

"A bold choice. Unconventional." The smile broadened into a grin. "I might even be inclined to agree with you on some days. Why is it your favourite?"

"Because of the arrangements," I confessed, warming to my subject. "Everything is so beautifully orchestrated, in a way that should seem lush, but isn't. It's icy, cold, minimal - in both senses of the word. It's so perfectly constructed that remove a note, and the whole thing would fall apart. But also, heavily repetitive, and very 70s avant-garde, reminding me of Philip Glass, Terry Riley, that sort of thing."

"Thank you." He looked genuinely touched.

"It reminds me a lot of Pornography - well, the Cure album - not in its sound, but in its form and execution. It's like this glossy black slab of impenetrable thing-ness. And yet there are these moments of absolute beauty amidst all the devastating bleakness. Not an easy album, not a pretty album. But somehow still a perfect album."

"Put it on," he pleaded. "I would love to listen to it with you."

"I can't," I confessed, flipping the CD wallet on, through Liszt, Mozart and Nyman. "I'm sorry, but it would be too weird."

"Why?" A touch of unexpected disappointment to his voice.

"Because you have, finally, stopped being, y'know, Carlos D, hedonist nazi bassist, celebrity, rock star, and started just being my mad American actor friend of whom I am quite fond. And I don't think I want to go back."

He moved over towards me, and rested his hand lightly on my shoulder, pulling me into a slight hug against his side, then bent over to gently kiss the top of my head.

"Ew," I said, trying to break the sudden seriousness of the conversation. "Boy cooties. Does this posh flat come with a shower?"

"Shut up," he giggled, walking away and collapsing backwards onto his bed. "I am so tired I want to die. Is it time for bed yet?"

I glanced at my watch. "Another hour." He groaned aloud. "Come on, I'm going to put on some Wagner, that'll wake you up."

He lasted another 74 minutes, chatting about Germanic myths, humming and occasionally air-conducting along. But when I got up to put on the next CD of the 4-CD set, I glanced over to see that he was fast asleep, his face mashed into the pillow, his arms flung out with glorious abandon. There was something so unexpectedly childlike about him, despite the stubble, despite the dark circles under his eyes, an innocence that never showed when he was awake. So I turned the CD player off, went over and pushed his legs out of the way so I could pull out the duvet beneath, and spread it over the top of him. Then I retreated to the sofa to read one of his books for an hour before I, too, passed out cold.
I awoke at about 8.30, glanced over at the bed to see Carlos sprawled out, fast asleep and snoring, his beard fully come in, his hair sticking out all over the place like a hedgehog. Shaking my head, I decided to let him sleep for another half hour, and padded through to the kitchen for a pot of tea and a warmed-up naan bread.

At nine on the dot, I made a fresh cup of tea, and carried it through to the main room. "Carlos?" I called out firmly, depositing the tea on the bedside table. Oh shit, how on earth was I going to wake him? Not sure of how to handle it, and slightly loathe to touch him, I called his name again, then gave up and shook his shoulder roughly. "Carlos! Wake up! It's 9 o'clock already."

"Go away," he mumbled, blinked at me lazily, then grabbed a pillow and pulled it over his head.

"No," I said, pulling the pillow firmly away from him, and offering the tea in its place. "Come on. This is how you get over jet lag. You're going to hate me, but you'll hate me worse if I let you snooze and you don't adjust your sleeping pattern."

He rolled back over to face me, squinting at me peevishly. "Did I take my contacts out?"

I glanced at the plastic contraption at the side of the bed. "It looks like you did."

"Ugh, this is tea, not coffee," he sputtered, then squinted about the room. "Where are my glasses?"

I looked about the room, then located them on top of the television. "Here. There is no coffee, remember? If you want coffee, we have to go out."

He put them on, then rubbed his eyes sleepily, then sat up and nursed his tea. "Sit," he offered, gesturing to the bed beside him.

"No," I said firmly, and pulled over one of the chairs.

"Oh," he teased, the spark coming back into his face as he sipped his daily caffeine. "You mean, you haven't fallen desperately in love with me after watching me sleep all night, like Kate Gordon did with Alex Jones?"

"In case you haven't noticed, you and I are not characters in one of my novels, and this is going to get awfully tedious over the next six months if you don't knock it off."

He rolled his eyes and sulked for a moment, but then he sparked again. "Are you in a film, or in reality?" he quoted, in what he probably fancied was a French accent.

I threw a pillow at him. "I don't know about you, but I'm in reality."

"Ach, how boring!" Carlos complained. "I'm in a film. All of the time."

"Ah, the delusions of actors," I teased, sitting back in my chair and putting my feet up on his bed. He grabbed one of my feet and wiggled my toes as if playing little piggies. "I never know, though, am I in a drama, a tragedy, or a black comedy?"

"Get up and get showered, and I'll take you to Borough Market. Then we can be in a quirky indie film."

That got him out of bed, and I lay on the sofa and watched Countryfile as he showered, then tried desperately not to look at him as he wandered about, wrapped in a towel, looking for the clothes he had only put away the previous night.
"You may turn around now, I am decent," he called out.

"You are always indecent," I flipped back, but was relieved to turn around and see him dressed warmly in black jeans, a wine-coloured shirt and a black V-necked jumper, though his hair still dripped water from the shower.

"I do try!" A lopsided grin. "Now put on your shoes, let's go."

Borough Market was busy, crowded already at 10am, but Carlos absolutely loved it, wandering from stall to stall with the excitement of a small child, wanting to taste everything, and try everything. He shopped as if it were a supermarket, buying coffee beans here, vegetables there, pies for dinner, bacon and eggs for breakfast, French Bread, Welsh cheese, damson chutney and steaks from rare breed Scots cows.

"You're going to spoil your appetite," I warned him as we walked back along the river.

"Never," he laughed, breaking off another hunk of crusty sourdough. "I'm going to be so fat if I live here for six months, though."

He did indeed cook me breakfast, apron over his clothes, spatula in one hand as he smoked over the grill in open defiance of culinary etiquette. But as he started to make plans for the afternoon, I had to drag him back to reality.

"I'm really sorry, Carlos, but I need to go home."

"But why?" he protested, like a small child denied a trip to the zoo.

"Because I have my own weekly shop to do... not to mention laundry, tidying the flat, now I've got to cram the whole of my weekend chores into one afternoon."

He put down the Guardian Guide with a pout. "OK, but... come back tomorrow? Lunch?"

"Don't your rehearsals start tomorrow?" I reminded him.

"Oh god, yes." He looked suddenly panicked. "Breakfast, then. Margaret, you've got to stop by here on your way to work tomorrow. Say about 8.30? Use your key if I don't answer the door, you have got to get me out of bed, jet lag or no jet lag. I'll make you breakfast - and proper coffee, too, if I nip up to Oxford Street to get a real coffeemaker."

"Come on, that's not fair. Don't make me responsible for your sleep schedule."

"Please? Just tomorrow? They always say the second day of jet lag is the worst." He paused. "Besides, I need you to bring my bike, so I can get to rehearsal."

"I can't bring a bike on a rush hour train," I protested.

"So come early. Get here for 8, maybe even 7.45? I'll make it up to you, I swear."

"Alright," I finally conceded, though I refused another cup of tea to make me stay later into the afternoon. "Tomorrow at 8."

I went home in a daze, but stupidly took out my iPhone on the train home. Oh my god, my friends were acting as if I was dead, simply because I hadn't answered any emails or texts in 24 hours. So I sent out 3 sets of 'No, really, I'm fine, I've just been busy. I'll see you at taping on Thursday!' texts and crawled home to hurry through the rest of my chores.
Of course Carlos didn't answer the door the next morning. Of course I had to drag the bike into the
lift all the way upstairs and let myself into the flat and shake him out of bed. And of course he
smirked and teased and mumbled "Ah, don't. Come on, just give me a minute. In fact, why don't
you just get in here with me, you can take a little nap, too."

"I'm going in the kitchen now, to put on the kettle, and if you don't join me within thirty seconds,
I'm going to make you drink Nescafe."

"Alright, alright, I'm up," he grumbled, reaching for the dressing gown to cover his bare chest as
he followed me through.

"I've got a present for you," I told him mysteriously.

Carlos grinned gleefully, perking up almost as if he'd been properly caffeinated. "What is it? I love
presents."

"Can you smell anything?" I asked.

He sniffed. "I smell... coffee? Proper coffee?"

"Voila!" Moving out of the way, I turned and gestured to the brand new French Press brewing on
the counter.

"Oh my god, I love you," he sighed, his eyes positively mooning.

"That's a bit premature, don't you think?" I said, trying to make a joke of it.

"I wasn't talking to you," he sniffed, and started physically fondling the coffeemaker, running his
fingers over the plunger with slightly obscene delight.

By ten to nine, I had actually left a fairly functioning human being, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed
and stuffing his script into a bookbag and wheeling the bike down the street beside me. We stood
at the edge of Shad Thames, and looked at each other as we prepared to go our opposite ways, and
for a moment, I wondered if he was going to try to kiss me like a '50s housewife. But no, he
shrugged, gave me a quick hug, hopped on his bike, and was off. And I got to work five minutes
early for a change.
Chapter 14

I found myself stopping at his flat far more than I had intended to. On Tuesday, he asked me to stop by after work and help him sort out curtains so the dawn didn't wake him. On Wednesday morning, his mysterious box arrived in the post, and of course I had to drop that off. On Thursday, I put my foot down and said no, I was going off to taping with the girls, and no, he could not come. But I did promise to meet him on Friday, after work in Waterloo for drinks with some people from the cast and crew - as if he wanted to prove that he had friends, now, too.

But I was not prepared for the grilling that I got, upon arriving at Sunita's on Thursday evening. "Where the fuck have you been?" she demanded, even before she demanded the surrender of my iPhone.

"I haven't been anywhere," I protested. "I've just been... busy, OK?"

"I've sent you, like, three emails about this weekend. Single Mingle at the British Library this Friday. Are you in or not?"

"Single mingle? What about the professional boyfriend?"

Sunita made a face. "Good god, you really haven't been reading my emails, have you? Dumped him weeks ago after getting me a lame Christmas present."

"God, you are so shallow," I gasped, before enquiring. "How lame?"

"A dustbuster."

"Oh my god. OK, that's just... weird. Fair enough. But... no, I'm sorry, I can't do Friday. I'm meeting a friend for his cast and crew social in Waterloo."

"Margo! You're not dead!" Evie appeared at the top of the stairs, followed closely by Alice. "Where have you been? This is the third week running - not even counting the Christmas weekends you were away - that you've blown out shit movies at Hollywood Green."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled. "I thought I told you, I had to pick up a friend at the airport early on Saturday."

"Is this the same actor friend you're blowing me off for on Friday?" Sunita grumbled.

"Actor? From America?" Alice probed, her eyes suspicious. "Does this actor friend have a name?"

"Yes," I said, but did not elucidate further.

"Does that name rhyme with Mr Problematic, by any chance?" Alice pushed.

"I... maybe?" I squirmed.

"Mister Problematic?" demanded Suni. "Who the fuck is Mister Problematic? Are you holding out on me, do you have a boyfriend you're not telling us about?"

"He's not my boyfriend!" I snapped. "He's just a friend."

"Would you blame her for not telling us?" said Evie quietly.
"Hey!" protested Suni.

"How do you know he's an actor?" asked Evie.

"Because she said she's blowing of Single Mingle at the British Library with me, for this actor boyfriend's cast party in Waterloo."

"Carlos!" I finally snapped. "His name is Carlos, and for the last time, he is not my boyfriend!"

"Carlos... Problematic man named Carlos... Carlos D?" snooped Sunita.

"D as in Dengler? Oh my god, I am calling my judge for a restraining order right now... I can't believe you lied to us!" Evie was almost transcendent with fury.

"He asked me to keep it secret - from you and from everyone, but especially you - because you lot fucking ratted him out to Brooklyn Vegan on the podcast!" I exclaimed.

"Actor," said Alice calmly, though her face was slowly lighting up. "Carlos. Waterloo. Valmont... oh my god..."

"How do you know he's understudying Valmont?"

"You told me you were helping him audition... oh my god... The Old Vic, right?" Alice looked at me like she was about to hyperventilate, fanning herself with her fingers.

"How on earth do you know that?"

Alice started jiggling up and down in place. "Benedict Cumberbatch is starring, in Les Liaisons Dangereuses, at the Old Vic, this coming season."

"Oh shit..." I suddenly, awkwardly, remembered a bad crack I'd made to Carlos about being unable to see Cumberbatch as Sherlock because the part belonged so totally to Basil Rathbone. No wonder he hadn't told me.

"You have got to find out... oh my god, Margaret... can he get us tickets? Can he get us backstage... oh my god, Margaret... what if he really is?" It had been a while since I'd seen Alice go full-on fangirl.

"Look, if you just give me my iPhone, I can text him and find out..."

"No!" snapped Sunita. "No iPhones! You know the rules!"

"But it's Cumberbatch!" howled Alice, practically shaking.

"One text message," Evie suggested diplomatically. "Or we are not going to get another cogent word out of Alice."

"You're outvoted," insisted Alice, as Evie got the key to the kitchen draw and handed me my phone.

So I heard a rumour, that you are understudying Benedict Cumberbatch. OK, one of the Cumberbitches I do 4BAABS with suggested it. Can you just confirm or deny? - M
Damn! I wanted to save it for you for tomorrow, but alas. Oh well, a picture is worth a thousand words. Here's me and Ben. - C.

And there, downloading onto my phone was a blurry smartphone photo of Carlos standing clasped arm in arm with a tall man of similar height and build, but with curly dark-gingerish hair. "Is that him?" I asked, showing the photo to Alice.

"Oh my god!" she shrieked, snatching the phone away from me. "Oh my god, oh my god, you have got to marry him, Margo. Marry him and invite Benedict to your wedding, so I can meet him!"

I laughed and texted Carlos back.

Well, Alice just asked me to marry you, so you can invite 'Ben' to the wedding. Or maybe Alice will marry you? - M

Is she cute? - C.

She's gorgeous, actually, but unfortunately for you, she's already married. - M

"I would leave Robert for Benedict Cumberbatch in a heartbeat!" insisted Alice. "In a heartbeat!"

"I thought he was married? And recently, too?" I said.

"Come on, that's more than just one text message," pointed out Evie, and held out her hand for the phone.

"Oh my god, this is such a scoop for the podcast!" gasped Sunita. "Carlos D, from Interpol, is understudying Benedict Cumberbatch in Les Liaisons Dangereuses at the Old Vic? Most journalists would kill for a scoop like this!"

"You can not use it," I snapped, my eyes flashing. "You can not even mention this on the podcast, on YouTube, on Tumblr, on anywhere. I'm serious."

"Come on!" protested Sunita.

"I'm dead serious. It's not that he will kill you - I will kill you."

Fortunately, my friends did manage to take heed and keep quiet, though I could tell it was nearly killing Alice, who kept flubbing her lines and stumbling over the most ordinary words. Suni kept making half-allusions and in-jokes, like she was going to burst out and tell at any second, but fortunately she kept just this side of spilling.

Friday... Friday was weird. Even though it was officially dress-down day at work, I found myself dressing with care that morning, just in case. I had long stopped dressing up in any way for Carlos, after he'd seen me blinking and greasy in the mornings, but this potential celebrity colleague, well, I kinda wanted to look my best. Not that he actually turned up in the end. His Royal Cumberbatch
whisked off to the Ivy or somewhere to meet his wife for dinner, though his costar, a woman I recognised off the television, she dropped in for a few minutes and stood the assembled crowd a round.

Carlos beamed with pride when I arrived, taking me by the arm and introducing me to a flood of people whose names I would never remember. "This is Margaret," he explained. "Without her, I would not be here."

"That's bollocks and you know it," I said, blushing slightly.

"We've heard so much about you," said a tall, blond man called Roger or Ralph or something, air-kissing me on both cheeks.

"Shit," I said. "None of it's the slightest bit true, of course. You do know Carlos is a famous maker-upper."

But a small, dark woman with overly plucked eyebrows, though she was terrifyingly thin and angularly beautiful in that way that actresses often were, she did not bother with the air kisses, eyeing me appraisingly. "Charmed," she finally delivered, with a slight toss of the head that felt like a dismissal.

"Teri is understudying with Amelia," Carlos explained with a wink. "My leading lady, as it were."

Was that a flirtation? Oh please, dear god, let that be a flirtation. It would be such a relief if Carlos got an actual, proper girlfriend on the cast of his play, and stopped pestering me quite so much. Carlos, shacked up with an actress, seeing me only once a week, for drinks and gossip and dating advice, that I could handle, quite happily. Though, granted, I would start to miss the proper coffee at 8.30 on the dot every morning, as I was still functioning as his wake-up call.

We drank until closing time, Carlos and I doing our usual double act, ripping one another to pieces in Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn repartee, even as Teri kept trying to take his side. As if it were any kind of contest! Go on, have him, I wanted to say to her, but then Carlos would say something even more annoying, and back we would be to squabbling, even as Roger-Ralph collapsed in laughter.

As we all spilled out onto the street, I tried my best to push them together, and she sidled up to him and asked, her eyelashes fluttering, which way he was going.

"Well, I've got my bike... though I might be a bit too pissed to cycle," said Carlos.

"Pissed," I laughed. "You've been here a week. It's not time for your accent to start slipping just yet."

"I could leave my bike at the theatre, and get a cab to Bermondsey, though... if you want to split it as far as London Bridge," Carlos offered hopefully.

"Nonsense, I can get a 68 very easily from here," I said. "Where are you headed, Teri? Maybe Teri can split a cab with you. Or..." I looked at Roger-Ralph, but stumbled over his name.

"I'm going to Highgate," said Teri, with a slight sigh that made it plain that perhaps for the first time in her life, she wished she wasn't. "Northern Line for me."

"The 68?" said Roger-Ralph. "Brixton or Herne Hill? I live in Dulwich, maybe we can split a cab."

"Erm, maybe..." I ventured, but Carlos caught my eye, shaking his head exaggeratedly. "The bus
will be here any minute... Oh no, there it is, and there it goes. I've missed it. But I'm sure there will be another one in fifteen minutes."

"Look, here's a cab," said Roger-Ralph, flagging it down.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with me, to London Bridge?" repeated Carlos, growing more insistent.

"It's well out of my way," I protested.

"Wait, wait," Carlos protested, just as I was about to step into the cab behind Roger-Ralph. "My keys!" he almost shouted, slapping his chest and pockets with an exaggerated motion. "You have to come with me, I've forgotten my keys."

I dug in my bag. "Fine, here - take mine..."

Teri glared at the keys, then waved goodbye and crossed the road to make her way to Waterloo Station. As Carlos and I had a Mexican stand-off over the spare set of keys, Roger-Ralph gave up and told the cab driver to go.

"Oh you fucker," I snapped. "You've cost me my ride back to South London!"

"I've spared you a lot more than that, Margaret. He's already tried it on with three of the women in the production, and we're barely into our first week of rehearsals." Carlos liberated his bike from the stand, and I suddenly realised that we were not getting a taxi after all.

"So what? I don't blame them, he's a good looking bloke. Maybe I could do with getting laid," I snapped.

"If you need a shag, I'm happy to oblige," Carlos snapped back, sounding more like a threat than a seductive offer.

"Shag?" I bellowed. "You're from New Jersey, for fucks sake."

"Grab a Boris Bike, we're going back to Bermondsey, and that's final," Carlos insisted.

"I'm not going anywhere with... shit! There goes another 68, ahead of schedule. There's not going to be another for half an hour, is there?"

"See, this is why I'm starting to hate London," grumbled Carlos. "Its unreliable transport, its crumbling infrastructure, Oyster Cards, night buses, that awful sensation of being stranded if you make the mistake of staying out two minutes past Tube Closing Time. A barbaric city; I miss New York."

"Well, if you miss New York so much, go home. I'm not keeping you." Slumping my shoulders and feeling more than slightly personally insulted as he ranted about my beloved city, I followed him around the corner to the Boris Bike vending station. "Get out your credit card - you're paying for it."

"Am I," he grumbled, though I noted he pulled out his wallet - and his own set of fucking keys.

"You arsehole," I muttered.

"Come on," he replied, handing me the receipt for the Boris Bike. "I'll make you breakfast tomorrow."
And so I woke, yet again, on Carlos' sofa, and went with him to Borough Market, to meander through the crowds drinking fresh coffee and buying groceries for breakfast. But when I got back to his flat, the ping of my phone was impossible to ignore as he grilled the bacon.

You are NOT blowing out Hollywood Green today. I refuse to let you. Bring the sodding Not-Boyfriend if you have to, but get your arse up here for 2pm, OK - Evie

I padded through back into the kitchen and showed the screen to Carlos. He squinted to read it, then smiled.

"So I've at last been invited to meet your friends? I thought you were ashamed of me."

"You want to go?" I asked cautiously.

"Hmmm. What's Hollywood Green?"

"Well, it's Wood Green, actually, all the way up in North London. There's a shitty cineplex up there that offers two for one deals on slightly past their sell-by-date Hollywood blockbusters. You know - X-Men, Star Wars, LOTR, that kind of thing. It's always packed with fanboys, screaming kids, losers like us - which, granted, makes it sound totally hellish, but really it's not. It's just a giant party, everyone shouts the words along with the films, talks back to the screen, it's a ton of fun, to be honest. Evie and I have been going for years."

"Star Wars? Alright, I'm sold." He flipped the bacon and cracked an egg. "And I feel slightly guilty about keeping you from something you've been doing for years. Tell your friend we'll come." He paused, smirking, as he manipulated the egg into the centre of the pan. "Not-Boyfriend. I think I like that."

"Fuck off." I started to text Evie back.

Alright. We're coming. Please don't make a big deal out of it, and *PLEASE* do not call Carlos the 'not-boyfriend' to his face because he thinks that's hilarious. He's not my boyfriend, he's not my 'not-boyfriend', he's just plain Carlos and...

With his ridiculously long arms, Carlos reached over the table and relieved me of the phone. He pushed his glasses up into his hair, squinted at the screen, started typing, and then hit send.

...This is Carlos, the not-boyfriend, and I will be delighted to make your acquaintance.
- C. (and M)

"That was so not OK. I hate you," I said, even as he slid a plate of delicious full English breakfast, plus American hash-browns, in front of me.

"I know," he laughed wickedly, and passed the brown sauce over towards me.
Of course we arrived about ten minutes late - Carlos' fault, as he seemed unable to ever quite get the hang of Oyster Cards - hiking up the hill from the Piccadilly Line to find that Evie, at least, had come prepared. Luckily, she had already bought our tickets for the double bill, and even obtained enough popcorn and candy to float a battleship.

"What are we seeing?" I asked, not even sure what we'd been roped in for.

"This is, actually, genuinely amazing. Animation special - a double bill of Akira and Princess Mononoke."

Carlos' eyes grew as round as dinner plates. "Oh my god. I love Akira. It's one of my favourite films of all time. Myself and Dan, we used to go to watch the midnight showings of it at the Angelica Theatre, back when we were students."

"Hmm." OK, that was a very clear point scored with Evie. As we queued up to go inside, she studied Carlos carefully, looking him up and down. "Well the tickets were two for one, but it's still a double bill, which means you owe me £7.50 each. Plus whatever you want to chip in for the food and drink."

"So what is it that you do," he asked, trying to make pleasant conversation, digging in his wallet to find money to repay her.

"I'm a criminal lawyer, so don't fuck with me, or with Margo," she retorted.

Carlos refused to let that faze him. "Oh, really. I played a lawyer in a performance last year. I wish I could have asked you for help researching the role. Prosecution or defence?"

Lowering her hedgehog bristles slightly, Evie actually bothered to give him an honest answer. "I'm a public defender, actually. It's a rotten job, and the Tories are making it harder by the minute - our funding has been slashed to ribbons. But it's critically important for the whole judicial system that everyone gets access to Justice - even creeps and drunks."

"That's amazing," said Carlos, and either he was a better actor than I'd given him credit for, or he was actually interested. "I always wondered, you know, who would take on the onerous task of defending criminals, given how important it is. At one point, I thought the most idealistic thing would be to work for the prosecution and incarcerate the malefactors, but then I realised. Actually, the most idealistic thing of all is to ensure that everyone, even the wretched, get a fair trial. I admire you, to be honest."

Evie stepped back, blinking slightly, as if slightly surprised that Carlos was being decent. To be fair, I was slightly surprised that he was being so decent. "Well, at least you haven't asked me the very worst question."

"Which is?" There was a slight pause as we found our row, a compromise about three rows back. I stood aside and let Carlos sit in the middle, relieved that he and Evie actually seemed to be getting along - or at least she hadn't called the cops on him yet.

"You know... asking me if I ever ask my clients 'did you do it?'"

"Well, I'm almost certain you don't. I wouldn't." Carlos took a box of popcorn and a bag of revels and handed them down to me.

"Wine?" asked Evie, digging in her voluminous army jacket for a bottle.

"Oh my god," said Carlos. "You are the best. You are the actual best."
"She's not going to be a solicitor forever, though, are you Eve?" I prompted. "She's going to school to be a QC."

"A what?" asked Carlos.

"Queens Councillor. A barrister," explained Evie. "A kind of super-lawyer - I'm not sure you have them in the States. But they work on appeals, on interpreting and guiding the law and shaping the legal system. That way you don't just work for individuals, you work on making the whole system fairer."

"That sounds amazing. Where do you study?" He took the proffered bottle and had a swig.

"Birkbeck," replied Evie. "They do an adult education course that aims at fitting around the schedules of unconventional candidates."

Carlos' face lit up, delighted. "I know where that is! So you're a mature student?"

Evie rolled her eyes. "Ugh, yeah, I guess that's what they call us. It makes me sound a million years old, like a pensioner or something."

"That's not how I see it," said Carlos with a wicked gleam to his eye as he arched his back. "I see mature student as something slightly saucy... you know, like... for mature audiences only."

Evie burst out giggling, her hand over her mouth. "OK, I like your version better."

"If you want to know a secret, I'm a mature student too," said Carlos proudly. "I'm at RADA - we're practically next door neighbours! We should have lunch some time, away from all the kiddies. Honestly, some of those freshmen, they are positively foetal..."

"Alright," she agreed. Taking the bottle back from Carlos, Evie leaned forward to hand it to me. 'I like him,' she mouthed at me.

I just stared at her, then glanced up at the man sitting between us. Who the hell was this polite, friendly, engaged man pretending to be interested in the lives of me and my friends? Where was the arrogant, demanding rock star of the irritating emails? But then the lights dimmed in the cinema and the three of us slouched down in our seats to stare up at the screen.

Carlos and Evie got on like a house on fire. I could not believe it. They drank wine and threw popcorn at the screen, and talked, constantly, in hushed voices, about what each scene in Akira meant, and then again, what it really meant. I might almost have felt a bit left out, except, well... except for the fact that Akira was a film that confused the hell out of me, I'd never really understood what was going on, and having Evie and Carlos sitting beside me, explaining it all was like having my own private Siskel and Ebert, helping me to make sense of the whole confused mess. I didn't actually feel excluded; I felt privileged to be witness to them, kinda like I felt when the 4BAABS girls got really caught up in discussing the relevance of some cultural event.

Between films, Carlos snuck out to buy a second bottle of wine, and we got even more merry during Princess Mononoke. As we spilled out into the night afterwards, we were still chatting away, debating, comparing, drawing parallels between that film, and Spirited Away, by the same writer and same studio. Evie didn't even really have to ask. "We're going for Turkish food, now, aren't we?"

"I love Turkish food," enthused Carlos, letting us drag him to the bus.

"Are we even going to bother inviting Harry?" I asked, leaning forward over the seat to talk to
Evie, perched in the row ahead of us.

"Fuck Harry," snorted Evie.

"Who's Harry?" Carlos asked.

"My soon to be ex-boyfriend," Evie sighed.

"You don't mean that," I said, as the bus hurtled down Green Lanes. "Do you?"

"This is our stop," Evie announced, changing the conversation as the three of us trooped outside.

"You're not just changing the subject after saying something like that," I insisted.

"Wait," said Carlos, as we reached the restaurant and hovered outside. "Do you two want to go to dinner without me and discuss... girl stuff? I'm fine with going back to Bermondsey, if that's what you want."

"No!" said Evie, as we rolled inside and waited for our usual table by the window to be cleared. "There's nothing to talk about. He's being completely unreasonable, and I don't know how much longer we can last."

We sat down and ordered a ton of food - about twice as much as two people could normally put away - and more wine. "But you've been together since college," I reminded her. "I'm sure you can weather this one."

"You know, I was thinking about what you said last month. About how you were not even sure why I had a boyfriend sometimes. And I started wondering the same thing. Like, is it enough of a reason to stay together, just the length of our relationship. The only thing we seem to have in common any more is the fact that we've been together for so long."

Carlos leaned forward, reaching all the way across the table to refill our wineglasses. Those arms really were entirely too long. It was disconcerting the way he never had to ask for anything, he just reached out and grabbed. "Do you love him?" he said.

"Harry?" Evie seemed surprised at the question, and it took her an awfully long time to answer, chewing thoughtfully on an olive, before realising there was no discreet way to spit out the pips. "I..." Chew, spit. "I suppose I do, and I don't."

"You don't even know if you love him." Carlos speared an olive that was trying to escape across the table.

"No, I don't really know any more," Evie confessed, staring into her wine glass.

"Well, then you should do him the favour of telling him that, then either breaking up with him, or letting him break up with you," Carlos pronounced, reaching over our heads to accept a basket of pide and some hummus from a waiter.

"Carlos!" I snapped, cringing, though I wasn't sure if it was at the advice he had just given Evie, or his dreadful table manners.

"No, he's right," said Evie despondently. "You're a wise man, Carlos."

"No he's not!" I protested. "He is the stupidest, most wrong-headed, craven..."

Arching an eyebrow and twisting his face wryly, Carlos relaxed back in his chair, shooting Evie a
deeply amused glance.

Evie burst out laughing, the despondent mood completely shattered. "You know what? I want to be maid of honour at your wedding. I know Alice is going to argue that it should be her, but really... I've known you longer. It should be me."

"Don't encourage him," I hissed.

"She won't tell me if she's in love with me or not, and it's an absolutely wicked, heart-breaking thing," Carlos sighed dramatically, clutching one hand to his chest.

"I don't love you," I insisted. "I will never love you, and I have told you that a thousand bloody times if I've told you once."

"You two are so already married," Evie giggled.

But suddenly Carlos was serious again. "Break up with him," he intoned. "Life is too short to spend it with someone you're not sure you love. You're a beautiful girl, Evie, and funny, and clever, and there is someone out there who you will be certain about. Find him. Don't waste any more time with this jerk."

"I should..." hedged Evie. "I should wait, until I've finished school... at least until the semester is over, so it's not disruptive..."

"You've only just started the semester," I pointed out. "And he didn't want you to go to school, anyway."

"Wait, he didn't want you to go to college?" snapped Carlos, his ears perking up. "I hate this fucker already. Dump him. Your lover should support you, in the things you feel so strongly called to do. My ex encouraged me to go back to school." His eyes flickered towards me. "Even she encouraged me to audition for RADA."

"You're right. You're absolutely right. I've been stupid, not to see that. It won't even be that difficult - I mean, it's not like we even live together." She paused, as if thinking that over. "We were supposed to be buying a flat together, supposed to be saving up for a deposit, but it's a sign, isn't it, that the single biggest way we could save money would have been by moving in together, halving both of our rents, but I never wanted to do it."

"I thought it was his housemate," I pointed out.

Evie shook her head. "That's a bit of a lie, actually."

"Evie," I chided.

"No, don't take that tone with me. After all, how long did you lie about Mr Problematic here?"

"Mister Problematic?" repeated Carlos. "Is there something you want to tell me, Margaret...?"

"Well, you didn't want me to use your real name with anyone," I pointed out.

"Well, look at us. We are quite the consortium of liars, aren't we," said Carlos. "Or what is the collective noun for a group of liars?"

"A corporation of liars," I snickered.

"An adjudication of liars," Evie suggested.
"You're a lawyer, tell a loy," I teased her.

But then the rest of our food came, and our conversation moved on to happier topics.

We were all slightly drunk when we left the pub. Evie had resolved to meet Harry for brunch the next day, and do the deed while they were too hungover and miserable to really dispute it. I was so drunk I let Carlos drape his arm around my shoulder as we walked to the bus, though I would probably regret that, too, in the morning.

"Are you coming back to Bermondsey with me," Carlos asked, putting his arm around me, again, as we squished together into the very back seat of the crowded bus.

"I really should go home. I don't have another change of clothes," I protested.

"I could lend you some," said Carlos quietly. "Or..." And suddenly he felt far too close to me, his breath hot and sticky on my neck as his mouth neared my ear. "You could, y'know, try not wearing clothes?" His lips were only millimetres from my ear, the warmth of his breath raising all of the hairs along the back of my neck, as he exhaled into my aural cavity, something twisting deep inside me.

"Stop it!" I elbowed him roughly in the ribs, pushing him away from me. "I am definitely going home, if that's how you're going to act."

He drew away, slightly hurt. "I'm only kidding," he insisted.

"I can never tell with you." And for that, I let him get off the bus at London Bridge, but rode it all the way down to the Elephant. Without him around me, everything seemed so clear, even when I was drunk. He and I were friends, and that was that. With him sitting so close beside me, whispering obscene suggestions in my ear, scribbling all over my boundaries with that casual insouciance, even while declaring feminist principles to Evie back at the restaurant - who was I kidding? That bothered me. Even as I had to admit, there was a part of me that responded to him, on a deep, unarguable bodily level. That just wanted to throw it back in his face, and say, OK, alright, Carlos Dengler, international sex symbol, I will take you on. I will show you who's boss here. I will own you, sexually. I will make you behave.

Oh, Christ, no, stop it, Margaret, I told myself, getting off the bus a stop early and hoping that the cold, subterranean tunnels of Elephant & Castle would help clear my head. It's you that's acting like a genuine feminist nightmare, giving mixed messages, supporting rape culture, letting him scribble all over your boundaries. You've said no and meant it, now stand your ground. Don't fall into this stupid, romance-novel trope of wrestling with your feelings and pretending you don't feel things you do, or do feel things you don't. This is not a fucking romance novel, it is your life. No means no. No does not mean 'well, maybe if the stars were right and he didn't act like such an arrogant, entitled cunt - well, at least if he did, he did it consistently and wasn't lovely and friendly around your friends, and then deeply problematic when you were alone - and wasn't a fucking international sex symbol and didn't make my ovaries twist around with half-fulfilled longing when he breathes gently into my cold ears...'

Oh fuck, here was the bus. I ran around the corner and clambered on, pushing my way upstairs, and to an empty seat at the back. Pulling out my phone, I stared at it, then typed his name in the text box.

I hate what you do to me. - M
I knew what I was expecting back, another salacious quip, an offer to turn around and get on a bus to Herne Hill and show me, even against my will, what tongues and fingers could really be used for, and if he did, would I really say no a second time? And if I were in a novel - or even the Nouvelle Vague film he sometimes claimed to inhabit - that's what I would have got back. But what the real Carlos dropped in my inbox surprised me.

I am so sorry. I'm drunk, and that was clearly out of order. I know alcohol is no excuse, but I will maintain better discipline and refrain from drinking so heavily around you in the future. It always works out badly, and I don't want to be that man any more. I am truly sorry. - C.

Curse him. Fucking curse him. I went home, and collapsed into bed, alone.
Over the next few days, we slid slowly back to some kind of regular pattern between us. On Monday morning, though I swore I wouldn't, though I swore I would show him, would punish him by removing my presence from his life for that violation, I found myself driven by force of habit to his door. Habit woke me at 6.30, habit made me catch the 7.30 train, and habit diverted my feet from Shad Thames to ring his doorbell and shout "Wake-up call, get the kettle on!" into his intercom as I rang the bell.

He was awake but dishevelled, curly dark hair standing on end, as he sat at the kitchen table in dressing gown and slippers. "Kettle's just gone, and there's coffee in the French Press. But I forgot to buy eggs, so you've got a choice of toast or Weetabix."

"I hate Weetabix, can you get Muesli when you pick up eggs?" I grumbled as I poured the cereal.

"Keep whatever food you like at my house," he offered. "And, perhaps maybe a change of clothes?"

I opened my mouth to make an inappropriate remark about toothbrushes and cohabitation, then realised I already kept a toothbrush at his house. "I've got plans for tonight, but I'll see you tomorrow morning, right?"

He spread his hands apologetically. "I'm not going anywhere." But then he smiled and dropped the crust of his toast into his plate. "Except maybe the shower."

As he shuffled off down the corridor, I suddenly wanted to protest 'Hey! You always kiss me on the top of my head before I leave for work!' but then realised, actually, no, that was inappropriate, and could give the wrong idea. I loaded the dirty dishes in the dishwasher, gathered my things, and headed off, pulling the door closed behind me.

Things became OK again between us. We did our best to avoid getting too drunk - which was probably good for my liver, as well. We cooked and ate together, we watched films together, we read, we talked - and of course we argued, constantly, all the time, for the sheer joy of it. Saturdays at Hollywood Green became a regular thing, as Evie, almost against her better judgement, found herself becoming fast friends with him. She told me that they had met for study-lunches a couple of times in Bloomsbury, and she'd found him a charming conversational partner, and a welcome advocate for her academic career.

I didn't grudge her that, in fact, maybe there was a part of me that even hoped for something to develop between those two. Spurred on by Carlos' advice, she did actually pull together her pride and dump Harry. (And Harry disgusted us all by not even having the good grace to be heartbroken, but to shack up with a girl over a decade his junior - and a secretary at his firm, to boot! Ugh!) So was I hoping that Evie might get over her relationship's undignified bust-up by turning those intimate tete-a-tetes in the Russell Square Cafe into something more? Maybe I was, a little.

Carlos and Evie - yeah, I could actually maybe see that. She was attractive, in an androgynous sort of way, and though I knew he wasn't her type (she always seemed to prefer those burly blond Viking types like Thor and Steve Rogers) she did think he was OK looking.

But romance steadfastly refused to blossom between them. They didn't even argue. Annoyingly, they seemed to agree on most things, whether it was points of legal morality, or the relationship of
the first trilogy of Star Wars films to the latter. They got on, they truly seemed to enjoy one another's company, but there was none of that sizzling chemistry. He treated her like a sister. He even gave her dating tips, when she went out to Single Mingle at the British Library with Sunita.

I introduced the fabled Mr Problematic to Alice, which, perhaps, went a little less smoothly. Carlos, discovering Alice's throbbing fangirl crush on his co-star, amused her first with titbits of gossip from the theatre, then let slip that both of them were going to be at fitting session at a theatrical tailor in Soho, and intimated that if Alice and I might care to meet him there, ostensibly for dinner, he could engineer some kind of encounter.

But as he named a date and a time, I narrowed my eyes at him. "You've changed your tune," I observed.

Drawing back, he knitted his eyebrows at me, annoyed to be interrupted in full flow. "What tune?"

"Your whole 'Celebrity is a disease of the ego' tune, and your whole 'Fans are awful, they see celebrities only as objects to be present in front of' tune and your whole damn symphony of how disgusting and degrading it is for a celebrity to have to meet fans, and now you're feeding Alice little dribbles of gossip to feed her crush and making arrangements for her to meet your colleague?"

Carlos blinked at me, his head swaying slightly from one side to the other like a defensive cobra, as he twitched his hands towards his hair, tucking his truculent fringe back in that familiar nervous gesture. "I never said that it was inherently disgusting and degrading for a celebrity to encounter their fans... just that it was an intensely problematic area."

Alice sniggered lightly. As a university professor, that word to her was like Page 3 to an 80s feminist. "You keep using that word - problematic. I do not think it means what you think it means."

I had to laugh at the expression on Carlos' face, torn between annoyance at being called out, and his obvious delight at the movie quote.

"I mean it," said Carlos slowly, twisting his forelock around his finger before tucking it back across his head. "In the philosophical sense, as you do. Not to condemn a subject as bad, or morally wrong, but to use it to examine the discourse... to start a discussion on the forms and praxis in which something can become an issue."

Alice leaned forward and crossed her arms in front of her on the table. "Try me."

Carlos stumbled for words under her gaze. "I mean... obviously, having fans is an incredibly humbling and rewarding experience, in many ways. It is an honour to be the beneficiary of that regard, and that... love. But that love can become demanding, can become a burden to the overly beloved. Especially if the love-object becomes beloved for... superficial characteristics which fans have chosen to project onto their idol-object due to arbitrary aesthetic aspects of their visage, rather than inherent characteristics of the human being beneath."

Alice's lips tightened in a thin smile. "He's funny, this one. Very funny. So do you think that my love honours, or burdens Benedict Cumberbatch?"

"I would not offer to introduce you, if I did not think it would honour him," he stuttered. "I esteem my colleague and..."

"You want me to express the fandom that you are unable to, on account of your position as his colleague, and subordinate - understudy is a subordinate role, yes?"
"It is an apprentice role," Carlos countered. "In a good student-mentor relationship, the teacher learns as much as the taught."

"Oof." Alice sucked her teeth at him. "You still didn't answer my question, though. Are you utilising me to live out your own fandom, of a colleague you cannot treat in that fashion due to your professional or mentorial positionality? You are, also, a fan, are you not?"

"I've seen his work, yes, and I... I admire his technique." Carlos looked positively flustered, his whole face caving in on itself in a sheepish grin of boyish ardor.

"Do you think it's possible for a fan and his or her idol to have a professional - or indeed a personal - relationship, which is healthy, and non-exploitative, for both of them?" Alice pressed on.

"Of course it's possible," stuttered Carlos, dropping his gaze, as colour spread across his cheeks. "I have had, in the past, extremely rewarding friendships... and more... with people who were fans of my work. It really depends on why a person is attracted to one's artistic endeavours in the first place. It can be, sometimes, that a fan is attracted to an artist's oeuvre because of pre-existing commonalities, commonalities of interest, of aesthetics, of philosophical alignment, and then yes, it is possible and indeed likely for them to enjoy a genuine kinship, and therefore a genuine relationship. However, at some point, a kind of... critical mass is formed, and the fame-mythos is engaged. At which point, fans are no longer interested because they share a kinship; instead the celebrity becomes an object, an abstracted symbol, a second-level signification, as the post-structuralists would say." His eyes flickered towards me as he posited this. "Not a human being to be engaged with, but merely a divinity to be present in front of. It is not pleasant being someone's idol-object; it is intensely dehumanising and a little bit scary."

Alice and I exchanged glances. "The difference between being an artist and being a celebrity, perhaps," I said, then added snidely. "I'll never know, from the inside. Thank fuck."

"I hate celebrity, perhaps, because it took from me the pleasure of being an artist, the pleasure of having fans."

"The pleasure of having groupies, maybe," Alice laughed.

"No," said Carlos emphatically. "Quite the opposite. It took away the pleasure of having fans - people who wanted to engage with me, my work, my ideas, my interests, who wanted to share something - and replaced them with groupies. People - and not only women, which is important to note, before you accuse me of sexism with that word - who merely wanted something from me, be it my body, my time or just my attention."

"What do you think I want from Cumberbatch?" asked Alice shrewdly.

"It's not what I think you want from him. It's what I think you - as a culturally engaged reader of his work - can give him."

"Writers need readers, musicians need listeners, and actors need an audience far more than we need them," I mused softly.

"Are you not also a writer?" suggested Carlos, raising an eyebrow.

I looked at him carefully, studying his face, as Alice pulled back from the table slightly and laughingly refilled our wineglasses. "Who's the fan and who's the idol in our strange encounter. Am I projecting onto you, or are you projecting onto me?"

A smile broke across Carlos' lips. "Are you in a film, or are you in reality?"
"I'm in a novel, and I'm tired of the leading man and tired of the plot."

"So change it," shrugged Carlos, and I could see he was desperate for a cigarette, touching his lips and his mouth. "I did. I quit. I walked out. I sacked my readers. Get out, I'm tired of you. I'm going to do something else."

"I thought you sacked your band," Alice laughed. "Abandoned ship, as it were."

He shook his head slightly mournfully. "No, they abandoned me."

"You quit!"

"Yes, but they stopped speaking to me."

"What?" I gasped, unable to believe the self-aggrandising cheek of him sometimes. "That's not what they say - in interviews, at least."

For the first time, I truly saw bitterness cross Carlos' face. "Well, they would, wouldn't they? After all, they speak to the press, so they get to define their narrative a little more than I do."

"Then speak to the press yourself, put your own side across," I suggested.

"No." A haunted look passed across his face as he shook his head. "I'm not putting that costume back on. Never again. I am finished with that rôle." But then he seemed to regain control over himself. "I mean, that's exactly it, isn't it. They speak to the press about me, they don't speak to me..." He paused, relenting slightly. "Well, to be fair Dan emails very occasionally, when he's not on tour. But with Dan, I always feel like he's keeping up an old business contact that he might need again. The others don't bother with that facade."

"They say it's the other way around," I protested. "They said that in order to move on, you had to leave them behind."

"Well, that's it, isn't it? My life changed, in so many unfathomable ways. Theirs stayed the same. So it's my fault for evolving, not theirs for stagnating. Convenient." Abruptly, he stood up, feeling for his leather satchel. "I need a cigarette. And I'm sorry, Margaret, but this time I need to smoke alone."

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I had to admit, I was more curious to see Carlos in 18th Century finery than I was to see the film star, but as Alice was almost beside herself, I had to organise things.

"Do not freak out," I told her. "Number one rule, do not freak out. Remember the Bowie principle. Did we freak out when we accidentally met Bowie while taking a wrong turn after ice skating at Somerset House? No, we did not. Is this man cooler than Bowie?"

"I dunno," whimpered Alice, pacing up and down Golden Square to try and regain control over herself. "He might be..."

"He is not cooler than Bowie," I snapped. "No one is cooler than Bowie."

"Iggy Pop. Iggy Pop is cooler than Bowie," Alice theorised, her breath slowly returning to normal.
"Benedict Cumberbatch is not Iggy Pop, though," I reminded her.

"No," she agreed. "Ewan MacGreggor - now Ewan MacGreggor, he played Iggy Pop. Does that make him cooler than Bowie?"

"Luckily, Carlos is not understudying Ewan MacGreggor, or I would be the one freaking the fuck out," I told her. "Are you ready?"

"No, I don't think I'll ever be ready, but we've got to go, or we'll miss him." Alice took a deep breath, did a few calming exercises, then nodded.

I walked into the small, overcrowded fabric shop downstairs first, and looked about for stairs or an obvious entrance. But as soon as I stuck my head into a likely corridor, an unctuous assistant appeared.

"Madame... may I help you?"

"Yes." I cleared my throat, trying to sound like I had every right in the world to be there. "My name is Margaret. I'm looking for my housemate. We were supposed to meet for dinner, but I'm afraid we might be early."

"Housemate?" the assistant asked suspiciously. Oh Christ, he wasn't buying it. Carlos had told me to say boyfriend, but I'd refused on principle. I was not an actor. I could just about stretch to housemate, but there was no way I was going to pretend to be his lover, not even for Benedict Cumberbatch. "Your housemate's name, perhaps, might help?"

"Carlos," I replied. "Carlos Dengler. He's understudying Valmont at the Old Vic. He told me he'd be trying on some costumes here this evening?"

The assistant walked over to another, equally suspicious looking gentleman, and the pair of them whispered in each others' ears, staring at us, before the second finally opened what looked like a closet door, and disappeared upstairs. For a terrible few minutes, we waited, me fiddling idly with some gorgeous gold brocade while Alice looked like she was rapidly losing her nerve and wanted to go home.

Finally, the second assistant reappeared, and whispered something in the ear of the first assistant, who walked back to us, gesturing with his hand. "Margaret what?" he asked.

"Margaret MacConnor," I supplied nervously.

"You are expected. You may go up."

I went up first, with Alice clinging, terrified, to my arm, a few steps behind me. Upstairs, there was a small, but brightly lit room, with dressing mirrors taking up most of the walls. On one side, were two swinging half-doors leading to dressing rooms. On the other, stood Carlos, looking absolutely devastating in a gold and turquoise embroidered frock coat over sky blue silk knee-breeches.

"Good evening, mademoiselle," he intoned, then bowed deeply.

"You look amazing," I told him. "I feel the urge to... break into applause, just looking at you." The brocade waistcoat, the miles and miles of silk lace around his throat, really it was too much. He looked... beautiful.

"Why thank you," he simpered, with a leer. He was in character again, and I was having trouble maintaining my equanimity, so I turned around, gesturing to Alice.
"You remember Alice," I reminded him awkwardly.

"Charmed," said Carlos, still in character, picking up her hand and bending over slightly as he raised it to his lips to kiss her wedding ring.

"That," said Alice, giggling slightly, "Was well problematic."

Carlos burst out giggling, and snapped out of character. "I'm sorry, I promised I'd behave. I know you all already think I'm a cad and a bounder."

But abruptly, we were interrupted by a booming, and terribly familiar voice coming from the dressing room next door. "No, I don't think it should be like that. I know that's how they wore back then, but I can't move like that. See..." There was a swoosh and rustle of silk. "Bring it up higher."

"We can't bring it up higher. It's not historically accurate," replied a flustered sounding tailor.

"Oh, sod historical inaccuracy. The women will like it if you bring it up higher. Don't you have any women on your staff to advice you with these things?"

"Women?!" gasped the tailor. "This is a gentleman's establishment..."

"Carl, what do you think. How are you wearing yours?" There was the rustle of silk again, then one of the swing-doors burst open, and another tall, slender man in a frock coat charged through. "See, yours sits higher, and... Oh." The actor stopped when he saw us, his face breaking into a smile. "Women!"

I grabbed Alice's arm, to stop her from bolting forward and throwing herself at him, as Carlos gestured towards us apologetically. "My housemate, Margaret, and her friend, Alice."

"Ladies," said the actor, spreading his arms magnificently. "May I enquire as to your opinions on a slight... sartorial matter."

"Of course," I shrugged, though Alice was still too overcome to speak.

"The waistcoat," he explained, tugging at the brocade. "I feel it is too low, and flaps against my thighs, impeding my movement. Now, the tailors say this is historically accurate. But I feel, it would be better... about here." Looking into the mirror, he hiked up the waistcoat so that its deep inverted V inadvertantly framed his entire crotch in gold against sky blue silk.

Alice whimpered and started to turn ashy, like she was going to fall over. I held her up as I turned to look at Carlos. Carlos, of course, had his entire crotch out flapping on display, but to be honest, I was quite used to Carlos wearing his trousers that tight, and had long since ceased noticing his family jewels.

"What do you think, ladies? Here? Or up here?" the actor repeated.

From Alice's reaction, it was quite obvious which elicited a better response. "Up higher, I think is better," I told him. "And if you're looking to elicit female attention, you could do to bring the trousers in a little, too."

"Ah-ha!" said the actor triumphantly, grinning as he turned to the tailor, pulling off the frock coat carelessly to reveal billowing cuffs. "If you want a good opinion on clothes, always ask a woman." He turned back to us. "Thank you, Alice, and... was it... Margaret?"

Alice whimpered as he stripped off his waistcoat and handed that, too, to the tailor, then bent down
and unfastened the knee-breeches. Although he was wearing yards of Georgian under-linen beneath, Alice let out a small cry.

"Is your friend alright?" he asked, concerned.

"I'm sorry," I laughed. "Alice is rather a fan of yours."

"Are you?" He looked up at that, as if noticing us properly for the first time, then smiled beatifically at Alice. "How charming!" Completely oblivious of the fact that he was, essentially, wearing only his underwear, he extended his hand towards her as if to shake.

That woke her up a bit, as she eyed it, terrified, then tentatively took it and shook, as if afraid it would turn into a snake and bite her. "I love your work," she finally managed to get out. It was quite funny, seeing Alice completely speechless. Alice, the fearsome Cultural Studies Professor of Goldsmiths, who had reduced the garrulous Carlos to a fringe-tugging mess, and was used to keeping entire lecture halls full of freshmen in line, was without words for perhaps the first time in her adult life.

"I'm so flattered," he purred, and his smile, astonishingly enough, actually seemed quite genuine and even slightly humble.

"I'm, erm... a Professor..." Alice managed to ejaculate, though she was warming slightly to her subject now that Cumberbatch had wrapped a dressing gown around his unmentionables. "I'm a professor of Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths, you see, and I often teach your performance of Sherlock at Freshman level, because, um, the students tend to already be familiar with it, as an example of, um, creative re-imagination of canon and, erm, meta-textuality, and, uh... yeah."

"Goodness." Cumberbatch, now, looked astonished. "Do you, really?"

"It's on my coursework, yes," Alice confessed, looking slightly embarrassed. Carlos, across the room, looked like he was battling very hard not to laugh, and was about to lose, badly.

"At Goldsmiths," he repeated, then looked over and caught Carlos' eye. "You see, Carl, you were asking me the other day, what made it all worthwhile - if acting - if celebrity - was worth the sacrifices. This..." He walked over to Alice and placed his hand, affectionately, on the small of her back. "Moments like this, Carl, moments when you glimpse how your work has inspired someone; these are what makes it worthwhile."

The look on his face was so pleased, and every so slightly self-satisfied, that I took my courage in my hands. "Do you mind... Alice.... would you like... would you mind terribly taking a picture?"

"But of course," said Cumberbatch. "If you give me a moment to change back into my street clothes."

"Oh my god," said Alice dumbly as he retreated back into the dressing room, with the tailors at his heels.

"Are you American, Alice?" the actor's voice boomed from inside.

"Um, yes. But I'm married to a Brit," Alice confessed.

"How charming!" said the disembodied Cumberbatch. "I wish my films were doing better in the States..."

"Are you kidding?" cried Alice, somewhat slightly reinvigorated now that he was out of actual
sight. "You're massive in the States."

"You're too kind!" He reappeared a moment later, wearing jeans and a casual jumper, then obligingly posed for a few photos with Alice, as Carlos disappeared into the other dressing room to change back into his street clothes. I was disappointed, as I'd really rather liked the elaborate frock coat and, well, the crotch-framing knee-breeches, rather more than I wanted to admit.

Catching Alice's eye as he emerged, Carlos smiled and clapped his colleague on the back. "We're going to dinner, if you'd like to join us, Ben?"

A panic-struck look flashed across Alice's face as she whimpered again.

"I'd love to!" Either he was the most incredible actor who had ever been born, or that look of pleasure followed quickly by disappointment was actually genuine. "But I've got to wait until the tailors finish their adjustments, and do another fitting. Dress rehearsal is next week, and you know Old Hickory Hockney will blow a gasket if they're not ready in time."

"Another time," said Carlos, as Alice breathed an audible sigh of relief.

Cumberbatch turned and snapped his fingers. "You are coming to opening night, though, aren't you, Alice?"

Alice shook her head sadly. "It's been sold out for months."

"Sold out, a nonsense," snorted Cumberbatch. "We'll find you tickets, never fear. Though... I'm sure you'd rather see your housemate perform Valmont, Margaret, I'm afraid you and your friend are stuck with me."

"I'm seen my housemate perform Valmont in his pants in the kitchen quite enough already," I laughed. "I'd be happy to come."

"It's settled, then," said Cumberbatch, beaming. Another round of handshakes and backslaps, and we escaped out into the cool Soho night. Fortunately, Alice actually managed to wait until we got round the corner until she shrieked aloud.

"Oh my fucking god," screamed Alice against the roar of Oxford Street traffic. "I met Benedict Fucking Cumberbatch! I love you forever, Carlos!"

He extended one long, skinny arm, and hugged her close as they matched step down Oxford Street. "Not so problematic after all, then?"

"You are the best, you are the actual best. OMG, much thanks... such gratitude... very indebtedness! Opening night. Opening fucking night!" she shrieked.

"You're welcome," said Carlos. "You're so welcome. I'm glad I could share the joy. Because inside... Well, although outside, I'm a calm, cool, professional, excited to be working with such an esteemed colleague... on the inside, yes, you were right. I still feel exactly like you."

"You've done it again." I muttered as I followed them down the street, then turned up into Fitzrovia to find the restaurant where we were eating. "Dammit, Carlos, stop making my friends love you. They're supposed to be on my side."
Chapter 16

We recorded another few weeks of 4BAABS, despite Evie's increasingly busy schedule. At work, we prosecuted one set of Russian hackers and put them out of business, only to have another Ukrainian gang move into the same territory. Working long hours trying to weave programming holes to try to catch them, I started spending more and more nights at Carlos' flat, even as he was spending longer and longer hours at the Old Vic. He was determined not just to understudy and play a couple of minor walk-on roles he had inveigled into speaking roles, but to weave himself into every aspect of life at the theatre.

Opening night approached, and, with a flourish, he produced not just two tickets, but four. "When I explained to Ben about Four Birds and a Box Set, he decided you girls needed a full Box."

"Oh my god," I stuttered, staring at the gilt-edged tickets embossed 'with compliments.' "Can we talk about this on the podcast?"

"Not to put too fine a point on it, but I think he's counting on you lot to do so. The Guardian and the Evening Standard haven't exactly been kind based on the press nights, though the Telegraph is withholding judgement until opening night. I think he's aware that he's becoming a bit... over-exposed, shall we say, and that grass roots support such as yours would be seen as providing him more street cred."

"It's bribery, then," I laughed.

"Isn't everything?" he shrugged. "Speaking of which..."

"No. Whatever it is, no."

"You don't even know what I'm going to ask."

"Well, I'm sure it's not something I'd want to do, or you wouldn't resort to bribery."

"It's not an awful thing. I just want you to be my date for the opening night party."

I glared at him. "Absolutely not. Take Alice - or Evie."

"Can I take all four of you?" he asked with a leer. I hit him. But not very hard. "Look, it's that girl, the one you met. Teri. I think... well, not to be arrogant, but I think she's got her eye on me."

"So take her as your date," I shrugged. "Go for it."

"Not a good idea."

"Oh, everyone does it. I thought theatrical productions were supposed to be hotbeds of sexual machinations."

"They are, but, well... she's just being a bit obvious. It's gauche."

"Maybe you should take her up on it. You need to get laid," I told him.

"I just think... well, she's rather more into me, than I'm into her, and it's... well, it's unbalanced. Awkward."

"Oh god," I snorted. "You are one of those men who is in love with the unattainable. You only
ever want what you can't have. And if a girl is actually into you, it instantly renders her cheap, and therefore undesirable."

"There's not the slightest bit of truth to that."

I just cocked an eyebrow at him.

He stood up and started pacing back and forth in front of the picture windows. "Look, she's just rather too obvious about it. I mean... she invited me round to 'work on our lines' saying she did so occasionally with a couple of other actors from the theatre - I thought it was a legitimate invitation, and treated it as one. But I got there, and it was me, and her, on our own, with her reclining on a divan in her lingerie. When I say obvious, I mean completely fucking obvious."

"Did you fuck her?" I asked hopefully.

"Of course I didn't!" Carlos roared. "I recited my lines, then I made my excuses and went home. I didn't want to lead her on, and make her think I wanted something I didn't."

"Did you want to fuck her?"

"That's not the point! There's no potential for a relationship at all. I mean, I'm in London for six months - five months, now - we're colleagues, for fucks sake - and it's so obviously not going to go anywhere."

"I'm sure she knows that, too. You're allowed to live in the moment, you know. Not every affair has to be The One. That's such a major Girl Fallacy, I can't believe you're falling for it, Carlos."

"I don't want to," Carlos said quietly. "It's cruel to, when my affections lie elsewhere."

"Don't," I snapped, in a low, warning tone, and stood up, casting about for my coat.

"I'm sorry." He sat down, and rubbed his eyes. "It's late, and I should go to bed. I need to get a good night's rest. I don't think you should come round for coffee Friday morning, but I'll see you at the theatre, yes? I'm in the first act, and three speaking scenes in the third, but I'll come up and perch in your box during the second act if you don't mind, yes?" As I started to leave, he chased after me. "Wait, wait, don't forget the tickets, or you lot are going nowhere!"

"Thanks." I gave him a quick, affectionate peck on the cheek, then left.

The podcast recording that week was simply hilarious. Alice and Sunita were at an absolute fever pitch of Cumberbitching, while Evie abstained, and I, well, to be honest, I had been charmed by the man's humility, so in contrast with his usual roles, and was starting to have a sneaking admiration for him.

We all dressed up for the Opening Night. Alice and Sunita wore actual gowns, a riot of taffeta and lace, fluttering like feminine butterflies. Evie wore a pantsuit, as she was coming from work, though she jazzed it up a bit with a dressy theatre coat and a silk scarf. Me, I did a slightly dressier version of my old goth self, velvet trousers, black faux-brocade waistcoat and a satin shirt. We met at Waterloo Station, but there were actual paparazzi outside the Old Vic as we walked up, looking to snap photos of Cumberbatch and other celebrities, though they weren't the slightest bit interested in us.

"Oi!" snapped Sunita, trying to catch their attention. "Don't you know who we are? We're Four Birds And A Box Set, mate!"
Most of the photographers ignored us, but one of them, gratifyingly, obliged. Sunita tipped him a wink and a bounce of her ample bosom, then we trotted inside to find drinks. We milled about the lobby for a bit, sipping champagne and trying to see and be seen, then made our way up to our box. Wow, OK, this was swish.

"Remind me to thank Ben effusively at the afterparty," I whispered to Alice as I looked out over the stage, so close I could almost touch it.

"Ben," snorted Sunita. "Ben, is it, now?"

"God, doesn't he look divine in the programme?" Alice whimpered.

"Where did you get that? I didn't get a programme..."

"They were on our seats?"

"Right, who wants some proper wine?" asked Evie, pulling an illicit bottle from her handbag.

"Oh god, put that away, Evie."

"No, give some here, Christ knows I need it," muttered Alice, gazing down at the stage. The lights dimmed, Alice whimpered, and I found myself pushed into accepting a thimbleful of wine in my empty champagne glass.

I knew I was supposed to be watching Cumberbatch. I heard the excited murmur of the crowd as he entered the stage, looking absolutely resplendent in his brocade frock coat, the waistcoat beneath daringly hiked up to display his shockingly tight knee-breeches. (Photos of those shockingly tight knee-breeches would reverberate across Tumblr for months to come.) I was aware of how he commanded the eye and drew the ear with his sonorous, highly trained Shakespearian voice.

The problem was, I couldn't take my eyes off the second footman, the one with the flash of red vest, the prognathous jaw, and the glittering black eyes beneath his periwig. And in the next scene, I couldn't take my eyes off the fucking butler, bending down low to deliver a letter, his long, bony shanks so shapely in silk and stockings, his pert arse pointed exactly in our direction. In the next scene, it was a footman again, his face impassive as granite, but his sparkling eyes roaming, searching up through the boxes like a spotlight. I knew he couldn't see me in the shadows, but still, I felt his gaze go through me like a knife.

A brief intermission, and Evie poured us all another glass of wine. But then I heard the soft swish of the door behind us, and felt a momentary breeze. Then suddenly there was a dark presence behind me, followed by a hand on my shoulder, and a gentle squeeze. I put my hand on his, and squeezed back, as I gestured for him to bend down. He collapsed to his knees, his face pressed against my chairback as I whispered to him.

"You were magnificent," I told him breathlessly.

"I was a butler," Carlos laughed.

"And two footmen. But you were still the best damn butler I ever saw," I assured him.

"You are too sweet." A quick kiss on my cheek that burned like fire, then he was gone again. Oh no, he was just dragging a stool forward to sit behind us. "What do you think?"

"I've lost track of the story already. Too many identical noblemen in frock coats."
Carlos laughed, but Alice turned around and hissed. "Be quiet! He's about to come back onstage."

Duly chastised, Carlos and I moved our chairs closer together and giggled like schoolchildren. There was no way I could pay attention to the story now, with his arm stretched along the back of my chair, only inches from my shoulders, despite the whispered instructions in my ears, accompanied by pointing at the characters I was supposed to be paying attention to.

But as the second act drew to a close, Carlos suddenly stood up in a flash of red silk. "Shit! I've got to be down there in two minutes..."

"I thought it was intermission next?"

"I have to change, this is my speaking part," he hissed, and was gone, leaving the side of my face caked in stage makeup.

We wandered aimlessly around the lobby again, during intermission, while Sunita obtained a slightly more legitimate bottle of wine. "He's actually alright, you know," Evie was saying, while Alice was shaking her head and gesticulating.

"Only alright? Evie, he is in-can-fucking-des-cent!"

"Right, more booze has been obtained, let's hit the ladies' room then go back to our seats!" Sunita called across the crowded floor.

I completely lost track of everything during the next few acts. But the Butler appeared again, speaking a single line in a voice that had been absolutely scrubbed of New Jersey inflections. Another footman, a dancing partner at a ball, and then, at the end, an attendant holding a pistol on a pillow at a duel. I had no idea who Cumberbatch was duelling with, or indeed, why, but I could see that Suni and Alice were both weeping openly, while even Evie was dabbing at her eyes.

"Oh my god!" howled Alice, as the curtains crashed, and leaped to her feet, clapping wildly. "That was incredible."

"If we shout loud enough, do they come back?" teased Evie, in a yokel Yorkshire accent.

The actors returned for a curtain call, and then another. And then the entire cast came out and flooded the stage, and my attention was too caught up with the tall duel attendant in the back to notice the stage hand that came out carrying a huge bouquet of roses for the leading lady.

When the curtain calls were finally over, and the house lights came up, Alice stretched and looked about. "We are going to the afterparty, aren't we? Your boyfriend did text me and say we were invited, earlier."

"He is not my boyfriend," I insisted, wondering when he and Alice had started texting.

"Are you sure about that?" teased Evie.

"Quite sure," I repeated.

Sunita looked unconvinced. "Is that because you don't want him for a boyfriend, or because you want him, but can't have him?"

"For fucks sake, what is this? If I wanted that man for a boyfriend, I would have that man for a boyfriend. I do not fucking want him for a boyfriend, and I am, to be honest, quite tired of being teased about it. Give it a fucking rest guys, OK?"
"Alright, alright, no need to go postal," shrugged Sunita, pulling out her compact and powdering her face before we headed down to the party.

There was a formal afterparty in a large reception parlour upstairs. We showed our gold-edged tickets and gave our names, and were escorted up the stairs and past the velvet rope, then we were given another free glass of champagne. But the party was massive, and crowded with people, and there was a long queue of people waiting even to talk to the supporting actors.

But after a few minutes, an arm snaked around my waist. "Don't worry," said a voice in my ear, then a hand appeared and beckoned Alice closer. "There's this afterparty, then there's the after after-party. Much more informal and relaxed - Ben will come through after about half an hour of meeting and greeting. We, however, should go through now." Carlos lowered his voice. "Because the drinks are free through there."

Offering an arm to each of us, he guided us through another set of security, flashing a pass, and behind another velvet rope. This room was smaller, and less sumptuous, but far less crowded, and as we approached the bar, yes, it turned out the drinks were free, at least until beer and house wine ran out.

"Beer or wine?" asked Carlos magnanimously. "And red or white?"

"Wine, please - red," I supplied.

"White for me," Alice asked.

"What kind of beer... nah, I fucking hate Stella. White wine, please," said Evie.

But Sunita was staring at Carlos, her head cocked to one side as she considered him, and I swear to god, her eyes were huge, and she might as well have been licking her chops. "I like my drinks like I like my men - full-bodied and robust."

Carlos turned towards her as if noticing her for the first time, and I saw his back arch, and one eyebrow raise, slightly wolfishly. Oh for fucks sake, Carlos, not you, too? The way that men reacted to Sunita was so predictable it was almost comical. "I'm afraid we only have dry or cheap tonight," he quipped.

"Cheap, then," drawled Sunita. "I can't stand anything to be dry... least of all myself."

I wanted to put my face into my hands and sink through the floor, but Carlos handled himself with aplomb, turning back to the bartender. "Three red, two white, please."

Roger-Ralph appeared next, oh, thank fuck. Maybe he would take the brunt of Sunita's flirting - he seemed like the type who would relish it, as his gaze passed across us admiringly. "Four girls? An entire bevy of beauties, Dengler? How the devil does this rogue do it."

"A beer then, Raj?" Carlos suggested, clearly pleased as punch to be surrounded by four pretty girls, in the eyes of his colleague.

"Don't mind if I do." Roger-Ralph-Raj leered at Evie, then widened his eyes at Alice.

"You were fantastic in the second act," Alice told him, though I had no idea how she had kept all of those be-wigged and frock-coated actors straight.

"Which one was he?" I said quietly to Evie.
Roger-Ralph-Raj roared with laughter. "Well, you know how to puncture an actor's ego, don't you, my lass."

"He was the music teacher," Alice explained patiently.

"Oh!" I brightened. "Then you were the one that shot Cumberbatch at the end." I paused for a moment. "But why did you do it?"

Carlos was now laughing at me openly. "She's hopeless. Don't even try."

"I hope you remembered which one I was, at least." I turned, and turned bright red as I looked straight into Cumberbatch himself, his arm around an incredibly beautiful woman at his side. "Valmont? The Seducer? The hero of the piece?"

"Nope," I teased, feeling quite flushed from the wine. "Can't say it rings a bell. Were you a footman?"

Maybe if he was in pants," prompted Carlos with a snicker. "Pants, at dawn, in your kitchen? Remember, my beloved housemate? Oh, but I mean that beloved in the platonic sense of course."

This last was delivered with a wink, and quite low, so that only myself, and Sunita, who was standing on the other side of him, could hear.

But Cumberbatch had taken Alice's arm and was introducing her to his partner. "This is the woman I was telling you about. This is Professor Alice Jefferson, she's a lecturer in Cultural Studies - at Goldsmiths."

"Oh, really?" said the wife. Alice looked like she was about to faint.

"She said that she's been using my work, to demonstrate... meta-textualism to her students! Isn't that incredible?" Again, either he was the world's best actor, or he was actually quite sincere.

"Oh, how lovely," said the wife, looking equally rapt.

"Well, Sherlock is a perfect example of a polysemic text," Alice was explaining, looking really quite overwhelmed by the whole thing. "A story which has many meanings, many possible interpretations, which are both constrained by culture and place, but also transcend..."

As I watched the three of them start to talk it over, it struck me suddenly, that Cumberbatch wasn't just listening, he was actually basking slightly. That accent - he had to be an educated man. And yet he seemed to spend half his life portraying super-heroes or scenery-chewing villains. It had made him wealthy beyond his wildest dreams, clearly. Yet, to watch him, interacting with Alice, it seemed that there was still something so eager-to-please about him, like he was searching for validation in the academic terms she was throwing around. Surely an actor of that stature, a man with Hollywood not just knocking at his door, but screaming down his keyhole, this man didn't care what critics said? Let alone what fans said?

I turned to ask Carlos if it was true, or if he had been teasing me, when he said that Cumberbatch was counting on 4BAABS enthusiastically gushing about his performance in the play. But Carlos had disappeared. I looked around wildly.

There was Evie - oh good god, there was Evie being chatted up by Roger-Ralph-Raj. Remembering Carlos' words, I wondered if perhaps I should step in and save her, but then again, I didn't entirely trust Carlos' assessment of the man. Instead, I moved closer, to eavesdrop, before deciding on a course of action.
"Well, yes, it's a big step for a girl from Hull..."

"You're from Hull? Good god, I'm from Bridlington! Just up the road."

"You never were from Bridlington. Not with that plummy accent," snorted Evie.

"Theatrical training, my dear," Roger-Ralph-Raj confessed, before letting his accent slide a little. "I was born Reg, in t' East Riding. God's own country."

"That's uncanny, stop it. You're taking the piss."

"Nowt tekkin' the piss about't," Reg drawled in an almost comical Yorkshire accent. "So tell me, how'd a lass fro' Hull become a Barrister?"

"I'm not a barrister yet..."

"You know, my next part, I'm auditioning for the part of a lawyer, perhaps you can give me some tips, as it were," he suggested, sidling up to her.

"Pull the other one, I've already had that chat-up line from Carlos last month!" she flipped right back.

Evie would be just fine handling him on her own, I thought to myself. But where the hell had Carlos got to? I looked about, peering through the thickening crowd. Alice and Cumberbatch were still locked deep in conversation. Now that was weird, and I wondered what Sunita would have made of it... Shit, more to the point, where the hell was Sunita?

I poked my way through the crowd, then spotted them both, sitting on a low divan by a window. Sunita of course, Sunita it seemed just couldn't help herself. Of course she had sat so that her short, little legs peeked out from the slash in her skirt, all the way up to her thighs, giving a grand good view of her gams to Carlos. Carlos, who in point of fact, was, despite all his protestations about he just wasn't into women who were so obvious, leaning towards her, getting a good eyeful of her generous bosom as he sat tilted towards her, his arm spread out along the back of the sofa, only inches behind her.

That bastard, that fucking bastard! My head spun. Despite sipping champagne all evening, I wasn't nearly drunk enough to handle this. I looked down into my half-empty wine-glass, but couldn't think of a thing to do. Think, Margaret, think. And quickly. Sunita leaned forward to deposit her empty wineglass on the floor, making sure that Carlos got a good look at her heaving bosoms, only inches away from his eyes, already on stalks.

Drinks. That was it. Gulping down the rest of my glass quickly, I moved over towards them and sat daintily on the other side of Sunita, as far as possible from Carlos' lying eyes and slender thighs. "Carlos," I said, trying to keep the claws out of my voice. "Be a dear, and get us some more wine?"

Carlos looked down at his own glass, still barely touched. Clearly he'd had other things to do with his mouth. "In a minute?"

"Now would be a good time, as I need to go to the loo, and you know girls have to go to the loo in pairs, and so I need Suni," I extemporised.

"You don't need me to go to the bloody loo with you, Margo," Sunita sighed. "We're not ten."

"I do," I insisted. "I need you to go to the loo, and then I need you to look up the time of the last train back to Wimbledon."
Sunita glared at me for a moment, but then rolled her eyes, and climbed unsteadily to her feet. After years of going to dating events together, Wimbledon had become our 'safe word' that meant that the other needed to get out of the conversation, the situation, the date, whatever, immediately, no questions asked and no discussion brooked until we were outside and safe. Neither of us ever invoked Wimbledon without a damned good reason.

Taking her by the elbow, I practically frog-marched her to the ladies, then grabbed her and pulled her inside a stall, relieved that the Old Vic's ancient toilets were generous enough to hold two.

"What was that about?" Sunita demanded. "Why did you invoke Wimbledon?"

"What do you think you're doing?" I hissed.

"Chatting up a bloke," she shrugged.

"But it's not any bloke, it's Carlos!"

"So?" Sunita looked at the toilet, then looked at me. "Are you gonna piss or what?"

"No, I don't need to piss, I need to talk!"

"Well, I do need a piss, so you'll excuse me." Sunita insisted. She hiked up her skirts, pulled down her tights and plonked herself down on the loo. "What?" she demanded, when she saw that I was still glaring at her, half furious, half panic-struck.

"Of all the men in the fucking room, you have to chat up Carlos?"

"What's the big deal? You don't want him," she pointed out. "I heard you deny it three times, he's not your boyfriend, you don't want him for a boyfriend, you would never even consider him as a boyfriend."

"But that doesn't mean I want you humping him," I said sullenly.

"You're mad, you know that?" she accused me, followed a few moments later by "Hand me the bogroll?" I reached behind her and grabbed a fresh roll to give to her. "It doesn't work like that. You can't just squat a man like that. You don't want him, but you won't let anyone else have him? That's ridiculous!"

"Can you not just, for once, just... just leave him alone, because I ask you to?"

"Do you want him for your boyfriend?" asked Sunita, standing up and shaking out her skirts, aligning up the slit so that it would fall open right. "If you actually want him, he's yours. Just say the word, and I will back off."

"No," I grumbled, feeling absolutely trapped and cornered. Why the fuck couldn't I just lie, if it would throw Sunita off the scent? Because, to be honest, I was more than a little disappointed with the way that Carlos had reacted like every other dog with a bitch in heat, when confronted with the typically gorgeous and alluring Sunita for the first time.

"Then let someone else have a go, alright?" said Sunita, opening the door and stepping out into the ladies' room. She washed her hands, then opened her handbag and powdered her face, pinching her cheeks to bring up the colour before back-combing her hair to make it stand up all about her face like a lion's mane. Standing beside her, I felt like an oversized, ugly, gawky kid, standing in man's cast-off suit.
"Suni, he's more vulnerable than he looks, OK?"

Sunita re-applied her lipstick, then smacked her lips at herself in the mirror. "Good, I like them a bit vulnerable. Actors and musicians, they're always so insecure, deep down."

"Suni," I wailed, even as I trailed her out to the main room. The party was ebbing slightly, the crowd clearing out, but there was Carlos, still sat on the divan, though with three fresh glasses of red wine at his elbow.

"Where's Evie?" I asked, casting my eyes about but failing to see her.

"She went home with Raj," Carlos practically cooed.

"And you didn't see fit to stop her?" I demanded.

"After 18 years with that wet rag, Harry, I think she actually needs what Raj has to offer," Carlos replied with a smirk.

"And Alice? What have you done with Alice?"

"Alice," explained Carlos. "Was invited to a late dinner with our leading man, his wife, and the Culture Editor from the Telegraph. Rather a coup, I'd say. Would you ladies like some wine?"

Suni accepted a glass as she sat down next to him, letting her slitted skirt fall open almost all the way to her buttocks. I sat down beside her, grabbed a hunk of fabric, and tossed it across her almost bare thighs to make her decent again.

Carlos laughed aloud as he handed me my wine. "Your wine, Madame Prude."

"Fuck you," I retorted.

"I've been trying for two months; you keep saying no," Carlos rejoined, in a half-mournful, half completely flippant tone.

Sunita smirked as she sipped at her wine, parting her legs slightly so that the extra fabric slid off again. I couldn't help but see Carlos' eyes slide in the same direction.

"Wimbledon," I practically hissed.

"No," Suni snapped. "That only works once. And I've already told you. If you're not getting on the last train, then the train is leaving without you."

"I'm going home, then," I announced, still glaring at her.

Carlos looked back and forth between us, as if completely confused by what was going on. "Do you want me to call a cab?"

"That won't be necessary," I snarled. "The bus leaves from just round the corner."

"It's late. Do you want me to walk you to the bus stop?" he offered.

"No!" I howled. "I hope you both enjoy yourselves! Have a bloody good time!" I turned, fighting the tears that were threatening to roll down my face, and practically ran off.

I didn't start crying until I was safely outside, in the cold air. I didn't stop crying again until I was in Herne Hill, sitting on the top deck of the bus until all the other passengers were already on the way.
down the stairs, and the driver started flashing his lights as if he was worried I was going to stay and just sleep there.

Cursing the stupidly thin velvet swing-coat I'd put on in the earlier, warmer part of the evening, I ran home hugging myself. I turned on the heating as soon as I got in, then flung myself down next to the radiator, my teeth chattering, though that was probably distress as much as cold.

I picked up my phone and turned it off so I wouldn't hear it not ringing, ignoring an excited message from Alice detailing her dinner. But then ten minutes later, I turned it back on and dialled Suni's number. It went straight to voicemail. Of course. We'd all turned our phones off at the beginning of the play. Did that mean she was still at the theatre, or... well, I knew all too well the other circumstances under which Suni turned her phone off. I turned my phone off again and threw it at the wall.
I cried myself to sleep. I cried when I woke up on Saturday morning, and cried as I walked about Herne Hill Market like a zombie, because sourdough boules and rare breed steaks now reminded me too much of Carlos at Borough Market. I got home and turned my phone on, but there were still no messages. I turned it off again, but plugged it in so the battery wouldn't run down.

I spent Saturday afternoon lying on the sofa, watching sad films and crying. Then gave up and went to bed, watching old episodes of Space Station Nebuchadnezzar on my laptop. "All love is unrequited," cried Commander Petrova, as the freedom fighter who had loved her desperately, unrequitedly, lay dying in the med-lab, having given his life to save her own. I could never picture Carlos doing anything that deep, that romantic. Saving someone else's life at the expense of his own? It would mess up his hair.

I woke stupidly early on Sunday morning, my back and neck cricked from having slept curled around the laptop. Fuck. When I turned my phone back on, there was still nothing. Come on. I had been incommunicado for over 24 hours at this point. Did not one of my friends give a fucking damn about me? Oh fuck it. Suni was still in bed with Carlos, it was obvious. My guts ground with deep despair at that thought. Evie was probably sitting backstage at the Old Vic, being fed grapes by her actor lover. Alice... I had no idea if Alice was now conducting a sordid affair with the Culture Editor of the Telegraph, or having threesomes with Cumberbatch and his lovely wife.

I went for a jog around Brockwell Park, hoping it would sort my head out, but it didn't help. Neither did the long, hot soak in the shower. I turned my phone on, saw no messages, and turned it off again. My friends were all dead, and Carlos... Carlos could go to hell.

And then the noise started. An awful, rhythmic, electronic bleating, like an android's electric sheep being slaughtered. I tore down to my kitchen to locate the source of that horrendous sound, then finally found the culprit, underneath a pile of ancient Guardian cooking supplements I'd been intending to try at some point. It was the BT landline I'd had to have installed when I put the broadband in, and never thought about again.

Picking it up cautiously, as if it might explode, I said "Hello?" into the receiver, as if I had forgotten how such obsolete technology worked.

"Don't hang up," said a woman's voice, distorted by the wires. It took me a moment to recognise it.

"Sunita?" I spat.

"I get the message; I know you're not taking my calls right now, but I didn't fuck him, OK? I want you to know that I did not fuck him," she insisted.

"Not through lack of trying, I'm sure," I snorted.

"We went back to his, had a couple of glasses of wine. We might have snogged for a bit, but he wasn't into it. He talked about you, Margo. He asked me questions about you, he wanted to tell me things about you, he went on and on and on about you until the fucking sun came up, Margo. And then he called me a cab - and he paid, because he's a gentleman - and I went home."

"So what," I said, feeling all sorts of weird sensations churning around in the bottom of my stomach. Shit, what if that Welsh cheese I'd eaten the afternoon before had been rancid?

"He's in love with you, Margo."
I stared into my German Expressionist calendar, into the angular face of Conrad Veidt, trying to figure out what the fuck those words even meant. "So what?" I said, and then put the phone down.

I went into my bedroom, and I put on a dress. Mind you, I had to dig through about three years of accumulated debris and discarded clothes to find said dress, but I knew that I owned one. I had bought one, once, on a whim - well, not on a whim so much as an order from Alice, who said that a woman was nothing without a Little Black Dress. So I dug out my Little Black Dress, dusted if off and picked lint off it with a roll of cellotape, then put it on. Yes, it fit, but I looked like a scarecrow in the plush black velveteen. Then I found black tights. Those were easier; I had an aunt who gave me two pairs every Christmas and had done since I was 15. They were useful things to have around the house, for fixing broken hoovers and filtering sediment out of homemade beer. I couldn't find a decent pair of girly shoes, so I just put my Doc Martens back on.

I went into the bathroom, and dug through the cabinet, then dug through every last drawer until I found that condom that Suni had given me, ages ago, you know, just in case. Just to have around the flat, in case some man appeared magically in my living room and demanded to ravish me. Then I peered at the rusting label and saw the date. It had expired in 2011. Oh, fuck my life.

Never mind, they sold them in the bathroom of the Railway. I put on my coat, dug in my bag for a couple of coins, armed myself with latex, and caught the train into London. *Come on, just do this*, I told myself, forcing myself to walk along Tooley Street quickly, in case I lost my nerve. It felt so strange to be doing this on a Sunday, without crowds of commuters, so different from the walk I did nearly every day of my life.

I didn't ring the doorbell at Butler's Wharf, afraid that he would tell me to go. I just let myself in, and rode the lift up to the fourth floor and slipped in his front door. The flat was quiet, dead, the front room dark, the curtains drawn. For a horrible moment, I thought he wasn't there, but then I heard the soft susurration of snoring from the bed. As I walked over, fear shook me. What if he wasn't alone?

Of course he was alone, his body flung out across the bed, arms and legs akimbo, with a pillow draped across his head. I removed it, and the snoring stopped. For a moment, I just stood there, staring at him. How many nights had I slept in the same room as him, and never thought to look at him properly, look at his thin, hairless chest, the slightly too broad shoulders, his oddly buff arms, all bare in the over-warm flat. None of the pieces of him quite seemed to match up, and yet his body still made a harmonious impression. No, don't look at him like that, like a problem to be puzzled over, think of him as a man, a man that you desire. But desire, stubbornly, would not come. All I felt was confusion. So I kicked off my boots, and I lay down, in Carlos' bed, next to Carlos' sleeping body, and stretched myself out beside him, feeling like a lamb lying down for the slaughter.

Even in his sleep, he sensed the weight of the bed change, and rolled over towards me. One hand grazed my stomach, then rested there, against my hip. His face started to twitch, then he sniffed. Finally, one eye opened, glittering, in the dark.

"Margaret?"

"Yes," I said, my voice trembling.

He removed his hand, rolled over me, and for a moment, I thought he was going to jump on top of me, but no, he was only reaching over me to turn on the bedside lamp. The impossibly long arm was withdrawn, back to his side of the bed, as he propped himself up against the headboard, studying me, as if not quite believing what he was seeing.
I saw his eyes take in the dress, his brow crinkling with curiosity as he reached out, picked up the hem lightly as if to make sure, yes, his eyes were not deceiving him, it really was a dress, but then he dropped it again. He rubbed his eyes, massaged his unshaven face with his fingers, but when he opened them again, he seemed surprised I was still there. "What are you doing here?"

"Isn't this how you want me?" My voice was controlled now, no longer shaking, but it sounded oddly dead. "In your bed?"

Carlos rolled over towards me, curling his whole body up as he sidled up next to me. Softly, ever so gently, he laid his head against my shoulder, the stubble of his chin rough against my exposed skin, and brought up one of his legs to lay across mine. Wrapping himself around me like a blanket, his arm went, tentatively, first to my stomach, brushing against the velveteen fabric, back and forth, then moving it higher, until his hand came to rest on my breast. I stiffened slightly, but did not flinch. His mouth was against my neck, kissing softly, his nose against my ear, lips soft against my jaw, moving ever closer to my mouth.

Oh Christ, I thought, as his hand closed around my breast, his finger and thumb finding my nipple and slowly, tentatively, starting to pull it to life. His lips were against my cheek now, searching closer and closer to mine. Oh come on, Carlos, I thought to myself. Just do it. Just put your hands up under my dress, then pull it off over my head, your fingertips grazing across every part of my skin. Just roll over on top of me, push my legs apart with the weight of your body. Kiss me, suck my tongue into your mouth, work your cock inside me, not slowly, not torturously, like this, just stab it into me, roughly. Just fuck me as hard as you can, showing no mercy, don't make me think, don't make me decide, don't make me feel. Just fuck me, just make me come, make me claw at your hair, shouting your name aloud as my body betrays me with orgasm. Don't make me have to make this decision. Just do it to me.

But his lips stopped short of my own, and after about thirty terrifying seconds lying completely still together, his breath hot on my face, his hand heavy against my breast, he sighed deeply and pulled away. His hand was withdrawn, his leg moved back to lie against mine, instead of on top.

"What?" I asked, trying to catch my breath, wanting to scream, wanting to protest, wanting the weight of his body and the warmth of his breath back.

"You don't really want this, do you?" he asked quietly.

"What makes you say that?"

"If you wanted this, you would turn towards me and kiss me back. If you wanted this, you would arch your back into my touch. If you wanted me, you would wrap your arms around me and whisper yes, Carlos, give it to me, now, I want you, Carlos, softly, but firmly, in my ear."

"So girls who do any of those things are sluts that want it, huh," I said, trying to keep the fury at being refused out of my voice.

"I didn't say that." He moved even further away from me, raising his head up on one elbow to stare down at me. "You may think many things of me, but this one fact is true: I have never forced anyone, in my life, and I have no intention of starting now."

Fighting conflicting urges to do all of those things - to arch my back towards him, to kiss him, to grab great fistfuls of his hair and pull him towards me, screaming at him to fuck me as hard as he could - and to just collect my things and run as hard and fast as I could away from him, instead I burst into tears.
I didn't think I had any more tears, I thought I had cried them all out over the preceding two days, but it seemed there were always more tears. I crumpled. I curled in a ball, rolled towards him, and buried my head against his chest, just crying and crying.

"I hate it when girls do that," he said curtly. "I hate it when girls just burst into tears, and don't even bother to tell you why. It's manipulative as hell."

"Just shut up and hold me."

He did as he was told, wrapping his arms around me, enfolding me in his embrace, bending his head down to kiss the top of my hair. "Are you going to tell me what this is about."

Slowly, tentatively, I wrapped my arms about his waist and laid my head against his bare chest, even as what came out of my mouth surprised me even more. "I don't think we should see each other any more."

"Why?" His voice was restrained, but petulance bled through.

"We're living too much in each other's pockets. We're spending too much time together, too intimately, of course wires get crossed, emotions get confused. We should spend less time together, and you..." My voice wavered, but I ploughed on. "You should start seeing someone else." A full heartbeat's pause. "Someone that isn't one of my friends."

"You were trying to set me up with Evie, only a few weeks ago," he pointed out, then felt how my whole body stiffened in his arms. "This is about Sunita, isn't it. About what happened on Friday night."

Oh, congratulations, Captain Obvious, I wanted to spit. But I resisted the urge and buried my face deeper against him. "It is, and it isn't."

"It seems rather like it is."

"It is about Sunita, but it isn't about you." I paused, feeling for words that were still too tender to voice, even eight years later.

"I feel like I should probably put on a pot of coffee, but I'm worried to let go of you in case you run. I don't have the time to play tag right now."

"Oh, Christ." I sat up, rubbing my eyes. "Fuck, it's Sunday, you probably have a matinee you have to get to."

He glanced at the clock across the room. "You've got three hours. I don't have to be there until two."

"No, no, I am keeping the butler from his duties, oh fuck, why did I even come here," I mumbled, looking around for my shoes.

Carlos shook his head. "No. Your timing, as always, Margaret, could not be worse. Ben doesn't do the Sunday matinee, that and Monday are his contracted time off. It's my big debut. As Valmont."

"Fuck! You hate me, don't you. You should be resting, preparing yourself, learning your lines, doing your blocking or whatever..."

"No, I need you to tell me, now." There was the hint of irritation to his voice. "Because if you don't tell me what it is, I am going to spend the whole afternoon worrying about it, and be unable to
concentrate on my performance or stay in my character. So I am putting on a pot of coffee, and you are telling me, no matter what it is."

I sat, snivelling, as he climbed out of bed, feeling like the most rotten bitch in the world.

But he paused before he left the room, looking back at me with mingled fury and fear on his face. "You have no idea how close I came to..." His voice trailed off as I saw the tenting in his calvins. "You should count yourself lucky indeed that I am possessed of such discipline and self control."

I heard him walk through, first into the bathroom - wondering if he was going to relieve himself manually - and then, after a few minutes, into the kitchen. Lying back, I pressed myself into his bed. It smelled like him, like his sweat, like his hair product, like that faint, musky, masculine scent, so I rolled over, and inhaled deeply, cursing his self control. That proved it, didn't it? It wasn't actually my body he wanted; it was the sheer unavailability of me. Or maybe it was worse. This was... a thing with people, especially men, who had read my stories on the internet. They read those intense, carnal, erotic tales full of self-determining women who knew what they wanted sexually and went out and got it, and they expected me to be like that. And when I wasn't, when I was just plain, ordinary me - shaking, scared, confused, ambivalent - well, no one wanted that. People read my novels and expected an exotic, interesting, intoxicating creature. What they got was me, somehow both complicated and yet intensely boring.

Finally, I got up, sick to death of weeping, wiped my face dry with his sheet, then padded through into the kitchen, to find him standing at the sink, smoking furiously. Feeling like an absolute bitch, I walked over to him, put my arms around his waist, and pressed my face against his back. For a second he tensed, but then he just reached down and touched my hand, squeezed it slightly, then patted it.

An awful, reckless mood overtook me briefly, and I was tempted to move my hand downward, to search between his thighs, to see if he had spent his erection, or if he still had anything left to give to me, but I pushed him away, and dropped my arms from around his slender waist. "I'm sorry," I said.

"It's alright." He shrugged, deposited his cigarette in the ashtray, and went to pour two cups of coffee. "Milk, no sugar, right?"

I nodded, then picked up the cigarette, taking a long, deep drag off it, savouring the dampness where his lips had just been. "Please."

He sat opposite me at the table, and gestured for me to take the other cup of coffee. "So what is it, between Sunita and you, if it isn't me?"

I took a deep breath. "You know I used to be married, right?"

He shook his head. "Well, no. I knew there was a partner, once, with whom you bought the flat, but I did not know you were married."

I nodded slowly. "I was, indeed, married. Paul and I originally bought the flat together when we were still married."

"Paul?" said Carlos, smirking. "I fucking hate that name."

"You're not going to believe this, then."

"Oh no."

"That's an awkward coincidence." He looked like he was trying very hard not to laugh.

"It is an awkward coincidence. If this were a novel, no one would ever believe me. But that was indeed his name." I took another drag of his cigarette. Paul - my Paul - had also been a smoker. I still missed it, sometimes, even though I'd quit after he left. Carlos looked at the cigarette, frowned, then shrugged and lit another.

Still sucking on the cigarette, I launched into the story. "I'd known Sunita since school. We were at boarding school together, pretty much inseparable in the way that girls are between the ages of about 14 and 18. But then we went to different Universities. She went to Brighton, I went to Goldsmiths. But Britpop was happening all around us, we both ended up in bands, we played gigs together, lived together in cheap digs in Camden. Did our first tour of the US together, my band supporting hers, which is how I know so much about shitty venues in NYC."

"What were you called? I was really into Britpop, we saw every British band that ever played at Brownie's or the Mercury Lounge. I wonder if I ever saw you?"

"God I hope not." I shook my head, blowing the smoke away. "I'm sorry, I'm getting sidetracked again. I do that, I go off down tangents rather than say, straight out what I mean to be saying. What I mean is, Sunita and I were close. I trusted her. Implicitly. I was actually glad that she and Paul got along. And though she was not Maid of Honour - that was the singer of my band - she was in my bridal party when we got married."

"I think I can see where this is going. Ouch," said Carlos quietly, handing me his cigarette when mine burned down.

"Yes. My husband left me for Sunita. My best friend. And what hurt the worst was, this was not some spur-of-the-moment, carried away by passion thing. This was a long, careful affair, that they hid, and systematically lied about, for four fucking years."

I sucked deeply at the cigarette as Carlos reached out and patted me gently on the hand. The pain came and went, sometimes it was just a dull ache, sometimes I barely even noticed it, but today, that pain, that pain was still as fresh as the day I found out.

"I only found out by accident, too. They didn't even have the guts to tell me. Betrayed by technology - a mobile phone. He left his mobile at home one day, still plugged into the charger. I was trying to work, it irritated me, the way it kept pinging with text messages, so I went over to try to figure out how to turn the ringer off. While I was trying to figure out how to set it on silent, I accidentally opened one of the texts. It was from Sunita. It was very explicit, detailing everything she planned to do to him - at lunch that afternoon, when they were both planning to say they were at a business meeting."

"Oh Christ, I am so sorry, Margo."

I shook my head, ploughing on regardless. I had to get it all out; once I started telling the story I couldn't stop, until it was all over. "There were dozens of messages in his inbox, all of them filthy. I forced myself to read them, I read them all. They never mentioned me once. Not at all. Not even 'oh, poor deluded Margo, she's such a fool for not realising'. It was as if I just didn't exist."

I took a deep gulp of my coffee, and Carlos slid over to the counter to freshen our mugs.
"I went to our computer, in our home office. We used different browsers, to keep our privacy - not that I ever thought it mattered. It seemed a gesture of trust, that I used Netscape and he used Explorer, so we didn't get our bookmarks and our hotmail accounts mixed up. I am not proud, but I opened his Explorer, and I read his emails. Four years, Carlos. Four years, it had been going on."

"What did you do? Please tell me you changed the locks and told him to get the fuck out?" That seemed oddly moralistic for the normally quite relaxed Carlos. Maybe I was rubbing off on him.

"I wish. But no. I waited until he got home. I waited, with the phone on the kitchen table in front of me, and print-outs of some of the more choice emails. And I confronted him with them. I asked him to explain."

"I wouldn't have given him that much."

"I was still in love, you fool," I sighed. "I know that some marriages grow cold and familiar after a decade, but I was still very much in love with my husband. I wanted it not to be true. And at first, he tried to deny it - he tried to make out that Sunita was delusional, that she had actually hallucinated the entire thing, and that he was the helpless victim of a mentally unstable woman."

"He honestly expected you to buy that?"

I shook my head slowly. "I sat at that table, my heart breaking. If she's delusional, I said, why are there so many replies?" I paused for another sip of coffee. "The game was up, then. He knew it was over. He went upstairs, and he packed his things, said he was going to Sunita's. You know, up until that moment, if he had confessed, if he had apologised, if he had taken the responsibility, and said, I'm sorry, it happened, but I won't see her again, I was foolish enough that I might have taken him back. But no. He just threw up his hands - this is too difficult, you're making a scene - and he was gone."

For several minutes, there was silence between us, as Carlos just looked at me, his face horror-struck. "But..." he finally tried to venture, though he stumbled over the words. "How... I mean, you and Sunita are friends now."

I nodded slowly. "They were together for two years. I made other friends. Evie - who I'd gone to University with - moved down to London and lived with me for a bit, when I was at my worst. Then Alice, who I knew from the internet, moved to England to be with her soon-to-be husband. As difficult as it was to manage financially, I re-mortgaged the place and bought out Paul's share of the flat. But that was the end of being in bands and a freelancing lifestyle. I sold out, sold my guitars and got a proper programming job."

"I was wondering why your flat had so few instruments, for someone who said they used to be a musician."

"Your flat doesn't have any instruments, either," I pointed out.

"It's not my flat."

"I meant, the photos of your house in New York."

"I quit music," he shrugged. "I never wanted to see another bass guitar again. I have a computer workstation, though."

"I didn't see it in the photos..."

"There's a reason I have a two-bedroom house, and it's not for Gaius... There's a part of my life that
I need to be able to shut the door on, to remind me that it is over. But you're getting off topic again. How did you and Sunita ever become friends again? Paul is... he's not in the picture any more, is he? She didn't mention a boyfriend."

I shook my head slowly, a cruel smile forming across my lips. "As I said, they were together for two years. Then, when Paul got that windfall of the lump settlement from our flat, he up and left her... for her younger sister."

"Oh my god."

"They got married, on that lump sum. As far as I know, they are still married, and Sunita barely talks to her family, because they took her married sister's - and the grandkids' - side. Oh god... I mean, I spent ages dreaming up elaborate revenges, punishments for Sunita, but what he did to her was way, way worse." I paused to suck my cigarette down to the filter. Carlos lit me another one. "She came... grovelling to me, wanting to know if I was at all interested in wreaking some kind of revenge on him." I laughed coldly, without humour. "But after two years, my desire for revenge had rather gone cold."

"You don't seem like a woman who lays down grudges that easily."

I shrugged resignedly. "I found out... so much about Paul and his secret life... lives... while I was scrubbing him off my computer, that after a while I came to see that I had dodged a bullet, not being around when his house of cards fell in. In a way, Sunita did me a favour exposing all those lies. And it wasn't just the sexual lies. It seemed that every damn thing he'd ever told me, about his life, and about our life together, it was all a lie. He was deep in debt with the Inland Revenue for a start - if I hadn't bought him out of our flat, they would have taken it. If we hadn't divorced, there would have been a lien on my salary."

"Can they do that?"

"They can do pretty much anything they like - they do not fuck around."

"How did he get in so deep?"

"Paul was a club promoter - and fancied himself a DJ and a bit of a 'sound artist' on the side - as well as working as a solicitor. I thought the club thing was just a lark - a hundred pounds, maybe two hundred pounds here or there. He didn't keep records, there were no accounts. Except the clubs he promoted at - they kept accounts of how much was taken at the door. Saturdays in the West End - that could be a thousand, two thousand pounds a pop. Now I knew he didn't keep all of the money - though I had discovered a certain unaccountable amount was going up his nose every week..."

I saw Carlos flinch as I said it, saw his lips purse as if understanding something for the first time. "A coke habit," he said quietly.

"Yes," I replied, trying to keep my voice dispassionate. "It turned out Paul was also hiding a massive coke habit from me. And yes, in the midst of it all, he tried to blame his poor life choices on his coke habit. The affair, the lying, the embezzling... he wouldn't take responsibility for any of it. So no, when I hear someone try to blame their bad behaviour solely on cocaine..."

"I'm sorry," Carlos said, very quickly, as if grasping intuitively that that was at the root of my distrust for his own historical excuse-making. "I never meant it as an excuse, or as a reason to not take responsibility for my choices. But if you lived with someone who lied about a habit, I can see..." But fortunately, though I saw questions flicker across his face, he seemed to sense my need to get the story out, and dropped it. "So is that where all the money went? On drugs?"
"Well, some of the money was genuinely paid out to bands, paid to DJs, staff, etc. But to the Inland Revenue, it looked like we had an extra fifty thousand pounds a year coming through our hands."

Carlos whistled appreciatively. "I always knew I should have stayed a DJ instead of a bass player. Money for nothing, and your chicks for free."

"Hardly. That was the other lie that collapsed in on itself after he dumped Sunita. In order to make time for his affair with Sunita, he had been lying about his billable hours at the law firm. He made up a whole phoney client that he billed for his time, saying he was at meetings, when he was with her. He even charged hotels and dinners oh his work credit card to hide the expense from me! After so many years without a payment, his employer started to get suspicious about this mysterious client who took so many of his billable hours but never seemed to settle with accounts. They could have sued him to reimburse the money - they could even have had his license revoked - but no. All those Oxbridge boys, they look out for one another. He was just quietly let go, without a reference, mind you, but it could have been a lot, lot worse. So he was actually unemployed, right when the Inland Revenue came after him. Nice twist of fate, there."

"The tax man as karmic redistribution," said Carlos. "I rather like that."

"Something like that. It took them years to sort that mess out, but of course, the Banks family are so wealthy - they took care of it eventually."

"Nice for him."

"They did it for the grandkids, not for Paul," I snorted. "But while it was blowing up, Sunita and I started getting together, every other week, just to compare notes on the karmic redistribution against Paul. We would lock our phones away somewhere we couldn't get at them to drink-n-dial, put away a bottle of wine or two, and compare notes, compare stories, and just rip him to pieces."

"Two birds and a bastard," laughed Carlos.

"Something like that. One night, while we were at it, Evie dropped by to return a box set she'd borrowed off me. She stayed, and had a drink, and had a moan about Harry - she was still living with him at that point - and two miserable cows became three. Pretty soon, we stopped bothering with the moaning about men, and it just became an excuse to put our phones away for the evening, drink and watch terrible films. Alice came by one time, for a Space Station Nebuchadnezzar marathon, and after listening to us bitch for two hours straight, she said that the three of us were so wicked, so evil, and so funny, we should record it. It was a bit like MST3K, but with more misandry, at first. Alice uploaded the recording to the Goldsmiths faculty website, and it became an instant hit. The podcast was born, and somewhere along the process, Suni and I found ourselves actually friends again. But..." I paused, wondering how I had managed to smoke so many cigarettes.

"But you never really trusted her again."

"Well... I trust her as much as I trust anyone."

"But you don't trust anyone."

"Well, do you blame me?" I shrugged lightly, though the question was anything but. "You should have a shower and get going to the Old Vic. Your public awaits."

"Will you come with me?"

"I... I shouldn't. I meant what I said about us living in each other's pockets. We should see less of
each other. We proved, this morning, we don't want a... carnal relationship. So we should let each other be. Go and find someone else."

His mouth set, a grim line, as he stared at me. "This is a final warning, right? It's so not gonna happen."

"Something like that."

He stood up, then sat back down again, his face urgent as he leaned forward towards me, even as I was suddenly very aware of the wiry muscles of his bare chest, his pale skin glistening only a few inches away from me. "You and me - with your history, and my history - we would be really bad together. We would be toxic for one another. I understand that. I understand where you are coming from, and why you are the way you are, now that you've told me. But we would trigger each others' worst insecurities, live out each others' worst nightmare. I need to stop using morally demanding women as a stick to beat myself with. That's something I've discussed over and over with my therapist. I can't be your cad. And I refuse to make you into my conscience. But... But! Can you and I really not be friends?"

"I thought we could, but I think we need to be, actually, friends, and not live-in not-lovers. You need to stop being my not-boyfriend."

Carlos sat for a moment and stared at me, that old argumentative light suddenly sparking in his eyes, his jaw grinding, like he knew he should not do this, but there was just some madness in him, some desperate need for precision that was going to make him pipe up and contradict me anyway. "Margaret, that doesn't make logical sense. It was clearly a joke when Evie first said it, but 'not-boyfriend' is not a real thing, it was a purposeful absurdity. So it is not a logical category of human interaction... How can I stop being a not-something, without becoming the thing?"

"Listen to me, Carlos." I had to fight the urge to flick the curl of his forelock away where it had fallen into his face. "I have the spare keys to your flat. I keep a toothbrush round your house I stay over so much - and a spare change of clothes in your cupboard. That's the behaviour of people in a Relationship. Our relationship is not in the category of 'romantic relationship', of that I'm certain. But the way we're living, I cannot be certain that our relationship is definitely 'not-romantic'."

He shook his head defiantly, chewing on his lower lip like he was really struggling with this. "Nope. This is starting to go a bit too Shroedinger for me. You're saying we both are, and aren't in a relationship, in some quantum universe somewhere?"

"No, you're still thinking in Boolean Logic - on / off, yes / no, true / false. But it's not like that - look, I deal with this every day in programming. In databases, if you don't fill in a binary Boolean value where the database is expecting one, it creates something called a NULL value. 1 would be a yes, 0 would be a no - but this NULL is something else. It's definitely not a yes, but the computer can't say for certain that it's a no, either. So if you try to query it, it just spits out an error and refuses to count it either way. It is an unknown entity, neither a yes nor a no."

I saw understanding dawn in his eyes. "It's like a blank space."

"No, it's worse than a blank space. It is a non-space. A vacuum. And you know how nature feels about those."

He smiled wryly. "So you see me as not a yes, but not definitely a no, either. You view me as a kind of unknown, undecided category that you can't assign a value to."

"I'm afraid so."
"You know, I think I actually kind of liked that about us. That you and I weren't in a category, we were in something else, something we were figuring out as we went along." What was dawning in his eyes now wasn't just understanding, it was hope. "So how do you deal with these NULL values in programming?"

As much as it hurt, I knew I had to kill that hope. "Well, you can deal with it one of two ways. You can write a bit of code that tells the machine, if you find a NULL, treat it as a no. Or you can force the data entry, and manually populate all NULL values with a no."

The light died in his eyes. "So what you need to do right now is forcibly populate me with a definite no."

"Yes."

"I see." He stood up and pulled his dressing gown tighter around him as he walked out into the corridor. "I'll take that shower now," he said, with slightly trembling decisiveness. But then he stopped, and turned around, looking at me with an aching expression. "But I would, still, like you to see me perform. At least once. It would mean a lot to me. Come with me to the theatre tonight?"

"Alright," I agreed quietly. "I'd like that. But then I go home, OK?"

He left his bike at home, and we got the bus together in uneasy silence. Both of us had too much on our minds to talk, sitting at the back of the bus. An understudy taking the bus to the theatre... I wondered if Carlos ever missed his rock star days of being ferried around in a luxury tourbus with a driver. Was this a step down, or a step up, for him? I could see his lips moving, reciting his lines, while me, I just tried hard not to think about what had happened - and what had almost happened - between us. A ticket inspector got on at Borough, but as I was digging for my Oyster, the packet of condoms fell out and flopped onto the floor.

Carlos handed his Oyster to the inspector, then bent down to pick them up. He stared at them as the inspector walked away, before holding them out towards me. "You were... actually serious? About sleeping with me this morning?"

"I..." I stuttered over motivations that now seemed totally obscure to me. "I wanted to be prepared, just in case you didn't exercise that fabled self control."

His face was dark, an unreadable mess of conflicting emotions. "Did you actually want me to force you?"

No, I wanted you to love me. But we both know you don't, no matter what Sunita says. You're in love with the idea of the unattainable, not with me. "I don't actually know what I wanted. But I think it is genuinely for the best that we didn't."

"Look, take them," he insisted, still holding them out towards me, but I hung back nervously, afraid of what he might be thinking now.

"No, you take them. Use them. I'm serious - get yourself a proper girlfriend. Ask the lovely Teri out for aftershow drinks."

Carlos sighed deeply, then spirited them away into some deep inside pocket of his jacket.

The house was not completely full on a Sunday afternoon. Indeed, some people had given their tickets in for returns upon realising that the star was not in attendance, which meant that I managed a better seat than Carlos had expected - though, granted, he was not quite able to procure me a box. There were less fangirls there to swoon over Cumberbatch, but there were more kids and old
people. With Carlos off preparing, I had time to study and observe theatregoers in much more detail than I had on the opening night, and I found them fascinating. But then the house lights dimmed, and I sat back, and prepared to try to lose myself in the story. And when Carlos strode onto the stage, I forgot everything else.

I'll be honest; I doubted my decision again and again during the play. And not even because of the seductive qualities of Carlos in very tight silk knee breeches. It was a genuinely odd experience, to see two such different actors play the same character over the course of one weekend. It just reminded me of all those early long, spiralling email conversations with Carlos. And here was the proof of everything he had been saying - the same play, the same character, the same words, the same director. And yet Cumberbatch and Carlos were like night and day. Cumberbatch had played Valmont so restrained, so controlled, a consummate manipulator and seducer. Carlos, on the other hand, was rawer, more fiery. He played the part with an ambiguity and an intensity where you were never quite sure if he was the sly, emotionless manipulator - or if he genuinely felt and meant everything he said. When Cumberbatch reformed at the end, and claimed he had fallen in love, it seemed one more pose in a long series of calculated poses. When Carlos did, one tended to believe him. I couldn't tell you which of the two was the better actor - though, if the press, if the fans, if Hollywood was to be believed, it was clearly Cumberbatch. But I certainly saw how different they were, and how much skill was possessed by each.

I missed those email conversations, to be honest. I missed the ferocious energy of them. I missed the unfiltered... no, that wasn't true. I missed the ability to go back and edit and polish arguments before Carlos could leap on the weak link in the armour. But then, I realised, the other thing I missed was the slight emotional remove. It was safe to flirt, and shamelessly, with Carlos by email. It was not safe to flirt in person. It was safe to absolutely and completely lose my temper, and tell him exactly what I thought of him in email. In person, I was always slightly distracted by those mocking black eyes.

When the play finished and the lights came back on, I thought of just turning and going out with the crowd, of taking the bus home and letting that be the end of it. But Carlos had given me a pass, and specifically asked that I come backstage after the performance. A backstage pass. After all these years, how weird it felt to be holding one of those again. But that said, I had never been backstage in a play's theatre, rather than a concert hall or club.

I made my way back, and asked for Carlos' dressing room. I found him at an almost stereotypical lighted mirror, having his wig removed by a stylist.

"I feel bad now, I should have stopped and got you a bottle of champagne or a bouquet of roses," I teased.

"Ha!" said Carlos, waving the assistant away now the wig was off, and reaching for the cold cream and facial wipes. "Well, come on, out with it. What did you think?"

For a moment, I considered teasing, considered spinning out the conceit that I knew nothing about drama and couldn't concentrate on plots, but the worried expression on his face warned me to tell the story. "I thought you were bloody good, actually. I thought you were a lot more convincing than the other bloke."

"Ha!" said Carlos again, thumping his dressing table with pleasure this time. He looked so pleased I knew that was the right thing to have said.

"And I have to say, again, that you are right. About acting, and the importance of actors. This was a valuable lesson, and I want to thank you for it."
"That is music to my ears," said Carlos, swabbing his face with a wipe, the natural colour slowly returning where the greasepaint was wiped away.

"How did you feel about it?"

"Nervous as hell. And I was distinctly... unsettled for much of it."

"Sorry," I cringed.

"No, I think actually it gave me the right emotional tenor." He smiled. "OK, I completely skipped a whole block of the text during the second act, but my colleague covered it, and I don't know that anyone else noticed... Was it horribly noticeable to the audience?"

"Not at all. I couldn't even tell you which bit you skipped."

"I noticed," said a voice behind us. I turned to see Teri, still wearing a housemaid's outfit. "You're lucky Amelia is such a consummate professional."

"I'm sure you would have eaten me for dinner, had I made the same mistake with you," Carlos drawled.

Teri did not reply, she just fixed him with such a look.

Spotting my chance, I shifted and prepared to go. "I should be off, really..."

"So soon? You only just got here," Carlos protested, looking up at me.

I shot him a pointed look, then glanced up at Teri. "So nice to see you again, Teri."

"Likewise," she said, with a cut-glass accent that made it quite clear she felt anything but.

I prodded Carlos, and he did actually turn towards her. "Are you going for drinks afterwards, Teri?"

"I don't know. Perhaps. Perhaps not. I'm feeling a bit fatigued with people."

"I know a charming little pub down on Lower Marsh. Perhaps I could take you there, if you would prefer a more intimate setting?"

Her eyes flickered towards me. "Is your housemate coming with us?"

I shook my head pointedly. "I'm not coming, no. And..." I dug in my bag, and found the spare set of keys to his flat. "Since I've moved out, and I'm not your housemate any more, really, you should have these back." His face was tense, but finally accepting, as I dropped them onto the table in front of him. "You were magnificent, you really were. You are a splendid actor," I told him, as I bent down to kiss the top of his head. "Thanks for the ticket. I'll be seeing you. Delighted, as always, to see you again, Teri. Enjoy your drinks."

I walked out with my head held high. I did not look back. I got to the bus stop, and the 68 pulled up right in front of me. I went home, I did not pass Go, I did not collect $200. I went home and collapsed into bed.
Mondays for me were normally quite busy at work, so I used the extra half hour I didn't spend at Carlos' flat to come in early, with a large latte and my breakfast in a bag. Over the course of the week, our old friend, the Ukrainian Hacker complaint seemed to have sprouted not just legs, but wings, and eventually tentacles, data showing up all over the web. Every time Hardip and I thought we had a grasp on the scale of it, the bit we were investigating would suddenly disappear, seem to tunnel through a solid firewall, and then pop up in another location a hundred miles away.

"This isn't Ukrainian Hackers," I muttered as I readjusted the parameters of my algorithm. "This is Japanese fucking Knotweed."

Hardip and I both ordered supper to be delivered to the office, and sat there until nine at night - nearly midnight Ukraine time - until we had gathered the necessary evidence for Judicial to take to the tribunal the next day, proving that the same particular bit of code was behind all of the seemingly unrelated attacks. Luckily, Joan signed off on an expense slip for a taxi home, so I stumbled to my bed, and was asleep before 10pm. So much for the glamourous rock star life of a podcasting celebrity.

Without Carlos, my life soon resumed its normal shape. I spent long hours in the office, throwing myself into work I had maybe become a bit lax in pursuing when I thought there was someone who wanted to see me at 5pm. I didn't hear from him all week, and thought that was a good sign.

On Thursday, Sunita was, perhaps understandably, a bit weird with me. "Have you heard from Carlos at all this week?" she fished, a little too obviously, as I handed over my iPhone.

"No," I said, but refused to let anything further slip.

"He's not answering any of my texts," she announced, slightly accusatory.

"I'm not surprised," I said, a little more snippily than I intended.

"I met him for lunch yesterday," Evie said, a little hesitantly. "Are you OK, Margo?" She looked into my eyes, a little too concerned.

"I'm fine," I assured her

"Why would she not be OK?" Sunita demanded.

"Look, Margo, I don't want you to hear this from me, if you don't already know," Evie hedged.

"If it's what I think it is - what I hope it is - it's fine. Honestly. I'm the one that ended things with him. Not that there was anything to end." That was a blatant lie; there clearly had been or I wouldn't have needed to end it.

"Well, would someone tell me, please?" Sunita was growing agitated at being left out. "What is going on with Carlos? Is he OK?"

"He's well. He seems happy," Evie shrugged. "He told me that he had met someone, that he had started a new relationship - someone from his theatre company, it sounded like."

"Thank fuck," I ejaculated, before I could stop the thought from escaping.
Sunita glared at me. "You are insane. You are actually, clinically insane."

"Who's insane?" asked Alice, finally bringing up the rear as she walked into the kitchen with a big basket of food.

"Carlos is apparently seeing someone..." Sunita hissed. "Someone that isn't Margo."

Alice looked directly at me. I shrugged. "No," she protested. "Carlos can't be seeing someone else. He's in love with Margo, we all know he is."

"Well, obviously not, since he's dating someone else so quickly," Evie shrugged, with her typical all-men-are-bastards expression.

"I asked him to start dating other people. To put some emotional distance between us," I said quickly, wondering why I still felt the urge to defend him from Evie.

"So you asked him and he just did it, that quickly? Sounds like he does love you," Alice pointed out, quite nonsensically. "Not that it's fair to... to... what's her name?"

"Teri," supplied Evie, with a definite frown.

"Teri? Wait, I've met her, she seemed perfectly nice," Alice replied.

"What, am I the only one whose messages he isn't answering? That's not fair..." complained Sunita as we all walked through into the living room.

"Suni, you should probably open a can of sit down and shut the fuck up," warned Alice, and we all sat down to eat.

"Girls, let's get this straight. It is with my express approval. Suni was right. It wasn't fair what I was doing - I didn't want to date him. So it wasn't fair for me to expect him not to date anyone else. It's... better this way. For both of us. Now I do not want to talk about it again. If you want to talk about Carlos' relationship, talk to Carlos about it. Not me."

We recorded the podcast after dinner, though I was somewhat less than effusive than usual. Luckily, Alice and Sunita went into overdrive on the whole Benedict Cumberbatch thing, going over every aspect of the play in excruciating detail. I only had two minutes to go over the weekly releases and the weekend gigs, but that was OK - I really was not that excited about Computer Music and the whole Hey QT thing so it wasn't like I had much to say about it anyway.

I was still subdued on the tube back to London Bridge, as Alice eyed me carefully. "Are you OK? I mean, are you really OK?"

"I am, and I'm not. It all just brought up a ton of stuff I thought I'd dealt with, and I clearly hadn't."

"Sunita?" asked Alice, though we never talked about that.

I shook my head quickly, but under Alice's wary eye it turned to a nod.

"He does love you," she assured me, reaching over to pat me on the hand. "I'm sure of that."

"Yeah, and that's what hurts. This would be really easy if there were no feelings, on either side. But there are. On my side, too, though I've been lying, even to myself, about that. But we are both adults, and we both know that some emotions are better not acted upon. We would be so bad for one another."
"Why?" probed Alice. "Because he's a flirt? Honey, that doesn't mean anything. That's just the way some men are. It's about ego, not about desire."

I shook my head again. "No, I mean, it's... it's not even about that. He's... he's a child. He still believes in Polyamory, for one thing."

"Oh, lawd," laughed Alice. "I mean... no. Obviously, it works for some people, but I don't see you going along with that. No way."

"Does it work for some people? I'm not so sure," I snapped. "Nineteen year old girls who don't want to be tied down to a relationship just yet. And the forty year old men who want to fuck them without having to leave the comfort and safety of the family home? Fuck that shit, seriously."

"Now come on, you know that does not describe either you or him. I don't know what his bag is, but I don't think you can accuse him of that."

"No, I think it is purely emotional immaturity with him. He wants to be in a relationship, but have the plausible deniability that he's not. He wants to have his cake and eat it, too."

"Are you sure that's him and not you?" Alice probed carefully, and were it anyone else suggesting that, I might have smacked them, but for some reason I heard her out. "Seems to me like you want the emotion and the drama - and yeah, the emotional ego thrill - of being in a relationship, but you don't want to commit to something that might be difficult, or painful, or expose you to hurt."

"Do you blame me?" I snapped.

"Yeah, but if you don't make yourself vulnerable, you don't ever let anyone in." The train was at Bank already, so Alice better make this fast. "How long has it been since you dated anyone?"

"I... date," I protested. Well, at least I went on awful speed dating events with Sunita and refused to go out with anyone because all of the options were so dire. Carlos was the first option in... years who had not been utterly dire. In fact, Carlos was quite the opposite of dire, Carlos was annoying, and yet intriguing, like someone had deliberately assembled a puzzle box and left it on my desk with a note saying 'Treats inside. Some assembly required.' "Oh... fuck Carlos," I snapped, and climbed to my feet as the train slid into London Bridge.

"Well, you had your chance, and now he's fucking someone else... because you told him to," Alice shrugged, and dashed off in the direction of the New Cross train with a jaunty wave.

Carlos and I kept true to our words. I didn't text him, he didn't text me. I glanced up at his building on the walk to work, but did not ring the doorbell, and certainly did not stand out on the riverfront, trying to work out which balcony was his, oh no, not me. I went to the movies with Evie on Saturday, and if she was disappointed that it was just the two of us, she didn't say. She had a new love interest to complain about after all - astonishingly, Reg seemed to have stuck around and taken her out for another date, and was due to stay over that evening, so she couldn't hang around after dinner. She didn't see any long-term potential in the relationship, at all, but she was enjoying the attention - and he was exactly the burly blond Viking type she lusted after in films, totally unlike the skinny and slightly balding Harry.

Sunday, I met Alice and Robert for brunch in Greenwich Market, and the weather was starting to improve just enough that we followed it with a brisk walk up the park. The days were lengthening, the snowdrops were out, and crocuses were starting to push their heads through the mud. A week since I'd spoken to Carlos. As we stood at the top of the hill, looking down across London, I tried to make out Waterloo and the Old Vic, thinking of how he would be preparing for his performance,
his big moment, getting his face painted and his wig adjusted down over his forehead. Was he happy? I hoped that he was. Was I happy? That was slightly harder to answer.

By the next 4BAABS taping, no one even mentioned Carlos. True, there was a slightly more pressing issue hanging over the group: Alice arrived twenty minutes late, and, practically purring with pleasure, announced that she had been offered a weekly column on film and theatre by the culture editor of The Telegraph.

"Oh my god, congratulations," I gushed, pouring her a glass of wine. "I'd have got champagne if I'd known."

Evie glared. "You can't seriously be thinking about taking it."

"Why not?" Alice shrugged.

"Well, is it a conflict of interest?" Sunita hedged.

"Nah. I spoke to my boss at Goldsmiths, and they're pleased as punch. Another feather in my cap, as far as they're concerned," Alice said proudly.

"I meant the podcast," Sunita muttered into her drink.

"Come on." Alice rolled her eyes.

"No, you come on," sputtered Evie. "The Torygraph? Are you fucking kidding me?"

Alice shook her head, but I could see already that she was starting to get her hackles up. "It's really cool, actually. For my first piece, they're flying me to New York to review Selma! How amazing is that?"

"Oh, of course they are," sneered Evie.

"What?" snapped Alice, whirling on her.

"I cannot believe that you, of all people, are falling for this. It's the Torygraph. They've recently been the focus of a dedicated twitter campaign highlighting how White and how Male their entire staff of writers are," Evie grumbled.

"So? At least they're doing something about it."

"Come on, don't be so fucking blinded by your Anglophilia that you don't see what they're doing. If Fox fucking News offered you a job commentating on race issues, would you take it?" Evie started to rant.

"Race issues?" snapped Alice. "I do not like the direction this is going."

"Don't fall for this, Alice," moaned Evie. "They are the most right-wing paper in Britain, and suddenly they're hiring a black woman to cover an American film about the Civil Rights Movement? You don't feel like you're being... used, at all? This doesn't smack of tokenism to you?"

"Oh, just come out and say it, why don't you?" snorted Alice. "You think they only hired me because I'm a black woman? Would you stop and just take a look at the things you are saying right now? Because you're sneering at them and calling them right-wing, but that's the most racist thing I've ever heard come out of your mouth yet, Evie."
"No, I didn't mean it like that," Evie protested.

"Oh, really?" Alice's eyes flashed. "You didn't? You don't think that there's any other reason that a black woman with a PhD in Cultural Studies from Columbia fucking University could get hired as a film critic for a British paper, other than tokenism? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"That is not what I am saying! Not at all! Don't twist my words. But what I'm saying is that when the Devil asks you to dance, you might want to look at his motives before you say yes."

Alice went on the attack. "You can't stand it, can you? You're jealous, aren't you? That of all of us, it's me that's worked this podcast thing into a paying job. Me, the outsider, me, the American. And it's me that your precious broadsheet wants."

"I'm not jealous. I am just pointing out that the Torygraph's motives might be a little less noble than you are assuming, because I am more familiar with the cultural landscape of this country..."

"Oh, don't you cultural landscape me..." snapped Alice.

"You just don't even know what you're dealing with! You might want to research that publication's history a little more closely..."

"I know exactly who I am dealing with, in this situation," Alice pointed out. "I mean, you want to talk tokenism - you, who is going to Law School on a special program to recruit QCs from non-traditional backgrounds, and you play your Northernness, and you play your Working Class fiddle every damn chance you get, so you can ride your token into Law School..."

"Wow, that is out of order!" boomed Evie, in a voice that probably cleared entire courtrooms."

"No, you are out of order. How is what I'm saying there any different from what you're saying about my new gig at the Telegraph?" Alice countered.

Finally, Sunita decided to intervene. "OK, maybe you both should take a step back, and..."

"You know what?" Alice said, drawing back to sit on her heels. "Maybe I do need to take a step back. Maybe I need to take a step right out of here. It's late, I have a ton of work to do, and I am catching a flight to New York straight after my lecture tomorrow. So you know what, I think I'm just going to go home and pack."

"But... but the podcast," protested Sunita.

"Maybe I need to re-examine my priorities," said Alice carefully, pushing her almost-full glass of wine away from her. "Now that I have an actual paying gig on top of my lecturing and teaching, I don't know that I have the time to commit to this little hobby any more."

As Evie sulked, and Sunita stared, gobsmacked into silence, Alice climbed to her feet, and walked out of the room. Gesturing for Suni to stay put, I clambered up and followed her into the kitchen as she retrieved her smartphone from the drawer.

"Look," I said quietly. "I know you're angry right now, and I know you're busy this weekend, but you're coming back, right? You're not quitting?"

"I don't know, Margo, I don't know."

"Come on, I know you and Evie always scrap... I mean, yeah. She was pretty out of order back there, but..."
Alice shook her head slowly. "It's not just Evie. I'm serious. Taking on a newspaper column is a pretty serious commitment in terms of time. They interviewed me quite thoroughly to make sure that I would have the time to do it, on top of my University job - something Evie didn't even think to consider. And even if Evie's right, and I am a token - which I don't think I am, and I wouldn't take the job if I thought that was their intention - we both know I'm going to have to work twice as hard and write twice as well to be taken even half as seriously. This is a serious offer, and I intend to take it seriously, and even if she's right and this is an awful, Tory, right-wing rag, the only way to change it is from inside."

"Why are you letting what Evie said get to you so much?" I probed.

"You don't think I thought all those things she was saying, myself, when they offered me the job? I can always undermine myself twice as well as any of you guys can. So I do not appreciate being undermined from without as well as within."

"Do you wanna go, and have a glass of wine, and talk about this?" I offered, reaching out and touching her gently on the arm. I always thought of Alice as completely fearless. It was odd to hear that she had her insecurities, too.

She paused for a minute, as if thinking it over. "I do... but I really do have to go home and pack. Maybe next week?"

I nodded. "OK. Have fun in New York..."

I walked back into the living room to find Sunita setting up the recording console. "Can you give me a linecheck, please, Margo?"

I stared at her. "We're going to do it without Alice?"

"I don't see why not. It's not as if we cancel podcasts when one of us goes on holiday. We've always just taken up the slack," she shrugged.

"But..." My heart was heavy, and I didn't want to admit that I hadn't prepared enough to cover for a full third of the programme. "This is kind of short notice."

"It'll be fine," insisted Evie. "I can handle the film stuff and Suni will do television."

"You know," I said reproachfully. "You could stand to go a bit easier on Alice sometimes."

"As if Alice would want me to 'go easy on her'," Evie snorted.

I stood my ground. "I think you were unfair on her."

"She was unfair on me, though, insinuating that I was only annoyed about the whole thing because of racism. Oh yeah, that's it, that's the only solution. It's not anything to do with distrust the Torygraph and distrust Torys..."

"Please, do not start this up again?" I asked quietly.

"I know these people," insisted Evie. "I know how they operate, these slimy upper class bastards. They use people. I'm just afraid for Alice - she's so blinded by fandom and by these cute, upper-crust accents. You know the Cumberbatches have... picked her up socially? They've been trotting her out for dinner parties, oh look, here's our new Black best friend. I don't trust them."

"She's right, you are so fucking jealous," I snapped.
"Yeah, it totally sounds like jealousy to me," agreed Sunita. "Fuck, I mean, I wish I were getting invited to dinner with the Cumberbatches."

"I am not jealous. I don't even like him as an actor," protested Evie.

"How is Alice going to dinner parties with the Cumberbatches really any different from me meeting Carlos online, and going on to hang out with him?"

"I was pretty suspicious of Carlos' motives until I met him. The guy's just lonely in London," Evie shrugged. "All of his friends are back in New York."

"You know, sometimes there's nothing suspicious to it. Sometimes you do just meet the people who create work that you admire, and there is a mutual appreciation. If you both appreciate the same things, it can become a genuine friendship. Sometimes it does just happen." I shrugged helplessly, still not entirely sure how the entire thing with Carlos had really happened, but aware that it had.

"I hope for Alice's sake that you're right," Evie grumbled.

"Can you two stop arguing, and give me a line-check?" Sunita interrupted.

I went to Hollywood Green as usual on Saturday, though Evie had warned me that she wouldn't be able to stay on for dinner afterwards, as she was meeting Reg for a quick supper before watching his play. As someone who supposedly wasn't even a fan of Cumberbatch, she sure was seeing his play an awful lot.

But she stopped before she said goodnight, headed to transfer to a different train. "Look, don't shoot me if you don't like the question, I am just the messenger here, OK?"

"Depends on what the question is, and who it's from." I looked at her oddly, fearing the worst. "What?"

"Look, I'm going to be seeing Carlos tonight, obviously..."

"Oh. Tell him I said hello." I breathed a slight sigh of relief, then realised with a start that it had now been two weeks since we'd spoken.

"I will... but he asked me, to ask you, would it be alright if he emailed you?"

I stared at her like she was nuts. "Why would he need permission to email me?"

"Because you told him you needed a break. And I do believe that he is actually trying to do the right thing, and heed your boundaries. Asking me to ask you meant that you were perfectly free to refuse and tell me to tell him to fuck off," she shrugged.

"I am perfectly capable of telling Carlos to fuck off myself," I laughed.

"I know you are, and maybe he's feeling a little fragile right now."

I paused, and considered it, remembering how I had, several weeks ago now, told Suni that Carlos was a lot more vulnerable than he came across. "OK. yeah. Tell him I'm fine with him emailing me. I'd like it, in fact. Hey, you know what, I'm going to email him when I get in this evening, so tell him to expect a message from him when he gets home from work."

"I will." She kissed me quickly on the cheek, then stood up to run for the next train as soon as the
doors open.

"And you know, you could stand to apologise to Alice," I called after her.

"Fat chance," she called back, and was gone.

Hey Carlos, Evie tells me you've been asking after me. I do appreciate your showing the consideration of checking. But yeah, I'm fine with your emailing. In fact, I quite miss seeing your name in my inbox. How are you? How's the play? Hope all is well, XO, M

In truth, I missed more than just his name in my inbox. But if anything, I was surprised at how my life hadn't been turned upside down by the... breakup, or whatever it had been. My life had gone on much as usual. I hadn't pined after him. I hadn't constantly refreshed my inbox, waiting for messages that hadn't come. I'd just quietly got on with things. There, that was proof I wasn't actually in love with him, wasn't it? If I'd been in love with him, I'd have been gutted, devastated, not just mildly pleased to have been asked after.

On Sunday morning, bright and early, a reply arrived.

Margaret! I am well. The play is 'splendid', as the luvvies around here have taught me to say. But the main reason I wanted to email was: I spend last Saturday afternoon browsing Camden Market, and you will never guess what I found. I thought this might be an amusing blast from the past for you. - C.

I opened the attachment and stared straight into my own face from 20 years previously. What...? How...? It was a digitally clear photograph of a somewhat battered 7" single with the name The Jelly Babies emblazoned across the top. In the front was a familiar looking blonde girl in one of those stripy ringer shirts that no one had worn since about 1997, standing next to a boy in sunglasses and a silver shirt, but just behind them was a tall girl, all in black, grinning dementedly out from under a shaggy mop of red-and-black striped hair. My old band.

How on earth did you find that? OMG, I'm so embarrassed. - M

Unfortunately, I do not currently have access to a turntable, so I've been unable to play it. I've been asked around and hope to locate one soon. The man from whom I purchased it swore he had a bootleg of said Jelly Babies supporting Stereolab at a club delightfully called the Sausage Machine, and if he can find it, he will rip the cassette to MP3 for me - for a small fee, of course. I assume that were I actually able to obtain such an important document, you would of course require a copy? - C.
I'll spare you the suspense and warn you that it was in all likelihood terrible. Those early gigs were quite drunken affairs. If you can find the Peel Session, though, that is probably worth a quid of two. - M

Or you could do me the honours and just rip it for me? I've checked on Spotify and found only a dodgy 70s pub-rock band with truly ghastly beards, with the same name. - C.

Sorry! I would if I could, now that the cat's out of the bag, but I lost most of my record collection in the divorce. - M

That is a shame. Right! I shall make it my mission, while I am still in London, to locate a copy. - C.

Oh! And before I forget. I shall endeavour to throw a small soiree - well, more of a gathering, really - at my flat, a week from Monday. Would it be an undue imposition, if I were to ask for your attendance? I believe Reg is bringing your friend Evie as his date, so you would hardly be stuck talking to yours truly all evening, I promise. Yours as ever, C.

I would be delighted to attend! Can I drop by after work, or should I walk around the block a few times while you prepare? (I can even volunteer to help set up, if that would help matters.) - M

Volunteer gratefully accepted! The canapés, etc. will be courtesy of Mr Marks and Mr Spencer, but I am certain we can put you to work. See you then. - C.

We. I read the email over a few times to make sure I had not mistaken the Royal We, then decided to take it as a warning. Carlos and Teri were giving the party as a couple. It was good to know in advance, rather than be blindsided by it. But no, it was fine. I could handle it. A couple of times I almost panicked, and thought about asking a male friend to accompany me - Hardip from work was always happy to stop off for a drink before going home - but decided I didn't want to risk a grilling or recriminations from Carlos. I would attend, alone, and talk to Evie if it was too dreadful.
By way of concession for being alone, I decided to dress to kill. I changed into a pair of slinky black velvet trousers - far too nice for the office - on the way out, plus a form-fitting satin shirt and a snazzy black and white striped tie. I did my hair, and actually put on some make-up, piling on the mascara as a form of psychic defence. Then I dug around for the nice bottle of Scotch single malt I'd specifically bought for the party, put on my coat, and walked the 3 blocks to his flat, ringing the bell for admittance.

"Hello?" I was not prepared for a woman's voice answering the buzzer.

"Um, this is Margaret. I said I'd drop by after work to help prepare for the party?" I stuttered.

"Oh, right." Buzz. "I'm sure I don't have to remind you of the way up!"

Was that a dig? No, stop it. Don't be paranoid. Oh Christ... I suddenly remembered Carlos' little fib about my being his 'housemate'. If Teri had seen the flat, she would instantly have recognised that it was impossible for two people to platonically share that space. Except for the minor detail that I hadn't actually lived there! What if she thought I had been his actual, live-in girlfriend? Fretting nervously, I checked my hair in the elevator's mirror, then took a deep breath and stepped into the hall. The door wasn't open, so I had to knock, but to my relief, Carlos answered, looking ever so slightly dishevelled, a flour-dusted apron over casual clothes. Oh shit, had I got the dress code wrong? Well, better overdressed than underdressed, right?

"Margaret!" he cried. I had been prepared to shake his hand politely, but he simply threw his arms around me and squeezed. Was he drunk already? No, just excited. "So good to see you! I love parties... I had forgotten. Oh, you remember my girlfriend, Teri, right?"

Girlfriend? They'd been going out for three weeks, surely that was a bit premature? But it was too late to tease him about it, because there she was, emerging out into the hall from the kitchen behind him. "Yes, we've met twice before now," I told him, extending my hand to greet her. Teri did not hug, though I had to suffer a single air-kiss. "Lovely to see you again."

"Likewise." Her voice was faintly icy, though she looked positively incendiary in a crimson asymmetrical gown with one shoulder bare and the other swathed in elaborate drapery. OK, compared to Teri, I felt underdressed again.

"What are you making? I thought Marks and Sparks were providing the food." I asked casually, following them through back into the kitchen.

"Well, that was the plan, but nubbins here accidentally bought some-assembly-required breadrolls which require actual baking," Carlos explained apologetically, gesturing towards a gooey mass of dough he had been attempting to roll.

"Ach, you don't need to roll them, you just chop them up, put them on a greased baking sheet and pop them in the oven," I chided him.

"Well, if it's so bloody simple, you do it!" sighed the exasperated man, pulling off his apron and slinging it around my neck.

"Bloody?" I teased. "You're from New Jersey, Carlos." The rate at which he was picking up British slang was slightly alarming.
He rolled his eyes theatrically, then glanced down at his ruined clothes. "Oh god, I still need to shower and change my clothes... what should I wear?" he fussed.

"Just wear your suit, darling," Teri soothed him, and for a horrible moment, I was actually glad that she was there to bear the brunt of his neurotics, until she rather possessively added "The one I bought you, not that dreadful thrift shop thing that looks like someone died in it."

"It's vintage," Carlos protested slightly defensively.

"The one with the velvet pointing and the purple paisley lining? I liked that one," I added, coming to his defence.

Teri looked me up and down for a half-beat before snorting dismissively. "It looks like something you'd see teenage goths wearing outside the World's End in Camden, and let's face it. Neither of you are on the right side of 30 to get away with that nonsense much longer."

Carlos' face fell as he shuffled away. "OK, I'll wear the new suit."

"And the red shirt, I think, Carlos, not the black one?" she called after him as he retreated to the main room. "It's a party, not a funeral." She turned towards me with a totally put-on long-suffering look. "He's a very handsome man, Carl, when he puts his mind to it. But his taste in clothes leaves a lot to be desired."

I stared at her, open-mouthed, lowering my voice in the hopes that Carlos wouldn't hear me. "You do know he was considered a style icon in New York for most of the Noughties."

Teri remained unimpressed. "The Colonies are so hopeless. Always have been. I know you let him get away with incredibly bad style choices, but that's all going to change now I have him."

It took every ounce of self control I possessed not to burst out laughing. I wasn't quite sure which conceit amused me more - either the ridiculous idea that I had had anything to do with Carlos' clothes (and the accompanying delusion that I had been his girlfriend or something?) - or the faintly pathetic notion that Carlos was some kind of dress-up doll to be passed between women, rather than a grown man more than capable of dressing himself, and very well at that. Shaking my head and biting my lip to stop myself from replying something I would definitely have regretted, I turned back to the hopeless mass of bread dough and tried to shape it back into vaguely roll-like objects.

Outside, I heard Carlos shuffle past on his way to the loo. "I'm going to shower now," he called back. "Answer the door if anyone buzzes."

"Will do," Teri called back slightly too quickly, as if still trying to assert her claim to possession, of both flat and man. For a moment, I desperately wanted to disabuse her of the notion, tell her, 'I have never lived here. I am as much of a guest as... well, as you are, sweetheart!' but there was another part of me, and a not-very-nice part of me, that was almost enjoying her discomfort. Moving over towards the oven, I checked to see if the pre-heating was done, but it had not warmed up yet. "That light will go off when it's ready," Teri informed me officiously.

I looked at her very carefully, before saying in a very low and even and slightly chipper voice I knew tended to absolutely exasperate Carlos "I know how to operate the oven, thanks."

That was mean, I knew it. I shouldn't have done it, but something about her tone had just irritated the shit out of me. But even so, the way that her face changed in response caught me by surprise, the pleasant smile she kept up around Carlos absolutely demolished, like an unfashionable facade
to be replaced by a glare of complete disdain. It was only an instant before she recovered herself, wiping her face clean like a consummate actress and replacing the look of furious hatred with a slightly more haughty version of her previous smile, but it was too late. We both knew I had seen it.

"In case I need to remind you, you don't live here any more," she said quickly, her smile not even slipping.

I should have just said it, should have steered the conversation out of the deep waters into which we strayed: 'you are mistaken; I never lived here. Carlos and I never had any kind of sexual relationship.' But really, I felt the fault lay with her. If she had made any kind of overture, any kind of friendly gesture, any gesture of solidarity, rather than that weird territorial grab, I would have made a friend of her. When I'd walked through the door, I'd wanted to be friends with her. After all, it had been me that had wanted Carlos safely off in another relationship. I had no designs on the man. But it irked me, the way her face and her behaviour utterly changed the moment he walked out of the room.

Across the room, the oven clicked, and the pre-heat light went off. Shaking my head, I turned back to the bread, and picked up the baking sheet. But as quick as a flash, Teri was across the room, and had seized the tray from me. OK, fine, if putting a tray of bread in the oven is what's going to make you feel secure in a relationship, you go right ahead, madam. But as I held up my hands in concession, she made an unpleasant face. Oh, should I maybe have warned you that Carlos smeared that side of the tray with butter while he was greasing it?

"You could at least open the oven door for me," she almost hissed.

"I didn't realise you wanted my help," I purred back, opening the door wide enough for her to slip the tray inside, but not wide enough for all the heat to escape.

"You're right. I didn't ask for your help," she shot back as she manoeuvred the tray inside. "I don't know why Carl invited you to come hours early, but it looks like I'm stuck with you."

"Perhaps he wanted you and I to get to know one another better?" I suggested.

Oh god, I knew that was mean, a caustic soda-bomb wrapped in sugar coating but the look on her face, it was totally worth it. I wanted to laugh aloud, it was so farcical. I wanted to reach out and pat her on the head, and tell her I'm not your enemy. Please, let's just stop this.' Well, maybe without the patting on the head. Perhaps that was a bit patronising. But there was some cruel child inside me that felt like I had a butterfly on a pin and was enjoying watching it squirm. Or maybe I was the butterfly and Carlos was the pin. I had no idea, I just knew it was compulsive, seeing all these misunderstandings building between Teri and I and not doing a damn to stop them.

"Would you like a drink?" I had never heard an offer sound so much like a threat.

"Oh, that reminds me. I bought a little party gift." I had almost wanted to forget about the expensive bottle of scotch, wanted to just leave it in my bag and take it home - but no. It was for Carlos, rather than for her. "Just my contribution to the party."

Even the whisky seemed to irk her. "Oh, you shouldn't have." Her nose twitched with irritation as she surveyed it. "Would you like this, then, or would you prefer a glass of wine?"

"I'll wait until after we've eaten for the Scotch." Did she think I was an utter fucking savage? Or was that the point?
"Red or white."

"Red."

"Oh, maybe Carlos can open it. I'm having white."

"Never mind, I can open a bottle of wine." Just to irritate her further by showing I knew where Carlos kept both the corkscrew and the wineglasses. We sat in silence at opposite ends of the table, sipping, until the silence grew unbearable. "So you live in Highgate?"

"Oh yes, I have a little maisonette near The Flask. Almost Hampstead."

Bitch. I said nothing, just smiled the vague smile of Londoners comparing property values. "How delightful."

"And you, you live in South London, yes?"

"Oh yes, I live in Herne Hill. Almost Dulwich." I didn't mean to parody her phrasing quite so cruelly, but there it was.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Dulwich is so pretty. I had a friend who went to school there."

Of course she did. For the love of god, do not ask me if I know your snotty, stuck-up little boarding school mate. (As if I didn't go to boarding school myself.)

But at that moment, there were the echo of footsteps in the hall, and Carlos appeared in the door. Carlos, wearing a black suit that was almost startlingly conventional in its cut, far more conservative than I was used to on him. With his hair slicked back, wet and almost jet black from the shower, the black tie and bright red shirt flattered his fair skin so that his face looked almost porcelain in the bright halogen light of the kitchen. My face must have lit up, because he turned to me as if for approval, and beamed with the pleasure of being looked at admiringly. But Teri's voice rang, sharp, in my ear.

"Oh god, Carlos, no, not that one."

Carlos' face dropped. "What? You said wear the red shirt, not the black one."

"That's scarlet, darling. I'm wearing crimson. We'll clash."

Looking slightly dubious, Carlos shrugged. "The other one is also red, dear."

"The dark red one, darling. Come on, I'll help you find it." She rose, smiling sweetly, and led him back out towards the main room.

I took a large sip of wine, then closed my eyes and pressed my fingers against my eyes, remembering a bit too late that I was wearing mascara. Shit, well, that was going to be smeared now. But I couldn't shake the feeling that I had made a mistake. I had made a horrible mistake.

But across the kitchen, the timer on the oven buzzed, an all-too-quiet tone that Carlos and I had often missed when arguing in the other room, and risen twenty minutes later to find our pizzas horribly burned. I walked over to the oven, peered in the window to check if the rolls were ready - they were - then removed them and turned the oven off, glad to have something to do as I prised them from the baking sheet and tipped them onto a wire rack to cool.

About ten minutes later, Carlos reappeared in a shirt of an infinitesimally darker hue - though it
made his skin shine just as prettily - and spotted the bread. "Lovely," he decreed, and reached for one, though it burned his fingertips to try and pinch one off the rack.

"Really, you shouldn't have, Margaret," said Teri, pointedly.

"They would have burned," I shrugged. Seeing Carlos still struggling with the burning hot bread, I speared it with a knife and tossed it onto a plate for him. "Butter?"

"Oh god, yes, butter!" he enthused, licking his fingers as I dug in the fridge. "Melting butter on oven-fresh hot baked bread - is there anything better? Oh, you were so cruel to give Dieter a gluten intolerance. Of all the impositions... I truly felt for the poor man. But I suppose you would say it was comeuppance for his misadventures..."

I laughed aloud, forgetting the detail with which Carlos seemed to have memorised the stories. "It wasn't comeuppance, it was just a reaction to his medication. Now unless you're going to say that his Chlamydia was divine retribution..."

"Of course it was, it was divine retribution for his homoerotic passions, and you are always a vengeful deity, you little moralist," he teased. The bread was now cool enough for him to prise it apart with his fingers, and he had offered me a piece, and the pair of us stood, blowing and scoffing and huffing over burned tongues like a pair of schoolchildren.

Teri looked deeply unamused. "Who on earth is Dieter?"

Carlos had opened his mouth and was about to say something, an animated light dancing in his eyes, but I felt suddenly alarmed. This was not something I wanted shared with Teri. She did not strike me as the type to understand. I caught his eye and quickly shook my head. "It would take far too long to explain."

Letting out a little chuckle, Carlos reached for another roll, but Teri slapped his hand away. "Leave some for the guests, please?"

"Margaret is a guest. Would you like one, Margaret?" Carlos teased, and honestly, there was a childish part of me that wanted nothing more than to eat every last one of those rolls just to spite Teri, but I remembered my manners and pulled back.

"No thank you, Carlos." This with a little moue that provoked a giggle and an echoing pout from my partner in crime.

The buzzer for the door went, out in the hall - that was always much louder than the oven timer - and Teri straightened up, shaking the drapery of her dress back into place. "I'll get that shall I? If you two can manage not to eat the entire dinner by the time I come back..."

A brief flicker of annoyance moved across Carlos' face for a fraction of a second as he watched her retreating back, but then he turned back to me, his face slightly clouded. "Do I look alright?" he asked quietly, his long, elegant fingers twitching towards the knot of his tie.

And at that moment, looking at his face, almost ivory-white in the halogen spotlight, the red of his shirt picking up russet flecks in his black eyes, I knew I had made a mistake. I gazed up into his dark eyes, and I said "You look beautiful."

For a tiny instant, pain registered, first in his eyes, and then rippling out across his face, his narrow lips, but then he set his jaw, and twisted his mouth into a mocking sneer. "Oh, come on, Margaret. Play the game. You're supposed to tell me I look hideous, ugly, repulsive, my prognathous chin is so large it could single-handedly re-occupy the Rhineland, my nose is so monstrous it blocks out
the sun, small children follow me and laugh at my unsightly visage..."

I shook my head slowly. "But you're not," I said very quietly. "You look beautiful, to me, now."

The sneer dropped from his mouth as he stepped towards me, one hand reaching out to my elbow, his whole face a question, and I desperately wanted him to say it, wanted him to ask, but at that moment Teri's voice echoed across the flat. "Carlos? Come and meet my friends..."

As soon as he was gone, I let out an enormous sigh of breath I hadn't realised I was holding until he was gone, then turned and found my glass of wine. Stop it, I told myself. This is pointless. This is madness. He only looks so beautiful to you tonight because he's unavailable now. But an unavailable Carlos is a safe Carlos. You can be friends now, without complications. It's what you wanted. And I picked up my glass of wine and drank until that other part of me, the part that kept saying 'no, no, no, no, no, no, no...' shut up.

It was a slightly awkward party. And yes, that is the art of comic understatement. I couldn't face hiding in the kitchen until Evie turned up, so I forced myself to go out to the main room, to mingle, but I found Teri's theatre friends so impossible that I found myself hanging back, drawn towards the stereo for the simple weight of having something to look at.

"Oh, what a brilliant idea," said Carlos, breaking away from Teri's mates to join me by the entertainment centre. "Why don't you put some music on?"

"All you've got is Interpol and classical music, and I don't think you'll think me for putting on Turn On The Bright Lights at a party."

Carlos looked slightly put out, hands on his hips. "Bright Lights is great party music, I'll have you know. I've been to some fantastic parties where it was playing. Hell, we had some great parties while we were writing it."

"I suppose it depends on what kind of parties you go to, and as we both now know, we are decidedly on the wrong side of 30 for that sort of nonsense."

A positively wicked grin twisted Carlos' lips before he wrested it away. "Behave. Be nice."

"Why? You don't like nice girls. You like bitchy girls and goths."

His lips twitched smile-wards as his eyes drifted across to Teri, performing in the centre of the room, her bright blood-coloured dress an eye-catching conversation piece as she chatted with someone I'd probably seen on the television. "Yes, I have always been attracted to difficult women. But they don't always like me. Do they."

Like some great crimson bird of prey, appearing out of a clear sky and swooping down to carry off her prize, Teri poached him straight out of our conversation. "Carlos! Come and meet my simply delightful friends..."

Digging in my pocket, I pulled out my iPhone, and contemplated texting Evie to see when she was going to arrive, but then saw the Spotify logo in the apps. Well, there was one way I'd always survived excruciating parties, back when I was a painfully shy student. I found the extension lead for Carlos' stereo, plugged it into the jack of my iPhone, then started assembling a playlist to get the party off the ground. Blondie. You could never go wrong with Blondie. The Tide is High or Atomic? Oh god no, not The Tide Is High, or Teri really would think that I was after her man. I dialled up Atomic and dropped it on the stereo instead.

Across the room, I could see Carlos' head prick up, his fingers twitching to the beat as he craned
his head back, caught my eye, and mouthed "Tune!"

After about half an hour, I was having the time of my life. Perched on the edge of the sofa nearest the window for the best reception, I had a bottle of wine at my knee, and a whole plate of nibble on the coffee table beside me. People were talking, drinking, laughing, far more animated as the place was filling up, and a couple of people were swinging their arms and tapping their feet like they might actually dance in another song or two. I was sticking to more familiar classics for the most part, 80s pop and 90s indie, though occasionally I'd throw something in just to catch Carlos' ear, and would be rewarded with a quick, appreciative glance from across the room.

He kept coming over, every time he excused himself, ostensibly to freshen people's drinks, and would perch on the sofa next to me. "Come on, let me have a go," he'd beg, trying to snatch the iPhone away from me.

"No way. It's your party. You can't DJ at your own party, it's against the rules," I teased, holding it just out of his reach.

Once, a slightly drunk middle aged man stumbled over, and I was afraid he was going to accost me to request something truly dire, when he approached Carlos instead. "She's really good," he slurred. "Where did you find her, and can I hire her for my next shindig?"


Carlos' gaze shot straight towards me. "And bongo jams a speciality!"

"Never figured you for a Clash fan," I laughed.

Smiling that slightly superior smile, Carlos nodded. "They were Dan Kessler's favourite band at school. He always used to shout that bit at the end of our set when we were still playing shitty kegger parties at NYU. Taking requests now on the bandstand; and bongo jams a speciality!"

"You're kidding me. That's so funny." I was about to rummage through the iPhone to dig out the Clash album it was from, when of course Teri swooped down yet again.

"Carlos, come and meet my entertaining friends..." And every time Carlos would sigh and pick himself up and go off to be paraded round another group of friends as The New Boyfriend. I played Revolution Rock off London Calling, and sat on the back of the sofa, grooving to myself.

At well past 9 o'clock, Evie finally turned up, got herself a drink, and came over to perch on the sofa beside me. "Well, you took your time getting here," I accused her, somewhat sullenly.

"I'm sorry, it's a Monday night, I had to work late, clearing out the weekend backlog of arrests. But you seem like you're having a good time, regardless." She gestured for me to put the iPhone down and talk to her.

"Alright, alright, let me just stick it on a playlist." I switched it over to one of my inspirational jogging sets, then put the phone down between us - shielding it with my body so Carlos couldn't snatch it away. "So apart from work, how are you."

"Great!" She looked over at Reg with a leer that made me think perhaps the backlog of cases was not all that had kept her from the party. "How are you surviving the party? Are you and Carlos getting along alright?"

I shifted uneasily and fiddled with the iPhone some more to make sure the next song would be a
fairly long one. "Carlos and I are getting along just fine," I assured her, and she smiled. "But Carlos' new girlfriend and I... not so much."

"I see." She looked over at Teri, who was currently making a bit of a display of her public affection, clearly for Reg's benefit. To be fair, Carlos did look like he was enjoying it, as he did always rather enjoy being the centre of attention. For a moment, I wondered what the back story was there, then decided I was better off not knowing. Theatre crowds were always so weirdly incestuous. "Does she have anything to be worried about?"

"No," I snapped, rather too quickly. There was no way I was going to tell Evie about that wobble back in the kitchen. "At least not on my end. Carlos and I are getting along so much better now. I think we really can be friends, without all that sexual tension in the way," I lied. Was he really feeling up her bum like that? In public, while she was talking to Reg? Good god, I would never stand for that! I stared, openly, desperately wanting him to look over and catch my eye, but he ignored me completely, thrusting his nose into the nape of her shapely neck. She laughed and pushed him aside, rearranging the folds of her elegantly draped dress.

"You are the world's worst liar. I hope you never have to go to court."

"What do you want me to say? I've made a horrible mistake? I secretly love him, though fuck knows why, and I've stupidly told the man I love to go and fuck a woman I can't stand, to make me safe from ever having to act on this irresponsible, impossible, all-consuming lust? Please! Come on, if that were a novel, the readers would be getting up and storming out and refusing to read any further at such a stupid, pathetic plot twist."

"Don't be melodramatic, Margaret," chided Evie. "You can just admit that you're slightly jealous."

"I'm not jealous!" I protested. "And certainly not of her." Across the room, Teri executed a perfect ballerina turn, then threw her arms around the neck of the latest guest to arrive, collapsing into his arms. For all his talk of polyamory, Carlos looked ever so slightly put out.

But just at that moment, someone else decided to upstage Teri, as there was a definite ripple on the other side of the room, near the door. And holy fucking shit, Carlos was definitely moving up in the world, because Ben Cumberbatch had just walked into his party. And attached to Ben's side was his new best friend, Alice, wearing a slinky dress I had never seen her wearing before. I looked around for his wife, but she of course, was nowhere to be seen.


"You're telling me," she muttered darkly.

I glanced back at Evie. "What?"

"I've got a bad feeling about this," she muttered darkly.

"I dunno. At least she looks happy. Why can't you just be happy for her, for once."

"I'm telling you, you don't know these posh twits like I do. They only pick people up, in order to use them."

"Evie, you know, sometimes the things you say... you do know that I'm middle class, right?"

Evie winked. "It's OK. I don't hold it against you." As I waved at Alice and beckoned her over, she made as if to climb off the sofa and go shooting off in the other direction, but I grabbed her and forced her to stay.
"Hello, Margo. Evie," acknowledged Alice as she walked over. She and Evie had been tense as hell at the last 4BAABS taping, but at least she had turned up. The podcast had limped on, for another week, despite two of its principles no longer speaking to one another.

"Now, Alice," I said, in a light tone that could clearly be read as joking (I hoped). "Where's Robert, where's Mrs Cumberbatch? People will talk..."

Alice laughed lightly, and made a naughty face, stretching, then rubbing her bare arms together. "It's not what you think. We're friends. You're totally wrong about these people, Evie. They're just interested. Ben actually stopped by my work today. I showed him round the department, introduced him to some of my colleagues - he even wanted to sit in on a lecture - my god, can you imagine how my students would react?"

"You should have done it, none of your students would ever give you shit again," I laughed, but Evie remained oddly silent. She had stood up, and was now trying to edge away, out of the conversation.

"Well, he says he wants to come back next week, on his day off." Alice's eyes positively twinkled. Out of nowhere, Carlos suddenly reappeared, draped one of his impossibly long arms around Alice's bare shoulders, then somehow managed to get the other around Evie, pulling them both towards him. "My girls! My favourite girls... how are you?"

"Excuse me?" coughed Alice, just as Evie said "Erm, do what?"

"Apologies, my mistake," laughed Carlos, his eyes flashing with mischief. "My fully independent adult women, with complex emotional and interior lives of your own... how are you?"

"Margo, how have you managed to go this long, without slapping the shit out of him?" asked Alice, only half joking.

"She has actually slapped me precisely twice," quipped Carlos, all bubbly and effusive like he was starting to get a bit drunk. "I rather enjoyed it, to be honest. Made me feel like Cary Grant in a 1940s screwball comedy."

I smiled at Carlos, but shot him a warning glance. "You know, I think I need the loo. Evie, can you take this, so Carlos doesn't get hold of it?" I passed her the iPhone and moved off down the corridor to find the lavatory luckily unoccupied.

Looking the door, I leaned against it for a moment, and took a deep breath before sitting down and relieving myself. I washed my face - or rather, wet it down as much as I could without disturbing my mascara - then grasped behind me for a towel. Oh Christ, the towel he had recently showered with. His scent still clung to it. For a moment, I was tempted to raise it to my face and inhale, deeply, but then tossed it away from me, into the laundry hamper. I dug in the airing cupboard for a clean one, and used that, then wondered if that was one of those impositions I should no longer do, now I was trying not to live here.

Over on the sink, I could see that my toothbrush was gone from the mug, and felt a vague twinge of regret. No, it was right that he'd thrown it away. It definitely gave the wrong impression. But at least it had not been replaced by one of Teri's, just yet. I don't know what devil overcame me, but I found myself snooping in the medicine cabinet - I suppose I was just checking for evidence of female habitation, to see how quickly Teri was moving in on him. But there was nothing that was not familiar. His deodorant, his hair product, shaving cream, the familiar black leather bag that contained his razor and shaving kit.
Some mad impulse made me pick it up. The zipper was open, and there inside, I saw a flash of orange plastic. I dug down and fished it out. There, hidden inside, was my toothbrush. OK, I had no proof that it was mine - maybe it was just one of a million identical orange medium- bristle Superdrug toothbrushes floating around Bermondsey - but it certainly looked like mine. Now that was weird. Why had he kept it? Why was it hidden? But to ask him would mean having to confront my own snooping.

I put it back the best I could, washed my hands again, then returned to the kitchen to fix myself a drink. Watch the booze, though, I told myself, and made it a weak one, interspersed with a few sips of water from the sink. And then I returned to the main room of the party... to find Carlos sitting on the back of the sofa, DJing and poking away at the screen of my iPhone.

"Hey!" I protested, snatching it away from him, outraged to discover that he wasn't DJing at all, he was in point of fact rummaging through my messages. "What are you doing?"

"You kept all of my messages," he said, somewhat sheepishly.

"I keep all of my messages. The phone does it automatically," I lied.

"No it doesn't," he pointed out. "You don't have reams and reams of messages from Alice or Evie. You saved mine to a folder."

I blanched to think of what messages to Evie or Alice he might have seen, but then decided to go on the attack instead. "You kept my toothbrush. That's weird, Carlos."

"What were you doing snooping in my shaving kit?" Carlos snapped, outraged.

"What were you doing snooping in my iPhone?" I retorted.

"Touché," he said quietly.

"I wondered if Teri had thrown it out," I confessed.

"I hid it so that Teri couldn't throw it out - you know, in case you needed it again," he hedged, hunching his shoulders like a giant bat.

"What, with all of your beard clippings all over it?"

"I keep my razor clean," Carlos pointed out. That he did; the man was fastidious.


Carlos blinked, as if the question was completely unexpected, as if he hadn't considered that I - or indeed anyone - might be concerned about his welfare or general happiness. "No, I am happy. We're good. It's... it's nice. I think it's good for me. You were right. I needed to just leap back into it - dating and all. When you haven't been with anyone for a while, it's easy to develop this giant narrative in your head - oh, the love that's coming me, the next love, the perfect one that I will give up my solitude for, it will be the biggest, best love that anyone has ever experienced. And it isn't like that, is it. You just have to date the next person, and see if they're nice and if it works for you." He didn't look sad as he delivered this speech, he just looked rather thoughtful.

"And it is working for you, you and Teri?" I probed, not sure which answer I really wanted to hear.

"Oh, I think so." This was delivered with a jaunty smile that did its best to belie the ambivalence of
the words. "We get along well. We're sexually well-matched, we have a good understanding."

"So she's fine with the whole non-exclusive deal," I said cattily.

Carlos cocked his head to one side as he considered me. "Yes, we both agreed since... well, there wasn't really the scope for a long-term relationship, that we would keep things casual. I find it best if you... well, if you tell the other person to simply assume that it's non-exclusive, until both of you agree that it should become exclusive, that works best."

If it didn't bother her, why on earth should it bother me? My eyes flickered across the room, to Teri, still flirting unabashedly with the handsome newcomer.

"Oh, don't," sighed Carlos. "It's not what you think. He's a very famous director who frequently works at the National Theatre. Teri's after a part in one of his plays. It's just how things are done in the Theatre. It doesn't mean anything."

"Oh?" I raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"The trouble with you, Margaret, is that you are just too suspicious. You never give anyone any room to make any mistakes, then get angry with people for not being perfect. Teri's not like that," Carlos enthused.

"Isn't she," I said icily, wondering if I should tell him about the scene in the kitchen. If I'd really wanted to be mean, I could have pointed out: why, if they had such an understanding relationship, had he hidden my toothbrush, of all things. But I kept quiet, more for his sake, than hers.

"She's very open... and she knows simply everyone in the Theatre," Carlos insisted, looking over at her wistfully. "I can't even tell you how many people she's introduced me to. How many doors they could open. She's been extremely helpful over my career..." He didn't even have to add 'unlike you', though it felt like it was implied.

"I'm sure she has," Determined to ignore him, I sat down on the back of the sofa, and started to busy myself with the iPhone, flicking his song selections out of the way with a fingertip and dialling up the next few choices.

"Don't be like that," he sulked.

"Go away, I'm busy. I'm DJing - and I didn't see you exactly helping me with my career by recommending me as a DJ for your friends."

And, with impeccable timing, Teri appeared out of nowhere and swooped down, insisting, "Carlos, darling, come, I've got someone terribly important I want you to meet..." He flashed me one last glance, half desperate, half irritated, then shrugged and went off to be introduced, leaving me to my music.

Just to spite him, I dialled up Everything Is Wrong from the last Interpol album, the new one without him. As the bassline echoed across his flat, he seemed to ignore it, but as Paul Banks' falsetto voice boomed out, he suddenly turned and shot me a wounded look. I stuck my tongue out at him. He cracked a smile and rolled his eyes. I spent the next half hour or so talking to Evie, then slipped out early once Alice decided she was going to DJ, and got out her own phone.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

A giant 'thank you' to Tom, both for the walks on the North Downs, and for introducing me to Kant's obsession with boundary lawsuits, which fit so perfectly with Carlos and Margaret's muddled boundary issues, and the help explaining the convoluted logic of Transcendental Deduction.

I did my best to leave him alone, knowing that it was an itch I should not scratch, for the good of my own mental health. But my life had changed, and in some ways I no longer recognised it.

My Fan Fiction story had stopped dead. I still logged onto the internet every few days, checked Tumblr posts and chatted with fandom friends on Twitter, but the last chapter of Exquisite Corpse was still sitting, unanswered and unfinished in my inbox for over a month now. I wasn't blocked; I knew exactly where the story needed to go, and how to write it. I had just totally lost interest in it. I opened the manuscript up and tried to work on it, after a couple of not-so-subtle hints from Scarlet on Tumblr. But as I read the last few chapters, I stared at it uncomprehendingly. They were just words on a page, they meant nothing to me. Who the hell had written this thing? It couldn't have been me.

I closed it again, and sat down with a book instead, but something was bothering me, and I couldn't concentrate. I wasn't writing any more. I hadn't been writing since Carlos moved to England, in fact. At first, that had been because I was spending every spare moment of my days with him, but now, that just wasn't the case. I just had no interest in writing. Constructing parallel worlds and populating them with amusing characters to be played off against one another did not hold quite so much amusement for me, now I felt like I was trapped in the emotional vice of a romantic dilemma as tricky as any I'd dreamed up in fan fiction. I went back to the computer, opened up a blank sheet and typed.

*I think I'm in love with Carlos.*

No. In black and white, it looked absurd. Delete that. I started again.

*I'm becoming weirdly obsessed with Carlos.*

I stared at the page, then deleted the word 'becoming'.

*I only want him now because he's unavailable.*

That was more like the truth.

*This is unhealthy, and it needs to stop.*

Oh, this is just fucking stupid. I've just got writer's block and none of this is helping. I closed the page without saving, and slammed the laptop shut again.

A week later, I was barrelling down Shad Thames on my way to work, when someone leapt out from under the awning of the cornershop, almost as if they'd been waiting for me.
"Margaret! This is a surprise. Come up for a coffee..." Carlos brandished a carton of milk, as if to prove that his presence on the street was innocent.

"I can't, I'm late for work," I muttered.

"Bollocks. No you're not. I know for a fact that you're on flexitime, and you don't have to be at work until 10," he pestered.

"Bollocks?" I raised an eyebrow at him, refusing to even answer the bulk of the question.

"I know, I know, I'm from New Jersey," he retorted, rolling his eyes playfully. "Come on up."

I found myself following him without even meaning to, caught up in his slipstream. It was warm enough that we were both in shirtsleeves, and I found myself watching the muscles of back moving underneath his light cotton shirt as he opened the heavy door to his building. The width of his shoulders belied the thinness of his ribs underneath, and I wondered if he had been eating properly. Teri looked like one of those girls who lived on black coffee and hyperbole, so I resolved to just go upstairs and make sure that Carlos ate a proper breakfast.

"You owe me a walk, you know," he reminded me, as we caught the lift up.

"Do I?"

"You said you'd take me to the Weald of Kent. You did promise," he reminded me.

"Oh, I suppose I did."

"We should go soon, while the weather is so good." He filled the kettle, then cleaned the French Press as it boiled.

"If you wait a few weeks, the bluebells will be out."

Suddenly, I was filled with a massive wave of longing, wanting to walk through spring woods, the carpets of bluebells underfoot, the bare beech branches overhead just starting to glow lightly green with buds about to burst.

"Blue Bell Knoll," said Carlos with a wink, and started to whistle a fair impression of Liz Frasier. I suddenly imagined him, walking through the carpet of almost supernatural blue, the light of the flowers reflecting up into his face, filled with the wonder of my favourite magical spot, up in the weald.

But reality interrupted my cute little fantasy. "Will we be bringing Teri?" I asked, as casually as if we were discussing a troublesome dog.

"Teri's not much of a hiker," Carlos sighed, shifting his weight from hip to hip like a nervous horse. "I think it will be just the two of us."

I tried not to let a smile of triumph show.

"Unless you wanted to invite Evie and Rog along?" He had his back to me as he filled the French Press with boiled water, so I couldn't see his expression.

"Evie's pretty busy, coming up to mid-term exams. I don't know that she'll be able to take a whole day off for a proper hike," I blurted out.

He sat down at the table and placed the coffee between us. "It'll be just us, then."

"OK."
I took the last Friday of the month off work. It was one of those bright, cloudless April days that really only an English spring could produce. The sky was a bright shade of azure, curving like a dome above the park. I put on my hiking boots, and a tweed jacket, though really I probably wouldn't even need it, then packed some snacks. Bread, soft cheese that would go all nice and melty in my backpack, shortbread for energy, and a hip-flask full of brandy in case it got cold up on the high weald.

Carlos, looking impeccably cool behind dark sunglasses, was already waiting for me at London Bridge, wearing well-worn jeans, but boots that looked suspiciously clean, a black turtleneck of some kind of hi-tech wicking fabric, with a nylon wind-cheat tied around his waist. We bought coffee and Krispy Kremes for the train journey, found our platform and settled into our seats, sliding out of London before the commuters even started to flood in.

We left the station silently, shrouded in mist that still lined the valley bottom - just wet enough for Carlos to put his anorak on - then made our way up a muddy track, deeply rutted, between old high hedges, up into the Downs. I thought I was in good shape, but the incline was too steep to talk, so we climbed in silence, wisps of mist quickly blowing away until we emerged, blinking, into bright sunshine. As we climbed a wide, grassy swathe, I suddenly stopped him and gestured to turn around. And there below us, the sun drying up the last patches of smoky fog, lay the calm, still, Kentish farmland, while up on the uncultivated hills lay the swathes of ancient woodland, clinging to the chalk downs.

"The demarkation is amazing, from this height," Carlos observed, his hawk-like eyes peering off into the distance. "England really does resemble a patchwork quilt from above. Field, field, forest, brook, all marked out in little tiny squares. Small, old, medieval."

"Not quite medieval," I observed. "The current field pattern is post-Enclosure. In the olden days, it would have been a lot more open - the fields marked out in hundreds. But, of course, the woods would have been a great deal larger."

"But that deeply rutted road we came up - that was ancient, surely?"

"Yes, that's an old Holloway." I smiled, but he seemed disinclined to move, holding his hand to shade his eyes as he tried to peer down it, but all we could see was the course of ancient, gnarled hawthorns following it down the hillside.

"There's a Radiohead album cover that's almost exactly like this, isn't there," he mused, gesturing out into empty space, taking in the field boundaries and deep hollows.

"Not exactly. Their downs are out in Oxfordshire and Wiltshire. Chalk and cheese country."

"Wiltshire," he repeated, finally turning around and following the slightly flattened path up the hillside. "Isn't that where Julian Cope is from?"

"Never figured you for a Teardrop Explodes fan."

"It's a post-punk classic!"

"Well, I prefer his solo stuff," I shrugged.

"Of course you do." Carlos rolled his eyes and arched his back. "Have you read the Modern Antiquarian?"

"Of course I have," I retorted, almost insulted that he thought I might not. "But I'm surprised you have, you mouldy old Goth. That's my kind of thing, not yours."
"Chalk and cheese," he laughed. "That's you and me."

"You know that phrase is about the geography, right? The chalk upland which wasn't much good for agriculture, versus the more fertile flood-plain below, which was excellent for dairy farming."

"I did know that, actually," sniffed Carlos, as we walked on, and the wide grassy incline narrowed, a faded signpost and a green acorn sign leading to a hole into the trees. "Another topological demarkation," he observed. "And into the woods we go."

"Into the trees," I sang. "Running towards nothing, again and again, and again..."

"Shut it. You're the mouldy old Goth now," he teased, walking ahead of me until we came to a path wide enough that we could walk side by side. The path was just along the breast of the hill, tangled forest to our left, bare tree trunks blocking out the summit, while to our right, stretched out unimpeded views across Kent. "You know that Kent was obsessed with demarkations and property boundaries."

"Kent? What, William Kent, the antiquarian?"

"Kant," Carlos enunciated more clearly. "Immanuel Kant, as in the philosopher. German, 18th Century, Categorical Imperative, Critique of Pure Reason, you might have heard of him?"

"Your accent," I teased. "After three and a half months in England, really is quite extraordinary."

He ignored me, ploughing on, both across the hillside and into his topic. "He had an interest - well, Kant had an interest in everything - in property boundaries. Jurisdictional disputes, boundary and border disputes in various German principalities of the time."

"It's quite an early preoccupation. The Manorial Court and Manorial Rolls existed to settle ancient boundaries here. Many parishes, in this part of the country and others, would set aside aside certain feast days and holy days - usually at the end of April, funnily enough - for the 'beating of the bounds'. It's supposed to be some kind of medieval tradition, a way of establishing boundaries, pre-dating the use of maps. They would go out with switches and green boughs, and do a kind of precession along the outline of the parish, so that everyone knew where they stood. You can see, looking at this patchwork, why the confusion."

His eyes lit up as he bounded along - it wasn't often that I met someone who walked quite as fast I did, and I was glad of not having to slow my pace. "It sounds delightful. Are there places where they still do this?"

"Some, yes. Though like much else, it may well be a Victorian revival. Why was Kant interested in boundary disputes between German princes, though?" This was just the way our conversations tended to run, meandering off along winding digressions before snapping back to the main thrust of the argument.

"Well, what he was really interested in was the... oh god, do not take the piss out of my German if I pronounce this wrong, but the Deduktion-briefings. The formal filings - what Evie would call the legal briefs - to establish the authenticity of the claim. He was interested in the argument itself, the kind of argument that a jury would find compelling. He was interested in the difference between the proof of the quid iuris - the matter of the Law - as opposed to the proof of the quid facti - the matter of the Fact... Which was the basis of his thinking on Transcendental Deduction."

"This is the bit that I never understood," I grumbled. "It always seemed to be arguing that instead of having facts, that we mentally build categories around; we have the categories first, and assign
"Hmmm, now why does that kind of thinking remind me of someone I know," pondered Carlos, and I couldn't quite tell if he was being genuinely snide, or if he was joking and I was just projecting my own discomfort into his words.

"Well I mean that's it, isn't it. When you're trying to establish boundaries between one property and the next, do you have this arbitrary idea of what boundaries are, and how they should run - straight lines, right angles and perfect geometry, for example - or do you look at the lay of the land, the curve of the hillside, a natural meandering river bank, and adjust the boundaries to fit the actual landscape of the two entities and their specific personal relations?"

He turned his head slightly to fix me with a quizzical glance. "Are we still talking about transcendental deduction, Margaret?"

"We're talking about boundaries," I insisted, though I was no longer certain if we were talking about Kant or indeed Kent or ourselves and our messy blurred personal lives. "And we're talking about the kind of arguments that are permissible or impermissible, the kind of arguments, and proceedings and... activities that would be overreaching, or overstepping."

"Overstepping boundaries, or overstepping logic itself?"

"Honestly, you, Carlos, I think you overstep everything," I muttered, and we were off again our own personal boundary disputes.

Soaring off along the top of the Downs, it really felt at times like we were flying, especially when we passed wisps of low-lying cloud the sun had not quite burnt off. We were discussing boundaries, for hours, as we stared down into tiny fields and hedgerows. Edgelands, Interzones and no-man's-lands. Political boundaries, psychological boundaries and personal boundaries. The boundaries of knowledge; the boundaries of Science. Carlos had Kant and Hume and the assembled mass of the Empiricists on his side, while I had archeology and topology and field-walking for flints on mine. The path would climb, and we would plunge up into deep, tangled forest, with only tantalising glimpses of views between briars and bare beeches. Then the path would abruptly drop out of the treeline again, past startled cows chewing their cud in dewy fields.

We reached a crossroads at the top of the hill, and I consulted the map as Carlos loped down off the hillside and climbed a small hillock. "What is this? There seem to be a small group of them here."

"Tumuli, sayeth the map," I told him. "Barrows. Ancient burial chambers up on the hill. They'd have been bright white with chalk when they were fresh, beacons of the ancestors flashing their goodwill to the villages below."

"Barrows," echoed Carlos, sitting down, taking off his anorak, then rolling up his shirtsleeves and his trousers. "Like something out of Tolkien." He peered at his chalky skin, and frowned. "I'm as pale as a barrow-wight, after this English winter of yours. How on earth do you cope? I'm dying for some sun."

"Sun? In Britain? In April? You're lucky you've got this, mate." Stretching, I peered up at the deep blue sky. Climbing down to join him, I sat beside him as he produced a thermos from inside his pack and started to pour out a cup of coffee.

"I'm afraid there's only the one cup, so we'll have to share," he offered. "Cigarette?" I nodded. This was becoming a bad habit when I was around him. We drank and smoked in silence, the coffee
warming us as our bodies cooled off in the cold morning air after the heat of our exertions. "So which way do we go, T.C. Lethbridge?"

"Along and to the right if you want to carry on the Downs Walk, but if you want to take the detour to Blue Bell Knoll, we turn left, up over the ridge, and down into the secret valley."

"Secret Valley full of shoegaze records. I like the sound of that."

"Cocteau Twins aren't Shoegaze, they're Ethereal. Classic 4AD," I muttered pedantically, before I could even help myself.

He rolled his eyes and offered me the last of the coffee. "I do believe they straddle the Kantian boundary between Post-Punk, Ethereal Goth and Shoegaze."

"Do you think I want your backwash?" I shook my head at the coffee, let him finish it, then off we went.

Up we climbed, through scarred chalk cuts, past the roots of ghostly beech trees, then back down into an ancient Holloway, deeply rutted so that the tree trunks started at about head height. It felt oddly like a graveyard, the bones of the earth exposed under drifts of leaves, even as patches of green were starting to show through in between.

Our first bluebell! It was just off the path, glowing violet in the slanting morning sun. Then another, and another, and then a small patch. Carlos gasped as we passed a shower of blue cascading down a slope, but I shook my head. "Wait, that's nothing."

We walked on, down through a line of ancient trees like guardians, to find that the lee of the hill was sheltered, and slightly warmer, so that the trees were already starting to bud, that slight glow of chartreuse hanging about the tips of branches so that the whole forest seemed to buzz with colour and life, even though no leaves were yet visible. We crossed a stream, climbed up the other side, then walked down off the path into a dell, absolutely carpeted with bluebells, as far as the eye could see, waves and waves of almost supernaturally blue flowers reflecting back the pale sunlight that drifted down between the buds.

"Oh my god." Carlos' voice was as hushed and reverent as if in a cathedral. And the glade looked slightly like a cathedral, the silver-grey of the tall beeches arching off into the sky like columns of granite. He shrugged off his pack, left it on the gnarled root of a tree, dug out his camera and started to wander off, snapping photos. "Oh, Margaret - do me a favour. Take a picture of me here, with my smartphone? I want to send it to my Mom."

"You'll have to wait until we get to the next village. There's no reception here."

"Doesn't matter... please?" He held out the phone, already unlocked for me, but I just opened the camera app, and resisted the urge to snoop.

"Lie down," I told him. "Your pale skin will look spectacular against the blue of the flowers."

"Won't I crush them?" he asked, sounding slightly worried, then took off his sunglasses.

"They're flowers. They bounce back," I assured him. He lay down, spread himself out with abandon, limbs splayed everywhere, back arched. I gestured for him to turn towards me, and he raised his face so it was framed by blades of blue, looking like a Pre-Raphaelite painting in the magical light. He was the perfect model, really, aware of his own beauty, working his best angles, as if he were forming the composition in his mind, green leaves, blue flowers, sharp angle of a pale cheekbone, and that dark hair falling in his face, slick with sweat and now beaded with dew. He
took my breath away. How had I ever thought of him as ugly? His face was like modernist architecture, all angles and planes and perfectly balanced lines.

We snapped more photos, teasing one another and laughing at our boldness. "I'm ready for my close-up, Mr DeMille," he sighed huskily as he leaned back into a halo of flowers, his hair flopping in his face, hands folded behind his head, eyes half closed so that his extraordinarily long eyelashes brushed his cheeks. Stepping across his chest, I stood over him, pointing the camera-phone down and snapping away as he arranged his shoulders for the best angle.

And then abruptly... I'm not sure how I slipped; the ground wasn't particularly muddy. My shoelace tangled in the zipper of his anorak, flapping around his waist? But all of a a sudden, I was down on the ground, on top of him, kneeling, one knee straddling either side of his chest, my face only a foot or two away from his, as he lay, exposed and vulnerable beneath me. For a moment, we just stared at one another, too surprised to speak, but I swear, this look came over his face, a look of intense and unquenchable desire. He looked at me, and I looked at him, and I felt myself drawn, down towards him, until our faces were only inches apart, and suddenly my lips were brushing his and his lips were brushing mine and I was arching my back towards him and he was straining up towards me and I had dropped his phone to his chest, and my fingers were reaching behind his head to touch his hair and pull his face towards mine, and suddenly, we were kissing.

Carlos. His hard, slightly insistent lips. His warm, wet tongue. The surprisingly soft skin of his face, his chin, freshly shaven, as smooth as a newborn babe. The stiff, wiry texture of his hair.

And suddenly, he pulled away, pushing gently at my shoulders. "Don't."

I snapped back, as if realising for the first time, what I was doing, and who, exactly, I was doing it with. "Oh my god, I'm so sorry."

"Look, don't do this," he stuttered, as if unsure of what he was saying. "It's not fair to you, and it's not fair to Teri."

"Oh my god," I repeated dumbly, clambering awkwardly to my feet again, pulling my bootlace away where it had got stuck in his coat's zipper. "I am so sorry, I don't know what came over me. I... Oh god."

"No, it's alright." Sitting up, he held out his hands in front of him, palms down, as if trying to calm me. "I mean, it's this place. It feels magical, it's like... it's like a place out of time, out of the real world, and that strange, Tolkien magic made it seem like this was possible..." He, too, climbed to his feet, flustered, and started to look about for his bag. "No, this is a very bad idea."

"It didn't happen," I suggested. "We both dreamed it."

"Yes," he agreed. "We dreamed it. A waking dream. A fairy illusion. This is a very odd place. Beautiful, but..." He looked about him, throwing the vast sea of bluebells, the unearthly light, the silvery-grey columns of the trees. "Odd."

"We should head back to the main track..." I offered.

"No. I don't quite want to go just yet. I want to sit for a little while and feel... enchanted," he said, very quietly. Moving backwards away from me, he found the bole of a huge beech, and sat on its roots. "This is the kind of place that makes me wish I could paint."

I moved away from him in the opposite direction, and sat on another tree slightly behind him. And he looked at the bluebells, and I looked at him, trying to work out what had just happened. Carlos,
Mr Casual, Mr No-Strings, had just told me to get off him, because kissing him wasn't fair to his girlfriend. The girlfriend he supposedly had a polyamorous, non-exclusive, open relationship with. Or was that not it? Was it just *me* he didn't want? He wasn't really looking at the bluebells, he was just staring off into the middle distance, touching his lips with the tips of his fingers, rubbing back and forth lightly as if surprised they were still there.

"You can paint, can't you," he finally offered.

"Well, a little." I stiffened suddenly, remembering how he'd once looked through my Tumblr, my Twitter, to glean facts about my life. Had he seen my nature drawings and architectural sketches, which were actually pretty decent, or had he seen the awful, embarrassing fan art, drawings of Thom Yorke and Dan Kessler?

Turning, he looked back at me. "Would you ever consider painting me?"

"If you're going to suggest that this should turn into the plot of Constructing Parallel Worlds, because we're sitting in a forest..."

A long-suffering smile slipped across his face. "If that's one of your stories, I've not read that particular one. But I wasn't thinking along erotic lines at all, if you're going to suggest a nude..." But then the smile faded. "I wish you'd stop treating me like a character in one of your stories, that you can just manoeuvre into place, and then just construct a narrative around, regardless of what I actually feel or want. I'm a living, breathing human being, with a heart, and a conscience, and a sense of what's right and what's not."

"Look, I said I'm sorry, alright?" I started to protest, but then I just blurted out. "You've fallen out of love with me a little, haven't you?"

"A little?" For a second, he looked profoundly pissed off, but then he relented. "I think when first I met you, I idealised you quite a bit. And now that shine has worn off a little, yes."

"Good." I bit my lip so that I would say no more.

He sighed deeply and stood up, then walked over to me, holding out his hand to pull me to my feet. "We should be on our way. It's beautiful here, but the day is slipping away."

Together, we climbed up out of the enchanted dell, up into the sunlight, and I took my hat out of my pack, to stop my face from getting burned. Out of the magical knoll, things seemed somehow clearer again. And after about half a mile, we had fallen back into our mile-eating gait, and our rough and tumble philosophical squabble. We pushed on, through Natural Philosophy and the origin of the Scientific Gaze, right until the end of the ridge, then dropped down into a river valley to eat our bread and cheese, musing over pagans and their worship of rivers, trees and mountain spirits.

Back up the other side of the river valley to climb the next Down, and we were back on geology and topology, and the effect of climate and geography on national character, the Germans versus the English, and their differing senses of the Sublime. Rousseau and Ruskin took us the next three miles, as the sky started to cloud over, and I got out the hip flask of brandy to warm us. By the time we reached the next signpost, the mist was starting to roll in - or rather, roll up the sides of the downs. It was odd, almost spooky, watching the ground and bushes seem to exhale, condensation rising up off them to form plumes of cloud like dragon's breath. Carlos kept stopping and getting out his camera, snapping photos, but I was starting to worry about missing our way if the fog really closed in.
"It's like the hills are alive, and they are actually breathing," observed Carlos. "Like the way your breath turns to condensation in the cold."

"In a way, they are. When the air cools, the water vapour condenses out of it in the same way."

"No, the water is coming from the ground, look how it's rising up... Sublimating." He paused for a moment, considering. "I always get so caught up in the psychological meaning of that word that I forget the original."

"We should get off the hill, in that case, so we don't get lost and all turned around in the fog."

"No, surely that's the other way around. We should stay up here, because it's the only place we can get a clear vantage point."

"A clear vantage point of what?" I gestured around us. As we'd been walking, the valleys below us had filled up with mist, and it was like we were walking above a sea of clouds. "There's the next sign post. Ah, Chisling Drew. There's a pub there, if I recall correctly. We can get a pint there, then catch a bus or a taxi to the station at Beechurston."

"Chisling Drew," echoed Carlos, even as he reluctantly followed me down the steep, rutted path. "Bee Church Stone. I swear you are making up the names of half of these villages. If we see a sign to Hobbiton, I know you've lead me astray."

We wandered around in the mist for another hour, as we somehow managed to miss the turn-off and ended up in an interminable field full of shaggy and curious, but basically well-meaning cows. When we reached a river, I knew we'd gone too far, so I forced Carlos to turn back and marched him across a soggy field until we finally located the stile and clambered over it to find a footpath back along behind some allotments to the village. If we hadn't had an almost full hip-flask of brandy, things might have got a bit strained, but for the most part, we stayed quite good-natured, enjoying the scenic route of allotments, followed by a foggy graveyard, a flinty perpendicular gothic church swirling up out of the mists, and then, finally the pub. The bus stop was right outside, and a quick perusal of the timetable revealed we had exactly 50 minutes to wait until the next bus.

"Blast it, if we hadn't mucked about in that stupid field with the cattle, we might have made that last bus," I grumbled, even as Carlos pushed open the door of the pub and peered inside.

"If we'd made that bus, then we wouldn't have an hour to kill, sitting in front of a lovely, roaring log fire, drinking strong Kentish ale. I'm glad we missed it. My round, I believe."

We dried out nicely by the fire, as Carlos found a mouldering old book titled 'Go Ask The Men Bringing In The Hay: Stories From Bygone Kent' and started holding court, reading out a selection of folk-tales and quaint old-fashioned, possibly pagan, customs in his best Shakespearian actor's voice. He had that odd ability to make friends (or indeed, enemies, just as easily) anywhere, and had soon charmed both the odd women behind the bar and the odd assortment of regulars, getting them to chime in with their own stories of 'bygone Kent', especially when they heard that I was a local girl, and had grown up a few towns over, telling me tales about Godwinstowe 'before the war'.

"What about you?" the old duck behind the bar asked Carlos. "You're not from around here, not with that accent."

"I'm from New York," Carlos explained with a rather-too-proud grin.
"New Jersey," I corrected, jovially wanting to puncture that supercilious smugness.

"Actually, I'll have you know, I was born in New York," he insisted. "In Queens. I was the only member of my band that actually was." But then his face took on a wistful look. "In fact, today's my birthday."

"Really?" asked the landlady. "Oh, lor, let me see if I can find a piece of cake for the birthday boy. Oh no, put your money away. It's on the house."

I looked at him carefully as she shuffled off. "Your birthday? Why didn't you tell me?"

He just laughed. "If you were a proper fangirl, you would have known."

"Well, clearly I'm not. I wish you'd told me, I'd have got you a present."

"That is exactly why I didn't tell you." He paused, then smiled disarmingly as the landlady reappeared with an tea cake with a candle pushed into it.

"Best we could find, love," she told him, before leading the pub in a round of Happy Birthday To You.

"Today... the walk... the company... the countryside... even the arguments about Kant! That's been the best birthday present you could have given me really."

It was, actually, heaven. We didn't really want to leave when the tiny rural bus came, though the bus driver held the door open so Carlos could finish off his second pint. The bus dropped us at Beechurston Station with five minutes to spare. I stood by the fence and knocked the mud off my boots, but Carlos left it on, insisting it provided a certain touch of authenticity. (Authenticity he would have to sweep up in that posh, wooden floored flat, thank you very much.)

We piled onto the train and collapsed in a heap. I felt tired, but happy, full of beer that made me forget how sore I was from the long walk. But Carlos seemed oddly out of sorts, sitting opposite me, without speaking, tapping his fingers against his lips and staring off into the middle distance. It wasn't like him to be silent for so long.

Finally, I broke the ice. "Are you still angry with me, about that kiss?"

"What?" Bringing his eyes round to focus on me, he seemed disoriented, as if not entirely sure what I was talking about. "No, sorry, I was miles away."

I settled back into my seat, not particularly reassured by the answer, but as the miles slid by outside, it started to play on my drink-befuddled mind. "Look, when you said it wasn't fair to Teri..."

His eyes snapped back onto my face, his jaw setting in a slightly irritated angle. "Do we have to go through all this... again?"

"No... I'm sorry." Shutting up, I settled back into my seat and pressed my nose against the glass, watching suburban Kent unfold outside. "Have you sent those photos to your Mum yet? We're probably back in phone reception again."

"Ah. Thanks." He dug in his pack and pulled out his phone, flipping through the camera roll. "These are really quite good actually. You definitely have an eye."

"Thanks," I grunted.
After the swish of the email sent notification, he lowered the phone and looked carefully at me. "I'm sorry, Margaret, I shouldn't have snapped. I'm just preoccupied."

Alright. I'd bite. "No, I'm sorry. What are you thinking about?"

Raising his arms, he folded them behind his head, his eyes drifting back to the continual panoply of the Green Belt. "That pub. It just got me thinking about place. About how I thought of you as such a native Londoner, and yet you inhabit rural Kent just as easily. Which got me thinking about... well, where home is for me. And about where I go when Les Liaisons has concluded its run."

"Back to New York, I assumed. Your apartment... Gaius..."

Carlos nodded, and drew his mouth into a thin line. "Teri has been introducing me to all sorts of useful people in London. Directors, agents, casting people... I've been making a lot of good contacts. But the problem is, they're all British contacts."

"Why did you come to Britain, if not to make contacts?" I probed. I mean, obviously, there was a part of me that suspected he had come to Britain to meet me, wanted him to admit to it, but I knew he was never going to say so now.

He shook his head. "I came to Britain because the opportunity to study at RADA was too enticing to fail to take full advantage of. And it has been awesome, I have learned... so much. But I did not plan on extending my sojourn beyond the 6 months of the program."

"Well, I am reminded of why you said you left Interpol."

He nodded grimly. "I was tired of travelling. I didn't want to leave New York. I don't think you understand, the way that I miss New York, when I'm not there, the way other people might miss a lover or a child. And yet, here I am in my chosen profession, my calling, as it were... having to be away from New York, yet again. It doesn't seem fair."

"No," I agreed. "And I don't actually think you should stay in London, when this play is over. I think you should go to your home. Since Home is so important to you."

He pulled a wry face. "Thank you for saying that... but you're one of the few people that... if you advised that I should stay, I would find a way to do so."

"Because you'd miss me?" I teased, in a clearly ironic tone.

"Because I value your advice." He paused for a moment, as the train went through a tunnel. "I trust your advice comes at face value, and that you don't have ulterior motives."

"Do you think Teri has ulterior motives in trying to get you to stay?"

"I doubt the lovely Teri has any motives that are not ulterior," Carlos laughed. "It's hardly my career she's interested in."

It started to nag at me again. "When you said..."

"You're not going to give me a rest on this, are you?" he snapped, as if it had become a sore point.

"I'm sorry." I dropped my gaze, slightly hurt.

"Alright, I'll be honest with you. I suspect... I fear that Teri is rather insecure about you, in
"Well, I'm not surprised. You didn't bother telling her that our relationship wasn't romantic!"

He fixed me with a penetrating glare. "You told me yourself, that you were not able to say, with one hundred percent confidence, that our relationship was not romantic."

"Alright, but she thinks I lived with you." Now that the jolly beery buzz was wearing off, and now that the object of my jealousy was not in front of me, I was feeling slightly ashamed of not having set her straight myself.

"Did you not?"

I thought again of the toothbrush. "Well, that's debatable."

"Regardless of the cause, I do not wish to deliberately hurt her, or make her anxieties worse, by dallying with a person I know she feels insecure about. This isn't about exclusivity, it's simply about consideration."

"I see." Averting my gaze from him, I stared out the window at the familiar village names on the run-up to London. Of the answers I'd rehearsed internally, I'm not sure that that one had ever crossed my mind in regard to Carlos. Mentally, I had to readjust my view of him slightly. Again.

"I have been many things in my life, but, despite what you may have heard about me, I am not a complete cad. The weight of expectations... the qualities, positive and negative, that strangers ascribe to one, on account of one's looks, or the arbitrary angles of one's facial features... We get this in casting, all the time. One has a certain kind of face, a certain set of the jaw, a rakish angle to the brow or the nose, so one must be a villain and never a hero, a Mr Wickham or a Mr Willoughby, and never a Mr Knightly or a Colonel Brandon."

"And never a Darcy?" countered Carlos, raising an immaculate eyebrow towards me. "Never an idiot who makes foolish mistakes through pride, or the folly of youth, which he must learn to outgrow?"

We stared at one another for a long time, the countryside rattling by outside, as if neither of us dared speak. Finally, I broke the silence. "I make a poor Lizzie Bennett, though."

"You're right on that account," he said with an incline of his brow which probably meant he was only teasing, but he could not have chosen better words to sting me. "You're one of those girls that tries so hard to prove she's an Elinor not a Marianne, that she overshoots the mark and ends up an Emma - or worse, a Fanny." The furious expression on my face must have warned him that he, himself, might have overshot the mark, for he backed down quickly, dropping my gaze and looking away out the window. "By the way, I think you're right about the hedges, actually."

"What? About the hedges?" Mentally, I had to shift gear, dropping my outrage to rewind a couple of hours, back to an earlier segment of our conversation.

"I think, in point of fact, that the hedge is the perfect topographical representation of England. Or at least the southern part of it. The combination of fetishised demarkation and insularity. The multifunctionality of denoting territorial boundaries, while at the same time, concealing property, but also providing a means of movement without encroaching or being seen... that is absolutely and
characteristically English."

"But... that's what I told you two hours ago!" My irritation at having my words co-opted momentarily surpassed my irritation as his blatant change of subject.

"Yes, well you're right." Carlos nodded decisively as if that were the end of it, and a smile returned to his face. "We're getting close to London, aren't we? The buses have changed colour."

"We are indeed. We'll be at London Bridge in about fifteen minutes. Look, off in the distance, there are the masts at Crystal Palace."

"My time in London is just about half up, and I feel like I'm only barely starting to get to know it."

*And you,* I thought to myself silently. *And you.*
Chapter 21

Everything blew up at the next podcast recording. Well, in a way, they blew up, but in another way, they returned back to normal. For weeks now, Alice had been enthusing about her fast-developing friendship with Mr. Cumberbatch, or 'Ben' as we were now all calling him, with raised eyebrows at the sudden intimacy. He had taken such an interest in her work, she insisted. He had even taken to dropping by the University, to sit in on classes - and he especially seemed to enjoy being introduced to her colleagues.

"Ben had lunch today, with myself, and Sara Ahmed! What an absolute mindfuck, to have a Hollywood star, sitting in and listening to our interdepartmental gossip," she had told us in previous weeks. But this week, it was a different story.

"That bastard!" Alice exploded. "That conniving, social climbing, backstabbing total fucking asshole ratbastard douchecanoe!"


"Fucking Cumbersnatch!" cried Alice, slapping down the print-out of a press release which had been addressed to the Telegraph's Culture Desk that morning. Sunita and I squabbled over it for a moment, but then Alice picked it up and read it out. "Today, we are pleased to announce the exciting Directorial debut of Benedict Cumberbatch, who has been planning for some time his entrance into the other side of the camera. Cumberbatch announces that his first feature will be a biopic of Slavoj Zizek. In preparation for this role (Cumberbatch will also portray the film's subject) the new director has been immersing himself in the heady world of Academia, researching Philosophy and Cultural Studies, before finally securing an introduction to the man himself..."

"Oh my god," said Sunita. "Cumberbatch doesn't look the slightest bit like Zizek. How is a six foot two, skinny ginger English boy convincingly going to portray a short, fat, bearded Eastern European? I mean, Assange was a stretch, but this..."

"He used me!" howled Alice. "All that pretending to be interested in me, and interested in my work... trying to meet my colleagues... Fuck! I introduced him to some of the finest thinkers and writers of our generation, and of course.. he just wanted an introduction to the fucking celebrity. For his fucking film."

"What a cunt," agreed Sunita. "I never liked him. Always thought there was something suspicious about his eyebrows. Never trust a man with dodgy eyebrows."

"You've changed your tune," I observed, with a wry smile.

"He used me!" Alice repeated, picking up the press release to read it again, then throwing it decisively back onto the table.

"Who used what?" asked Evie, clattering through into the kitchen, tossing her bag and her keys onto the counter.

Alice crossed her arms over her chest, and glared at Evie for a moment, as if this were all her fault, but then relented. She picked up the press release and thrust it towards Evie. "If you even start to say 'I told you so' I will personally rip your head from your body and piss down your neck."

"Nice..." drawled Evie sarcastically, but as her eyes scanned the document, I saw her face fall. "Oh my god."
"I know!" said Alice curtly. "I know! Don't even say it..."

"I am so sorry," Evie said quietly, moving over and patting her reassuringly on the shoulder. "Look, I really wanted you to be right. I really wanted him to be different, for you, but... I'm sorry."

Alice sighed and shook her head, then pulled Evie into a rough embrace. "No, I'm sorry."

"Does this mean you're going to quit your job at the Torygraph?" Evie asked hopefully, as if she just couldn't help overegging the pudding.

"Fuck no," snorted Alice. "I'm hanging onto that, just long enough for this fucking film to come out. And then I'm going to assemble a round table of the best fucking intersectional feminist philosophers in the fucking country, and we're going to sit down, and rip that film to pieces, rip apart all of its inaccuracies, its hagoiological tendencies, its philosophical unsoundness - and we'll make the Telegraph publish that, so help me god."

I told Carlos over coffee the next morning. (I wasn't sure at what point we'd slipped back into having breakfast together twice a week - those mornings that Teri wasn't staying over, that was - but the habit was too familiar a one to break at this point.)

He furrowed his brow and shifted uneasily in his chair. "I feel like this is my fault."

"Why?" I asked. "I mean, it's not like you're secretly only talking to me because you're preparing a role for your upcoming film as a Russian hacker, are you?"

"No, but I did introduce them," he sighed, freshening up my coffee and pushing the carton of milk towards me.

"Were you aware of his intentions?"

"No."

"Then I don't see how it's your fault."

"I should have been more aware, been more sensitive," he mused. "I feel like I owe her an apology. She's my friend, too, after all."

"That's sweet," I observed. He could, still, surprise me at time, with how oddly considerate he was capable of being.

"Oh, that reminds me. You presence is requested, at dinner on Monday evening." He lit two cigarettes, then passed me one.

"Really? I thought your one evening off was date-time with Teri," I teased.

"It is Teri, in fact, who requested your attendance."

I gave him the side-eye as I finished my coffee. "What on earth does she want with me?"

"She wants to introduce you to someone."

"Oh no," I scoffed. "I'm not playing this game."

"No, trust me on this one. It is in your best interests to meet this person," Carlos tried to assure me. "Remember... Teri knows everyone in this town. Agents... directors... writers..."
"You know, for someone who believes celebrity is a social disease, you are awfully keen on introducing people to them."

"Just shut up and come. Monday night. I'll email you the address of the restaurant when she confirms the reservation."

"Alright, alright." I stood up, kissed him lightly on the top of the head - another habit that was too familiar to break - then sauntered off to work.

Alright, I was curious. Curious enough to dress slightly up, in Court-nice, but not curious enough to dress up all the way to Party-nice or Date-nice. So Teri was going to try to set me up with one of her mates. I couldn't say I blamed her, it was the sort of thing I would probably have done, were the situation reversed. And I presented myself at the shockingly posh bistro in Covent Garden, and was shown downstairs to a private basement booth, brick-lined but velvet upholstered, in that sort of shabby chic way that apologetically announced its own expensiveness. Carlos and Teri were already ensconced - he rose to kiss my cheek, but she just air kissed me while seated - but our guest of honour was missing.

"So sorry," purred Teri. "Grant's been delayed in the office for 20 minutes. He said to have drinks or appetisers without him, but he'd join us as soon as he could."

"Well, just as well," I shrugged, accepting a drinks menu from a waiter, before deciding just to go with a carafe of the house red. "Tell me about this bloke you're trying to set me up with..."

"Margaret," tutted Carlos. "It's not like..."

"Well, let's speak plainly, then, shall we," Teri cut him off. "Grant is an old pal. He split with his wife about six months ago - it sounded fairly cordial, no infidelity or any nastiness like that - and it's time for him to start dating again."

"Any children?" I probed. Children were a no-go area for me.

"One, a daughter - teenage, I believe. Boarding school in New York."

"American?" I asked. This was sounding less and less desirable by the minute.

"Yes, but he's been over here for about five years now. Hence the difficulties in the marriage - she didn't like England. His job's over here."

"Carlos said he was a writer?" I probed. Well, he hadn't said, he'd just insinuated, but forewarned was forearmed.

"Screenwriter," Teri corrected, somewhat breathlessly. "He works for Channel 4 - and he has just been commissioned to produce a brand new series. So if there are any appropriate roles going, of course, we want to be first to hear..."

I raised an eyebrow and glanced at Carlos. He was right; Teri didn't have any motives that weren't ulterior. I wondered if he'd told her he was going back to New York at the end of the play's run, or if she'd just chosen to ignore it with that choicely placed 'we'. Of course it helps to know the producer's girlfriend if you're scouting for a role. It helps even more if you have introduced the producer to his girlfriend, and therefore he owes you a favour. I smiled as sweetly as I could, and sipped my wine.

"I think you may be impressed by some of his writing credits in the past," Carlos informed me in a loud stage whisper, and he was practically wriggling in his seat, as if he couldn't resist getting the
spoilers in. "You might be interested to know that Grant's first big break in television was working on... Space Station Nebuchadnezzar!"

"Oh." I looked at Carlos meaningfully, even as he surveyed me, his eyebrows raised, as if expecting a reaction.

"Sorry, what was that about Space Station Nebuchadnezzar?" asked a voice behind me. "I felt like my ears were buzzing, and I couldn't help but overhear my name."

I stood up to greet him, extended my hand to shake, and realised with a start he was at least two inches shorter than me. Well, maybe he wouldn't be if I were in flat heels, but I'd got so used to being able to wear big clunky boots around Carlos without worrying about towering over everyone in sight. For a minute, we looked each other up and down, as if we were both well aware of why we were there. I could see a slight burst of disappointment in his face - men were always disappointed in me; too tall, too masculine in dress, not enough makeup, not enough hair, not even the slightest pretence at a display of secondary sexual characteristics - but he had the good grace to recover and try to hide it.

Not that he was my type, either. Well, apart from being too short. (Not that that stopped blokes like Dan Kessler from being seriously attractive.) He was good-looking in that sort of blandly handsome American way. Short, wavy blondish hair, good teeth, chiselled good looks, square jaw, button nose - he looked, in short, a bit like the captain of Space Station Nebuchadnezzar. I didn't like squarely handsome, ordinary looking blokes. I liked slightly odd-looking blokes with cheekbones like geometry and noses like blocky, brutalist Soviet housing blocks of the 1960s. My eyes flashed across the table to Carlos, who misinterpreted the glance.

"Margaret is actually a big fan of Space Station Nebuchadnezzar," Carlos lead with, and I wanted to cringe. "She made me watch a couple of episodes, but I've got to confess, coming in, in the middle of it, I didn't quite get the exact nature of the conflict between Shadows and Morgons."

"Oh, it was just your bog-standard conflict between good and evil, light and dark, chaos and order," Grant shrugged, with admirable humility. He must get buttonholed all the time, as the few SSN fans there were left tended to be extremely obsessive.

"Well, it was slightly more layered than that," I hedged, torn between my pedantic desire to set Carlos straight, and my desire not to come across as a trainspotting super-fan in front of this potential date. "The fundamental conflict was between different schools of philosophy I'm sure you would understand, Carlos. The Morgons' question - 'Who are you?' was all about self-knowledge and enlightenment. The Shadows' question - 'What do you want?' is much more of a Utilitarian ethic.. but I'm sure Grant is tired of hearing random people's theories about this."

Grant laughed. OK, no. He had an ugly laugh. "I don't get it nearly as much as JMS does, to be sure. But I think JMS likes getting into those Big Questions philosophical debates, even with random fans."

"JMS?" asked Carlos, looking lost.

"The Producer of SSN - came up with the whole five-year story arc... it's complicated," I said quickly, then turned back to Grant, hoping to change the subject before I could be outed as any more of a super-geek. "So Teri says that you've just been commissioned to produce a new series. What is that about? Sci-Fi or something else?"

Grant grinned, cat-like, and almost purred, the way creative men always did when asked about their latest projects. "Hopefully both Sci-Fi and something else. I've got Ursula LeGuin on board as
a creative consultant, which is a huge coup for me. I'm a massive fan of LeGuin. We were discussing how far too much 20th Sci-Fi was centred around the idea of the military, and conquest and invasion and wars - yes, even SSN - which was just this odd artefact of how most 20th Century Sci-Fi writers had been men in military service. We wanted to come up with a completely different approach. I approached LeGuin because I knew that she came from a more academic, sociological background. So we decided to write a series which focused more on first contact situations, on anthropologists turning their attention to alien civilisations. Channel 4 was interested in breaking Doctor Who's stranglehold on contemporary British Sci-Fi, we worked out a deal."

"OK, now you have my attention. I love LeGuin, she's one of my all-time favourites..." I confessed.

"Mine, too. It's a privilege to work with her. I tell you, I still get, like, the occasional fanboy squee when I get an email from her," Grant admitted, and I found myself warming to him.

"So where have you got to, in the commissioning process?" Teri asked, with admirable subtlety.

"We're still assembling a team of scriptwriters at the moment. LeGuin has come up with the concept, and the characters - she wants all female leads, which is going to be slightly controversial, I can tell you already..." Teri's face lit up at that remark, and I could see the machinations going on behind her eyes. "But she pointed out, and quite rightly, that in a first contact situation, women are known to be less aggressive, more diplomatic..."

"Oh, I don't know about that." I bristled slightly at the idea.

"Well, less testosterone-driven, at least," Grant conceded.

"Let's not just use testosterone as the old excuse and get-out clause here," I sniffed.

"Do you know the old pulp fiction story, Looking Through Lace?"

"Alright, that is one of my favourites."

"Well, I liked the idea that women researchers would catch things that the men miss."

"Or the power of context in linguistics, over the brute force of semantics," I countered.

"Look, I'm on your side. I'm a committed feminist. I just think that women are better at perceiving context."

"And I am deeply suspicious of men that identify as feminists - especially when they're using this as an excuse to contradict actual women. Look, I am glad that you are making a series which features women heavily, as leads. We need more balance in television, fullstop, let alone sci-fi. But I do worry that if you believe women to be these special, super-intuitive super-beings, rather than ordinary and flawed human beings, then you are doing us a vast disservice."

Grant narrowed his eyes at me, as if not sure how to respond.

"She has a point," said Carlos diplomatically, before going on to tease me with a definite wink in my direction. "Though I would not get her started on linguistics and semiology unless you want to be here all night."

"I used to be a structuralist, but now I'm not Saussure," I quipped, in our old, familiar bantering tone.

"Please," said Teri, with a slightly long-suffering expression. "Can you not get him started. I swear,
Carlos just lives to argue, he is such a born contrarian that you can say something as fundamental and basic as... 'The most classic colour in the Parisian fashion pallet is matte black' and he will try to argue with that... Look, he's doing it now."

Indeed, Carlos had raised one finger to protest, and his face was a picture of disgruntlement as if he was fighting with the urge to contradict her, and losing miserably, even as he hated to be proving her point. Knowing exactly what it was that was annoying him, I leaned forward, carefully lowered my voice and told her "But black isn't actually a colour. It is the absence of colour."

"Thank you!" snorted Carlos, slapping the table with his open hand. I had never seen him look quite so grateful.

"Black is so a colour. White is the absence of colour," Teri protested.

"Not in optics, it's not. White is all colours, mixed together. That's why you get a rainbow if you refract white light through a prism. If you're looking at a something white..." I tossed my napkin onto the table. "It is, essentially, reflecting all visible light. If you're looking at something black..." I pointed across the table at Carlos' sable dinner jacket. "It is absorbing the entire visible spectrum, or as close as possible, the darker the black. Light is what creates colour in our eyes. So no light reflected, no colour. Black is not a colour."

"You're as bad as he is," Teri protested. "Telling me that white is black and black is white. Sometimes I hope you two contrarians just talk one another to death so I don't have to listen to him arguing any more. It's exhausting."

I shook my head slowly, feeling the urge to defend Carlos. I mean, sure, there was a time when I'd have accused him of the same thing. But I had slowly grown to understand him, and though I was aware of the presumption involved in explaining a woman's own boyfriend to her, I thought it was imperative to grasp this particular aspect of Carlos' personality. "He doesn't argue just to be an arsehole, or just to wind you up, though," I protested. "He argues as a way of working through what he does, and doesn't believe, as a way of establishing truth. Deductive reasoning."

Carlos was looking at me with a new expression, a tentative smile, like he couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. But Teri was laughing openly now, and waving her hand disbelievingly in his direction. "There's no truth in Carlos' arguing. Like I said, he just has this pedantic need to prove that he's cleverer than you, by arguing black is white and white is black."

"You're doing him a vast disservice if you think that. He's not saying 'black is white and white is black' he's saying 'this object for our consideration appears to be neither black nor white.'" I picked up an object d'art that was lying on a shelf beside us, turning it over in my hands. "It's kind of a greyish colour, shall we compare it to other grey artefacts of our acquaintance? How about silver, is it akin to silver? No, it's not shiny. How about charcoal? No, it's not as dark as charcoal, it's more dull and has a slightly reddish-ochre tinge, like iron. Can we agree upon the likelihood of iron? Can we establish a consensus? Can anyone here be quite convinced as to the possibility that it is or is not of an iron-like quality? As opposed to platinum or tungsten or aluminium? What are the distinct qualities of iron or not-iron that we can ascribe to this colour without exercising the boundaries of the optic sciences in our rational debate."

Carlos was definitely trying to contain his laughter, his eyes flashing, even as Teri and Grant guffawed away at his expense. "Passable imitation," he pronounced. "Except it's aluminum, not aluminium."

"Not in this country, it's not, mate," I quipped right back.
"I'm American, too. I'll allow it," Grant laughed, and appeared to relax. "So Carlos tells me that you're a writer. You certainly have a way with words."

"I don't know that I'd go that far," I hedged, shifting awkwardly in my chair, not really wanting to have this conversation in front of Teri.

"Why?"

"Well, it's not really... properly... published fiction," I stuttered.

Leaning forward in his seat, Grant lowered his voice. "Are you a fan fiction writer?"

"Oh my god, I'm going to kill you," I muttered, wadding my napkin in a ball and throwing it at Carlos.

"I said nothing!" he protested innocently.

"I have a lot of respect for fan fiction writers," Grant assured me. "You know, on SSN, we used to call them our own, private, personal research team. They worked on the official SSN website, they filled in holes in the plot - we ended up hiring a couple of them to work on continuity by the fifth season - lord knows we needed it after five years of juggling those plotlines! I have nothing but respect for fan fiction writers. So if you are, you know you can tell me..."

I opened my mouth, then closed it again.

Fortunately, Carlos came to my rescue yet again. "You know, if you want to hear an example of Margaret's work, you should download her podcast. It's very funny. I've got really into listening to it every week, to keep up on pop culture."

I stared at Carlos, slightly taken aback. "You never told me, you..."

He shrugged sheepishly. "Well, I started listening to make sure you didn't say anything horrible about me. But then I got kinda hooked..."

"What's it called?" asked Grant.

"Four Birds and a Box Set," supplied Carlos. "You can get it on iTunes, but they also have a YouTube channel. All my friends watch it - it's amazing."

"No way!" Grant slapped the table. "My daughter watches 4BAABS on YouTube... She loves it, she wants to be a games developer when she grows up. Oh wow. She'd be so impressed if I told her I was having dinner with you. Wow. You're that Margaret."

I laughed somewhat nervously. "Yes, I'm that Margaret."

"Look, I should give you my card. We should have lunch some time..." he suggested, digging in his wallet.

"Well, aren't we having dinner right now," I laughed.

"I meant, in a business context." He supplied a business card, and I turned it end over end in my fingers. A Channel 4 email address, a mobile number, the address of a posh flat in Notting Hill. Across the table, Teri caught my eye and mouthed something at me I didn't quite catch, but at that moment, the waiter came to take our orders.

Somewhere between the main course and desert, I got up to use the loo, and found myself
accompanied there by Teri. Not exactly an ideal companion, given I wanted to get some space and some fresh air, and clear my head of the wine, but she seemed determined to have some kind of girly-chat.

"You seem to be getting along well," she observed.

Oh, for the love of god, don't talk to me while I am actually in the stalls. We don't know each other well enough for that yet, and I truly hoped we never would. "He's alright," I observed cagily.

"Only alright?" she asked as we met, again, at the sinks. I wanted to wash my hands and get out of there, but she dug in her bag for her lipstick. "He's very handsome," she observed. "Don't you think? Much more handsome than Carlos."

For a moment, I was going to protest, even in the name of loyalty to friends, then saw it for the trap it was. I'd already defended Carlos enough for one night. "He's not really my type," I hedged.

"Well, what is your type then?" Teri put her lipstick away and started to powder her nose. It would rude to just bolt back to the table before she was done, right?

Tall, dark-haired bass-players with degrees in philosophy, intense black eyes and jawlines like brutalist architecture, I wanted to shoot back, but I resisted. "Look, Teri, it's very kind of you to think of me, but I'm not really in the market for a boyfriend right now."

"Are you sure about that, because if you had a partner of your own, perhaps you wouldn't emotionally over-rely on Carlos so much," she said cattily.

"If I wanted a boyfriend, I would have one," I shot back, and I knew I didn't have to add 'if I wanted a boyfriend, I would have Carlos' for the implied message to hit home. At that point, I no longer cared if I was being rude - I stalked towards the door, slammed it on the way out, and made my way back to the table.

Carlos was looking itchy when I got back to the table. "Do you want a cigarette?" I asked, knowing exactly what that shredding motion at his napkin implied.

"I'm dying for one," he admitted.

"I'll go up with you. Hope you don't mind, Grant? Teri will be back in a moment."

I didn't even want a cigarette, I just wanted to go up and outside into the cool air, but Carlos lit me one, regardless. "I'm going to start charging you for cigarettes," he teased, as he handed it to me, already lit.

"Teri thinks you should start charging me for 'emotional support' if I don't get a boyfriend soon," I snorted.

Carlos rolled his eyes. "Would it hurt to just go on one date with the fellow?"

"Don't you gang up on me, too."

"Well, don't date him if you don't want to, but he could, seriously, do something for your writing career," insisted Carlos, sounding like somebody's mother.

"I don't even have a writing career."

"Exactly. And with your talent, you should."
I went for exactly one date with Grant, meeting him not for a business lunch, but for a light dinner at a posh restaurant in Notting Hill. We chatted desultorily about ourselves, but the conversation kept returning from personal matters to his developing serial. It was easy enough to do - he was completely obsessed with it in a way that I did, admittedly find slightly charming, since it was obviously passion, rather than self-obsession that brought him circling back to it. He seemed genuinely interested in my ideas, to the point where I was wondering if Carlos had a point, and if I should be pressing him for a writing - or at least consulting job.

But as we finished our dinner, and he suggested we go on someplace else for a drink, I found myself hemming and hawing. He fixed me with a direct expression, and just blurted out with that total lack of fannydangle that I was starting to find refreshing in American men. "Hey, so are you getting a date vibe from this evening, or no?"

"Well, I, erm... I... I feel a bit put on the spot right now. Do we have to decide so quickly?" I stuttered.

"It kind of decides where I'm going to take you for drinks right now. See, if this is not a personal date, and we're going to talk shop all night, then I'm going to take you to my favourite pub, where we can chat and actually hear one another talk, but if it is a personal date, then I'm going to take you to a very trendy but rather noisy bar with loud music, expensive drinks and dancing. Which would you prefer?"

I looked at him for a minute, but my heart just wasn't it. "Look, I don't want to be rude, but I think I'm leaning towards the 'go somewhere we can just talk' option, to be honest."

He smiled, nodded and waved his credit card at a waiter, who brought the bill, and they settled up. "I do appreciate the honesty," he admitted as we walked outside. He lead us away from the high street, up a side road, and into a friendly but quiet and cosy little neighbourhood pub. "I must admit, the first couple of years I was here, I found it incredibly difficult, the way British people never said anything straight out." We ordered a couple of pints of bitter, and settled at a table in the back. "So I'm reading this correctly, you're not interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with me."

For a moment, I felt like an insect, caught on a pin, at being asked so directly, but then I shrugged and slowly shook my head. It was a relief to get it out in the open, so I surprised myself by risking another bit of honesty. "I'm sorry. It's nothing personal. It's just... I'm in love with someone else."

He nodded quickly. "Yeah, I figured. It's someone we both know, right?"

I stared at him, slightly taken aback. "What makes you say that?"

"Come on, you can't be a writer for as long as I've been, without learning how to read people. It's all over your face. It's your ex, isn't it? You two even act married, finishing one another's sentences, smoking one another's cigarettes and slopping wine into one another's glasses."

"Oh god. It was a habit we'd got into over coffee, stealing each other's drinks if there wasn't any left in the carafe. I wasn't aware we'd started doing it in public, in front of other people no less. No wonder Teri hated me. "Look, it just can't be. Carlos and I, we've been through this a dozen times. It just wouldn't work out. I mean, for a start, he's a New Yorker, I'm a Londoner, neither of us wants to move..."

"I know that one. Intimately," Grant agreed. For a few minutes, we sipped our pints in silence and I
wondered how quickly I could make an excuse and go home. "That doesn't seem to bother Teri, though."

"He and Teri have a different kind of relationship, though. They've got one of those casual, open, no-strings kind of things, where it doesn't matter if he stays in London after the play, or not," I explained.

"Really." Grant's face seemed to light up. "Tell me more about that."

"There's nothing to tell. Carlos is really keen on the idea of consensual non-monogamy, but it's just not my scene. Another strike against us."

Grant seemed to consider something for a moment, but then he brightened. "He's a fool. She's a beautiful girl."

That reminded me of something. "You know how you're going to be casting all women leads for this series of yours... you don't think there's a part in it for Teri?"

He practically burst out laughing. "With all due respect to Teri, can you honestly see her playing a serious academic?"

"I don't see why not."

"Well, no offence, but she's kind of a frivolous girl."

"Well, for a start, she's an actor. It's her job to pretend to be other people. And secondly... are you implying female academics can't be bother serious about knowledge, and into frivolous things like clothes, haircuts and make-up? I mean, this is exactly what I'm talking about. Allow women to be three-dimensional characters, rather than abstract embodiments of goodness or sexuality or just one thing."

Grant leaned back in his chair, kinda laughing to himself. "Embodifiers?"

Ugh. "Embodiments. Signifiers." It was the sort of thing Carlos and I did all the time, making up new portmanteau words to express concepts we couldn't quite articulate.

But Grant shrugged the mistake off. "You really are refreshingly honest, for a British person. And I totally appreciate that."

I looked for the barb underneath the compliment. "No, I'm serious. Because Alice - one of the girls I do 4BAABS with - she's a serious academic, she's got a PhD from Columbia, she's one of the best Cultural Theorists in the country, hell, in the English language, but she's still into clothes and film stars and video games and some shit you would probably consider deeply frivolous. We all have our foibles - I mean, yes, I am still way, way too into rock stars and pop music for someone pushing 40 - but we are rounded human beings, with flaws and strengths and... humanity."

Suddenly Grant's eyes lit up, as if he had just connected a wire in the back of his head. "You're absolutely right. The chemistry that the four of you have - you are very dedicated, serious professionals, and you are all obviously friends - though you fight, and the fights are real, you can tell, just listening to it, when Evie and Alice start getting into whether a film is trash or not..."

Digging in his bag, he pulled out a small moleskin, and started to scribble away in it. "That is exactly what we need for the LeGuin Project."

"What," I quipped. "Four birds and a battleship?"
"No, it's perfect." He scribbled away, his spidery black handwriting filling the page. "Would you four be into it? I mean, I'd have to run it by Ursula..." Here he looked up, with a little-boy expression lighting up his face. "I never quite get used to it, you know. I mean, I'm never going to tease you for being a fangirl about SSN, when seriously... every time I see Ursula LeGuin's name in my inbox, holy fucking shit, I get the fanboy flutters."

"Wow, OK, that's somehow kinda reassuring..." I laughed.

"Would you consider coming on board as creative consultants? Character development. That sort of thing."

"Well, there would have to be considerations..." My head started racing ahead. "We would need to have real power, like, you are not just turning this into Sex and the City in space. Veto power over casting, for instance, because let me tell you right now, if you cast some buxom bimbo in Evie's role, she is going to fillet you."

"Right, Teri will be playing Evie's role," Grant quipped.

"Teri is many things, but do not underestimate her. She is not a bimbo."

"I know." Grant flashed me a marvellous smile. "But about this project... can I get phone numbers, email addresses - or would you prefer to broach it yourself? I don't particularly care to get filleted."

"We're taping tomorrow. I'll raise it with them, then, and get back to you."

The squealing was deafening. For once, all four of us were unreservedly in favour. Even Evie, normally suspicious as hell, was placated after some brief comments about contracts and getting everything in writing. Alice, although she was obviously still slightly sore from her recent betrayal by Cumberbatch, seemed almost to want to do it more because of that, as if wanting to prove there was still some goodness to fandom. Also, as we all freely admitted - the LeGuin name was a massive swing in Grant's favour. Apart from the fact that we all appreciated her in our own ways, the general concurrence was that someone that amazing would not work with someone untrustworthy. Sunita was almost beside herself, and already planning various tie-in promotions, wanting to know if her programming team could develop the syndicated videogame and app to go with the series.

So on Friday morning, I rang Grant and told him we were all on board. If he wanted to meet the girls, we were all free for brunch on Sunday afternoon. No, he begged off, unfortunately he was busy on Sunday. How about Tuesday evening? No, that wouldn't work for Alice - she had an evening class to lecture on Tuesdays. Wait, how about Thursday? Did he want to come down early, have supper with us, and experience a taping? It was so perfect, I couldn't believe we hadn't thought of it before.

I waited to tell Carlos in person, though I was brimming over with excitement. Saturday afternoon, he had a big thing going on at RADA, and then Sunday was his performance at the Old Vic, so I waited until our Monday morning coffee to bounce up to his flat and share our good fortune.

But I found Carlos in a weird mood, distracted and slightly distant. He made coffee, as usual, and did congratulate us, and said he'd always known I had it in me. But the whole time I was talking, he kept fiddling with his phone, checking for messages.

"Am I keeping you from something?" I finally said, slightly irritated.
"No, no, it's fine, it's just... do you mind if I make a phone call?" he asked. I shrugged and let him get on with it, knowing I wouldn't get his full attention until it was out of the way. He dialled a number, and let it ring a few times, but then hung up without leaving a message.

All right, I'd bite. "Who are you trying to phone?"

He shrugged and slid the phone back onto the table between us, glaring at it, as if it were the technology's responsibility. "Teri's not answering her landline. And her mobile is switched off. Which is unusual. She's always home this time on a Monday morning. I can't think where else she would be."

"Maybe she's sleeping," I shrugged, irritated that his mind was with her, not me. "Was she tired after the play yesterday?"

"She went out after the play," Carlos sniffed. "Without me. She said she had a very important appointment."

"She is allowed," I reminded him. "You guys do have an open, casual relationship, remember?"

He glared at me for a moment, then picked up the phone and cycled through his inboxes again, checking his email, checking his texts, checking his voicemail. Nothing. "I know she is, but... I'm worried."

"Worried, or jealous?" I teased him.

The wounded look he shot me showed I had hit a little too close to home. "I have no reason to be jealous." But he put the phone back down on the table, and started spinning it around its axis.

Suddenly, I was curious. "You remember how you said you practised consensual non-monogamy with 'Cindy'."

"In theory, yes," Carlos explained with a deep sigh. "I told you, that the freedom of being *allowed* to stray mean that I almost never felt any urge or desire to. After the first year or so, I don't think I ever exercised my... extra-conjugal rights."

"Did she ever exercise hers?"

The look he gave me was absolutely poisonous. "Not that I'm... aware of. She said that she wasn't that interested in taking advantage of it, though the option was certainly open to her, had she chosen to."

"So you don't actually know what it's like to be sitting in the other seat for a change, do you?" I continued, knowing full well that I was risking the very boundaries of our friendship to suggest it.

"I have had... other relationships which were open," he sputtered. "It was never a problem. *Never.*"

I said nothing in reply, I just shook my head slowly.

"Aren't you running late for work?" he finally enquired, with a distinct edge to his voice.

"Oh, I've got ten minutes yet," I shrugged lightly, though I took the hint and left.

Over the next few weeks, the shoe was very much on the other foot, and Carlos did not wear it well. When we next met for coffee, Carlos was in a terrible mood.

"Well, I hope you're happy," he accused. "Teri is now seeing Grant."
"She's allowed," I reminded him.

"I just..." he sputtered. "I just wish it were someone I didn't know. That would make it easier."

Under my breath, I muttered 'you wish it were someone that didn't exist, that would make it easier' but shrugged and offered my condolences. "I'm sorry."

He stared into his coffee, whisking the milk round and round with a spoon, before venturing "Do you want to go out tonight? Do something, get out of the flat?"

"Like what?" Considering it was a Monday night, I was not that keen.

"I don't know. Drink. Dance. Carouse until dawn."

"Carlos," I said softly, standing up and walking over to him, laying my hand lightly on his shoulder. "It's not going to make you feel any better." Without raising his head, or looking at me, he slowly lifted his hand to his shoulder, and placed it over mine. My whole body stiffened as his skin touched mine. "Don't do this," I sighed, and pulled away. "I'm going to work now."

"You only want me when I'm unavailable," he snarled back at me as I collected my raincoat from the hallway.

I walked back into the kitchen and looked at him, sitting in his bathrobe at the kitchen table. Oddly, he looked even more beautiful for looking slightly defeated and deflated. "I don't want you when you're only using me as a tool to hit back at someone's insecurities. No I don't."

It took every ounce of my self control to walk out that door, but I somehow did. Why did we keep going so wrong?
Chapter 22

The situation somehow limped on for over a month. I knew it was actually bothering Carlos, as I somehow seemed to have turned into his confidant regarding the subject of his lovelife. But every time I told him, look, it clearly bothers you, just break up with her, he would hem and haw. And usually it took the form of some kind of obscure point of etiquette in the Theatre, how liaisons which formed during the course of a play's limited run could not be formally ended until the run was concluded, or it would destroy the delicate chemistry of a play's cast and crew.

But really, I knew the answer was his pride. To break up with Teri would be to admit that non-monogamy did not actually work when his partner was the non-monogamous one. To admit that in point of fact, he was actually a hypocrite. Oh, his pride would never allow that. And so he suffered on, not quite in silence, but in stiff indignance that he somehow never expressed when Teri was actually around.

'Four Birds And A Battleship', as we had all codenamed it, took off like a rocket, even before the contracts arrived. Channel 4, we discovered, meant business. They wanted it all in writing, who owned what intellectual property, in return for what moneys would be delivered when. We got some fees up front - all split four ways - and then another set of fees when the scripts were delivered. And then our lawyer - a friend of Evie's from Birkbeck - negotiated us into the royalty structure, a system sort of like points on records, whereby we traded some of our initial fees in exchange for a share of the royalties, were the programme to be a success. Sure, it was a calculated risk, because it was entirely possible that the programme would never be completed after the initial pilot. But if it were... syndication and box sets and Netflix meant that it could go on earning for years.

Carlos was pleased as punch that we were doing it - and proud of his own role in making it happen, but he never wanted to talk about Grant, and quite frankly, I didn't blame him. Teri, I thought honestly, was taking the piss. She loved Grant's lifestyle - she loved the offices at Channel 4, and the flat in Notting Hill - and seemed to be making herself quite comfortable in it. And yet, I was not entirely prepared for what happened the day that Teri decided to stop taking the piss.

It was Carlos' last week in London. It seemed hard to believe, but six months had gone by almost in a flash. He graduated Summa Cum Laude from RADA's graduate programme, and packed the diploma carefully aside to be framed and hung in his apartment when he got back to New York. I had agreed to go to his last matinee performance on Sunday afternoon. The play would close the Saturday after that - a resounding success on all sides, it was generally agreed, and there had been suggestions that maybe it should have another run, were it not for the star jetting off to Slovakia to start filming his directorial debut. On Monday, the removers were coming to take the larger stuff - including the bicycle - that Carlos had managed to accumulate over the course of 6 months, and then on Tuesday he flew home. I felt strangely bereft at the thought of it, but was determined to make the most of our last time together.

But when Carlos called me on Sunday morning, I could instantly tell something was wrong. "What's up?" I said breezily, but his voice was tight, controlled, holding back emotion.

"Would you mind coming over?" he asked, his voice insistent.

"Well, I was going to meet you at the Old Vic, but what, you want me to come round your flat a bit later, and go over together?"

"No. Do you mind coming over now?" He sounded almost on the edge of tears.
"Can you tell me what this is about?"

"No. Please. Just come. Quickly. Take the train and not the bus."

I did a quick sink-wash, changed my clothes - oh Christ, my period had just started so I had to change my knickers - then hopped on a train to London Bridge. Luckily, the train, for once, was not delayed, and I made it to his flat in just over 20 minutes. He buzzed me up, but did not speak in the intercom. I got upstairs to find the door left ajar, but Carlos was nowhere to be seen.

"Carlos?" I called, then padded through. The bathroom was empty, he was not in the kitchen - though uncharacteristically the dishes were all over the counter and not put tidily away in the dishwasher. "Carlos, are you in?"

"I'm here." His voice sounded oddly flat, deflated. There he was, sitting on the sofa in the living room, a cigarette burned down to his knuckles in his hand, staring off moodily into the Thames.

"Are you alright?" I asked, then cursed myself for the stupidity of that question. "You're not alright at all, are you. What's wrong?"

He shook his head, then flinched as ash fell into his hand. I scrambled for the ashtray and took the singed filter away from him. But when I picked up the pack to light him another, I shook it and realised it was empty. From the butts in the ashtray, it looked like he'd chain smoked the lot.

"If I go to the shops and buy you another pack of cigarettes, will you tell me what's wrong?" I asked quietly. He nodded and gestured with his chin towards the spare keys, lying out on the table. The spare keys that had once been mine, but had somehow made their way into Teri's possession.

I trudged down to the shops, bought a pack of cigarettes, a spare pint of milk just in case, then let myself back into the flat, making a carafe of coffee and carrying it out to the living room in that endlessly English way of accompanying bad news with hot caffeinated beverages.

Carlos took a sip of his coffee, then lit a cigarette. "If you say I told you so, I will actually thump you."

"What happened?"

"Well, first... do you remember the director who originally referred me for the program at RADA?"

"The one who said you were too tall to act opposite his five foot nothing leading lady?"

Carlos nodded slowly. "The diminutive leading lady - and her equally tiny squire - are going to Hollywood, as they have been attached to the film version of the play."

"Oh?" I said non-committally, confused as to where all this was going.

"However, in the light of the increased publicity that the cinematic version has generated, the play is moving from Off Broadway to Broadway. One of the smaller Broadway theatres, but, still Broadway. However, he needs new actors. The leading lady he has just cast is 5'10". My height is no longer a problem, it is now a selling point. He wants me to read with the new leading lady when I get back to New York."

"Oh my god, that's good news, though, isn't it?" I gushed, wondering why the haggard face and the unwashed hair if he had just been offered a potential leading role in a Broadway play.
"One would have thought, yes," said Carlos.

"Then what's the problem."

"Teri dumped me after I told her."

I stared at him, wondering why he was taking this so hard. "But the play is ending in a week. You knew the relationship would come to an end."

"That's not why she's dumping me. She's dumping me, because she's going to New York. With Grant."

"Ah." Now, I had known that Grant was going to New York for a few months, partly to spend some quality time with his daughter over the long American summer holidays, but also to drum up some potential funding from PBS as a possible partner for Four Birds And A Battleship.

"She just had to get that dig in. She's not ending it because of the Transatlantic thing. Oh no, that's not a big dealbreaker, if some big-shot producer comes along and sweeps her off to Manhattan. It's me. I'm not good enough, I can't help her career enough. I will just no longer do. And she wanted to make it quite, completely plain, that she was going to New York for Grant, and not for me, and she didn't want me to get any untoward ideas about it."

"Oh, Carlos, I am sorry," I sighed, not entirely knowing what to do. It wasn't unexpected, but that didn't mean it wasn't rough. I felt suddenly very, very guilty for even encouraging him to date her in the first place.

"Look, I know what you're going to say. Come on, Carlos, your heart's not broken. It's not even bruised. It's your pride that's smarting right now." With his actor's ear, he could imitate my accent and even the sarcastic tone of my voice perfectly.

"I know, but that doesn't mean it doesn't hurt," I reassured him, reaching out to gently squeeze his shoulder.

"It hurts so much right now." Stubbing his cigarette out in the ashtray, he kind of crumpled in on himself. "I did not expect it to hurt this much," he added, as if surprised to find out that he actually had emotions, and that other people could affect them. "Not even so much being dumped - but being traded in for someone that could help her career more."

"Come here," I said quietly, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and pulling him towards me. He did not protest, he just collapsed into my lap. With anyone else, it would have felt awkward, but I just pulled him towards me and hugged him for all I was worth, as his head folded against my chest and his arms went helplessly around my waist.

"I'm a fool," he mumbled into my shirt.

"We're all fools where our prides and our genitals were concerned," I told him, smoothing down his hair, parting his wildly frizzing hair and trying to impose order upon it.

"I should have listened to you more," he conceded.

"No, I think actually you should have listened to me less, when I told you to date her," I countered.

"No, you were absolutely right. I needed to do it. I just... I clung on to something for too long. Clung on because of... my pride." His voice dissolved, and I realised my shirt was wet. Was he actually crying? Bending down, I rubbed my cheek against the top of his head, nuzzling him gently
and wishing I could do something to stop the pain. He sounded so wounded it broke my heart, even if maybe, secretly, I sort of thought he deserved it slightly.

"Shitty timing, too," I added. "Did she do that on purpose?"

"I think so, yes." He relaxed a bit, raising his legs up and spreading his body out along the sofa, though he did not release his hold on my waist. "It's almost as if she's jealous that I got offered another part in a play, immediately, and she's still understudying, so she wants to sabotage my last performance."

"Still understudying, at her age? She can't be that good," I said cattily.

"She's only 26."

"Good god. I thought she was about 35."

Carlos sniggered into my stomach, the first genuinely amused noise he'd made since I arrived. "You know, sometimes I really love just how casually cattily mean you can be."

"Like I said, bitches and goth chicks," I observed, stroking his hair gently. Without all the styling product in it, the frizzy curls he normally blow-dried out were really quite soft. "That's what turns you on."

He sighed dramatically, nuzzling his head deeper into my chest. Really, it should have either been bothering me, or turning me on, that his head was resting on my breasts, but at this point, it just felt like we'd been through so much that it was just a quiet, non-sexual gesture of affection. "If this were a film, this would be the bit where we collapsed into each others' arms and declared that we were still in love with one another, and proceed to make mad, passionate love to one another," he observed.

"If this were one of my novels, this would be the bit where we broke one another's hearts forever," I retorted.

"Why are all of your novels so sad?"

"Well, life is so sad, isn't it?" I observed.

"All love is unrequited," Carlos quoted. "That's your Space Station Nebuchadnezzar, isn't it?"

"Except when it isn't. You just can't act on it, because reasons."

Carlos raised his head and stared up at me. Even bloodshot from crying, his eyes were still spookily beautiful, black chocolate around the outside, but with those glints of reddish tones around the centre of his iris. "It isn't a novel, and it isn't a film. It's just our lives. What are we going to do with them?"

"I don't know." I tightened my grip around his shoulders, then squirmed onto the sofa to make myself more comfortable, bringing my legs up onto the cushions. My left leg was OK, skirting down the side of the sofa, but there was nowhere else to put my right leg, except on top of Carlos. So I draped it around him, squeezed him a bit tighter, and left it there, so that we were both giving one another full body hugs.

"That feels nice," he observed, squeezing my waist.

"It does," I agreed.
Slowly, he started to work his head back and forth, until I realised that my nipple was hardening against his cheekbone. As I moaned softly, he turned and kissed the newly raised hump tenderly. And suddenly I felt my body become aware of the presence of his body, his hips between my knees, his arms around my waist. I bent down and kissed the top of his head, then kissed his forehead, then kissed his eyebrows, his eyelids, his cheeks, his nose, and then, finally, the hard line of his mouth. He didn't stop me, he even started to respond, inching his whole body up the sofa towards mine.

We twisted, wrestling slightly, as he hauled me towards him, and suddenly I found myself lying on top of him, my chest against his, my face hanging above his, only a few inches from my own. I shivered, looking down at those impossibly thick, long, black eyelashes. But his eyes crinkled down in a frown, as he pointed out, "This is, as usual, impossibly bad timing."

"It always is, isn't it?" I couldn't stop looking at his mouth, at the pink of his lips, wanting him to move up towards me, to press them against mine. And then I remembered that I, too, could move, arching my neck down to meet him, nibbling him with my teeth until he responded. My whole body was just drawn towards him, my hips sliding towards his, our legs tangling together, my hands against his face, pushing back the curly mass of his hair.

When I moved towards him, he followed me, pushing his weight up against me as he brought his mouth up towards mine, pushing his tongue into my mouth as my thighs parted to admit him. Our hips were moving now, rhythmically grinding against one another, and I could feel something catch between my legs, slipping out of his bathrobe. It felt so right that I wanted to scream when he moved back again. "You know we shouldn't do this. You know all of the reasons this is a really bad idea."

"Maybe we should," I said recklessly. "Maybe we should just fuck, maybe we should just bang each other once, and get it out of our systems, so we stop with this whole unrequited bullshit, and this wanting-what's-unavailable bollocks, and we can just move forward, get on with our lives."

He kissed me again, pushing against me with the full weight of his hips, and I felt my whole body coming slowly to life, wrapping my legs around him, super-aware of that part of him swelling to life against my thigh. "And what if it doesn't."

"Doesn't what?" We had rolled onto our sides, and his hand was now skirting down my back and towards my arse, and oh god, everywhere he was touching me felt like my skin was tingling. "Doesn't get this madness out of our systems."

"Then I guess we have to deal with that when we come to it," I snorted, playfully chasing his mouth and latching onto it, sucking his tongue into my mouth and rolling it obscenely about. "Are you sure about this?" he gasped, when my mouth left his and moved downwards to nip gently at that soft skin between his jaw and his neck, his head lolling backwards in pleasure.

"I have never wanted a thing quite so much in my life..." I murmured, then giggled softly. "Yes, Carlos, give it to me, now, I want you, Carlos."

He threw his head back and laughed softly, but then his eyes lit up with a ferociously hungry look. "OK..." His hand moved slowly down my body, caressed the lobe of my arse for a bit, then moved inwards, searching between my arse cheeks, then stopped as he touched the unexpected plastic of my maxi-pad. He stopped kissing for a moment, and pulled away, curious. "Oh."

"Oh fucking shitting fuck," I swore, suddenly cursing my stupidity.
"What is it?"

"I can't, I'm on my fucking period," I muttered from between clenched teeth.

"I don't mind," he breathed into my ear. "I find it's nice when girls are on their period. Slicker. Wetter. I can fetch a towel... or we could do it in the shower... I have yet to initiate this tub..."

I tried to pull away slowly, though his offer was tempting. "I'm sorry, but I really can't. I've got... erm, I've got fibroids. They cause... pain... cramping... They make sex quite painful - especially when I'm on my period. I'm sorry but I don't want to risk it right now. It can be grim."

Carlos pulled away from me, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "Christ, I should have known. You're never going to fuck me. There's always some excuse, and now is no exception..." He looked down at his bathrobe, and tried to adjust it to cover the tenting. Christ... I had had... that... pressed between my thighs? Suddenly I felt really annoyed at having to give it up, and went chasing after him.

I moved towards him, put my arms around his shoulders and pulled him back towards me, stuck my tongue into his ear, licked all around the side of his throat, bit the nape of his neck and trailed my teeth along his jaw until his head lolled back and he went all floppy and limp. I parted his bathrobe carefully, kissed his chest then nibbled at his shoulder. "Maybe it's better this way," I said quietly. "I mean, we only have to wait - what? 4 or 5 days? It's good if we think about it, consider it, don't rush into it."

"Rush into it? It's been seven months at this point!" he almost yelped. "I swear to god, Margaret, every time I say yes let's do it, you end up coming up with another reason to say no. And then when I agree, OK, no, you climb on me and start torturing me again. Stop pulling the rug out from under me! You want it, you don't want it, you want it again. It's like you want me to want you, but you refuse to do anything with that desire. Honestly, what, are you so afraid will happen, if you and I go to bed?"

That gave me considerable pause as I pulled away from him again, chewing my lip as I tried to make sense of it all. "I think I'm afraid, that if you and I do sleep together, that I will develop feelings for you, and you won't."

"I think you already have plenty of feelings for me," he snapped.

"Yes, right now I have the feeling that you're an incredibly arrogant and presumptuous cock," I tossed back.

"Arrogant... presumptuous... or maybe completely projecting..." When he turned back towards me, his eyes were desperate. "You think I don't have feelings for you already? Do you think I'm some kind of monster? I have more feelings than I know how to articulate. And..." Here he let his shoulders slump back in a little shrug. "More than just feelings. Slowly, he took hold of my hand, and brought it down gently upon his tented bathrobe, as if to show me the force of his feelings. Every part of me suddenly became totally alert as I felt his warmth beneath the soft cloth, moving my hand about tentatively. His thigh. A jutting bone that might have been his hip. And that hard, slightly springy protuberance... Panting like a mad thing, I pushed the terry-cloth towelling out of the way and grabbed greedily at his cock. Oh god. He was fully erect, a shaft like the gearstick of a manual automobile. He put his hand on top of mine and insistently showed me how to stroke. "Will you come back with me tonight, and stay the night with me?" he asked, breathily. "Actually sleep with me, even if you don't fuck me."

"I don't have my things," I protested.
"I found... a bag of your clothes... while trying to sort out what to pack and what to leave..." he panted, and I was astonished that he could still think, despite what I was doing to his organ.

"Can you just not wait, another 4 or 5 days?" As I continued to stroke, he shook his head wildly. "Is this not enough?"

"No! I've waited long enough... Now I want all the time that you and I have left together. All of it," He looked at me, and his eyes were wild, and I knew at that moment, that it wouldn't work, that he and I would never be able to fuck one another free of this weird obsession. I didn't care. I wanted to do it anyway. But then he brought his mouth down on mine, and sucked my tongue into his mouth, and with an odd little quiver, and a spasm of his hips, he bucked, and pumped hot, white liquid out over my hand and wrist.

For a moment, we just lay tangled together, as I could feel his heartbeat still pounding underneath my fingers. But then he stirred, and kissed me, kissed my face over and over, before laughing breathlessly. He opened his eyes and looked into mine, and smiled. "Thank you," he said quietly, then kissed me one last time, and looked about for a tissue to wipe us off with. "That's one way to mend a wounded pride."

"You should get up, and take a shower," I chided him. "Get ready, you're going to be late."

"Yes, yes," he agreed, and slowly pulled himself to his feet. As he stood, looking about for his cigarettes, I craned my neck and peered at the long, white length of his body revealed between the gap of his bathrobe, a hip, a creamy thigh, his rapidly detumescent cock. His chest was so hairless I wondered if he waxed, but his lower arms and thighs had a thin covering of light brown hair, the same gingery tone as his beard when it came in. Noticing me looking, he grinned salaciously. "Do you think I'm beautiful?" he asked, batting his thick eyelashes at me.

"No," I told him in a flat, mocking tone. "I think you're hideous, repulsive, ugly, disgusting, your chin so large it could single-handedly re-occupy the Rhineland, small children recoil in horror at your revolting visage..."

"Liar," shrieked Carlos, and jumped back over the coffeetable, climbing up onto me and holding his face above mine threateningly, before both of us disintegrated into giggles. "I know you think I'm beautiful," he told me confidently, dropping a single kiss onto my forehead before loping back to the shower.

"You are such an egoist," I shouted after him. "You're supposed to tell me that I'm beautiful."

"You'd belt me," he laughed from the corridor.

"You could still try," I sniffed. But then I lay back on the sofa, reeling a little bit, hardly believing what I'd just agreed to, even as I kept holding my hand to my face, trying to keep sniffing the smell of his sex on me. It hadn't felt like thing-in-itself. It had felt like the promise of things to come.

What if we did it? What if I did, actually, climb on top of Carlos, and hold him down, and fuck him until he couldn't breathe? Fuck him until I knew what it was like, riding that arrogant cock, turning that arrogant sneer into breathless pants of pleasure, begging me for more? He was going home in a week, it wasn't like it could go anywhere. But was that an incentive or a dissuasion? To finally bang it out of our systems, just before he went back to New York forever?

He reappeared about twenty minutes later, clean, and with his hair blow-dried into waves running back off his forehead. There was a towel tied around his waist, but he shed this as he walked past the sofa, and draped it teasingly across my head. "Wanker," I told him, even as I sat up to watch his
bare arse wiggle across the room. He even walked like he knew how hot he was, sauntering across
his room with an extra spring in his step, now he knew I was watching.

"Well, if you want to be precise, you wanked me just now. I think that makes you the wanker," he
countered, with a sly smile.

"Fuck off."

He laughed. "Oh, trust me. If you weren't on your period, I would be fucking you off so hard that
you wouldn't be able to sit down for a week."

"You're incorrigible," I snorted, then paused. "I think I like it."

He pulled on a pair of pants, then circled back to the sofa, kneeling down beside me to study me
carefully, a smile dusting his freshly shaved face. "I'm not going to tell you you're beautiful, even
though I do think you are, because you wouldn't believe me anyway. But what I am going to tell
you is that you're clever, and you're funny. Which I like a great deal more than just pretty."

I wanted to throw my arms around his neck and shower his face with kisses, wanted to pull him
down on top of me and never let him go. I wanted to scream, wanted to throw things and say,
Goddamit, Carlos, why can't you just be my normal, ordinary, not-leaving-London-in-a-week
boyfriend. But then I remembered. That was why we were doing this. Because the world was
ending, so it didn't matter if we fucked.

"Get dressed, or Make-Up are going to blame me for your being late," I told him.

We held hands as we walked together to the bus stop. It was such a tiny gesture, and yet it seemed
to make my heart go all fluttery even more than it had, holding his cock in the palm of my hand. It
felt weird, it felt so public and exposed, like I was convinced someone was going to stop me and
demand to know why I was holding my friend's hand, didn't I know what that looked like? Carlos
was in a good mood, whistling to himself, constantly catching my eye and squeezing my hand as if
to say yes, look at us, we're actually doing it. We're pretending to be lovers, in public.

The bus came, and I got out my Oyster, as he scrabbled for his, but I walked to the back and found
a double seat. He followed a minute later, loping in beside me, then wrapping one of those
impossibly long arms of his around my shoulder, squeezing me gently. For a moment, I panicked, I
felt hemmed in, like I couldn't breathe, like there wasn't enough oxygen on the bus, and I wanted to
get the fuck off, away from this imposing man and his spreading thighs. But then I managed to get
my breathing back under control, looked down, and gently tapped him on the thigh, nudging him to
get him to move his legs closer together so I had space to breathe.

"Sorry," he murmured, and kissed me softly on the cheek. Oh Christ, I wanted to scream to
everyone on the bus - did you see that? He just kissed me, in public. I decided to leave my hand on
his thigh, just to see if he'd notice, just to see if he'd cough, and hem and haw, and politely try to
squirm out from under it. But he didn't, in fact he squeezed me again and turned towards me to
nuzzle his nose against my head. "You always smell so good," he whispered into my hair.

I wanted to tell him that he was mad, that he had no nose; in point of fact, I hadn't even showered
that morning. But then suddenly we were at Waterloo, and piling off the bus. I thought he was just
going to check by the box office to make sure I got a good seat, then park me somewhere with a
drink, but instead he took me by the hand and lead me backstage. I sat with him as he changed,
admiring his shapely legs in the knee-breeches, than watched the transformation as the hair and
make-up artists turned him into Valmont for the last time.
He was in a ridiculously good mood, laughing, cracking jokes with everyone, generally playing up the witty bon viveur. Even when Teri arrived, clearly coming over to check on his broken heart - or wounded pride - or really to admire her handiwork, perhaps, he didn't so much as frown. She looked perplexed for a moment, dropping her voice to a concerned murmur, as if wondering why she wasn't getting a reaction out of him, but then she turned and saw me.

I said nothing; I just smiled and nodded. "Teri."

"Margaret," she acknowledged, then fled. I just watched her go, not with anger, not even with the pride of having seen off a rival, just with a weird odd feeling, maybe even close to gratitude.
Carlos, as Valmont, glowed, right through the performance. But this time, I wasn't watching him as a character, I was just watching him as a man, watching how he moved onstage, the beautifully controlled movements of his long, shapely limbs. He and Valmont were completely separate in my mind, now, and I wasn't sure how I could ever have conflated them - the scheming aristocrat, and the goofball eccentric who pranced naked across his flat after zinging me with a wet towel. The man and the role, the man and the celebrity seemed to have completely detached from one another, and suddenly I understood what he meant when he said he had based his Valmont on my twisted idea of his public image.

We didn't hang around after the performance, and I couldn't really say that I blamed him, what with Teri gossiping loudly across the dressing room, about her powerful new screenwriter boyfriend.

"Do you want to go to dinner?" asked Carlos, as we walked out into the warm June evening, though it was still nearly as bright as mid-day.

"Alright," I agreed. "Anywhere in particular?"

"Do you know, I kind of want to go to Le Pont de la Tour. Because it was, after all, where we met for the first time."

I eyed him carefully. "Are you actually, just a big, soppy, romantic?"

"Possibly." He pulled out his cigarettes and offered me one. "Do you want to walk? It's such a beautiful night, it'd be nice to stroll along the South Bank."

The South Bank was flooded with people, but somehow it didn't matter when I was walking with him. We strolled, arm in arm, wrapped around each others' waists, being slow ourselves, getting in the way, taking photographs of ourselves with the Thames in the background. We stopped outside the Tate, then walked halfway across the Millennium Bridge, just to kiss, suspended over the Thames, with the sun blazing on the white face of St Paul's in the background.

"We should definitely take a picture of this, to send to my Mom," he suggested.

"Won't that be awkward? Will you have to explain who I am?"

"She knows exactly who you are," he said, meaningfully, and I wanted to probe him further, on what, precisely he meant by that, except a Japanese couple stopped us, and asked if they would take their photo for them, if we took theirs. Carlos, magnanimously, agreed, and the conversation moved on.

It took us an hour to walk back to his flat, but the sun wasn't even showing any sign of diminishing. Le Pont de la Tour was busy, but we still managed to get a window seat, laughing over all of the misunderstandings we'd been through that first night we'd hesitantly met. When we left, sated and slightly drunk, the sun had still not dipped below the horizon.

"My god, it's nearly 10 o'clock. Is the sun never going to finish setting?" he asked, squinting out into pinkish-gold Western sky.

"Not really, no." I thought for a moment. "It's the 21st. It's the Solstice today. We should do something to celebrate."
Carlos’ lips turned up in a saucy smile. "Celtic fertility festivals, a la the Wicker Man, perhaps?" But then he laughed. "It doesn't seem fair, the first night I'm going to spend with you, and it won't even get dark."

"All the better to see you with," I teased as I followed the alleyway round and waited for him to unlock the door. "You know, this reminds me of another episode of Space Station Nebuchadnezzar..."

"Oh, of course it does," he laughed. "I suppose you're going to make me watch the entire program now, all five years of it..."

"No, no, no, wait, listen," I told him as we piled into the lift. He turned us to face the mirror in the back, and put his arm around me, posing together, to see how we looked. Tired, slightly windblown, we looked like we belonged together. "When the Zimbani race... the good, super-advanced New Age kinda aliens... when they become close, before they decide to get it on, they spend three nights together. The male sleeps, and the female watches, waiting to see when his true face emerges."

"Oh god, I don't even want to know what my true face looks like at this point. I'm quite certain I've got a painting in an attic somewhere that can show you that," Carlos quipped.

"If she likes what she sees, then they proceed to the crazy New Age sex bit, when they spend the night 'exploring one another's pleasure centres' - which is left a bit open to the imagination..."

Excusing myself, I disappeared into the bathroom to sort myself out - blast, yes, my period was still going strong - then emerged to find Carlos had disappeared.

"We need to drink up all this wine in the next week," he called, and I followed him into the kitchen. "Zinfandel or Merlot?"

"Merlot, please."

"It's just as well I don't have to sexually perform tonight. It means I can get really, wretched drunk," he sighed, digging for his corkscrew. I produced it from the correct drawer, and handed it to him. "You are still into it, right?"

"Do you think I'd have changed my mind so quickly?"

He gave me a coolly appraising glance. "Knowing you... yes."

"Try and get rid of me," I muttered, accepting a glass of wine and walking through into the main room. I kicked off my shoes, then looked around, wondering if it was too early to just climb into bed and collapse, exhausted and emotionally drained from the roller-coaster of a day. As I stepped out onto the balcony, and stared at the finally setting sun, Carlos came up behind me and put his arms around my waist, before kissing me softly on the back of the neck.

"Do you mind taking this off?" he whispered into my ear as he tugged at my shirt.

I turned to face him. "I can't get naked," I warned him. "There might be blood."

"I just want to see your breasts," he breathed softly.

Putting my glass of wine down on the table, I nervously raised my hands to my neck, and slowly started to unbutton. The look on his face was exquisite, nervous, and excited, and completely disbelieving, like he couldn't believe this was finally happening, that same kid-on-Christmas-
morning expression from selfies he'd once sent me months and months ago. I shrugged off my waistcoat and draped it over the back of one of the iron chairs, then slipped my silk shirt off my shoulders, and stood before him in my bra.

"Wow," he said, his voice trembling, like, how many girls had this man probably seen naked in his lifetime, and he was still excited about me? "You're..." He reached around, and expertly unfastened my bra, without even looking at the fastening, like he had done this a thousand times in his lifetime, pulling it away to reveal my breasts, flopping out into the pink-orange-purple light of the sunset. "You've been holding out on me," he observed, bending down as he cupped on breast in each hand, tenderly kissing each nipple in turn. "All those flowing silk shirts, the men's waistcoats, the ties... and you were hiding this underneath?" He bounced my breasts in his hands, as if trying to get a feel for the heft of them.

"Well, what did you think I had underneath?" I blushed slightly, having always considered my endowment a slightly embarrassing nuisance.

He shrugged lightly, then dropped lightly to his knees and kissed each breast again, carefully, considering, as if trying to decide a preference. "I thought you were just chubby."

I slapped him, not hard, but just enough to make him giggle and step back.

"Come on, I thought my preference for plus-sized girls was writ large all over the Internet," he laughed, a little self-deprecatingly.

"That's a mean thing to say. Are you negging me, Carlos?"

"It's not mean," he laughed. "It's just a preference. I'm... relieved to find you buxom under all the angles. I'd only be negging you if I said I hated your body." He kissed me again, tenderly, rubbing his face into my nipples. "I'm delighted with your body. I love your breasts. I just had no idea. You are full of surprises today."

I frowned, feeling suddenly very self conscious about his open delight in my anatomy. "I kinda hate them," I confessed.

"Why? They're so beautiful; so soft, so full, so round." A soft pink tongue snaked across my nipples.

"Because of the stupid assumptions that people - especially men - make about you if you have full breasts."

He let go of my nipples and leaned back on his haunches, looking up at me carefully, as if trying to appraise me. "Such as...?"

"People assume one of two things - either that you're feminine and motherly and nurturing - or that you're a slut. Or both at the same time, if you're..." I had been about to say 'if you're Sunita' but mercifully stopped myself. But I deliberately changed the subject, crossing my arms over my bare flesh defensively. "...wearing clothes that reveal them in any way. I've always hated them, they ruined my life when I first grew them. I wanted to stay coltish, boyish, androgynous forever. And then I got saddled with these jugs, saddled with this stupid, curvy, plus-sized body, forever ruining my androgynous ideal."

Carlos' face was a perfect picture of puzzlement. "I don't understand why, when people say 'androgynous', they always mean boyish. Because I think you are genuinely androgynous. Androgynous meaning a mixture of masculine and feminine aspects, not just... boyish. Your
androgyny intrigues me - your *both*-ness."

I eyed him carefully, then shrugged it off with humour. "*Both*-ness," I told him deliberately. "Is not a word."

He shrugged lightly, rolling his eyes, that camp, slightly effeminate crumple I always found so endearing. "You may have noticed... that I am not the world's most masculine man."

"Nooo," I teased.

"I'm an actor," he explained, as if he hadn't caught my sarcasm, or just chosen to ignore it. "I'm aware that I'm very metrosexual, perhaps even camp. I've worn make-up both on and offstage, I care about clothes and style and art and other feminine preoccupations. But I don't feel... like a woman. I feel... a *both*-ness. A duality. Masculine and feminine. I feel like the parts of me that are camp or effeminate in me are drawn to the parts of you that are rough and masculine; and the parts of me that are still, decidedly a man, are... delighted as hell to discover those parts of you that are, decidedly and unequivocally, a plump and curvy and absolutely erotic *voluptuous* woman."

I felt myself flush, my face, my neck, my breasts going bright red, and started to sputter. "Your thinking... is still... so bloody binary, with this whole oppositional gender thing."

He shook his head, and straightened up again, wrapping his arms around my waist as he nuzzled his head between my breasts, and kissed my stomach gently. "No, really... it's not. It's the opposite of binary; it's everything all blended together. And I think that truly, we complement each other. Yes, with all the Derridean connotations that you're going to read into that word intended."

I giggled nervously, then shivered slightly as a breeze blew up off the river. For a moment, I just stood there awkwardly, but then raised my hands and touched his hair, pulled those delightful curls about before twining my fingers in them and clutching him close against my body, marvelling at how perfectly we seemed to fit together.

"Come inside, let's go to bed."

His tenderness surprised me; his consideration even more so. I cast about for something to sleep in, as I needed to hang my trousers out to air, to do for another day, but wanted to sleep in something more substantial than just my knickers.

"You want to keep safe from my rapacious hands, no doubt," he teased.

"I just don't want to bleed all over your rented bed."

He found me a pair of ridiculous knee-length cycling shorts, which were slightly ill-fitting on me, but he was nice enough not to laugh. Maybe he was really, actually, *into* me, if he still wanted to sleep with me, dressed in such ridiculous garb. Kicking off his trousers, he pulled his shirt up over his head, so that his skin was equally as bared. Then he pulled back the covers of the bed, and led me in beside him, pulling just the bottom sheet back over us, so we didn't get too warm, giggling like children in the half-dark of a summer night as he pulled it up over our heads.

For a long time, we almost didn't dare touch one another, just lying and looking at one another. Then slowly, tentatively, we edged closer together. Noses and foreheads touching, eyes staring into one another as if searching for secrets there. Then arms drifted closer, touching one another's skin, exploring, my fingertips searching for stubble on his chest.

"What?" he asked, as my fingers rubbed back and forth as if petting a kitten. "No, I've never had hair on my chest. Hell, I didn't grow a proper beard until I was about 18, and even then it only
came in in patches. It's my mother's side of the family. The Germans are all as hairy as bears, but me? Hairless as my unknown Indios ancestors."

"I had no idea." I moved closer, touching my knees against his, as his hands moved to my hips, cursing the cycling shorts, then slid off onto the plump curve of my belly. For a moment, I wanted to apologise for it, but he cupped my flesh lovingly.

"You are speckled everywhere," he observed, connecting freckle to freckle to freckle with an exploratory fingertip.

I couldn't help myself, I completed the song lyric without even meaning to. "Speckled like a leopard."

For a moment, Carlos looked outraged, but then his face relaxed into a smile as he bent to kiss a pronounced mole in the shadow of my collarbone. "Just like a leopard," he echoed, then added, "It's odd. You don't have many freckles on your face, but your shoulders, your belly, your arms..."

"That's just being English," I confessed. "I mean, my Mum made me wear a hat everywhere, when I was a child, on account of the chestnut hair..."

"It's natural?" he asked, poking fingers into my roots.

"Well, it brightens in the sun, but mostly... OK, Miss Clairol helps a little," I said defensively. "When I was a kid I always wore a hat, or sunscreen to protect my face, but I was a little hellion. As soon as I was out of sight, I'd just tear off my clothes and go screaming about the woods half-naked, same as my brother, in nothing but sandals and a pair of sawn-off shorts. My Mum warned me, but I never listened - and this is my punishment. Freckles, everywhere."

"They're adorable," he whispered back, bending over to kiss my shoulders. "Did I ever tell you I totally have a thing for English girls. Especially English girls with freckles."

"Ha!" I snorted.

"Oh come on, you're not offended by that, are you?" he laughed, moving down to kiss my collarbone, my neck. "Why are you so offended every time I tell you I like your body?"

"Well, how would you feel if I told you I had a thing for something completely arbitrary and superficial about you... like, what if I told you I had a thing for half-Columbian bass players from New Jersey?"

"That's racist," snorted Carlos, though he was still smiling, tracing my freckles with his fingers.

"Like it's not racist to have a weird fetish about my ethnicity?"

"There's no such thing as racism against British people," Carlos pointed out with that smug, pedantic tone of voice that was like a red flag to a bull with me.

"You think there are no Black or Asian British people? I think Suni and Alice would beg to differ," I parroted right back at him, just for the sheer pleasure of pedanting him right back.

"You're White British," he corrected.

"You're White Columbian," I replied, just to irritate him.

"You know, I'm technically not, I'm technically mixed ethnicity..." he started to grumble, and for a
second I thought he was going to get actually angry, until he saw the mischief dancing in my eyes, and relaxed, laying back against the pillow before growling mock-crossly and nipping me playfully on the cheek. "You are the most infuriating woman I have ever known, and I am the most foolish man in the world for being in love with you."

I rapped him playfully on the nose with my index finger. "No. I'm even more foolish for loving you."

And suddenly we looked at one another, startled, as if surprised that the truth had slipped out in such an easy, offhanded way. In all my previous relationships, it had always seemed like such a protracted negotiation, like pulling teeth, to admit that we loved one another. Yet with Carlos, with this frustrating, annoying, problematic man I didn't even really know if I wanted, it had slipped out, just like that. The truth. I was in love with him. And he was in love with me.

"When did you know?" I asked quietly, almost afraid to breathe, for fear that he would just laugh and clap his hands and admit he'd made it all up, for a joke, just to trap me in a confession.

But there was no joke. He was deadly serious. "Me? I knew before I even met you. You? That day with the bluebells..."

I tried to make a joke of it. "Before you even met me? What would you have done if I'd turned up and been fat and old and hideous?"

His eyes flashed. "Who's to say you didn't, and I decided not to be shallow and love you anyway?" For a moment, I just stared at him in horror, trying to work out if he was serious - and if that was noble, or insulting, if he was - but then he burst out laughing and kissed the patch of cheek he had just bitten. "I'm joking. I thought you were lovely the moment I saw you. A chubby Goth. Just my type."

I thumped him on the shoulder. He thumped me right back, but playfully, a glancing blow, like a girly-slap. "What happened on that day with the bluebells? Was it because I kissed you..."

"Well, partially. That was when I started to think... when I started to do more than just hope and endlessly pine. But I wasn't certain until the train home, when I asked you, should I stay in London, or go back to New York. And when you said... go back to New York, it's your home, you need to be there, then I knew."

"But I was telling you to leave. Why would that make you think I loved you?"

"You were telling me to do what was best for me. Against your own interests. Even though I'd said I would stay if you wanted me to. And still, you told me to do what you thought was best for me. That's love. That's real love," he told me, stroking my hair gently out of my face. "Selfless love."

"But you were in such a bad mood with me that day - you were so short with me, every time I tried to talk to you about us, or about Teri," I protested.

"Don't you see, I was trapped? It was like you created a dilemma for me, and I was damned, no matter which option I chose. I wanted you so badly, I could have taken you then and there, right amidst the bluebells. But if I so much as contemplated the tryst, then you were right. I was a cheater and a cad. If I'd consummated my passion for you, while I was with Teri, you would never have trusted me ever again. Even if I'd gone home and broken off relations with Teri to liaise with you, there would always have been that pall of suspicion in your mind. So I stayed, trapped."

I studied his face carefully, and thought it seemed totally honest, totally open, there was still
something that didn't add up. "I didn't push you into that dilemma. You chose it for yourself."

"I needed to date, to prove to myself as much as you, that I could be a good boyfriend. That it wasn't just a fluke, my last relationship."

"Or maybe," I suggested, very quietly. "It was just your pride again."

"Oh, don't start," he grumbled, an edge of real irritation sneaking into his voice again. "I've already admitted to sins of pride once this evening, wanting to prove to you that the polyamorous thing was working when it clearly wasn't." He paused, as if considering something quite deeply. "Maybe it isn't actually people that are polyamorous, but individual relationships, which either function in that milieu, or they don't."

"This is starting to sound an awful lot like 'there are no homosexual people, there are only homosexual acts', you know."

"Oh, don't, with the fucking Foucault again..." he snapped, but then irritation relented, and turned to play again. "Why is it, that when you are at your very most irritating, that is when I am the most physically attracted to you?" He kissed me softly, then placed his hands on my arse and pulled me roughly against him. "Christ, I want to fuck you so bad right now."

"It's good for you to learn how to wait," I said, I hoped reasonably.

"I suppose. Discipline and Punish, right?"

"Discipline and Control," I suggested instead. "We need some discipline in here!"

"Throbbing Gristle? God, you are so irritating," he laughed, encircling me with his arms and pulling me closer. "Like Nature just assembled you from all sorts of bits and pieces that I would find especially irresistible, mixed with things I would find annoying beyond compare. It's like a special recipe of irritation and enticement, for Carlos catnip."

"Anger is still a passion," I reminded him, remembering a conversation I'd once had with Alice on the very subject. "Hatred is a passion."

"Why," he murmured, kissing my face softly, though his eyes were half closed, those beautiful long black lashes resting gently on his cheekbones. "Why did Nature assemble you from bits and pieces I can't resist. Dark hair, green-grey-blue eyes just like a New Order song, buxom breasts, an argumentative streak with a overly competitive inability to let go of a debate, a propensity for dropping in mangled bits of post-structuralist linguistics, and a predilection for the music of The Cure, Kraftwerk and Throbbing fucking Gristle..."

"You forgot the speculative fiction thing," I reminded him.

"And a science fiction geek," he laughed.

"I hate science fiction," I protested.

"No you don't." Suddenly his eyes snapped open. "Original 60s Star Trek, TNG or DS9?" he abruptly demanded.

"Oh god," I groaned. "Daddy or chips level dilemma."

He laughed aloud. "And you said you don't like science fiction."
"Star Trek is speculative fiction. There's no science in it!" I protested.

"Semantics," he laughed. "Well, go on. Which do you like better."

"Tough call between 60s and TNG, but I think TNG just edges it. Can't stand DS9, though. Cheap SSN wanna-be. Voyager had its moments, though. I think I'd take that over DS9. The whole Dominion thing was just stupid."

"Voyager was crap. Get out of my bed," he growled, and it was impossible to tell if he was joking until he tickled me.

"Come on, Janeway was hot. You can't tell me you didn't fancy her."

"Oh god, you're right. Guilty as charged. It's my Katharine Hepburn thing."

"You know... I grumble, but... I'd be willing to be polyamorous for Janeway."

He suddenly stopped moving. "Are you serious?"

"No," I burst out laughing, grabbed him around the ribs and started to tickle.

"You asshole. Don't even talk to me. Go to sleep."

"I'm not going to sleep until you go to sleep."

"You first."

"Close your eyes, I'll still be here in the morning."

I could not believe the oddly affectionate man that kissed me the next morning, and brought me coffee in bed. He was tender, solicitous of my needs, made sure I had a clean towel and showed me where the hairdryer was - as if I hadn't stayed over dozens of times before things got weird, back in the spring. Before I left, he tossed me the spare keys again.

"Will you come back tonight?" he begged.

"I can't. I have to go home and exchange out some things. Clean clothes, girly bits, you know how it is."

"Tomorrow?"

"OK," I agreed. "Tomorrow and Wednesday, so long as you try not to get in too late. But I can't do Thursday. And then..."

"Friday?" he suggested, his eyes lighting up, as we both knew what was on the cards.

"Saturday," I corrected.

He nodded as if barely believing what we were agreeing to. "Saturday, then." He exhaled deeply. "I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Right," I nodded, and turned to go, but suddenly he caught me by the hand, and held me for just a moment, looking down into my eyes as if he was still amazed that this was all happening, and I was really there. But then he raised my hand slowly to his lips, and dropped a kiss, gently, into the
palm of my hand, rubbing his stubbly chin against my fingers until it tickled. When he removed his mouth, he folded my fingers closed, carefully, tenderly, on top of it, then pressed my hand up against my chest.

"Keep that here, close to your heart, all day," he told me softly, then held the door open for me, leaning against the door frame and watching me as I disappeared out towards the lift.

My lips were chapped from kissing, when I got to work. I kept touching them, picking at the memory of Carlos until I popped out at lunchtime to buy some balm. I was surprised it didn't glow all over my face, I was surprised that people couldn't smell it on me as I passed. All I could think about was sex - well, not even sex, as we hadn't yet had sex, just the feel of Carlos' long, wiry arms wrapped around my body, his face pressed into my breasts.
Chapter Summary

Yes! It is the bit scene in the City Girl novel, where the girls go S.H.O.P.P.I.N.G. in order to obtain an outfit sexy enough to wow the starcrossed lovers together.

But I'm going to stick a warning on this chapter - from now on, this story gets very explicit. And I made a decision when I started writing it, that the sex was going to be a bit too real - messy, squelchy, painful sex between middle-aged bodies that have things going wrong with them. So I didn't want anyone to be surprised when this chapter starts to go quite rude, quite quickly.

Three nights, I spent at his house, a good, prime, fairy tale kind of number. I slept with him without fully fucking him, and found that I actually trusted him. The boundaries were always carefully set, and always obeyed. He looked, but did not touch. He touched, but never too far. We kissed, we snuggled, we held one another. I got used to the smell of him in my bed, the sound of him as he slept, the oddness of turning over in the middle of the night to find massive long legs taking up the mattress. I got used to his rhythms, his moods, his bleary-eyed crotchetyness before his first cup of coffee, his first cigarette. Oh, and his ebullient friskiness after his morning wank. Like, that was a thing I had completely forgotten, it had been so long since I lived with a man. I walked in on him by accident, the first time and blushed profusely. The second time, I asked him about it, and wanted to watch, wanted to see the mechanics of how he got himself off, for my own curiosity.

"You can watch if you..." He gestured for me to take off the ratty black cardigan I'd borrowed off him to keep off the early morning chill.

I just laughed and removed it, then spread myself out naked before him. "What do you think about, when you..." My eyes slid down as he expertly manhandled himself. He had no foreskin, which I found genuinely odd, compared to most of the British men I'd known, so I was curious about what took up the slack.

"I think about tits, mostly," he shrugged.

"Like this?" I asked mischievously, picking them up and cupping them in my hands, angling them towards him.

"Oh Christ..." His eyes looked like they were going to pop out of his skull. "Do you mind... if I come on them..."

"No, go ahead." I moved them closer, amused by his teenage-boy reaction to two handfuls of flesh.

"In fact..." he gasped, as his hand movements grew more jagged, and his breaths grew more shallow. "Can I put it between them?"

I laughed lightly, then moved down towards them. "Yeah, sure."

He put his cock between my breasts, and I folded them over him, like two great water balloons. "Can you... jiggle them..." he directed, even as he was bucking with his hips. I obliged, trying not to
giggle as he vibrated in the midst of my flesh. It felt kinda nice, actually. His face went slightly blank, an expression I was starting to recognise as his eyes slitted, and his jaw set, gurning and biting his lower lip, before he abruptly pulled out from between my breasts, then spurted all over them, one, two, three, small arcs of semen, pale across my freckled skin. "Oh Christ." He grinned, surveying his handiwork. "That looks fucking amazing," he sighed, reaching out and slowly rubbing his cum into my skin, working it round and round in little circles until he was raising my nipples with the slick, sticky moisture.

"What is the big deal," I laughed softly. "About your semen on my nipples?"

"I don't know," he said, bending down to kiss my breasts, not even seeming to mind that he was getting a mouthful of his own cum in the process. "I just think it looks so awesome, so... outrageously erotic. Maybe it's the confluence of male ejaculate and the potential secretion of breast milk... I've no idea. It's just so hot." He flopped back on the bed, his arms, slick with sweat, above his head, a tiny bead of cum clinging to his lips.

"You've got something on your..." I bent down and licked it off, on impulse, then regretted it. "Ugh, that doesn't taste so nice."

"It doesn't taste of anything at all," he shrugged, licking the rest of his lips clean. "And I've tasted my own cum often enough on girls' lips to know."

"It tastes like mucus."

"Mucus doesn't taste like anything."

"You smoke too much. It tastes like snot and salt."

"What are little boys made of?" he teased me, seizing me around the waist and pulling me towards him, holding his sweaty, cummy hands against my face. "Slugs and snails and puppydog tails."

"Shut up with your boring gender binary, and your boring heteronormativity again," I sulked, pretending to slap his face, but really just running my fingers along his cheekbones.

"Sorry to ruin your fantasy of androgynous lesbian chic, sweetie, but I think when I've just come all over your tits, this is pretty hetero," he tossed right back, clutching me to him, so I couldn't struggle away.

"A non-binary girl with an effeminate boy still doesn't make this hetero," I snorted, trying to push him off me.

"Are we back on binary again? Well, I think I've just populated your NULL value pretty effectively," he teased, holding me tight, kissing my face until I stopped struggling. "Damn, I wish I could taste you. When is your period over?"

"No," I said, quite decisively, and laid my finger over his lips.

"I wish I could taste you right now. I don't even mind if you're a little bit bloody... I guess it's pretty unsafe, but... then again, you said you haven't had sex with anyone in a couple of years - have you been tested since then?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't want you to. At all. And not even just when I'm on my period. I don't want you to, at all. Ever."

"What?" He looked utterly perplexed.
"No, I'm serious. I don't want you tasting me. I don't want your mouth on me, down there, at all," I insisted.

"You're serious?" He looked utterly disappointed as I nodded, and more than slightly sulky. "Oh, man, that sucks. Why not?"

"I don't like it."

"You'd like it the way I do it. I've never had any complaints. In fact, I have frequently been complimented, and told I am *very* talented with my tongue."

Suddenly we were no longer playing. I sat up and looked at him like I was vaguely disgusted with him. "What, you expect me to just lie there, hating every minute of it, just so you can feel *talented* with your tongue?"

He pulled back, and looked ever so slightly hurt, like I had wounded his masculine pride by insulting his prowess. Oh, for f**k's sake, this was going to be the problem with getting with a guy who had fucked a million girls, wasn't it? That because *2000* other girls on his last European tour had enjoyed it, he expected me to enjoy it, too.

But then he saw the expression in my face, and relented. "Hey, OK... please, don't be mad at me." He put his arms around me and pulled me closer again. His lips found mine again, as his tongue searched for me, and he kissed me, slowly, back into good humour. "If you don't like it, we won't do it. I just..." He pulled away, his dark eyes soft and slightly vulnerable as they searched mine. "I just feel really selfish at the moment. Like, you keep getting me off, and I wish there were a way I could return the favour."

My heart melted a little tiny bit, as I relented. "Saturday," I assured him. "Saturday, I will show you how you can return the favour."

He grinned, and bit my lower lip. "Saturday."

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The 4BAABS girls, at least, noticed that something was up, as I swanned through the door of Sunita's and Evie's flat, 15 minutes late, because I couldn't stop texting filthy nothings back and forth with Carlos, on the bus.

"Have you had a haircut?" asked Evie, looking me up and down.

"Have you lost weight?" suggested Sunita.

Alice, however, was more to the point. "Have you got laid or something, Margo?"

I blushed bright crimson and called for a glass of wine. "I have done just about everything except actually get laid, but it looks like that particular problem will be solved... on Saturday."

"With who?" demanded Sunita.

"Whom," corrected Alice, ever the grammar pedant. "Did you finally put out for Carlos?"

"I thought Carlos had left the country," said Sunita, ever out of the loop.
"Nah, Reg is in the play, too, remember, and he told me it's running until Saturday. Ah, wait - Saturday, the night of Margo's hot date... though that could be circumstantial evidence, wouldn't hold up in court, it does look suspicious," observed Evie. I stared at her. She was still dating Reg, four months later? Maybe both Carlos and I had underestimated the man.

In my waistcoat pocket, my iPhone dinged. As I pulled it out to check Carlos' latest smutty suggestion, Sunita made a grab for it. "Hand it over, you know the rules..." There was a brief tussle, but she won, holding it out in front of her and reading the text displayed against the lock screen. "I breathlessly anticipate our next assignation, and the opportunity to deluge your deliciously buxom endowments with the pearls of my loins... Oh Jesus Christ, Margo, he even sexts like he's swallowed a thesaurus."

"Give me that," I snapped, and seized it from her, to file the text away and then turn the whole thing off.

"You really are banging Carlos," observed Evie.

"Finally," whooped Alice.

"Wait, remind me - he's leaving for New York when?" asked Sunita.

"Tuesday," I sighed.

"You have had this man in the country for six months, playing the will-you won't-you game, and you wait to bang him, until literally three days, before he leaves? Are you fucking nuts?" demanded Sunita.

"Better late than never?" I offered.

"Or maybe that's why she's waited," Evie suggested. "So if he turns out to be a flop in bed, then she won't have to deal with him hanging around..."

"Nope," I countered. "I have done just enough, with him, to know... chances are extremely unlikely that he's going to be a flop. He... well, let's just say, he knows what he's doing." Lord knows he had had enough practice.

"I don't think that's it," said Alice, shaking her head. "I think she's scared."

"Look, in case it slipped your mind, he had a girlfriend for at least 3 of the six months that he was there," I reminded them.

"Yeah, an open, non-exclusive, no-strings-attached girlfriend who was also banging our producer friend on the side," Sunita pointed out.

"He... uh... didn't want to get with me, while he was with her, because... well, he knew that Teri was, erm, a bit funny about me. Insecure was his word."

"Insecure?" snorted Evie. "She acted like a jealous fucking harridan at that party."

"But regardless. He realised... that infidelity with me, would be deliberately cruel to her, and would make me trust him even less - so he abstained. I think that was the first time that I realised... despite his whole 'ladies' man' reputation, he was a trustworthy, honourable bloke," I confessed, though it felt completely bizarre to say it aloud. I hadn't even been able to admit it to Carlos, though he had guessed alright.
"You had to get him to date that hag to realise that he is actually dateable? You are completely fucking nuts, you know that, right?" accused Sunita.

But still, it was Suni I pulled aside, in the kitchen, while she was clearing up after dinner, after we'd recorded the program, and Alice and Evie had sat down to go over what Suni and I had added to our Sharepoint during the previous week. "Sunita, I need your help."

She shook her head. "I don't think you need my help. It seems like you're doing just fine on your own."

"I need your help with clothes, Suni."

Her eyes lit up, as she looked me up and down. "Yes, OK, that I can help you with. Though, that said... if you were able to pull Carlos in your man-hating Weimar Lesbian uniform, maybe he is just really into you, regardless."

Putting my hand on her arm, I pulled her out of earshot of the living room, and lowered my voice. "Do you know what one of the biggest problems is, with me and men?"

"Yes! We've been through all this before. You're too intense, too androgynous, too competitive, too bitchy and mean, too know-it-all..."

I shook my head. "Those are exactly all the things that Carlos says he likes about me."

"OK, you really don't need my help, then."

I reached for the last bottle of wine and poured myself a glass, swigging it before launching into a confession that terrified me to the core. "The problem is, I just don't feel sexy. I got the stuffing knocked out of my confidence, sexually, a long time ago, and it never came back. I don't want to have sex, because I don't feel like my body is a place where sex can even happen."

Sunita grabbed at the bottle of wine and poured herself her own glass. "Is this my fault? Is that what you're trying to say."

I shook my head. "No. I've been carrying this a long time, but just... no. If it wasn't you, it would have been someone else. It was already gone before everything that happened with you happened. Maybe Paul just bullied it out of me. I stopped feeling like a sexual being a long time before he started having affairs."

Leaning against the sideboard, Sunita studied me carefully. "Can you not take this one thing, from the whole... mess with Carlos?"

"What one thing?" I asked, staring sullenly into my cups.

"Margaret, Carlos is hot. He is, like, holy fucking shit, super-shit-hot. This guy has been an international sex symbol, heartthrob rock star, actor... and he has been bending himself out of shape over you for the past six, seven months? Can you not see something in this fact, that proves you are sexually desirable?"

"Carlos has problems of his own. Don't let the international superstar thing fool you. He is a guy that has never really let go of the geeky, spotty, frizzy-haired, acne-ridden dirtbag he was back in high school. No matter how many beautiful women he fucks, he still, at heart, wants the woman that rejects him."

"If that's true, why is he sticking around, now that he's got you?"
"Maybe that's what I'm afraid of?"

"Margaret, you're allowed to want this. You're allowed, in fact, to have it. You're allowed to get totally naked and screw the super-hot dude who appreciates your intensity, your competitiveness, your hilarious bitchy meanness..."

"I'm terrified to want it, in case he yanks it away."

"So you want me to take you shopping, and buy you a killer outfit like a suit of fucking armour, that will make you feel like you are entitled to grab a piece of your hot rock star's skinny ass?"

"Something like that, yeah."

"OK." She nodded slowly. "You and me, we are meeting on Oxford Street, at 10am, Saturday morning."

"No, not Oxford Street," I moaned.

"Oh yes. We are meeting first thing, at Marks and Sparks, to get you properly fitted for a decent fucking bra, because the one amazing asset you have is your sodding tits, and you've been hiding them in a bra two sizes too small for the past five fucking years!"

I flushed bright red as I remembered Carlos' joy at discovering them. "I hate them."

"No you don't. And Carlos certainly doesn't, if that text is anything to go by. We are getting you a decent bra that makes the most of what he likes. And then we are going to Selfridge's and sorting you out with a dress that stops traffic."

"Do I have to wear a dress?" I moaned. "I hate dresses. And I hate that part in every goddamn fucking romantic comedy where the girl goes off to Selfridge's or Saks Fifth Avenue and comes out in this boring fucking ballgown and conventional fucking makeup that makes her look like a beauty pageant contestant, and the man just drops to his knees at this vision of bland heteronormative femininity. No. I'm not doing it. I don't want to look like someone else. I want to look like me. Me, just... hotter."

"Aw, jeez, you are impossible! But... well, we'll see what we can do."

And so, on Saturday morning, I found myself being poked and prodded by a venerable shop assistant at Marks & Spencers, being fitted for a bra, only to discover that although my chest measurement was approximately the same as it had been at 30, I had gone up two cup sizes. Fuck, I was going to have to let out all the men's shirts I had carefully taken in to fit me. Then, once I was girded with a dainty lacy thing with hidden underwire and cantilevers up the yinyang, and two more substantial battle-bras for work, we crossed the road and regrouped in the Selfridge's cafe to check out various outfits that Sunita had cut out of fashion magazines.

"Nope," I said to some 70s catsuit horror. "You can't piss in those things." I flipped over to some hotpants and disco-shirt abomination. "Absolutely not. Who the fuck decided that the 70s were coming back in fashion? And if it had to be the 70s, why did it have to be this rubbish, and not Bowie and Roxy Music?" I flipped the page to see Kim Kardashian pushing a pram wearing a tuxedo, albeit a tuxedo jacket without a whit of a shirt on underneath. "Actually, that's kinda hot." I studied it for a few moments, trying to work out how her breasts seemed to bob suspended without a visible bra-line anywhere in sight. Oh wait, no, in the next photo it was obvious she was wearing a deeply slashed jumpsuit underneath. "No jump suits. And I could never get away with that." I flipped it over and went on to the next page, a photo of Tilda Swinton in an odd, constructed
woollen thing. "Sure, if I were about fifty pounds slimmer..."

But Sunita had taken the Kim Kardashian photo and was studying it closely. "You could so get away with this. Maybe without a jumpsuit, but with just a tuxedo jacket over a super-low neckline."

"Maybe if I had cosmetic breast surgery," I snorted.

"Nah, look. She's just had a kid. She's not been having surgery. Look, she's got tape, here and here to keep the jumpsuit in place, and the jacket from flapping open. And then there's two semi-circle support cups just here... and here..."

"Those would never work on my tits."

"Trust me, if they work on a breast-feeding mother, they'll work on you. Let's give it a go. It totally matches your aesthetic. As you said... you, but hotter. Wait here and eat your cream bun. I'll pop into M&S to get you the right size support cups, and be back in a jiffy. Also, tailor's tape. You'll see."

It wasn't so bad. I spent the afternoon trying on suits. Sunita was a total pro at this - she set me up in a little-used dressing room on the top floor, then went off on a mission with a tape measure to find the sexiest suit in all of Selfridges. I liked the sober, black or charcoal suits with mannish cuts that would have done for work, but Sunita put her foot down.

"You but hotter, you said, remember? Those are just you but lawyer-y-er. Look, I'm going to go down to the men's suit department, and grab the gayest looking guy I can see down there. We need some serious queer eye for the straight... or whatever you are, here."

True to her word, she returned about fifteen minutes later, with another armload of suits, and a very stylish looking young man in tow, wearing an outfit that looked like he'd stepped out of the pages of Attitude Magazine. "I suggested going for a brighter colour palette," the Attitude template announced. "But I wanted to see what your skin tone was like before making a recommendation."

"Maggot white, and covered in spots," I moaned, holding up a crimson suit in front of me. "No. That's not going to work, and he's going to think I'm taking the piss."

Attitude Man shook his head. "Milk-white, with freckles. English rose, I would say," he suggested diplomatically. "Plus the auburn hair..."

"Chestnut," I corrected.

"I'm thinking maybe turquoise? Plum?" He pulled a gorgeous purple suit from the rack.

"Not turquoise. His costume is gold and turquoise, and I don't want to look like we planned to match - that's way too Teri for me. Ooh, now, plum... plum, I like." I stripped off my jeans and pulled the trousers on, then put the jacket on over my T-shirt. "The colour's good, but it's a shame about the cut. Way too mumsy."

"Yeah, agreed. Mumsy is not what you want to project," Sunita agreed. "Do you want a cup of coffee? We've been in here so long the assistant outside asked us if we wanted a hot drink." I shook my head, not wanting to be any more jittery than I already was.

"What, exactly is the occasion, may I enquire?" asked Attitude Pin-up as he fussed with the blazer, trying to make it look less frumpy, but it was no good. The cut was all wrong.

"She's got a date with a rock star tonight," Suni teased.
"Fuck off!" I snapped, just as another assistant appeared with a paper cup of Nescafe.

"Jamie, your client wanted a coffee?" asked the girl. Sunita put her hand out to take it.

"A rock star?" The boy - Jamie - brightened slightly. "For real. What band?"

"Ex rock star," I corrected. "And I'm not telling. And neither are you," I added quickly, glaring at Sunita in warning not to spill a word.

"Well, I ask because I wanted to know what kind of aesthetic you were going for. If you were going for a kind of more mod casuals, you know, Oasis, Stone Roses kind of thing, or perhaps 60s chic of Beatles, Stones, Carnaby St. Or a more sophisticated kind of Strokes slash Interpol aesthetic, with suits?" He straightened his tie, and fluffed his hair in the mirror. "It might fun to match your outfit to your boyfriend's image, yes?"

I was about to protest that he was not my boyfriend, then realised... well, for the next three days, at least, maybe he kinda was? "Christ, I am so not used to this whole 'rock star girlfriend' thing - it's doing my head in. Erm, I guess Strokes slash Interpol is getting warmer?" I hedged, hoping my face wasn't burning. "But my own style is maybe a bit more to the Goth end of the spectrum? Dark, but elegant."

"How Goth do you want to go?" Jamie asked, now openly grinning. "Like, are we talking Carlos Dengler in Edwardian collars and velvet smoking jacket Goth, or Burning From The Inside era Bauhaus Goth? I think we have some Anna Sui downstairs."

Sunita nearly snarfed her coffee all over the pile of cast-off suits, as I fought to retain a straight face. Oh, Carlos and his eternal cult of celebrity. It figured, of all the shop assistants in Selfridges, Sunita would find the one Interpol fan.

"I love Anna Sui, but I think I'm on the wrong side of 30 to pull off fishnet and batwings Bauhaus style Goth," I laughed. "But you know whose style I always really loved? The Velvet Underground. Especially the early days, the Banana album, the Warhol years. That's more my kind of thing. Androgynous, but sophisticated."

"Oh, yes! Nico!" Jamie snapped his fingers. "My icon!"

"Well, I haven't got the cheekbones to pull of Nico's icy Germanic sang froid, but that's the sort of thing I'd really love to go for," I confessed.

"Have you got mademoiselle's measurements?" Jamie asked Sunita, then wrote them down on a little slip of paper. "I'll be back in ten, and see what I can find."

"Oh my god," said Sunita. "Carlos is actually, like, really, proper famous? To the point where shop assistants have heard of him? I thought he was just, like, you know, Bob Pollard kinda indie-rock obscure."

"You might not have kept up with pop music since the 90s, but other people still do. And yes, Interpol is still kind of a big deal to them."

"You should tell him, you should totally tell him," urged Sunita.

"Don't you dare. You have no idea how weird Carlos can get about that kind of thing," I hissed. "What if he turns up at the play, with a bunch of his mates?"

"I think he would work extra-hard to find you a super-hot outfit, if he knew who was going to be
the beneficiary of it."

For a second, I almost contemplated it, but then shook my head. "No way," I snorted. "He would kill me." My phone dinged inside my bag, so I dug it out. Of course it was him.

I'm taking the liberties of procuring... necessary items for tonight. Do you have any specific requirements? - C.

Extra lubrication would be good. (No slur on your arousal techniques, but, erm: Fibroids.) M

It was somehow easier to negotiate this stuff via text message, where he couldn't see my blush and I couldn't see his awkwardness.

Extra lubrication is urgent and key in preventing further outbreaks or transmission of my own... uh, condition. Are you alright with latex, or should I source organics? - C.

I couldn't decide if that was considerate or just weird. Oh wait, he had read about Merry's allergy in Sudden-Onset Celebrity and clearly wondered if I suffered from the same problem. Would he ever realise that I was not my characters?

Latex is fine for me. Is there anything I need to be aware of about your condition? Any special precautions I should take? M

We can talk about it tonight. In fact we'll *have* to talk about it tonight. But, alas, I must warn you, our presence has been requested at the afterparty tonight. We can put in a brief appearance, for the sake of form, and move swiftly on, though. - C.

OK, I'll see you then. Looking forward to it. I can ravish you a bit later! x M

There was a knock, and then the curtains swished aside, as Jamie returned with an armful of velvet. I quickly tossed the phone to Sunita and gestured for her to stuff it back into my bag - without reading it, please?

"Right! I have some suggestions for you," Jamie burbled, hanging velvet drapery about the room. "Though the size was tricky in the Anna Sui..."

"Of course not," I sighed. "Designers hate fat girls."
"Mademoiselle is hardly fat," assured Jamie, pulling out his first selection, a gorgeous expanse of wine-coloured crushed velvet.

"Buxom, I thought that was how Car..."

"Shut it!" I hissed.

"Sorry! Zipped..." she laughed, as she covered her giggle with her coffee cup.

"The colour is gorgeous on you," Jamie enthused, as I frowned at my reflection. Oh god, he was going to be one of those, who just came up with compliments, regardless of whether the outfit worked or not. I shook my head. The colour was gorgeous, but the fabric was oddly gauche, and the cut was far too generous, like 70s upholstery in suit form, all drapery in places that probably looked good on skinny girls, but looked like I was trying to hide all of the bits I wanted to accentuate.

"I don't like the cut. What else have you got?"

"This is more your Velvet Underground basic black," Jamie announced, pulling out a beautiful velvet suit so dark and luxurious it seemed like the absence of space, rippling over his hands.

I slipped the jacket on, and it felt like it was made for me, nipping in to display my breasts and my waist, before flaring out to cover my hips. But when I pulled the trousers on, I was annoyed to discover that they didn't actually button. "This is supposed to be a 16?" I muttered. "How annoying. Do they have anything bigger?"

Jamie shook his head. "Oh, my mistake. That line doesn't go above a 14."

"God, I better get them off before my superbass splits them..."

"Can they be tailored?" Sunita suggested, stroking the fabric hopefully.

"Not in time for tonight,"I sulked.

"Now the last suggestion, and you can slap it down if I got it wrong," said Jamie with a little giggle. Sunita looked at him like she wanted to take him home and mother him. "You did say rock star girlfriend. Well, I thought, who is the ultimate rock star, and who was the ultimate rock star wife?"

"Justine Frischmann?" suggested Sunita. "Don't give her ideas about rocking up in Doc Martens, though."

"Debbie Harry?" I contradicted, though I hardly saw myself turning up in ripped garbage bags and plastic space-antennas. Oh, Christ, clearly this foetus hadn't heard of any of our references from the confused and slightly annoyed look on his face.

Jamie shook his head briskly. "How about... Bianca Jagger?" From the back of the rack, he produced something shiny and satiny and white.

"Oh my god, it's a wedding dress," cackled Sunita, and clapped her hands.

"No way. I don't wear white."

"It's not actually pure white - and I'm not surprised you can't get away with white, with your skin. You need tanned or olive skin to really look good in pure white. You need an off-white - eggshell
or ivory. So this tone should be perfect for you."


"Just try it," hissed Jamie.

I slipped the jacket over my T-shirt and found it so soft it was like wearing nothing at all. The cut was even more gorgeous than the black one, with a slight amount of hidden support for my breasts when I buttoned the single button. "OK, this is actually quite nice," I observed, turning around to see how it flattered my behind.

"And the trousers..." Jamie directed.

"These are trousers?" I held them up, looking through yards of gauzy fabric to find the waist. "What is going on here?"

"Just put them on." He was almost at a fever pitch of excitement.

I slid them on, and the gauzy fabric clung to my hips, tight down my thighs, before flaring out into huge sailor-boy bells by my feet. "This is ridiculous," I said, trying to work out the zipper. "It's like the 70s threw up on my calves."

"You said you wanted Roxy Music earlier - and that is totally Brian Eno... Oh wow, is that a satin military stripe down the side? Nice. Very lengthening," observed Sunita.

"I don't need my legs lengthened any longer or I'd be a giraffe, thank you."

"Who knows, maybe Carlos is into bestiality?" she laughed. "Nothing would surprise me about that man." The phone pinged again.

"Don't you dare read that," I hissed, fiddling with the trousers. "Jamie, how do you do this? The zipper doesn't go all the way up."

"No, it's not supposed to... Here, let me." I let go of the waist and held my hands up, letting him fix it. For the second time in as many days, it felt odd to have a man hovering so intimately around me. "They don't sit on your hips, they sit up high to flatter you, and then plunge down in front. It's a very flattering cut, the vertical minimises your belly and accentuates your long legs. You'd see the line better if you took your T-shirt off."

I turned around to take the jacket off, slipped my T-shirt - well, it was Carlos' T-shirt actually, come to think of it - off, and then put the jacket back on. "Oh, I see."

"If you don't feel that daring to expose your navel, there is a lace body suit that comes with it, but I don't think you'd need it, really," Jamie informed me.

"You need a wax, darling," noted Sunita. "Don't worry, I have a woman in Holborn who can always slot you in." She glanced up at me, then started pounding at my phone.

"Are you texting him?" I demanded, whirling on her.

"Don't worry, I'm not pretending to be you or anything. He's just bored before make-up and costume arrive and giving me the backstage gossip."

I turned back to the mirror, entranced by what I saw there. It was a weird mix of Eno and Brian Ferry, with Bianca, and Mick, with more than a touch of 80s Duran Duran thrown in. All those
references I bet that Carlos would actually get. "There's no way I can wear a bra with this, though."

"Tailor's tape and half-cups," said Jamie with a nod.

"Got some earlier," called out Sunita.

"Also, look at this..." Reaching behind the single button, he showed me a tiny silver chain I hadn't noticed before. "Here, loop this round the button..." He fastened it so that the jacket hung just the perfect amount open, yet wouldn't flash anyone. "If you wanted to accessorise it with some silver Statement Jewellery, that would work."

"Maybe," I mused, staring at myself in the mirror, trying to work out if I had the guts to actually wear something like this out in public.

"Where are you going tonight?" Jamie asked, and I felt myself holding back. Had he heard Sunita earlier? Was this what it was going to be like, dating someone like Carlos, forever wondering what other people's motives were, when they asked about him?

"The Old Vic," Sunita supplied, yet again, spilling the beans.

"Hmm, a bit staid," Jamie mused. "Maybe a hat instead of statement jewellery? I'll go downstairs and see what I can find..."

"Wait, wait," I called after him, before he disappeared. "How much is this all going to cost, first?" He dug in the pocket, and pulled out the label with pricetag, attached to the security device. "Ouch," I said.

Jamie looked at me thoughtfully, biting his lip. "You know... I am authorised to give you an employee discount... up to 15%..."

"That does help," said Sunita. "But the managers here can usually get you up to 20% off."

"Alright, 20% but you're really cutting into my commission." Jamie conceded.

"Come on, Jamie. Do it for Interpol. Think of how excited Carlos is gonna be, when he sees her in that," Sunita wheedled.

"Suni, shut up, I'm going to fucking kill you!" I hissed.

But Jamie's face was an absolute study in fandom, as the young man struggled desperately to keep his cool. "I thought it might be," he finally gulped. "Can you..."

"I can't," I said apologetically. "I'm really sorry. I wish I could, but I really can't."

"It's OK," Jamie shrugged. "Definitely, let me get you a hat, though..." But he turned just before he left the dressing room. "Just one thing, though. Is Carlos happy, since he left the band?"

I felt my heart melt a little. He was just a kid, really, and hadn't I wondered the same thing, back before this whole thing started? "You know, I think he is? I really do think that acting is his calling; it's what he's meant to do. He really does love it."

"I'm glad," said Jamie, and disappeared again.

"This is a complete indulgence," I said, turning back to the mirror to confront Ziggy Jagger-dust, swishing my legs to make the satin sparkle in the light. "When I am ever going to wear this thing again?"
"You can wear it to your own wedding," Sunita giggled.

"Fuck you, I am never getting married."

"OK, then, you can wear it to Evie's wedding."

"What?" I snapped, as I turned around. "Evie's not getting married."

"She will be soon, mark my words," she said, tapping my phone. "She just announced that she's giving me three months notice to give up her room in my flat. I'm going to have to find a new housemate."

"What?" I snatched the phone from her to realise that all along, she hadn't been texting Carlos at all. It was her own Galaxy, not my iPhone. "You've been texting Evie all along?" I demanded, as I handed it back, feeling somewhat foolish.

"OK, I guess that was mean. I just wanted to see how you would react. And you didn't, so I guess..."

Was it odd that I hadn't? Or were Sunita and I finally cool again? Or did this mean that I was finally actually feeling secure in a relationship again? Well, no. Because I couldn't really believe that I had one. Three and a half days. Three and a half days before he went back to New York, I reminded myself. It wasn't even time enough to get jealous.

"Evie's moving in with Reg?"

"Yeah, it seems he's got a role in a playhouse up in Leeds for the summer, so they're doubling up in his London flat for next few months. Kind of a test run for moving in together. Or, at least, that's just what she says... Christ, where am I gonna find another housemate as reliable as Evie?"

"That's going to be so weird, her not living with you any more," I observed, though really, they hadn't actually been living together for that long. But then I turned back to the mirror and tried to make up my mind about the outfit. I had to admit, the effect was mesmerising, hiding the bits I wanted covered, drawing the eye away from my problem areas with that dazzling neckline and those swishy bell-bottoms. I threw a few David Bowie poses, then pouted at myself in the mirror, feeling distinctly turned on. "You know, this suit is so fucking hot, I almost fancy myself in it," I laughed.

Suni put the phone down and started to clap. "Fucking buy it, then. No matter what the cost, buy anything that makes you feel like that."

I sighed and rolled my shoulders about, trying to see if the fabric would follow my movements, and it was quite disconcerting the way it showed unexpected flashes of the underside of my breast, while still just about preserving my modesty. "I dunno, I feel shallow as hell for buying something like this just because I want to look sexy for some bloke."

Standing up, Suni put her hands on my shoulders and turned me around, 360 degrees, so I could see myself from every angle in the 3 mirrors. "Never underestimate the importance of good clothes, Margo. Not for their effects on men, but the effects they have on your own confidence. You stand up straighter when you wear this outfit, sweetie. You arch your back and tilt your hips and stick your breasts out like you are actually proud to be in this body, for a change. Hold onto that feeling, you'll need it tonight."

"You think?" I bit my lip and pouted at my reflection, and for the first time, maybe, just maybe, staring at the sultry creature in the mirror, I actually saw what Carlos desired in me.
As I was trying to make up my mind, Jamie returned with a large, wide-brimmed felt hat. "The piece de resistance?"

I put it on and pulled it low over my face. "I feel like Fedoras of OKC now."

"More Scarface than OKC, I would think," teased Sunita.

I made a face and pretended to cock a gun at myself in the mirror. Bang, bang, you're dead. "Alright, I'll take it. Break the bank."

But before I could disrobe, Jamie stopped me. "Do you mind if I take a photo?"

I glared at him. "No way. If this ends up on the internet, I will fucking hunt you down and kill you."

He looked slightly wounded. "No, for my portfolio. I study couture at Central St Martin's."

I relented. "I'm sorry. Go ahead. I guess Carlos' paranoia is rubbing off on me a bit." I posed for him a little, then he flicked about with his phone.

"Alright, I'll wait outside until you're ready for me to ring you up."

We left the shop having made a substantial dent in my savings, though not as bad as it would have been if Sunita hadn't wheeled and dealed a substantial discount. So being famous - or at least dating someone famous - had its upsides as well as its downsides. Then Sunita hustled me into a cab bound for her 'lady' in Holborn.

"Bikini Line, Landing Strip or full Brazilian?" the receptionist asked breezily.

"None of the above," I yelped. "I just need my, erm... belly button area, erm, tidied up."

"Are you sure you don't want to, uh, clean up, down there, while you're at it?"

"Quite sure," I snapped, before Sunita manoeuvred me into the waiting room. "Jesus Christ, I mean, I've been out of the game a while. Is that what guys expect now, am I expected to be smooth as a 12-year old down there?"

"Carlos is the same age as you, he has definitely seen a bush before. But seriously... guys under 30? They're weird. They honestly think that girls are naturally like barbies down there," whispered Suni.

The efficient young woman arrived and took me off to change, then a sadist in a white coat ripped my belly clear of all its fuzz. Before I could protest, she had started threading my bikini line "just to tidy up the stragglers" causing me to yelp, with surprise more than pain.

"Hey, stop it!" I protested. "Knock it off. I am going to be doing stuff with... that, later today, and I need it not to be throbbing in pain. He can deal with me being straggly."

"Alright, alright."

I produced my card again and laid on another wallop of cash, doing up my jeans before the sadist could get any more idea about my pubes. Then I returned to the waiting room to find Sunita poking at her phone again.

"Do you want to go to Aveeda and get facials? Two for one offer, this afternoon," she enthused.
"Absolutely fucking not," I snarled, still feeling my belly stinging slightly. "I am done with all this girly shit. I wanna go home - or at least back to Carlos' - and sort out this stupid outfit before I completely lose my nerve."

"OK, but we're going back to your flat, because I am making you change your shoes. There is no way you're wearing Doc Martens - or Motorcycle boots - with that outfit," Suni fussed, steering me towards the bus stop and onto a 3.

"I don't have any shoes that aren't Doc Martens, or boots," I whined.

"Right, then, we're getting off this bus and going back to Oxford Street to buy heels."

"How about silver Doc Martens?" I bargained. "Will that be OK with it?"

"I have not seen silver Doc Martens since the 90s."

"Heck, there are parts of the back of my closet I have not seen since the 90s. Trust me, I still got 'em."

"Are you at least going to let me do your make-up?"

"Suni, no! Don't make me regret inviting you back..." I moaned.

Leaning towards me, she picked a hair off my shirt with the concern of a mother hen. "Margo, I have been waiting for the day you actually got a boyfriend again for the past 8 years. Can you just indulge me?"

"All this effort, for a relationship which cannot last beyond a physical expiration date of three days?" I pointed out.

Suni looked at me reproachfully. "You know, that we are all rooting for you to work out a way to keep this going."

"Well, there isn't. Might as well go out with a bang." If that was true, why was I wasting all of that money on expensive designer suits and intimate waxing? I pushed the question out of my mind and lead Suni off the bus at Brixton, arguing over whether we were going to get another bus, or walk over.

"Save your strength for later," she told me with a wink. "You'll need your stamina, when he sees you in that outfit."

We took a bus.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

This chapter is REALLY explicit.

It took over an hour to get dressed, sticking bits to other bits with tailor's tape, trying to get everything to stand up that was supposed to stand up. I had to be careful not to turn around too fast, or gravity would send one of my boobs making a break for it, but between the two of us, Suni and I managed to strap everything down. I even tried the lace body suit thing, then decided that I actually looked more nude with lace in places where I expected to see skin than without. Besides, I could not imagine my lover being pleased at being forced to wrestle with a body suit, as even I couldn't quite work out the snaps around the crotch, and anyway, what if I needed to piss?

My lover. I had almost forgotten him in all this. I was really going to go through with this? It was almost as if the whole shopping trip had been a diversion to stop me from really thinking through what all the preparation was for.

Suni fussed with the tape, and adjusted the hang of the coat, tried a gold necklace, and then swapped it for a silver tassel. She did my hair, though I knew that would be wrecked under the hat, then fussied round my eyes with mascara and eyeliner, though I drew the line at fucking lipstick. I packed a weekend suitcase with a few changes of clothes, my own toiletries, and a less ridiculous pair of shoes and let Suni "help me carry it" to Carlos' flat on Shad Thames. Really, I just wanted the company, and perhaps the moral support.

I could see a bag from Boots on the bedside table, and was quite curious about what preparations, prophylactic or medical or otherwise Carlos had made, but I decided not to indulge my curiosity with Suni around to pass judgement on the contents.

"Are you going to be alright?" she asked.

"Fine, fine," I assured her, though my voice fluttered nervously.

"You remember how to do it, right?" she teased. "Get the cock hard, stick it in your hole and wiggle it around for a bit... if you can't get the cock hard, stick your little finger up his arse and try massaging the prostate for a bit."

"Suni!" I howled.

"Just checking! Look on RedTube if you need any other suggestions or inspiration. Right, I should go. And you should get a cab, so you don't get dirt on anything, OK?" She kissed me on the cheek, and breezed off to whatever exciting urban weekend fun she had planned, leaving me alone and terrified in Carlos' empty flat.

A cab? Alright, I could do a cab. It seemed a ridiculous luxury, but what was one more wallop of cash, after I'd already burned through so much? I looked in the mirror one last time, still astonished by the sexy androgynous alien from Planet Bowie that gazed back through my own smoky eyes, then dialled for a taxi.
As the cab rounded the corner, there was actually a queue of cars dropping people off at the
theatre. Oh, so it seemed that closing night was almost as much of a big deal as opening night. At
least I'd had safety in numbers that night, surrounded by all of my mates. I dug in my messenger
bag for my sunglasses, and popped them on my face for courage, and then suddenly it was my turn
for the kerb. I paid the driver a little too much, didn't even ask for the change, then climbed out,
blinking, into the early evening, feeling awfully alone in the crowd of people. Remembering what
Suni had been telling me all evening about posture, darling, posture, I threw my shoulders back and
angled my hips, preparing to spend the entire evening sucking in my stomach, since it was so
blatantly on display.

"Miss!" someone shouted off to my right. He couldn't possibly mean me? Or maybe it was one of
Carlos' mates, looking out for me? "Yes, you, Miss, in the white?"

I turned, pursing my lips expectantly, and was blinded by the flashbulb. What the fuck? Had
someone just papped me? I blinked, and tried to shake the afterimages away as I made my way
inside. People kept looking at me - or maybe that was imagination, my paranoia getting out of
control? No, really, they were. But then again, I had just been papped after all. And it was probably
odd to see a woman dressed to the nines arrive at the theatre by herself, and walk in as if she owned
it. I even wished I had the faff of dealing with the box office, but Carlos had left me my ticket on
the kitchen counter back at his flat.

"Yoo-hoo!" someone called and I turned, but it wasn't for me, and older woman waving excitedly
at her friend.

"Darling!" No, that wasn't for me, either. I wondered if I should go to the bar and waste some time
getting a drink, or if I should just give up and go and sit down already.

"Oh, hello, sweetie, is that you?" No, it was most definitely not. I put my head down, shielding my
view with my hat, and turned to go.

"Oh, yes, I do know you. You're Alice's friend, aren't you?" I looked up, straight into the face of
Mrs Cumberbatch. Shit.

"How are you?" I said softly, as I found myself swept into air kisses.

"Oh, good, good... How is Alice? We haven't heard from her recently?" she asked, as if it were a
mystery to her why her husband had dropped her once they'd got what they wanted.

"She's fine," I replied non-committally, resisting the urge to retort 'you could try asking her
yourself' and walk away.

The woman looked around, and I felt awkward as hell. I had forgotten her name, but clearly she
had forgotten mine, too. "She's not here tonight? Are you all on your own?"

"Well, I'm here for Carlos, really?" I tried to hedge, so I didn't sound like a total loser.

"Oh! Ben's understudy? Carl is lovely. We've enjoyed having him so much," she enthused with the
same practised fragrant airs she no doubt used on everyone. "But it looks like we're both stage
widows tonight, then."

For a moment, I wanted to protest, we are not fucking married, we're barely even dating, and how
on earth did you know... Then realised that there was no mistaking my outfit for anything but a
date outfit. She took my hand and squeezed it gently, as if to reassure me, and I felt myself slowly
warming to her, even as I tried to remind myself how fickle these theatre people.
"I'm afraid this is just what it's going to be like from now on," she told me with a pained smile, then a nod and a gracious wave for a member of the press. "You will get used to it." Another more rehearsed smile as someone else walked by. "Where are you sitting? Oh, you're only a row over from me. Do you want to see if we can get someone to swap so we can sit together?"

It was, frankly, a bizarre evening, and I was quite relieved when the lights went down, relieving me of the need to carry on this bizarre half-conversation with someone I didn't know at all. I was surprised to find that, over the course of the past few months, Carlos had apparently travelled up in the ranks, and now had several speaking roles, and his name on the programme in his own right, instead of just "understudy", with a tiny biographical blurb at the back provided by RADA.

The moment he appeared on the stage, I forgot everything else around me. His glittering eyes lit up my world, as I watched him move about the stage with controlled animal grace. Even as I saw him clothed, I couldn't help but think of him naked, those dimples where the muscles of his thighs met his bony ass, the staircase of his ribs, his calves toned from cycling up and down the Thames path.

I didn't care what anyone else said - having seen both him and Cumberbatch twice each now, I still rated Carlos the better actor - or at least the better Valmont - even as I now admitted my personal bias. At intermission, I found myself swept out to he bar with my new best friend, though it was somewhat awkward battling through her not introducing me to her friends, as clearly, she didn't know my name. I wanted to laugh at the absurdity, even as her friends complimented my outfit, wanted to know the name of my stylist. "Oh, ask for Jamie at Selfridge's," I shrugged lightly, as if it were normal to have a personal consultant. Maybe I could make back that 25% Suni had reamed him for with a couple of recommendations.

The bell rang for us to go back in, and a slightly tired expression came over her face. "Oh well, another 40 minutes, and it's all over."

I looked at her carefully. "You don't sound disappointed."

"I don't know about your Carl, but my Ben has an awful habit of staying in character for weeks at a time when he's doing a play. Let me tell you, Valmont has not been a particularly gracious companion, these past six months."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Oh, I've quite liked having a butler."

Her laugh this time was not studied but surprisingly genuine and a little bit horse-like, as we picked our way through to our seats. That laugh made me warm to her. "I tell you, I am not looking forward to this Zizi fellow. I understand that he's a philosophical genius and all, but he's quite uncouth. Not at all like your friend Alice - your friend Alice was lovely - very clever, but not a brute with it like this Slav fellow. I miss her."

"I'll tell her I saw you," I said, wondering how she would laugh at the idea of being compared favourably to her and Sara Ahmed's nemesis.

"If I give you my phone number, will you pass it on to her?"

I stared at her. Evie's words echoed in the back of my head - never trust these posh cunts, they're all the same. But she seemed at least somewhat sincere, unlike her husband. "I can do better than that. I can give you her phone number and email."

Digging in my bag, I pulled out my iPhone, and flicked through my contacts until I found her. The other woman tapped the digits into her phone, then stuttered, "I'll tell her that... you told me I could get in contact with her?"
"Margaret," I supplied, finally deciding to just bite the bullet and get over the awkwardness.

"Sophie," she replied, relief flooding her voice, as if it wasn't completely weird to be only just now finding out the name of someone you'd been seeing around for six months. "It's always like this - awkward. You meet colleagues' partners, you're thrown together for a few months, and then on comes the next lot and their names are gone. You must think I'm so rude."

"It's all very new to me," I conceded.

"Oh, that's right. Your partner was a musician, before he studied theatre, was that right?"

"Yes," I shrugged, not sure I wanted to discuss his previous life with strangers, not even sure I had to a right to. "And I'm even further from this world - I'm a computer programmer." I paused, then added. "And an aspiring scriptwriter. Or, at least recently, since Carlos has been encouraging me to submit my work."

"Oh, how lovely!" Her pleasure sounded oddly genuine, thought the house lights were dimming and we had to be quiet.

Finally, the play ended. And then there was row after row of curtain calls, another set of bows, and another wave of applause. Flowers were produced, thank yous were read, and then more flowers. Another curtain call. The Director was produced. Another wave of applause. I just watched the tall, dark man in the back row and wondered how soon it would be until those hands were on me.

"You're going to the aftershow party, right?" Sophie asked.

"Yes, do you know where it is?"

"Same as the last one."

I didn't want to admit that I'd been slightly drunk when I'd arrived, and more than slightly distraught when I'd left the last one. "Can we stop at the Ladies'? I rather need to check that all my cantilevering is still in place."

"I'll show you the VIP loos. No queue," she announced, and took me by the arm, and lead me upstairs.

I checked my hair, reapplied some eyeliner, made sure nothing had fallen out, then returned to the large, elegant parlour to find the bar laid out again. We got drinks and stood awkwardly, both waiting for our partners to emerge.

It was like I could sense him from across the room, like all the hairs stood up on the back of my neck when he arrived - or perhaps I just heard that distinctive New Jersey accent as he started greeting colleagues and well-wishers. I hung back shyly, trying to remember to arch my back and suck in my stomach, but I saw his eyes sweep the room, scanning for me, and then widen, as he caught sight of me. His eyebrows shot up, and his smile widened. I guess he liked what he saw? He shook his friend's hand, finished the conversation swiftly, and excused himself to come sauntering across the room, staring at me with open desire. Yes, it had been worth every penny, this damned suit.

"Margaret," he said breathlessly, his hand snaking around to the small of my back as he bent down to kiss me, sending a shiver down my spine. Then he drew himself back and just looked at me, his smile twitching into excitement as he arched his back and twisted this way and that, as if trying to get an angle see inside the gash down the centre of my clothes. "I like this, but..." He lowered his voice, dropping his lips just level with my ear. "I keep wanting to put my hand inside it."
"I think that's the general idea?" I licked my lips and looked up at him from under my lashes, in a veiled invitation.

"If these people were not around," he muttered, then glanced back over his shoulder as he tried to hive me off from the crowd, turning our backs on them as he extended one of his huge hands, and pushed his long, elegant fingers inside my coat, probing one of my beasts. "Oh, Christ..." His skin just touched mine, and I felt my heart start to quicken. "How soon we can we blow out of this party?"

"You tell me," I whispered as I arched my back towards him, feeling myself melt.

"Sophie, my love! Oh, and Margaret, how lovely to see you again..." We were interrupted by the sudden appearance of Carlos' mentor, and I had to be polite, and be air-kissed and greeted and offered drinks. Although Ben was clearly showing off, on a high from his recent performance, Carlos and I were locked in our own private world, just exchanging glances and titters and meaningful looks. He hovered around me like a moth, putting his hand on the small of my back, or the nape of my neck, or the angle of my hip, at every possible occasion.

An official photographer appeared, and I pushed Carlos forward to stand by Ben, since clearly it was the star he wanted. "Can we have the ladies, please?" He gestured for Sophie and I to step forward, insisting that we stand in the centre of the frame, because it was pictures of pretty girls that the evening papers really wanted to print. Carlos put his arm protectively about me, and I settled into the crook of his arm like we had been made to slot together. His black suit and my white looked absolutely fantastic together, even as he couldn't seem to stop fiddling with my satin detailing.

The chain fascinated him, and he tugged at it when the photographer finally walked away, moving on to the next actor. "So this is the link that holds the ensemble all together, is it. If I pull on the rip-cord, do you abruptly disrobe?"

"Get me alone, and find out?" I suggested, standing on my tip-toes to drag my tongue along the edge of his ear, but before he could reply or react, someone else came along to congratulate him and shake his hand. He put on a good show of camaraderie, and heartily slapped his colleague on the back, but we kept being pulled back towards one another, like iron filings orienting towards a magnet. His shoulders twitched, he shifted his weight back and forth from hip to hip, he seemed to twist about as if he were dangling in the wind.

And then, finally, we were released. As Reg stepped up to fetch the next round of drinks, Carlos threw up his hand and announced "No, really. We must be going. It has been delightful, everyone, and my very best to you all..."

"...but we see the outfit that your beloved has just rocked up in, and we understand that you have more pressing concerns," Reg teased. It felt bizarre to me, how everyone had just accepted my appearance as Carlos' paramour overnight, as if the whole Teri thing had never happened. I wondered what on earth he - or she - had told them. But there was no time to think of that, as there was a sudden flurry of arms and hugs and air kisses.

"Come with me," he directed, heading not out, but back into the bowels of theatre. "I need to collect my things." We found a locker, from which he extracted a small black duffel bag, then gestured for me to follow him down a dank corridor that seemed to descend to a level beneath the stage. We climbed a flight of iron steps, then he pushed open a fire door, and suddenly we were outside, in the unexpectedly cool night air, with Carlos clinging to my hand and striding purposefully towards the taxi rank.
"Butler's Wharf, Shad Thames," he barked at the taxi driver, opening the door so I could climb in, then practically pouncing in on top of me. I settled back into the soft leather as he put one arm around the back of my shoulders, then pushed the other up inside the promise of that satin gash. "Oh Christ," he murmured, pulling my face towards his with kisses as his hand pushed past the tape to find the underside of my breast, squeezing it roughly. I put my arms around him and pulled him towards me, draping my legs up over his lap. I had never actually had sex in the back of a taxi cab, but somehow the brief journey from Waterloo to Tower Bridge didn't seem like it would be anywhere near enough time.

His hand was moving lower now, exploring the line between where jacket ended and trousers began, disappointed by the high waist, but pushing his fingers down into that V-shaped gap above the flies. Lower, his fingers went, then lower, following the gash of skin until he hit the chunky silver zipper, and then he dodged underneath. His fingers touched my hair, and he inhaled sharply. "Oh, thank fuck. I was terrified you might shave," he mumbled into my ears as he twisted his finger into the curly mass, playing with it for a moment, but then he pushed lower. He searched until he found the cleft of my lips, and gingerly pushed within. My breath caught in my throat, every muscle tensed, every nerve concentrated on that single, fine fingertip still making its way lower, brushing past my clit with a twinge, then pushing to find the damp entrance to my inner labia. "You're already wet," he observed breathily, licking my earlobe as he moved his fingertip back and forth, spreading the moisture around before preparing to push inside.

"Since the moment I saw you tonight," I breathed back, nibbling at his neck.

Abruptly, the cab pulled to a stop. "Shad Thames - or as close as I can get you," the driver announced. "Damn, so soon," Carlos swore. "I can drive around the block another time if you'd like more time with the lady... but I'm going to leave the meter running," the driver said in a world-weary tone that indicated he saw this kind of thing all the time.

"No, no, that won't be necessary," Carlos said swiftly, pulling his finger out from inside me. He held it up to his face, sniffed delicately, then thrust it into his mouth to lick it clean. "You taste so good..."

"Eight pound fifty," said the driver, as if totally unimpressed by the scenes unfolding in his back seat.

"Yes of course," Carlos barked, digging in his pockets for his wallet. He extracted a tenner as I pulled my clothes back together and climbed out. "Keep the change."

"You're too kind," the driver deadpanned in an exaggerated cockney accent.

We fled down the cobbled street and dashed to the safety of the doorway before kissing again, then collapsed inside the lobby as his key found its mark. He pulled us up straight in the lift, and turned me around to face the mirror, the pair of us standing together, looking beautiful and dashing and flushed with sexual arousal. _Damn, I thought for the first time. We actually look good together. A handsome couple; I was happy to think of myself as handsome, where I never thought of myself as beautiful._

_Somehow, we made our way to the door of his flat and let ourselves inside. "Now where was I?" he asked, pushing his hand back into my jacket to find my breast again._
"I think you were somewhat lower down," I told him.

"Wait, wait," he said as he caught his breath. "Where are my manners? Would you care for a drink? A glass of wine?"

"Alright," I conceded, through really I just wanted to throw manners to the wind and just grunt fuck the wine, get inside me, now, at him. As he found two glasses, and poured, I wandered through into the main room, perched on the edge of the sofa, and pulled off my boots and my socks.

"Drink?" he thrust it into my hands, and I took a gulp, but then I put it down and reached out to wrap my arms around his waist, pulling him towards me, laying my face against the thin fabric covering his hips. Beneath my cheek, I could feel the soft swelling of how aroused he was starting to be, rubbing my face back and forth across it.

"Get into bed. I have other plans for that," he ordered, dropping his hand to my hair and pulling me gently away.

I laughed lightly, picked up my wine and skipped over to the other side of the flat, gulping down another fortifying dose before stretching myself out across the mattress. He followed, kicked off his shoes and socks, and slipped in beside me, looking down at the long line of milk-white flesh from collarbone to crotch with open interest. He followed his gaze with his lips, kissed gently at my neck, my chest, my sternum, my stomach, down across my belly, an impudent tongue snaking into my belly button before dropping lower.

"No," I reminded him, tugging at his hair as he tried to push his nose under the fabric of my trousers.

"Alright," he agreed, then swept his hand up my exposed flesh in the opposite direction, sending a little shudder down my spine. "Can I tug on this now?" Bending down, he managed to unfasten the little silver chain, and released my breasts from their satin binding. "Let's get this off..." His fingers found the tape holding the half-cups to my skin and gently ripped it away, but I was too turned on already to feel the slight rip as anything but another frisson of excitement. He cupped my breasts together, then held them apart, pulling each nipple into his mouth in turn, sucking until they lengthened, teasing with his teeth, though nips never turned to bites. And as his mouth played over my nipples, his other hand dove lower, pulling down the zipper of my trousers and thrusting his fingers into the gulf. "Can I remove these?" he asked softly, and I raised my hips off the bed, pushing both trousers and knickers off me. He pulled away from me, and moved to the foot of the bed, taking them by the hems and pulling them down and off me, staring with fascination at what was revealed.

"Was it worth the wait?"

"Oh god, yes." Moving up my legs, he parted my thighs and peered between, gingerly opening my labia with long, elegant, fingers, laying me open with the deftness of a surgeon. "So beautiful."

"Like you haven't seen a thousand pussies."

"And each is unique as a snowflake. Some girls are are like flowers, some girls are like exotic sea creatures, some delicate pearls, some pale, some pink, some shocking purple. It's still such a surprise every time, such a beautiful secret revealed..." As he spoke, he was tracing little movements back and forth across my cunny, teasing like he was going to push inside, then pulling out to rub my own moisture back against me.

"Not to put too fine a point on it, but we've had six months of foreplay at this point. You can get to
the main event, if you like," I urged, feeling little eddies of pleasure whirl up inside me each time he touched me.

"Preparations," he said mysterious. "Must be made."

"Oh, right. What's in the bag?"

He bent down to kiss my bare stomach, nipped at my breast, then climbed up and over me to fetch the Boots bag. "I feel like we should have had this conversation before this juncture, but... I must, in all conscience, let you know what you're getting into before we go any further."

"I feel at this juncture, that you could be a little more naked," I teased, lifting my leg to prod at his waistcoat, elegant and fitted indeed, but still in the way.

He caught my leg, and drew my foot to his lips, gently kissing my toes, my instep, the ball of my foot. The anticipation seemed to shoot down my leg like an electric current, making me writhe with delight before he finally let his captive go. "As you wish." He stood up, and slowly unbuttoned his waistcoat, tossing it back towards the sofa. Then off came the tie, slowly unfurled, then dragged, tantalisingly across my breasts, catching at my nipples, before being discarded. He unfastened his belt, pulled it off, and snapped it between his hands a few times, making me jump, before dropping it to the floor. When he pulled off his trousers, his nakedness was revealed, his cock rising towards me with enthusiasm.

"Now. The bag." He pulled out a box of condoms - a rather intimidatingly large box - and a few tubes of things. "In all fairness, I have not actually had a break-out in about four or five years," he said, in a matter-of-fact tone that seemed to indicate he had had this conversation enough times to have practised it thoroughly. "I used to be somewhat cavalier in my use of condoms. But I have learned, to my detriment, that I can be infectious, even when there is no sign of a break-out. So we must use these at all times, especially at the beginning."

I sat up, and moved towards him on the bed, reaching out and touching his shoulder affectionately. "I appreciate your telling me this."

He shrugged lightly, his face tender. "I logged on to the Internet - on your good old NHS Advice site - and I looked up Fibroids, since you mentioned them. I didn't know what they were, and... well, open lesions can be a risk."

I shook my head. "Nothing like that; they're just a pain. Literally." I picked up the tubes and read the labels. Both were lubricants - one was 'desensitising and numbing, for longer enjoyment'; the other stated in a chemist's neutral tone that it contained a mild antiviral agent.

"Friction itself can sometimes cause a breakout, especially when I've gone some time without intercourse..." He let his voice break off, and I was grateful, as I didn't really want to know how he'd handled this with Teri, if, indeed, he'd handled it at all. "But, luckily, the NHS advised lubricants as a way of dealing with Fibroidal pain." He shot me a wicked look up from under his long eyelashes. "May I... apply some to your... necessary parts?"

I giggled nervously. "Usually, I find it's just a question of... finding another, less painful angle. I have to be honest, the one that's really especially painful is the missionary position."

The grin that Carlos shot me was positively filthy. " Luckily, there are... thousands of other positions available to us. If I were a post-structuralist, I might say I specialise in positionality." He moved around to the foot of the bed, kneeling between my legs, opening the tube and squeezing a tiny amount into the palm of one hand. "It might be a bit cold, so let me warm it up for you..."
"This is starting to take on a distinctly medical kink," I teased, spreading my legs apart and raising myself up on my elbows to watch him, watching me.

"I'm sure I can obtain a white coat and a stethoscope from the wardrobe department, if that's what turns you on..."

"I've seen your films," I laughed.

"Have you." He flashed me a grin, rubbing his hands together before transferring the lubricant to one finger.

"It seems you rather like playing doctor. There's something a little Birth Of The Clinic about all this."

"Well, lie back and let Doctor Foucault apply his Medical Gaze to your problematic areas," he directed. I laughed aloud, my belly heaving, but abruptly lost my breath as he pushed gently but insistently inside me. Oh Christ. For a moment panic gripped me, more out of fear of pain, than actual pain itself, but I took a deep breath, and then another, and the panic passed. "Are you alright?" His voice seemed unduly concerned, so I opened my eyes, without having realised I'd closed them.

"Oh, I'm fine, fine, why?" I said jauntily.

"You looked terrified," he whispered, as if not buying my jauntiness.

"I am terrified."

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No. I want you to keep going. Keep going, all the way."

"Tell me if it hurts," he said softly, moving his finger about inside me, part spreading the ointment, but part searching.

"Oh god," I moaned. How could he be doing this to me? How could I be not just lying back and taking it, but actually enjoying it. Abruptly he stopped; frowning and concerned. "No, that's good," I urged him. "That feels nice. Ooh, oh yes, that... ah... ah... Ouch! No, not there." He laughed apologetically, removed his finger, added more lubricant, then resumed. "Yes... Yes... No! No-no. Oh sweet jesus, yes, there, oh god..." I couldn't help myself, I arched my hips and started to move against him.

"Yes, I think I see what angle we must investigate," he whispered softly into my ear, then bent down to open the box of condoms. I'm not sure how he did it, ripping the packet with his teeth and rolling it down his shaft single-handedly, but his hand kept moving inside me, sending little ripples of pleasure up my spine. "This might be easier from behind. May I roll you over?"

We moved, together, and he pushed my thigh up out of the way, rolling me slightly as he withdrew his finger, then he squeezed a bead of lubricant onto the condom, and followed with his cock. He slid inside me easily, reaching for my breasts with his hands as he started to thrust, very gently at first, kissing my shoulder before straining forward to kiss my cheek.

I concentrated everything on the tip of his cock, the weight of his hips against my buttocks, his shaft sliding in and out of me, trying to stay calm as I met his rhythm and started to jam myself back against him. My breathing slowed to the same measured pace as his thrusts, push, slide, release, slide, clench, push. Already my brain was trying to find the pattern of it, like a puzzle to be
worked out. No! For fucks sake, stop thinking. Just start living, start feeling, concentrate on this man whose arms I am lying in, on his cock inside me, on the way our two bodies fit together and move apart.

"Do you want some music on?" he whispered in my ear. "It might help you to relax."

"OK," I breathed, then felt him slip out of me. I sat up and had another sip of wine as he paddled across the room, flipped through his CDs, then flipped something on. A light pulse of strings filled the room, followed after a few bars by a woman's voice, high, ethereal, slipping down the scale like a silvery thread. "Dead Can Dance? John Tavener?"

He shook his head, momentarily distracted by the music, standing in the middle of the room, his eyes closed, hands moving delicately to the beat as if he were air conducting. "No, it's a soundtrack. The Curse of the Golden Flower. It'll pick up as it goes on. You'll like it, I promise."

Returning to the bed, he kissed me earnestly, then put his hands on my hips and moved me again, raising me slightly in the air as he slipped back inside. "Is this still OK?" I was almost surprised by the gentle consideration in his voice. He was nothing like what I would have expected from the aggressive, arrogant man abusing his instrument onstage.

"It's OK," I whispered back, starting to move against him more insistently. "You can be a bit more rough with me, I'm not going to break."

"Time enough for that later," he promised, kissing my face. "I like to build up. Just tell me if I hurt you."

He built like a crescendo, as the music slowly swelled around us. A shift of position, another angle, a gentle respite, and then some more aggressive thrusting. A rough slap on the side of my thighs as he shifted me into the next desired space, then a caress across my breast and a tender kiss, before redoubling his efforts. I started to relax, but then I started to match his passion and his insistence, pushing his hips to where I wanted them. And then I slowly lost all self control, pulling him on top of me, pushing him about, abasing myself beneath him before flipping him over and using him like a toy to scratch some itch. One angle, and then another. Upside down, half hanging off the bed; on my side, one leg pushed up into the air; him kneeling and me straddling him, riding him like a pony; back to front, his face in my arse and my tit banging against his knees; standing against the sofa; lying in front of the balcony praying to god his neighbours couldn't see in; face down on the carpet, him banging into me from behind, whole body bent backwards as he strained into me. His stamina was impressive, but his self-control was incredible. He dragged me back to the bed and held my legs up in the air, rolling my hips forward as he pushed into me.

"Ow!"

"Oh god, I'm so sorry." He pulled out immediately and kissed my face over and over again. I found the lubricant and handed it to him, and he reapplied it, and tried again, from behind, the very first angle we had coupled in. "Where do you want to be, when you come?" he asked, trying to duplicate those first juddering shivers as the sinuous music rolled and crashed about us.

"I..." There was no easy way to do this. "Look, I'm sorry, but I'm never going to come like this. It's nice but... well, I'll show you after you come. Are you anywhere close?"

He laughed somewhat dryly, kissing my sweaty hair. "I've been somewhere close for over an hour. I've been waiting for you."

I laughed, seriously admiring his self-control as I turned the question around. "Where do you want to be, when you come?"
"I want to look at you, when I come. Is there a way we can do this?"

"On my side. You lie back, and I'll push up onto you." He did as he was told, his hair a curly mass as he slumped back against the pillow. Carefully, I worked him inside me and started to move again. "What do you need me to do?"

"Can you..." he licked his lips, his eyes slitted, his dark lashes bright with sweat. "Can you play with my nipples?" I reached down and took hold. "Harder," he urged. "Don't worry about hurting me. In fact, if it could hurt, that would be good." I bent down and nipped him. "Oh god..." I bit him harder, seizing that tiny pink nub between my teeth and pressing as hard as I could without breaking his skin. "More..." He was thrusting blindly now, that odd shuddering that meant he was very, very close. I grabbed his other nipple between thumb and forefinger, then bit again. "Oh yes... Look at me, Margaret?" I raised my head and stared at him, his black eyes wide and staring, his hair sweated out into a frizzy mass, his huge, slightly pointed nose, as his thin lips parted, and he finally spasmed beneath me. I let go of his nipples, and he thrust a few more times, pushing up into me, before he finally let go and relaxed, slumping back against the pillow.

Bending down, I kissed his face, pressed my lips against each eye, his nose, then he moved up towards me, nuzzling my mouth with his own. It seemed like he was barely breathing, but I could feel his heart racing in his chest through my own breasts.

After a few minutes, he opened his eyes and smiled. "Now what do you need me to do?" he asked, reaching down and holding the edges of the condom before he pulled out of me. He found a box of tissues on the night table, wrapped it up, then tossed it away into a bin, where it made a wet-sounding squelch.

I lay back against the mattress, and pulled him down beside me. "I need your hand," I said, and he worked his way between my thighs, pushing inside me, then starting to move. "No," I told him, stilling him with my hand. "I need to be in control."

"You always need to be in control, don't you?" he half giggled, but then turned over, lying on his side gazing down at me, his black eyes glittering.

"Let me do it," I told him, mashing his fingers down against my clit, then starting to move myself against him.

"I'm just a puppet for your pleasure, yet again."

"Pleasure has its uses." I was so close already, my body coaxed and hammered into readiness, but I just needed to pull it out... oh god, there it was. He moved his finger lazily inside me, and a tiny whirl of pleasure eddied around it. "Stop. Don't move." I used his hand to dig away at me, uncovering the orgasm I could feel building down there. It was like a knot of tension, a ball of pleasure just sitting there somewhere behind my groin, and every stroke of his finger seemed to bring it closer, closer... and then I bounced away greedily, not ready to succumb to it yet.

"You're vicious," he observed. "I would never dare to be..."

"Quiet," I demanded, shaking my head. He laughed and bent to silently kiss one of my nipples. Another approach, as I coaxed the ball of pleasure up out of my flesh, push, push, the palm of his hand grinding against my pudenda, his fingertip pushing from the opposite direction inside. Once it started, it was like a chain reaction, impossible to stop, a trickle, a rush that turned into a cascade, a shuddering quicksilver pulse that seemed to start at his palm, then dance backwards along the length of his finger until it ran back inside me, glowing, shimmering, undulating, until it disappeared somewhere up inside me. I fell back, silent, and tried to catch my breath.
"Wow," he said, raising one eyebrow. "That seemed quite intense."

"Yes," I hissed, feeling suddenly a bit chilled, as if aware of the sweat across my chest for the first time. He moved to remove his finger, but I shook my head and held it in place. "Wait."

"Oh Christ," he swore, bending down to kiss me. "You girls and your multiple orgasms. It seems so unfair."

"Another," I demanded, and started to move his hand again. It was easier this time, the ball of pleasure nearer the surface, and easier to knead to life, but unfortunately, the orgasm didn't last quite as long, and didn't seem to quiver quite so far back.

"How many do you intend on having?" he asked, his face hovering over mine as if studying me.

"Three, maybe four? I find that tends to suffice."

"I see," he teased. "Well, let me know when you're finished, and I'll light some cigarettes."

"Another," I barked and started to palpitate his hand again. And when that one was done, I let my captive go. He extracted his hand carefully, shook his wrist to loosen the stiffened joint, then held it up to his nose. But even I could smell the faint tang of antiviral lubricant on my natural musk. So he wiped it against the sheet, then reached to the night table for a pack of cigarettes.

He placed two in his mouth, lit both, then passed one to me. "It's so unfair. It will be another hour or two until I'm ready to go again."

I sucked at the cigarette deeply, wondering if I was going to be able to give up smoking again when he left. "It's OK. I can wait." I slumped back against his chest, leaning my ear against his ribs to listen to his heart. "Or maybe I'll take a little nap."

"If you fall asleep, can I fuck you in your dreams?" he asked, exhaling through his nose so that his whole face was wreathed in smoke, like he just knew how the silvery haze suited his angular features.

"Yeah," I murmured to his chest. "For the next three days... do it all. Do whatever you like. I want to do everything."

"Everything?" he asked with a leer.

"Every fucking thing."
This chapter is not actually finished (and not really edited much either) but I'm just putting it up in its raw form because I want it done with. I'm sure clever readers can fill in the missing scenes in their imagination, from the notes I left myself.

I dozed for a while, my face crushed against his chest, my arms tightly encircled around his waist. Half awake, half asleep, I felt myself lifted up by angels, enfolded in their wings and gently caressed in a thousand pleasurable ways, and woke to find my lover inside me. Slowly and sleepily, we did it all over again, less intensity, more tenderness, sloppy and comfortable. He fell asleep in my arms, his head pressed between my breasts, a deeply satisfied smile that made him look disarmingly like a small boy dusted across his lips.

We woke, early, in a pool of sunlight. Carlos kept rolling over, moaning, one arm thrown across his face, before finally, he gave up and climbed from our bed to draw the curtains. But I laughed to see him turgid as he ran back across the room, and reached out to grab his thicky bobbing cock, and pulled him towards me by it. He found a condom and tried to push inside me, but my vulva throbbed.

"Ow," I winced.

"What is it?" he breathed, pulling out again. "Wrong angle?"

"No. I'm..." I laughed slightly at the absurdity. "I'm actually just sore."

"Oh god, I'm so sorry." His voice sounded so contrite I felt sorry for him.

"It's been a while," I confessed, but I could see the disappointment on his face. "Get the other lubricant, and try the back entrance."

For a moment, I could see that he didn't understand what I was asking, then he started to blink with disbelief. "Wait, are you asking me, what I think you're asking?"

"I'm suggesting that since one avenue appears to be closed to us right now, you try the other."

"You're suggesting. You're going to just let me do this, without an argument, without me wheedling or begging or having to negotiate or... You want me to do this?" He seemed almost flummoxed by the idea.

"What, does it destroy the appeal, if I'm willing?"

"No! No, not at all..." He cast about until he found the desensitising lubricant, and slathered it over his condom. I took a deep breath, and relaxed as much as I could, and he pushed his tip inside.

"Oh Christ," he muttered. "You're so tight... Relax..." I breathed out, and let myself go limp, and he took hold of my hips and pushed all the way inside. "Oh my god..." he gasped, as I tightened myself around him again. "If you do that again, I'm going to come in about thirty seconds... Unless that's the idea?"
"Sorry," I giggled, and released him, as he started to gently rock back and forth. It wasn't unpleasurable; it was on that odd edge between slightly uncomfortable and extremely satisfying, a different kind of carnality, the childish pleasure of defecating, the edge of a frisson at the idea I should find this humiliating or painful spicing up the obvious joy it was bringing my lover. If it hurt, it was because I wanted him to hurt me. If it was humiliating, it was because I was already totally abased by my desire for him. His eyes were like slits, and he was biting into my shoulder in pleasure-pain every time I squeezed too hard to expel him. "I can't do this for long," I warned him.

"This is not going to take long," he moaned, grasping my hips and holding them, as I slackened my internal grip on him, and let him pump until he came. "Wow," he said, kissing the side of my face from behind. "That was... wow." I could feel him take hold of the condom as he pulled out of me. "Ugh, this is nasty. I'm going to dispose of this in the bathroom." When he came back to bed, he had washed, and his hands were cold, but he snuggled up to me as besotted as a teenager. "Is there something I can do for you now?"

I laughed and kissed his nose. "You can make me breakfast."

He had bought supplies in anticipation of not leaving the house for the rest of the weekend. We lay about the bed, eating and getting crumbs everywhere, leaving smears of jam from sticky kisses on exposed skin. We showered together, laughing and giggling as we lathered one another, but did not dress, lazing about the house, staring at one another with a kind of shell-shocked amazement. It was somehow more intimate than fucking, to lie, only inches apart, his eyes so close to mine, and just stare into the deep black holes of his pupils, like gaping lacunas in the deep black of his eyes, knowing, feeling that there was another person that close, looking right back at me with the same mix of curiosity and awe and wonder. We had tiny competitions to see who could go the longest without blinking. After a lifetime of wearing glasses, I always won. His eyelashes were things of wonder to me, so dark and so thick, but he laughed when I tried to softly touch them.

"Don't; that tickles," he said, pulling away, though they spread like fans across his cheeks as he blinked. "Girls are always jealous of my eyelashes."

"They're incredible. Quite the nicest thing about you."

"And not my cock," he sighed, pretending to be disappointed, even as I grabbed it and held it firm between my fingers. But then he grew serious again. "There's a Barthes quote about staring into the void of a lover's eyes, I think from A Lover's Discourse. I was trying to remember it."

I lay back, running my fingertips across his face, along his cheekbones, down his nose, along his lips and around that massive jaw. His face followed my touch, like a cat, and I remembered another Barthes quote. "Language is a skin," I quoted. "I rub my language against my lover. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire."

His lips parted as he looked at me, his eyes so vulnerable I thought he was about to cry. "Do you know how long I have waited for someone to quote A Lovers Discourse to me? How could you know...?"

We moved from the bed to the sofa, but that was as far as we got. The sun moved slowly across the flat, sending shadows spinning longer as we twined and re-twined ourselves around one another. He opened a bottle of wine, and we watched a film - god I think it was The Pillow Book, but I barely concentrated on the plot. Lying top to tail together on the sofa, I was too busy investigating Carlos' skin, the back of his knees, the folds of his toes, the calluses on his heels from years of wearing heavy boots.

"You should write your next novel on my skin," he mused, running his hands down the back of my
thighs before resting his wineglass on my arse.

"Maybe I already have."

"Do you want to watch another film?" he offered.

"No, I want you to read to me."

"What should I read?" His face slowly lit up as he removed the wineglass, then stood up. "All of my new books are packed for shipping..." Opening the box, he poked his way through a few tomes before settling on Robert Macfarlane. "I did think it was funny, the way you turned my obsession with hiking and mountain-climbing into Dieter's redemption."

"Do you know what's even funnier?" I asked as he settled back into the sofa, pulling my head into his lap. "I had no idea of your obsession, when I wrote that."

"Really? But you even named a couple of trails I have posted about being on."

"Posted where? I hadn't read your Facebook then." I shook my head slowly. "It wasn't your redemption, it was my own. See... My ex-husband was not the only one to get into trouble with chemical over-indulgence. The Jelly Babies might not have been known for our records, but we were known for partying. As the band's trajectory went down, our drugs intake went up. The crowds get smaller, and you stop getting the same hit off performing, so you have to look for your hit elsewhere. The come-down of the Brit-Pop party was bad. I got into some bad shit."

"I think I've read this part of The Last Party. Where everyone gets into smack?"

"Yes," I said cautiously, not wanting to get into further details. "I needed to leave London, get away from the scene, from the dealers, from bad influences. I had a friend who had just married a man from Upstate New York and gone to live there, and she offered to let me stay with them for a month or two while I sorted my head out. I was in bad shape. But one day, she said 'I've got a new high for you' and I was like... 'no, no, I don't want any more drugs' and she said 'no, it's nothing like that' and loaned me a pair of boots and chucked me in the back of her car."

"Where did you go?"

"Do you know, I don't remember, that first time? It was in the High Peaks of the Adirondacks - Essex County, which I thought was funny. Her partner kept calling it Mount Morrissey, and singing, in this kind of comic, exaggerated Smiths voice 'Climb Mount Morrissey, climb me, pin and mountain me...'

"Mount Marcy," Carlos corrected. "I know it well."

"Perhaps. Well, we stood at the bottom of the trail, and I looked at the mountain, and I just said 'you are fucking kidding me'. But she said, 'no, it's not that hard, you just put one foot in front of the other until you are at the top.' And we walked for about four or five hours, just putting one foot in front of the other, up the trail as it got steeper and steeper, until it turned almost into a rock face, and I thought I couldn't go on, but she'd just say, behind me, 'look for the cracks, find a foothold, put one foot in front of the other' and up we'd go."

"It's high, but it's not a difficult ascent. Especially once you get past the tree line..."

"I know. And finally we were at the top, and we came to this great, flat, open space of bare rock, and I just flung myself down in a patch of sunlight and panted like a dog. And my friend, she said 'turn around and look' and I turned around, and I swear to god, it was an actual religious experience,
just lying there, at the top of that mountain, staring out over the entire mountain range, with only the blue sky of heaven above us, and ribbons of lakes and rivers threaded between like perfect silver mirrors. I will never forget it. The runner's high, from all that exertion, getting to the top, of course. But mostly the sense of immense personal accomplishment, of... well, first I was standing at the bottom of this mountain, and now I am standing at the top, just through putting one foot in front of the other. Combined with this astonishing, godlike, eagle view of the world, and how beautiful it was, and how insignificant I, and all my tiny little problems looked from up there."

"I know that feeling very well," Carlos nodded. "There is nothing that compares." But then he bent to kiss my forehead. "Well, almost nothing."

"I know you think I'm just a prude, but there's a reason I abstain. I never took another drug from that day on. I never had any need to. I walked, instead. Solvitur Ambulando."

He was almost laughing in recognition. "Yes, I've read Bruce Chatwin, too. I had very much the same experience. I was looking for more social things to do that did not involve drinking, drugs, or sitting in dark smoky rooms. A friend of... Cindy's took me to the Harriman State Park. I had never known such a challenge, and such peace. I came home, and immediately made plans to do it again."

"I came home and I rang my Dad - who, trust me, after the depths of my parents' divorce case was surprised to hear from me again - and went to stay with him for six months. We walked the entire length of the SouthWest Coast Path, then we climbed Rough Tor, and slept out there in the wind and rain."

"I am sad I never got to meet your father on this trip, or to visit Cornwall. He sounds like a rather interesting person."

"Oh my god," I groaned, trying to imagine my father and Carlos in a room together. I didn't think the entire windswept Tors of Bodmin moor would be enough to contain both of their personalities. "My father... my father is a trip alright. A philandering, womanising, mendacious maker-upper and teller of tall tales... and a musician and a poet and a playwright and a Bard of the Cornish Gorsedh."

"You are kidding me."

"No." I shook my head despairingly.

"A playwright, huh."

"Don't even think about it."

He bent down to kiss my hair again. "There's so much about you I have yet to discover. I feel like I could spend a lifetime getting to know all of your odd little secrets. I wish..." His voice trailed off as he just looked at me.

"We have two days left, OK? Make the most of them."

"We could have so much more..." he started to say, but seemed to catch himself, stopping for a moment and biting his lip. "I want to go to Cornwall with you. I want to hike in the Adirondack High Peaks with you, in fact, I kinda wanna do the whole Long Trail with you."

"Don't wish for impossible things," I warned him, feeling a sudden chill drift across my skin. With the sun on the other side of the building, the heat had gone, and I was suddenly cold in my nudity. "Are you going to read to me, or am I going to have to start molesting you?"
"I could be bribed," suggested Carlos, picking up the Macfarlane book again, paging through it to find a good story. I turned my attention to the fat pink worm nestled between his thighs, only inches from my head. Really, it amazed me how pale his skin was, on the bits of him that were never exposed to sun. American men were so strange; a cock without a foreskin looked like a strange mushroom springing from between his thighs. I picked it up and started to examine it as Carlos started to read, imagining its veins were mountain ranges and its folds and wrinkles were deep crevasses. A couple of scars, ancient, faded, just slightly pocked like the edges of his cheeks where teenage acne had obviously bitten hard. I wondered what happened to the scars when he was erect, and started to massage, very gently, feeling it stirring to life and lengthening in my hand. "If you keep doing that," he said calmly, interrupting the story, "I will lose my place."

"Sorry," I said contritely, and laid it back down, staring at its single eye as Carlos continued the story, set on a wild island off the Irish coast, lashed by the wind and inhabited only by sea birds. The cock did not go down, though, it just stared at me, one-eyed, twitching slightly as its owner breathed. Cautiously, I extended my tongue and licked, just along the darker edge where the mushroom head joined its body.

Carlos gasped aloud. "Stop it..."

"Think of it as a test of your acting abilities," I teased him, moving my head forward and licking the rim again before popping the whole head into my mouth.

"Oh Christ, that's not safe. You shouldn't do that without a condom."

"I hate the taste of latex. It'll be fine; you said you haven't had a breakout in, what, four years?"

"I can still be infectious, even when..." the rest of his sentence was swallowed in a gasp as I sucked his whole cock into my mouth and started to move my tongue up and down it. "Do you want cold sores, on your mouth? They leave scars, you know. Permanent ones."

"It'll be fine. Keep reading," I told him, with my mouth full. He struggled on, admirably, getting to the end of the page before surrendering himself to the sex. The book fell to the floor as he tangled his fingers in my hair, stroking me gently, as if I were a pet.

"I'm going to need you, to stop doing that, and get on the bed so I can fuck your brains out," he said, quite matter of factly. I just laughed and climbed off his lap, swigging down the rest of my glass of wine before racing him back to the bed, picking up the box of condoms and throwing it at him. He rattled it, dismayed at how empty the huge box seemed to be getting, then extracted a condom and rolled it down onto his swollen cock as I dug in the bedclothes for the lubricant. I was still sore, but I didn't care. I wanted him inside me, and there had to be one more angle that we hadn't tried as he lay back on the bed, and I climbed on top of him, impaling myself on his waiting cock.

We fucked until he came, and then I came. Then we lay together, kissing and drinking wine and playing with one another until he was hard again. It was imperative, I felt, to keep on fucking until we were sore, and then even after, until it stopped being fun, until we didn't want to do it any more. But when my vagina was tired, I wanted him in my ass. No, that wasn't working this time, my bowels were too full and it just felt uncomfortable, so he ripped off the dirty condom and tried something else. He put his cock between my feet and rubbed himself back and forth for a while. Then he put it behind my knee and closed my legs, then in my elbow, inside my armpit, and then finally just between my breasts again. I wanted him to fuck every inch of me, wanted there not to be one inch left of skin that hadn't been penetrated by his cock.

"Can I come on your face?" he asked breathily, as I could hear he was nearing climax.
"If you need to," I said, and lay back, closing my eyes and steeling myself for the lashings of hot sticky cum as they landed on me.

He kissed me again and again, as if trying to make up for defiling me, as if not understanding that this was the point. I needed him to do everything. I needed there not to be one single sex act, no matter how demeaning, that we had not done together. Only then, could I let him get on a plane to New York, and out of my life.

As I woke on Monday morning, hearing my iPhone's alarm blaring away off on the other side of my room, he seized me about the waist and held me, pinned me down so I could not go to it.

"Throw a sickie," he urged.

"I can't," I whined, remembering the Monday morning reports I had to run.

His black eyes glittered in the half-dark as he held me down. "You can."

I whimpered slightly, then gave in. "Alright, but let me go, because I need to call my boss." He released me, and I picked up the phone, switched off the alarm, then walked into the kitchen to ring my boss and tell his answerphone that I thought I had eaten something really dodgy at the weekend, and needed to stay in bed. "I could get fired for this," I told him as I padded back into bed.

"I'll take care of you," he whispered, and pulled back the blanket so I could climb back inside. "Come here. Lie down. I want to climb on top of you, and just lie on you like a pillow." Grabbing two great hunks of my breasts, he pushed them into shape, thrust his face between them with an enormous grin, and somehow we both fell back asleep like that.

When I awoke again, the sun had shifted towards late morning. We, too, had shifted in our sleep, so that I lay curled like a foetus, and Carlos had curled around me, wrapping his entire body around me, arms and legs like a gigantic blanket, his face pressed into the nape of my neck. I could feel his cock, hard, between the lobes of my arse, and though my whole body was aching, I still wanted him, yet again. As I leaned forward, to pick the box of condoms off the night table, he stirred to life, moving his hand down and thrusting it between my thighs, rubbing his thumb and forefinger on either side of my clit.

The box felt too light, but I ratted it, and was rewarded with a dry, leafy sound. But when I upended it, only an empty wrapper fell out. "Shit."

Carlos raised his head, looked around, checked the other night table, then sifted through the sheets, but there were only empty wrappers, and one ghostly used condom which had slithered off in the heat of play. He sat up, looked under the bed, tipped the wastepaper basket to peer into it, then shook his head. "We're out."

As he rubbed his eyes, I thought about how far it was to the cornershop, then felt a cavalier mood take me. "Do it anyway."

He stopped rubbing. "Are you nuts?"

"No, I don't care. Do it anyway. I said I wanted to do it all. This is the last thing."

"Is this like one of those Daniel-and-Merry pregnancy roulette scenarios?" he asked, worried.

I shook my head. "It's less than a week since my period ended. It's extremely unlikely that I could get pregnant, and really, I can get the morning after pill."
His eyes were worried as he climbed back into bed and pulled me into his arms. "I could still infect you, you know that, right?"

"So I get herpes. Big deal. It's no worse than the flu, right? I'll live." He hovered above me, rubbing his cock against the skin of my outer lips, as if unsure whether to push inside or not. "In fact... I almost kind of want it," I whispered, knowing that what I said was sounding completely mad. "I kind of want something of yours, physically, for my own, to remember you by, when you've fucked off back to New York."

"I would give you anything, anything at all..." he sputtered. "But not this." Reaching behind him, he found the tube of antiviral lubricant. "Fuck, I can't believe I'm doing this," he sighed as he slathered himself liberally with it, then pushed his way inside me. "Oh Christ," he muttered, manoeuvring my hips into place and plunging into me again and again. "It has been so long since I did this bareback... I had forgotten."

Ignoring my bruised skin, I pushed myself back against him, trying to grind myself towards orgasm, even as his hands found their way back to my clit. "Don't," I warned.

"I want to try to make you come. Let me at least have this, OK?" he asked.

"Do it at my speed," I warned him, trying to slow him, even as I pulled my own hand away and let him attempt it on his own. OK, he had been a fast learner, he had definitely got the idea of where to put his hand, how to push, and was following the lead of my rhythm. After a few minutes, I could tell, the orgasm was there, it was down there waiting for me, hiding just beyond the reach of his fingertips, but he just wasn't going at it hard enough.

"Are you going to come soon?" he asked, through gritted teeth. "Because I don't know if I can hold out much longer."

"OK, OK, let me just..." Reaching between my legs, I put my hand on top of his and started to grind. Hard. Yes, there it was. After three days of fucking, there wasn't much of an orgasm, but what there was pulsed sharply across my groin. He came about a minute later, then slowed his thrusts until he stopped, staying inside me afterwards in a way we had never dared when he was wearing a condom. It was OK, I told myself, even as I caught my breath. The Morning After Pill. And the flu and some cold sores... I could live with that. Honestly I could. Who else was I going to fuck after he left, anyway?

Clutching his arms around me, he kissed my shoulder. "I love you," he said, so softly I almost missed it. "I don't know how I can say that, after what I've just done. But I wouldn't have done what you asked, if I didn't love you. I just want you to know that."

I shifted slightly, and he slid out of me, slick with antiviral lubricant and his own drying cum, so I turned around in his grasp to face him. "There's a Boots on Tooley St. We can go there this afternoon." His face was still worried, and I realised what I hadn't said. "Carlos, if I didn't love you, I wouldn't have asked you to do that."

"Morning after pill," he repeated, nodding and kissing my cheek gently.

"You don't have to come with me. Though I'm sure you've done this before."

He shook his head. "Not in a while." But then his face grew strangely pale. "I have, twice, in my life, taken two separate women for abortions. So I'm already going to hell."

"If a man could get pregnant," I told him. "Abortion would be a sacrament."
"You're a Protestant, you don't understand," he replied.

"Two that you know about," I laughed dryly, and kissed the tip of his offensive chin. But his face grew more worried still. "What? What is it? OK, sorry, is there more? A paternity suit or six, waiting in the closet somewhere?"

He blanched absolutely pale, and turned away from me, reaching for his cigarettes.

"Shit, I was joking..." I gasped, but his face was far from amused. "For real, OK, have you had to deal with paternity suits?"

He nodded slowly. "Three times. A good, fairly tale number, as you said before. The first, my lawyer asked her kid to take a DNA test, and she refused. The lawyer said, there, that proves it, the kid isn't yours, don't worry about it, but for another year, I couldn't help it. I might not have worried, but I wondered. The second, again, my lawyer asked her kid to take a DNA test. The kid failed, he was not mine. Some other guy's problem, right? What a relief."

"And the third?" I had a sinking feeling in my heart.

"The third, there was no contact information at all, except a very obviously fake hotmail address. She didn't ask for anything - she said she didn't want money, she didn't want anything from me, she just wanted me to know. She'd got married since then, you see, and the guy had agreed to raise her daughter as his own. She never sent anything except photos. Every year, the same day, September 21st, she sends a photo of this gorgeous little girl." His voice started to grow ragged, as if he was trying to control something too big to hold back. "This little girl... has my eyes. I have a kid. I have never told anyone this - not even Cam... Cindy - but I have a daughter, about 9 or 10 years old, somewhere out there, who looks more and more like me with every passing year. But no matter what I email back to her mother, I get no response. I will never know anything about my daughter, other than those photos."

"Oh my god, I am sorry," I said, as two pieces of knowledge flooded my mind. The first was obvious - Carlos had a ten year old daughter, somewhere out there, who he had no way of getting in touch with. The other... Cam... Cameron. A very pretty girl, one of his Facebook friends who liked or commented on everything that he posted. She'd sent me a friend request that I'd unthinkingly accepted after we replied to one another, commenting on one of his Valmont pictures. 'Cindy' had a name, a face, a history, and ultrasound baby photos that she had posted a few weeks ago, that I had hit 'like' on, without even knowing what I was doing.

Carlos shook his head, shrugging off the sympathy. "I suppose it was inevitable. I used to be pretty careless. But..." He hugged me tighter for a moment, then released me. "Shall we get dressed, and walk down to the Boots on Tooley Street?"

"OK," I agreed and climbed out of bed to shower. Mingled semen and blood ran down my leg as I climbed into the tub, but I tried not to think about whether it was mine or his. We needed to fuck until we got it out of our system. So maybe that was what this was.

As I dug in my weekend bag for a change of clothes, he took a shower. Since he was in another room, I extracted my iPad and plugged it in, surreptitiously checking for one thing. Cameron. She had high cheekbones, dark hair and piercing green-grey eyes - clearly, he had a type. I went into messages and sent her a private email.

Hi. We don't really know each other, but if you're who I think you are, we certainly
have a lot in common. I think Carlos and I might be starting... well, we kinda have a bit of a thing going now. You're his ex, aren't you? The big one. If this is not too impertinent a question to ask, can you let me know, because it's driving me crazy and Carlos is too discreet to say anything. Why did you two break up? You clearly loved each other a lot. - Margaret

I put the iPad to sleep as he walked back into the room, sloughing water from his hair. "You know," he said. "The removals company aren't due to arrive until 4pm. We should at least try to get something out of London on my last day here."

"OK," I agreed. "Shall we walk to Greenwich - maybe even the Thames Barrier if we walk quickly - and take the train back?"

"I'd like that."

We held hands as we headed out onto the Thames Path. Although I normally hated having to do that with anyone, for the first time in a very long time, it felt natural. As he stood for a few minutes, at the railings over the river, staring wistfully out towards Canary Wharf, that prow-like nose jutting out into the breeze, I felt suddenly washed by a wave of emotion, the sense that at some point in the future, this was a moment I would feel very nostalgic for. So I moved around behind him, circled my arms around his slender waist, and squeezed him tightly, pressing my face into that slight hollow between his broad shoulders.

He put his hand on top of mine and squeezed back. "You're being very affectionate today."

"I'm sorry. Caught up in a moment, I guess..." As I pulled away, he caught me in those enormously long arms and pulled me into an embrace, resting his chin gently against the top of my head.

"No. I like it." Before he could change his mind, I curled up against his chest, and planted a small kiss right over the top of his heart. I was not used to being with a man who was so much taller than me. I towered over most men I met; even my husband had only surpassed me by about an inch. But beside Carlos' hugeness, I somehow felt like a doll, a child, a small thing that could be protected by the enveloping width of his shoulders. It was an odd feeling, but not entirely unpleasant.

Finally, our bodies drifted apart as we started to walk, though we found reasons to stay close to one another. He took photos of his building, the Design Museum, photos of me on the odd bridge over the mouth of what was left of the Neckinger. We didn't hike; we strolled, arm in arm, hand in hand, stopping frequently to just pause and look at one another. The weather was warm and bright, a perfect late June, and the sun reflected off the river seemed to make his skin glow.

***as they are sitting catching their breaths in a beautiful spot, he unknowingly strikes a beautiful and characteristic pose, being relaxed and slightly goofy. She takes out a notebook tries to do a sketch of him, but as soon as he sees her drawing, he gets all excited and "are you drawing me?" and tries to strike what he reckons is a noble and aesthetically pleasing pose, which is all wrong for the drawing and ruins her sketch

We got as far as Greenwich, where we stopped and browsed in second hand bookshops, though he swore blind, he could not pack one more book in the boxes he was shipping home. We ate lunch in
Margaret is torn between ambivalence and the premonition of nostalgia as they wander about Greenwich Market. Everything Carlos does seems loaded with meaning. He swings wildly between tiny actions she sees as sensitive and kind and caring, and tiny actions she sees as selfish and annoying and completely un-liveable-with. (Carlos isn't swinging at all, he's just being his usual self, but Margaret just feels torn and wishes she had more time to make up her mind about being with him.)

After strolling all day, we decided we were too tired to walk back, and caught the 188 home. We were lucky, we got the two seats right up front, on the top deck.

"You're going to drive the bus," I teased as he settled into position.

"You know, I hated these buses when I first got here. But I am very much going to miss them when I go home," he sighed, extending an arm and draping it round my shoulders, pulling me towards him.

And I let myself be pulled; I even nuzzled gently against his chest, leaning my head against his shoulder, feeling acceleration push me against him as the bus rounded the tight corners of narrow London streets.

"We need to go to the chemist," I reminded him, as we got off in Bermondsey, and he started to head back to his flat. "Morning after pill."

He stopped short on the pavement and squinted at me, pushing his hand up into his hair. "You know... I've been thinking. You don't have to... if you don't want to."

I stared up at him in blank horror. "Carlos, I need to," I told him, in no uncertain terms. "I don't want kids. I have no intention of ever having kids - even yours." I went inside alone, to face the obligatory lecture on prophylactics from a bored chemist, before emerging with my pills and another packet of condoms, just in case.
When we got back to his flat, it was quarter past three, so he ran about, throwing the last of his things into boxes as the filthy sheets spun round in the washing machine. "You know," I told him cautiously. "You could spend the night at mine. It's closer to Gatwick, after all, on the same train line... and you wouldn't have to wash up breakfast things or tidy up in the morning."

He seemed to muse it over, staring round at the walls of the flat he had come to call home. "That is, in theory, a really good idea," he observed, but then the buzzer went, and I retreated to a corner of the sofa, as out of the way as possible, as he and the removals men discussed his boxes, his bicycle, and whether it was possible to compact the bike further before putting it in their bike crate.

I pulled out my iPad and checked my messages. Facebook pinged with new mail.

Hi, Margaret. Yes, I'm afraid you have indeed worked out my secret, though I was only 'allowed' to become friends with you on the condition that I didn't tell you, so please don't let Carlos know that you've figured it out.

And it's fine to ask. It's not a sensitive topic, and I would be curious myself, were our positions reversed. The truth is, I became broody; I realised that I really, really wanted children. Carlos made it very clear that fatherhood was out of the question for him. So we decided to move on. I am really pleased that he and Jeff, my partner, get along so well, and I think he's going to make a great 'uncle' when the time comes. Which, as you can see, will be coming, and alarmingly soon! Argh! I'm not ready! Even though I've waited my whole life for this.

I was so pleased to see his news! And I am so, so happy for your both. I think that you are a great couple, you clearly make him so happy, and I know that you are a very smart lady, and you will find a way to make this work.

Take care,
Cam

News? His news? I had only told her that we were 'sort of maybe starting a thing' - which hardly came as the kind of announcement that required her kind of response. Or, I dunno. Maybe she was just one of those super-posi women who got excited at their friends even having a whiff of romance. But still, it bothered me. I hadn't been on Facebook all week, so I just looked down the usual assortment of news, comments, photos on my feed.

And then I saw it.

Carlos Dengler is now in a relationship. "After seven months of will-they, won't-they, Margaret MacConnor has made me the happiest man in London or NYC."

Clicking through and paging down frantically, I stared at the comments thread. A congratulatory
comment from Cam, likes from a series of people in New York I didn't know, then Reg, and Evie, and Alice, and 'Sophie and Ben' - oh fuck! No wonder all of his theatre friends were so solicitous towards me! More comments, some facetious, some not, one from a 'DKessler74' enquiring whether the bridal registry would be at Barney's or Liberty's.

Fuck. Why had he done this to me? Like it wasn't bad enough announcing this to all of our mutual friends, he had to go and tell a bunch of strangers? What was this, emotional blackmail to try and wind me into a full blown Long Distance Relationship, when I'd only agreed to 3 days of trying to fuck each other out of our systems? Panic gripped my mind, as I tried to puzzle my way through his motivation. You just didn't do something like that unilaterally. The decision to announce a relationship so publicly, well... much like the decision to enter a relationship, it was something that required the consent of two parties. Was this just how it was going to be with Carlos from now on, that he was going to make decisions on my behalf, present them as fait accompli to my friends, and expect me to just go along with it? I didn't like the precedent that was setting. Not at all. Perhaps he just hadn't considered it - but what else did that mean he just hadn't considered? No, I would have to confront him on it, nip it in the bud. But I had to admit, it did bother me, far more than I could adequately put into words.

I closed Facebook and opened my email, feeling bothered and slightly upset and distinctly unsettled. My email inbox just looked like a mess - 200 hundred new messages, and I didn't want to know how many of those were about my newfound 'relationship status' - so I logged onto to Tumblr instead. 17 messages in the inbox there. Asks from people I didn't even know, asking me shit about Sherlock and Doctor Strange, and what the living fuck?

Knowing that he was the nexus of all internet gossip, especially on Tumblr, I fired off a quick message to Scarlet, hoping he was awake despite the time difference.

Scarlet, my social media has just gone to hell. What the heck is going on? - Pace

A message pinged back a few minutes later, with a link to a Tumblr post.

At what point were you planning on telling me about this, huh, Pace? - S

I opened the post on Scarlet's blog. Ten thousand notes was the first thing I saw, as the picture loaded, slowly, on Carlos' shitty wi-fi. What the fuck had Scarlet posted that had picked up ten thousand notes that quickly?

The headline and photo credit loaded first. AP / Evening Standard. Saturday night in London, closing party at the Old Vic: leading man Benedict Cumberbatch, his wife Sophie, with Carlos and Margaret Dengler. It was the photo where we'd all posed together, the girls pushed to the front to make a pretty picture, while Carlos stood to my side, arm clenched tightly around my waist, with an expression of pure possession plastered across his handsome face.

Oh Jesus fucking Christ. Jesus fucking Christ, no. I mean, OK, it was a gorgeous picture. The white suit had looked even better than I had remembered, and we all looked like stunningly gorgeous, successful celebrities out for a glittering night on the town. But Margaret Dengler? What
the living fuck? Where had that come from? Was that someone's idea of a joke, or a genuine mistake? Had they asked around, heard 'that's Carlos' new partner' seen the white suit that looked like a fucking wedding outfit, and assumed the worst?

Carlos finally returned from the lorry outside, lightly dusted with sweat and his hair all standing on end, but the removals men had finally taken both boxes and the bicycle. He actually laughed when he saw my face.

"Alright, who's died?" he giggled, walking over and kissing the top of my head.

"Carlos, that's not funny."

"Sorry," he said, contrite. "You just look so horrified." I turned the iPad towards him, and he took it, squinting at the screen after the bright glare of daylight. "Oh, what a fantastic picture. Can I get a copy for my agent?"

"Look at our names," I snapped. He read, then started to giggle. "It's not funny!" I howled.

"It is actually very funny. But I'm sure that the Evening Standard has a corrections department, and you can get your name sorted out. Though... Margaret Dengler. It has a nice ring to it, I must admit."

"It's all over Tumblr," I wailed. "It's got something like ten thousand notes on it!"

Carlos looked unperturbed. "Is that a lot?"

"Over ten thousand people think I'm married to you!"

"Look, if anyone should be upset over this, it's me, and I just think it's an amusing error. Relax, it will be gone by next week. Hmmmm. Do you want to drink the last bottle of wine here, or should we take it back to yours? Actually, I'm not sure I want to be hungover on the plane, mind, so maybe I'll just leave it for the owner as a thank you gift - unless you want it?"

"And you, too, will be gone by next week, unless you've forgotten," I snapped. "So what is this business about you changing your relationship status on Facebook?"

Carlos drew himself up to his full height, and did that characteristic defensive gesture where he arched his hips forward and pulled his head back, like a snake preparing to strike. "I would say that we are, indeed, in a relationship now. We have both declared... our mutual... affection and regard, we have utilised the L-word, on more than one occasion. We have confessed intimacies of the... deepest and most personal variety... If I were not able to presume, from these tokens of... commitment, that we were engaged in a somewhat... more than purely carnal affair, then... what..."

"You could have asked me!" I protested, feeling more and more oddly violated, hearing this odd litany or checklist of relationship goals that he seemed to have ticked off. Like he truly had preconceived this transcendental category of 'relationship' and just deducted me into it without my knowledge or consent.

"I thought you would be pleased! Flattered and... made to feel more secure in the relationship that I had done it spontaneously, and without being prompted or nagged to." The way he spoke of relationships and sex, sometimes, really, I wondered who on earth he had been shacking up with before me. Then again, I knew exactly who he had shacked up with, before me, and noted that he had never changed his relationship status through the entire affair.

"But you're leaving tomorrow," I reminded him.
"I am," he said, and suddenly his voice started to fill with emotion, as if it hadn't really seemed real until now. "Oh god. Yes, I am." Sinking down to the sofa beside me, he took the iPad from me, still open to that ghastly paparazzi photo, and put it down on the coffee table before pulling me into his arms. I didn't realise, until he touched me, that I was shaking, and in fact, so was he. "This is suddenly so frightening. So overwhelming. I have been... well, I have been on some kind of autopilot since re-enrolling at NYU. The program at Tisch was so well-planned, so perfectly laid out, do this, do that, study this, perform in that... And then the first audition I went to after graduating lead to the RADA program, and then... another six months perfectly planned out. And now, suddenly, at the end of that, I find myself quite at a loose end, with no idea where to go next, or what to do. Without school, I'm cut adrift. And I'm afraid."

"So you're hoping that forcing me into some kind of relationship I'm not sure if I'm ready for is going to provide you with structure and direction for the next phase of your life?" I stuttered, suddenly feeling very cold.

"That's not what I meant, at all," Carlos protested. "I just meant that... my feelings for you are the one thing that I am certain of, in my life right now. Our relationship is a centre of calm in a confusing and uncertain..."

"We don't have a relationship," I pointed out. "You are leaving tomorrow. You are getting on a plane and flying thousands of miles away..."

"It doesn't have to be the end," Carlos said softly.

I burst into tears. Exhausted from a week without sleep, and emotionally devastated from three days straight of the most intense and emotionally demanding sex of my life, I couldn't take any more. "I want to go home."

"OK," he agreed, carefully stroking my hair. "I'll call a taxi. Can you get your things? Your suit is hanging in a dry cleaner's bag in the closet. And don't forget your hat." He picked it up like he was going to deposit it onto my head, but at the last minute changed his mind and tried it on himself, adjusting the wide brim to a jaunty angle. Of course he looked absolutely beautiful in it, like a dark-eyed version of the Thin White Duke.

Dumbly, I packed all of my things away in my weekend bag, checking the bathroom twice for my toiletries, my towel, retrieving leftover muesli and nuts from the kitchen to take home with me, ignoring the fact that the entire world was coming to an end the next morning. All along, I had known this was coming. I had known that Carlos was not mine to keep, I had known that he was leaving. Why had I done this? For six months, I had kept him at arms' length, knowing how dangerous he could be to me how he had the power to get inside my emotional armour and split me wide open. And now, with 18 hours before he was due to get on a plane and leave forever, all of that pain seemed to be hitting at once?

We held hands in the back of the minicab, though we didn't kiss and grope urgently like we had on the cab only a few nights earlier. Everything seemed to have changed in only three days, the hope and joy giving way to all of this terror and pain?

"You know what?" said Carlos as we decamped into my living room. "Fuck the hangover, we should just drink a bottle of wine now. Unless you want to fuck again one last time tonight?"

I looked at him, bleary-eyed and shaken from the sudden crying fit I didn't seem to have quite recovered from. "Yes."

"Yes to what? Wine or bed?"
"Bed," I said, urgently.

It hurt. It wasn't fun. It was painful and awkward, my labia bruised, his cock chaffed, both of us covered in odd bruises, a definite hickey blooming on the tender curve of his shoulder, but both of us forced ourselves to go through with it anyway, and our orgasms were shallow and somehow unsatisfactory. He held me afterwards, wrapped his arms around me and buried his nose in my hair, inhaling my scent as if trying to memorise every aspect of me.

"What if I don't want to go?" he said quietly, setting the alarm clock for six the next morning. "Would you let me stay here?"

"What about your visa?" I asked, panicking blindly, even as I half wanted him to say actually, you know what, fuck the visa, I just want to stay with you, no matter what the cost.

"Fuck, no. You're right. It expires on the 30th June. I have to go back to New York if I want to reapply, and I'd have to provide evidence of another acting job waiting for me, and I've rather shot that one in the foot with Teri's friends..." His voice trailed off.

"No, you're right. You need to go back to New York. Audition for that Broadway play you're up for. Not to mention... I bet Gaius misses you like crazy."

He nodded slowly. "Yes. I imagine he does." But then he pressed his mouth against my scalp and whispered something into my hair, something that sounded awfully disturbingly like not as much as I am going to miss you.

"I don't know how we're going to do this."

"We can email each other every day, five times a day... speak on the phone once a week," Carlos suggested. "Technology has created other options, FaceTime and Skype..."

"I can't, I can't, I can't." I shook my head dumbly.

"Why not?"

"It's just prolonging the agony of the break-up, trying to fill the gaps with electronic simulacra of highly mediated and formalised communications. I don't want to play that game. I want to get it over quickly, the pain. We should go cold turkey, not try to prolong the pain. You have to go, and I have to get over you."

"I do have to go," he agreed, and the air hung heavy with the pregnant pause that followed. "But you could come with me."

"What?"

"You could come with me." His voice gathered strength the second time he said it.

"What, to New York?"

"Yes. You could come with me." Like it was a fairy tale, and if he asked three times, I had to agree.

"What am I going to do in New York? What about my job, my life, my flat?" I protested, feeling my head go all light and the bottom of my stomach go all funny.

"Quit your job," insisted Carlos, kissing my cheek over and over again. "Rent out your flat. It's easy - I did it. You already said that your mortgage is low, compared to the rents you could achieve in
"What the hell would I do for money, for work, in New York? We'd both go bonkers if I just hung around your apartment doing nothing all day." I couldn't believe I was even contemplating this, but at that moment, hanging onto Carlos' neck, I was willing to consider almost anything.

"You know Grant is in New York. I'm sure he would employ you, it wouldn't take much to formalise the screenwriting gig into a proper career."

"I don't have a work visa or a Green Card," I protested, which was the whole reason that Grant had gone by himself, and not taken any of us - especially Sunita, who had been dying for a trip to the Big Apple.

Carlos took a deep breath. "We could always... we could get married."

I stared at him, feeling like the whole world was suddenly melting around me. Like the heating was on, yet all the windows were open, and it was abruptly winter outside. The room felt like it was spinning, my breath catching in my throat, my whole body hot and cold and tingling all over, like I was coming down with the flu. Oh god, I thought to myself. This must be the virus. They said it often started with flu-like symptoms, and here I was with the hot and cold shakes and my heart pounding in my throat and the feeling like I was about to throw up.

"Well, don't behave like a girl that's just been proposed to; don't scream or cry or throw your arms around my neck or anything," he drawled sarcastically, though his own face was quite, quite pale and ever so slightly scared. "You look like you've just seen a ghost. Is it such a wretched and horrendous proposition?"

"Marry you?" I repeated. "Did you really just say that we should get married? Get the fuck out of here..."

His whole face fell, just sort of crumpled in upon itself, and I felt myself suddenly regretting the corny Americanism I had just come out with - like, where the hell had GTFO just come from - Alice, or Tumblr, or the internet? But what he said next destroyed everything.

"Well, it doesn't have to be a real marriage," he added, with what he probably presumed was a jaunty shrug. "It can be a Green Card Marriage, a marriage of convenience, a legal fiction so that you can stay in the country. We could still... see other people, practice consensual non-monogamy, carry on as we have been..."

I came crashing back to earth with a lump. My fever broke, my heartbeat stilled, back down to normal, even as I could feel all the disappointment and regret welling up inside me like a wound. "No," I said firmly, knowing that there were really only two words one could respond to a marriage proposal with, whether it was a serious, 'proper' one, or some jokey hipster polyamorous rubbish that Carlos might want. "Absolutely not. No."

He stared down at me silently and resentfully for a very long time, then slowly removed his arm from around my shoulders, straightened up stiffly, and climbed out of bed. "Well. I need a cigarette. Do you want one?"

I shook my head. "I'm giving up. Do you mind smoking in the kitchen... and make sure the windows are open."

"Not at all," he said, unusually formal and reserved, as he retrieved his pants from the floor and pulled them back up over his skinny hips. I had been expecting tantrums and arguments and a very
long lecture on how I was wrong about everything and marrying him was the most perfectly logical and reasonable solution to all of our dilemmas, but he was almost unnerving me with how calm he was being, slouched backwards away from me, his skinny hips jutting towards me. Oh Christ, his hips, how would I ever live without his hips, those two protruding bones, the two thin ridges of his arse below? Finally, he turned and walked from my room. "I think I'm of a mind to smoke alone."

I stared up at the ceiling, wondering what on earth had just happened, what on earth I'd just passed up, or what fucking bullet I'd just dodged. How stupid I'd been, to think that Carlos would just give up his precious Polyamory and make an honest woman of me. Honest woman? What the fuck kind of Victorian talk was that? I didn't want to get married, any more than I wanted to have kids or... or move to New York. London was my home. All of my friends were in London - I didn't know anyone like Suni and Alice and Evie in New York. Me, and Carlos, stuck in a brownstone in Washington Heights, with the dog and a sham marriage I didn't want. No, good god, what the hell had I been thinking. Carlos and I, and the dog, climbing up that endless trail towards the heavens, singing 'climb Mount Morrissey, climb me... pin and mount me...' Oh Jesus Christ, stop it, Margaret, pull yourself together. You knew what you were getting yourself into. Three days to fuck it out of your system, and then he goes home, and you get on with your life.

A life that does not include a polyamorous husband in New York. No matter how amazing his cheekbones are, how penetrating his dark-chocolate eyes are, or how sexy his bony arse looks in a tiny pair of black Calvin Kleins.

After about ten minutes, he returned, one of my old, too-small, ratty black cardigans wrapped around his shoulders, looking both absurd and absurdly cute. He perched at the opposite end of the bed and stared down at me as if trying to memorise me. "So you want to end this cold turkey."

"I think it would be best, really," I said calmly, evenly, trying to keep the shiver out of my voice because if I showed any emotion at all, I would just break down crying. If he had asked a second time, if he had just turned around and said, 'look, are you sure about this getting married business, because we could honestly try to find a way to make it work' I would have cracked, would have crumbled, would have thrown myself into his arms and screamed yes, yes, yes, let's just make it up and figure it out as we go along. But he didn't. He stared at me evenly, until I noticed the heavy dark circles under his eyes, like he hadn't slept properly in three days either.

"So no contact? No emails, no phone calls, hide each other on Facebook, no nothing?" he asked. I nodded, not trusting my voice. "For how long?"

"They always say it takes half as long as a relationship to get over that relationship when it breaks up..."

"Well, how long was our relationship?" he asked somewhat irritably. "Three days or six months?"

"Oh, let's not lie any more. It was on and off for six months, and we both know it."

"I see." His voice shook, though with sadness or poorly concealed rage, it was quite hard to tell. His face looked much harder than mine - but brittle, as if it could crack at any moment.

"We need to try and get over one another. We need to heal, and come to terms, and... you know, see where we are in three months, and if we can try to salvage a friendship out of it."

"Three months, six months, a year... what if we never get over one another?"

"Don't," I snapped, feeling particularly fragile.
He sighed deeply. "Look, if you don't mind, I'm going to sleep on your sofa tonight."

"But why?" I practically howled.

"Because if I sleep in your bed, I am going to try to fuck you again. And I appear to have an actual friction burn on my cock, which, like my heart, needs to heal," he said, quite matter of factly.

"I'm sorry," I stuttered, climbing out of bed, feeling like we had already bruised each other in too many ways. "That jumper looks ridiculous on you. Do you want a T-shirt to sleep in?"

At that, he smiled. "If I can keep it? I searched my whole apartment for my favourite black Haynes when I was packing, but I rather suspect it would be here if I looked for it, wouldn't it."

"OK," I agreed, and dug through my T-shirt drawer for anything in a size large enough to fit his enormous shoulders. "You've got your choice - Love and Rockets, Cranes, or Blur at Ally Pally."

"The comic or the band?" I loved that he knew to ask.

"The comic." I held up a faded black T-shirt with Hopey playing bad-ass bass while the rest of her band raged around her.

"Love and Rockets, please," he said quite reasonably, though I was loathe to let such a beloved and well-worn T-shirt go. "Do you want me to wake you tomorrow? I'll be leaving quite early to miss the commuter rush."

I nodded slowly. "Of course I want you to wake me."

"OK, I'll try," he nodded, his lips risking a smile as he added "Even if I have to beat you with a hot wheels track..." My heart did a little flip-flop at the thought of a boy who quoted obscure Love and Rockets dialogue, and I couldn't stop myself from grinning, wishing I could just stop him, cry out: look, come on. it's fate, my name is even Maggie, why can't you be my Hopey?

But I didn't. I merely shrugged helplessly. He walked over to me, bent down to kiss me gently on the forehead, then nodded decisively, and walked out of my room, and out of my life.

Of course he didn't wake me the next morning. Of course I woke at 8am in a mad panic, because I'd forgotten to set my alarm, as I'd been counting on his, to find my flat deserted and empty. There was a note on the kitchen table.

I'm sorry, but I couldn't bear to wake you, and I hate overly emotional goodbyes. I will vacate your life, as you wish, and leave you alone, for the next 3 months - or forever - as you wish. I will do my best to get over you, in my own way, though I fear it may be futile. I have loved you, and deeply. I don't think you understand how deeply. No matter what else you remember of me, please remember that. I will treasure our brief time together for the rest of my life.

Still, your humble servant,

Carlos
Chapter 28

In the morning, I had to confront the ruins of the life I'd been ignoring to spend a weekend in bed fucking. Even knowing that I was running late for work, I logged onto the internet to see if he had left me anything, anything at all. Facebook was a minefield.

Carlos Dengler is no longer in a relationship.

I hid his Facebook feed, and logged out, resolving not to even look at the comments thread. Looking at my inbox, I saw concerned little notes from Alice, from Evie, even from Scarlet.

Pace, what the fuck is going on? What the fuck was that photo about? Are you, or aren't you married to Carlos Dengler? - Scarlet

Oh, fuck it. He might as well know the truth. If I told Scarlet, I told the entire internet. It saved me from having to tell them myself.

I am not. The Evening Standard got it wrong. He did actually ask me to marry him, but I had to turn him down. - Pace

You WHAT?!? So you were actually dating him? How long has this been going on? How long have you been lying to me? Were you EVER planning on telling me if I hadn't seen that photo online? - Scarlet

Scarlet, it's complicated. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. After all that shit went down with Brooklyn Vegan, he swore me to secrecy, asked me not to tell *anyone*, especially not people from the internet. I didn't even tell my IRL friends until after he actually moved to England. And as to dating him... well, it's complicated. It was back and forth, and confusing and complicated for six months. We didn't even officially become an item until a week ago, and now it's all over. So for most of it, I didn't even know what it was that I had to tell! I am sorry you found out this way. I'm sorry the photo was printed, to be honest. But there it is. - Pace

Since BROOKLYN VEGAN?!?!!? What, that's seven or eight months you've been lying to my face and jerking me about? And I'm just carrying on writing that fan fiction for you, like a fucking idiot. What, did you show it to him? Did you laugh over it with him? I'm so angry. YOU DIDN'T EVEN BOTHER TELLING ME HE WAS
IN ENGLAND?!?!? Let alone that you knew him, and were dating him? How could you do this to me? I thought we were friends; I thought we trusted one another. Friends don't lie to one another like this. Do you think I'm a total fucking idiot? I don't know that I can trust you any more. - Scarlet

Scarlet's recriminations bit hard. He had every right to be angry and upset with me. I had, after all, as he pointed out, been lying to him for over half a year. And yet it frustrated me that he couldn't seem to see the jaws of the dilemma I'd been trapped by, and why I'd had to lie. He talked about trust - and yet, I knew if I'd mentioned one word to him about Carlos being in England it would have been all over the internet.

I'm sorry, I really am. I had hoped you would understand. But I loved him, Scarlet, I really loved him. In all his problematic complexity. And now I somehow have to find a way to stop loving him because he has gone back to New York forever. I have to go to work now. Can't talk further right now, if indeed, you even still want to talk to me at all. But I wanted you to know: He's a complicated and amazing man, he's nothing like we thought. And I did really love him. - Pace

Work was even harder. I sat down at my desk, and tried to just run the reports that had been due the previous day, but my boss dropped by and tapped me gently on the shoulder.

"Margaret, when the weekly reports are finished, can we grab a moment to talk? Privately. I'll be in the one-to-one room when you're ready," he said, in that guarded tone that made me know I was really, really, in fucking trouble.

I finished the reports quickly, grabbed a notebook and a pen like this was just an ordinary meeting about some search algorithm they wanted me to write, and headed off down the corridor to the plush room with the sofas where we took our more confidential meetings. My boss was already there, as was Hardip, and Lana from HR. And Lana was holding a copy of the Evening Standard. Shit.

"Hi. What's up?" I squeaked, closing the door softly behind me. Someone told me to sit and I sat.

"How's your stomach?" asked Alan, my boss.

"My stomach?" That threw me, and I looked about, flustered, before remembering the excuse I'd used to throw the previous morning's sickie. "I... It's better?"

"I'm going to cut to the chase," said Lana. "Hardip saw you drinking in Le Pont de la Tour when you were supposed to have been sick with a stomach bug. And, of course, there's this." She proffered the Evening Standard, the photo I now never wanted to see again, the expression of possession on Carlos' face that now cut me to the quick. "I'm going to ask you again, was it a stomach bug you had yesterday, or something else?"

"OK," I confessed under pressure. "I didn't have a stomach bug. Am I sacked?"

Alan let out a deep breath. "Look, I want to make it clear. We are very concerned about you, Margaret. Yes, your work has been slipping, you've been taking too many days off, you've been lying to us. Repeatedly. But the number one priority right now is your health..."
"My health?" I stuttered. Apart from potentially being infected with Herpes, what the hell was wrong with my health?

"We understand that you've been drinking," said Lana calmly, pointing again to the photo in the Evening Standard. Suddenly I looked at the photo again, and saw that all four of us were holding champagne glasses - in fact, Ben was still holding the bottle. "But we can get you help. You know that you have medical insurance, it covers substance abuse issues, we can get you into rehab, we can get you counselling..."

Looking back and forth between their three faces, Lana concerned, Hardip worried and slightly guilty, Alan beleaguered, I suddenly realised the conclusion that they had all leapt to. Yes, I had been acting strangely, secretively, arriving late and dodging out early, even disappearing to the bathroom to cry. "Oh my god, I can see why you would think that, but..." Abruptly, I just burst out laughing, shaking, though with relief or fear I couldn't quite tell.

"Look, we understand that you're going to be in denial about this," Lana ventured.

"I'm not in denial," I laughed harder, realising that anything I said to deny it was only going to confirm their suspicions. "But honestly, I've not been having a drinking problem. I've been having an affair."

"An affair?" stuttered Hardip.

I pointed at the Evening Standard and tapped the photo of Carlos gently. "My boy... Well, my ex boyfriend now. He flew back to New York this morning and, I'm... well, actually I'm quite upset about that."

"Boyfriend?" stuttered Lana.

"The South American man with the dark eyes?" Alan continued. "I've seen you meeting him, and often, before and after work. Going up to his flat in such a daze you don't even respond to my greeting in the street, then showing up to work, totally wired about twenty minutes later..."

"We've been meeting for coffee. He's a New Yorker, he makes it very strong," I shrugged, suddenly realising how totally focused on Carlos I had been for the past six months, if I'd been blanking my own boss in the street.

"Coffee?" asked Alan, slightly disbelievingly. "Oh my god, I thought he was your drug dealer."

"No!" I burst out laughing again, suddenly thinking through how I would report this conversation to Carlos. 'He called you South American, he thought you were my coke dealer, I mean, Christ, how racist is that?' and Carlos' dark eyes lighting up with both outrage and amusement. But no. I stopped laughing, realising that I would never now relate this conversation to Carlos. "Columbian man? Tall, handsome, dark hair, dark eyes? My lover, Carlos. My boyfriend." I corrected myself rapidly, realising I'd only just got used to calling him that before I had to stop. "Well, ex boyfriend, now."

"Boyfriend," repeated Hardip. "But you're gay?" He stuttered over his own declaration, then rapidly tried to recover himself. "Or, at least, you're always following LGBT news on our shared Yahoo Pipes."

"Bisexual," I corrected somewhat testily, remembering another awkward conversation with Carlos in the V&A.

"Would you be willing to take a drugs screening test?" asked Lana.
"I'd be willing to take whatever you like, though I warn you, yes, I do occasionally drink - but no more than any of you do," I protested.

"That won't be necessary," interrupted Alan. "Look, I'm satisfied as to the nature of Margaret's recent problems, that they are romantic in nature, not due to substance issues. If she's going through a break-up, then a drugs test is the last thing she needs."

"She still has the unproved sick day to account for," Lana said peevishly.

"We'll call it a Personal Day," Alan suggested. "We are entitled to five of those a year, at supervisors' discretion, and I'm using my discretion here. I'm sorry to hear about the break-up, Margaret, and I'm sorry I got it so wrong."

Break up. Yes, that was what it was. It seemed odd to hear it so named aloud, feeling a squishy mess of emotions slopping around inside me. "Thanks, Alan. Can I go back to my desk now?"

"Yes, of course."

I didn't go back to my desk. I went straight to the ladies' loos and burst out crying. Carlos was gone, he was really gone, he hadn't even said goodbye, and now the affair with him was fucking up my job and my life and my friendships and everything.

When I got back to my desk, my eyes red and my nose rubbed raw, my boss was hunched over his own desk, avoiding my gaze. But my inbox pinged as soon as I sat down.

I am sorry about that. Strong-armed into it when Lana saw the photos in the ES. Are you alright? - Alan

Alright for now. I'm sorry; I may be a bit raw for the next few days. I will try to keep it out of office hours. - Margaret

Look, if you need personal time, let me know. You've not taken a single day in the year you've been here, so you have it coming to you. - Alan

I somehow managed to get through the work day. And the next. And the day after that, though I was a zombie in the office. I broke down at 4BAABS.

It would have been fine if it had been just the usual rough and tumble good-natured teasing and sparring. But everyone was so concerned, so solicitous, asking me if I was alright, trying not to mention Carlos, though I know they'd all seen that "Carlos Dengler is no longer in a relationship" status update the same as I had. Alice said she couldn't believe it, and Sunita gave me a little hug, and then suddenly I was crying and crying and crying, and just couldn't stop.

"I miss him," I wailed, utterly inconsolable. "I can't believe how much I miss him."

"There, there," said the normally undemonstrative Evie, patting me gently on the shoulder.

"But I love him!" I howled, the tears running down my face in a way that sinking a glass of wine
didn't seem to help. "I can't believe it. Six months, he's here, and I fuck it up in every stupid way. Then he leaves, and I love him, I love him, I love him, and I can't seem to stop."

"We all knew you loved him all along," said Alice soothingly, stroking my hair. "It just took you a little while longer to realise it."

"It's too late now," I whimpered, as Suni poured me another glass of wine.

"You know, it's not too late," said Suni, even the optimist.

"It kind of is."

They recorded the podcast without me, as I was too prone to bursting into tears to make it through the taping. I just lay on the sofa and listened to them, trying not to make any sobs audible enough for the microphones to pick up. I said I'd do a vlog during the week to make up for it, but of course I didn't. I looked and felt like shit, and couldn't bear for the camera to be upon me.

I tried to throw myself into my work, but the Russian Hackers had gone oddly quiet, either cowed by the Rouble's collapse, or trying their attentions elsewhere. I tried to work on the Four Birds and a Battleship script, but it just wouldn't come. My prose seemed lumpen and leaden, refusing to bubble and flow up onto the page, coming only in dribs and drabs that were too poor to even share with Sunita. So I edited, I tightened previous dialogue, clarified bits of direction, wondering how long this pall of grey cloud would last.

Grant told us he was so close to the PBS deal, that the whole thing looked like it was really going to happen, and PBS would want 22 episodes for a season, instead of the British 12. We had 8 episodes in reasonable shape and another 4 under development, but another 10? In one of my best, most expansive moods, it would have been a struggle, but I stared at the computer screen and could not make the words come.

A week passed, and then another. If anything, the pain seemed to sharpen with time, as if I'd been merely numb those first few weeks, not entirely processing that it was actually happening. I had stopped refreshing Facebook compulsively, knowing his feed was hidden, and had somewhat stopped twitching towards the phone. But I hadn't stopped the subconscious glance upwards at a certain part of the Thames Walk, trying to see if his balcony was open, even though I knew that whoever it was living up there now was not waiting for me. A hundred times, I opened up an email and typed out 'Carlos, I can't do this; I love you too much. Please can we find a way to get back together?' and a hundred more times I just closed it without saving.

I vented into my diary. It was the only place I was writing, and my prose, there, at least, was spinning out of control, writing of my love over and over and over. How could I have been so dumb, How could I have been so blind. Why didn't I realise my love sooner, take advantage of it when its object was still in London, when he was still there, for my arms to hold.

And then I got my period. I don't know why that was what set me off, but... Maybe it was the ultimate, final proof that I was not pregnant, that all that fucking had come to nothing. It hadn't even worked to get him out of my system; if anything I loved him more than ever, couldn't think of him without that shudder of desire, remembering how forcefully he slipped between my thighs. I thought of the previous period, of groping with Carlos on the sofa, his hand down the back of my knickers, begging me to get a towel and just make love with him anyway. I cried, and cried, and cried, too hard to go to work, then rang my boss and told him that my Fibroids were acting up. He signed me off for another personal day without a second thought.

I rang Alice that afternoon, knowing that she was between classes, and just bawled down the
"I miss him so much," I wailed down the phone, as if I hadn't already told her the same thing about two hundred times before.

"I know you do, sweetheart," she said. "I know you do."

"I love him," I said, in what was fast becoming a ritual.

But Alice went off-piste. "So why do you tell me every goddamn time? Why don't you just tell him?"

"We promised not to contact each other until we were over one another. It seemed kinder."

"He misses you, too, honey, I know he does."

"How do you know that?"

"He asks after you. All the time. Oh, fuck it, he told me not to tell you, but if one of us doesn't say something, no one ever will. Every single email. He just wants to know that you're OK, that you're taking care of yourself, eating properly, not drinking too much, getting to work."

That hit me like a punch in the stomach. I had been so convinced, after the way he left without saying goodbye, that he would just walk away, that he would forget me ten minutes after he was gone. He thought about me, too? *Tell him I'm not OK*, I wanted to shout at Alice. *Tell him I miss him, tell him I can't live without him, tell him I'm miserable.* But I got control over myself. "Do you still speak to him? How is he?"

"He's managing the best he can. This isn't easy for him, either. He's had good news, his last audition was successful, and he's been accepted for a part in a big Broadway production. So he's really throwing himself into work, keeping busy."

"Oh, I'm glad to hear he got it." I tried to imagine the look of pride and happiness on his face when he found out, that way he would kind of sway from side to side, wriggling his hips with little-boy excitement. I smiled just to mentally picture him, then felt a crevasse of loneliness open up at the realisation that I would never see him wriggle with pleasure like that again.

"He did announce it on Facebook..." she told me.

"I've hidden his feed," I sighed, then felt that addictive twinge of wanting to open up Facebook, open up all of my social media and search him down. "Has he been posting a lot?"

"He's been posting photos mostly. Nothing personal, though. Lots of pictures of hillsides and hedges - Kent, I think. Oh, some quotes from the Critique of Pure Reason... oh, and a photo of a half-timbered pub somewhere called Chisling Drew. Does that mean anything to you?"

I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. "Yes. Yes, it does." I sighed deeply. "Alice, what if I never get over him?"

"What if you never *want* to get over him?"

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I have never known you to give up this easy, over anything. You're the woman that always fights for what you want, whether that's chasing down Russian hackers through the International Courts, or bashing the shit out of GamerGate assholes clogging up our YouTube channel. You're always the first person on a bus when it pulls up to the kerb, and I've seen you..."
fight your way to get served at a crowded bar like a salmon swimming upstream. You're a fighter, Margaret. So now the man you love flies back to New York, and you're just going to lie down on the sofa and weep like a Victorian heroine? He loves you, of that I'm certain. If you're weeping like a girl in a sentimental novel, it's because you want to be, not because you're incapable of fighting to find a better option."

"Fuck you, you don't understand, Alice," I snapped, stinging a little from the ToughLove.

"I understand all too well. If this means something to you, get on a plane or pick up the phone, or send an email or something. I have to go to a meeting now. I'll be in my office again from 5pm, but there might be students. Bye."

I said goodbye, feeling like I'd been slapped in the face. Go to New York? I couldn't go to New York. What an absurd idea. I picked the phone back up and rang Sunita.

"Just stop whinging and go to New York, for fucks sake," agreed Sunita. "Alice is right. Alice is always right, you know she is the smartest one of all of us."

"I can't just pitch up and get on a plane to New York... it'll be insanely expensive to book a flight now..."

I hedged, trying to think of any excuse not to.

"Go on Sky Scanner dot net. Plug in your dates and your destination, and it scans every airline to find the cheapest available flight. It helps if you can be flexible with your departure time, and leave within 24 hours."

"But... but... where will I stay?"

"In Carlos' bed most of the time, knowing you," she sniggered.

"I can't be that presumptuous. We'll need to talk, we'll need to negotiate... I'll need somewhere to... how can I get a hotel at such short notice?"

"Go on fucking AirBNB, Margo. You know all these options as well as I do. Stop whinging about it and just do it."

I rang Evie, but her phone was switched off. No, this was too important to wait. I rang her work number. "You have reached the office of Evelyn Barnsley. I'm not here, I've gone to Leeds for the week, but I'll be back in on Thursday morning, though if it's important, please call Janie Rory on..."

I put the phone down. Leeds. Reg's play was in Leeds. Had the insane workaholic Evie actually taken a week off work to go and see her boyfriend in Leeds? There was no other reason for her to be up there - I mean, if it were the East Riding, I might have thought it was a family visit, but all of her family were in Hull, not Leeds. Evie. Plain, old, sensible Evie, had gone all the way to Leeds for love. I could go to New York.

Loading Sky Scanner, I looked up plane flights. Actually, Suni was right. The decent flights were hideously expensive, but flights at inconvenient times of the day, changing in obscure places like... Atlanta, wherever the fuck that was... the price wasn't as unreasonable as it seemed? I logged onto AirBNB and typed in Washington Heights. Dozens of apartments popped up, from extremely basic box-rooms to luscious 4-bedroom brownstones. I popped up GoogleMaps in another window and started typing in addresses. Yes, there was a tiny studio apartment with a loft bed, that was only 3 or 4 blocks away from Carlos' street, right near what looked like a cute little park on StreetView. Taking a deep breath, I emailed the owner about his availability, then went back to Sky Scanner, my mouse hovering over the 'buy' button of the cheapest flight.
Was I going to do this? Was I really going to do this? Was this, an actual thing, that I, in my life, could really do? Fly halfway around the world, for love, to chase down a man I wasn't entirely certain I wanted to spend even another day with, let alone the rest of my life?

My email pinged. The man with the studio in Washington Heights.

Are you from England? I love England so much! We had such a fabulous time in Manchester last year! The apartment is available whenever you need it - no trouble at all, I just go and stay with my boyfriend in Morningside Heights. Just give me 48 hours notice so I can wash the bedsheets. - Michael B in Manhattan

There was a flight I could afford. There was a place to stay. There was only one thing left to check. If there was still the faintest glimmer of hope that Carlos still wanted me. I didn't want to argue, I didn't want to give him time to either build up impossible hopes, or to have him talk me out of it as an impossibly stupid idea. I just wanted to know, did he miss me? I looked at my phone, then looked at my email. Email seemed easier, not to mention cheaper. I opened up an email and typed his name.

Carlos, I miss you. I miss you so much. Do you miss me at all? - Margaret

The reply pinged back by the time I had hit refresh on Sky Scanners. The flight had gone up by £5, but it was still affordable.

Margaret. I miss you so much I sometimes feel like I have had a limb amputated. And just as people with amputated limbs often report phantom pain in phantom limbs, I feel haunted by love which no longer has a vessel to contain it. But I also know that emails like this do not help the healing process, they exacerbate and prolong the pain, so I will not engage in hurting you further. But know, that I have a phantom heart that will continue to love you until the day I die. And yes, I miss you. But it's probably best not to pick at scabs until they heal. Carlos.

I read it three times in quick succession, knowing that the heart that was pounding my chest was not a phantom limb, but a very real and present love that would no longer be denied. How could I give up a man who wrote such things?

Digging in my wallet, I pulled out the spare credit card I only ever used for grave emergencies like the boiler exploding or my bathtub flooding the downstairs flat. Yes, I thought healing Carlos' phantom heart was an emergency, an emergency of the gravest kind. I hit buy on the flight ticket, and typed in my credit card details. Then I emailed back the anglophile in Washington Heights and put a deposit on the studio, telling him I was arriving at an ungodly hour in the morning, so perhaps he should just leave the keys somewhere safe.

Then I rang my boss. "Alan, I know I've never done anything like this before, and trust me, I
wouldn't be doing it if it wasn't an emergency, but I need to take a leave of absence. Unpaid, if need be. Starting tomorrow."

"Margaret, you have, like, two years of untaken leave just sitting on your HR file. I'll put the request through, on the condition that you stop saying vague things like 'fibroids' and 'stomach bug' to me, and tell me what is going on."

"Do you remember my 'South American man', the one with the dark eyes?"

"The one who moved back to New York?"

"I need to go to New York," I said. "Leaving tomorrow evening."

"I understand. And Margaret...? Good luck."

I dropped by my doctor's surgery and asked to see a nurse, explaining that I was a nervous flyer and I had to get on a plane in 48 hours. After a brief exchange during which I assured her that no, I was not an addict, and no, I really did not want to sign up for a course of CBT for dealing with phobias and panic attacks - especially given that there was a six-month wait for that, and my plane left the next day - she spoke the doctor and came back with a prescription for beta blockers or tranquillisers or maybe they were placebo fucking sugar pills, but I didn't care so long as they helped me get on that flight.
Chapter 29

Within 48 hours, I was on a plane, leaving Heathrow at close to midnight. I slept fitfully, tossed by oddly vivid dreams. Time barely registered, I just felt wrapped in a cocoon of steel and cotton wool. Five hours later, the flight attendant touched my shoulder and told me we were nearly there, offering me tea or coffee and a ‘midnight snack’.

Rolling up the window shade, I was dismayed to find it was still dark outside, but I could see something glowing faintly orange in the distance. Something shimmering just over the horizon - dawn? No, wrong direction. Perhaps it was the last gleams of sunset? The shimmering grew brighter, then I saw a string of Christmas-tree lights glowing faintly below, then the deep jet black of sea below us gave way to the soft matte black of land, dotted and ringed with lights and motorways and tiny moving searchlights I realised were cars. Off in the distance, the shimmering thing brightened, resolved into square blocks and bright spires, and...

Holy fucking shit. The plane was flying straight directly over Manhattan, all lit up and glowing golden-yellow-white like someone had spilled out a box of jewels in the middle of the river and dragged their fingers through the glittering pile, carving it up into rows. Twinkling slightly as clouds passed between the plane and the island, Manhattan seemed like childhood tales of a Crystal City far to the West, shining spires of winking lights and dazzling glass.

The plane banked sharply, heading down towards Newark, tilting me towards the glowing jewel-city so that it seemed so close I could almost reach out and grab one of those glowing crystals for myself. And somewhere, down there below, amidst the lights and the glittering towers, Carlos must have lain sleeping, flung out across his bed with that glorious abandon, oblivious to the beautiful richness that surrounded him. No wonder he loved this city. It was indeed beautiful.

My flight arrived in Newark at a wretched time of night, when no buses seemed to be running, so I sprang for a yellow cab to take me to Manhattan, and was surprised to find, with the tunnels and the light after-midnight traffic, that it took less time than the subway back from JFK. Nearly half-dead with jet lag, I found the keys at an all-night convenience store - and collapsed in my tiny subdivided studio without even bothering to change.

Of course I woke before dawn, my brain still operating on London time, even though my body screamed with weariness. The miniscule kitchenette was smaller than my broom cupboard, but the lovely Michael B had left a small box of Twinings English Breakfast Tea with a note saying ‘enjoy!’ So I drank my tea and watched until the sky grew vaguely pink through a window no bigger than a porthole.

When the sun had risen, I took a shower (there was no room for a tub) and dressed, then headed out into the New York morning. New York! I wanted to laugh aloud at the sheer, cliched New York-ness of it. Huge apartment blocks! Fire escapes! Hydrants! Yellow taxis flooding this way and that, and failing to stop at traffic lights I hadn't even noticed hanging like laundry from lines high above the streets.

Actual New York cab drivers who hung out of their windows to scream "Whassamadduh you, hey? Wut dah fuck, geddoutta my way!" in brassy American accents, so that I jumped out of the way, then stood on the pavement - sidewalk - clasping my hand over my mouth and laughing because it was just like a film. No wonder Carlos always felt like he lived in a film. All of New York felt like a film.

The park across the street was long and narrow, spread out all along the edge of a cliff dropping
away to the Hudson River below, but still managed to contain several benches, a table laid out as a chessboard, and a small grass and dirt compound where several early-morning dogwalkers were standing with their impatient animals. I stopped for a while, made friends with a pug and petted a border collie, then went off in search of breakfast.

A diner! An actual, proper, New York diner! All shiny and aluminium - oops, I mean, aluminum - and silver. I wanted to burst out laughing as I made my way inside, and perched at the counter, trying to remember the sorts of things that Carlos moaned he could not get in London. A cup of coffee - deep black and scalding hot - and a bagel. Oh my god, New York bagels were an actual revelation, brown and crispy on the outside, but chewy and soft inside, the cream cheese and the - I don't even know what the pink stuff was, salmon of some kind? - complimenting one another perfectly. I felt almost embarrassed for the Brick Lane breadroll I'd once tried to console Carlos with.

Carlos. Oh Christ, yes. I had come here for Carlos, after all. I looked down and saw my hands were shaking, so I asked for a refill of my coffee. Digging in my bag, I produced the small tourist map I'd found at the airport, but it didn't even bother with most of Manhattan anywhere North of about 80th St. We were way up closer to 180th Street. Well off the map. The waitress took pity on me, and found a large yellow atlas.

"We're here, honey," she said, in the kind of overly loud, slightly brassy tone that people everywhere used to talk to tourists, as she pointed at a square on the map.

I had looked up Carlos' house on the internet so many times in the intervening days, that I could find it in my sleep. "I need to get here."

"OK, come out of the diner and turn left. Cross the road, go down two blocks, then make a right. You'll see a Key Foods on the corner, that's where you turn. Go down that block diagonally until you see the church. Past the church, turn left. Go down quite a ways - it's a long block, but it's real pretty, especially this time of year, with the trees out. Your friend lives on a real nice street, there."

"Thank you." I made sure to leave her a big tip, American style, then set off, her instructions rattling in my head.

It was indeed a really nice street, the kind of street I thought only existed in Woody Allen comedies and kids' television programmes from the 70s. Brownstones, long flights of steps that searched as porches and stoops, sheltering trees of an American species I didn't recognise. And here it was. Carlos' house. A tall, narrow, elegant, brownstone, much nicer and in better nick than I was expecting. I knew from what he'd told me that he lived on the ground floor and basement, and rented out the apartment upstairs to cover property tax, utilities, and the like. A nice lifestyle. Not exactly rock star rich, but enough to support a jobbing actor's precarious salary.

I took a deep breath and looked up at the front windows, but the curtains were drawn, and no lights shone from inside. He had always been a late riser, hence why he needed me to stop round his flat at 8.30 every morning to rouse him in time for class at RADA. I looked at my iPhone - no signal, as I hadn't thought to activate roaming - and saw that it was twenty past 1 in the UK. 8.20 in New York. Well, I was almost on time for an American wake-up call. For a moment, I nearly lost my nerve, and resolved to walk around the block, but then I realised if I left now, I would never get up the courage to come back.

I walked to the top of the flight of steps to the front door, looking for a bell or a knocker, or something, then realised that the protruding doorframe concealed a kind of covered porch. Well, that was a considerate touch for visitors, considering the place was covered in snow and below zero for four months of the year. It was unlocked, so I pushed inside. Two doors, both in a glossy,
dark-brown wood that matched the colour of the stone outside. The rest of the vestibule was lined with mossy green tiles in a subtle Victorian paisley pattern that reminded me almost painfully of our conversations at the V&A. I peered through the frosted glass of the door that looked like the main door, and saw steps leading up. No, he was definitely on the ground floor. I turned to the right. Oh, of course. It was almost comical. This door had a gothic-looking wrought-iron door knocker in the shape of a large Victorian D. I raised it and knocked three times, a good, fairy-tale sort of number.

No reply. Oh Christ, I did not come all of this way to be stymied by a muffled door-knocker or Carlos' sleeping schedule, so I looked about for a bell. I found it and buzzed, once, long, annoying, impossible to sleep through, hearing the tone echoing through the chambers within. Two minutes passed. Nothing. I buzzed again, longer, louder, more annoying, wondering if I had actually missed him, if he had gone out to walk Gaius, if I should just sit down on the steps and prepare to wait for him. What if he'd gone to an audition - or a rehearsal? He could be hours. I supposed I could leave a note, but that would destroy the element of surprise I was hoping for.

But finally, I heard footsteps within, and an all-too-familiar disgruntled grumbling. "Alright, alright, I'm coming, though I've no idea what's so important you can't just leave the package on the doorstep or whatever..." A shadow moved in front of the frosted glass, as I felt my heart beating in my throat, my excitement threatening to overcome me, as I fought back the urge to scream or cry or...

The door swung back, and suddenly Carlos stood before me, blinking, his face unshaven, his hair all standing on end, his familiar bathrobe hastily wrapped about his naked chest. "Margaret," he blurted out, all of the blood draining from his face, leaving him grey as television static as he stared at me.

"I'm sorry," I laughed gaily, just relieved to finally see him. "I suppose it's just a habit, waking you at precisely 8.30 every morning. A habit I rather missed, a habit I..." I grinned at him and shrugged, feeling my heart swelling at the sight of him, the smell of him, the deep musk of sweat and... sex?

He just continued to stare at me, and as he raised his hand to his face, rubbing at his sleepy eyes, I suddenly realised that something wasn't right, this wasn't going quite as I had planned it. "What on earth are you doing, here?" he demanded.

I stepped towards him, as if to hug him, but he took a step back, cautious, nervous, perhaps even a little bit frightened. No hug, no kiss, no joyful shout of relief as he threw his arms around me and picked me up, bodily, from the ground, to spin me round and press his face against mine. This was definitely not how I'd imagined this reunion. "I..." I stumbled over the opening line. I had been so convinced that he would be pleased to see me, would have just swept me up in his embrace, and that we would have just seized one another and fallen into bed that I hadn't really properly thought through what I might say. I love you, I miss you, I love you, let's never be parted again, I can't stand it. But his face was not welcoming, it was shellshocked, ashen, ghastly pale.

"You shouldn't be here," he stuttered. "Why here... why today...?"

Well, that bit was easy. "I booked the soonest flight I could, after I got your email."

"You shouldn't have sent that email," he said, his voice quiet and very shaky. "I was... coping, until I got that email. Then I... stopped coping."

"You shouldn't have to cope," I protested. "Neither of us should have had to cope with this. I'm sorry. I was wrong. I... I didn't know what I wanted. I thought I knew what I didn't want - I didn't
want the pain, and the suffering, and the waiting... but remember Barthes? Remember A Lover's Discourse. A lover is one who waits. Waiting is endemic to the situation... that we..."

Carlos' face darkened. "What are you talking about. Why are you here, Margaret. Why have you come? Why have you..." His face moved as he spoke, from anger, to fear, to abject suffering.

"I wanted to surprise you. I thought you would be happy. I thought you would..." Stupid me, I had actually thought you would fold me in your arms and carry me off to bed and say 'hey, you know, that whole green card marriage thing? Let's do it.'

Inside the house, I suddenly became aware of another set of footsteps. Carlos' face moved, from pain to guilt to anguish, as horror dawned across my face. He was not alone. That was why the cold greeting, the flustered air, even the state of disarray of his clothes and hair... oh god. Oh god no.

The door opened at the other end of the hall, and a voice floated through, young, female, American. "Come back to bed, Carlos. What's taking you so long? Who is it at the door, anyway?"

As the figure emerged, Carlos shifted his weight uneasily from hip to hip like a nervous horse, clutching his arms around his bathrobe and trying to hug himself, as the girl stepped into the light, and squinted at me. She was young - ridiculously young, 20 if she was a day - and very, very pretty, pale skin, wide cheekbones, long, glossy dark-brown hair. And she was very conspicuously naked, except for a brown-striped shirt I recognised as Carlos', draped around her shoulders in a way that only served to heighten her nudity.

"Oh," I said, feeling all of my excitement evaporate, suddenly realising that I was cold, and exhausted, and that the sodden sense of aching pain I had started to grow used to in the hollow cavity of my chest, it had gone almost numb with agony again.

"Look, it's not what you think, Margaret..." Carlos protested, before wisely shutting his mouth again.

The girl stared at him for a moment, distinctly put out, then glared at me. "I'm sorry, but who are you?"

Resisting some devil-urge to say something ridiculous and dramatic like 'I'm his wife, sweetheart', I merely shook my head, refusing to take my gaze from Carlos.

"Please don't be angry," said Carlos, his voice so strained I could see a vein throbbing in his neck. I shook my head slowly. "I'm not angry," I said slowly, barely believing the control I was exercising over my voice, so that it didn't shake, not really. "I'm actually grateful. Because this unfortunate child, she has just spared me from making what would have been the worst mistake of my life."

"No," said Carlos dumbly. "No, please..."

"I'm not a child," said the girl, angrily. "I am 21 years old, and I demand to know what is going on..."

Carlos turned towards her, the cold look on his face actually frightening me slightly. "Look, I'm sorry..." He stumbled over her name - oh Christ, did he even know it in the first place? "I'm very sorry, sweetie, but please can you go back inside and put your clothes on? Something has come up,"
Defiance flashed across her face, and for a moment, I actually thought she was going to tell him to get stuffed. But she said nothing, looking back and forth between us furiously. "No," I said, quite calmly. "I was mistaken. Don't let me interrupt you." Taking a deep breath, I turned around, opened the door of the porch and started down the steps before I could begin to cry.

"Margaret," cried Carlos, slipping out of the door and coming after me. "Margaret, don't walk away from me..."

I was down the steps in leaps and bounds, dodging a smelly puddle at the foot of the stairs, but he stopped, his bare feet and flapping bathrobe preventing him from going any further.

"Margaret, come back! Please!" From inside the flat, we both heard a loud crashing noise that could have been the slam of a bedroom door, or could have been the start of a very angry crockery-smashing spree. I hoped to god the petulant girl-child smashed every atom of glassware he owned. "Shit."

Spotting my chance, I broke into a run, dashing towards the church, rounding the corner, and was gone. I didn't stop running until I was back at the Key Foods. Oh fuck, what was I thinking, oh fuck. Now I was on my own, in a foreign country, and oh fuck, what the fuck had just happened?

What had I been thinking, coming to visit Carlos like this, just turning up on his doorstep at an ungodly hour of the morning? I should have emailed first, to see if he wanted me to come. Should have phoned, to make sure he was alone. No. Wait, Fuck it! Despite the searing pain, I was glad that I had done it. I had pulled back the mask, and seen Carlos for what he really was, what I knew he was capable of, all along. What if I had rung first? Would I really have wanted the fake reunion if he'd put me off for a few hours, met me at the diner, that girl's kisses still fresh all over his cock, and me none the wiser? At least I knew now, at least I knew.

Trying to calm myself, I walked around the Key Foods, picked up milk, some bread, bananas and something that passed for American breakfast cereal. Something as simple as muesli, it seemed, did not exist in this country, so I had to get something called granola. A week in New York, I reminded myself. I now had a week in New York, by myself, and hell, forget your broken heart, take the holiday you have deserved for a very long time. See the sights, go to the Museums, climb the Empire State Building. Hell, maybe I could even drop in on Grant.

My good mood lasted until I got back to the tiny shoebox-sized apartment, and then I burst into tears. It was too awful. What had I been thinking? What on earth had I expected? Carlos was free to do as he pleased; it wasn't his fault he had broken my heart. But then I was angry again. How could he have written me, that beautiful email, that talk about his phantom heart loving me forever, oh god, that utter patent, silver-tongued bullshit about a phantom heart, how could I have fallen for it?
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

The ending, which everyone still reading will find immensely unsatisfying.

(Except for the surprise guest appearance from Gaius the Italian Greyhound.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I hurled myself down on the bed, but sleep wouldn't come. Really, I wanted to pace, but there was no room at all to pace in the tiny one-room apartment. Stuffing the milk into the fridge, I seized my keys and my bag, and retreated back out to the street. The park. The narrow urban park was just the right size for pacing, wandering over to look at the two old men playing chess at the table, then wandering back to see if any dogs had appeared at the exercise compound. A dog, that was what I really needed. I thought of childhood dogs I'd owned, a Sheepdog, a Lurcher, a Dalmatian. I thought of my brother's soppy Chocolate Labrador, much abused by my niece. Even that ridiculous pug of the early morning would have done, its hideous face panting as it sniffed at my shoes.

The distinctive patter of toenails on tarmac as a dog rounded the corner at speed, his leash dangling behind him as if he had given his owner the slip. A thin brown greyhound, racing towards the exercise compound, far too fast for any human to catch. He stopped at the gate, then bumped against it with his head, as if annoyed at being unable to get inside. He whined for a bit, circled a few times, then stood on his hind legs as if trying to gauge how easy it would be to hop the chainlink fence, but it was too high for all but the tallest Great Dane to break into or out of.

Then the animal sniffed the air, saw me, sitting on the bench opposite, and came trotting over, eyeing me quizzically, as if begging me to let him into the dogrun. "Sorry, mate, I can't help you," I told him, but the persistent bugger did not give up. Jumping up on his hind legs, he put both his front paws on the bench, and nudged me with his head. Then again, harder, this time giving the fabric of my trousers a hopeful little lick.

His large, soft, chocolate-brown eyes looked so plaintive that I gave him a swift pet, nuzzling his soft fur and scratching him behind the ears. Encouraged by this attention, he leapt bodily up onto the bench beside me, trying to reach up to lick my face, then settled for offering his paw as if he wanted to shake hands. Laughing, I accepted the paw, but then the dog took that as an invitation to climb up into my lap.

"Oi!" I protested as he licked my face, apparently enjoying the salt of my tears.

"Gaius, get down! How many times have I told you..." His owner appeared, somewhat more slowly, around the same corner. "Oh."

Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no, no.

"Margaret," said Carlos, loping into view. "I'm sorry, I... I left his walk too late this morning, so he's overexcited. I apologise."
Gaius had stopped licking the salt from my tears, and was now just concentrating on giving me a thorough face-washing. Were it anyone else's dog, I would actually have appreciated the attention, in that dumb way that canines seemed to know when a human was upset and needed comfort and attention. "I was just going," I said limply.

"Don't go on our account, we won't be long," he told me, picking up the end of Gaius' leash to pull him down from my lap. He detached it from the collar, and finally admitted him to the desired compound. Inside, the dog ran around like a mad creature, tearing about, chasing pigeons, barking up trees, before finally heading off into a shrubby corner to squat and do his business. "Some privacy, if you please," quipped Carlos, noticing me staring at the animal. I was trying to look anywhere but his face, really.

"Sorry," I mumbled, in that overly apologetically English way, but he turned to me, his eyes searching.

"No, I'm sorry. I'm sorry about that scene, I'm sorry about..." His voice trailed off as I wondered how he had got rid of the girl. "Why did you come, Margaret?"

"Because I'm stupid!" I snapped.

"You're many things, but you're not stupid. Why did you come?"

I wanted to cry all over again, but I held my voice firm. "Isn't it obvious? With all your powers of critical thinking, and transcendent and logical deduction, can't you work it out for yourself?"

"I want to hear it from your mouth."

"Because I realised I was in love with you, you asshole. Because I missed you. Because I loved you. Because I actually thought, yes, I loved this man, this impossible, flummoxing, annoying, beautiful man enough to attempt the impossible, to attempt to try to negotiate a long-distance relationship, a lasting love affair, a... something more."

"A declaration," observed Carlos. "An actual declaration. Do you know, this is the first time you have actually told me, unbidden, that you have feelings towards me. Because I was starting to wonder if you even had emotions at all."

"That's not fair."

"Isn't it? This is the first time you have told me, unprompted, that you love me. And it's not even spontaneous, I had to pull it out of you. Like extracting teeth. Like this is some Victorian costume drama, and I have to guess at how you feel from sighs and meaningful glances and the way you manipulate your teacup."

"Fuck off," I spat. "What do you even expect if you fall for a repressed Middle-Class British person? What do you want from me? Swooning, and passionate declarations, and Oprah Winfrey style 'I love you, man, I really love you' theatrical displays of saccharine sentiment? You've read my stories. You know what my emotional range is, and the ways in which I know to display it. Just because I do not, constantly, ragingly, wear my heart on my sleeve and post it all over Facebook for the world's consumption, like you do, does not mean that I do not have one. I loved you, Carlos. As much as I have ever known how."

"Loved," Carlos noted, looking suddenly rather contrite, as if this violent declaration had shaken him more than he intended. "Past tense only?"

"After that scene, did you really expect anything else? I know, I know. It's my fault. I should have
emailed to let you know I was coming, should have called before I came over. But would that have changed what you did, or just prolonged the discovery of the kind of man you really are."

"The kind of man I am?" asked Carlos, starting to sound outraged.

"Why did you do it, Carlos? Why did you fuck her?"

"Why did I do it?" he snapped. "What fucking business of yours is it, who I sleep with, when I sleep with, and why I sleep with, now? You're not my girlfriend, you're not my wife, as you have made patently plain, again, and again, and again. No, seriously, Margaret, I'm tired of this. How was I supposed to know you loved me? How was I supposed to know you were flying over to be with me? The last I heard, you emphatically did not want to be with me. You did not want to even hear from me - your idea, if you will recall. An idea that you felt entitled to just revoke at will, with no thought about how that would affect me..."

"Don't you try and blame me for your behaviour," I snarled.

"What am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to just wait for you, forever, to make up your mind? You don't want me, but you still want to keep a leash on my cock? Yes, I was upset by your email. As I was upset by your total lack of reply to my email, when I bared my heart to you. All of my emotions, just out there on display: I. Will. Love. You. Forever. The kind of pronouncement I never make, ever - and yet not a word from you. Not a single word. Do you blame me for being upset? Do you blame me for being broken-hearted, all over again? Do you blame me for going out and getting wretched, wrecked-up, absolutely blind stinking drunk?"

"For getting drunk, no. For picking up some little teenage strumpet..."

"For fucks sake, Margaret. Do I need to remind you? You broke up with me, remember? You broke up with me. I asked you to marry me - me, who has never made a marriage proposal before in my life, never wanted to make one, never thought myself capable of even wanting to make one - I proposed, and you turned me down."

"That was a mistake, the way I reacted to that," I said dumbly, remembering the awkwardness of that conversation. "It all happened so fast, and then unhappened so fast, I wasn't entirely certain you really meant it."

"And yet, you can't forgive me the mistake of letting myself be picked up by a star-struck student throwing herself at me in a bar."

"I had no idea you were serious. I mean, you remember how you put it. A green card marriage, a marriage of convenience - 'we can still fuck other people'. I don't want to fuck other people, unlike you. I only want you."

"Well, we're agreed there, at least."

"No we're not - you don't want to fuck me, you want to fuck fangirls in student bars!"

"What else do you want me to say? What else do you need me to prove?"

"I think you've proved enough, with this little episode," I shot back snidely.

"I've proved what? That a single man is capable of having consensual sexual relations with a single girl? For Christ's sake, Margaret! Am I a trained monkey, a performing seal? Do you have another jump I can hoop through? Another impossible standard to meet? Another holy grail for me to fetch you before you'll have me? I am an actor. If there is one thing I am good at, it is taking direction.
You called all the moves. You always had to. You say be chaste, and I was chaste. You say, go and date someone else, I went and dated someone else. You say fuck me for three days, until we're both raw and bleeding, and I fuck you for three days, until my cock bleeds and your vulva is almost swollen shut. You say go away and never speak to me again, I go, I stay silent, though my heart is breaking. You email me against your explicitly stated wishes to say you miss me, I send you poetry back. What else do you want me to do, Margaret? Do you want me to stay celibate for the rest of my fucking life, just in case you suddenly up and decide that actually you do want me, after all? What do I have to do, Margaret, to prove that I am actually good enough for you?"

"This is how fucked up you are? This is how fucked up your conception of love is? That it's some kind of boy scout badge, some kind of reward that you earn through ticking off one task after another. Rather than a kind of trust that has to be negotiated between two people," I stuttered, feeling oddly like I was echoing a character in one of my own novels, the novelist being written by her own words.

"Well, that's it! I feel like... what impossible benchmark do I have to meet to earn your trust? I feel like... all this time, you have just been waiting for me to fail. So here, yes. I have now met every single one of your expectations, and failed, in a massive flagrant way. You're not just the Director, you're the writer of the play, too, and you've written me as a fucking cad, a playboy, a rake. And so I, your actor, fall for it, and play the fucking cad, the playboy, the rake. There! Are you happy? You set me up for failure, you seem to want me to fail, and then hate me for failing!"

I stared at the dog compound, feeling like absolute shit. Even Gaius, realising that something was wrong from all the shouting his master was doing, had come over and leaned his two front paws up on the gate, peering worriedly through the wire.

"I..." I started to say, but Carlos had got up. Was that it, was the conversation over? Oh. No, he was just going over to let Gaius out, then returned to the bench, picking the dog up and folding him into his arms as he sat down next to me again. "What if it's the other way around, Carlos? What if it's me that thinks I'm never going to be good enough for you? That I'm never going to be enough for you? That after everything you have done, and everyone you've been with, I am never going to be able to satisfy you?"

"You think that, after everything? You really truly think that?"

I shrugged, feeling like I'd been holding up this impenetrable wall of unimpeachable carriage and bearing, signifying confidence, for so long that it felt like it was crushing me. "You've been with all these women, these amazing, beautiful women, so pretty it actually makes my teeth hurt to look at them. How on earth are you ever going to be happy with me? I'm not a rock star girlfriend, I'm a writer, a critic, a hopeless intellectual interested in algorithms and code and semiology who's read too many books on philosophy to ever truly be happy."

Gaius whined, fretting against his master's embrace, and extended his paw towards me again, poking me as if trying to distract me from our argument. Sighing deeply, I took the paw and held it, stroking his soft, dun-coloured fur. So the dog was as big an attention-seeker as his master. Figured.

"But that is... precisely... what I want in a lover? What I've always wanted, since I was young?" Carlos turned to look at me, his eyes and his dog's eyes four black mirrors of concern. I smiled, thinking how owners and their dogs came to look alike, both of them thin, and elegant, and highly strung, yet both with those incredibly beautiful, liquid, expressive eyes. Carlos smiled back. "If I had never been a rock star, if I had never been in a successful band, if I had quit music twenty years ago, at the same time you did, and become a career academic like your friend Alice's
husband. If I had never met Dan Kessler, and followed the original plan, and become a professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin or wherever, the exact same person, but a different job, would you have me?"

I didn't trust my voice, so at first, I just nodded. "If you had lived that life, without the groupies, without the cocaine, without MTV... Yes, maybe, I think I could have fallen in love with you while we were still emailing one another arguments about Barthes and Cary Grant films."

"I am that person, Margaret. Underneath it all."

"But you're not. If you hadn't been a rock star, if you hadn't played those songs, worn those costumes, made those films, said those annoying and provocative things in interviews, you and I would never have met. I wouldn't even have known who you were. If you hadn't asked those questions in your art, I would never have answered them in my writing. We never would have started emailing."

"What if we'd just met on the internet, as people do. What if we'd just bumped into one another and started arguing, on the Foucault tag on Tumblr. What if we'd met on The Cure's internet message board. What if you got to know me a different way, fell in love with me for my own internal qualities first? Because maybe that's something I appreciate about you - that although you deeply distrust the whole rock star thing, you actually respond to the books I've read and the arguments I make and the things I think about, not my looks, or my clothes, or my deeply regrettable musician past? I don't care that you think I'm ugly. But I do care, and deeply, that you think I'm clever."

"I was kidding about you being ugly," I said hurriedly, worrying that he had got the wrong end of the stick, yet again. "You know that, right? I have come to see you as beautiful, not because of your clothes or your haircut - or your massive jaw - but because your mind, your frustrating, annoying, exasperating - and yes, seriously clever - mind intrigues me so. I don't love you because I think you're cool or beautiful. I think you're beautiful because I've fallen in love with you, your emails, your arguments, your general vexatious you-ness, regrettable rock star past and all."

He burst out laughing. "That is simultaneously the worst insult, and the nicest compliment I have ever received. And yet, even while you describe feeling this way, you can't seem to understand that this is exactly the same reason why I believe you to be the most singularly desirable woman I know? That I think you're beautiful because I have come to love you, all of you, with your complicated history and your messed-up emotions and your own deeply regrettable rock star past and all?"

I just stared at him, biting my lip, not knowing whether to trust my heart or my brain, feeling like a tiny airplane tossed about by turbulence.

"I'm feeling a bit like a character in a Jane Austen novel right now, all meaningful glances and teacup-reading and second chances, but I will put it to you again. Margaret, will you marry me, in the ordinary, conventional way - not a green card marriage, not a marriage of convenience, but an exclusive - or as exclusive as two flawed human beings are able to maintain - commitment born of love and devotion and a genuine desire to built a life together."

"Carlos, no," I whimpered, dropping the dog's paw and putting my face into my hands. "I can't even... I was so jet-lagged I didn't even trust myself to make the decision, so scared and so heartsick and feeling just bruised all over like I wanted to go home, but I didn't even have a home, I had a tiny shoebox with a porthole window.

"I can't even - what? Process the question? Can't even marry me? Do you mean that as a 'no' as in
'no, I won't marry you' or do you mean that as a no simply expressing surprise and confusion and disbelief of the question, as implied by the internet-memetic usage of 'I can't even'? And if it is an actual 'no' as in a refusal of the marriage proposal, do you mean that 'no' with complete certainty, or will you just change your mind and be back again in three weeks' time, the moment that I smile at a nubile young co-ed in a bar? Are you certain that you won't have me?" 

I shook my head very slowly. "No."

"No what?"

"Carlos!" I shouted, overwhelmed by his flow of word-vomit loquaciousness. "Stop being so bloody Carlossian!"

"Well, stop prevaricating! Give me an answer, dammit."

"No, I don't want to marry you. But also no, I'm not certain of that, not by a long shot."

"Back to the old NULL value," he observed.

I nodded, feeling all mixed up and confused and suddenly understood why computers freaked out over NULL values. They weren't just ordinary blank spaces of nothingness and unknowingness, they were terrifying, confusing voids of whirlwind emotions and conflicting desires and Jesus Christ, I hated Carlos, I never wanted anything to do with him after the way he had treated that 'nubile co-ed' back at his apartment. And yet I still could not tell him to fuck off and leave, because there was a part of me that remembered his nobler qualities and was as pathetic and dog-like and devoted as that greyhound tucked in his arms.

Someone was poking me, so I looked up. No, it wasn’t Carlos, it was Gaius again, prodding me gently with that velvety paw until I took it. Carlos looked at his dog, and smiled, then turned his own velvety-dark eyes towards me. "Alright, we'll populate that question with a NULL value for another week, a month, a year, the rest of our lives. But will you at least do me the honour of being my fucking girlfriend until you decide?"

"Carlos, don't..." I sighed, feeling like I was not prepared to have my resistance worn down in this manner.

His glittery black eyes widened. "Please?"

Chapter End Notes

I have to confess that, even as the author, I honestly do not know what happens next, and I do not know what Margaret's answer is.

I honestly don't see any way that they can be together, and I believe that Margaret will never trust him again, and they would actually make each other miserable and drive each other crazy in a serious relationship. But I also think that they love each other so deeply and they fit so well together that they will not be happy apart, either. I think either outcome is perfectly possible, and either outcome is perfectly doomed.

If you, as a reader, have an opinion or a preference or a better idea of the outcome than I do, please do me a favour and leave me a comment telling me what happens next,
because I do not know!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!