

## Chapter Twenty Two

Carl waited outside the train station for Sasha in a cloud of gloom. His head throbbed from where he had been clubbed. After the terror of the previous night he now had to act through being dumped by his lover. He considered just departing and leaving Sasha to her own conclusions. His lack of sleep seemed to make the despair more bearable though. It would be a new experience to be humiliated by the person closest to him, he supposed.

The fluorescent orange numbers on the concourses' digital clock clicked over. He stared at them, numbed and eye lids drooping, part of a line of morose travellers. Suddenly there were passengers flowing past the ticket inspector and then Sasha.

She seemed to glow amongst the other passengers. She was only of average height but her build was athletic, curved and well-proportioned. Her gait bounced and glided where those around her dragged their feet. She was crisply dressed in thin black jeans and a loose, pale blue cotton top covered over with a black waistcoat. She held a floral patterned travel bag in one hand. Her hair was straight and naturally blond, cropped half way down her neck. It framed her impish, neat features that suddenly broke into an instinctive broad smile as she saw Carl.

Carl realized he was smiling back. The past days' illusions of Georginas and Louises dissolved in the presence of a woman who was actually his friend and who he loved. Happiness flickered, but now they were closer he could see the black smudges under Sasha's green sparkling eyes. She looked exhausted, more so than the hospital ward's usual grind. They hugged. Wouldn't they normally kiss, worried Carl? His smile seemed suddenly fake – he was about to hurt her. He'd better soldier on until a more appropriate place for that discussion though,

“Good trip?” he asked

“Yeah, almost on time,” she replied, “I could do with a coffee.”

“It's only five minutes to home. Let's make it there.” An agonised half hour in a coffee shop would be too much for him. She nodded and they headed across the car park towards the city centre. Their usual banter didn't kick start and they walked in long periods of silence interspersed with stuffed pleasantries. Why, oh why, have I messed this up wondered Carl?

At his flat Sasha dumped her bag in the hall. Hadn't she carried it through to the bedroom last time?

“Coffee then?” Carl made for the kitchen. She came too and busied herself finding mugs and sugar. He fumbled with the kettle lead and washed up a spoon. The conversation ahead loomed in Carl's mind and feelings of sickness washed up from his stomach. Finally they were done and they moved to the sitting area, choosing the two touching ends of different sofas. Sasha took a sip from her mug although it was too hot, then

placed it down on the table. She looked up at him directly for the first time since the meeting at the station. She looked pale and as if about to cry. Shit,

“Erm,” tried Carl but Sasha interrupted,

“No, let me,” there was a studiousness about her tone as if she was reciting something well practised. She took a small gulping breath and continued, “I’ve messed up, Carl.” He looked at her blankly, cast adrift by the sudden change of direction from his thoughts. “You know Gail bullied me into going out with her and Andy last Wednesday? Well she didn’t show, the stupid bitch. So I was stuck with Andy – he was in a real state about being dumped again. He spent the whole evening just moaning about how useless he was, he was pretty depressed. We had a few drinks, and then we went back to his place for coffee. We always do after the pub, I didn’t think anything of it. Well, I don’t know, we ended up drinking his vodka and...,” she faltered, then with tears flowing added, “I slept with him. I don’t know why. I just felt sorry for him I think. It was totally stupid. I don’t even fancy him.” Carl stared at her shocked. “It didn’t, doesn’t mean anything. Oh God, maybe that’s worse.”

Sasha looked totally distraught, desperate to see some sign of understanding or forgiveness in Carl. Slowly his brain engaged; his first instinct was to laugh. How lucky was this coincidence of infidelities? He suppressed the smile, it wouldn’t look good. He was instantly guilty of his position of power in the conversation – he knew but she didn’t yet. In any case did it make everything OK or twice as bad? Any reaction he might have when her story had settled would only be hypocrisy though so he was going to have to live with it non-judgementally. Sasha’s strength suddenly seemed to give way and she looked down from his face dejected.

“Wait love,” he put his hand out on hers and she looked up hopeful and terrified, “my turn next,” he said quietly. He told her about Georgina Montford, just the bare bones. His story sounded much like Sasha’s to his own ears just different names and places, fleeting changes.

After he had finished Sasha sat back, pulling her hand away. She looked shell shocked, pale and fragile and beautiful. There ought to be an equality here thought Carl but he was just waiting on her judgement. He’d known since first seeing her on the station what he wanted and strangely the events they were discussing were an irrelevance. Neither of them dared say anything but Carl finally broke,

“What should we do, do you think?” he asked trying not to beg.

She gave a rueful smile and wiped a tear off her cheek. Perhaps she was seeing this as luck too, Carl hoped. Finally she timidly proposed,

“Fancy going to bed?”

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The early afternoon sunshine was a little disconcerting to wake to. Carl and Sasha had collapsed from exhaustion, entwined in each others arms. Once Carl had recalled recent events though, he smiled, more relaxed than for days. He snuggled closer to Sasha's gentle curves and smelled her hair. Thank goodness everything had worked out alright.

Sasha too was rousing and luxuriated in some contented stretches. Her eyes opened slowly and regarded him,

"Hello you," she smiled. They kissed long and gently. "Now, explain to me why you have a sore head," she prompted him. Carl began to explain the previous night's bizarre adventure. Sasha shifted onto her side, the sheet only half covering her, and regarded him seriously, her head resting on her hand, elbow on the bed. When he finished she shook her head in wonderment and horror,

"Didn't your Mum ever tell you about the cat?" he looked at her bemused, "The dead one," she prompted.

"Oh, curiosity!" Carl exclaimed, smiling. "Guess I always wanted to know how it felt!"

"So where's this great book?"

"Geoffrey ended up with it. I suppose that was his intention all along," Carl reflected. "Still I probably owe him one!" Sasha didn't look like she found that funny. It was a bit early for jokes about Georgina. He'd better change the subject.

"You know I almost bought an engagement ring to apologise to you. It seemed a bit crass though. Should I have done?" Sasha's frown melted into a smile. They should put that line in the dating manual thought Carl cheekily. You could only use it once, mind.

"It would have been a little brazen but very sweet," she concluded.

"You wouldn't have thrown it back at me then?"

"Probably not." They grinned at each other. Sasha was looking expectant.

"Er, did we just get engaged?"

"I think you do have to buy the ring for that."

"Oh yes, of course. Should we?"

"Yes."

The slightly stunned silence that followed between them was broken by the crash of a door close by in the building.

“Heh, that must be Amber back!” exclaimed Carl. He explained, “Her bloke cheated on her too and she was steaming about it. Then she just left. I’ve been wondering if she was OK for days. Perhaps we should go down and see?”

“Give her a chance to get home first,” suggested Sasha. “Anyway we should celebrate getting engaged shouldn’t we?” she batted her eyelids mock provocatively. Carl rolled over to her and regarded her face from a few inches away.

“I should warn you I’ve been having all sorts of existential and academic concerns about the male sex drive,” he said, deliberately over pompous. Sasha giggled and made an ‘oh’ shape of query with her mouth. A bit more seriously he added, “I don’t like the overtones of violence and possession.” Sasha laughed again,

“I do!” She paused and then added, “as long as they’re kept as overtones. I think of it as like eating.” Carl wasn’t sure that helped and looked quizzical. “Well, eating is pretty horrific – stuffing dead animal flesh and vegetable matter into your mouth doesn’t stand up to much academic scrutiny either. Instinctively it’s fun though! So it’s best just to swallow your pride and enjoy it.”

“Alright, I’ll soldier on!”

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Amber opened the door dressed in a flurry of reds and oranges. Bright colours usually reflected her good moods. She smiled on seeing Carl and positively beamed when she clocked Sasha in tow just behind.

“Come in. You two look happy,” she commented, part question.

“It’s traditional when you’re engaged,” revealed Carl.

“Oh my God, that’s wonderful.” Amber jumped with excitement and bounded over to embrace them both in a big hug.

“Wait, wait,” interrupted Sasha jovially. “I keep telling you Carl, it doesn’t count until you’ve actually bought the ring!” Carl shrugged and resisted muttering, “women”. He suppressed a smile. Before they had come down he had had an e-mail from Geoffrey which said simply ‘Cyril agrees – bring in a bank payment slip!’ Sasha was going to get a more expensive ring than she bargained on! That revelation could wait, so he diverted the conversation to a different track,

“Where have you been Amber? I’ve been really worried.” Amber performed a spin on the spot before stretching her arms out and declaring,

“Venice!”

“I’ve been worrying about you and all this time you’ve been swanning around Venice?”

“It is beautiful! The Grand Canal, the golden walls of the cathedral, gondoliers! It’s amazing what you Europeans get up to,” she pronounced.

“How did you end up in Venice?” queried Sasha.

“Trevor!” Amber responded. “He suddenly turned up,” she turned to Carl, “just ten minutes after you left! He had two tickets to Venice on the midnight flight from the airport. There was no time to pack so we jumped in his car and just made it.” Carl was still processing the very possible image of him and Amber in bed when Trevor came in. Amber could clearly read the thought in his face and turned to Sasha, “I was really upset and Carl was so sweet.” That seemed fairly discreet but Sasha apparently knew just what she meant and blessed him with a pleased, indulgent smile and a hug. Carl’s luck seemed to have switched from catastrophic to worryingly positive. He hoped it would last.

“Is it too early for a bottle of wine?” Amber asked, “I’ve got to tell you all about Venice. And Sasha, I had to buy all my clothes over there - you should see them!”

“Wine sounds lovely,” said Sasha for them both.