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Trading Tatiana

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Prologue

Tatiana's bare feet thudded on the pier's wooden planks. A chill wind whipped her hair into her face. Her red crop top and micro skirt provided little protection. But she was running too fast to notice.

She pushed her way through the milling crowds, her ears assailed by the cacophony of noise blasting from arcade games, speakers and amusement rides, and by the screams of terror and delight from people experiencing the gravity-death combination that exemplifies a good funfair. Voices clamoured in a dozen different languages and seagulls screeched in their own. Yet louder than all these to Tatiana were the sounds of her own ragged breathing and pounding heart.

She didn't know. She didn't know that the only way off the pier was the way she had come on to it. Forward planning was a luxury she couldn't afford. She reached the end of the pier with a despairing wail. Fighting her way through the mass of people, she did a u-turn round the trampolines. And almost collided with Viktor. The brothers had split up and would trap her like an eyebrow hair in tweezers.

Tatiana wheeled round, heading back the way she had come. She could see Georgi advancing on her. She waited until there were only half a

dozen people between them, knowing Viktor would be closing in from behind. She was close enough to see the triumphant smile on Georgi's face when, without warning, she turned sharp right, ran straight up some shallow steps and across the dodgems' arena. Darting between the hurtling bumper cars, she avoided collisions by a hair's breadth. The men inside the ticket booth yelled out and raced to join the pack already hunting her. Tatiana was too fast for them, but they had enough time to prevent Georgi and Viktor from taking the same route, buying her a few precious seconds. But she was tiring now. It had been a long time since she had run anywhere. Her legs had turned rubbery, and she staggered forwards under her own momentum.

A low black and white building loomed in front of her. Thanks to Georgi's insistence that she learn English, she could read the sign outside. 'Ladies'.

They were close behind her again. She lurched round the side of the building and in through the door. See? No forward planning.

A dead end on a dead end.

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I WAS USED to things that went bump in the night. I lived in Boddington Heights. A crumbling, stinking slice of hell in the heart of the beast that is the Old Kent Road. Violent arguments between so-called lovers, parents and children, dealers and dealt-to were daily occurrences. Police busts were regular.

My strategy for blocking out other people's dramas was well-established. In order to prevent myself hearing something I would find impossible to ignore, I would turn the TV or stereo to full volume if I was still up. Bury my head deeper into the pillow if I wasn't.

But the commotion I heard in the early hours of that particular damp May night evaded my usual tactics.

For starters, I'd just switched off the TV, so the clanking of the ascending lift's gears sounded louder in the sudden silence. As did the assorted bumps, thumps and curses that followed the opening of the lift doors on my floor. I brushed my teeth to the accompaniment of footsteps clattering on the iron staircase on the other side of my bathroom wall. I gazed at the dolphin

transfers on the wall tiles, studiously ignoring what could only be the sound of someone forcing the padlock on the trapdoor to the roof. The metallic crashing of something bouncing down the stairs made me jump, but I didn't allow it to interrupt my flossing routine.

I hummed loudly and covered my ears with my hands as I wandered round the flat switching off lights and checking that the front door was secured by both bolt and chain.

But I still couldn't drown out the thuds, groans and grunts of exertion as something heavy was dragged up the stairs to the roof.

Merciful silence resumed as I went over to my bedroom window and closed out the darkness and the drizzle behind plum-coloured velvet curtains. I snuggled under the duvet. Something was happening on the roof. But it was none of my business. And now it no longer intruded on my senses, it was easy to ignore.

The lull didn't last long. Just long enough to allow me to drift towards sleep. A shriek pierced the darkness, followed by a fearsome clanking that sounded like a ship weighing anchor. I shot upright as something thudded against my window. The shoddy double glazing (one of the council's much vaunted 'improvements') shuddered in protest, but by a miracle it withstood the force. A panic-stricken voice gibbered in terror three paces from where I sat, naked and trembling in my bed.

Given what I've said about Boddington Heights, you might be forgiven for thinking such an occurrence would not be unique. Except that I lived on the top floor. Of a twenty-storey block.

I leapt from my bed and crossed to the window. Steeling myself, I pulled the curtains about a foot apart. And almost immediately yanked them shut again. I staggered back into the room, shaking my head in disbelief and wheezing for breath. This wasn't possible. It couldn't be happening. It had to be some weird kind of delayed hallucination. A throwback to my smackhead days. The wilderness years.

I was shivering uncontrollably. I pulled on a baggy sweatshirt from the chair at the end of the bed and forced my unwilling feet back to the window.

This time I only opened the curtains a chink. Enough to confirm that it wasn't me who was insane. Just the situation. So that was OK then. I suppose most people would be more terrified knowing that what they were seeing was really happening. But not me. My big fear is insanity. Everything else comes a long way behind.

A man, wearing something black and shiny, glistened in the rain outside the window. He was suspended by one ankle, hanging upside down and face out. The view over the sleeping city, even on cloudy nights, is spectacular. But I doubted if my companion out there appreciated it.

A pair of white buttocks, protruding from a cut-away section in his skintight suit, was pressed against the glass, like a child's face squashed against a toy-shop window. Red stripes criss-crossed their compressed surface. I gazed at them, fascinated.

His voice, muffled by the double glazing, was clear in intent if not content. This was one seriously scared bare-botty man.

So what should I have done? Call the cops? No way. I don't have the kind of relationship with the police where you actively initiate contact. Anyway, for all I knew, Mr Dangly Stripe.Bum might be a serial killer. Or a paedophile. Perhaps what I was witnessing was a version of rough justice. But not necessarily less just than that meted out by the legal institutions in this country.

I cocked my head on one side and contemplated the buttocks pressed against my window one last time, before flicking the curtains shut with a decisive swish and returning to bed.

Sleep was impossible knowing that if it wasn't for the glass in my windows I could have reached over, parted the curtains and dabbed Savlon on the sore arse of a man suspended upside down, 250 feet above ground level. I sat up and smoked a fag, using the inhalations to keep my breathing deep and even. I recited song

lyrics in my head to phase out the gibbering outside. This wasn't my crisis. I didn't have to allow it to affect me.

Interminable minutes later I heard the screeching of metal on metal, accompanied by a squelching noise as the buttocks slid up my window. Not long after, I heard footsteps on the iron stairs coming back down from the roof.

I tiptoed to my front door and pressed my eye to the spy hole. Two people swam into my fisheye view. One of them stabbed the lift button. The doors shuddered open and they stepped in and turned round to face me. Their distorted faces shone sickly green in the fluorescent light: a woman, slightly built with spiky hair, wearing a mini skirt and corset under a tight leather jacket, and a good-looking Asian guy. The woman seemed to be bruised down one side of her face. I ground my eye into the spy hole. The lift doors were shutting, but I could see something on the man's forehead. At first I assumed it was a scar or a birthmark. But then my wobbly vision made it out just as the doors slammed shut. It was an A inside a circle. An Anarchist symbol.

My curiosity was piqued. They weren't what I was expecting. Whatever that was. And what had happened to Mr Dangly Man? I gave myself a mental slap and repeated my mantra. Not my business . . . Not my business . . .

I carried on repeating it as I pulled on jeans, trainers and cagoule. What is it about me? Why can't I learn not to interfere? No one in the other three flats on my floor felt the urge. The couple who lived opposite would probably have been indulging in their only obvious pastime – extreme S&M sex. Unless of course one or the other of them had been recently sectioned, as was frequently the case. The newly arrived Somali couple would be too scared. They only ever opened their door to pass in or out and infrequently at that. A bunch of lads lived in the fourth flat. I'd never been able to work out their scene, but they were out until the early hours most nights.

I unbolted, unchained and unlocked my front door. All the time refusing to ask the obvious question: What was the point of

all this security if I walked straight through it and into the exact unknown danger it was supposed to protect me from? I clicked open the latch, and pulled the door towards me by the letter box so that it would appear to be shut unless it was pushed. By me. In a hurry.

My heart thudded louder than my footsteps as I climbed the iron staircase. The trapdoor leading to the roof was open. Drizzle slanted down from the square of black sky on to my upturned face. I emerged on to the roof – a square of flat concrete framing the lift motor housing in the centre. Massive arc lights at each corner warned low-flying aircraft and illuminated the desolate gloom.

A dark rain-sodden bundle lay by the roof edge, huddled in a foetal heap. At first I thought he was dead. Fighting the urge to run back down the stairs, I crept over to him. A distant siren floated upwards. I heard shouts and running feet. Car doors slamming. Drunken singing. Other people's lives. Mine was frozen on this roof. With this man.

A tiny sob and a groan issued from the heap. Not dead then, I thought. That's good. I suppose. There was a strong acidic smell. As I came closer, I realised my partner in this surreal tableau was lying in a pool of his own vomit. This was not a problem in itself. People with direct experience of Class A drugs get used to taking evacuated body fluids in their stride. What *was* a problem was what to do next. I'd got this far. I'd got dressed. I'd come up on the roof. I'd seen what was there. Now what?

'Um. Do you need help?'

It sounded lame. No, worse. It sounded really stupid. But it was the best I could do. In response, the bundle gibbered and curled up tighter.

'Please. Don't hurt me,' he whimpered.

'I'm not. I won't. I just . . .'

Well? What was I just . . . ? Just checking? Just being nosey? Just enjoying the night air?

'. . . I just wondered if you were OK . . .'

The bundle shifted and turned over to face me. The white face, ghostly pale in the unforgiving arc light, looked up at me with surprise. Or maybe it was disbelief at the stupidity of the question I had just asked. He was middle-aged with dark, floppy hair. Close up I could see that the suit he was wearing was made of skintight black leather. He was lying on his arse, which was probably just as well. I'd seen as much of it as I could handle for one night. He was staring at me with an intensity I found uncomfortable. What had I got myself into this time?

His voice, when it came, was surprisingly even and calm.

'Can you get me down from here?'

'Are you injured? Can't you walk?'

'Not with this on my ankle I can't,' he grunted.

I looked down and for the first time realised his foot was secured to the railing on the roof edge by a length of heavy chain. I squatted to get a closer look. The chain was attached to the railing by a device like a giant key ring. The other end was slotted through a pair of handcuffs attached to the man's ankle. There was no way I could undo the handcuffs, but the clamp device looked straightforward enough. My fingers fumbled with the wet metal.

'There you go,' I said, holding the chain aloft in triumph.

I wished he would stop staring at me. I was relieved when he heaved himself up into a sitting position and rubbed his ankle around the cuff. But then he swivelled his head again and resumed his appraising gaze.

I felt a flash of irritation. He was the one sitting there with a striped bare arse, handcuffs on his ankle and puke on his chin. I didn't have to be there at all. I turned back to the stairs.

'Please,' he urged. 'Please. You've got to help me.'

I stopped in my tracks.'

'Got to?'

'Please. I'll make it worth your while. Why did you come up here if not to help me?'

He had a good point there. I turned round.

'How can you make it worth my while? It doesn't look to me like you've got pockets in that outfit . . .'

'If you help me get out of here, I'll see you right. I swear.'

I hesitated. But then the same demon who had persuaded me to come up to the roof in the first place against my better judgement whispered in my ear. Why not? Well, actually I could think of a thousand reasons why not. But I ignored them all.

'Come on then. You'd better come down to my flat.'