

PETER AND LISA: CHAPTER 53
HOW TO WIN FRIENDS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE

"So, this is you turning over a new leaf, is it?"

"Yup. That's me." She draws a halo above her head, "Good as gold."

"You'll understand my scepticism."

"Uh-huh. But you can always think of it as you teaching me well."

Sarah bounces Grace on her hip, "I could. But we both know you're unteachable."

"Pretty much."

"Hence scepticism."

"Look, I just want to pick your brains..."

"Not literally."

"No, not literally."

"I'm not sure metaphorically it's that good an idea with some bug keeping me up all night. Don't you, bug?" Grace gurgles, grabbing vaguely towards Sarah's hair.

"Baby brain accepted."

"Well, with that caveat firmly on the record, what piece of my vast and dangerous knowledge do you require?"

"Vast and dangerous knowledge?"

"Can't I have a little fun playing Queenie? Just go with it."

"Yes, my queen."

"Better. Isn't it, Princess Bug?" Grace gurgles, clapping. "See, you have both of our approval."

"Very good, my queen."

"So?"

"It's about you."

"Oh, goodie, my favourite subject."

"Of course it is. When...when you took...possession of Mimi..."

"Oh, don't worry about that, we've found her a new home."

"You have?" she looks at Sarah's smile, her eyes narrow suspiciously, "You've given her back, haven't you?"

Sarah pouts, "You weren't supposed to guess. It ruins the fun if you guess. But yes, Steven's paid his fine so the matter's settled."

"Fine." Lisa replies tightly, "Settled. That wasn't the question."

"Oh, wasn't it? Oh, goodie, maybe I can get you changing colour for Grace after all."

"Changing... oh, no. I'm keeping calm about this. Turning over a new leaf, remember?"

"Well, I hope it doesn't make you too boring."

"I'll try not to be, your majesty."

"Good. So the real question?"

"You confiscated Mimi. How?"

"What do you mean, 'how'?"

"I mean, I thought the whole point of our little community was a lack of formal rules, so..."

"Every community has rules. Ours are just more...guidelines."

Lisa gives her a look of extreme scepticism.

"Fine, Princess Grouchy. The rules aren't really written down. It's more a matter of the Keeper's discretion..."

"You mean yours."

"No, I really mean Stuart's. Of course, he listens to the good advice of his wife."

"And the bad advice?"

"Oh, especially to the bad advice. That's always the most fun. But, to answer the question, there are a few that apply and magic sales happen to be one of them. It's mostly done to keep things secret, of course, but the Keeper needs to know who's selling what to whom, just in case. So there's a process, and Osbourne ignored it. Which was really stupid of him, but that's what he does. Bastard doesn't

think the rules, as few as they are, apply to him. And, I admit, I took great pleasure in reminding him that they do.” she smiles like a cat with a bird at its feet.

“What else are there actual rules for?”

“There mostly aren't. It's broad brush, the details are...flexible and each Keeper fills in the details.”

“Meaning?”

“Well, taking Osbourne as an example, there isn't a hard and fast rule for what the penalty is, just precedent. We stick close to that as it's what's been acceptable in the past but we could run the scale all the way up or down.”

“I see.”

“We're responsible for keeping the secrets secret. To do that, we're basically little kings in our domains. As long as we keep the secrets safe and don't piss off too many people, we're good.”

“So you could...”

“Straining at that new leaf, are you?”

“What?”

“I know what you're going to ask. And the answer is possibly yes, but definitely no.” she holds up a hand to forestall any comment, “We might be able to impose additional controls to civilise us a little, but they'd be resisted and enforcing would be hard and by nature harsh. And loopholes would arrive to drive coach and horses through. That's what happens when you take people's toys away.”

“I thought you said you were basically a queen.”

“I am. Basically. Ask Marie Antoinette what happens when the Queen overextends her power.”

“But...”

“No. We're a light touch and we use our official power only when we have to. It works better that way with a bunch as diverse as we are. And I'm not sure I could persuade Stuart to risk it, even if I agreed with you.”

“Which you don't.”

“Not fully, no. You still see things as very black and white and our community has more shades of grey than E L James.”

“Read that, huh?”

“Of course. Always looking for new ideas to try out.”

“Of course.”

“Still if you need pointers...”

“No, thank you, my queen.”

“Oh, goodie, some colours do still work on you. We'll work on that.” She claps lightly, Grace smiling in her lap.

“Yes, my queen.” Lisa replies tightly.

“Don't worry. I'm not going to actually force you into anything, no matter how much fun it is to tease that I will. Nothing without consent, remember?”

“Sure. Do you promise not to trick me into giving consent as well?”

“I'm hurt, deeply hurt by this lack of trust...”

“That's not a yes.”

“It shouldn't be necessary.”

“And it shouldn't be difficult. Here, I'll show you.” She raises her hand, ““I promise not to trick Sarah Drake into any agreement without her understanding and consent.’ See, easy?”

“As if you could trick me, anyway.”

“Well, I can't now, can I? I promised.”

“You did.” She bounces Grace on her knee.

“And you didn't.”

“True. Friends should be able to trust each other, rather than rely on promises and agreements.

That's for business.” She looks down, “And Grace needs to have her lie down or she'll be grouchier than you.” She pushes back in the chair.

“Yes, my Queen. I'll see you later.”

“Maybe.”

“...seemed pissed.”

“Well, duh, L. Normal people get pissed if you don't trust them.”

“I don't trust you and you don't get pissed.”

“Of course not, but I am magnanimous and look past your cynical, distrusting nature. Your other bestie obviously doesn't yet.”

“My what?”

“Cynical and distrusting nature. You always think the worst of people.”

“I do not.”

“Oh, please, you explode if I even joke about stealing your boy toy. Like I'd want your sloppy seconds even if he was my type. Sometimes, L, I think your spring's wound a bit too tight, you know?”

“No. Do enlighten me.”

“Sure. You're a coiled spring waiting to pounce on something to be outraged about. You're not happy unless you're kicking back at something and when there's nothing big, you find something small and blow it up into a mountain. You're a crusader who gets lost and mopey when there's no dragon to slay, so you go all Cervantes on some poor windmill's arse instead.”

“So why are you still here if I'm such a bitch?”

“Did I say 'bitch', bitch? Did I?”

“No, but...”

“Exactly. Besides, I love you in spite of you being a bitch.”

“Why?”

“You know why. Remember how we met?”

“I shouted at some dickhead who was screwing with you. So?”

“Well, sure, that's how you remember things.”

“So how do you remember it?”

“Well, there I was, an innocent fresh into college, scared out of my wits, trying not to stand out and I'm getting chewed out for getting in his way. And I'm embarrassed and scared and not sure if I want to run, cry, curl into a ball or just be sick. And just as I sort of decide to do all of them a Scottish hellion shows up out of nowhere getting between us, standing her ground and basically acting as my knight in shining armour, surrounded by flames of holy righteousness.”

“Really?”

“Ok, so it was jeans and a black t-shirt, with a bag slung over your shoulder, a couple of band badges on the strap and battered trainers, work with me here. The point is you stepped right into it without thinking. The guy was bigger than you, had his mates with him and I was just a shy, retiring fresher who was used to hiding if there was trouble. And you made him run off.”

“It wasn't that dramatic.”

“That's my point! It's what you do. Just another day, another dragon slain. For princesses like me, it was a revelation. If I wasn't, like, 100% straight I'd have dropped to my knees and let you ravish me there and then.”

“You what?!”

“Like I said, that confirmed my boys only sexuality. But it was a near enough thing to really confuse a good church girl like me.”

“I...”

“Of course you didn't. Like I was going to tell you that! I was a timid little country mouse in the big city.”

“I am struggling with you being timid, O.”

“Because I'm so awesome and confident now, but, then? Oh, yes, completely scared shitless. Head down and get away from everything. Except with my fierce protector around. Easier to be brave and open when you know someone's got your back and won't take no shit. And the more I could do that, the more I didn't need you to do it. But without that first meeting? Who knows what I'd be like?”

“So, what's the point of this confession?”

"You asked how I coped with you being a bitch. And it's because I know that there's a heart of gold under the exterior and that there's someone fun under all the burnt-on armour. You just have to know how to find the can-opener to get her out."

"Oh? And how do you do that?"

"How else?" she raises her glass, "Alcohol!" and drains it. "Cute boys help, but they're off your menu now." she turns her head as the bar staff walks past, "Not mine, though."

"Well, thank you for that."

"You're very welcome."

"You really know how to make someone feel good and then knife them with a smile, don't you?"

"Oh, please," she waves a hand dismissively, pouring another glass with the other, "this isn't sticking the knife in. This is more a clue-by-four to get your attention."

"Oh, thank you very much."

"You're welcome. So..."

"So?"

"So, are you going to tell Auntie Olamide what's really bugging you? Or do you want me to guess, very loudly, mind, with all these people around to hear, at all the disgusting, sordid things you and the boy toy are doing?"

"Why do you think something's really bugging me?"

"L, I'm insulted. We're besties. I can tell when you're pissed. And right now, you are clearly bothered by something other than maybe being a bit of a bitch to your inferior bestie."

"Inferior bestie?"

"Hey, I was here first. I claimed dibs." Despite herself, Lisa smiles a little. "There you go. So?"

"Well, I..." she trails off, trying to think how to explain it without revealing anything, "I can't. Just...I can't."

"Secrets, L? From me? After I told you all that?"

"I, look, ok, I want to, really, but I can't."

"I see."

"They're not all my secrets to give, ok?"

"Oh, that kind of bothered. Sounds serious."

"I guess."

"Ok. You know I've got your back whatever it is, right? And if you need help burying the body, I'll call on some people."

"What body?"

"The one of whoever's bugging you. You'd do the same for me."

"Yeah, probably. Thanks, O."

A small office in Lincoln's Inn Fields, near Chancery Lane, a voluptuous platinum blonde pushes up her wide horn rim glasses, illuminated by the glow of a computer screen, the smell of leather coming from the thick tomes lining the wall as much as the oversized seats. "I know I owe you, and you know no-one's going to be more supportive of the idea than me, but couldn't you ask for something easier? I hear world peace is popular these days." She purrs.

"It can't be done?"

"Oh, it probably can be, but it's not going to be easy. You're asking for a contract that supersedes any subsequent contract."

"Ok."

"And that's tricky. The obvious way is to give someone else exclusive rights to co-sign any decisions. But..."

"No."

"Exactly. Not only would you never agree to that in a million years, even without yours truly as an object lesson, but if you wanted to cancel that arrangement, how would it work? You'd have to get your co-signatory's agreement and, if you're cancelling, presumably that relationship isn't in good shape."

“So?”

“So I'll have to think about it. As a side project unless you want to make this official rather than random lawyer thoughts.” she takes off her glasses, chewing coquettishly on the end in thought.

“I don't think I could afford that.”

“Probably not. But I'm sure you know people who...” she pulls the glasses out, suddenly appearing to notice them and jams them back into their proper place.

“Do you actually need those?”

“Of course not. Can't have a bimbo in glasses. Glasses make you look far too intelligent. You might even have your own opinions on things. Can't have that.” she sighs, “I used to need them. And I feel more like me and less like...her when I'm wearing them, even if they are just costume store fakes, but, those...instincts aren't quite gone, which is why I find myself sucking on them if my mind wanders too much!!”

“Are you...”

“Fine, fine, I'm fine. I have to be, don't I? Because this is me now!” she takes a deep breath, snorting it out, and then another, “It's getting better. This sort of thing doesn't happen as often and it's not as if I'm going to flirt with the partners. Or if I did they'd know why, and all of them are too careful to take advantage, if nothing else. And I'd have to actually meet Mr Stoker first.”

“You still haven't met him?”

“He has a condition that means he needs to work at night. Extreme sensitivity to bright light.”

“You mean he's a vampire?”

“Don't be silly. Even with...everything, vampires don't exist. They can't. It's...they don't exist, do they?”

Lisa shrugs, “Not that I know of. But I'm ordering extra garlic bread before I come see you after dark.”

Tabitha lets out a bark of laughter. “Oh, been a while since I've properly laughed.” she wipes her eye. “But free time's up. I've got a lot of papers to sort out.”

“Sure. Thanks for thinking about it.”

“If I find a way, I'll let you know, believe me. And bring me some of the garlic bread.”

“Ugh.”

“Rough day?”

She grunts in response.

“Oh, very rough day. Do you need unwinding?”

“Regular unwinding orrrrr....”

“Which will work better?”

“Well, I...” the phone rings.

“Sorry. Hello...” he pulls the phone away from his ear, “It's for you.”

“Who is?” she asks, taking the phone, “Hello?”

“What did you do?!”

“Who...Carrie? What?”

“What did you do to get Sarah pissed at you?!”

“What?”

“Don't give me what. What did you do?”

“Why do you think...what?” she pulls the phone away as a hand emerges from it, swiftly followed by the rest of Carrie who looks a mix of angry and confused as the phone drops to the floor. She looks around.

“Ok. That's new. Now, why do I think that? Why could it be? Well, it might have something to do with seeing her pissed off when I left rehearsal and her telling me the reason she's pissed off is, quote, your sister, end quote! I'd say that was pretty good reason! I thought you were supposed to be the reasonable one and I was the one who was chaotically irresponsible!! Arrrrgh!” she turns away fuming.

“Now look...”

"No, you look! I..." and as she turns, her head bursts into flames.

"Aaaaaaahhhh!"

Carrie's skin chars and flakes away, leaving her blackened skull to turn its flame-filled eyes towards Lisa. Her skeletal jaw moves but the only sound is the crackle of flames. As all three of them stand rigidly shocked, the flames roll down her body, stripping her body of its skin and clothes until only the burning skeleton is left, standing in the middle of the room like the unholy ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

"What did you do?"

Carrie puts her skeletal hands on her ribs in a classic 'Me?!' pose, before shrugging.

"Don't give me that. This is you being a magic sponge again, isn't it? Have you still not got that dealt with?"

Carrie gives her a flaming finger in response before she's lost in a thick, suffocating, fluffy white cloud with the clean scent of desert sands.

"What now?!" the cloud disperses, leaving Carrie holding her position.

"Ok. That's better. Talking again. Although my throat is a bit sore." she coughs out a curl of smoke,

"Now, back to you ruining..."

"Not today, please."

"But..."

"Not today." he repeats, "You and Lisa can fight sometime when you're not going to set fire to my flat because you're too angry."

"But..." she catches the warning look, "fine. We'll talk later, sis. Now, how am I supposed to get home? It's not like I packed my oyster card in this outfit."

"Same way you got here." he holds up the phone.

"And how do I do that? I didn't mean to come here in the first place."

Peter hands her the phone and before Carrie can respond she pours into the handset and vanishes with a final kick of her feet. Peter hangs up.

"So, rough day?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"If you've pissed Her Royal Sazness off, we're probably going to have to." Lisa scowls as he puts his hands on her shoulders, "But I think we need to destress you some first." and starts to gently massage her. Lisa gives a contented sigh as she feels her body softening away.

Some time later, Lisa blinks, languidly stretching her newly-extant body, "Mmmmmmm."

"Awake?"

"Mmmm."

"Relaxed?"

"Mmmmmmmmmmm."

"Ready to talk?"

Lisa fully opens her eyes, "You had to spoil it, didn't you?"

"Well, Carrie had a point."

"Spoiling it further, magic boy. Fine." She sits up.

"So, why is Sarah pissed at you?"

"I don't know!" she takes in the sceptical look, "I don't! Ok, ok, maybe she thinks I don't trust her."

"And just how would she get that idea?"

"Well, I might have promised not to try to trick her and then she wouldn't say the same so..."

"So you got miffed?"

"I just pointed it out!"

"Yeah, can't see why she'd get the impression you don't trust her."

"How can I if she won't just..."

"Same way you trust me."

She looks up at him, "I make you agree terms before we do anything, magic boy."

"Not every time and, let's be honest, that's our warped idea of foreplay more than real negotiation."

You know I won't do anything you'd refuse."

"That's different."

"Why?"

"Because I..."

"Trust me?"

Lisa folds her arms defensively, "Not the point."

"Uh-huh. So, in your usual charming and tactful way, you let Sarah know that you don't think it's just a playful game with her and you're worried she'll actually betray your trust. Anything else? I mean, that's not great, but it's not enough for her to be actually pissed enough to say so."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, Sarah does not just let you know she's pissed. Far too straightforward."

"She didn't tell me. She told Carrie who yelled at me for it!"

"That's...a good point. Still a bit direct for Queen Saz, but..."

"But?"

"But she might have figured you wouldn't pick up on anything more subtle than a sledgehammer."

"Hey!"

"Oh, come on, Lise, I love you dearly but there are bulldozers with more mmmph!" a pillow hits him in the face. "Oh, you want to play, do you?"

"Maybe. Talk is cheap, magic boy. Why don't you show me what a bad girl I've been?"

"**With pleasure, little Jedi.**"

Some more time later, Lisa lifts up her mobile, "One missed message. Who's calling me on the at this time of day?"

"Okay, Sis, it's me, don't hang up. Look. I want to...apologise for maybe getting a bit in your face with things. I didn't mean to come over, you know, that just happened, anyway, I admit I...overreacted. And I'm sorry for reacting to your stupid, dumb...sorry, sorry, I'll be good, so, yeah, sorry? Pax? There I said it. You can put the pink away, mis..."

"Well, I guess that's an apology. And now I've got to do the same. Adulting's hard!"