

The Best Romance Ever – Ina Disguise

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“Why do his eyes look so filled with hate?” Aldous adjusted his glasses and looked at Kira. They were watching ‘the international health expert’ Sam Redwood’s gadget infomercial on TV.

“I don’t know. It is very aging. He looks tired, old and bitter.” Kira was surprised to find she was not as upset at seeing Sam again, after two years of avoiding looking at him, as she thought she would be. “One thing is for sure, it won’t be anything to do with me. I’m way too insignificant. Try the bit of fluff on the screen next to him, maybe she said no.” The corner of her mouth twitched in irritation.

Sam, unusually thin by his normal cuddly standards, continued to talk about the virtues of drinking greens whilst glaring hatefully out from the screen. Occasionally flicking a blonde curl from his face, he deftly demonstrated the wondrous seed crushing qualities of his gadget, smiling at the cute female sidekick whilst continuing to look homicidal whenever he looked at the camera.

“He is probably hungry. Or maybe this is his new ‘older guy’ sexy look. I don’t know. It looks more like his new ‘older guy’ scary look from here. At least the shirts have improved.”

“Kira, how long have you been in love with this guy now?” Aldous frowned.

“Three or four years, maybe?”

“Have you tried talking to him?”

“No point, he is screwing his staff and they won’t let me. I don’t know whether it comes from him or them but same difference, I don’t get to communicate with him. It’s probably just as well, because at least fifty percent of the time I am furious with him.” Kira lobbed another bit of cacao into her mouth along with the blueberries. “I could always pretend to be a stranger until I had him cornered, but to be honest my apparently god-like beloved and I don’t get on particularly well and we can spot each other under assumed names at a hundred paces.”

“I gathered that from the last time you spoke.” Aldous laughed at the recollection of Kira’s fury at Sam for not accepting Kira’s gift of her artwork, ‘Raw Sex Object.’

“What do you see in him? He still looks like a twat to me.”

“The oddest things set him off and he gets furious. I imagine he thinks he is so impossible to get on with that he doesn’t really like people getting too close, so he keeps everything nice and superficial. My version of exactly the same behaviour is to avoid people entirely. We are the opposite, and yet exactly the same. It’s strange, all I exist for is making the guy happy, and yet the minute I even see a picture of him this deranged child takes over my mind and I say terrible things to him.” Kira paused only to sigh. “The only answer to it is exactly what I am doing, which is to try to avoid even seeing him. It doesn’t help much, we should really just have the titanic fight until one of us, probably me, expires. All I know is that I have never met him, I don’t get on with him, and I miss him every minute of every day, which is, of course, absurd. I should reinstate the team of ex-boyfriends to take my mind

off it, but they were hopeless, and besides, that's why they got the boot in the first place. It's not really me, is it, the lovesick look?"

"Not really, no, and you don't even like hippies."

"Or vegans, schmaltz, hedonists or utilitarians. It's God's idea of a horrible joke." Kira sighed. "Or beards, for that matter, and I don't imagine for a second he likes short fat Scottish bitches. It's going to be unresolved forever, whilst I get fatter and fatter and eventually decompose in a miserable twisted heap."

"Time for a new project, Kira."

"Yep, I think so too. It's a shame Aldous, I can think of at least one excellent gentleman that I would have liked to marry, and now I can't. Love sucks, especially this version."

"How did the artwork appraisal go?"

"I am reasonably talented apparently." Kira continued to look glum.

"Great!"

"I suppose so. It's always the same, you look at your own work, and you think a five year old could have done it because you remember all the things that went wrong. Other people just see the result, so you don't really know until you show it to people. You have no idea the courage it took to show that thing after Sam rejected it, and he hadn't even seen it. He was just being a self-important dick. Considering he talks about 'grace' so much, he doesn't appear to know what it is."

"He looks like he's probably a bit self-important all the time to me."

"Nah, just a Yank avoiding being touched by anything. You get a similar effect with over-educated oiks over here. They have to be told what to like by someone with more money than them. It's the only way they can tell if they're doing something 'kewl.' And you have to remember he likes to be stressed. I was a nasty sounding person when I overworked too. It leads to all sorts of horrible flippant moments because you're thinking about something else."

Aldous giggled happily at the thought of all those thoughtless rich people as he went to feed the cats. Kira hurriedly switched Sam's hate-contorted face off and continued to sew, idly wondering if her own forsaken expression was any better than his.

Sam, international health guru extraordinaire, looked out of the drab hotel window at the roller-skating blonde. Five years ago, he thought, I could have tapped that. He turned back to the computer, where his book on gardening still lay unfinished. The now familiar cold feeling crept over him as he pondered whether to work on that or his presentation for the next day.

Business was, as usual, doing well. The TV endorsements were making him money, but not as much as he had hoped, and the demands on his appearance and time were frustrating. Now spending more time in NYC, and considerably less time doing what he loved with the smaller health shop venues, he did not feel life was treating him well. The increase in fan numbers had slowed down considerably.

Where had it all gone wrong? He patted his tummy and wondered if he dared eat anything. He decided not.

Nothing had really changed in terms of his attractiveness, of course, but Sam felt he was losing his mojo, and it wasn't a good feeling. He gloomily wondered what would cheer him up. Everything seemed stale and routine, just 'ticking over,' and to make things worse, Sam was lonely. He usually functioned at a pace that ensured he was never really aware of being lonely, but things had slowed below his preferred level thanks to the income and restrictive nature of the TV work. Worse than that, the anticipated chat show appearances had not yet materialised and he seemed to be in an unaccustomed rut. Same locations, same subjects, same long term relationships with the groupies that ran his business. Kira had pointed out in one of her many irate videos that this was now stifling his opportunities, and he suddenly had the feeling that the stupid bitch might be right. Surely not? Sam scowled at his wrinkles in the mirror as he pondered the fact that he even remembered this.

The gardening book was designed to push him into a more established mid-life, middle class market. The lack of prospective chicks in this market was depressing in the extreme. Older women were far too complicated and far too challenging if you kept them around too long, a fact he was painfully aware of from the increasing demands of his groupie staff. He had arranged his life to avoid the tedium of long term relationships by employing the keenest and furthest away female fans to run various parts of the business, on the basis that he would drop in to 'service' them now and again, but after years of this arrangement, it seemed they all felt they had a claim on him. So it was that what had started as a stable of sexually available workers had turned into a gaggle of nagging wives.

He turned his attention to the new material online under the search term of his own name, a monitoring habit he kept to every Sunday. The usual vitriol from purist vegans, mooning from lonely women, yet more disagreements from aspiring self-professed health gurus. Deftly, he clicked dislike and reported each youtube video that he felt was negative about him. Why didn't people who didn't like him just leave him alone to work? Why did they feel the need to answer back? Didn't they know how much he cared about promoting health? Didn't they understand the sacrifices he made for them every day? What was stopping these envious, unhappy people from living their own lives, rather than trying to interfere with his? Say what you like about Kira, at least she removed them after receiving her dislikes, although she had curtailed his disliking habits by impersonating him for her pop video, repeating the same image of his 'thumbs down' negativity over and over again. She looked particularly fat, of course, and the jacket she had spent a month making for him was far too big for her, making the hideous vision even worse. Ah here she was, popping up on a video after months of saying nothing about him whilst she made cartoons and videos for the pop video she had mercifully abandoned making. What was she saying this time?

"OLD! She says I look old!" Sam exclaimed aloud at Kira's usual scathing affection. He realised that he couldn't really click dislike as she would know she had gotten a reaction and would probably retaliate. The only thing to do with bitches like that was ignore them until they dried up and hopefully died. Sam's heart rate had doubled as he had watched her laughing about what could have caused his sudden aging. He looked in his notebook. Cathy, 25, with the spectacular breasts – she was nearby. "Old indeed!" He called Cathy and invited her to his hotel room. No need for wooing with Cathy, he thought with satisfaction.

Tatania Harris looked at her elderly husband with bristling contempt. “What do you mean you aren’t attending the Whitehouse? You can’t say no to the President. You can’t possibly expect me to go through the paparazzi alone?”

David was seventy four, had been Hollywood royalty since birth as a result of his gorgeous mother’s ascent to stardom in the forties, and was currently recovering from a rather expensive bout of leukemia. “I would rather stay home with the kids. We’ve seen all this before. We don’t need them anymore, Tatania.”

Like hell we don’t, thought Tatania. A still fiercely ambitious Cornish woman in her mid-forties, she retained her drive despite the inevitable fading of her famous looks. She wasn’t maintaining her celebrated rear end for no reason. She had always known, of course, that her husband lacked her drive, but he had once been an excellent career move. He had enabled her to crack the all-important American market and become an A- lister, invited to the Whitehouse, on this occasion, to increase the popularity of a flagging president. “Get a grip, David. Life is too short to waste opportunities.”

“Yes my love, which is why I am not going to waste the evening at a party when I could be enjoying my children before it’s too late.” David sighed. “Feel free to invite someone else. Maybe Clooney would go with you?”

“I don’t want to go with Clooney, I want to go with you, darling.” Tatania purred. David was the established all-American star, not her. She tried in vain, however, David was shaking his head as he stroked the heavy, metal-plated armrests on his expensive dining chair. “Oh for God’s sake, David.” Tatania lost her patience. She tossed her much admired strawberry blonde waves as she rose from the intricately veneered table, gracefully managing to miss banging her now slightly scrawny hips on the edge. Americans had no taste for the comforting British middle aged curve, and so neither did Tatania. Her looks continued to suffer as a result, necessitating many trips to the plastic surgeon.

“You’ll be fine on your own, darling.”

“I suppose I’ll have to be. Maybe I should try it for a bit longer than tomorrow night.”

David looked at her. Her career had not been going quite so well, of late, he knew that. But why was she so bothered? They had more money than anyone deserved, why couldn’t she just make the effort to understand him, for a change? They had more than enough, and time was short. He was 74, and who knew if he was really clear of leukaemia, or worse, another form of cancer? Why couldn’t she just take a few days off the gym and the overwhelming ambition for a change and enjoy some time with him? “If that’s how you feel Tatania, I am sure you can have some time to yourself.” He so wanted her to be happy and stop wanting so much out of life, but if what she needed was time to think, so be it.

Interpreting this as his not caring about her anymore, the huge and fragile ego of the prima donna kicked in. “Are you seeing someone?” Her blood pressure rose as she expressed her passion for her multi-millionaire meal ticket. She donned her best ‘proud but raunchy’ expression and assumed her most impressive ‘wounded wife’ pose by the fireplace.

“Of course not, I just want to stay in. If you really want to spend some time on your own, you should do it. I don’t want you to be unhappy for a single minute. We’ve been through a lot in the last year or

two. I will completely understand if you want a break.” David, desperate to indulge his beloved, dug the unfortunate hole deeper.

“FINE!” Tatania flounced out of the room to scream for the staff. “I need a packer!” she yelled as she ran up the huge staircase. “And the stylist! Tomorrow night is the Whitehouse dinner!”

Unaccustomed to feeling unwanted after years of ensuring quite the opposite, she was not used to the knot sitting uncomfortably somewhere around her waistline. She satisfied herself by bullying the PA, the packing assistant and flirting with the stylist as she prepared for her lonely appearance at the Whitehouse. “Not *my* packing, you idiot, HIS! I am not going anywhere!”

Malcolm kissed Valerie good morning and ran his hand to the small of her back. The Arbory Retreat, as it was now known, had done well that year, thanks to several rallies under some common health problem banners. The Diabetes Festival that Sam had come up with had borne Malcolm sufficient fruit to enable him to enjoy a couple of months off every year, time he valued as time to spend with the delightful Valerie. With an agility not normally associated with a septuagenarian, he rolled over and sprang out of bed when he heard the ringing of the telephone.

Several minutes later, Valerie emerged from the bedroom to see a naked and bewildered Malcolm still standing by the phone. “What’s up?”

“David Harris wants to come here. Indefinitely.” Malcolm was usually so calm, now he just appeared to be stunned.

“The David Harris from the movies?”

“Yes. He says he needs a break. I didn’t even know he was into this kind of stuff.”

“He’s been ill, he will be into every kind of stuff to make him better. It was on the news. My, we have gone up in the world.” Valerie smiled. “I hope you said yes?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Of course I said yes. He doesn’t want anyone to know where he is, though.”

“Best we keep him in the house then, just in case we get any flying visitors.” Malcolm didn’t get too many since Zeb Toledo, the public speaking megastar, had stopped visiting in his helicopter, but you couldn’t be too careful with such an important guest, he surmised. They made up the guest suite in a state of subdued excitement, adding some exuberant foliage plants from the garden in pots for the private courtyard, settling down to their last week of freedom before their honoured visitor was due to arrive, fresh from his holiday in the Maldives.

I’d better touch up my roots, thought Valerie, patting her hair, as she happily went about the house, checking ionisers and mopping tiles.

Alex, the pool boy, was very surprised to find his trousers around his ankles after he was ordered into the house to see Tatania. A weekly visit was usually sufficient to maintain the large pool at the Harris home and he had assumed that he was in trouble when she screamed from the window for him. He had found himself efficiently stripped down to almost nothing and was now wondering if he was, in fact, dreaming. The strawberry blonde head of the famous actress now bobbed rhythmically at his groin. Could this really be happening? Suddenly, just at the point where he was starting to forget

who it was and enjoy it, she stopped. “Now, boy!” She appeared in front of him and flung the gold silk dressing gown open to reveal her still very impressive body, clad only in equally impressive underwear.

“Please, I’d rather...”

“Shut up! Now.” Her rather menacing tone dropped somewhat, to a growl.

Alex blinked. He couldn’t really want to say no to her, could he? He supposed he wasn’t a real man unless he did it, and besides, who would dare to turn her down? ‘Once more into the breach,’ he thought, as he made an obligatory lunge forwards. It appeared to have been the correct course of action.

Sam looked up irritably from his copy of Homes and Garden. This crap wasn’t really his bag, but the marketing masterplan had to work with his age. Aging sucked. He stuck his chin out in mute protest at his homemaking enslavement at the hands of the empire-building money god, and tugged at his beard.

Molly and Happy looked at each other in despair. Would he ever be in the mood? He looked so fed up. They had already tried getting naked. It had failed to distract him from his surly reverie with the interior magazines. “Can we put some music on Sam?” Unaccustomed as they were to actually talking to him, they felt a little nervous.

“Of course you can, I’m not your pa.” Sam snapped. Happy jumped. This was not like Sam at all.

“Have we done something wrong?” Molly’s eyebrows formed a sharp arrow as her eyes widened. The pink plaits, which almost reached her equally pink nipples, heightened the overall effect. Sam noted this, softening somewhat.

“I’m sorry, ladies, I’m just tired of studying this BS. Come here.” He put the glossy magazine down and opened his arms for his beloved chicklets. Molly and Happy were suitably overjoyed.

Aldous removed the headphones and closed the browser on Kira’s company website. “I think that’s as much as we can do today. The call centre reported excellent figures.”

“Oh good. Any idea how the booksales on Raw Scandal 5 are doing?”

“26 a day or so, it seems to be doing very well.” Aldous picked up his jacket.

“Oh good. Maybe I will be rewarded for my efforts in my next life.”

“You’ve devoted a tenth of your life to this guy, you know that? And he still can’t manage an email. Doesn’t it piss you off?”

“It is what it is, Aldous. It makes me feel better, and besides, maybe one day I will want to write about something else and the audience will already be there. This isn’t about trapping him and I’m not really interested in screwing him. I doubt very much I have sufficient skill in that direction. If he wants to talk to me, I’m easy enough to find and he has more than enough determination to figure out how to

do it.” Kira paused, frowning. “Given the unusual circumstances he really has to come and get me if he decides he wants to. There’s no point in chasing somebody who has women coming out of his ears and an obsession with his own freedom, however fake that freedom is, unless he wants to be caught. ”

“Do you think that’s likely?”

“Not really, no, by the time he grows up and smells the roses I will be decrepit. He will probably end up in his dotage watching his very much younger wife screw the gardener. He will enjoy that and feel that he has achieved the American dream. At least he won’t be bored.”

Aldous collapsed in a fit of giggles. This was most unusual, Aldous usually saved his chortling for when Kira wasn’t looking, assuming that her jokes were unwittingly at her own expense. Given that Kira’s jokes tended to be very much witting, this annoyed her slightly, but it was nice to have company now and again and it gave her time to see to her mother.

Kira tried to avoid bridling. “It’s a shame he couldn’t see past the gender issue really, I should have pretended to be a man when I spoke to him. I think he might have preferred it if he had gone for the stadium route rather than this shackled TV career of his. I could have got past the ‘feelings’ issue if I wasn’t so damned hurt, but that’s not really his fault. It’s my personality problem. Still, I don’t suppose you can really tell these things until you try, can you?”

“Well, in a way I suppose it’s a good thing. You would have broken your back for him doing it that way.”

“I’ll probably do that anyway. It’s a bummer being so convinced you are right about something as pigging irrational as this isn’t it? At least I didn’t spend seven years writing up the academic work only to find out he was a plonker.” Kira laughed. “We can’t have the general population knowing how the world really works now can we?”

Tatania’s fury with her indolent and now absent husband seemed only to increase with time. The staff whispered amongst themselves about her increasingly erratic and unpleasant demands on them, and wondered if milder-mannered David would ever come back.

“I WANT LOBSTER! WITH BELGIAN BUTTER! AND A RIPE AVOCADO MASHED FOR MY FACE!” She was screaming from the top of the extravagant staircase. A procession of unsuitable males had been visiting the house, and the associated increase in activity was increasing her appetite to the point that action would soon be necessary if she was to keep up with the public appearances. Worse than that, several shopping trips had resulted in calls from frantic shopkeepers trying desperately to be tactful about their missing stock.

George, the house manager, was a worried man. He put in a call to David.

“Oh right the sex thing, yeah we’ve had that problem before. The stealing is new. Send her to a clinic of some sort for a month. That usually cures it.” David was used to Tatania’s moments of aberration, and remained entirely calm. Given his reputation, this was not entirely surprising. His own exploits had, at one time, been the stuff of legend, and he had attended a few clinics himself.

George did as she was told and Tatania was duly packed off to a remote retreat under the pretext that it was a very exclusive holiday that David had sent as a gift. The staff heaved a collective sigh of relief as they lined up on the driveway to wave her off to Switzerland.

David Harris opened his eyes, wondering where he was for a split second before realising he was in someone else's bed. He looked first to the left, then the right, eyes widening. What the heck had happened last night? The last thing he remembered had been meditating on the porch as the sun went down. He frantically tried to remember what had happened after that, but he could not imagine how he had ended up sandwiched between Malcolm and Valerie in their bed. Surely he hadn't talked them into....?

No, no, he was quite sure he hadn't. Could meditation be so advanced that he would forget this stuff? Gingerly he slid down the bed, under the sheet and out the bottom before wandering to the shower, noting that he still had some clothes on, at least. The mirror told him that he had been crying, but strangely he physically felt better than he had felt in two or three years.

He showered, changed into another set of expensive linen clothing he had purchased, judging it suitable for such a place, and wandered out to the garden to weed. He was amused to find he was enjoying the sheer boredom and simplicity. Would Tatania calm down and let him go home? She had not yet even noticed that she had no way of contacting him and that he was effectively missing. She would be at the nunnery he had chosen for a month, so he figured the storm would break in five or six weeks.

Malcolm appeared, at length, and gave him a gentle wordless hug. He accepted this and continued to weed, wondering at the pace of life at the Arbory. Why wasn't he bored? He was missing the children, right enough. He wondered if he should have them brought here too. Too noisy, he thought, and besides, he had plenty of other houses he could go to if he got bored. No, for now, the Arbory provided a welcome change from the screeching Tatania and he was learning a lot about the joys of introspection. He smiled as he thought about his late father. He would have strongly disapproved of introspection of any kind, a real man's man, he thought.

“Dipshit hippy shite!” exclaimed Aldous. “You have to eat something!”

Kira had stopped eating. She hadn't eaten for a week, so far, and was showing no interest in starting again. “It would be if I was fasting and talking spiritual bullshit Aldous. I just don't want to.”

As long as Aldous had known her, she had always been fat. Even when Kira was thin, she was fat. Aldous preferred flat chested women, and so Kira was fat no matter what she did, not a great incentive for her to particularly care whether people liked her appearance or not. It was a choice between being fat, or having men assault her in the street whilst women abused her for her buxom appearance, and so Kira usually preferred taking the fat option. Eating had the added advantage of shutting her up, she found. A silent Kira was always more popular.

Aldous didn't like Kira all that much, and so the fact she had stopped eating bothered him only because he felt he shouldn't be eating either, since he was also fat. At various times in his life, he had loved her, but he had never liked her.

“Is this because of Sam? Do you think he will like you any better thin?”

Kira laughed. "No, Sam has other reasons to find me repulsive. I still don't want to go out and I still don't brush my hair, I just can't be bothered eating. You've never complained about me eating, why would you complain when I don't?"

Aldous tried another tack. "Why don't you get on and write the academic book?"

"Why don't you go through the email and leave me alone." Kira did not want to talk about the book, of all things. "What's the point in a book when the one person I wanted to read it, won't read it? That's all finished now. He made a fool of me, even if it was by accident. Several times! Fools don't tend to write great works of brilliance." She poured another glass of water and looked out of the window. "The irony is that the company is doing well enough to actually hire him now, and I can't bring myself to do it. Feelings are such messy things, aren't they? It's not his fault, it's mine."

"Who is Leonard Davenport?" Aldous tried to cut through Kira's morose rant.

"God, some millionaire I used to date. What on earth does he want?"

"He says his parents are dead, and he would like to take you out."

"What a little shit he is."

"Why?"

"If his parents are dead, he is now worth twenty seven million pounds. He is dangling a money bag at me," Kira laughed. "He is an absolute tosser, and the money won't last him long, he can't stop gambling. Diamonds, as far as I remember. That's how they made their money."

"Are you going to go?"

"I didn't really like him when I was skint. I do not imagine that has changed now that I'm not. I'm afraid the people who marry for money don't get the easy life they imagine. It's a bit like being overpaid for work. A horrible sick feeling."

"I think you should go."

"Maybe you should go instead?"

"It might take your mind off things."

"It will just make it worse." Kira put the glass down. "Apparently I have a faithful heart. Can you just open the rest of the mail please?"

"Raw Sex Object has won a prize?" Aldous hoped this would lift her mood somewhat. His hopes were dashed.

"So what." Kira angrily twitched at the curtains, much to the amusement of the Bengal cat sitting on the window sill.

"So we are going to New York?" Aldous was sure this would cheer her up.

"What?"

“You, and Raw Sex Object. New York.”

“Have you any idea how much it will cost to take that thing on a plane?” Raw Sex Object, the gift Kira had made for Sam, which he had rejected via his agent, weighed around 40 kilos. “I don’t really like New York City. They get so frightened when you smile.”

Aldous became exasperated “They are paying.”

“You take it.”

“They want a photograph of you with it.”

“God no, smiling and fat in NYC, no thanks.”

“I’ll book a flight. It is next month.” Aldous turned to the keyboard, frustrated by Kira’s misery.

Kira’s voice rose a notch or three. “I DO NOT want to go to NYC, particularly not with that failure of a thing. Don’t you get it? It’s meaningless. How did I even end up in the stupid competition?”

“I entered it.” Aldous knew this meant he was about to get a roasting. He was surprised when Kira’s voice lowered, rather than rising to a scream.

“Right...So I have to go?”

“Yes. I’ll come if you want.”

“OK.” Kira started to cry. Again. Aldous got up from the computer and went to make tea.

Tatania looked up at the belltower and wondered whether it would be possible to somehow get to the top. She had no idea how long she was expected to stay in the silent order of nuns, but in her current hyper-aroused state, the 2 hourly calls to prayer were quite a relief. She didn’t have to think about anything as long as she was in the nunnery, because despite there being no one to talk to, there was always something else to do.

Only the senior nuns seemed to have access to the bell itself, and there seemed little way of volunteering to join the cleaning team, since she was unable to speak to anyone. All instructions were issued via hand gestures, and in her case at least, seemed to involve prayer or scrubbing something suitably humble. Tatania had fixated on the bell simply because it was the only thing available to aspire to.

The mother superior, sensing this, had responded by ensuring that Tatania had endless floors, stonework and threadbare carpet to scrub. She was to have nothing shiny, and nothing was to be done for her. This, she reasoned, was the fastest way to slow down Tatania’s overrunning emotional engine.

‘Humility in all things’ it said in French above the archway. As if you needed reminding, thought Tatania as she wasted another expensive nail on scrubbing yet another expansive grey stone floor. She was feeling faintly murderous towards David, and spent her time thinking of ways to restore her failing ego.

As time went on, however, her mind cleared and she began to enjoy the lack of strategic planning involved in enforced domestic drudgery. Soon she would be home, free to do as she pleased, and although she doubted that she would ever be asked to play a nun, it was all good experience.

Sam smiled as Candy ‘dismounted’ and gently kissed him before making her way to the side of the bed. The hotel room was as sparse as it was drab, and she caught a glimpse of her dyed hair and tired neck in the mirror across from the windows.

“You’re still totally amazing.”

“I know, but I gotta go. Bill will be getting tired of the kids.” Candy rose to put on her silk shirt and the flannel pants she had worn before her arrival. “It was good to see you after all those years. How long has it been?”

“Twenty five years. You look great, you really do.” Sam was well aware he was being insincere, but he revelled in the joy of superficial pretence. It was only when he bumped into his old friends that he realised how well his complex regimen actually worked, since he was more usually in the company of other health enthusiasts. Candy, formerly condescending and out of his league, was, at forty three, a mere 3 on Sam’s objective looks chart.

“Yeah, you haven’t changed at all either.” Candy did not sound nearly as overjoyed about it as Sam.

Kira had now taken to wearing a steel boned corset most of the time, which had changed her shape somewhat alongside her new food-free regime. Aldous was hoping this new feature would not last, as in her upright garb she was more prone to fits of indignant fury. Still fat though, he thought, with his customary smug defeatism. It would be a long time before she looked the same size as the women *he* favoured.

Kira, oblivious and with no intention of favouring Aldous in any way whatsoever, continued with her campaign of self-sculpture. The rise in blood pressure aside, the corsets were rather comforting and made her feel slightly less unloved. She also suspected that forcing her organs back to where they were supposed to be from her usual concertina posture, bending over her sewing or computer, would improve her overall functioning. It certainly appeared to be the case, although not being able to bend down at the waist was a tiny bit of a pain when dealing with her mother or indeed, the garden. This, together with a few litres of water and green tea every day, seemed to be producing the desired effect. Kira had long since given up being 100% raw, it just didn’t suit her either mentally or physically, but she still held to the principle. If in doubt, drink something, if very hungry, make sure there was a vast quantity of raw vegetables to hand. The omission of fruit had brought the curls back to her hair, and she was relatively happy with her appearance by the time the trip to NYC became imminent.

“You do realise all that is pointless?” Aldous watched Kira pluck an eyebrow and fluff up the curls. She had become uncharacteristically feminine of late. He did not like this at all.

“Generally speaking it is a waste of time over which women collude in the hope of getting some time to themselves, yes.” Kira smiled and smoothed down the pencil skirt over the corset. Her breasts looked scarily huge to Aldous, accustomed as he was to Kira’s usual combat trouser/sweater combination to minimise them.

“Why are you bothering? It’s not like anyone will care. You are over forty.” Aldous hoped this would bring the less glamorous, more cynical Kira back to him. She may have been built on a more cherubic scale than most people, but at least she was stimulating company.

“I’m in the mood, Just let me do it, I am usually thinner when I’m in the girly mood. I can’t keep writing books about raw foodists and look crap, can I?”

“You can’t expect to lose 200lb at your age and compete with an eighteen year old in a bikini, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Jeez you don’t know much about sex, do you?” Kira shook her head. “In any case, the principle is to outgrow the object of devotion, not attach yourself to it. I told you, it’s about the work. Shit happens, but work is work. My failed romance has won a prize!”

“Do you think you will get through customs in that thing?”

“We will just have to wait and see, won’t we? Grab your bags, cutesy-wootsy-poppety Aldous dahlink.”

Aldous prayed that Kira would not be this cheerful for the next seven hours, so that he could enjoy his travel videos of Iceland on the flight.

“What do you mean I’m booked on Thursday?” Sam was confused. Annette had slotted a date in his work diary without his noticing. “In NYC? That means I have to travel back tonight? Are you trying to kill me?”

“It was very last minute. It’s a good rate.” Annette was very satisfied with her cut for this appearance. The mysterious Oodle company had been very generous for only a couple of hours work. She rubbed the back of her smartphone as she flexed her fingers.

“It better be. What am I doing?”

“I’ll brief you when you get back to town. It’s an afternoon job. Nothing you can’t handle.”

Sam frowned. He had seen this name ‘Oodle’ somewhere before, but he couldn’t remember where. He tried running a search online. Nothing came up apart from a few random pictures of people he had never seen before. They did not look very healthy. “What do they want me to talk about?”

“You don’t need to talk at all. Just appear. That’s what they wanted. Just a few pictures, that’s all.” Annette adjusted her underwear as she put down the telephone.

Tatania touched down at JFK one hour before Kira. Not that she knew, of course, but she re-entered her reality of pampering and privilege just one hour before Kira was due to leave hers of seclusion and fiercely guarded privacy to make her artistic debut in the USA.

Tatania made her way through the airport, picked up her personal assistant and bodyguard and donned her dark glasses, assuming that the paparazzi had been informed of her arrival. They had not. Tatania

was unsure whether to be happy about this or sad. Lack of attention was not a good sign. She called her house manager.

“Any sign of that bastard David?”

“No, ma’am. He is staying away as instructed.”

“I’m sure you can find him if you really want to, George. Let him know I want to talk to him, will you?” Tatania did her best to sound sweet.

“Certainly ma’am. Will you be back for dinner?”

“After a little shopping. Send the dresser to Vida, will you?” Vida was Tatania’s current favourite in clothing design.

Aldous decided that priming Kira a little couldn’t hurt. The organisers of the award had requested maximum publicity. She had elected to avoid the corset for a day or two, as setting up Raw Sex Object necessitated a lot of bending and she didn’t really want to have to worry about it. Aldous looked at her, twiddling away with the panels, kicking the base into shape. The frame had originally been in his brother’s bedroom.

“What do you think Aldous? Is there any way of altering those spotlights at all?”

“I don’t know. Who do you think will turn up, Kira?”

“Probably nobody, just like the rest of my life. Do you think it’s socially unacceptable to advertise for a sperm donor?” Kira sank to floor level and polished frantically at a small scratch on the wooden platform supporting the artwork.

“Why do you want a sperm donor?”

“I don’t particularly want to do what everyone else does and pretend to have a relationship when I’m in love with someone else.”

“How can you be in love with someone you’ve never met? You would probably hate him.”

“Don’t ask me. I just know it is so, and he doesn’t want me. So is it socially unacceptable to just post an ad saying something like – fancy having a child before it’s too late? Lady, 43, plump, doesn’t care about your hobbies or your good sense of humour. Busy looking after mother so doesn’t want to live with you. Vile family background etc etc. Talking of which, remind me to call the respite unit and check on her, will you?”

“Why don’t you try having a relationship?” Aldous felt strongly that Kira’s more unconventional traits should be discouraged.

“Because that’s gone so well in the past, hasn’t it? Who the fuck would want to be part of my family?” Kira plucked a bit of fluff from the artwork and prepared to bang a panel pin into a loose area of carpet.

Aldous knew this to be the case, but he didn’t want Kira to start crying again, so he tried to change the subject. “Have you any idea who your customers are?”

“I’m not really interested. I’m just glad they seem to like it.” Kira’s clothing line, handbags and hats had sold surprisingly well. “Some of the names seem vaguely familiar, but I’m sure it’s coincidental. There, I think that should do it. Does it look OK from where you are?”

“Yeah it looks OK to me.”

“Great. Ok let’s get changed.” Kira stood back from the screen, cocking her head and adjusting the top spotlights on the panel at the back of the room. She was covered in plaster dust from the floor she had been rolling about on. “The Japanese top I think. Did you pack it?”

“Yep.”

Sam examined his appearance in the mirror. He had managed to deflect the light from the worst of the wrinkles, and ensured that his curls were crisp, shiny and perfect for the photos. At least he was allowed hair for this event, unlike the TV appearances. He was a little annoyed at Annette. He had been unable to find out anything much about the Oodle company, and she had neither asked them nor been able to answer his questions. All he knew, was that he was being paid five figures for a couple of hours at some downtown venue which was apparently very fashionable with journalists.

He grabbed his jacket, didn’t bother with a bag since he still had no idea what he was appearing for, and headed out to the crowded and dark subway. He would normally have walked, but it was hot, and pictures were the only things Annette had mentioned as a requirement.

One hour later he entered the oddly shaped building, grateful for the blast of air conditioning in the cavernous white entrance hall. He was directed towards the ‘main hall’ by a grim faced receptionist, whereupon he entered a large white room filled with a variety of works of art and a somewhat stranger variety of people. He scoped the room for someone recognisable, and could find no one. One area had a crowd of excited Japanese with cameras, another had some very serious arty Scandinavian types, still another had some rather overdressed people seemingly trying to outdo each other for attracting attention. He tried scrutinising these.

“Oh my God, it’s Lady Julep.” Sam muttered audibly, “And Big G Minor.” He spotted several more greater and lesser entertainers clustered around one object. It slowly dawned on him, but he couldn’t see all of it so he went closer to be sure. Yes, indeed, it *was* Raw Sex Object, Kira’s gift that his agent had rubbished. The bitch had actually paid him for coming here. Sam supposed he would have to be nice to her in front of these potentially useful new friends. She must be some kind of crazy control freak. He had always had that impression of her. Thank God she was usually in a different country. He looked around the room to see if he could spot her.

Aldous, stuck in a mannerly chitchat with the gallery owners, spotted Sam just before Kira entered the room, having finally made it into her brown Japanese Kimono top. She still hadn’t remembered to brush her hair, he sighed. Tangled brown waves everywhere and no makeup at all. She looked taller than usual, however, thanks to some platform wedges. Aldous wondered if he really should drag her back through the door and brush it for her, and then decided not to. She was hopeless. He extricated himself from the oddly crude American version of polite conversation and joined her.

“Who are all these people? Why are they here?” Kira looked confused.

“Don’t you recognise the clothes?”

“Some of them, oh yeah that blonde bit has one of my handbags. The big black dude over there is in that jacket I made for Sam. Are these all customers?”

“Haven’t you seen the videos?”

“What videos?”

“They’re musicians. Quite famous, some of them. Your clothes have been in a few videos.”

“Really? I should put my prices up.” Kira did not smile, but seemed a little more relaxed. Aldous looked over her shoulder and spotted Sam, who was staring in horror at her bottom.

“Ah I see the guest of honour is here. Go and talk to Rivron and I’ll be back in a minute.”

Aldous greeted Sam. “She will be ready in a few minutes.”

“I take it you are the Oodle company.” Sam looked miserable.

“Correct. The gallery owners wanted a few pictures of the muse and artist together. Come and meet Kira.” Aldous smiled to himself. He wasn’t sure how Kira would take it, but he hoped it might resolve things once and for all.

Sam allowed himself to be led over and stood behind Kira as she chatted with Rivron, the gallery owner, a tall thin bespectacled man with a nasty purple silk tie. Aldous tapped her arm. Sam was transfixed as she swung round, blue white skin and a wide face to match the huge hands. To his surprise she looked horrified.

“What are you doing here?” She looked at Aldous. “Did you do this? He isn’t a whore, Aldous.” She looked back at Sam. What a strange looking man, she thought. I wonder why I find him so compelling? She cocked her head, unsmiling, unblinking.

“You didn’t know? You look amazing, by the way.” Sam did his best to go into oily mode, since his fee was rather huge. He held out his arms, offering a hug.

Kira knew this was not the case. She was not 21, a hippy, vain, or stupid. “Shut up, shut up. That shirt is hideous. Take it off this instant. You can wear this.” Oblivious to the crowd, she took off the kimono top and held it out to him. The Japanese, thinking this was the beginning of the event, started to applaud and take photographs. The rest of the crowd turned to witness the small, rotund and incredibly pale woman waving her very expensive top at Sam.

“I like this shirt.” Sam looked annoyed and paused, noting the paint splattered mammaries. The paint was a variety of shades. “You could kill someone with those. You have good skin, you should exfoliate.”

“Alas I cannot kill anyone with them, it’s been tried. Hurry up and put this on. I will find something else.” Kira’s sour yet quizzical expression did not change. “Did you bring the velvet, Aldous?”

“I did indeed.” Aldous smiled. This was like watching the Discovery channel. Would the lions mate or kill each other in the attempt? Sam took the top.

“You want me to put this on here?” Regaining awareness of the now fascinated crowd, he looked at Aldous in panic. The funny little woman was starting to look cold under the blast from the air conditioning unit. Either that or she was very pleased to see him. “What do you see in me anyway?”

“You would have made more money if you ran away, but you didn’t. It doesn’t mean I approve. You’ve worked very hard. Why were you so horrible to me? You’ve wasted years of my time, not to mention money.” Kira still looked rather challenging for Sam’s taste, so he elected to say nothing and looked at Aldous.

“Duck behind Raw Sex Object, there is room and the crowd will love it.” Aldous was always helpful. “I’ll take the shirt.”

Kira went to the backroom of the gallery to put on her brown velvet alternative and the audience exclaimed and giggled as they knocked back yet more wine. When she emerged, she was rubbing her head. The unkempt waves now looked almost styled into a curly heart shape. The gnome like roundness was now rather more comfortingly concealed beneath dark brown cotton velvet.

“Can you fluff up his hair a tad, Aldous? Yes that’s better. OK we are ready now.” Kira had managed to restyle Sam in under 3 minutes, all told.

The professional photographer took the obligatory shots of artist and muse standing with Raw Sex Object and the audience politely applauded.

“May I have the camera? And can we have the lights down apart from the spots?”

Gosh, thought Aldous, Kira is assertive today. “Can you sit inside the object please?” Kira tweaked the positioning of the object to cuddle Sam as he sat cross legged on the mat. The lighting brought down, Kira lay on the floor and started to take shots of Sam inside her artwork.

“Think cold and heartless thoughts for me?”

“I don’t do cold and heartless.” Sam frowned.

“You do now. This is my gig, not yours. Think Caligula rather than Dionysus, for once.” Kira took shots continuously, rolling around and moving up and down to get the required angles.

Half an hour later Kira was filthy from the gallery floor, but had taken about a hundred shots of Sam with the object. The photographer transferred them to computer and the lights were brought back up for the audience.

Sam, now uncomfortably stiff, longed for the cover of darkness. Was it possible that *anyone* could make his dick hard, just by looking at him for long enough? Why was he so turned on? He thought about dead birds for a few minutes, staring at a small spot on the floor until he judged it safe to get up. He joined the crowd as a slide show of photographs flashed on the huge display screen.

“I’m beautiful.” Sam was delighted. The audience duly clapped. “I really like this top.”

“Keep it, as long as I can burn that shirt.” Kira did not look at him, and she still did not smile. Sam did not know how to handle this at all.

“Thank you. What does the back mean? Love immemorial? Am I the Sam in big letters?”

“People I should forget forever. Love is just wasted energy if you happen to be me. Fortunately I have learned how to productively redirect it from my years of experience.”

Sam felt strangely hurt. “It’s never wasted.”

“Of course it is. You don’t give a shit about me, and that’s entirely normal. Even my own mother doesn’t. I’m the one that’s weird. It’s fine. It’s just normal.” Kira turned to address the audience and patrons of the event.

“Thank you so much for the opportunity and prize. Thank you, everyone for coming, and thank you for wearing my stuff. I really appreciate it. Please enjoy the rest of the wine.” She turned to leave. Sam looked at Aldous.

“You can go now, if you want. Or stay and do some networking. She won’t come back in. She’s very timid, and she’s probably in tears. She does that angry thing to protect herself.”

“OK.” Sam felt as if he had been punched in the face. These crazy British people were far too efficient. “Can I have my shirt back?”

“No. She wasn’t kidding about burning it. Thank you for coming.” Aldous shook his hand, and went the way of Kira, out from the back of the gallery.

Sam took a moment to gather his thoughts before introducing himself to Big G Minor, a man who would definitely benefit from some health advice. A few of Kira’s admirers shook his hand and chatted for a while. Sam carefully took time to engage with a few of the recognisable ones, glancing at the door Kira and Aldous had gone through, hoping that they would reappear. After an hour, he realised that they would not. He felt rather abandoned. It wasn’t as if they were friends of his. He looked again at the artwork. Pink imprisoned chaos for romance on the spring panel, Conventional order and lush green on the summer panel. Off centred tradition for the autumn panel and Grey Gothic stonework for the winter panel. The story of any relationship told in wool and surprisingly ordered design. Quite smart, he guessed, for a crazy person.

He wondered briefly what she would have done if he had accepted it. It was too late now. There was no way of ‘unhurting’ her, and no real reason to anyway. It wasn’t even as if she was even cute.

“You never mentioned that Raw Sex Object wouldn’t be coming back with us.” Kira pouted as she and Aldous tolerated the tedious movie on the way home.

“The gallery want to display it for six months. They will ship it back, don’t worry.”

“As long as they don’t try to sell it.”

“Are you worried that dear Sam will propose and you won’t have it? You might as well get some money out of the thing.” Aldous was feeling waspish.

“No, no. I just wanted to leave it to him in my will, along with the beginnings of the academic piece on the netbook.”

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