

THE PENANCE LIST by S C Cunningham

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OPENING CHAPTERS

The Penance List

(Book 1 of The David Trilogy)

Day three, Chelsea, London, England

Standing over her, he picked up the bottle of red wine and stretched his arm out high over her head, ready to pour. He waited patiently as she regained consciousness. The drugs were wearing off.

She woke to the heat of the spotlights burning her skin; their harsh light piercing her eyelids. Why was it so hot? She tried to move away from the source, but her heavy limbs barely moved. What was happening? Her mouth was parched, her throat locked tight, a searing pain ran through her jaw as she tried to swallow... *what the fuck!*

She rocked her head backwards and forwards, groaning with the waves of pain, trying to clear her mind. Where was she? Memories began to tumble back into place... *fuck!* Where was he? She knew he was somewhere near; she could smell his expensive cologne, could hear his agitated breathing; he was aroused.

She squinted through the light, her darting eyes anxiously trying to find him. On a bedside table, a few feet from her head, something glistened. She strained towards it, pulling the glint into focus. Her heart stopped. A neat row of surgical instruments lay on a silver tray, his tools of torture set out in an orderly fashion, soldiers ready for duty, their polished blades shimmering in the light.

"Jesus, David, what are you doing?" her rasping whisper barely audible, tearing her throat.

Her mind raced, the realization of what he had in store pumped sobering adrenaline through her body.... *fuck, how could she have been so stupid?* With all that had been going on, she should have known it was a trap? She had seen his work; she knew what he did to his victims. He didn't love her, he hated her. It was a lie.

She could hear the dull throb of traffic; she must still be in his flat, which meant people were nearby. Wincing with pain, she tentatively opened her mouth, took a deep breath, and yelled hard, praying someone would hear her.

From nowhere, a heavy torrent of liquid crashed down onto her face, filling her open mouth, silencing her scream to a gurgling splutter. She gasped with shock, drawing a mouthful of the vinegary fluid to the back of her throat, blocking, engorging, she couldn't swallow. She tried to cough up, but the liquid kept on coming, more and more. It tasted like red wine... *what the hell?*

Acidic splashes burnt her eyes. The overflow from her mouth quickly filled her nostrils and ran down her face, collecting in a pool beneath her head. Red liquid chased along the

THE PENANCE LIST by S C Cunningham

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creases in the plastic sheet, cooling the skin of her back. Panic clambered through her, her heart thumped high in her chest; her lungs tightened, she couldn't fill them... *no air, he's drowning me, the sick bastard!*

She could hear him laughing out loud, as more liquid crashed down onto her face. She turned her head backwards and forwards to escape the flow; he laughed some more, enjoying her spirit, following her mouth with the bottle. She thrashed her limbs against the mattress to loosen the bindings but they were locked fast. He laughed again. She was suffocating, drowning, and he was loving it, he wasn't going to stop! Stinging tears slipped from the corners of her eyes, watering the wine to pink rivulets that ran down her cheeks. She stilled the screaming inside her head and started to pray... *please God let me live.*

As quickly as it started, the torrent stopped. She spluttered, snorted and gulped for precious air. Her breathing calmed as the panic subsided, then silence... *what now?* Opening her eyes, she strained against the lights; he was standing over her, smiling. His dressing gown had fallen open; the bastard had a hard-on.

Anger boiled inside her, he was playing with her. She spat at his crotch, took a deep breath and screamed again, stronger, louder, the effects of the alcohol numbing the pain in her jaw. Another torrent of liquid hit, heavier than the first, as he held the bottle higher over her face. She snapped her mouth tight shut and shook her head from side to side, trying to escape the downpour. She retched, bile rose in her throat, keeping her mouth tightly closed, she swallowed it back down. She retched again and again and swallowed.

The courage of his quarry amused him; she fought harder than the others. He finished decanting another bottle, admiring the trails of wine that ran through her hair and splattered her beautiful heaving breasts. He wondered if she would look as beautiful inside, once he had opened her up. He dropped the bottle on the bedside table and picked up his beloved camera. He like to document before and after shots of his victims.

Click, Click. The camera shutter hissed as he took a close-up of her angry face. His phone rang, he ignored it.

"Swallow, darling, swallow, it's a delicious little Chateauneuf-du-Pape; you mustn't waste it," he moved to the end of the bed and stood between her open legs, he squinted into the lens and focused on the red stream of wine that trickled its way down through pubic hair to swollen, glistening lips.

Click, Click.

He moved back up to her chest, bent low over her right breast and put his mouth against her skin, chasing up a wine trail with his tongue. Her nipple jumped, hardened.

"Bastard," she spat, pulling her arms and legs, the binding ropes see-sawing cuts into her skin.

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Click, Click.

The intoxicating wine gave more courage.

“There’s no way you’re going to cut me up, you bastard,” she turned her face away from him and screamed as hard as her lungs could stand.

Growing bored with this game, he brought his fist down hard on her stomach. She heaved with pain; angry tears stung her eyes... *fuck you!* She wouldn’t give up; summoning strength, she tried again.

Click, Click.

She looked good when angry, but the screaming would attract attention. He smashed her hard and fast for a second time; this time his punch angled up and under the rib cage. It had the desired effect; she passed out, silence.

He opened the drawer of the bedside table and pulled out two screwdrivers, a staple gun, and masking tape. The screwdrivers were for the eye sockets, the staples to pin back skin, and the sticky tape to silence her mouth.

He took another sip of the exceptionally agreeable wine; although it was a tad cool, not quite room temperature. He inspected his tray of instruments. Teacher would be pleased, how neat he was... *top marks dear boy!* He picked up a remote control and punched the play button. A soothing Mozart violin concerto filled the air.

He pulled on a pair of surgical gloves, enjoying the clammy feeling of distance they gave between him and his patient, between him and his conscience. Humming to the music, he turned his attention to the tray of tools, his fingers danced along the row of blades, finally landing on the smallest one; he held it up to the light, inspecting the cutting edge.

“This will do for starters. I’ll open you up just a little at a time. You will be conscious, able to enjoy the fun, just like I was when he took me. But of course you knew that, didn’t you, my angel, you conspired with him.”

A painful image of himself as a seven year old boy flashed across his eyes. He was bent over the Headmaster’s desk, knuckles white with fear as he held on for dear life. Legs dangling, shorts hanging around his ankles. His tear-swollen face scrunched up, biting his lip, trying not to cry out and make it worse. He bore through the pain as his anus was being torn into by the old man’s swollen cock, praying desperately for the grunting animal noises to come quickly, so that he would stop.

“Now wake up dear, dissection time.”

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He cheerfully shrugged away the memory, and knelt at the side of the bed, slapping her face with renewed hate. She started to come around. He leaned in over her for the first incision... *this would wake her up.*

Chapter One

Eight weeks earlier

Cellini's Restaurant, Chelsea, London

"Granted, it's not everyone's cup of tea, if you swallow, you are in the minority, it needs sugar or brandy or something," Tara blew her blonde fringe out of her eyes, concentrating on her defence.

"Depends on the guy's diet of course, pineapple is meant to be good, no fast food, no ciggies, no drugs, and it could almost be palatable," the two girls looked at her blankly, "it's full of protein, low on calories," she enthused, but no, they were still not convinced.

Click, Click. hidden in a cafe across the street, he focused the camera, fitting all three in shot.

As per normal for most Fridays, the girlfriends giggled through lunch discussing men, or the lack thereof. Tara, Helen, and Josie were single, beautiful, intelligent, best of friends. They had reached the age of thirty having avoided the three things that sap a girl's energy; marriage, divorce, and kids. It wasn't that they didn't want long term relationships; they were sexually active and adored men, they had just never quite understood the workings of the male mind.

If you give them what they want, the chase is over and they move on, if you don't give them what they want, you are a frigid bitch. If you give them the babies their egos crave for, they are out the door, financing as little as possible, and seeing their offspring at weekends, between the golf, football and their latest sexual conquest. They want commitment yet freedom, for you to be faithful, yet them to be free, for you to be a full-time mother, yet them a part-time father. You can't win.

Sourcing a man that knows what he wants, is a balanced, reliable, trustworthy soul mate, a good father and sexy as hell, was a tough call. Maybe the girls asked for too many boxes to be ticked, their quality control too high. Maybe they shouldn't even consider long term stuff until the guy was at least over thirty five, forty, settled in who he was and what he wanted. The trouble was a girl's time clock ticked away. The choices were test tubes or older men. It was a tricky one, can't live with them, can't live without them. Hell, did they need to have babies anyway? Weren't they overrated and oversupplied?

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Tara had a particularly high setting on her quality control button, although highly sexed, she was extremely choosy, the consequences of which would lead to long periods of man-drought. She was currently going through a serious dry patch, climbing the walls as she had not been with a man for a year. She craved the relaxed laissez-faire attitude of Helen.

Helen had a lower par setting, 'love the one your with', she made do with whatever was available on the day, or rather, whoever actually showed an interest in her, which, because she was beautiful, was quite a lot of men.

Josie tended to laugh along with the girls stories of man-woe, giving advice and sympathy where needed. She seldom dated, was wary of men and was happy to be alone; she was more interested in her career, often working late.

However cynical they appeared, they each had the romantic seed of hope, that one day Mr. Right would come bursting in on his white charger, or gas-guzzling SUV, meanwhile they waited, grazing on titbits.

Tara and Helen had met as juniors at a convent boarding school for young ladies, upsetting a multitude of nuns in their wake. Josie had been adopted by them years later at college. Her cheeky up-front London cockney savvy and their self-effacing Sloaney wit made an entertaining mix. They had stuck together through thick and thin, enduring life's roller coaster; they were a good team.

Their bond was about to be tested. Evil was to enter centre stage of their cosy, comfortable lives. It had been sitting on the periphery for years, plotting, planning, patiently waiting. It was watching them now; they only had to look up through the restaurant window to see it, hiding behind the large black lens that focused directly on them.

Click, Click. the shot pulled in tight on slender fingers wrapped around the stem of her glass.

"I love it, but I totally understand those that don't, especially when you think about where it's actually coming from... so to speak," giggled Tara, "excuse the pun!"

"Yes, urrgh!" Helen groaned, jumping on the gruesome fact with gusto. Although she loved sex, she was not an advocate of placing anything remotely live or squidgy in her mouth. Her retch-reflex was too sensitive, oysters, snails and egg white had the same effect.

"Think about it T, they urinate out of the same hole, it's absolutely disgusting!" she raised her hand to the front of her face, blocking out the image, "yuk! second thoughts don't think about it, don't even go there," too late, she had gone there, her face scrunched up with disgust.

"But, so do we," corrected Tara, levelling up the case for the opposition.

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Helen grimaced; covering her face with both hands to push away two sets of visuals. Looking down at her wine glass, the yellowy chardonnay didn't look quite so appealing.

"Urrgh... STOP... I'm eatin, do ya mind?" moaned Josie, her cockney accent shouting over the two girls. She punched them both smartly on the shoulder, secretly loving it when they got into full debate on the endless subject of men and their ever-fascinating appendages.

The girl's discussion mainly flowed in this vein; their witty banter moved at a gallop, sprinting through sentences that didn't need completing, interspersed with giggles, tears and hugs. They 'got' each other with intuitive precision. When a man joined the table, the conversation would politely shift a gear to less risqué subjects. Men were sensitive souls; they may not be able to cope with the intense level of, utterly pointless, discussion given to their private parts.

Tara did sometimes wonder how they could talk such utter rubbish for hours on end; she put it down to a necessary form of free DIY therapy from those who actually loved, cared and understood you. Knew how to make you laugh and what made you tick. She believed in avoiding shrinks whenever possible, buy a friend lunch; it was cheaper and didn't keep the drug trade in business. Too many unnecessary pills out there.

"I hate BJ's; I hate the taste, the feel, the pressure. I am SO useless at them, they make me gag, which is SO not such a good look," complained Helen, pulling a very unattractive gagging face.

The girls giggled; Josie put her fork down, giving up trying to eat.

"No, seriously," continued Helen, "I try really hard, but I can't swallow to save my life, and my hand jobs are a nightmare. I get into a nice rhythm; everything's going fine, then it starts; the insecurity creeps in. Am I doing it right? Am I holding too tight, too hard? Am I yanking too fast? He's not saying anything, not helping, except the odd sharp intake of breath or animal-like groan. Was that a 'pained' intake of breath or a 'pleasurable' intake of breath, a 'yeah, good' groan or an 'ouch! fuck that hurt' groan; how the hell do you know? You have to be a mind reader. My hand gets tired; my knees ache; my jaw starts to lock; my teeth get in the way; I remember that he pees out of it and ..."

She takes a slug of wine, soldiering on with her regular moan about her disastrous sex life.

"... whoosh!...I lose it; hand-to-mouth coordination gets all out of sync; and I go into a blind panic, knowing that he knows, that I know, that I've lost it. It's like reverse parking; start analyzing it and I mess up, every time..."

The girls look at her quizzically, trying to keep up with her line of thinking...reverse parking?

THE PENANCE LIST by S C Cunningham

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“And, to make it worse, he’s looking impatiently down at me, like, ‘come on, babe, get a move on,’ probably waiting for the footy to start, spotting my roots need doing, and trying not to laugh at the farting noises my mouth is making...urrgh!! It’s all SO unattractive.”

She sighs, serious faced, topping up wine glasses, the girls trying not to laugh.

“How do you know if you’re doing it right?” she pleaded.

“Hey relax gal, you don’t ‘ave to do it, it’s not mandatory. Some guys don’t like blow jobs, having a set of gnashers around their privates fills them with terror, and some guys don’t like to go down on us for the same reasons; we pee out of it, and the little ‘panic button’ is hell to figure out,” Josie tried to calm her, but she wasn’t listening.

“And why the hell is it called a ‘blow job’? Granted, it’s a bloody job, but there is no bloody blowing involved, unless I’m doing it wrong,” she stopped in her tracks and looked quizzically up at the girls, “do you blow in the hole?” they both shook their heads, trying not to laugh.

“I don’t want to force a bloody air bubble down his tubes, he’ll go blue... try explaining that to an ambulance crew. No one teaches you these things, its real trial and error stuff.”

“Well maybe that’s what the older man is for, hon... to teach a girl the sexual basics,” piped up Tara.

“That’s even worse, they take Viagra and never bloody stop... they have a hard on for days, you’re bits are as sore as hell, and they never bloody come, where’s the fun in that? To top it all they end up having a heart attack,” Helen gulped more wine, shaking her head.

Josie giggled. “We’re a bit old for older men don’t ya think? Ours would come with a wheelchair and bus pass. It would be more useful to learn a few resuscitation techniques... a good bit of slap’n tickle and a cheeky bit of CPR, very sexy.”

Click, Click. the frame catches their three heads rock back with laughter, a cauldron of witches.

Chapter Two

*Twenty-two years earlier
Heddington Hall Boarding School, Berkshire, England*

His beauty was a curse. Even though he knew it was coming, his throat retched each time he heard his name summonsed in assembly.

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“And lastly, would David Howard report to the Headmaster’s study, directly after choir practice!” bellowed the Assistant Head to the army of three hundred bored, shuffling schoolboys that stood before him.

He stood on an old wooden pulpit at the side of the stage. The heat of the morning sun poured in through the vast windows, mixing musty smells of stale milk, wood polish, and body odour. Ghostlike particles of dust caught in the sunlight and percolated around his hunched shoulders, captivating the attention of the younger boys in the front row. He mumbled through the Morning Prayer and attempted to lead the choir in the final hymn, ‘The Lord’s my shepherd’, as usual, he was painfully out of tune.

Thankfully, the morning bell rang announcing the start of class. He dismissed the assembly hall. Two sixth formers heaved open the large wooden exit doors and the boys obediently marched out row by row, relieved that the tedious standing in silence was over. Noisy chatter filled the room.

As the teachers began to leave the stage, the Headmaster remained seated, his beady eyes followed David’s small frame. A satisfied grin pulled across his face as he contemplated the afternoon’s pleasure. He particularly enjoyed the boy in his choirboy robes.

David prayed each morning that the Head would tire of him, move on to someone else. That he would become a normal, innocent, carefree boy again. He spent hours in the school chapel tirelessly chanting the holy rosary, kneading the worn string of beads in his small hands. He didn’t understand the meaning of the words he was saying, but knew that they were important, what God wanted to hear, so he prayed and prayed over and over, begging for help.

He was a good boy; he didn’t steal, swear, lie or hurt anyone. He cleared his plate at mealtimes and completed his homework. He regularly attended early morning mass, sung his heart out in the choir, and lit countless candles, but to no avail. He began to doubt there being a God. If there was one, he had been abandoned. Why? He obeyed all the rules, kept quiet, seen and not heard. Why was he not good enough to be loved by God? Surely God loved everyone?

The Head summonsed him regularly for ‘private acts’, he frightened him into submission by telling him that he had the Devil in him, that he was a lost soul going to hell. The Head would graciously save him by exorcising the Devil and preparing his path for heaven. The exorcism occurred when they met in the Headmaster’s study, it was their ‘private act’. Their meetings were to be kept a secret; if anyone were to find out he would suffer the wrath of the Archangel. He would be tied to a wooden cross, slashed with a thousand knives to within an inch of his life and left to burn in the cauldron of hell. David often wondered in whose hands was the worse fate... the Archangel or the Headmaster.

He had thought about going to confession, telling Father Michael, the school priest, but the fear of the Archangel got the better of him. Even if he did find the courage to tell, he

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doubted the priest would help; he and the Head were best friends; they always sat together in the dining room at meal times, laughing and joking. He had a suspicion that Father Michael knew of the 'private acts'. Sometimes he would be aware of another presence in the room, someone watching from the cupboard. He would hear a moan come from behind the door, the same type of animal groan the Head would give as he jerkily completed the exorcism ritual. He was alone, frightened, dirty and ashamed.

Recently he had been asking his Religious Education professor about the teachings of the Bible, about the fear people had of the Devil. It seemed to him that the Devil was as strong as, if not stronger than, God. If God did not love him, maybe the Devil would, he was certainly strong enough to protect him from the Archangel and the Headmaster. It would be pitting a demon against a demon; the nightmare would finally stop.

He wondered if he could change sides for a little while, just until the pain ceased. One day he would be as tall as the Head and could protect himself, then he could return to God's side. Like supporting Man United whilst he lived in Manchester, but really he supported Chelsea, it was just to survive.

Plan B would be suicide, but he wasn't brave enough for that.

As they marched out of the hall, a few of the elder boys glanced back at him. He lowered his head, he was sure they knew of his shame, of why he got extra attention from the Headmaster. He wanted to scream out that it wasn't his fault, that he hated it, that it hurt when the Head tore into him, that he would do anything to make it stop. Did they know because the same had happened to them when they were small? Surely someone would speak up? Was everyone frightened of this man? Why did he have so much power?

And why had he been chosen? He had been told that he had a cherubim face, whatever that meant; should he put a blade to it, cut it up? Should he cut his body, his willy? Would that stop the Head calling him 'his special boy'?

His shame kept his head low, unable to look students and teachers in the face. He had learned to dress and undress alone, cried off from swimming and PE, any activity that exposed his bruised, beaten, vile, ugly body to their pitying eyes. He concentrated on surviving from one day to the next. Blocking out the pain. He had changed from an innocent, cheerful, loving little boy into a lonely, degraded, dirty being that was going to hell.

His sister was a bitch, his father distant, the only person who truly loved him was his beautiful mother; he feared that if she ever found out what he was allowing to happen, that he would lose her also. He tried to keep up an academy award performance in his letters home. Inventing news of winning sports cups, gold stars, prefect badges, that he was a popular and studious pupil, but he no longer had the stomach for writing.

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He was as much to blame for keeping the guilty secret. The shame of people knowing was as bad as the act itself. He began to form a scarab shell, keeping up the pretence, hardening his emotions.

During the assembly's closing hymn, he came to a decision, one that would change his life. He scoffed as he sang the empty words 'The Lord's my shepherd'... oh no he isn't, he's got the sack, the Devil is replacing him; things are gonna get better.

With renewed strength, he stood tall and puffed out his small chest. Chanting his new plan under his breath, he marched out of the great hall, staring straight ahead, ignoring the serpent eyes that bore into him from the stage. The Devil would help him now, he would be loved, he was no longer afraid. He pushed through the heavy oak doors, defiant, caring less for the cusses from fellow pupils as he knocked them out of his path.

Chapter Three

Twenty-two years later

Cellini's Restaurant, Chelsea, London

Tara, T to her friends, a kind-hearted, attractive, leggy blonde (well, almost blonde; the dark roots had to be sorted out every now and then), was the protective mother-hen of the trio, the organizer. She held down a good job in advertising (just about, her time keeping was shit and her upfront honesty got her in trouble), she owned a small one bed roomed flat in Chelsea, paid her bills on time and was a dutiful daughter to her eccentric, overbearing, social climbing snob of a mother, whom she prayed she would not become.

Tara loved sex. Hey, who didn't? It was free, healthy, body toning, and sent feel-good pheromones whizzing through your system. As long as no one got hurt and you were with the right person, what better way of spending the weekend than loved up, giggling under a duvet with a delicious creature? Being an old romantic, sex and love went hand in hand. To make love to someone, she had to be 'in love', at least a little. As falling in love didn't happen every day she hardly ever actually had sex, she endured insufferably long dry patches. But when it was good, it was very good, and worth the wait.

Sadly, when she did fall, she had a penchant for falling for the wrong guys. Viking types: rape and pillage, well, no rape, but certainly plenty of pillage. Pillage of her heart, generosity, trust, and with her messier affairs, her bank account.

In the aftermath of one of her break-ups, her trusty girls were on hand to pick up tear-stained pieces. Their hardest job was overseeing her cell phone usage. Vetting the texts, voice messages and emails she insisted on sending to the offending male, especially after copious amounts of wine and character assassination sessions late into the night.

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The girls would have to forcibly uncurl her angry digits to confiscate her phone. Not an easy task as she had the strength of an ox when under the logic-drowning influence of alcohol, but needed to avoid acute embarrassment the following 'sober' day.

'gonna cut ur herpes-ridden balls off, put em in a coffee grinder, post em 2 ur tart wiv a note - dear slapper, wake up n smell the coffee.'

Not the sort of helpful message to send to an ex when trying to cultivate the cool, sophisticated, hand raised, *'am I bothered about being dumped?'* look.

Post relationships, Tara was banned from sending the ex any non-authorized-by-the-girls messages for at least three weeks (three weeks tended to be the average habit breaking time frame). She spent many a hangover (between trips to the bathroom) wolfing down headache tablets, gallons of water, and egg and bacon toasted sandwiches, feverishly thanking the girls for saving her from herself. How did love, lust, sex make us behave so desperately pathetic?

"They are, after all, only 'men' for God's sake! There are plenty more rocks on the mountain," said Helen, the girls knew she meant pebbles on the beach, but with the amount of men she had got through, mountain was more appropriate.

Helen was the rich bitch of the three. Her sexy wild eyes, unruly auburn hair, and voluptuous mouth gave her the look of a passionate gypsy. Orphaned as teenagers, she and her brother had inherited an unhealthy amount of family money. She had dabbled at working in her student days, but being a 'dogs-body-runner' in a company that she could probably buy lost its shine after a while. She did not have to work, but most definitely should have; it was dangerous leaving her bright, inquisitive brain idle, consequently she was bored, bored, bored.

Her self-esteem was surprisingly low for a girl of her beauty, it may have stemmed from being the daughter of a beautiful mother. Living in her shadow, always overlooked. She had no idea how attractive and entertaining she was, however many compliments she received. Consequently, she fucked every man she met in the search of love and affirmation. She craved to be as confident and together as Tara and Josie, and was jealous of the ease with which they swanned through life. She loved them both dearly, but felt she was always running along behind, trying to keep up.

Lack of confidence, jealousy, sexual predation, and boredom were a dangerous mix. Tara and Josie had their work cut out cajoling and supporting their needy, adorable friend.

Josie had a different beauty. She was perfectly coiffured with striking, glossy red bobbed hair, and a knock-out figure. She was the stylish one of the three, always immaculately turned out. When she opened her mouth, her surprising cheeky cockney London accent made her all the more attractive. She was cockney and proud of it. She mercilessly took the piss out of the other two's 'posh' accents. She had worked hard to get where she was. She

THE PENANCE LIST by S C Cunningham

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adored her friends and their tireless debates on minutiae; she escaped her own demons listening to their trivia. She didn't feel the need to discuss her exploits; she just patiently listened to theirs, envious of their innocence.

The girls were in Cellini's, their favourite restaurant, discussing the complicated science of men. They loved escaping to the cosy waiter-friendly haunt, sipping wine and gossiping the trivia stuff. They picked at delicious food and were spied on by flirty waiters and pervy, pasty businessmen with wives at home who had no idea on how non-understanding they were.

Chapter Four

Coffee Shop, Chelsea, London

Across the busy London street, behind the poster-cluttered cafe window, he silently watched the girls at lunch. A large red double-decker bus pulled smartly into his view.

"Fuck," he spat under his breath.

He was seated on a tall barstool high enough to see over the traffic and into the restaurant, except when buses laden with bored, miserable, commuter pale faces trundled by.

"Only London has this many bloody buses," he cursed, waiting anxiously for it to pass, but the remorseless traffic had come to a standstill.

His beautiful, dark, chiselled face leaned momentarily against the cold glass. He was alone in the cafe except for its staff, who were too busy chatting amongst themselves to take much notice of a tourist playing with his new camera. From time to time, he pretended to studiously scrutinize the instruction manual laid out beside his double espresso, absorbing the multitude of functions that his new toy boasted, particularly 'how to focus', giving reason for his lens to be trained on the same spot for the past half hour.

Whilst waiting for the traffic to move, he rested the heavy camera in his lap and allowed his tired eyes to close for a moment. The cold glass soothed his forehead, numbing his caffeine-induced headache. His mind wandered back to when he was a teenager, standing in the woods, screams echoing through the trees, the wind chasing around his naked body.

He slipped his hand into the inside top pocket of his coat, searching out for the reassuring touch of cold steel... ahhh, there it is, my partner in crime. He stroked the knife. His generous, sensual lips stretched into a contented smile; he felt a leap of excitement between his legs. He loved being him; he got away with murder.

THE PENANCE LIST by S C Cunningham

www.sccunningham.com

An impatient car horn brought him back to life. Rubbing his eyes, he returned to work. The traffic was crawling; the bus had moved on. He picked up the camera, focused in on the soft lips of her mouth and took the picture.

Click, Click. laugh, little girls, enjoy while you can, not long now, soon it's my playtime.

Chapter Five

Cellini's Restaurant, Chelsea, London

"Spit, don't swallow, I say, can't stand the stuff either, no matter 'ow much sugar you put wiv it," announced Josie, cheekily spicing up the debate. "It's the texture that gets me, egg white gloopyish."

She squeezed her red glossed lips tight into a rigid line and shook her head, not about to let a drop of anything in, gloopy or not.

"Spitting is SO not a good look though, Jose. Just pretend you love it, spread it all over your chin with the tip of his dick," Tara tilted her head back, pouted her lips, and waved a clenched hand seesaw fashion across her euphoric face, demonstrating her enjoying-it look.

Click, Click. he recognized her action, licking his lips; what a bad girl.

Josie giggled; she of all people did not need a lesson in blow jobs, but Tara had a sweet way of talking naughty whilst making it sound as if she were discussing pruning petunias. Tara took her sex tips seriously; she wanted everyone to have the fun she had.

"That way, he's in heaven with the view and the thought that you love every damn inch of him, while not having had to swallow a drop. Perfect; everyone goes home happy," Tara beamed, her blue eyes sparkling with the simplicity of it all.

Enzo, the handsome young Italian waiter, in his smart white apron, had been forgotten as he deftly dispensed the crisp Chardonnay into their glasses. He listened open-mouthed, barely breathing, as he followed Tara's performance.

Josie couldn't resist mimicking Tara. Exaggerating her demonstration, she ridiculously wielded her cock-clenched hand all over the place; across her face, in her eye, over her shoulder, in her ear, over her head, under her chair, in her handbag, up her nose, across her chest, over the table, under her armpits.

"Like this, dahling?" she asked in her poshest voice, arms flailing, mocking wide-eyed innocence, teasing her wonderful friend.

Helen burst into giggles. Tara gave them both a withering look and soldiered on.

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"You may jest, girlies, but I think some form of BJ is important for a girl to master, a necessary tool of the trade, so to speak," giggling at the pun, "blatant spitting is trashy, SO not ..."

"... A GOOD LOOK!" Helen and Josie joined in loudly, teasing her some more. According to Tara, whatever you were doing, you had to do it looking good, with a bit of style. It would be on her tomb stone, 'this is SO not a good look'.

"How do you get them to kiss and cuddle afterwards?" asked Helen, as she twisted the stem of her glass a little too roughly, "most roll over, fart, fall asleep, or light up a fag and turn on the footy!...or, maybe, they just don't like the taste of their own stuff and don't wanna kiss you afterwards... bloody cheek, and they expect us to swallow it; where is the justice?"

"Jeez, girls, do you mind, I'm trying to eat 'ere," Josie cut in, "bloody hell, can we stop talking men's juices just until we get past the main course, for once, puhlease..."

Enzo, still in a daze with the blow job demonstration, subconsciously wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His other hand, dispensing wine into Josie's glass, had been forgotten. Wine decanted out of her brimming glass onto the tablecloth.

"'ere! wotch it, sunshine, I don't wanna swim in the stuff!" barked Josie.

Tara, realizing he was listening, deftly changed the subject. Butter wouldn't melt.

"I love this time of year when the flowers come out; they look so pretty, they have such wonderful window boxes here; I wonder which florist they use," she mused, pointing to the magnificent display of flower boxes outside the restaurant window.

The girls nodded, momentarily confused at the sudden change of tack in convo.

Click, Click. they're looking out the window, had they spotted him? fuck, fuck, fuck!!

Red-faced, Enzo muttered an apology, mopped the mess with a napkin, dropped the bottle back into the ice bucket, and made a fast exit to the kitchen. English girls were frightening, the pastry chef agreed with him.

"How's Ed the Head?" asked Helen, seizing the opportunity to change the subject.

Click, Click. good, they hadn't seen him; he pulled in tight on her mouth, licking his lips, soon he would taste the fear in her sweat.

Tara took a deep slug of her wine. The memory of Ed still tingled through her, after all this time; he was one of the sexiest men she had ever met; he had also broken her heart and was the reason for her dry patch. He was so unfaithful, so unreliable, but so deliciously

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charming. Once you realize that you don't marry guys like Ed, you just play with them until 'the one' comes along, you are fine, never fall in love with an Ed. Sadly Tara, being a romantic, had. It ended in tears, when she realized she was not the only one he whispered sweet nothings to and shared his beautiful cock with.

"Ed was many tears ago," she said distractedly, getting bored with the hurt of longing for him. Forcing cheer into her voice, she counted up the months since they had split.

"Shit, it's been nearly a year... so long without sex. I keep dreaming about it, I wake up in sweat, it is so frustrating. I'm going through a serious dry patch girls, gonna heal over soon if I don't meet someone; wish I wasn't so damn choosy," Tara's eyes scanned the table, searching out the butter dish.

"He was so bloody good he has ruined me for anyone else, fuck him!" she yanked the innocent dish towards her, "where the hell have all the good ones gone?"

Brutally tearing off a chunk of crusty bread roll, she stabbed it into the perfectly formed butter coils, and scooped up an unhealthy amount of the hip-enhancing stuff. She then waved it baton-like in the air between the two girls, and popped it into her mouth with a feisty chomp.

"Yuk...!" cringed the girls in unison. What was it about being hurt by a guy that made a girl stuff her face with food?

"They are either gay, married, or into skinny young fings. Young fings are safe, cause they are not wise enough to know 'ow lousy they are in the sack," informed Josie, as she won a quick tug of war with Tara, and snatched the butter dish out of her reach.

"All the beautiful, fun, fit ones are gay! It's so bloody annoying," sighed Helen, "they should teach us these things in school: blow jobs, reverse parking, understanding the wine menu, and spotting dodgy men."

"I can't imagine Sister Stanislaus turning the next page of our text books: 'Now girls, page 12, Chapter 4, Blow Jobs, who did their homework last night?' mimicked Tara in her best Dublin accent.

"Helen Howard, D minus, that's outrageous! Have you learnt nothing? Your Blow Jobs are a disgrace, detention after school for you young lady!"

Click, Click. he caught a close-up of the stretch of her neck as she threw her head back with laughter, and wondered whether he should place an incision across her neck.

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His work done for the day, he packed the camera into its case, left cash for the coffee, popped on his shades, and slipped out of the café. The staff turned to the sound of the door closing; cold air whipped around their legs.

Tara shuddered.

“Ooohh, someone just walked over my grave,” she giggled to the others, more light-heartedly than she felt, “talking of Sister Stan, how’s that brother of yours, Hel? Haven’t seen him since school, he still taking weird pictures of earthworm’s innards?”

“Oh, he’s fine, sends his love, I keep him up to date with what you’re up to, still has a crush on you, you know, T, he has such bad taste,” Helen teased, topping up their wine glasses.

“Let’s toast to T’s next shag, to the end of her dry patch.”

They raised their glasses, giggling at the faces of the fellow diners who had turned to hear Helen’s (a little too loud) toast.

Chapter Six

Chelsea, London

David’s six foot six frame lorded it down the Brompton Court Road towards his flat. His glossy dark hair blew across his face, his long black trench coat, spread out behind him, flapping in the wind. With his hooded cunning eyes and regal hooked nose, he had the look of a bird of prey, towering over pedestrians as they scrambled out of his way. He was intimidating, compelling and frightening, beautiful yet ugly. Those unfortunate enough to catch his eye would flinch with fear and scurry away, head down, hoping to go unnoticed.

He walked past the Brompton Court Tube, a central underground train station where three main-line arteries to London’s city centre converged; it was as grimy and busy as ever. Vagrants, beggars, drug addicts, prostitutes, office workers, schoolchildren and tourists spewed in and out of its gaping mouth, onto the traffic relentless Brompton Court Road. As trains passed beneath, warm tunnel air bellowed up the escalators and out the entrance, lifting abandoned rubbish and chasing it around the ankles of pedestrians. A fine layer of black soot covered the surface of surrounding buildings for a 100 metre radius.

A collection of norm and abnorm under one dirty rat-infested roof. He likened it to Hades. He felt comfortable there; if he had time he enjoyed just leaning against the pillared entrance and watching, absorbing the energy. Sometimes, if the mood took him, he would sniff out a fellow depraved soul, to take home and fuck. Juices would be exchanged but names wouldn’t.

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He often laughed at the pathetic presence of police. They had no control. The street lifers, tramps, drunks, beggars, drug pushers, prostitutes, pimps, ruled the tube entrance with fear. It was their domain. When you walked through, you walked fast, with purpose, no eye contact, no looking back, just keep on moving. Tourists would catch on too late; muggings were abundant.

Sadly, he had no time for watching or tating now; he had fresh film to develop. His flat was a short walk from the tube. He liked to live in the middle of all the action. 24/7 traffic and footfall heaved past his front door. The Brompton Court Road never stopped.

From the outside, the big old house, split into five flats, looked haggard, diseased, in need of repair. No burglar would deem it worthy of breaking into for fear of catching something... this suited him.

'Shithead' had been graffitied in large black letters on the front wall. Other equally charming words and symbols had blossomed out around this fitting address. He skipped past the entrance pillars with the non-existent gate, vandalized and torn off long ago, down the dark steps, to the side of the house, past the line of overflowing dustbins, to his front door. The smell of damp, stench-ridden rubbish filled his lungs; he loved that smell; breathing deeply, he sighed.

"Ahhhh... home sweet home."

The keys slid into the three locks and he stepped inside his private world. The noise of the ceaseless traffic abated as he closed his heavy oak front door.

The contrast was breath-taking, something out of a glossy designer magazine. The light airy flat spread throughout the basement of the large old house. High white ceilings, white wooden floors, decadent French gold-framed mirrors. A spacious sitting area with an open plan kitchen and dining area. A large central fireplace and white grand piano. The only colour came from the tasteful paintings, sculptures, and vast urns brimming with exotic cut flowers. Double French windows framed with plentiful cream silk drapes opened onto a luscious jungle garden, its patio crammed with flourishing terracotta pots and scented candles.

Two marble bathrooms, an en-suite sunken hot tub for eight, and walk-in shower room. A pure white, cream and glass bedroom with a king-size bed. Cream carpet, chaise lounge, muslin drapes, cushions and bedspread. Wall-to-wall mirrored built-in wardrobes and white glass dressing table and drawers. A clinical white and cream, mirrored cocoon; a cleaning lady's nightmare.

Daddy had died, leaving him millions to play with. He was single, no need to work, money in the bank; what more could you ask for? A passion to fill your time with? He had that also; his very own plaything, his private obsession.

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"She" lived around the corner, so when the flat had come on the market, tastefully owned and decorated by a talented gay designer, he snapped it up, fixtures, fittings, the lot. Well over the asking price, an estate agent's dream, but it was worth it. The only changes were to the second bedroom. This was his den.

He chucked the keys onto the hall table, briefly checked his perfect reflection in the mirror, and turned left down the corridor, past the shower room and bedroom, straight to the den at the end of the hallway. His secret place, not even his cleaner got to see. He punched in the code for the door lock.

Originally it was the second bedroom, positioned at the back of the basement under the road. It was very dark, with light from only one small dusty window. The window had a view, through rusty cobwebbed security bars, to the dustbins. Sometimes he would idly watch prostitutes ply their trade against his outside wall. They thought they were safe, hidden from view, little knowing he could spy them, he took pictures ... *women were so cheap, no one would notice if they went missing.*

He had gutted the room, painted it deep burgundy red, and fitted low spot lighting. A darkroom area for processing his special films was built against one wall; three trolleys of glistening surgical instruments beneath shelves of DVD's and electronic equipment lined another. The other two walls were covered in his favourite photographs, collated over the years.

In the far corner, an enormous television screen hung from the ceiling, twisted at an angle like a huge bird of prey swooping over its domain. A large leather reclining chair sat in the opposite corner, facing the screen, his private cinema for one.

He was a collector of visuals, a voyeur. He liked to watch, he particularly liked to watch her. Sometimes he got to touch and taste her also, during their private time. He could almost taste her now... he gently tugged at his cock through his trousers as he savoured the thought... *later, later*, he promised himself, he would jerk off over one of today's photographs.

Now, he had Devil's work to do. He couldn't wait to see the fruits of the day's spying, Friday lunches were always productive. He had all three of them together on film; she was looking particularly good.

He picked up remote controls and bleeped the television screen and music system into life. Music filled the room; his favourite Mozart track was on repeat. The screen flickered into life; a loop of black-and-white photographs and short video clips began to play out over and over.

Humming cheerfully to the music, he meticulously prepared trays of solutions for his film. Visions of Tara played out in the air above his head.

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Chapter Seven

Photographic Studio, Soho, London

Tara burst into the studio, late as usual.

Lunch with the girls had gone on too long; she could have stayed all afternoon; it was great therapy. She hated breaking up the party. Why did she have to work; why couldn't she have loads of money like Helen and just hang out all day? She must remember to meet God halfway and buy a lottery ticket.

"I am SO sorry," she announced apologetically to the room, "dodgy traffic; Knightsbridge is all road works, just for a change," no one was listening.

She chucked her jacket and bulging, ridiculously large designer bag onto the nearest sofa, while signalling to the bored receptionist for a much-needed sobering coffee. She was slightly tipsy; such a lightweight, two glasses of vino and she was anybody's.

She took a deep breath... *right; time to get into work mode*. She surveyed the room in a swoop. The atmosphere was dreadful... who died? She recognized the hairdresser, the lovely Anton; he, the makeup artist and photographer's assistant were huddled in a corner by the coffee machine gossiping, filing their nails, and drinking coffee. She could hear cursing and mumbling coming from somewhere in the back of the studio... *hmmm, no music, a big no-no*.

The studio was a large, light, airy loft space that made good use of its vast Victorian bay and roof windows. It belonged to celebrated photographer, Seb Maloney. London's current hottest property, he was young, trendy, roguishly attractive and had a soft Irish accent to die for. He also had a great eye for catching soulful, edgy fashion shots. The media loved him; he had something different, an Irish passion the critics called it, he modestly put his talent down to simple hard work and painstaking, mind-numbing attention to detail.

Tara and he had known each other from boarding school days; he was 'one of the girls', one of the few men that could keep up with their banter. He and Tara loved each other dearly and booked to work with each other whenever they could. Seb had dated Helen a few years back; luckily, they had survived the tempestuous interlude as mates.

"Seb, angel, where have we got to?" she shouted out in the general area of the mumbling.

"You're late," he grunted, like a spoiled child, from behind a vast sky-blue backdrop.

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Seb hated sports gear jobs. It was whoring, but paid good money. Cheap logo, drab clothes, dim-witted overrated sports celebrities unable to string a sentence together, with their interfering managers and hangers-on that had more of an ego than the star themselves.

At least today's guy came alone, no entourage, just an aging ex-army action man, squeezed into an uncomfortably tight chauffeur's uniform, parked up outside. Franco Rossellini didn't say a lot. Some Italian pin-up footballer on £200 grand a week, no doubt. He wasn't into football himself, more of a rugby man. But he had heard this guy was great on the pitch, pity he was 'Mr No Personality' off it.

The brief for the shoot was typical: drape vastly overpriced clothing over the back of a famous drop-dead gorgeous guy, drape a blonde on top as bait, imply that 'wearing this crap you too could have a cool sexy lifestyle'... the fact that the guy would look good in a bin liner with a nappy on his head doesn't feature. Manipulative brainwashing drivel but it paid the bills.

Sadly, the model he'd been sent for this job was finding it difficult to look remotely attractive. She needed a good meal and to stop snorting up the unhealthily large amount of cocaine stashed away in her makeup bag. The incessant talking and sniffing was driving him mad. They had taken five rolls of film and got nothing. All Franco needed to do was cuddle the girl in various poses. Fun, smiling, relaxed, the 'just got out of bed' look. Just getting into a coffin more like.

Franco was either very nervous or thoroughly bored. He held the giggling sniffing blonde at arm's reach, as if he would catch something, looking totally 'do not want to be here'. The model, who was initially chatting happily, fancying herself as the next hot football WAG, had tried desperately hard to put him at ease, but was now feeling snubbed and on the verge of getting over emotional. He felt a drama queen moment coming on.

To top it all off, Franco was sweating profusely under the lights, his face shining, driving the makeup artist to distraction. She had put so much powder on it was now beginning to clump in unsightly patches. Thank God they had booked the ever-professional multi-talented hairdresser, Anton de Menton, who was managing to allay her fears, whispering comfort to her over the coffee pot, as she dragged heavily on her Gitane cigarettes.

"...it's terribly sexy to be shiny, darling. SO now. He is, after all, expected to sweat, being a highly trained athlete an' all. Do you know how much that there body is worth, honey? Lordy, that sweat is pure gold nectar, dahling... now quit smoking, honey, it'll give you craggy lips," he waved away the strong-smelling smoke, "pooh!"

At last Tara was here. She was a good producer, had a knack of putting people at ease, and got the job done. Maybe they would hit the deadline tonight after all.

"Tara, over here," he came out from behind the backdrop. They greeted one another with a big bear hug, all anger at her being late dissolved. He smelled the whiff of alcohol and

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cigarettes in her hug and felt a pang of jealousy; she had been having fun while he'd been slaving away. God, he needed a pint.

"Haven't got it yet, but trying a softer backdrop. Franco was lookin' a bit too mean and moody with the grey. The blue might do something with his eyes, in fact Tara," his voice lowered to a whisper, for her ears only. "Jeysus, total bloody disaster. I know the guy's worth £45 million, feckin' punt, but not in the modelling business, mate, and the girl is coked out of her feckin' brains, if she had any... what a feckin' mess."

Eyes skyward, he clapped his hands loudly and walked out into the middle of the room.

"Ok everyone!" he shouted, "let's try again. Lights, positions same as before."

Anton squealed with excitement and shooed the others into action, the room lit up as Seb and his assistant, Mark, busied themselves around the camera and adjusted the lights. Tara went to the back of the studio, gratefully received the coffee from the expressionless receptionist, and slumped onto the sofa.

A young beautiful model skipped, a little too excitedly, out of the changing room, followed by the legend, Franco. Tara had only seen him briefly on TV clips from sports programs she would accidentally hit on while channel surfing. Had never paid much attention before; wasn't into footballers; far too fragile and feminine looking; had slimmer calves than she... rugby players were more her scene, but he was delicious, or was it the wine from lunch?

What a body! She resisted the urge to wolf whistle. She could have sworn she heard the wonderful Anton sigh. Looking over at him, she giggled and they gave each other a conspiratorial wink. Anton began feverishly waving the air in front of his face to cool down.

The tune 'It's Raining Men' came into her mind... *yo! Where are the girls when you need them, they would have loved this, he's beautiful.*

She wasn't prepared for the sight of Franco; it was all she could do to keep her mouth from gaping. She made a note to get a life and end the dry patch; it was making her desperate and reducing her quality control; a footballer, for chrissakes! She was hardly WAG material, being over thirty, she was more like GAG material, 'grandmothers and girlfriends'.

Beginning to feel the heat of a hormonal flush, she shifted her body deeper into the sofa, took a deep breath, and crossed her legs, trying to calm, to get some control over her man-starved body. She hadn't squirmed like this over a guy since Ed; it was pathetic schoolgirl stuff. She crossed and re-crossed her legs; still not comfortable, her skirt rose up her thigh.

Franco caught the movement and looked over at her, bored.

He was so unfootball, not at all poncy, spoiled, delicate looking, but built like a strong, rugby-playing thug. The type that verbalized with a grunt rather than words. He had the 'Me

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Tarzan, you Jane' thing going on, and that John Wayne walk, wide-open legged as if his manhood led the way... *why do guys walk like that, she mulled... is it something to do with the muscle structure, do they overwork that inner thigh muscle thing?* She must remember to ask a gym trainer; actually, she must start going to the gym again... urrrgh, she hated gyms.

A footy boy and an Italian stallion... ohmigod, Tara, don't even go there, asking for trouble, serious tacksville, be calm, be professional, work. Her heart began to speed up; it had been so long since she had felt man-induced palpitations like this... must be the caffeine.

The model sat on the stool in front of the heavily lit backdrop. Franco begrudgingly sauntered up behind her, a bored circus lion having performed his act a thousand times before. He didn't notice Tara as she crept up to the camera to get a closer look, hovering behind Seb as he shouted instructions. She watched quietly, as two films were painstakingly taken.

Franco was asked to hold the model in front of him and smile cheekily over her shoulder at the camera, 'the guy who had it all' look. They tried various positions, all looked like cardboard. The model was lovely enough, but Franco was obviously not into it. Tara watched him closely; his intense lash-laden dark eyes followed direction from Seb, but he wasn't enjoying it. He was too intelligent for this 'playing the puppet' lark. It was highly likely that he may walk out. She couldn't afford to let that happen; it was her job to keep everyone in line.

Enough of this nonsense; the alcohol from lunch made her brave, if not a little bossy.

"Stop, please, everybody; one minute, Seb, can I have a word with Franco for a second?" she shouted in her best authoritative schoolmarm voice. All looked around to see who had spoken.

Without waiting for an answer, she marched out of the darkness from behind the camera, past a stunned Seb, strode on to the set, put her hand on Franco's arm, and led him off before he could get his bearings. He was relieved to be away from the hot lights, but who the hell was this bird?

"I'm sorry, Franco; my name is Tara, I'm the assistant producer on this campaign. Apologies, I should have been here earlier to meet you but got delayed. I just want to stop wasting your time by having a quick word with you, follow me, please."

Tara dragged the dazed footballer to the back of the studio in search of some privacy. She clicked a CD player into life as they passed an equipment-laden worktop; Marvin Gaye's soulful tones of 'Let's Get It On' filled the room.

She noticed the quizzical look on Franco's face; maybe his English was not that good. Now, where could they talk? The loo was the nearest door she could spot. To the shock of the

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whole studio and Franco, she pulled the £45 million star into a scruffy entrance marked 'Gents', closed the door, and locked the heavy iron latch.

Luckily it was a spacious, old-fashioned, high-ceilinged, marbled gentlemen's loo. A line of magnificent marble sinks proudly lined the facing wall, with an ancient mottled mirror hanging over them. A row of cubicles and a hat stand lay to the far left-hand wall. Sherlock Holmes came to mind, Seb was clever to have kept the old traditional features.

She turned happily to him, ready to make her much-used 'boost the celebrity's confidence' speech, when she was bowled over by a torrent of Italian abuse (well, it could have been Italian, she wasn't sure). It sounded distinctly like "What the fuck is going on? I've had enough, I'm off!" this was not going to plan; he was not a happy chap; mustn't upset the star, first rule of producing.

She leaned calmly against the line of sinks and let him rant on for a few minutes. Waving his arms, stomping up and down like a bull. Shit, he was lovely; she could almost smell his hormones... *I guess this is what he is like at half time when his team are losing, such a delicious deep voice.* His face began to glow again. She stood, arms and legs crossed, patiently waiting for him to finish.

Hands on hips, in the middle of the room, he suddenly stopped, as if realising she didn't speak Italian. He looked at her properly for the first time, taking her in from head to toe. She assumed he was assessing her as a bossy bitch. His eyes could have killed; he looked ready to walk, again. She took her moment.

"OK...you—want—out—of—here."

She talked painfully slow broken English, arms waving theatrically, pushing each syllable home with a nod of her head.

"We—want—job—done—everybody—happy. You—listen—me. We—go—home—soon. I—show—you—how, ok?"

He couldn't hold back any longer; his face broke into a huge smile.

"Why are you talking like an idiot?" he purred in perfect English, with just the hint of an Italian accent.

"Shit... sorry," Tara giggled, scrunching up her face and shoulders with embarrassment, wanting the ground to open up so she could disappear.

"I thought you couldn't speak much English, what an idiot," she hit her forehead with her hand, "duh..."

They giggled; the tension in the air loosened its grip.

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“Look, we both want out of here ASAP. All you have to do is get a few shots of you holding the girl, looking happy and sexy. How easy can that be?” she pleaded.

He wasn't convinced. Reluctantly he shrugged his huge beautiful shoulders... *down girl*, crossed his arms and listened to her. She wished he wouldn't stand so provocatively, with his legs apart like that... *concentrate; try not to look at his crotch*. Too late, he caught her checking him out.

“I know you are bored, the girl is coked out of her head, the photographer is losing his rag, it's hot under the lights, and not a football in sight,” she gave him a playful tap on his shoulder, trying to raise a smile.

“Watch,” she said as she spun around to face the mirror over the middle sink. Her hips leaned against the cool marble; her hands gripped the sides of the basin. He stood still behind her. Their conversation carried on through the age-mottled mirror.

“There is nothing to this acting game; just a bit of confidence. The mirror is what the camera sees. We'll practice the look they want, take it out to the studio, repeat it with the model in front of camera, and then we can all go home. All you have to do is pretend you are holding someone you really want,” she turned to look back at him over her shoulder; a thought came to her.

“Are you gay?” he didn't flinch; sexy dark eyes stared back at her.

“Whatever,” ... *oh God, what a waste*.

“Just pretend. Here, it's easy, put your arms around me... it's ok, I won't bite,” she smiled.

He didn't move, arms crossed insolently across his chest. He wasn't making this easy for her.

“If you can fake a dive on the pitch, you can fake this, much less painful,” she thought she saw him wince; oops, had she said the wrong thing? She waited.

Nope, still nothing, face blank... *legs still apart*, watching her. Another tack was needed.

“Okay, what do you want? Do you want a drink? Do you want drugs, hookers, more money, ice cream, what? You're the star here; command whatever you want, but let's just get it done, please... 'cause I'm gonna be in the shit and lose my job if we don't deliver this on time and within budget...please!!” she pleaded.

His eyes narrowed as he took in her last words; he came to a decision; finally he smiled.

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“Ok, tell me what you want me to do,” he moved in close behind her; the heady sensual smell of him hit her first; the intense-looking eyes hit her second; he patiently awaited instructions.

The shift in energy within the room was palatable; an electrical current zapped through her. She squeezed her grip on the sink to steady herself. Here she was in a smelly ‘Gents’ with a bloke, the body of an Adonis, worth £45 million, leaning up behind her, expensive studio time and crew waiting outside the door, her job on the line, and stinking of garlic from her boozy lunch, it was beginning to feel very hot...she blew her fringe out of her eyes in an effort to cool down.

“Ok,” she cleared her throat, “lean in close... that’s it, now, put your arms here,” she reached back and pulled his solid arms around her torso, spreading his... *large masculine...stop!...hands across her stomach.*

“Hold me like I’m the FA Cup,” she ordered, impressed that she had remembered the name of a bloody football trophy. Where had that come from? TV osmosis had a lot to answer for.

He tightened his grip. Finally he looked comfortable holding something. She wondered what an FA Cup looked like.

“Good, now lean in and smile cheekily at the mirror, the camera. Rest your head on my shoulder, whispering something in my ear; you’re really happy, you’re about to get laid ...*what if he’s gay?... or...have just scored the winning try... I mean over, err...goal, or saved one...err...what position do you play again?*”

She was babbling, trying anything that came to mind; the closeness of his body was making her giddy; he smelled SO delicious... *concentrate girl!*

Her brain gabbled away, trying to keep her mind on the job... *he’s probably a goalie; all that fearless leaping around; guess they work their upper and lower bodies, and his upper body is definitely worked.*

Following her instructions a little too well, his lips brushed against her ear as if to whisper something; she felt his warm breath exhale and tickle her neck; instinctively she closed her eyes and let her head rock back against his... *oops, am in trouble now.* Her neck was one of the most sensitive parts of her body; touching it had a seriously sensual effect on her; it was one of her G spots, apparently, whatever that was, a past boyfriend had commented that it was a sure-fire way of getting her into the sack; it made her lose control.

Franco heard the small sound caught in the back of her throat; it was unexpected. Miss Cool had weakened a little. He surveyed her face in the mirror, eyes semi closed, head rocking back as if she were in heaven. Actually she was cute; she had a sexy efficient secretarial look about her; he was beginning to enjoy this. He leaned into her; her body took his full weight, forcing her hips hard against the sink; she didn’t feel the pain.

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Looking up, she caught his face watching her in the mirror; he had a full-on beaming cheeky smile, it was perfect; he looked so sexy.

“That’s it, Franco!” she squealed a little too loudly. “Fantastic, that’s the look they want, let’s go outside and do it for the camera, quick.”

She wriggled to move out of his arms; he didn’t move. She wriggled some more; he was not budging. Was that the beginnings of a hard-on she could feel nudging the bottom of her spine?

Franco felt her body stiffen; was she nervous or excited? He would teach this know-it-all lady a thing or two. No way was he stopping just yet; he had only just started. He was gonna have some fun.

“I haven’t finished,” he growled into her ear, his lips barely brushing the fine hairs of her neck.

She jumped as his hands cupped her breasts. He felt their warm skin through the flimsy blouse material. She wasn’t wearing a bra; he liked that. This was too easy.

Reinforcing who was the boss, he slammed his hips hard against her ass. Dirt and dust powdered the air; as the sink’s rusty hinges smashed against the wall, the crash echoed the room. The force of the sudden strike expelled the air in her lungs with a groan.

She fell forward, her head just missing hitting the mirror. Outstretched arms pushed up against the glass to steady herself. Releasing one of his hands from her chest, he grabbed her hair and yanked her head back, forcing it to lay on his shoulder, twisting her face to his, their mouths almost touching, her back arched, pushing her chest out, her arms flailed away from the glass. He had a firm hold of her breast in one hand and her scalp in the other. He meant business.

Silence.

Their eyes locked hard in the mirror; who would make the first move?

What was he going to do, rape her? She glanced sideways to the door, she could scream out, cry for help; it was just the other side of that door.

Silence.

“What are you doing, Franco?” she spoke first, calmly, softly with a half-smile, “if you want to fuck, ask, you don’t have to force yourself on me.”

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Her voice was so low and soft that he had to strain to hear it; the absolute control in her tone took him by surprise. The position of power shifted. What was this... he started to release his grip.

“No... no... don’t stop,” she whispered, “I like it.”

Was she messing with him; what was she doing? She looked and felt so good; his cock was hard against her; it would be easy to take her right now. Ok, let’s see how far she dare take this.

Perspiration glistened across her chest and neck. Her body was getting hot; being locked in a hold like this was a turn-on. It had been so long since she had had a man touch her. She held her breath and silently begged him not to stop; every cell in her body began to tingle with excitement.

She arched her back further, causing the blouse to strain open across her chest. Noting the invitation, he couldn’t resist flicking the top three buttons to release beautiful, full tits. She didn’t flinch. He expertly dipped his hand beneath the material, following her face in the mirror; he gently rolled her left nipple between thumb and forefinger. Her response was immediate; her breath quickened, the nipple hardened. Half smiling, her head rocked back onto his shoulder; her knees slumped, giving him the weight of her body.

He nuzzled his nose against her neck, whispering encouragement to let go; his sultry accent and the tingling sensation brought on by his lips drove her mad. It was so long since she had felt like this; he had no idea what he was unleashing.

Time to return the favour; she began a slow rhythmic grinding movement of her hips, rubbing herself into his crotch. His cock throbbed to life against her teasing ass. He couldn’t believe it; she was horny as hell.

“Yeah, that’s it, keep moving, baby... that’s nice!” he whispered, his hips following hers, joining her rhythm.

Both hands now toyed, roughly kneading her heavy tits. She moaned, head back, chest arched. Their hips danced, grinding in circles. Her supporting arm refound the coolness of the mirror and pushed hard against it, forcing her body back into him, meeting him with equal strength. Her free hand went down between the top of her legs; she rubbed her fingers through the material of her skirt.

She was going too far, she knew it. She caught his eyes watching the movement in the mirror; they were so bloody powerful, with his sexy half smile; he had the look of just holding back before a great fuck, it would be perfect for the shoot. Should she stop and get him out there?

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Before she could think, he released his grip and swung her around to face him. Holding her fast by the shoulders, he yanked her into his chest and guided both bodies from the sink to the right-hand side wall. He pushed hard against her, forcing her back onto the welcoming cold marble wall.

“I’m gonna have you,” he whispered close into her ear. She felt the heat of his mouth, smelled his breath; he was so fucking sexy, she arched her back with pleasure.

“Do it!” she ordered, grinning like the cat that’d gotten the whole fucking dairy farm.

His hands grabbed either side of her face and neck and pulled her close to his mouth. So close, but not touching... making her wait. Breathing in her smell, eyes on her mouth, watching her lips.

What was he waiting for? She couldn’t bear it any longer...

“Do it... Mr Big Footballer... kiss me... all mouth and no trousers, are we?” she taunted.

He wouldn’t. He teased her with his breath; she felt it warm on her lips; she opened her mouth, reaching, begging to be kissed. He backed up as she neared him; he was enjoying making her wait... *the bastard*, she tried again and again... *that’s it*, having had enough, she grabbed the back of his head and forced his mouth onto her; her tongue sank into his warm, soft mouth.

... *finally*, he thought. God, she was sexy; this was getting beyond him now. He was hard and he knew she would be wet; he could just pull up her skirt and sink into her.

They ate each other’s mouths hungrily, hands everywhere, groping, squeezing, pulling at clothing, their groans echoed the room.

BANG, BANG, BANG, the door shook.

“What the hell’s going on in there, Tara? We must get on...”

Seb’s angry voice bellowed through the door, followed by the hammer of an irritated fist.

“Just coming, Seb.”

Tara managed to unlock her mouth from Franco’s and push herself free.

“Literally,” she whispered with a giggle... *shit, why is my sex life always such a disaster?*

Franco staggered back into the centre of the room, pissed off at the interruption, but still smiling. They surveyed each other with laughing eyes as they quickly brushed down

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clothing, flattened hair, and did up buttons. Tara giggled at the tent effect in his crotch, the perfectly ironed designer tracksuit crumpled.

“Ok,” he said, grinning, “I’ll do it, but let’s get a few things straight. I’m not gay and I don’t dive... got it? And I’m a striker, not in goal... got it?”

She nodded, gratefully... *what the hell’s a striker? does he hit people... sit on the bench, boycotting, refusing to work... I wonder if there is a terminology book I can buy somewhere?*

“And next time you’re gonna snog the face off me, let me have eaten garlic also... you’re lucky I love the stuff,” he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, licking his lips.

Tara cringed apologetically... *ohmigod, shit, how embarrassing.*

“So sorry,” she muttered, flushing red. She had almost fucked a complete stranger, but breathing garlic on him was a complete no-no, SO not a good look.

He laughed at her Englishness, dragged his fingers through his hair, tugged at his collar, and turned to the heavy ‘Gents’ door. He pulled back the latch, swung it open, and strode out onto the studio floor as if nothing had happened. Tara timidly followed, walking a few steps behind, her knees weak, tell-tale perspiration on her top lip. Praying no one could tell what had just taken place.

The whole crew were waiting outside with bated breath. You could have cut the atmosphere with a knife. Their celebrity looked thunderous.

He spoke firmly and clearly to a bemused Seb and the rest of the room.

“I want some classical music on, Strauss if you have it, or Mozart will do. I want the shoot to be done differently. Tara will be in the shot with me. Her back will be to the camera. She will wear the clothes the model was wearing. The model gets double pay and champagne for all of us. You will try it my way; if it doesn’t work, we go back to your way. Otherwise, I leave.”

They tried to talk him out of it; you couldn’t just change a story board at whim; hours of costly preproduction analysis had been put into a project such as this with every minuscule detail pondered over and agreed at numerous meetings and levels; Tara’s bosses wouldn’t like it, besides, she needed to get agreement from the New York office, which could take days, but he was adamant; it was his way or the highway. Finally, she was beaten down, against her better judgment, they played along with him.

It turned out to be the best shoot ever. The model was not put out for long, champagne and the wage packet helped; she ended up being the stylist and having fun, she was good; maybe she should change profession. Anton agreed, but gently warned her that she couldn’t support her cocaine habit on a stylist’s wages; it would have to go... *Hmmmm*, she would have a rethink.

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Franco was right. Tara's blonde hair spread across the back of the client's shirt was all that could be seen of the girl. No one could tell it was her, the crew were sworn to secrecy; her bosses would have gone mad at her for putting herself in front of the camera, but it was worth it, every female that saw these pictures in the future wished they had been the mysterious girl. Wished Franco was looking at them in that way, and holding them the way he held her.

He looked great, wrapping himself around the lucky blonde. His top was creased and had sweat patches on it (from his previous exertions? Seb wondered), but as Tara had said, this all added to the authenticity of the product; it was a sweatshirt, after all. He looked as if he had just had a very healthy workout and the clothes still looked great, attracting a glamorous lifestyle and hot women, all part of the branding. Ad man, eat your heart out.

They played with each other in front of the camera for two hours; they got through a further six outfits, all with the same theme. It really worked, even when, on the last few shots, Tara, who knew by then it was in the can, sneakily whisked up Franco's top over his body, revealing the most exquisite six pack she and the crew had ever seen. They all went berserk. Anton nearly fainted. Wolf whistles, screams of laughter, and chants of "more, more..."

Franco looked shy for a moment, but took it in good stead and pretended to retaliate by attempting to pull up her top, this made for great shots and everyone laughed until it hurt.

Seb was in his element. He loved the energy in the room. Tara and Franco had real chemistry between them. He did not know what happened in the 'Gents' but whatever it was, he wanted to bottle it and use it again sometime. The two of them were magic to watch. He couldn't wait to get the film developed.

Six o'clock, Franco's driver walked into the studio, putting an end to the day. Seb started organizing the crew to pack up, ordering the messenger for the processing lab to collect the films. He bear-hugged Tara, kissing her repeatedly from cheek to cheek with gratitude; he whispered, "I don't know what you did, but it worked, you and he were great. I take everything back I said about footballers; he's a sophisticated one, that one; a good sport, Mozart, indeed. Call me tomorrow; I'll get the prints biked over to you."

He gave her another huge hug of thanks, squeezing the life out of her as she giggled to get free of his grip, and rushed off in a whirl of importance, screaming instructions to his crew in his delicious Irish brogue, ending with "and then, mine's a pint..."

Franco had been watching their hugs, kisses, and intimate whispering from the other side of the studio. He suddenly felt foolish; the girl was into the photographer, they were laughing at him.

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Tara turned to catch him observing, smiled, and hurried across the studio to walk him to his car; he seemed distant. Outside, the driver was waiting in the large black Mercedes, fingers impatiently tapping the steering wheel, the passenger door open, the engine purring.

“Thank you, you were great, I haven’t had so much fun in a long time,” she said, smiling at him, meaning it. She wondered how to subtly give him her number without coming across as a forward slut WAG wannabe.

He looked at her coldly and shook her hand politely, which seemed strange after all they had been through in the last few hours. Why the sudden change?

“It was a pleasure, Miss...err...?” he asked straight-faced, no hint of a smile.

She blushed with embarrassment. He didn’t even know her name, and they had just been sucking face and ripping each other’s clothes off.

“Warr...T...Tara Warr,” she faltered.

“Thank you; it was a pleasure, Miss Warr, thank you for your help and professionalism. Goodbye.”

With that he turned, stepped into the car, and slammed the door a little too forcefully, she thought. She stared open-mouthed at the car door; tinted windows reflected her own gob-smacked image back at her. She quickly closed her mouth. The car slid effortlessly off to join the rush-hour traffic, leaving her alone on the pavement feeling bereft, confused, and dropped from a great height.

“What the hell! Men! Honestly... what planet are they on? I suppose he does this sort of thing all the time,” she huffed, confused, “of course I was only doing my job, it didn’t mean anything to me either!,” she yelled at the car as it turned smoothly into a side street, her words lost in the deafening din of London traffic.

She checked her watch. It was too late to go back to the office. The girls may have gone on for drinks somewhere; she deliberated joining them, but wanting to be alone, she opted to go straight home and wandered off down the street in search of an elusive black cab. She normally had the car, but didn’t drink and drive on girlie lunch days.

“Typical, bloody rush-hour traffic, bad time to get a taxi, I’ll probably have to walk for hours, and in these shoes,” she mumbled to herself, her mood having plummeted in just ten seconds.

“I hate men.”

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What a shame; he had felt good, comfortable, funny. She could almost have fallen for him. Wrapping her arms around herself, she could still feel him on her; still taste his kiss on her lips.

“I wonder if he tastes mine? He probably still tastes the garlic... urrgh... my love life stinks!”

Chapter Eight

Soho, London, England

Franco's black Mercedes sped smoothly away from Seb's studio, winding through the streets of London. His driver, Michael, knew the cheeky little back streets and one-way systems to twist in and out of, especially during rush-hour traffic.

Franco lounged back into the soft leather seats. What the hell was all that about? The last thing he needed right now was a woman messing with his head. He groaned at the memory of the past few hours. He had the urge to turn and look back at her, standing in the street. But refused himself, keeping eyes sternly forward like a stubborn child.

“Michael, music please,” he quipped.

Franco avoided his driver's eyes in the mirror; Michael would have sussed something was up, and he didn't want conversation right now. Michael knew better, and at the press of a button, the elegant strings of Beethoven's Symphony No.1 filled the car.

Franco took a deep breath and started to relax. The rich smell of leather filled his nostrils. The air-conditioning began to kick in. London sped past his window.

She was something else. How dare she treat him like a fool? It was a cheap setup with that photographer, whispering away to each other. She wasn't into him, had just been using him to get the job done, and he had fallen for it, let his guard down... *prick-teasing putana!!*

All women are the same. Easy to lay, hard to shake off. All they wanted was your money. Why can't he find a woman with style? She probably had a boyfriend at home, poor kid. He's busy earning the money to keep her happy while she drops her panties all over town, giving it away. I did not even know her name... Warr, what kind of name is that anyway?

He flicked the lid of his cell phone, it buzzed into life. Twenty-two messages... *shit!* With a sigh, he patiently dialled up his voicemail and listened through them; at least they would take his mind off her.

A few messages from his agent, Ned Bromley, Brommers to his friends, filling him in on some contract changes with Brompton FC, who Franco had been signed to for the past three

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seasons, helping them acquire a few pieces of silverware for the Directors' Box cup cabinet. Brommers was renewing his player contract; all was going well. He was a good agent, of the old school, when footballers were 'men' not 'overpriced drama queens' and the Board of Directors were true lovers of the game, not corporate raiders.

Franco was an injury-free hot property at the moment with, allegedly, a few attractive offers on the table from other clubs. Brommers could therefore afford to squeeze the BFC Board on their deal. He had a charming knack of screwing a good deal out of club chairmen without pissing them off. He was one of the few agents that were respected within the industry. Never too greedy, no bungs, and made sure the club came out feeling they had got their money's worth.

He was in demand; a naturally quiet, private man, he would reluctantly get dragged out to speak at football industry seminars, or advise clubs and governing bodies on a variety of player/manager matters. His direct 'no airs and graces' approach had earned him the name in the press of 'Bulldog Brommers'.

Disquiet had been growing within the industry with the way less-than-scrupulous agents operated, their carnivorous abuse of power when conducting the financial movements of players. Brommers shared this unease and, with like-minded chairmen and governing bodies, was pushing for new laws and stipulations to be put into force to protect the club, the player, and ultimately the fans. But inevitably, where obscene amounts of money were involved, greed often triumphed.

Brommers had been around a long time. He kept his word; the world of football was very small. He knew the importance of respecting and nurturing all relationships, from kit man to chairman to the press. Be careful whom you shit on; they could be sitting across a boardroom table from you one day, making decisions about you or your 'boy's' future.

He only took on players with a professional, hard-working ethos, had no time for babysitting spoiled egos. Before taking a player on, he would look at the parents. He had a general rule that a player with a solid family support system behind him was less likely to go off the rails once the damaging amounts of money and fame rolled in, therefore a better bet to invest years of nurturing, some players were just out of nappies, they needed caring protectors, not hangers-on and users.

He wasn't a saint; he would be on call 24/7 if his boys really needed him but expected them to be grownups, run their own day-to-day minutia of life: pick up their own laundry; know how to avoid volatile nightclub situations; know what present to buy their girlfriend/mother; know when to say no to a press-hungry page three girl, or a prematch curry piss-up with the boys; know what clothes to wear, what bills to pay, what laws to adhere to; to turn up on time and drug-free for training, get on with the manager, and work their socks off. He didn't want to be bothered with their private life every five minutes; that was their business; he respected them to get on with it. This encouraged a mutual respect

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with his players, kept their feet on the ground, maintained street sense and touch with reality.

This way of working suited Franco. His last agent had tried to wet-nurse him; it got on his nerves. It worked for some players, but was dangerous, you could too easily get used to someone doing everything for you. Before you knew it, you were incapable of doing anything for yourself. You became reliant on the agent, frightened to leave him, even if he was no longer right for you, you'd outgrown him, your fear of organizing the smallest details in life alone tied you to him like a resentful, expensive marriage.

Brommers also had respect for a true sportsman. Not pushing too hard for just the money-making deals, he would encourage space for training, rest periods, and family. He saw the player as a long-term investment, well after the playing days were over, encouraging whatever the player's forte, be it TV and media or management and coaching.

Too many agents just looked at the main chance of the day, at lining their own pockets. They would fill a players' diary with sponsorship deals, photo shoots, interviews, book launches, the opening of a paper bag, with an eye only on their own percentage. Before you knew it, the player was overexposed and out of control. The press and public owned him, stalked him, burned him out. Yes, he was very pleased with Brommers. They had a mutual respect.

Hating the phone and idle chit-chat, Brommers got straight to the point; communiqués were curt. Franco did not need to call him back today unless he disagreed with the points raised. They would speak tomorrow.

Other messages were from his coach, his physio, his ex (Maria: seventeen missed calls!!!), and his newly acquired interior designer, Felicity Ramsey-Jones. Some arty-farty lady his chairman's wife had kindly put him in contact with. Not knowing anyone else in the interiors business, he nervously took her on.

His new flat in Chelsea had taken up more time and money than expected, but he was determined to be part of its creation and not leave it completely to a stranger's taste. It would be his nest. He knew the feel he wanted but didn't know how to create it. He had a sneaking suspicion that he and Miss Arty-Farty did not speak the same language, and it could cost him dear in the end, but he didn't have time to traipse around stores choosing fabrics, paints and furniture, not to mention the public chaos his fame tended to cause. The traffic stopped if he stepped out to buy a newspaper.

Maria, his ex, a stunning, six-foot, emotionally challenged Brazilian twiglet of a model, had called seventeen times; she was driving him mad. They had dated for only three months, during which time they had split up three times. She had selective memory; each time she would conveniently ignore the fact that they were over and carry on as if nothing had happened. The making-up sex was great, although he suspected that it was the only time she ever really made an effort in the sack.

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Why did he get bored so quickly? Would he ever find Miss Right? Like a good Italian boy, he had been spoiled by his strong, intelligent, independent, warm, loving, great cook of a mother. No one lived up to her strength of character; she was strong as an ox, yet soft as butter. A real 'looker' in her day.

Poor Maria, she may be a top model, with legs up to her armpits, but she didn't stand a chance against his mum. He would not be returning her calls, emails, letters, or text messages... what part of 'it's over' did she not understand? He wondered what 'the end' was in Portuguese.

Tara bounced back into his thoughts. A picture of her cute face made him smile. He licked his lips; he could still taste her, smell her. Shit, she turned him on; he hadn't met anyone like her; sexuality oozed out of her. He tried to shake her face out of his head, but it remained, the warm feel of her body in his arms wrapped itself around him... he relented.

Closing his eyes, leaning back into the seat, remembering the feel of her, the immediate reaction to his touch. Maybe she was genuine; maybe she liked him and wasn't a using whore... nah... he chided himself for being naive. She was easy to take. Had that photographer not interrupted, he would have been inside her in seconds.

The thought excited him.

"Shit, stop this," he said aloud, shaking his head.

Michael looked up into the mirror.

"Sorry Boss?"

"Oh, nothing, talking to myself, Michael, forget it," he waved away the words.

The boss had it bad, thought Michael, bet my bottom dollar it's that bird he left back there on the street, not a bad bit of posh totty. Maybe she turned him down. Better than that snooty bitch of a stick-insect, Maria, any day. A 'module' bird was ok for five minutes, but what do you do wiv em once you've shagged em? Convo isn't exactly riveting... guess you could discuss colonic irrigation verses laxatives or the price of false eyelashes, but after a while it's a bit borin. What the boss needed was a decent bird with a bit of meat on 'er and a brain.

Michael turned the car into a discreet side street off the Kings Road; he flicked a remote control to open private gates and expertly manoeuvred it into the tight confines of the underground car park, that nested beneath a block of luxury flats. Franco had the penthouse, he said goodnight to Michael, agreed on the pick-up time for morning training and took the lift from the car park to the top, the eighth floor.

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In the lift, he checked his appearance in the mirror and thought about the photo shoot. He had really enjoyed it. He hadn't noticed anyone else in the room but her. They had laughed and laughed, it felt natural, easy, they just played with each other like children. He had relaxed and opened up to her, acted the fool to entertain her. But as they were leaving she clicked off, job done, mission accomplished, giggling with the photograph, patting each other on the back. He realized it was all part of the job for her, it didn't mean anything. He felt stupid, used. She probably did this all the time, but he was private and found it difficult to trust so readily, not for the camera, not for anybody.

Doubts began to seep in as to whether it had been a good idea to take on the campaign. He could imagine the stick he was going to get from his teammates, not to mention the opposition, when the advertisements came out, his big grin everywhere. He had a reputation of being a tough, silent type. This wussy romantic stuff was going to blow it for him; he would look a right plonker.

Staring blankly at his image in the mirror, waiting for the lift to chug its way to the top, he thoughtfully stroked his chin. He never smiled, but for the past few hours he had smiled so much his cheek muscles hurt. Remembering her laughter, another smile came to his face. Maybe he should give her another chance.

Yep, he would think of a way to meet up and test her out; everyone deserves a second chance. At worst he might get a shag out of it. But if he were honest, it would be good to finally find someone who lasted longer than a few dates. He was getting old and lonely of late, sensing it was time to settle down on the female front, find a soul mate with hot chemistry, and get cosy in the nest he was building; all he needed was the right bird to share it with. Tara Warr might not be her, but he would have fun finding out.

The doors of the lift opened to the sound of a cheerful 'ping'... yeah, he would give her another try... *watch out, Miss Warr, Franco is out to get ya.*

"Ready or not, here I come," he sang, as he gave a cheeky little sauntering walk to his front door, Mozart forgotten.