

# Breathless Sin



**J.B. Coke**

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Strategic Book Group

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## Prologue

Donald Stalker lit his first cigarette of the interview and stared in silence at his prospective employee. He let the smoke linger, exhaling slowly to disguise the satisfaction, which was burgeoning within him. Of the many diversions, which he accommodated in an industrious life, interviewing new recruits was the most consistently rewarding, especially when, as today, the applicant was young and inexperienced.

She was looking back at him through hooded eyes, head slightly bowed, with a hesitant half smile on her lips. She seemed eager to please but not too sure of herself. It was an uncertainty, which Stalker would seek to prolong - an uncertainty, which always gave an extra edge to his pleasure.

Not all the girls had it of course. The blithe and carefree, the brash and brazen, the cynical and sophisticated all had self-confidence to spare. They would turn an interview around and try to manipulate him. That was why an interview like this was such a pleasure. An interview with a girl who wants to do what is expected but will hesitate before each obstacle he puts in her path.

Melanie stared back at Stalker across the big desk and struggled to get the tiny tremors in her knees and fingers under control. She wished he would say something and help her to relax. Getting work as a model was an important part of her plans. She knew she had the looks and could easily learn to pose for photographs. All she needed was an opportunity to break into the business and this seemed like her best chance so far. Donald Stalker was the boss. This was his agency. His name was on the door.

He had selected her for interview and although he was trying to hide it, it was clear that he liked what he saw. This was no time for nerves. She had to make the most of the situation. Melanie was sure she could handle it. She might lack experience but she understood very well the power she had over men.

Like many beautiful women Melanie was obsessed with minor blemishes. Her breasts were firm and pert but in her own eyes, lacking in volume. Her hips, she thought, were too narrow and she wasn't quite tall enough. Then there was the mole inside her left shoulder blade and the tiny scars on her knees and her groin. She was expecting an inspection at some stage and worried vaguely about how she would carry it off. It wasn't something she was looking forward to but she had borrowed money from her sister to buy the right kind of expensive underwear, in case things ever got that far.

She was seated in a single office chair, a meter or so in front of his executive desk, in the middle of a huge Chinese carpet. Behind her and the carpet were a couple of broad steps leading down to a conference table and a coffee corner with a couple of leather settees. She was trying hard to pay attention and keep her smile in place. The huge desk symbolized perfectly the power of its owner. She was a vulnerable captive, somehow brought to account. The excitement distracted her. She felt like a little girl David confronting her Goliath.

Stalker was doing nothing to help her. He kept a straight face and deliberately let long silences develop, which heightened the tension between them. He observed her intently through an unblinking gaze, feeding his desire on the details he absorbed. She was more of a figurine than an athlete. Slim but shapely with the delicate kind of structure he most enjoyed. Her face shone with the freshness of youth, the high forehead and wide blue eyes framed by straight, streaky, shoulder length hair, which was, at the same time, light brown and dark blonde. It was parted on one side and held back by a clip on the other, heightening the impression that she was only just out of school.

He made a show of consulting the notes on his desk and turning over papers as if looking for vital information.

"How old did you say you were?"

"Eighteen and a half. I put my date of birth on the form."

"It says here that you have four 'A' levels."

"Yes that's right."

"Maths, special maths – whatever that is – physics and chemistry. Why do you want to be a model? Why don't you go to university?"

"My Mum and Dad want me to go to university but I persuaded them to let me take a gap year first. I want to earn some money."

"Lots of girls want to be models. It isn't enough to have a pretty smile."

She smiled her pretty smile and shrugged her shoulders in a 'how would I know' kind of way. Stalker pursed his lips and hid his interest behind a façade of boredom.

"I usually only take on girls, who are referred to me."

"I don't know anyone who could give me a reference."

Stalker drew again on the cigarette. "Does my smoking bother you?"

"No. Not at all."

"Do you like being photographed?"

"I think so."

"In your underwear?"

"I guess that's ok."

"And without it?"

She put her head to one side and avoided his gaze. "I suppose so."

Stalker sighed and drummed his fingers on the desk as if he had better things to do.

"Look! I can't promise you anything but if you want me to, I'll put you through the routine and then we'll see where we stand. Is that what you want?"

"Sure," she said quickly, without understanding what he meant.

Stalker reached to his left and pressed a button built into the top of his desk. There was an audible click as the door bolts slid into place. She turned her head in the direction of the door and sat up straighter in the chair, alarm clouding her beautiful face.

"A red light comes on above the door on the other side," Stalker said nonchalantly. "So that my assistant knows that we are not to be disturbed."

She bit her lip and nodded. "It made me jump."

"There is nothing to be afraid of. If you want to be a model we have to put you through your paces. See what you are made of. Do you still want to go ahead?"

She nodded vigorously. "Oh yes! It's ok. It took me by surprise. The business with the door."

Stalker sighed as if his patience was being stretched to its limit. "Stand behind the chair and unbutton your jacket. Oh and take your shoes off. You'll make holes in my carpet."

She had dressed with conservative sophistication for the interview. A dark blue two piece, with white blouse and blue stockings. The kind of outfit her mother might have worn. She kicked off the blue stilettos, rose from the chair and stood with hands on hips, the jacket drawn back behind her wrists.

"I said behind the chair."

"Sorry," she said turning on her heel.

"Never mind! Take a walk around my carpet instead. Leave the jacket on the back of the chair."

Melanie smiled and slipped the jacket off her shoulders. "Should I just walk normally or do you want me to slink and sway?"

"Slink and sway is fine but don't overdo it. Lose the skirt somewhere before you come back to the chair."

She stopped and confronted him over her shoulder. "You want me to do a striptease?"

"Do you know how to do a striptease?"

"Not really."

Stalker leant forward on his elbows. "I told you we have to put you through your paces. Models sell their bodies to the camera lens. I have to see what you have got to offer."

"It's ok. I'll take the skirt off."

"The blouse will be next so get yourself in the mood. Are you wearing a petticoat?"

"A what?"

"A slip, an underskirt. Something that comes between the skirt and your stocking tops."

"Sure I am. It's the middle of winter."

"That will be coming off too."

"I think I get the picture. Do I get to keep my bra and

pants?"

"Probably not but we'll get to that later. Let's see you slink and sway."

Melanie sashayed to the far corner of the carpet suppressing a nervous giggle as she fiddled with the zipper on her skirt. Halfway between the two far corners she stopped and let it slide over her slender hips to the floor.

"How tall are you?"

"Five seven and a half. I put it on the form."

Stalker knew already how tall she was. The minimum height was five eight. He wanted her to deal with it. He watched with quiet fascination as she slunk her way back towards the chair. She was certainly admirable and she knew it too. She might not yet understand what it meant but she knew that she had a body to be admired. Slim and fragile but endowed with soft feminine curves, which hinted at voluptuous power.

"Do you have any scars or birthmarks?"

"I had my appendix out two years ago but you can hardly see anything."

Stalker grunted. "What about tattoos?"

"No. I don't like them."

"Well that's a blessing at least. The blouse and slip come next. Then you can sit down."

The slip was a skimpy shift in white satin and lace with a tiny red bow at the hem. It barely covered the tops of her stockings. The remark about winter had been disingenuous and Stalker wondered for the first time how much of the youthful innocence she exuded was just for show. If she was playing games he would raise the stakes and find her limits. Passing the final barrier was where his pleasure really lay.

She took the blouse off slowly, tugging at the fasteners on her wrists, sliding her slim fingers under the buttons at her breast. She smiled her biggest smile and lifted a playful eyebrow as she pushed the blouse off her shoulders and set it down with her jacket on the back of the chair. She crossed one knee in front of the other and slid the thin straps of the slip off her shoulders, over her breasts and down to her waist. When it gathered on her hips she lifted her arms above her head and wriggled like a belly dancer till it fell past her knees to the floor. She stared at Stalker looking

for approval but he held his stoic mask of boredom in place. The smile left her face and she sat down briskly, crossing her left leg over her right. "I suppose you want me to take off my stockings next," she said, in a little fit of pique but Stalker was not about to let her take control.

"Do you always wear a bra?"

"No not always."

"Do you have anything inside it or is it filled with old socks?"

"Of course I have something inside it."

"Take it off."

"Alright if that's what you want." She struggled briefly with the hooks between her shoulder blades.

"Stand up and take another walk around the carpet!"

By the time she came back to the chair, Stalker had risen and walked round to the front of his desk. He hitched himself up, so that he was sitting on the desk with his feet dangling over the front.

"I want to see that appendix scar."

"There isn't anything to see."

"I have to make sure. Come over here and show me."

Melanie pushed her pants down over her hips and pointed with the finger of her left hand to the thin red line in her groin. Stalker shook his head.

"That won't do. You have to pass closer inspection. It's part of the process. Come over here!"

Melanie held her ground and reached for her blouse on the back of the chair. The interview was taking the turn she had all along expected but as the crucial moment arrived she realized that she really wasn't prepared. She didn't want to be used and discarded. It would be just too humiliating. Stalker saw her hesitation and stepped in quickly, fearful that she might panic and withdraw.

"There is a vacancy," he said softly. "You can start tomorrow but first you have to convince me to give you the job."

Melanie stood stock still for several seconds before she let her blouse fall back onto the chair. She stepped forward uncertainly and stopped outside the boundary of his parted knees. He reached out, took her by the elbows and pulled her forward until

the tops of the stockings came up against the edge of the desk. He slipped his hands behind her and ran his carefully manicured fingertips down her backbone, moving slowly from one vertebra to the next. She put her hands on his chest, as if holding him at bay.

He pulled her closer and felt her body stiffen in resistance. She arched her back to keep her face and mouth beyond his reach. For the first time Donald Stalker let a half smile cross his face. He relaxed the grip in his forearms and moved his hands gently to the outside of his knees. Stalker never used physical force. He hated to be rough in the physical sense. Stalker's violence was exercised in that nether world, which is somewhere between the psyche and the soul. She would reach her decision in time. He just had to keep her focused and, above all, unafraid.

"The job is yours for the taking," he went on, in the same soft reasonable tone. "I just need to be persuaded."

"Meaning what?" She asked quietly refusing to meet his gaze.

"Meaning that you can get anything in life, if you are prepared to pay the price."

She flinched as his fingers reached again for the base of her spine and stared resolutely at her own polished nails, as she fidgeted with the buttons on his shirt. "How do I know that you'll keep your word?"

"A promise is a promise. You'll have to trust me."

"And how do I know what the price is?"

Stalker smiled and pushed her hair back from her face. "You have a boyfriend, don't you? What do you do, when you want to persuade your boyfriend?"

"I watch football on TV."

"What else do you do?"

"I kiss him and cuddle him a bit."

Stalker took a deep breath and lifted her chin so that her eyes met his. He spoke in a flatter, rougher tone. "I want kisses, cuddles and everything that comes afterwards. Just like you do for your boyfriend. Do you understand?"

She nodded her beautiful head and averted her eyes for ten delicious seconds, before moving her hands to the back of his neck and pushing herself gently forward, into his arms. She was coiled like a spring when their lips met but Stalker remained impassive,

feigning indifference to the mounting pressure and the tentative excursions of her tongue. She pulled back slightly and fixed him with a long and penetrating gaze. Somewhere deep in the hooded blue eyes, Stalker saw her make up her mind, saw her resign herself to what she was going to do.

She put her carefully rehearsed model's smile back in place and moved her hands over his shoulders, over his chest and down to his thighs. Stalker kissed her lightly, took her slender wrist and led her across the room to the leather settees.

# Chapter 1

If you think that working as a private detective is exciting and glamorous let me put you straight. Most of the time it's a pain in the arse. On this particular morning at least I had a black cab for shelter and a grizzled old cabby for company. It beat pounding the pavement in the pouring rain. We were one of at least twenty black cabs slithering around Hyde Park Corner and heading down towards the Palace. In one of the other nineteen was the lady I was following.

'Tiny' Tony Simmons is a greengrocer and a worried man. After thirty years in the business, two failed marriages and a fortune spent at the dog track, Tiny learned how to use the Internet and bought himself a Filipino third wife, less than half his age. Tiny leaves the house at four thirty every morning to buy produce for his shop. He is rarely home before eight. It is the rigor associated with successful business. Something Tiny learned from his parents while he was still a boy. Tiny's new bride has only Basic English. She doesn't like to work at the shop. Tiny worries about how she passes the long days alone at their home in Maida Vale, especially since she never answers the phone when he calls.

It seems he may have cause to worry. This is Wednesday and my third day on the job. Monday and Tuesday the house in Maida Vale was empty when I got there. I caught my first glimpse of Juanita when she returned home around a quarter to six on Monday afternoon. This morning I showed up extra early, which was just as well. She left the house around seven, walked the first quarter mile and then started looking for a cab. When I realized

what she was doing I took the first cab that came along and waited for her to find one of her own.

The rain was heavier when we came to Trafalgar Square and I worried that my driver might wind up following the wrong cab.

"She's in the other lane. They're heading for Charing Cross Road."

"Do you have a license?"

"What?"

"Cos if you want to drive I can sit in the back and give you advice."

"Just don't lose them!"

"You think I never did this before? Have your wallet handy so you can pay me quickly when she stops – and don't forget the premium!"

"What premium?"

"The 'follow that cab' in the rush hour premium. You think this is a piece of cake?"

"I thought you said it was all in a day's work."

"So it is son – and so is the premium. A tenner at least."

We were heading east towards the City with Waterloo Bridge behind us and the Law Courts coming up on our left. Juanita's cab suddenly started to signal a right turn and made a dive for a gap in the oncoming traffic. Before we could turn into the same side street a couple of buses slid across our path and blocked the entrance. By the time the buses moved on and we could complete the turn, Juanita's cab was no longer in sight.

"There went your premium."

"Hold on a minute, lad! Keep your wallet handy!"

My cabby accelerated dangerously in the crowded street and headed at breakneck speed towards the river. Just before we reached the Embankment he made a handbrake assisted left turn and slid to a halt in front of a small hotel. We both ignored the torrent of abuse from the drenched cyclist who was riding on the pavement.

"Why did we stop?"

"Your party is in the hotel."

"Who says so?"

"I say so. I brought her here yesterday and the day before. I was looking for her this morning when you flagged me down."

"All in a day's work, eh?"

"Don't forget the premium!"

"Did she tell you why she comes here every morning?"

"Nah but my guess would be that she is on the staff. It's a bit early in the day for doing any business."

"Hotel staff use public transport. They can't afford to take a cab to work every morning."

"Stranger things have happened, Sherlock. I ain't all that interested."

I paid off the cab and included a handsome tip. I figured Tiny could afford it. There was no percentage in observing the hotel from outside in the pouring rain so I went straight in through the front door. The lobby was narrow with a counter on my left and a tiny elevator at the far end. There were a couple of doors with labels on them. 'Stairs' and 'Breakfast Room'. The place was painted like a chocolate sundae - cream, pink and light brown. There was a foreign gentleman behind the counter with slick black hair reaching the nape of his neck. He was handsome in a vaguely Latin way, with a smooth chin and gold studs in his ears. He wore a bright orange tee shirt with a palm tree and 'Hotel Amora' emblazoned on the front. Perfect for the Costa del Sol.

"Good morning! Can I get breakfast here?"

"Are you a guest, sir?"

"No I'm just hungry."

"Sorry but we only provide breakfast service for our guests. There are plenty of cafes around here that open for breakfast. If you go to the end of the street and turn right."

"Actually I'm looking for her." I dropped a photo of Juanita onto the counter.

He glanced at the photo but didn't pick it up. "Do you think she is having breakfast?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"Where is your partner?"

"What?"

"Policemen always travel in twos."

"I am not a policeman."

"So what are you?"

"Just a citizen."

"Why are you looking for this woman?"

"She's my sister."

"I don't think so, sir." He almost said 'senor'.

"She is here isn't she? You recognized her from the photo."

He shrugged. "I don't think I ever saw her before."

"Her husband is worried about her. She leaves the house every day and he doesn't know where she goes. Any husband would worry."

"Her husband is here."

"I beg your pardon."

"That's why she comes - to see her husband. He's the night manager. He has a room in the basement."

"What's his nationality?"

"Filipino. We all are."

"Where does she go at night?"

"She's a night nurse. She works out of town."

"Do they have any kids?"

"Two boys. They live with their grandparents in Battersea."

"Not much of a family life."

"People from Manila earn money any way they can. That's all they care about. Earn lots of money, save it up and go home."

"Yeah. I see what you mean."

"If you want to see Juanita it's best to come back in the afternoon. Enrico is just off shift and I wouldn't like to disturb them right now."

"There's no need. It looks like a case of mistaken identity. Happens all the time."

"Why were you looking for Juanita?"

"Missing persons inquiry but they must have got the wrong person. She isn't missing is she?"

"I guess not."

"Thanks for the chat."

I turned and headed for the street, wondering how I was going to tell Tiny that he was being set up for a sting. That's the problem with buying on the Net. You can never be sure what you're getting.

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Every time I get soaked in one of London's winter squalls, I ask myself, why I don't move south for the winter. I don't have to change hemispheres or anything. Even the Mediterranean winter

is tolerably short. The answer, I know, is a combination of inertia and an unstable bank account. Worse still I am getting older and set in my ways.

I used to have a career but that is all behind me. These days I am 'Alex Taylor Inc' and I eke out a living as best I can, from the skills I learnt in the army. 'Security Services' is what it says on my business card. That covers everything, from fitting fire alarms to spying on cheating wives.

One of the problems in earning your living in the way that I do, is that you get to see too much of some kinds of people. This is especially true for the police, who all too often see people like me, as a worthwhile first line of inquiry, into anything from runaways to bank heists. My parents always told me, that people, who have frequent business with the police, are probably shady characters. I guess they were right.

The Four Feathers is one of those pubs off the Horseferry Road, which caters to the lunchtime office trade. It serves excellent sandwiches and a just drinkable version of old ale, which they dish up in coppery looking pitchers holding four or five pints. The place occupies a basement, under a tower block, accessible from an alley, between that and the building next door. Furniture is scant and functional. Decor is nonexistent. The bare floors are tastefully strewn with sawdust. The whole place is a little dingy and a lot dusty, which makes it the perfect hangout for the majority of the clients, who are civil servants from the surrounding offices. The crumpled civil servant look is also a trademark of Detective Inspector Arthur Endleigh.

Arthur is the son of a prosperous Home Counties accountant, recently retired and now cruising happily between his illicit stockpiles in offshore tax havens. A childhood spent in minor public schools, where most of the inmates had only half his intelligence, instilled in Arthur a liking for the easy life, which held him back at the minor Oxford College he subsequently attended and has done so since, in his career with Her Majesty's Plodders. He has, however, inherited his father's talent for cooking the books and enjoys modest success, through a combination of slyness and astute delegation. For reasons, which probably have much to do with a lack of resolution on my part, one of those to whom he likes to delegate is me.

An extended lunch at the Four Feathers is an indulgence Arthur hardly ever passes up. When I shuffled quietly down the carpet-less wooden stairs, at about a quarter to one, he was already installed at one of the few tables; scoffing his sandwich and issuing instructions to the two young detective constables who do most of his work for him. His usual companion, the equally shifty Detective Sergeant Hairline Harry Cavendish, was nowhere to be seen, for which blessing I was immediately grateful. Harry, whose hairline, as you might have guessed, joins his ears together round the back of his head, has an even more dubious past than Arthur and today is probably the capital's foremost authority, on the ancient art of being on the make.

I sauntered over to Arthur's table, scooped up the last remaining chair in the place and helped myself to a glass of Old Ale from Arthur's pitcher.

"Do sit down dear boy. Don't worry about not having an invitation."

"The word is you wanted a chat."

"The word was two days ago. Things have moved on."

"Nothing moves on that fast, Arthur. Not between you and me."

Arthur grunted and peered pointedly into his empty pitcher. I took the hint and ambled over to the bar. People in my profession are used to getting a hard time from coppers, who generally take the view that, if the private sector should exist at all, it should be reserved exclusively for their retirees. I do not, of course, qualify on that count. He did favor me with a benign grimace of sorts, when I returned with the refill.

"You ever hear of a High Court Judge called Mc Cloed?"

"Can't say that I have."

"Starchy old Scot. Part of the old order. Holier than thou. Talks with a mouthful of vinegar but like all puritans, susceptible to the odd temptation. In his case the temptations of the flesh."

"Sounds fairly run of the mill to me Arthur."

"Well His Worship was recently the victim of a blackmail scam. Having worked him up into a high state of readiness, the young lady he had invited to his hotel room jumped off the bed and opened the door to her boyfriend and another young lady of more tender age. The young girl jumps out of her frock and

onto the judge, the boyfriend opens up with the automatic shutter release and in less than a minute, all three have scarpered, leaving his High and Mightiness confused, frustrated and not a little angry.

"Needless to say the glossy five by tens arrived next morning. An artistic, full color sequence of the underage tongue on the judge's tits and the juvenile fingers wrapped firmly round his wedding tackle. The price for recovery of the negatives was included in the package."

I allowed myself a cheesy grin but said nothing. Arthur obviously had more to tell.

"He paid up of course - a professionally arranged drop in the middle of Selfridges - and he got his photos back. Then he called up his old college pals in the Home Office. Eventually, I was asked to call on the Under Secretary of this and that, who gave me a long lecture on the failures of our present day education system and told me to get these vermin off the streets."

"Congratulations, Arthur. I feel a lot safer knowing you are on the case."

"No one would waste their time blackmailing you, dear boy."

I tried to stifle a yawn. "I was thinking of the principle."

"This kind of racket isn't all that popular these days. Is there any word on the street?"

"How would I know, Arthur?"

"Well! Hotel bedrooms being one of your specialties . . ."

"Very funny! As a matter of fact, I have spent most of the last month fitting security alarms for Old Age Pensioners. It's the only growth sector in my business portfolio."

"Would you like to put the word out? The game is so well organized these days, a rogue operation like this is bound to cause a bit of a stir."

"Is this a business opportunity, Arthur, or am I doing you a favor?"

"You are doing yourself a favor, dear boy. The meek and the curious will inherit the Earth."

"Come on, Arthur! Find out who supplied the girl! I don't suppose he picked her up in the street."

"We are working on that, dear boy. Just keep your eyes and

ears open.”

“Why me? I don’t exactly move in those circles.”

Arthur sighed and stared into a distant corner of the room. “Blackmail is bad for business. Others are taking an interest.”

“Such as?”

“No one deserves what Mickey Monahan will do to them, if he finds them first.”

Mickey Monahan is a London businessman. At least, that is what he likes to call himself. Amongst other things, he runs a string of Night Clubs and about half the call girls in the city. I now understood why Arthur was telling me this sad little story. Mickey and I go back a long way.

\*\*\*

The Manor is not just a pub it is my home. At least the flat on the top floor is. Dave, my landlord in all senses of the word, calls it a penthouse on account of the two square yards of terrace accessible from my kitchen, via a French Window of the kind of dimensions, which were popular with archers, when they used to defend castles. My modest plastic picnic table had to be taken to pieces and reassembled on the outside. The tasteful, matching, one-piece plastic chairs I had to haul up from the street on a rope. The terrace nestles between the ridges of the annex roof and is artfully contrived to catch the maximum amount of pollution, in the form of either smoke from the boiler chimney or traffic noise from the High Street bus station. To discourage the pigeons from brooding, breeding and shitting all over it, I adopted a tabby kitten, which I hopefully christened ‘Prowler’ and which, I am very happy to say, has grown up into one of the biggest, meanest felines I have ever known. One of my few successes.

There isn’t much about the rest of the place, which would conjure up analogies to the word ‘penthouse’ either. The paper has been on the walls too long. The plumbing is too old, too noisy and too visible. Furniture and fittings are an ill-matched hotchpotch whose only common theme is a tendency towards dilapidation. I threw out the bed to replace it by one I could actually fit in but that cost me most of the space in the bedroom and a fretful weekend wrestling bed components and mattresses up and down the narrow stairs. Dave argues that I should restore the original bed and the holes in the stairwell plaster before I eventually leave but

I think he is going to be disappointed.

Despite its many shortcomings the penthouse is home to Prowler and I and provides a sanctum within which we can lick our wounds, restock our energies and prepare for further sallies into the hostile world of NW1. I can watch the six nations without having to endure the entreaties of the intelligentsia in the public lounge. I can let the PC beat me at chess. And on the increasingly rare occasions when there is a woman in my life, I have a place to surprise her with my skill in the kitchen and the heart-warming potency of decent French wine.

I did not put Cynthia into this category, however, and, like many of my visitors, I had decided to receive her in the little parlor adjacent to the main bar at the front of the pub. We all have memories, which haunt us and Cynthia is one of mine. My first ever love affair. The Eve in my paradise of innocence lost. In truth it only looks so innocent with hindsight. Our Chapel Youth Club was a hotbed of original sin.

Cynthia Washington wasn't quite sixteen and I wasn't quite eighteen, when we fell in love. Together we broke all the harmless barriers to adult life. From underage drinks and weekend cigarettes, to the trials of buying contraceptives, life consisted only of our sweet conspiracy. I can still feel the thud of her bosom hitting my chest the day she raced across our dirty northern schoolyard and threw herself into my embarrassed arms.

Cyn shone like a beacon wherever she went. On sultry summer nights, bare legged and mini skirted, she turned more heads than a Wimbledon final. I was just one of a host of moths drawn to her flame.

Cyn had charms, which belied her tender age. A sexual chemistry, which was fresh and exciting but at the same time, as old as the hills. Cyn danced close and breathy, wore her blouses unbuttoned and on every Youth Club hiking trip, went missing in the woods. Little girls all learn to seduce their fathers, with knowing glances and a secret smile. Cyn had a smile, which could have stopped a charging bull. A smile that started in her eyes and smoldered at you, from every corner of her beautiful face.

I forget who first gave her the nickname but 'Breathless Sin' suited her perfectly. She was always on the move; always into mischief and the very distillation of the sin we all most wanted

to try.

I haven't seen or heard of Cyn in years and suddenly she calls me up. She wants to know how I am doing – have a chat about old times. I can't imagine why but I suggested that she come over to the Manor. It is not as if I had anything better to do.

She turned up five minutes early but I was already comfortably installed with a pint of bitter and the Evening Standard. I didn't have any trouble recognizing her. Cyn has always been a woman that men look at twice.

"Hello Alex. You haven't changed a bit. Am I late? I got on the tube in the wrong direction and had to double back."

"You're early as a matter of fact - and you haven't changed either." I got up and pulled her into the peck on the cheek greeting, I felt most appropriate to our history. When I looked into her face and she smiled a nervous smile, I was suddenly eighteen again and all the years that had passed were a brief moment that had never existed.

"You look well Alex," she said softly. "I hope you don't mind me calling you up like this. It's very good of you to see me at such short notice."

"Of course I don't mind." I surfaced slowly from the reverie and breathed in a big headful of the new Cyn. She was still a beautiful woman. Slim and elegant with hardly a line to testify to the years that had passed. Her hair was piled up and folded into a pleat behind her head. Remarkably its red blonde hue was still intact. Long drop earrings rocked and swayed against her neck as she folded back the collar of her coat. The vampire in me showed the tiniest hint of fang. I guided her to the corner table, which is the nearest thing the Manor has to cozy and discreet, and we spent a few minutes hanging coats, ordering drinks and getting ourselves installed.

I had an overpowering urge to tell her that seeing her again brought back our school days and how much I had been in love with her, but I managed to get it under control. Instead I just sat there with a big silly smile on my face and I told her how beautiful she still was. The kind of backhanded compliment, at which I excel. She took it with a wry smile whilst she rummaged in her handbag for a cigarette. I didn't remember her smoking when last we had met.

"Do I still measure up to your teenage memories, Alex? That is quite a compliment."

"They were happy days," I said blandly, trying hard to get the conversation onto a more general footing. I didn't want to tell her they had been the happiest days of my life.

"Happy and carefree," she added with half a wistful sigh. "Life was a lot simpler when the biggest problem of the day was who was going to walk me home after Youth Club."

"There was never any shortage of volunteers."

"That's not true. Most of the boys were so shy. I used to hang around for hours waiting for somebody to get up the courage to ask."

"I remember it well. We used to hang around for hours waiting to see if somebody would."

She laughed and the mischief I so well remembered sprang into her eyes. "You and those friends of yours. Watching me like a pack of wolves. I swear your eyes rolled every time I sat down and crossed my legs."

"We were estimating distances. It's easier when you roll your eyes."

She laughed again. "Still the same old Alex. Always a clever answer."

"So at least you remember me."

"Of course I remember you, Alex. You were my first. How could I possibly forget?"

I wasn't sure that I deserved the distinction but it was nice of her to make the effort. I began to wonder why she had come.

"There was so much that we discovered together. Do you remember that day we made love in Benson's field?"

Did I? Stark bollock naked, running with sweat and I looked up to see three old guys watching us over the wall. They didn't say a word. They didn't make a move or even look away. They just stood there and kept right on watching. I was caught between passion and reason. Neither Cyn nor I were in any fit state for a confrontation. She didn't even know they were there. In the end I just ignored them and never told her. There wasn't much else I could do.

When she saw me smiling at the memory Cyn nodded her head and smiled in her turn. "Three old guys were watching us

over the wall.”

“I know. I never told you.”

“One of them was my Uncle George.”

“What?”

“The old guys. One of them was my Uncle George. Well he wasn’t my real uncle. I just called him ‘Uncle’. He was really an old school chum of my grandmother’s.”

“Did he recognize you?”

“Fraid so. He had a quiet word with my old man and I wound up over the back of the sofa having the slut beaten out of me. Uncle George got to watch that too.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“For the same reason that you didn’t tell me. I wanted to spare your blushes. You had a hot temper in those days. I wasn’t sure how you would react.”

I was as lost for words as I had been when I first looked up all those years ago. There didn’t seem to be anything suitable to say. Cyn sensed my unease and leant forward to grip my forearm.

“It wasn’t such a big deal. By the standards of the time I got what I deserved. We were rebels you and I. We were breaking all their rules.”

I hid behind a long pull on my pint of bitter and wondered what the hell was going on. Cyn had been here five minutes and had already hung a huge debt of guilt on me and an idealistic perception of our relationship, which I had never hitherto appreciated. I was already out of my depth and beginning to feel wary of what might be coming next. Cyn continued to lead our mutual reminiscences.

“Do you remember the Chapel Youth Club? All that table tennis and cocoa. God it was awful being young.”

“What was so awful? I don’t remember you being anything but super confident and cool.”

“Don’t be so bitchy! I was just as nervous as everybody else. I just hid it better, that’s all. I can remember how shy you were. How many hours I had to play bloody table tennis, just so that I could stumble occasionally into your arms. God I was hot for you then.”

“Don’t tell lies. The one you were hot for was that lay preacher with the tweed coat and leather patches. The one with the warm

soft voice and the hair that fell down over his eyes.”

“Oh him! I hope for Mary Burton’s sake that he had warm soft hands as well. Didn’t he get defrocked or something for feeling down her blouse?”

“He got off with a warning. Claimed he was led astray.”

“What? By Mary Burton? She was nearly nineteen and still wearing hair ribbons.”

“At the time of his intrusion twixt the shirt buttons, rumor has it that she was painting a cross on the end of his cock.”

“What?” Cyn burst into a peal of girlish laughter.

“With nail varnish, I believe. Recently acquired and cherry red. Must have been hell to wash off.” By now we were both giggling like children and our hands met across the table, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. As if we were stepping back in time.

“You must be making that up, Alex. It couldn’t be that I missed out on such juicy gossip as that.”

“I learnt about it years later. From Mary’s little sister. We went out together for a time.”

“Little Marjorie? She was only twelve.”

“Not years later she wasn’t.”

“She had ginger hair and freckles.”

“She had red hair and freckles suited her.”

“She wasn’t exactly Rita Hayworth!”

“Nobody was exactly Rita Hayworth. Young Marjorie had many redeeming qualities.”

“Such as?”

“Oh she was very entertaining. She told great stories for a start, especially about her sister. Then she liked to do the dance of the seven veils.”

“You are definitely putting me on.”

“No, honest. Marjorie had a passion for exotic dancing. It was after she saw Maureen O Hara and Jeff Chandler in some Arabian Nights movie about sheiks and slave girls. The gold chains really suited her.”

“She wore gold chains?”

“Sometimes, yes!”

“Only gold chains?”

“Only a cad would divulge such details.”

We laughed again and she steepled her fingers over the backs of my hands. "You are much funnier now than you used to be." She sat back and the wicked laughter in her eyes gave way to a reflective glaze.

"You never were that were you? A cad I mean. You were always so decent and principled. My knight in shining armor – but it could get a bit boring at times!"

"Be careful! I am susceptible to flattery."

"You didn't used to be. You were the least susceptible person I ever knew. That's part of the reason I came to look you up."

I waited, thinking that this might be the moment, that Cyn would start to tell me, why she had come to seek me out after such a long time. Without warning she pulled my hands to her bosom, leant across the table and surprised me with a kiss, which wasn't at all passionate but lingered just long enough to stir up a cloud of memories, which had lain for years like sediment in the basement of my brain.

"For old times' sake, Alex. I hope old times still mean as much to you as they do to me. For old times' sake I have to ask you a big favor."

"Go ahead and ask. You didn't need the kiss. I do favors for all kinds of people."

Cyn sighed a big sigh. "I had forgotten how prickly you can be. The kiss was for me not for you. I just wanted to remember."

"I think we both remember well enough. Why don't you just go ahead and tell me why you came."

Cyn started to rummage in her handbag. "Do you have any family, Alex? A little woman tucked away somewhere? An ex and a couple of kids?"

The answer was 'no' on all counts.

"I have an ex and a grown up daughter. I'm trying to find the pictures."

Cyn had left our native Yorkshire a few years before I had, in the company of an ambitious young engineer called Dick O Hare. Rumor had it that she was pregnant at the time.

Finally she came up with a packet of photos. They had been taken on a night out at a disco. Mother, daughter and their escorts. "This," she said, with obvious glowing pride, "is Debbie."

I smiled an admiring smile and selected one photo of mother

and daughter, sitting either side of the older of the two escorts, a well groomed individual of about my own age. I cannot say that the daughter was even more beautiful than the mother, because I had known the mother at the same age. Debbie was a little taller, a little fairer but in all other respects her mother reincarnated. She had the same smile and the same light in her eyes. The photo had a special poignancy for me. It was like looking back into my youth. I held the picture by one corner and looked over it into Cyn's eyes.

"How old is she?"

Cyn smiled and brushed her slender fingers across the back of my hand. "She is the right age but she is not yours. She'll be nineteen later this year."

"Like mother, like daughter."

"Too true, I am afraid. Headstrong, stubborn, leaps before she looks. Just like her Mum."

"So what's the problem?"

"Debbie's boss is the problem. He wants to take her to South Africa."

"Permanently?"

"No! Of course not permanently!" Patience had never been one of Cyn's strong points. "He wants her to go with him on a business trip."

"Does she want to go?"

"Yes."

I shrugged my shoulders. "You know how it goes, Cyn. You have probably been asked on lots of business trips in your time."

She threw up her hands in a gesture of exasperation. "For Christ's sake, Alex. I am not worried about her being seduced. Debbie is well able to take care of herself in that department."

"Then what are you worried about?"

"Debbie works as a model for a small agency in Soho run by a man called Donald Stalker. I have friends who used to be models. They tell me Stalker provides girls to sweeten business deals. I don't want my Debbie turning into a whore."

I smiled at her brightly. "You could hire me as a chaperone."

She looked shocked and then looked as if she was going to get up and leave.

"It's all right. It's all right," I said, laughing. "I know Stalker."

I'll call round and tell him that Debbie isn't for sale."

"You bastard!" She leant over the table and kissed me again. This time the kiss was for me.

I took a last look at the photo before slipping it into my jacket pocket. "Who is the guy in the middle?"

Cyn smiled a knowing smile, as if it was inevitable that I should want to know. "That's Nick. He is a friend of mine. We see each other now and then."

We exchanged phone numbers and left the Manor around seven, without my mentioning that I lived in a flat upstairs. We took a cab to Waterloo where I put her on a train for suburban Basingstoke. She lived and worked there as a receptionist for a computer company. At the ticket counter she turned and gave me the briefest of kisses before running off for her train. I watched her go as a dozen other kisses bounced through my memory. Kisses in bus shelters, kisses in cinemas, kisses under the street lamp outside her house. I knew that I was being sentimental to the point of being maudlin but I couldn't bring myself to care.

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By nine, with a small steak inside me, I and around five million others, were being lulled into an early sleep by another scintillating performance from our national football team, when Prowler uncharacteristically jumped into my lap and, claws, as usual, fully extended, began kneading my chest, while he sniffed around my neck like a puppy.

A rampant misogynist, Prowler is always openly hostile towards my paramours and he fixed me with a suspicious glare as he took in the scent of Cyn's embrace. Before he could spit in my eye I worked my hand under his belly and lobbed him deftly to the other end of the sofa.

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