

PETER & LISA: PART 4

CHRISTMAS PRESENTS

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Peter and Lisa came out of the theatre smiling and laughing together, just like the other couples. Peter led her to the restaurant, a small Italian place off the main road. “Hey, Tony! How’s things with you?” a waiter turns towards them as he pushes open the door, his jet black hair swept back from his olive complexion, his dark eyes glittering.

“Ah, not so bad, Peter, not so bad.” He turns towards Lisa, “And this is your beautiful guest for the evening? Enchanted.” He takes her hand, kissing it gently. “Please, sit.” The restaurant is not yet busy, but the activity just seen in the kitchens shows that it will be soon. Tony leads them to a small table at the back, a table for two with a pale candle already lit. “Would you like to see the wine list?”

“No thanks, Tony. Lisa, would you like red or white wine?”

“Oh, red, please.”

“You heard the lady, Tony. A bottle of red, of your choice, as usual.”

“As you wish.” He turns away.

“A bottle of red? Doesn’t it bother you what wine you get?”

“Not here, no. Tony has excellent taste in wine. I’d also recommend the paella.”

“How did you get such a close relationship with this place? You’re not exactly a restaurant person.”

“Perhaps I have hidden depths.” He smiles enigmatically.

“Possibly. And the real reason?”

“His father was a friend of my father. And I rewrote his accounting software to save him a third off his tax bill each year. He keeps that money back in case I want a really good meal. He always gets most of the money, so he doesn’t begrudge me the occasional indulgence of a good meal with truly excellent wine.”

“You rewrote the package? How?”

“Well, I’m not just a magician, I do work in the programming department. It’s sort of my job to write and rewrite code. And this wasn’t that hard to improve.”

“I’m impressed.” Tony returns, with a bottle of red.

“Would you care to sample the wine, madam?”

“OK.” He pours a small amount into Lisa’s glass. She sniffs the wine, swirling it around before the light before swishing it around her mouth. She nods.

“Excellent.” He pours two glasses, leaving the wine on the table. “And your menu.”

“You don’t get a menu?”

“Nope. I let Tony give me whatever he feels like. It’s never been less than fantastic, and it makes things

easier for me.”

“Oh, ok, could you do the same for me?”

“Certainly, madam. Have a good meal.” He walks off. More guests begin to fill the small restaurant.

“So, Tony’s father is a friend of your father?”

“Yep.”

“What’s your family like?”

“They’re not, around anymore.”

“Oh. God, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“‘Course you didn’t. I didn’t tell you and there’s no reason you’d have looked up my files, even if they’d have let you. But thank you.”

“When did they…”

“A few years ago. Dad was a magician, which is where I get a lot of my ideas and equipment from. Mum was his assistant, and manager. They’d retired by the time I came along, but Dad knew Tony’s dad from way back, and the two of us were thick as thieves when we were younger.”

“Oh. Could he do real magic?”

“No idea. He didn’t like performing while I was alive. Probably didn’t want me to think he was anything other than a normal dad. You know how weird kids can be about things that make them different. So, what about your family?”

“Oh, nothing quite so glamorous. My dad’s a lawyer and my mum’s a local councillor up in Edinburgh. I’ve got one sister, Caroline, or Carrie, who’s off at university studying some sort of physics that completely baffles me. Plus sundry aunts, uncles and cousins who we see at Christmas, sometimes, and that’s the family of Lisa Joanne McCagherty. Not nearly as exciting as a magician. I’m going up to see them in a couple of days for the holidays.” She hesitates, reaching across the table to take his hand, “Do you want to come with me?”

“What? Meet the parents?” he laughs, “Lisa, we’ve been seeing each other for what?” he glances down at his watch, “It must be a whole 39 hours now. Even if we count up ‘til Christmas, it’ll only be a relationship of a few days. And let’s face it, this is the first normal couple thing we’ve done.”

“So that’s a no?”

“I’d love to, but let’s face it, it’d look odd.”

“Not really. They’ve given up on me being ‘respectable’ and accept I’m going to be odd. You’ll be an improvement.”

“On what?”

“Oh, some of the people I’ve brought home before, and some of the ones I didn’t. You’ve got a job, even a pretty good one. You’re relatively polite. You’re not that bad looking.”

“Thanks.”

“You don’t want to spoil it by saying you’re a Conservative, do you?”

“Not really. Liberal, I’m afraid.”

“That’s no problem, I’ll just tell mum you’re deranged. She’ll understand.”

“You’re mother’s Labour?”

“Oh yes, very much old, old Labour, too. Just don’t get her started on anything remotely political and you’ll be fine. Keep things at the weather, what nice food she’s cooked for us and how great her daughter is and things’ll go fine.”

“Could be a problem with that.”

“What?”

“Well, won’t I bore her if I go on about how great her daughter is? It’ll take me a while to go through your good points.” Lisa beams at him. “And the faults could take all week.”

“Don’t push it. I still haven’t forgiven you for pushing me into that hole.”

“But you will.”

“Why?”

“Because you enjoyed it once you got over the shock, and because I’m adorable.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe you enjoyed it, or maybe I’m adorable?”

“Oh, I enjoyed it. I just want to be able to turn the tables. I don’t like being victim.”

“Sorry, no can do. Can’t teach this kind of stuff.”

They enjoy the rest of the meal, which was as good as advertised, in light conversation and banter and arrange to meet on Christmas Eve, or Monday, to drive up to Edinburgh.

Sunday passes in wrapping presents and packing and for Lisa fending off questions from Olamide, her flatmate, and calling her mother about the late guest. Ola presses her over lunch, a snacking affair as neither of them can be bothered to cook. She leaves out most of the details for some reason.

On Monday, Peter turns up at the flat with a single suitcase in his hands. Ola opens the door, and starts grilling him. Peter bats the questions away easily, pulling a pair of earrings carved from ebony in traditional African designs from behind Ola’s ears. Ola loves them, and consequently him. She leaves them alone after that, letting Peter help Lisa carry her bags to the car, a small Citroen, something as unflashy as you can get. Lisa smiles, as it fits Peter perfectly. He opens the sunroof, despite the grey clouds, explaining it makes him a lot more comfortable to have fresh air, even if it is cold. Lisa doesn’t grumble, at least not too much. She just pulls on her gloves and tucks her ears into her thick beret.

They stop just short of Scotland at a small hotel off the motorway. They get a single room, with two beds, the only one left. The receptionist assures them they can push them together if they want. Peter nods, and smiles at Lisa as they turn for the stairs. Lisa smiles until they’re out of earshot, when she gives him a half-hearted lecture on their relationship, and what it covers and especially what it doesn’t. Peter nods through the whole thing.

Once inside their room, Lisa finally realises something is up. “Okay, what’s the deal? What’s going on?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about, dear.”

“Of course not. This isn’t going to be like at your place.”

“What?” now Peter does look genuinely perplexed.

“You know, I go to bed dressed like a magician and wake up in silk pyjamas. That won’t happen here.”

“Oh. No, probably not. But then, not a lot happened at my place. I heard you fall over and came in. I magicked the clothes change when I put you to bed. I didn’t think you thought something else had happened. And if you think I would take advantage of you like that, you don’t know anything about me.” He walks into the adjoining bathroom, slamming the door behind him. When he comes out, he looks in better temper, but he’s still sullen. All through dinner he remains quiet, barely talking to her.

When they go back to their room, Lisa walks into the bathroom to change. And when she comes out, there’s a stranger sitting on her bed, a stranger in a thick red coat with white trimming and a huge bushy white beard, his long white curls under a red Santa hat. “Come over.” He booms in a huge bass voice, “Come over and sit on Santa’s knee.” She walks over very slowly, until she recognises the sparkle behind his pale blue eyes. She sits on his knee and tries to pull his beard off. “Ow! Please don’t do that.” He continues, his ruddy cheeks losing a little of their colour.

“All right, Santa Claus. What’s up with this?”

“This? Oh, just something to get us in the mood for tomorrow. And anyway, that’s not the real question.”

“Which is?”

“Have you been a good girl this year?”

“Could you define ‘good’?”

“You know, nice, compassionate, caring, generous, good.”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“Well, then, you get a present.” He reaches into a sack she hadn’t noticed and pulls out a cylinder, all neatly wrapped in black paper with red stripes circling around it and silver diamonds gleaming.

“What’s this?”

“Your Christmas present, obviously.”

“But I didn’t get you anything.”

“Not a problem. There might be something in the sack...”

“No. Forget it. I am not getting into that sack. Not at all. No way.” Santa shrugs.

“All right. Do you mind if I change?”

“Sure.” He walks into the bathroom, leaving the sack behind. Lisa looks at the seemingly empty sack balefully. “I am not going to reach into that sack.” A small voice in the back of her head starts complaining that she’s being unfair; that Peter had got her a present and she had nothing to give him; and what could it hurt anyway? The main part of her brain answered ‘Me’ quite quickly to the last bit. Lisa

picks up the sack carefully, examining every inch of the Hessian. Then she opens it and pushes it inside out, and still finds nothing. It looks exactly like a normal sack, nothing magical about it in any way. Which made her even more suspicious. She pulled the sack back the right way out and continued to stare at it. She was still staring at it when Peter came back, now in a pair of black boxers.

“Excellent self-control.” He murmurs, sliding into his bed.

“Aha! So something would have happened if I’d reached into the bag.”

“Of course.”

“What?”

“Ah, now that would be telling. The only way to find out is to try it. Which isn’t exactly likely, is it?”

“Not very. Not even a clue?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be anywhere near as traumatic as anything you’ve done, but that’s all I’m going to say.”

Silence reigns for several more minutes, “You won’t tell me?”

“No.”

“Fine. I won’t know then.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.” She rolls over. Peter turns out the light.

The next morning, Lisa wakes up early, only to find Peter already in the shower. She looks down at the sack, and at her present. She opens the tag on her present. ‘Don’t open this unless I’m there. Merry Christmas. Love Peter XXXX’ all in small, neat writing. She decides to take him at his word and waits. She looks down at the sack. “No. I am not going to reach into that sack.” She hears the shower turn off. “I don’t want to know what’ll happen to me if I do. I don’t. Oh, hell, yes, I do, but I don’t want to do it without some idea what I’m doing.”

“OK, it will dress you like Santa Claus, or a close approximation thereof. It might do a few other things, but only if you want it to. It won’t ask, though, so they’ll be a shock, but it won’t make anything disappear, or rearrange anything, or cut anything off, or stick anything through you, or do anything else to transform you.”

“Fine. I’ll have a shower first, then we’ll sort out the presents.”

“Fine by me, Lise.”

When Lisa emerges from the shower, and is dressed, she finds Peter still sitting on his bed. “So, which first? Yours or the sack?”

“Mine.”

“OK. Catch.” He tosses her her present. Lisa sits on the bed, pulling off the paper. What emerges is a cylinder of black, about an inch across and a foot long. It has no switch, but one end has a slight cavity in it, and is slightly wider around it with a red ring.

“Alright. I give up. What is it?”

“Pass it here. I’ll show you.” Lisa hands the cylinder over. It looks familiar, somehow. Peter takes the cylinder in one hand. There is a soft hum and a three-foot beam of white light shoots out of the cavity. Peter swings the cylinder around with the same humming.

“It’s a light sabre!!”

“Pretty much. It was easier to set up multiple functions with different coloured beams.”

“Different functions? What can I do with it? Does it really work?”

“Oh, it really works. And it does a lot more, too. You can have white, blue, green or red beams. Do not, under any circumstances, use the red beam unless you really, really mean to injure or kill someone or to completely wreck something. Red is the real colour. It slices and dices for real.” The beam shifts to a brilliant scarlet. He tosses the paper into the air and slices the light sabre out, searing a long line through the paper. “It’ll cut through almost anything, so be very careful.”

“OK, got it. What do the other colours do, then?”

“Oh, the white does very little. It will penetrate anything and glow through anything its inside. Here, give me your hand and I’ll show you.” She offers her hand. The beam changes to white. He pushes the light sabre into her hand, and a red glow pushes out through her skin. He pulls the beam out and shows her hand unmarked. “And now for the really cool part. You ready for this?” Lisa nods, “Good. Open your mouth.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to stick a light sabre inside your skull. Why did you think?”

“Oh.” She opens her mouth.

“Perfect.” He pushes the light sabre in slowly. Lisa watches the glow push through her cheeks in the mirror. Then she gets a shock as her eyes glow brightly and the light spills out of her ears and nose. The glow continues up her forehead until her hair blazes like copper under a flame. Her whole head tingles, the light sabre a warm strip running through her skull. Peter removes it. The glow persists around her eyes for several minutes. “Blue cuts things like the sword did. It cuts, but does no damage and the things can be restored just by putting them together, or you can rearrange things if you like. A demonstration?” Lisa nods. The blade shifts to electric blue and he slices her right arm off. He picks up the severed arm and hands it to her. “A little more?” Lisa nods again, still staring at her wiggling fingers. Her other arm falls off. Peter takes each arm and reattaches them, to the wrong shoulders.

“Will you stop doing that? Just put me back together properly.”

“Oh, alright.” He pulls her arms off with a soft sucking sound and puts them back the right way round. “And the green vanishes things that are severed. They can be restored, but not by the light sabre.” He slices it through her left wrist and her hand vanishes.

“So how do you get things back?” he tosses her a small bottle.

“Put a drop of this anywhere on the cut and it will be restored. If you spear something with the green rather than cut, nothing happens.” Lisa puts a drop onto her wrist and her hand shimmers back into form, still tingling.

“How do I turn it on?”

“You just will it to work. Give it a try.” He tosses the light sabre back, “Better try white first. It can’t do any harm if it doesn’t work properly.”

“OK.” She grabs the light sabre and concentrates. The light sabre hums. The blade shoots out and vanishes as she stops concentrating.

“Good. Keep practicing until you’re not shocked. Then I’ll help you with some other features.”

“Like?”

“Oh, light sabre duels and the like. Fun stuff.”

“OK. And you’re not going to tell me what will happen if I get in the sack, are you?”

“No more than I’ve already told you, no.”

“Fine. I might as well get this over with, then.” She pulls the sack open and almost starts to crawl inside. “You’re not lying, are you?”

“No. Word of honour. You’ll agree to everything that happens to you and you can refuse anything. Apart from the change of clothes, that is.”

“And this sort of Santa outfit...”

“Would be acceptable on the streets of London.” Lisa starts to protest, “Outside of Soho, as well. Even in the City, although there you’d get some strange looks.”

“OK, fine, I get the picture.” She starts to crawl into the sack, and stops. “You won’t keep me in here, will you?”

“Not unless you want to.”

“OK.” She stops again, “Word of honour?”

“Word of honour.”

“OK.” She smiles up at him and crawls into the scratchy sack. She’s not terribly surprised as the sack keeps on going, seemingly without end. Inside the sack Lisa wonders what Peter’s present is supposed to be. *“The sack was empty last night. Where could he be hiding the present in here? OK, he could be hiding it anywhere in here and I wouldn’t have seen it last night. But why would he need me to get in? And why would he get himself a present?”* Realisation dawns. She giggles. “Oh, Peter, you bad, bad boy. I’m not sure you deserve this present. But you’re going to get it.” The sack gives way to darkness and what feels like cardboard, all around her. She hears Peter’s voice, muffled.

“Oh, what a big present. I wonder what it could be?”

“Yeah, right.” She mutters. She hears the wrapping being ripped. The box around her unfolds, letting in the light. Peter reaches in to help her up. He whistles. Lisa stands up, glancing in the mirror. She finds her clothes replaced by a red baby shirt with white fur around the very low collar, cuffs and base, a fur edged red miniskirt and a floppy Santa hat. “Well,” she purrs huskily, “aren’t you going to unwrap your present?”



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