

BIRTHDAY GIRL

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9:18 p.m., two days before Lisa's birthday and five after they returned from Sheekys, Kings Cross Station, where Lisa and Peter sit waiting for Carrie to arrive. When they had arrived from holiday, Peter had difficulty opening his door from the pile of letters; all from friends of his father who had heard about his performance; all asking or demanding to know whether he would now be performing, and, if so, when; all handwritten, although the styles ran the gamut from ornate calligraphy text to drunken scrawl. Peter replied to them all with variations on one letter, making them different enough so that when they were compared (not if. He knows his Dad's friends pretty well) there are enough differences to make it seem like a new letter.

"Well, where's the train?"

Peter glances at the electronic notice board, "Still says 'delayed'."

"It's been saying 'delayed' for two hours." Lisa replies, arms folded, glaring down the platform.

"I know, I know."

"Fucking GNER*! So, what's the excuse they're giving?" *=Great North Eastern Railways

"Cracked rails." Peter replies.

"Announcement for passengers awaiting the 7:13 GNER train from Edinburgh. This service will shortly be arriving on Platform 7. GNER apologises for the delay, which is due to essential track maintenance." The message repeats over the tannoy twice more.

"Finally!" Lisa gets up off the chilly plastic seats, "Let's go."

Half an hour later, the train pulls up and dozens of passengers emerge onto the platform, emptying the train in waves. The sounds of dozens of feet slap and click on the concrete, the wheels of trolleys squeaking. Carrie emerges from the throng, dragging a case behind her on its wheels. Her long auburn hair hangs over her shoulders, a dark red T-shirt and blue jeans all covered in a long black coat, a pair of thin-framed glasses on her pert nose. She throws her arms around Lisa, "Hiya, sis!" she grins, "Hi, Peter. How's she been treating you?"

"Fine." He takes hold of the case as they walk off, "And where's my hug? I'm feeling significantly left out."

"You're not family." She walks closer to him, leaning on him. "And, besides, it would make sis mad if I hugged her boyfriend. She still hasn't forgiven me when one of her old boyfriends went out with both of us."

"And I'm not likely to if you keep making those moon eyes at my current boyfriend."

Carrie pouts, "Awww, I never get to have any fun." She winks at Peter and peels herself off him as they make it through the Station concourse to Peter's tiny car. Carrie looks dubiously at her case, and then at the car. "Are you sure this'll fit in there? I mean, no offence but..."

"It'll fit. The boot's bigger than it looks. Get in, and I'll sort out the bag."

“Hey, you can’t talk about my sister like that.”

Peter glances quickly at Lisa, “I wouldn’t dare.” He pulls the bag to the boot and opens it up, before heaving the bag up and into the boot with a grunt. “God, what have you got in here? Gold bullion?”

“Just a few essentials. I am down here for a couple of weeks, you know.”

“And if you get this place? What are you going to do then? You can’t stay on Lisa’s couch forever.”

“Too bloody right.”

“Well,” Carrie flutters her eyes at him, “I was hoping some big, strong magician would offer me a place to stay.”

Lisa’s eyes narrow; her jaw tightens, but she says nothing.

“And if I ever meet any big, strong magicians, I’ll let them know you’re interested.”

“Awww, I hoped you’d know, being a magician and all.”

“Amateur only.” Peter replies, slowly making their way through London, “I don’t have much to do with the professionals.”

“Yet.”

Carrie swivels attention to Lisa immediately. “Yet? You mean you might start doing it for real? For money?”

Peter glances at Lisa. “Maybe. We’re considering it at the moment, seeing how some things work out first.”

Carrie nods, falling silent for a little while as they crawl through London traffic, before she giggles.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m just imagining sis curling up in a box to avoid the saw.” She giggles again. Lisa opens her mouth.

“*Secret. Remember?*”

“*I wasn’t going to tell her.*” “You think I couldn’t do it?”

“I can’t see you letting yourself look remotely helpless for the public, sis, that’s all.”

“We’ll see.”

“You’re upcoming milestone birthday isn’t making you sensitive, is it?”

Lisa scowls and slumps down in her seat, arms folded. The rest of the ride home is carried out in sullen silence. Peter drops Carrie and Lisa off, struggling with Carrie’s bag, before driving back home. Carrie lifts her case up, swaying up the stairs, the case clumping down on each step. Lisa opens the door, ushering Carrie into the lounge, where an air mattress lies on the floor by the sofa, covered with a pair of blankets, pillows piled at one end. “Sleep well, Carrie.”

“What? It’s only 11?”

“And you’ve got to recover from your train trip, and I’ve got to get up for work tomorrow. You can stay up if you like, but keep it down.”

“Aww, does de poor old lady need her beauty sleep?”

“No. The ‘poor old lady’ needs some quiet time so she doesn’t explode and throttle her bratty little sister.”

“Oh.” Carrie looks up at Lisa, “You wouldn’t hit a girl with glasses, would you?”

“No.” Lisa sighs. Carrie beams, “But I might strangle her. So be quiet and go to sleep.”

“Yes, Lisa.” Carrie replies, looking down at her shoes, “You mean old lady.”

Lisa ignores her, closing her door and falling asleep to dreams of showing Carrie what real magic is all about.

The next morning, she wakes to her second alarm, still not properly awake and stumbles towards the shower. “Keep it down, will ya?” Carrie mumbles from the airbed, “Some ‘f ‘s ‘re tryin’ sleep.”

Lisa says nothing as she walks past. The shower hisses, hot water pelting into her face, waking her up properly. She washes, rinsing her hair out and emerges, knocking on Ola’s door, leaving Carrie asleep on the floor. “Wakey, wakey.” Lisa says softly, “If you don’t get in the shower before Carrie, she’ll get all the hot water.” Ola is up and in the shower within a couple of minutes. Lisa smiles to herself as she towels down her hair. *Make fun of me, will you, sis? Guess you’ll have to choose early mornings or cold showers.*

A breakfast of toast and cereal, and some muffled complaints from the sofa about the noise, and Lisa’s off to work. She dearly wishes she could stay long enough to hear Carrie take her shower, knowing that after two showers the water goes ice cold within a couple of minutes, but settles for a slight smile and a good deal of satisfied imagining.

Greg is currently off work, suffering from stress (which was a lot less than he’d be suffering from if he was still at work when Lisa had returned), so things had returned to their normal level of chaos and panic. Apparently his computer had taken an extreme dislike to him and, he claimed, would do things without him doing anything, things like change all his settings overnight, or convert his documents to Swahili. Of course, everyone knew it was someone, or, more likely, everyone in programming getting their own back on him, but Greg wasn’t at his best with computers and had requested time off. He’d been granted it, and a warning had been sent round programming threatening stiff penalties if the harassment of Greg didn’t stop when he returned. As Peter had been on holiday for most of the trouble, he’d escaped the warning. That’s the good news. The bad news is that Tracy is getting worse. Not workwise, at least not that Lisa can see, but she’s quieter and squirrellier than she was before the trip to Sheekys, doing her work, but not doing anything else. And, as she expects, when Lisa asks her what’s wrong, Tracy denies anything being wrong.

Lisa pretends not to see the brown internal mail envelope as it passes around the office. *Leaving that a bit late, aren’t they? It’s my birthday tomorrow, and...* She smiles, *Idea!* She opens up the on-line meeting program, highlights Tracy and starts to type.

‘Hey. Fancy a drink tomorrow? I’m having a little celebration of surviving this long Wanna come?’

‘I’m not really good for parties at the moment.’

‘That’s fine I’m sure my little sister will liven it up enough for anyone’

‘You really want me to come?’

‘Course. Why else would I ask?’

‘To make me feel better.’ Another message instants later, ‘Not that there’s anything wrong.’

‘Of course not. You’ll come then?’ She sends another message, ‘No isn’t an acceptable answer, btw ;-)’

‘:-) All right, I’ll come. But you’ll regret it.’

‘Threatening the boss isn’t a good idea, Tracy. You will enjoy yourself, clear?’

‘Clear, ‘boss’.’

Lisa closes the program. *Well, that’s my good deed for the day. I hope it balances the bad karma I’m going to get for Carrie.* She sends another message to Peter, much shorter.

‘Tracy’s coming out with us tomorrow. Sort it out. :-*’

‘Yesh, Mishtresh. Igor will short it for you.’

‘Good Igor *patting you on the head*’ she closes the program, smiling to herself. *He’s starting to get well trained. Maybe I should get him a collar.* An image forms of Peter wearing the collar, but is swiftly replaced by one of her wearing it, covered in fur and looking decidedly canine. *Maybe not.*

Work comes to a close too late, as always, even though she leaves on time and suffers the Tube home. *Ugh. Lovely. Hot weather and lots of crowded, sweaty people. Just what I need.* Fortunately, it’s only a couple of stops, but it still leaves her in less than good humour.

“Hey, sis!” Carrie calls as the door opens, “How was work?”

“Fine. You had a good day lazing around here?”

“Fine, fine. You could have warned me about the shower, though. I almost froze my tits off before it warmed up.”

Lisa turns, hiding her smile from Carrie. “My, my, such language.” She turns in time to see Carrie sticking her tongue out, “Sorry. I’m always first in, so it’s got plenty of hot water.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know, you’re a morning person and I’m not. So what we having for dinner tonight?”

“Depends. Who’s cooking it?”

“I thought we’d be going out.” Carrie replies, sounding a little petulant that they’re not.

“You want to pay, Carrie, be my guest. Besides, we’re going out tomorrow, and if you get this place, we’ll go out and celebrate that, too.”

“I’m a student, sis. Money and me ain’t exactly on close terms at the moment, so unless you want

pizza...”

“So we stay in and cook, fine. When Ola gets back, I’ll see how she feels. You haven’t become a vegetarian at uni and not mentioned it, have you?”

“Pfft. Not a chance. And now you can tell me all about you and Peter and this magic act you’ve got.”

“Carrie...”

“You will tell me, sis.”

“Why?”

“Because otherwise, Peter gets to see these.” She grins, holding up some photos of Lisa as a baby and toddler, all of them less than flattering to the subject, at least after a gap of nearly thirty years.

“Give me those, Carrie.” Lisa lunges forward. Carrie skips back, dangling the pictures tauntingly.

“Catch me first.” She grins, and trips onto the airbed. “Whoops.” She tumbles backwards, the photos flying from her hands as Lisa pounces, pinning her on the airbed. Carrie struggles and manages to slip one hand free, digging her fingers into Lisa’s side and tickling her until she lets go, giggling and gasping. Carrie smiles, and continues tickling her, “You give?”

“I give.” Carrie stops tickling, “And you’re going to regret that.”

“Sure, I am, sis, sure, I am. Now talk.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything. What else?” She grins, “Start with how you found out he was a magician? Where he gets his stuff from? Why you’re going to become an act? And don’t spare details.”

Lisa sighs, “OK. I found out he was a magician at the office Christmas party.” Carrie’s eyebrows shoot up. “He works in my company, and he was doing card tricks. He did some tricks on me, when everyone else was at the bar, and asked if I wanted to see some of his stuff. I said yes.”

“Hold on, you mean, when you brought him up at Christmas...”

“I’d known him about a week and a half.”

“So did he get you in the box then, or build up to it?”

“He cut me in half that night.”

“And he seems such a sweet boy, too. So where’s all this stuff come from? And have you christened any of it yet?”

“It’s all inherited. His dad was a magician, and when he and Peter’s mum died, he inherited the lot. And it’s none of your bloody business if we’ve christened it or not.”

Carrie beams, “Which means you have. Come on, sis, ‘fess.”

“No.”

“‘Fess up. I haff vays ov making you talk.” She holds up her wiggling fingers.

“Sod off, Carrie. What was the other question? Not the one about my sex life.”

“Um, oh, yeah, why are you becoming an act?”

“Well, it’s not really our choice.” She pauses, “It’s a condition of his parents’ will, I think, or something like that. Anyway, he has to perform two shows a year or he loses some of his legacy or something.”

“He’s got a legacy? You mean he’s rich?”

“He says not that rich. But he owns his flat, so if he sells that, he’ll definitely be loaded.”

“About time you hooked up with someone decent.”

“Like you’re one to talk. Who’s this magician who vanished my sweet little sister and put you in her place, anyway?”

“Oh, he calls himself ‘Mephisto’, but he’s really called Mike. But the ‘great Mike’ doesn’t have the same ring to it. He’s a professional, and I’m his main assistant.”

“‘Main’ assistant?”

“Yeah, he’s got a bunch of us.”

“How’d you get the job?”

“I was working at a magic club in Exeter, covering someone who’d got married and was off on honeymoon with a regular. She came back, but the magician, Jim, told Mike about me and he needed an assistant and we got on and he hired me.”

“And how old would this Mike be?”

“You’re not my mother, you know, sis.”

“How old?”

“He’s fifty-something.”

Lisa’s eyebrows shoot up. “And you’re going out with him?”

“Not really. He sort of goes out with all of us, and we go out with each other. I don’t fuck him, if that’s what you mean.”

“Sorry. I...”

“We just, you know, play around. He’s a dirty old man, but he’s so polite and upfront about it, and he’s got really good hands. And the rest of the girls taste lovely.” Lisa colours brightly. “Come on, sis.” She leans in, licking her lips, “Don’t tell me you never experimented at uni.”

“Do...”

“Mum and Dad know? What do you think? You know dad’s an old-fashioned mundy about these things. It’s bad enough I’m working as a magician’s assistant, ‘exposing myself for public titillation’, etc. If he knew what happens after the show, he’d have a coronary.”

“I know how he feels.” Lisa mutters. “Won’t you miss all that when you come down here?”

“That’s why I’m looking for a magician down here. Duh.”

“Right. Well, if you’re done freaking me out, what are we going to do about dinner?”

“I dunno.”

“Fine. Well, unless your cooking abilities have improved at university, I think I’d better do it. Let me up.”

Carrie rolls off. “So what are we having?”

“Butterfly chicken, Cajun style. How much pepper do you like?”

The evening passes quickly, Carrie, Lisa and Ola spread out in front of the TV, arguing about what to watch (as guest, Carrie gets outvoted more often than not), although Lisa retreats to her room during Eastenders. Carrie, as guest, doesn’t have to help with washing up, which pleases her greatly, although she does get ‘recruited’ to put the dishes away.

Lisa’s birthday dawns clear and bright and way too early. Again she and Ola manage showers before Carrie, although this time Lisa sticks a post it on the door to warn her about the water. As a treat, Ola cooks breakfast, the smell of bacon and eggs waking Carrie up, which requires more eggs to be broken, sizzling on the pan. Lisa leaves quickly, missing the first tube by twenty seconds and flips through the free paper impatiently as she waits for the next, a bag of cakes in her hand. *I still don’t see why I’m buying stuff. This is my birthday I’m supposed to get presents, not bring them.*

Two stops later, she’s at work and things proceed as normal, with the birthday card arriving on her desk sometime during a staff meeting (which is not the best way to spend any part of your birthday). The card is one of the bright kind, the ones that look like children’s birthday cards, complete with a badge, which Lisa is forced to wear by her colleagues. The messages are the usual array of bad puns and worse jokes about her age, mixed with a few simple ‘happy birthdays’.

Half an hour before she normally leaves, Lisa messages Tracy and Peter, reminding them when and where her party is to be held (sometime around 7, at Tony’s), and letting Tracy know how to get there. She sends off another message, which reads: ‘Off to the pub for some drinks first. Join me.’ Peter’s message continues, ‘Or else!!!’.

Both end up in the Three Pigeons halfway through Lisa’s first beer, about twenty minutes after Lisa. “What kept you?”

Peter looks at Tracy, “Do you want to tell her?”

“What?”

“You know, about us?”

“Us? What are you talking about?”

“You know, how we’re going out.”

“But, Lisa, I, we never...” Tracy stammers, looking helplessly between them.

“Peter, leave her alone. I know you’re a daft sod, but Tracy doesn’t realise how insane you are, so back off.”

“No problem.” He raises his hands, “Now, what am I getting?”

Lisa looks down at the bottle. “Another one of these.”

“Tracy?”

“Coke, please. Diet.”

Peter walks to the bar, and gets served quickly, *Must be magic. No one gets served that quick at a bar.* Lisa thinks.

“So, what’s the plan?” he asks, giving Tracy her Coke, Lisa her beer and another bottle for himself. “I presume we’re not going to get slaughtered here and then go to Tony’s?”

“That’s not the plan. The plan is: a couple of quiet drinks, go home, get changed, go out, have a good time, go home, go to bed, wake up on Monday.”

“But, tomorrow’s Friday?”

“I know, but Peter and me have the day off so we can celebrate to our heart’s content. And we’re going to be doing that at home, after the meal, so you don’t have to worry about it.” She adds, as Tracy looks worried. Tracy relaxes. Lisa glances down at her watch, “And I think we’d better get going after this, don’t you. It’s going to take me a while to get Peter presentable.” Tracy smiles a little at that. Lisa drains the bottle. “We’ll see you there, Tracy. Unless you’d like to come back to mine for total chaos and some girl time.”

“Gee, you make it sound so enticing.”

Lisa turns to glare at him. Peter shrugs and becomes very interested in his beer.

“No, that’s all right. I’ll see you at the restaurant. I need to get changed anyway.”

“Well, you’re more than welcome. You and Carrie are about the same size, I’m sure she’s got something that’d fit.”

“I don’t want to be a both...”

“Good. It’s decided then. Let’s go. See you there, Peter.”

“What? Did I miss something?”

“Usually. It’s simple. Tracy’s coming home with me, we’re all going to the restaurant and we’ll meet you there. See, simple.”

Peter rolls his eyes, “Try not to be too late, Lise.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Four girls in one flat, getting ready? That’ll be a good couple of hours, won’t it?”

Lisa looks across at Tracy. “Remind me what I see in him, could you?”

“I, well, he’s, I...”

“Leave her alone, Lisa. She knows I’m insane, but she hasn’t learned about you yet.”

Lisa sticks her tongue out and swats him. “Get out, Peter, while you still can.”

Peter upends his bottle. “No problem, Lise. See you at Tony’s sometime tonight.” Lisa picks up the empty bottle, brandishing it at him, “I’m going, I’m going!”

“You weren’t really going to…”

“Don’t be daft. It’s just a bit of fun. He knows I won’t hurt him.” She looks at Tracy, and winks, “Unless he asks me too, anyway.”

“What?”

Lisa grins, “Just kidding. Honest.”

“Oh. Why do you want me to come with you now?”

“Oh, that. I just want it so everyone’s met up before dinner, and I want to make sure you get there ok.”

“Oh. That’s nice of you.”

Lisa grins, “It is, isn’t it?” she finishes the beer, “Now let’s go.” She sets the bottle on the table and grabs Tracy’s hand, pulling her towards the door.

They arrive at Lisa’s shortly. “Come in.” she opens the door, “Carrie? Ola?” Silence. “If you’re planning something, get it over with, I’ve got someone with me and we need to get changed.” Carrie stands up from behind the sofa, her hair brushed and washed to a sheen, a short red dress matching her lipstick, thin straps over her shoulder, the dress covering her from her thighs to her chest.

“Jeez, you’re a killjoy, you know that, sis?”

“My birthday, my party, my house, for that matter, so my rules.”

“My house, too.” Lisa turns to Ola as she comes out of her bedroom in a long white dress with flowing sleeves. She’s wearing the ebony earrings Peter gave her for Christmas, a silver necklace hanging from her throat.

“Still my birthday, though.” Lisa replies with mock sulkiness.

“Yes, it’s still your birthday. Can you blame us for making a fuss?”

Lisa continues pouting, “No.”

“Now, who’ve you brought back? If it was Peter, you wouldn’t care what happened to him.”

“And we did have some great ideas what we could do with him, too.” Carrie adds, dangling a pair of handcuffs from her finger.

“Tracy, these two are my flatmate, Ola,” Ola beams, “and the lunatic over there is my little sister, Carrie.”

“Hi.” Tracy manages to squeak.

“Carrie, get that smirk off your face right now. Tracy’s coming with us, but she needs something to wear.

You and she are about the same size. Got anything?" Carrie looks Tracy up and down.

"I think we can do something for Cinderella. Can I borrow your room, sis?"

"I need that to change in. Ola?"

"Hm?"

"Can they change in your room?"

"Oh, sure." She steps aside, "Don't steal the lipstick."

"As if. Come on, Tracy. Time to make you look gorgeous."

"Think I'd better change, too. You already look gorgeous, O, so I guess you can relax for a bit." Lisa steps into her room and pulls a zipper out of her pocket with a smile. *No reason not to make this easy, is there?* She strips naked and pushes the zipper into her breastbone and pulls it down, stepping out in a dark green dress, with a dipping neckline. Pendant earrings spin from her ears as she turns. Her lips are painted a dark red, her eyes made up and her hair gleaming like hot copper. "That'll do." She picks up the skin at her feet. *Hmmm. What do I do with this? I'll need it later so I can get out of this at Peter's, but it won't fit in my bag, and...* her eyes sparkle as she smiles, *I could leave it there, I suppose.* She opens the door to her wardrobe, revealing the portal on the inside door and pokes her head through, "Peter?" No answer. She can hear the shower running, though. *Right.* She climbs through the hole in the wall that leads back to her room. She folds her skin up and places it under the pillows on the bed. *That should be safe. And it'll be a nice surprise for him, too.* She steps back into her room and fingers the light sabre. *Naaah. Not enough time.* She shoves it into her drawer.

She waits ten minutes and steps out. Ola looks her up and down and whistles. "How come it takes me an half-an-hour to look half as good as you look in ten minutes?" Ola asks.

"Oh, Peter taught me a few tricks his mum used to get ready quickly." *She must have done, or something like it, so it's not really lying, is it?* "And you look gorgeous. If I didn't know Peter better, I'd be worried about him seeing you."

"Thank you, roomie. How long do you think we've got until your sister's finished?"

"Depends what she has in mind. I'd say another twenty minutes at least. I'll check, then we can book the taxi." She knocks on the door.

"What?"

"How long're you two going to be in there, Carrie? We need to know what time to get the taxi here."

"Shouldn't be too long. We're almost done here." Lisa thinks she hears a giggle at that.

"Twenty minutes enough?"

"Sure. We'll be out and dazzling by then."

Fifteen minutes later, Carrie and Tracy emerge, Tracy in a little black dress, with small silver star earrings. She looks a little pale, trembling slightly. "All set?"

“Uhm, what about my, uhm, clothes?” Tracy asks, “I can’t leave them here.”

“Sure you can.” Carrie smiles, “We can pick it up when we leave Peter and sis to ‘celebrate’.” She grins and winks.

“Apart from having her mind in the gutter, as usual, she’s right, Tracy. There’s no reason you can’t leave them here and pick them up later.”

“Oh, right.” A horn sounds.

“Just leave them in my room.” Ola offers. “You can pick them up when we come back. Now let’s go.”

“Agreed.” Carrie opens the door. “Sis, as you’re not going to be using it, can I have your bed tonight?”

“Yeah, why not? Just don’t break anything.”

“No problem.”

“And no peeking through my stuff, either, Carrie.”

“Spoilsport!” she sticks her tongue out.

The taxi ride is relatively quick. Lisa spends most of it squeezed into and corner beside Carrie, with Tracy on the other side, Ola sitting across from them. For five minutes, they try their best to ignore the cabbie as he waxes lyrical on where they’re going, how they look, the state of modern Britain and half a dozen other subjects.

“Oh, just **shut up and drive**, will you?” Carrie snaps, leaning on Tracy as she pushes herself forward. Amazingly, he does, looking like he’s chewing a wasp as he scowls into the mirror. The journey seems to be quicker after that, but whether it’s the quiet, or the fact that the driver seems to have his foot stuck on the accelerator half the time isn’t clear.

The cab screeches to a stop outside Tony’s. Carrie gathers up money to pay him and shoes the others into the restaurant. The cab screeches off, numerous obscenities drowned out by the squealing of tires.

“What did you say to him to get him so pissed off, Carrie?”

“No idea. I think I caught something about ‘bossy women’.” She shrugs, “Guess he didn’t like me telling him to be quiet.”

“I guess not.” She leads them into the restaurant.

“Ah, Lisa, you look wonderful.” Tony beams as he walks over, kissing her cheek. “Even more radiant than when I last saw you.”

“Old friend, sis?”

Lisa colours.

“Old friend of Peter’s.” Tony replies, “Who is waiting to be dazzled by the beauty on display here. If you would be so kind as to follow me?”

“I like him.” Ola smiles, whispering to Lisa, “Do you think he’s taken?”

“Down, girl. You can hunt later.”

Tony leads them to a large circular table, where Peter is already sitting, in a clean shirt. Lisa sits down beside him, Carrie on her left, then Ola and finally Tracy on Peter’s right. “Would you like a menu?” he asks Lisa.

“Nope. We’re entirely in your hands, Tony. Surprise us.” Peter flashes her a grin, while the others look completely shell-shocked.

“Of course. I shall return with your wine directly.”

“You’ll be serving us?” Ola asks, smiling up at him. Lisa rolls her eyes.

“But of course, madam. Could I leave the arrangements for such a gathering in the hands of another?”

“Tony, you don’t have to lay it on so thick, you know?”

“Sorry, Peter. I’ll be back in a bit with the wine.”

Ola looks disappointed. “I was enjoying that.” She mutters.

“Don’t worry, Ola, we’ll get you a boy toy later, once we ditch these two.” Carrie smiles.

Lisa rolls her eyes. *This has all the makings of a loooooong meal.*

Tony returns with the wine and offers it to Lisa to taste. She nods and he pours.

“OK, sis. Presents now, or eat first?”

Lisa glances across at Carrie, her eyes shining. “Let’s get it over with. I know you’ve brought something bad.”

“Would I?” Carrie asks, looking all offended innocence, apart from the twinkle in her eyes. She hands over a thin black box about a foot long with a red bow tied around it.

Lisa takes the box and looks up at her. “This is something that can be opened in polite company, isn’t it, Carrie?”

“Why? Whatever do you think it could be, sis?”

“It had better be.” Lisa opens the box. And pulls out a pair of handcuffs, covered in pink fur. She arches an eyebrow at Carrie.

“What? I’m sure you and Peter will get a lot of fun out of those.”

“Where’s the key?”

“What do you...”

“The key, Carrie. It’s not in the box.”

Carrie pouts, digging into her small red leather handbag. “Really? My mistake.” She pulls out the key, “Here you go.”

“Thank you soooo much.”

“You might like these a bit better.” Ola hands over a small box, which opens onto a pair of glittering stud earrings.

“Oooh. These are lovely, O.” she leans across Carrie, kissing Ola on the cheek.

“Hey, how come I don’t get a kiss?”

“You’re lucky not to get a smack.”

“Uhm, I haven’t got anything. I, oh.” Tracy yelps as Peter pushes a small black-wrapped package into her lap. “Uhm, h-here.” She pushes it across the table.

Lisa opens the box, and pulls out a silver bracelet made up of interlocking diamond-shapes.

“And this should accompany it nicely.” Peter hands over a longer box. Lisa pulls out a pendant with a large silver diamond in the centre. The thin chain is a mixture of interlocking black and red links.

“Peter, you, you, these...” she throws her arms around him, kissing him all over.

“You like?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions.” She slides back to her seat. She looks around at the table, covered in boxes and wrappings. “Whoops.”

“You always were messy with presents, sis.”

“Allow me.” Peter picks up one of the sheets and shows his hand empty. He scrunches the wrapping paper up in his hand. When it’s all inside his fist, he squeezes it a little more, and then opens his hand, showing it empty.

Ola, Tracy and Lisa clap. Carrie raises her eyebrows. “Not bad. My turn.” She grabs another sheet, screwing it up. “On three, one,” she brings her hand down, “two,” and repeats, brings her hand to her shoulder and back to the table, “three!” she brings her hand down and opens it, showing it empty.

Peter joins in the clapping. He takes the bracelet out of its box, laying it on the table. He balls up another sheet and pushes it into the box. He closes the box, shakes it and opens it, showing it empty, but that the pearl white interior is now the same black as the paper.

“You sure you’re an amateur?”

“Pretty confident.” Peter smiles, indicating the last bit of paper. “Your turn.”

“Do you mind if I do something else with it?”

“Why not?” Lisa replies.

“Great. Thanks for volunteering, sis.”

“What?!”

Carrie smiles, rolling the paper up into a cone and picks up the bottle of wine. She stands up, holding the cone over Lisa’s head.

“Carrie, you’d better know what the hell you’re doing.”

Carrie begins to pour the wine into the cone. Lisa tenses, but remains dry. Carrie continues pouring until

the bottle is empty. “Ta-daa.” Apart from Lisa, the table claps. Lisa is too busy tensing for when the wine falls all over her. “Oh, stop that, will you?” Carrie unwraps the cone, showing the inside and outside clean and dry, and no wine present at all. She holds up the bottle, rolls the paper back up into a cone and tips it to pour the wine back into the bottle. She finishes, unwraps the dry paper and fills up her glass. “I thank you.” She grins, sinking back into her chair. “Your turn.”

At which point the dinner arrives, and the impromptu contest stops. Conversation becomes sporadic and involves more gesturing than speaking as all five pile into the linguini.

Peter nearly spits out his mouthful as, towards the end, he feels a foot stroke along his right leg. He looks up, across the table, but both Carrie and Ola seem to be paying attention to their food. The foot doesn’t reappear after that. *To say something or not to say something, that is the question. Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous flirting, or to take arms against a sea of relatives, and in opposing end them? Might as well keep quiet. Could have been an accident. And I really think I need to stop listening to Hamlet quite so much.*

Tony comes back to clear the table, “Sweet?” he asks.

“If it’s as good as the meal, definitely.” Ola replies. The rest also agree.

“Now, I think it was your turn.” Carrie turns back to Peter.

“It was, wasn’t it?” he takes hold of the sheet of paper and crumbles it up into a ball.

“Seen it.”

He looks over at Carrie, and opens his hand, revealing two balls of paper inside. “Really?” he puts one ball on the table, closes his hand and opens it again, showing another paper ball has appeared, which he puts down on the table. He reaches behind Tracy’s ear and pulls out another ball, adding it to the three already on the table. He finds another in Ola’s thick, braided hair, and a sixth in Carrie’s mouth.

“How’d you do that?”

“Come on, Carrie, you know a magician doesn’t reveal his secrets.”

Carrie sticks her tongue out and Peter plucks another ball off it. He places it with the others. “Very good. You’ve got a lot of balls. Now what?”

“This.” He picks up the balls and starts juggling. After a short while, he tosses one ball higher than the others and continues juggling with just five as it vanishes. He keeps this up, vanishing one ball every so often until they are all gone. “Your turn.”

“Hmmm...” Carrie picks up an empty wine bottle and starts tapping it on the table. Tap, tap, tap, and the bottle vanishes. “Your turn.”

“Lisa, can I borrow those handcuffs for this?”

“Sure. Going to make them vanish?”

Peter takes the handcuffs and snaps them around his wrists. “Tracy, could you confirm that these are locked and are tight, please?” Tracy tugs on the handcuffs and tries to get them off, but they don’t fit over Peter’s wrists. “Lisa, could you keep hold of the key, hands on the table?”

“Sure.”

“Good. Now, observe.” He puts his hands under the table and pulls them out, still handcuffed. “Hmmm.

That should have worked. I'll try again." He puts them under the table again and again pulls them out cuffed. "Right, third time lucky." He puts his hands under and pulls them out, uncuffed, quickly.

"Where did the cuffs go?" Ola asks.

Peter smiles. "Look under the table." All four women look under the table. Lisa bursts out laughing. Carrie scowls, her feet handcuffed together.

"I suppose you think this is funny."

"You suppose right."

"Are you going to just leave me like this?"

"I'm sure you can get out of anything an 'amateur magician' can do, can't you, Carrie?" Lisa taunts.

"Just give her the key, Lise."

Lisa opens her hand, and stares at the empty palm. "How?"

"Magic."

"Stop pissing about. Just get me out of this."

"Tracy?"

"W-what?"

"Look in your bag."

Tracy opens her bag and pulls out the key, on the red ribbon from Carrie's wrapping. She stares at the key, then at Peter, her mouth hanging open. "That's, that's, how?"

"He'll just say 'magic'." Carrie mutters, "Let me out, will you?"

"Oh, right, sorry." Tracy crawls under the table and unlocks the handcuffs, letting Carrie out.

"Very cute, Peter. I'll get you for that."

"Promises, promises." He smiles, as Tony brings along the dessert.

"Enjoy."

They finish the dessert quickly. Peter looks down at his watch. "Time to go, I think."

Lisa looks down. "I guess."

"But..."

"And you need to get some sleep before the interview tomorrow, Carrie, so don't argue."

"Yes, 'Mother'." Lisa rises to go. "What about the bill? You're not planning on skipping, are you, sis?"

"It's taken care of. Right, Peter?"

"Just need a receipt." He walks over to Tony, while Lisa and the others get up, straightening their clothes,

Lisa packing the presents into her bag. Peter returns. "Shall we go?"

"Let's." he takes her arm. Carrie sniggers. "Oh, shit, taxi."

"What?"

"No taxi."

"Ah. Well. There's no way all of you can fit in my car. We could..."

"Oh, just go home, will you? We'll be fine."

"Or you could take the taxi I asked Tony to call for the end of our meal." They all turn to stare at him.
"What?"

"Spoilsport." Carrie mutters as they walk out the restaurant and out to the taxi.

After the traditional kissing and hugging goodbye, the taxi pulls away, followed by Peter's car.

"OK, Peter, what were you up to back there?"

"Where?"

"I saw you put something in Ola's sleeve even if she didn't. What was it?"

"It's Tony's phone number. She'll find it when she gets undressed."

"You've set them up? You don't look like Cupid."

"I can if you want me to." Lisa bursts into a fit of giggles. "I don't see it's that funny."

"I, I guess not." She replies, wiping her eyes, trying to keep a straight face. "What about the show you and Carrie put on? Weren't you worried they'd figure it out?"

"Why? They all know I do magic tricks. Most of that stuff looked like any normal bit of slight of hand and escapology. And your sister's pretty good at that stuff, too. I mean, I've got an idea how most of those tricks work and I still couldn't see how she did that wine cone."

"Maybe she can do magic."

"Maybe, but you'd have to admit the odds of that would be pretty impressive."

"Stranger things have happened." She smiles at him. "Quite a lot of them to me in the last few months. And they're going to tonight, right?"

"Of course. You haven't got your real presents yet."

"Ooooh, better than the jewellery?"

"I hope so."

"Cool."

They arrive at Peter's an hour later, and he tries to lead Lisa into the magic room. "Uh-uh. Not yet. I've

got a present for you first. You go on ahead and I'll get it." She steps into the bedroom and pulls on her skin, zipping herself up and stepping naked into the room. Peter turns. "How do you like your present?"

"Oh, believe me, I like." He smiles, kissing her .

"So, where's my real present then?"

"OK. You've got two presents left." He picks a small wooden box off a thin-model sawing and opens it to show a large watch.

Lisa looks at it, "But I've got a watch. See?" she holds out her arm.

"This isn't a watch. Look closer at the numbers." She peers at the watch, and finds it going from 0 to 100, split every 10.

"So what is it?"

"If you'll allow me..."

Lisa holds out her wrist, "OK, let's see what you're going to do to me this time."

Peter buckles the strap to her wrist. The single hand on the dial turns around to 30 and stops. Lisa looks up questioningly.

"It's a lifeclock."

"A what?"

"A lifeclock. It shows how old you are."

"Like I'm going to forget. I'm not so ancient I'm going senile."

"Not yet." He pushes the hand around. Lisa starts to feel odd, tired. Peter leaves the hand at 80. Lisa looks down, her skin covered in wrinkles, drawn tightly around her bones. Her vision is blurred, liver spots dotting her hand. She feels herself stoop and looks at the grey-haired old lady in the mirror, her breasts sagging.

"Peter..."

Peter turns the dial back, going past thirty, past twenty, past ten and finally stopping on two. Lisa looks up, big green eyes dominating the child's face. She tries to speak, to ask Peter what was going on, but she only manages to gurgle, bubbles blowing out from her toothless gums. She tries to get up, but her body doesn't want to, and she flops back down again. She focuses on the dial and tries to get her stubby fingers to reach for it, but they don't. Frustrated, angry and cold, Lisa screams. And screaming is something babies are good at, unlike talking and walking.

Peter picks her up, rocking her gently in his arms. Lisa starts to feel sleepy, safe, comfortable. She finds her thumb in her mouth and sucks at it instinctively. Her eyes start to close. Peter turns the dial around and lowers the adult, naked Lisa to the floor. He doesn't get that far before the green eyes snap open and blink. "Wow. What a rush. That's some present."

"Oh, that's not the present."

"Huh?"

"Look at it."

Lisa looks down, “It says 24. But...”

“But that’s how old you are now. Physically, at least. That’s the present. You get to be young for a lot longer.”

“You sure that’s not a present for you? Trading me in for a younger model already?”

“Heh. Well, maybe. Keep that safe. It’s tied to you now, so if the hand gets moved, you’ll get affected. I can keep it here, if you like.” She looks up at him, “I promise not to use it when you’re not here and only with your permission, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“You know I’m not. You mean anyone can use this, and it’ll affect me?”

“Yup.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“It could be. Which is what the box is for. Just set it to an age you want to be, and I’ll pack it away.”

Lisa looks at the box. “Doesn’t look very secure.”

“Lise, it would take a dragon to break into this box once its shut. The only people who can open it are the people attuned to it, or the item inside it. And that means me, or you.”

“OK.” She unbuckles the lifewatch and lays it in the box. Peter shuts it. There is a soft hiss as the lid closes, followed by a barely audible click. He hands her the box.

“All yours now, Lisa.” She takes the box and puts it to one side.

“Thank you, kind sir. Now, what’s the other present?”

“I’ll just get it.” He returns with a pair of cabinets, connected to a pole rising between them. The doors are black and leave an open space, about a foot and a half high, at the top. Above the cabinets, are a pair of slim, slightly curved blades.

“Are you going to tell me what this one does?”

“Nope. It’s a surprise present.”

Lisa looks at the cabinets, “As if I couldn’t tell. You’re going to cut me up and put bits of me in different boxes, aren’t you?”

“Not quite, but you’ve got a lot of it right. Want to give it a go?”

“OK.” She climbs backwards into the cabinet.

“Just keep your hands by your sides.” Peter says as he closes the door.

“Fine.” Lisa waits. And waits. Then she hears the door to the other cabinet close. “What’s going on? What are you up to?”

“The trick.”

“Ha ha.” A motor starts up. After a few seconds, Lisa sees the edge of the blade as it cuts around the top of the door, slowly cutting through her neck, leaving the soft tingle she usually feels inching through her flesh. The motor starts up once the blade is through the box, presumably moving it to the next cutting

point. A panel on the door swings out to horizontal and pushes into the gap left by the blade, separating Lisa's head from her body. *OK. So it's automated. Why? So the assistant can play on her own? How would she get back together? How...* "Eeeep." She yelps as the head box rises up the pole. It turns slowly, giving her a long look at the room before it settles into place. The panel retracts and Lisa feels a strange sensation as her body rejoins. *How can I rejoin, I only went round halfw...* The door opens and she steps out and stares down at her hands, which are larger, with flat, bitten nails and dark hair over the backs. She looks down at the naked body, a pile of clothes on the floor, and gasps as she realises what the trick does: It swaps heads. Which means...

"Well, Lisa, what do you think?"

"It's weird, I mean, I'm looking at you, me, I don't know. What was the point of this?"

"Well," Lisa watches her body walk towards her, her hips swaying, "I thought you might like to see how the other half loves." He smiles.

"You mean, you want to..."

"Something like that. I mean, I know what turns my body on the most, and you know about your body. It'll be educational." He winks. "And tomorrow, we can be back to normal. Well, for us anyway."

"This is your other present?"

"Yup. Your chance to be the guy in our relationship."

"But..." Peter reaches down, tracing his smooth fingers along Lisa's newfound manhood, which responds. "Stop that."

"You ok, Lise? You want me to swap us back?"

Lisa stops, thinking. "I guess not." She reaches out, stroking her hands over his neck, dipping her fingers down the nape of his neck, a place that only gets proper attention when she's in a position to give it. "So, who gets to play teacher?"



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