

## Chapter Ten

Back in his own apartment, Carl knew he was supposed to be phoning Sasha. The conversation to come felt like a chore though. He was still enjoying the afterglow of the liaison with Georgina Montford. That she had given him the option to return was particularly empowering. He knew that he wouldn't dare actually do so but one could imagine the scenario; carefully chosen first words on arrival, a discrete and longer encounter, desperate pleas for him to return. Well, these were becoming fantasies. He should phone Sasha. It was his turn. Another unfulfilling long distance discourse would just further emphasise the futility of their separated lives though. He'd put it off until after he'd eaten.

Carl started to bang pots about in the kitchen sub-space of his flat. The flat, bedroom and bathroom apart, was open plan with a swish row of modern kitchen appliances and cupboards across one end. The whole room had that stark modern feel provided by yet more magnolia paint and high powered spotlights. The living area was a little bleak since Carl only had a few untreated pine bookshelves and an old futon couch. Amber called it minimalist, Carl, under funded. The interior of the fridge was equally bare but there was just about the contents of a vegetable spaghetti Bolognese, and a yoghurt. Carl paused to wonder if Mrs Georgina was in to sex and food. Sasha wasn't, she just started giggling.

Inevitably his mobile rang just as he was dishing the meal onto his plate.

"Hi Carl," Sasha sounded a little washed out, "it was your turn wasn't it?"

"Um, sorry, I was getting there," he tried to think of something upbeat but the day's trespass was all there was in his head, so a pause grew.

"Right," he could almost here the depressed sigh, "look, I'm sorry but they've messed around with the shifts at work. I can't do this weekend. I'm not going to have a long break until Tuesday. Can you live without me until then?" This was normal and it could equally be Carl who was away but that didn't seem to help tonight.

"Sure. No fun for you either. You had an interesting day?" Sasha paused, did it sound that forced Carl wondered?

"Erm, just watched a video, did some food shopping, dozed. You?"

"I might have cracked the code Andreas was using in his diary," and slept with my boss' wife. This shouldn't be so hard.

"Anything useful in the diary then?" Sasha seemed to be forcing interest too.

"I didn't make it that far because I hadn't copied down the bit I've got the code for. Assuming it will work that is."

“I see...” they tapered off. “Guess nothing too much has happened today then?” Nothing too much, Carl cynically echoed internally.

“I was just about to eat, should I phone back?” Carl said it to back out before he’d really even thought it.

“No. Love you,” the last sounded a little fragile.

“Love you too,” he tried to add conviction, “really looking forward to Tuesday.”

“OK, bye then.” She called off. Great, thought Carl, well handled. Very cool and mature. Got a secret, Carl will keep it for you.

He slumped down onto the sofa and twirled luke warm spaghetti on his fork. Perhaps today was a signal that things weren’t working with Sasha after all. He tried to bring up feelings of love and excitement about her but there only seemed to be familiarity. Casual sex with your boss’ wife wasn’t going to exactly fill an emotional hole either. He finished the pasta feeling depressed. Trudging into town to, most likely, fail to translate Andreas’ diary suddenly didn’t appeal. Maybe he’d do it early in the morning instead. He could drop in on Amber, she’d have a cheery worldview for sale. He might even tell her about his afternoon. She was the arty type, so would understand wild swings of passion surely?

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“Men! Do you ever think with anything other than your dicks?” Amber was not proving to be the Bohemian, understanding and supportive ally Carl had hoped for. Her usual cute bubblyness had been replaced with a forbidding stern anger.

“Well, come on, there was a woman involved too and she was no less at fault!” Carl hit back.

“Really? It sounds like you took advantage of her when she was upset. Why don’t you just add her to a cage in your harem!”

“Oh come on...” Carl quenched his outrage. A stand up fight with Amber wasn’t what he needed. “Let’s just drop it and have some wine, huh?” Amber seemed to reconsider pushing the issue and instead picked up the bottle and refilled their glasses.

Carl was feeling a bit hurt. Modern women seemed to champion this world view in which men played the role of the oppressor they had won freedom from. To Carl’s eye the intellectual idea of equality for women had won, was winning, because it was right and both intelligent men and women wanted it. It was a victory as much for men over thuggish history as women. The courageous suffragette seizing power back from oppressive man just didn’t seem right – after all in the years when there might reasonably have been considered an open battle between the sexes the male brutes had the women

pretty well imprisoned. He didn't imagine he'd have come off to well at their hands either. Amber was still glowering as if she knew what he was thinking and was challenging him to dare say it. Maybe this was how Germans born after the war must feel – a sort of original sin? Men had landed that on women too. OK, so men are bastards, he concluded.

“Have you told Sasha yet?” Amber wasn't done.

“No. How could that help?” he responded exasperated. Amber's eyes seemed to darken with a new layer of fury.

“You're supposed to be in love. You're supposed to be sharing your lives.” The level of accusation that could be worked into the word ‘sharing’ was quite intimidating.

“Would you want to know if Trevor had strayed unintentionally? I mean you'd just read lots of things into it that weren't there and everyone would get upset and messed up and..”

“Yes, Carl, I would want to know! It's Sasha's right what she chooses to read into it and frankly if you cared that much, you should have thought about it at the time.” Ouch, thought Carl, feeling pretty well pummelled. You can't really argue with the moral high ground. A long silence developed. After what he hoped was a contrite and reflective pause, Carl tried to shift the conversation to safer ground

“How did your  $E = mc^2$  picture go down at college?”

“Quite well,” Amber seemed to have said what she had to say and was willing to relent. “They didn't like the animals – they wanted black holes and... what were they? Top quarks I think. What are they?”

“Well, stuff is made of atoms. Atoms are made of electrons going round a nucleus. The nucleus is made of protons and neutrons. Protons and neutrons are made of quarks.”

“Oh, OK”

“They're not top quarks! They're called up and down quarks. The weird thing is that when we make particles in accelerators, there turn out to be two exact copies of the particles we're used to, only they're more massive. So the up, down, electron and a thing called a neutrino are the first family. The second family has the charm, and strange quarks and a heavy electron called the muon and a neutrino of its own. The third family are the top and bottom quark and the tau and another neutrino. The third family is the heaviest with the top quark the monster weighing almost 200 times as much as a hydrogen atom.” Carl was very pleased to be on to a new topic.

“What are they for then?”

“No idea. It’s a total mystery. They decay into the normal everyday stuff by the weak nuclear force, if you make them. Their existence is one of the big puzzles.”

Amber appeared to consider this before leaping up and grabbing his wine glass.

“What’s up?”

“You’re going to phone Sasha.” Amber pulled him up from the chair by his arm and dragged him towards the hall. Carl opened his mouth to appeal but was given a final stern command to go and pushed through the door.

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The temperature had fallen after sunset and the air was pleasantly cool as Carl walked briskly towards the centre of town. The streets were dark and quiet though he would probably not have noticed an elephant, so engrossed was he in his own thoughts. He was feeling mildly humiliated. He’d acted like a teenager so far this evening. The casual sex had boosted his ego until he was too full of himself. Then he had smugly told Amber, no doubt looking for her to be impressed, and, guess what, she had thought him childish and thoughtless. In retrospect it was clear that if you’re going to cheat on your lover you’d better be able to keep your mouth shut. He hadn’t even been able to look Sasha straight in the face down a telephone! So if it’s such a big deal that it’s going to dominate your thoughts you’d better run a mile from any such contact. It was too late for that so he’d better stop thinking of it as a big deal. Well, at least it was a plan. Forget the whole thing and grow up! Or was he simply justifying not phoning Sasha? And if an affair didn’t mean a lot why take the risk? He sighed and kicked a pebble into the brook alongside the footpath.

He took a short cut across a government building car park (the requisite 1960s concrete structure next to any British historic site), passed through a break in a looming high, flint wall and emerged onto the Cathedral Green. Here too the night was spookily quiet with no one about. It was late enough that everyone was at home or in a bar.

The stairs up to Andreas’ flat were claustrophobic and stark. Carl had flicked on a bare bulb on the wall that seemed more intent on darkening the shadows obscuring the steps than illuminating anything. There was still an acrid smell of chemicals although when he opened the door into the main room it was clear the police had cleared out anything that might be dangerous. Carl switched on the main light and then opened a window. The frames and latches were old, thin steel, streaked with dirt. He wedged the locks in place. Each window opened under a v-shaped gable in the roof. Looking up he could see a complicated web of struts supporting the tiles. Outside a car screeched past. So then, to the diary.

Carl hung his satchel over the back of the desk chair, removed the sheet of paper with the translation grids on it, sat down, and opened the diary to the last entry marked 3.3. This

was presumably the entry that had been made with the grids from Andreas' office. Taking a deep breath to savour the anticipation he began to interchange the letters.

*Out of C, must cut back – the bank and down to the Ferry tomorrow evening.  
Oxidised my first cinnabar – should impress the girls! Scouring more manuscript. S is still falling into the trap.*

Well that was clearly English. Carl was pleased that he'd made progress. C and S and bank and ferry though were all a bit mysterious. Could you really impress girls by oxidising chemicals, whatever cinnabar was? It was certainly interestingly conspiratorial. In fact, didn't it make a suspicious death seem more likely?

Carl turned to the next 3.3 but the translation came out garbage. Oh hell! The next worked though

*Beat the hierarchy problem today! With C made a 5d model with an arbitrarily light Higgs – up early to write up. Cool.*

That was a day Carl remembered. They thought they had a model where the Higgs couldn't become heavy. The model had had four spatial dimensions rather than the customary three and somehow that had seemed to help solve this big problem. Carl couldn't recall how they could have come to that conclusion; it had certainly turned out wrong and in retrospect how could extra dimensions have helped? Still it was fun to unearth the excitement of discovery even if it had been short lived and a false hope. So C was Carl himself? That didn't seem to match with the previous entry.

Working on he realized that the entries that wouldn't translate were actually marked 3.3, so there was a crucial underline. Perhaps it meant minus and he should shift the opposite way. He rattled off a new grid but generated more gobbledygook. There was one more 3.3 entry, longish, and again it translated neatly

*SukieG, SukieG, sexiest girl on Earth. Love the big tattoos. Too much vodka though. Spent all day on the web looking for IN alchemy – nobody's reproduced a word of it. Greatest man ever lived and just ignored. More room to manoeuvre less chance to be corroborated.*

Carl thought Andreas might have mentioned a girl called Sukie. Had she been down in Southampton? Maybe.

The greatest man that ever lived just had to mean IN was Newton. Newton had founded the fledgling scientific method in his mathematics of calculus. He had gone on to provide a precise description of gravity that unified the fall of an apple and the orbits of the planets. He had made the audacious and arrogant leaps that underlie the belief in science that all natural phenomena are open to inquiry, understanding and mathematical description. Almost every physicist Carl had ever met ranked him as the inspiration behind the radical changes that have occurred in our lives since the Elizabethan period

and so, as the most important man who has lived. Well, he'd met some American physicists who ranked Columbus as more important but that was a skewed cultural conclusion surely?

Carl stared at what he had translated for a few minutes longer. Why was 3.3 one shift down and three across in the table of letters? He was going to have to crack this or he'd go mad. He decided to copy down the 3,3 entries to work on in the morning.

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Before Carl knew where he was it was 2am in the morning and he really ought to be back home in bed. It was certainly too late to be phoning Sasha. He quietly descended the stairs from Andreas' flat aware that he was walking down the side of the house below.

He was trying to construct a compelling story, that fitted the translations he had, to present to WPC Thatcher. Andreas had been faking some documents. Maybe he had been practising the writing and inks on the old-looking paper that had been about his flat. That looked too mass-produced though, to be the basis of a forgery of something truly old. So must that be where the scouring of manuscripts came in? He could have been scraping old text off some real old paper. That seemed a bit sacrilegious and barbaric. Well, so be it, it still worked. Andreas was then writing about alchemy pretending to be Newton. He'd wanted to crib some real quotations from Newton's other work which is why he was searching the web. He'd need some elements in there that could be cross checked as being the sort of thing Newton really did say. The final act then was to flog the stuff to the mysterious S who was falling into the trap of thinking it was real. Was Andreas really that mercenary and after a quick buck? The plot sounded reasonable enough but who was S? Find S, find the murderer? There were signs of a motive emerging. Well, possibly.

Outside it was pitch black until his eyes adjusted. The sparkler image of the bulb's filament still danced across his retina. There was just about enough street lighting to let him see the doorhandle and keyhole. The catch was a peculiar old design and he had to use both hands and peer in close to secure the latch and turn the key. At that most vulnerable point he was alarmed by the sound of a footfall just behind him. A tattooed arm was forced across his throat and the whole force of the man behind him was thrust against his back. This attack was so unexpected Carl offered no response. His free arm was suddenly violently wrenched as his satchel was torn free, its strap giving way. Then a blow to the back of the head brutally pushed him forward into the house's wall, his cheek grazing badly on the whitewashed plaster, before he crashed to the ground.

Carl lay in a heap on a flower bed. His instincts were cowering and dazed. A small part of his brain was telling him to remember everything so he could tell the police. He fixated on the swirling black tattoos as if he thought they would provide a photo fit later. Uncountable time passed while he waited for the next part of the assault. Slowly the truth penetrated and it dawned on him that he was alone again.

Carl's mental faculties returned and he rolled over to a sitting position. His arm and side felt rather bruised, particularly where his satchel strap had been burst from him. There was blood on his cheek and now he felt the back of his head considerably more there too. Ouch. The satchel was gone. It had the translations in it and a text book he'd been working from. None of that was going to mean much to the thief. He should have been looking out for the man from the previous night though shouldn't he? To further the reprimand, his body generated a wave of nausea as he tried to stand. He collapsed back to his knees and vomited over the crushed rose bushes.