

The Best Scandal Ever –

Collected series so far.....

by Ina Disguise

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Preface

For the benefit of new markets, and readers who would not otherwise download such small publications, I have compiled the series into one volume. *Ina Disguise* represents my sandbox, so both this and *Short Misadventures*, my other compilation title, represent my emergence as a cultural experimenter, both in the form of researching new information and in expressing the results. A merely academic approach would not have been sufficient to cover the material I learned from David Wolfe, and still isn't. I am still working on computer games, further artwork and am moving into film and performance art before returning to the raw academic material that underpins much of the work.

In the course of my lifelong adventures in the raw food and alternative health movement, I could not help but notice a very restricted field, so I made efforts to use my strange and yet apparently long-lasting affection for David Wolfe to create a new medium for pushing the boundaries a little. I really wasn't expecting the love of my life to be quite such a fulfilling challenge. Hence, you will find some of the work quite thought-provoking, as it is designed to throw a gauntlet rather than relax the reader.

True love is not a pleasant thing, either for the person who experiences it, the unwilling or unaware recipient, or for people fortunate enough to be in actual long-term relationships. Sometimes it is charming, sometimes an adventure, sometimes terrifying, sometimes horrific, and the intention was with the *Best Scandal Ever*, to reflect that as best I could using the materials I had to hand, which were mostly Wolfe and I. It has often been very painful, and extremely lonely. Wolfe has a life of his own, so is relatively unaffected. He has been very tolerant, however, and as a result is now the proud owner of *Honey I made you an icon*, the artwork on the cover.

The work for Wolfe is far from finished, however I think we are through this introductory slapstick phase. He was most perturbed by my interest when we first met, but hopefully has a handle on what I am doing now, so it is time to move on to phase 2, both from a timeframe and evolutionary perspective.

It is important to understand and accept what you are in order to do something with it, and even when you are made aware, sometimes it takes time for you to know what to do with it. I even have a different walk than I used to, never mind the wish to live.

What I would most like from the reader, is a spirit of self-acceptance and personal growth that I have been keener to promote than even I was aware of. What I would like Wolfe to accept from it, is that there is no shame in **NEEDING TO HAVE YOUR ASS KICKED** now and again.

Best Adventure Ever is a computer game, and is still not finished due to Ina's current horror of nurses after the death of her mother, and so this part of the series will be released later. It takes a different slant at much the same topic, and players will be able to decide if they wish to be Kira or Sam in the course of a learning experience. I will be encouraging some input from Wolfe at a later stage in development, however I do not think he will be unhappy at what I have done with it.

Not offering a hug or so much as a glance as I don't want to be friend-zoned.

Ina

The Best Scandal Ever

It was hot in the slate blue classroom, even for California. Sam shifted uncomfortably in his seat, adjusting the blue woollen poncho he habitually wore during his public events at his damp neck. Metal chairs ground against the linoleum floor as his audience prepared to leave, clutching folders and now lukewarm water bottles.

He used a finger to lift a blonde tendril of his long hair over the neckline from where it was sticking to his skin, rubbed his chin, carefully avoiding smearing the coconut oil that concealed the worst of the sun damage and scoped the room. Four, maybe five possibles?

People often commented on his youtube channel that he was clearly feeling the cold because of his vegan diet, but the reality was that Sam the diet expert was fat. He had been even fatter before he had given up food but even on a liquid diet – the fact could not be escaped. Sam, the leonine and now rather eccentric last baby of a plump late mother, was born to be deliciously cuddly.

At school as a teenager, he had been teased mercilessly about his weight and manic inability to stop talking. His short neck made this look worse than it really was. He hid his pain by out-talking and at least trying to out-perform his classmates, and apart from the occasional spiteful exchange with the more popular blue eyed Aryan jock loving girls, managed to escape the worst effects on his self-confidence, enjoying his college years as a musician before the plane crash stymied his post-college career in the uber-masculine world of railway construction. As such, a formerly corpulent and over talkative hippy geek became the internationally famous yippy health guru and motivational expert – Sam Redwood.

“Thank you so much, Sam, you’ve changed our lives forever.” Sam heard this every day. The elderly couple were quivering slightly as they looked at him, damp eyed as the diminutive wife described how her frail looking, quiet husband had suffered colon cancer and recovered from a terminal diagnosis thanks to Sam’s work. Sam nodded and smiled and noted the thirty five year old blonde behind them.

“I’m so happy to hear that. It’s so nice to meet you both. I’m so glad I helped.” The usual response whilst he waited until today’s prize reached the front of the queue waiting to shake his over-warm hand. He quickly reached for his cold glass of water before the slightly overweight, sweating blonde got to him, beaming and battering eyelashes with unfortunately clogged mascara.

“I’m such a huge fan of yours, Sam.”

“Really? That’s good to hear! Are you rushing off anywhere, or do you have time to wait while I pack up?”

Sam liked girls. Sam liked lots of girls. Girls in every town he spoke in welcomed Sam on the same one night only basis every time he visited. Indeed, Sam would sometimes have to make excuses to avoid some of them, they were so keen. Never in his life previously had he dreamed that one day he would have the pick of quite so many women, and many of his former school mates looked on with envy at his legendary lifestyle and success with women. This one wasn’t on his ‘ten’ list, but she was a little imperfect, which he liked, and extremely keen to get to know him, which he liked even more.

“Is that true, that you’re the richest hippy in the world?”

“How about I tell you about it over some food?” Sam donned his particularly foxy mirrored sunglasses.

Another meal. Poor Sam worried a little, but if he was going to get today’s prize, a meal was necessary to provide the time necessary to close the deal. This one hadn’t been taking his advice for very long – she still had the skin of a conventional eater. A little encouragement, he thought, and soon she would have the glowing skin and bright eyes of the raw vegan.

Two hours later and Sam was dressing after a lengthy shower during which the offending mascara had mercifully been removed.

“Well, thank you, maam.” He smiled at her. She, not believing her luck, smiled back. What a story for her hard drinking ‘normal’ friends when she saw them later for a not-at-all-raw beer and Corn chips. Sam Redwood, who would believe it!

“When will you finish?” Una looked at the heap of bedclothes concealing her daughter, who was trying to hide under her handstitched patchwork quilt in an effort not to be seen slacking.

“I don’t know, mum. Please just go to bed. It will be done in the morning.”

Kira had been painting the narrow tall bathroom for five hours, fifteen minutes at a time, and was having another lie down to regain the strength to continue. A combination of liver disease, exhaustion and grief was making a normally simple job very, very hard.

“I tried to put the ladder up in the bath to get to the corner, but I thought the bath would probably crack under my weight.”

Kira was four hundred pounds. She hadn’t always been this weight, it had gone up and down constantly for fifteen years, between cancer, attempts to give up smoking and continuous bereavement, she had ‘given up, giving up’ and was hoping for a swift death. Painting the bathroom was essential however. Kira was not a girl for giving up on work, even if she had given up on her misbehaving body.

The doorbell rang and Una went to answer it, shaking her head slightly. She knew Kira would finish the job, but the tiredness was worrying. She wasn’t going to let Kira know that, however. It was not the Scottish Presbyterian way to show compassion on a day-to-day basis. Compassion was for very special occasions.

It was ex number four.

“Kira?” The tall aging punk smiled apologetically.

“She won’t see you if you’ve been drinking, you know that.”

“OK” Harry turned to go. He had never grown out of his fear of Una in the twenty five years since he had started seeing Kira. He knew he was one of a crowd of men who had never got over her, but he still felt the need to try and get her back after a few beers for courage. Kira was special, it didn’t matter what size she was she was still special to him. So special, in fact that took some personal pride in the fact he had bonked one hundred and twenty pounds off her weight a few years before.

Unfortunately, he was well aware that four other exs felt exactly the same way.....

Kira heard the front door close two floors below and sighed. ‘At least I can get the bathroom finished,’ she thought. ‘I promised dad to get the house done, and I’ll be damned if I won’t before I die.’

Kira, a notoriously foul-tempered Scottish academic, had had a hard five years. Losing two relatives and a couple of friends one after another had left her feeling miserable enough, but the lack of work after graduating from two degrees and corruption in the temporary jobs she was able to secure had left her with no confidence in any of the beliefs she had held so dearly before studying. Hard work did not have a reward, and you cannot trust people you stupidly trusted at sixteen when pushing forty. There are no prizes for holding off on having a family or waiting for the right person, and family are not necessarily on your side. Kira’s faith in everything had gone, apart from finishing the house life seemed entirely devoid of a happy horizon.

Over the years, Kira had learned to use art to delay bouts of despair, and two pieces of work were waiting to be finished even after the house had been repaired. The endless stream of exs requiring her attention had long ceased to be a solace and become a major pain, although it was gratifying to still pull at four hundred pounds. How many women would have multiple boyfriends at this size? She allowed herself a portly smirk in the mirror at the folly of her exs. They were all still liars, and all she really wanted was someone honest. The relationship with Harry had failed when he still couldn’t tell her the truth when she asked him to try seeing other people in order to tell her honestly about it. She had thought this would either provide the reassurance to make it work, or break them, and break them it certainly did. Apparently men prefer to lie and pretend monogamy even when totally incapable of it.

Kira struggled to her feet and shuffled back to the bathroom to tape a paintbrush to a broom handle. At least she could avoid breaking the bath.

“So what was this one like, Sam?” Don, Sam’s best friend was on the phone for a chick update. Sam was standing in yet another horrible hotel room with a bottle of water in his other hand.

“Oh ya know, blonde, nice tits – not so hot in the sack, better in the shower, but it wasn’t a busy day.”

Don laughed. Sam’s path to the stars was paved with women just like this. Sam’s life was a lengthy porn movie, punctuated by financial ups and downs and the occasional collapse from tiredness. Sam never seemed to stop – Don admired the energy but was glad he had decided to settle down. He looked at the unsuspecting bison, grazing half a mile away from the ranch house, and thought about his delightfully cuddly and happy girlfriend, asleep in his bed. He could chop some wood and think about dinner later.

“Gotta go, Don, meeting with the new execs.”

“Haha, enjoy that, Sam.”

Sam was off to meet the new investors in his baby, Ragha Health Foods.

Dr Malcolm Swartz shook his head.

“I just don’t understand how they can take it all away?”

Malcolm had just been struck off for over-prescribing medication. All the years he had been an MD, all the lunches, all the holidays, all the meetings. He had always thought giving people what they wanted was all he had to do. What people wanted, sick patients and pharmaceutical salesmen alike, appeared to be as many medications as possible.

“What am I going to do, Celia?”

“Before or after the divorce?” Celia, a well-groomed, well-kept, bejewelled goddess, was not the most sympathetic of women at the best of times. Now she was furious to discover that instead of the spoilt Jewish wife of a major earner, she was the wife of a disgraced MD and would not be attending any more country club lunches. “I’m not kidding, Malcolm.” She dropped her tone to indicate seriousness.

Malcolm briefly visualised his own suicide before retreating to the white yoga room overlooking the ocean. He would have to sell his beloved condo, he knew that. It would all have to go, pretty quickly too. Life based on credit was considered good citizenship in Malibu, he had never been a saver.

Celia had big expectations. How could you just lose everything in one day? He adopted the crocodile pose and as he stretched towards the ceiling, calculated he could possibly hide a few hundred grand. Enough to scratch a living without working, he supposed, but he would have to find another way to really live. As for losing her, she was a good hostess and had been a good mother, but good company she was not. The money was more of a concern, and sleeping in the overwarm minimalist white guestroom in his own house wasn’t Malcolm’s idea of fun at all.

He had always liked out west, property was cheaper there. He could sit and think for a while, plan his next move. For years, contemplating a bleak future with Celia, he had been concealing small works of Art from promising artists in his fishing lodge. He also had a rather extensive bonsai collection he could dispose of – she would probably sneer at that too. Celia wouldn’t be seen dead in a fishing lodge, and so at least that was safe. Yes, he figured, she could take her (several) million dollarsworth of flesh and leave him with enough to start over. It wouldn’t be a rich living, but he was sure something would come up. He concentrated on his breathing as he stretched his spine towards the heavens.

Joseph was hungover. He had been out partying all night with his friends from his college football team, and had just cancelled his usual Saturday workout with the guys. He put his stinking football gear into the washing machine and sprayed the bag with some horrible smelling fabric freshener before opening his narrow apartment window and sticking it as close to the draught as possible. He wasn’t sure what was making him feel quite so bad, but whatever it was he thought he had better stay exactly where he was until work started on Monday. Large shrieking women in an enclosed space doing dull, dull office work. He groaned at the mere thought. His mother may be very proud but city living since college didn’t suit Joseph at all, and he was tired of pretending he was something he wasn’t. He flicked on the computer on the small desk. There must be something else he could do. He randomly searched, eyes still hurting from the smoke and flashing lights from the night before. Might as well get wasted, he thought, and rolled a small fat joint. By evening, Joseph, by now rather unkempt and smelly, was lying on the floor staring at the ceiling. He had found the answer, not only to his hangover, but to his feelings of impending doom in regard to post-college city life. Tomorrow he would empty the cupboards into the garbage and start his new life. His mother wouldn’t be happy, he knew that, but in a few months he would be his own boss! He got up, ran a bath and deftly rolled another fat one.

Peter the fruitarian got off his bike with some relief.

“Fuck that, for a game of soldiers.” Lovely, his ravishing but noticeably thin girlfriend, took the bike from him and handed him a towel. She sat down and watched him rub the mud and sweat from his legs.

“No money though, what are we going to do?”

“It’s Ok, we can sleep at Toni’s and I’m sure she’ll have a few bananas in, eh? We can use some of the youtube money until next month. The website is paying for itself now.”

Peter had just quit the race before the end. Lovely knew that this was a considerably better option for his temper than losing, but sponsorship wasn’t going to appear at this rate and they had nowhere to live. Not that this was too serious in Western Australia, there seemed to be an endless procession of friends with fruit and beds to stay with, but something had to change. Lovely was well used to uncertainty, but sometimes it would be nice if he would just finish a race so they could have some sort of actual living.

“I feel like making a video, what do you reckon?” Peter grinned at Lovely. “A real nice one, too. Got your bikini, love? We can take down Sam Redwood again, that’s always fun.”

“Redwood will do as he’s told, you can see that just by looking at him.” Richard White, a tall distinguished east coaster, cast a gimlet eye across the breakfast table at his errant nephew. A younger member of the most evil family business in North America, he had just invested heavily in health food in the form of buying most of Ragma Health. He still needed guidance in the family ways, nevertheless.

“I wouldn’t count on it, he’s a stupid hippy. Stupid hippies have principles.” His neatly attired nephew pursed his lips.

“Haven’t you seen his background? He’s a very rich stupid hippy, and you don’t become a very rich stupid hippy without being corruptible. Go ahead with Ragma, and make sure he knows exactly what he has to do or get rid of him.”

“OK, Uncle Richard, but I’m pretty sure we’re gonna have to lose him. We can’t risk it.”

“Don’t worry about it, as long as his face is on the labels he can’t do or say much about it.”

Kira looked at the consultant in some disbelief.

“Sorry?”

“You’re deaf because you’re fat. I’m very surprised at your blood pressure, you obviously weren’t always so fat.”

“What exactly is the connection between being fat and going deaf? And I may well be fat, but I’m not stationary you know. I’ve been renovating a house for the last two years, and looking after 4 elderly people.”

“I’m advising antacids for indigestion. I think there must be fluid build-up behind your ears, you certainly aren’t conventionally deaf. But you are very fat.”

How very observant. Kira realised there was no point whatsoever in talking to this person. Kira was now gaining weight on orange juice and rice cakes, and could see no real reason for a 7lb gain per week, never mind the increasing skin problems or deafness. Her doctor had simply said “Stop eating.” As this evidently meant completely, Kira could see no way of avoiding eating herself to death.

Back at the GP, still shuffling in her late father’s slippers, Kira finally got an appointment for the new Obesity Specialist centre. She couldn’t quite understand the logic of her doctor, she had lost a hundred and twenty pounds in the previous few years low carbing at his suggestion, so her doctor evidently knew she had some degree of willpower, but she assumed that it was because of her desperate request for surgery and this was some new procedure of the NHS. He appeared to think her tiredness was simply grief and she would require some sort of support system to lose it all again. Kira had once been a hundred and forty pounds, and now she was four hundred. It didn’t actually change her life at all, same faces, same demands, a few more inadequate suitors actually when she was big. The only difference was that now her hair was falling out, she was conscious of the dying process. All she had to do was outlive her mother, that was all that was required and then nothing would matter anymore. The prospect of dying wasn’t nearly as worrying as the mystery illness that was getting worse every day. She worried about not outliving her mother, and about not fulfilling her promise to her late father of making sure everything was OK with the house. The dying bit, however, was not much of a concern. Kira had had enough.

Hilary measured her waist again.

“I’m tiny!”

“Yep, I told you. Just keep doing it and you will stay that way too.” Nina smiled as she swiped the apple out of her son’s hand. “Apples are for Saturdays, Colin. It isn’t Saturday. What else would you like to eat?”

Colin, a small blonde boy, decided to try the salt option instead. “Liquid aminos and lamb’s lettuce?” He hoped that this would be the correct answer. He knew from experience that this varied. “Better, yes you can have that.” Nina reached for the bottle and handed it to Colin. “How is the book going?”

“Nearly done and the TV company said next week for filming.” Hilary leaned against the cluttered kitchen counter.

“Good, you’ll be a great asset. You look even more sensible with those glasses, wear them. And make sure you have that really huge picture of you handy.” She picked up some shallots. “No, you can’t have Liquid Aminos and Celtic Salt together, Colin, pick one.”

Johan plunged the nettles into the cold stream and shook them. If anything had been on them, it had no chance in the fast moving stream water. His elderly father shook his head. A small, thick set man in his late 70s, he was at a loss to understand the cycle of knowledge that had led his family to stake a claim on the land and conquer it only to have this son of his fall head over heels with the weeds they had tried so hard to eradicate.

“We grow all this great stuff, and you won’t touch any of it, and you don’t want to be a farmer. What’s going to happen to the land?” His father looked at him witheringly.

“I’ve told you dad, this is the real food. Look how well I am now.” Johan had been a skinny and frequently ill child, teenager and then young man before taking up a ‘clean’ natural diet in his late twenties.

“That stupid film on the roller skates just makes you look like an overgrown teenager. Why don’t you see the light, son and earn a real living with me?”

“I am earning a real living, and it helps people, dad.”

“I don’t know who you think you’re helping telling them to eat weeds. This is the stuff your grandmother was trying to get away from. This great country, all these doctors and all that training and you want to eat weeds we tried to forget about.” Johan’s father shook his head again. “I’m always proud of you son, you know that, but all that money we spent on your filmmaking training and you keep making films about weeds.” Life had been hard on the small ranch for decades. They were now supposed to be reaping the rewards, but life had apparently come full circle.

Anastasia woke up and scowled at herself in the mirror. She looked perfect, as always, but the thought of another day at the gym, fanning her face to protect her botox, followed by experimentation with makeup rather than dinner, did not please her today. What she needed was a day off from being the most famous human doll in the world. Choosing to make your living by achieving impossible perfection had not been an easy choice.

“What you need is a proper job.” Her mother worried.

“There are no proper jobs, and besides, I am creative, I cannot live like that. I’m doing fine.” The reality was that Anastasia’s lengthy classes in mysticism, held in the local school, would take up most of the week’s evenings. People were starting to pay to listen to her classes in out of body travelling and meditation, and Anastasia knew that the more famous she got, the more money she would be able to attract, eventually paying her far more than she could ever have hoped to earn as a town planner. The ultimate aim had to be her own cult following, and this, whilst slow largely due to her gender, was not impossible in the Ukraine.

She used her mobile phone to take another couple of pictures of her impossibly slender waist and uploaded them to her youtube account before turning towards the blender to make her food for the day. Broccoli and avocado today, for her skin. She knew her career as a human doll could not continue too far past her 30th birthday, which loomed surprisingly soon, and lying about her age wasn’t really a long term option when so much of her life was online already. Anastasia, a formerly hard drinking, hardworking and hard living Ukrainian, determined to use her work ethic to amass as many followers as possible before gravity would take its inevitable effect. She would know when the time was right for her move to America, where she could make far more money than she was bringing in here. The videos were bringing in a trickle, the classes a little more, but by far the most lucrative angle she could see was an American cult. California was full of people prepared to pay big money for her enlightenment, she thought. It was just a matter of picking the right time.

The skinny redhead was slowly drawing her tongue up his inner thigh whilst the sagging brunette was, as instructed, dragging her rather inadequate breasts slowly across Sam Redwood’s chest. He had had a rotten day. The hotel room was pretty lame too, but at least he had company.

“That’s really amazing, Carrie, carry on as long as you want. Hey Honey, you’re so sweet.” They all smiled vacantly at Sam’s little joke. Sam’s mind started to drift towards the pruning in his Hawaiian garden. His mobile rang. Carrie and Honey snuggled alongside Sam whilst he took the

call:

“Hi, Don, they took the whole goddamn company.” Even the four hands and two pairs of lips on his thighs and stomach weren’t a sufficient distraction to prevent the loss of Sam’s wood.

“You’re shitting me.”

“No, they want me off the board, they’ve taken the whole lot. I don’t know what I’m gonna do.”

“How did they manage that?”

“Aw I dunno, I’ll have to talk to you later.” Sam’s disappointment was starting to make the girls show more interest in each other than him, which didn’t suit him at all.

“Yeah sure, I guess I’ll talk to ya later.”

“I guess.”

Sam returned to his comforting angels, whilst Don looked at his girlfriend, confused. “He’s been kicked out of Ragma Foods?”

Lucy’s eyebrows shot up. “How do they think they will keep the profile without him?” She heated her hands behind her as she stood in front of the fireplace, logs crackling comfortably.

“The books are already written – He would have to recall them all. He’s stuck with permanently advertising them. That’s a real shitty thing to do.”

“Well, Sam’s no angel, how come he couldn’t have wriggled out of that one?”

“Yeah well, Sam’s naughty but he isn’t evil enough to keep up I guess, who knows? If he isn’t winning, he won’t tell me, that’s for sure.”

Malcolm sat in his favourite old chair at the varnish deprived, ramshackle fishing lodge. The trees dripped on the roof, and he enjoyed the sound as he sat contemplating his future. Celia had been as good as her word. He was a free man. Free to do whatever he wanted, but what did he want? Right now he wanted only to talk to someone, anyone, and at the lodge he was as far away from anyone as he could get. He sought solace in his yoga books and leafed through some of the old hippy stuff from his college days. Some of those guys made a living from talking about spirituality, but where was God when they struck him off?

He looked at the pictures of smiling crowds of well-dressed American hippies enjoying mutual assurance of worthiness and smiled to himself. Idealism lends itself to a peculiar form of group contentment, even if the cause is futile and out-of-step with cold, hard reality, a reason for belonging. Malcolm reflected that he had never felt fully part of the medical fraternity and had just spent decades doing what he was told. Life in the strict hierarchy was not fun. He didn’t have to do that anymore, at least that was some cause for celebration.

Several very dark weeks and much meditation later, Malcolm started seeing spirituality in the water, the trees and the dead fish he was still eating and realised how he was to make his living now that he was a disgraced MD. As an alternative health practitioner he could not only help the sick, but wreak revenge on the system that had lost him his wealth and social position. Also his wife, but he wasn’t so bothered about that. He packed up the artworks, the yoga books, and what was left of his belongings and headed out in his old campervan to find his new home. A compound in the

desert, he thought, where he could set up some sort of communal arrangement and live the life he had dreamed of in college. First, he thought, he would head to the world famous Stoic Health Centre, offer his services and see if he couldn't pick up some tips.

Joseph hurled the last plastic bag filled with convenience foods into the graffiti covered trashcan before sauntering down the street to pick up some more liquorice papers. He was already a little pale but he felt he was free of his mother's cooking and that felt good already. Not that he disliked her at all, quite the reverse, he loved being smothered, but he had a strong feeling that growing up meant growing out of anything she had predetermined as suitable for him.

It was cold in NYC that day, and he huddled inside his sheepskin as he went down the street to source some fresh food and the papers to get him wasted once again. A cute little hippy chick passed him, her hair flicking him in the stiff breeze. He took this as a good omen and resolved to investigate the local health food store on his way back.

Hilary was slightly appalled when she saw the London news. "Nutty diet? I feel a bit misrepresented." She twitched at her embroidered cardigan and screwed up her nose. "Don't worry about it, you should have seen what they did to me, it still brings you more attention, and you can use the footage to imply fame when you hit the US market. Is that ebook ready yet? Have you set up some subscription options on your website?" Nina barely looked at her as she chopped the tomatoes for the raw kelp noodles.

"Yes, but I'm not sure who is going to pay me to look at a website."

"Don't worry, you'll be surprised. You need to start looking around to see who you can network with."

"I don't care what your precious Dr Degnan says, I don't want to go cycling today, that's all." Lovely was not enjoying the prospect of another hundred kilometres, even if Peter was. "Fine, fine just stay in and have a few clicks on the vids then." Peter wasn't used to insurrection from Lovely, but if she felt that strongly about it – strewth!

After Peter left, Lovely took another look at the video of her wriggling provocatively in her bikini for the delighted fans whilst reminding them of their duty to their animal friends. She looked fat, fat, fat. Cycling was all very well, but if it meant fatter thighs she was staying in and staying off the bananas today. An old hand at vomiting, she locked the door of the bathroom in relief. A full morning on her own, away from the kind, attentive and hyperactive Peter. A full morning to indulge her secret passion. To hell with her teeth and throat, she wasn't going to have big thighs.

Kira had told the improbably young adviser at the weight loss centre to get knotted. Having two sisters, she was well used to people who know nothing about weight problems attempting to give advice. The assumption was always that your day revolved around food, and never positive. It is amazing when people who have a weight problem are so often dumped with responsibilities that their 'healthy' associates simply refuse to take on, that the assumption is that they are the lazy ones. Kira idly wondered if this particular idiot had ever worked a nineteen hour day in order to return home and lift someone that didn't particularly want to be lifted.

The crunch had come after being led to a special 'fat' chair. This chair, built for someone of 600lb or more, dwarfed her. She was then told of all the people the twenty something year old had helped, including someone in their sixties who had apparently never known how to eat.

“I’m an ex chef and can you tell me how often you have dealt with a weight problem of your own, please?”

“Um, never.”

“I’ve lost your entire bodyweight 3 or 4 times. Do you really think you have any advice to offer me?”

“Um, I don’t think you’re suitable for our programme.”

“I agree.”

This led to Kira turning to her late father for advice. Kira’s father, an artist, had spent a small fortune on his health, massive toolboxes of pills were produced at every meal. Kira resolved to keep looking at alternatives until she found a permanent solution.

Thus the first book was started. Kira figured she might as well database the lot.

Anastasia delicately stepped off the plane in Tokyo to be greeted by a small group of smiling Japanese people with cameras and a sign with her name on it. The appearance was alongside a famous Japanese anime doll today. It was by no means a huge fee, but the free trip was nice. Anastasia, resolved that all appearances were worthwhile, enjoyed the attention if nothing else. A few shots were taken of her with the other doll, then she was offered sushi, which she could not eat, then, after a rather uncomfortable night in a very small hotel room, she was put back on a plane to the Ukraine. Glamour is so often not very glamorous, but at least it would raise her profile in Japan.

Anastasia was very hungry when she got back. 72 hours without food or water was good, she supposed, and well in keeping with the Eastern European tradition of dry fasting, but getting too hungry when you are restricted to vegetables and water is never a good idea. She ‘binged’ on half a carrot whilst blending her spinach, fennel and raspberry smoothie and felt quite sick after it.

“You’ve put me in a tent? At a festival? What the hell?” Sam Redwood was not a happy man. His agent hadn’t thought about Sam getting his female ‘rewards’ at the Goddess festival. He was forced to content himself with a public footrub of a free sample of magnesium oxide from a fan. His performance had been exemplary, even by his own standards. Smooth and as usual treading the fine line that comes just before smarmy, he had delighted a young and overexcited crowd with vague references to the ‘mother’ and had sold a few thousands worth of goods in addition to his usual hefty fee, but what use was money without the pussy?

Sam’s agent was stifling tears after the exchange on the phone. Years of doing what she was told and one mistake had led to thirty minutes of punishment by telephone. The little boy with the curl on his forehead, she thought, when he was good, he was very, very good, etc. He would still expect to play with her next time he was in town, of that you could be sure.

“But how much money did you make, Sam?” Don was used to bringing Sam down from his tantrums. He had made a good bit of money himself at the event.

“Only about twenty G turnover, not a good result for three days really, and those bastards at Ragha are still selling shit with my face all over it.” Sam was petulant but at least calmer.

“Well you can’t withdraw the books either – you’ll just have to wait until the print run dries up.”

“No shit, Sherlock. Look at that Don, even the old bald guys are getting laid and I’m stuck in a tent.” Don was relieved to see Sam was starting to laugh. Traditionally the ‘old bald guys’ would turn up to soak up Sam’s leavings, amusing him greatly. Such is the life of an American speaker, attract the chicks and the dudes will follow to pick up the sad ones at the back.

“He’s filming the weeds again.”

“Just let him do it, he’s happy.”

“What’s to happen to the farm?”

“Maybe he will create a market for organic weeds or something, either way – he’s well, he’s happy and he does seem to be making some sort of living. Stop worrying.”

“I can’t. Three generations worked to make this place, and look at him.”

“He believes in what he’s doing. Something will work out.” Johan’s mother wasn’t sure exactly what would work out, but her beloved son sure did look happy. He had been such a sickly young man, and now here he was, strong, healthy and apparently very young at fifty. “Maybe he’s right and we’re wrong?” The small seventy –something white-haired fireball of a woman gave her husband a stern look.

“I sure hope so for the sake of the farm.” Johan’s father shook his head. “Otherwise you’d better start eating some of these magic weeds and have a miracle baby.” They smiled at one another naughtily and carried on eating their chicken.

Joseph had thrown out his football gear, grown his hair, set up his shop online, written his first ebook and was marketing via the sparse network of contacts in the world of alternative nutrition. He was fairly confident by now that he could give up the day job and make his way in the world without any further support. His speaking engagements were picking up, and making his daily videos wasn’t a huge chore for the response rate of people seeking solutions and remedies from his store. Plenty of people seemed to want to go to a new vendor, and he found his colleagues in this small industry very helpful. Indeed, Sam Redwood himself had become a good, if not close friend, and had invited him along as a speaker to several minor events. All in all, his future did look pretty bright, and Joseph was reasonably content apart from the seemingly endless emails from people asking everything from when to eat fruit, to how to cure cancer. Soon, he reckoned, he could afford someone to take care of all that. In the meantime, he opened an email from one Hilary Yardley.

Dear Mr Moth,

I have written an ebook on my journey with health food, and wonder if you might stock it in your shop? I have enclosed some pictures.

Hilary Yardley

His eyes widened when he saw the pictures.

Kira was still up. It was 5am but she was dealing with her staff member in Russia, who seemed to keep extremely odd hours for a Russian. Running a twenty four hour business, even for fun, is not

easy. She laughed as she passed the youtube video on to her friend, Ghost.

“Get a load of this guy, he is so full of shit.”

Sam Redwood, full throttle. This went on for some months. Kira wasn't even sure why she was still listening to him. Her passing interest in rhetoric and linguistics told her he was a remarkable speaker despite almost constant 'winging it,' and she did quite like the positive reinforcement angle he favoured, a result, she later learned, of the use of NLP, but she was only half hearing anything he said whilst working on her virtual business. He spoke about a lot of stuff she was quite familiar with from her father, whom she missed, but why she would choose to listen to this guy when a lot of what he said was laughably corny was a mystery even to her. One of her parent's favourite jokes was to advise reading Dale Carnegie in response to any problem, she supposed that had something to do with it. In any case, she found it entertaining to let him ramble on as she worked, and frequently passed the funnier ones on to Ghost, who laughed at a lot of the same things she did.

“Am I just watching him because he's cute?”

“Is he cute?”

“Well not really, to be honest he looks a little bit like me, and I actually don't look at him that often either. You can see the little cogs turning. Why am I still listening to him?”

Kira eventually took to shouting at the computer in the studio while she worked “I DON'T KNOW WHAT I'M WAITING FOR YOU TO SAY BUT HURRY UP AND SAY IT!”

It wasn't until one unusually vicious video, taken by someone who had long since gone off Sam, in which he made an error and allowed his smile to drop, that Kira finally relented. He was a real person. A gloriously imperfect, real person. It might be worth surviving after all. Maybe there was a point. She climbed the ladder leading from the studio and proceeded to the kitchen to make a salad, the first of the rest of her life.

Dr Swartz, who, freed from his formerly respectable life as a Malibu MD, had taken to wearing amusing hats and a monocle, was listening at the door as Barry Crispin fired Robin Swayze. He didn't like the sound of it at all.

“We just can't have you making religious statements at work, especially not about homosexuality. I'm sorry.”

Robin ranted for a while, about religious freedom and his principles, then Malcolm heard him get up to leave. He quickly dived down the corridor before he heard the door of Crispin's office open and close. He guessed he wouldn't be seeing Robin again then.

Crispin was a dour man, rarely took his own health advice and appeared to concentrate on his alarmingly tall coiffure and neatly trimmed moustache rather than his business, on a day to day basis at any rate. Rumour had it that some skulduggery had been involved in his takeover at Stoic, but no one seemed to know if it was true. Malcolm didn't like him all that much, but he was here for information on the business so he was prepared to tolerate him for a year or so whilst he located his future home. In the meantime, several kind baby boomer ladies had taken pity on him. All in all things were looking up for Malcolm since Celia's departure.

Kira liked to shock Aldous.

“I’m thinking of getting married, Aldous.” They had just been shooting. Kira had decided, to balance her raw non-meat diet, she would take up clay pigeon shooting. She had lost a hundred and twenty pounds by this time, and was feeling a little better.

“Oh?” Aldous knew from the tone that Kira was about to say something utterly ridiculous. He had known her a long time. He never quite knew how seriously to take her, but he knew the ‘incoming ridiculous statement’ tone when he heard it.

“Yes, I think I’ll marry Sam Redwood.” She stroked the dusty dashboard of the now filthy blue Subaru.

“Who is he?”

“Oh just some Yank author, looks a bit like me, vain, bit of a slapper.” Kira was on a roll now but tried to keep a straight face.

“Why would he want to marry you? He’s famous for something?”

“You don’t get it, do you Aldous.” Kira was always astonished at the lack of confidence in her friends. It never occurred to her that there was any division between her and anyone. “Famous people are just normal people minus the sense of shame.” Kira wasn’t quite this staggeringly self-confident, but she loved making Aldous think. “Why do you think famous people are automatically different?”

“Well, I quite fancy Elizabeth Hurley, but I don’t think shed want to date me any more than she would date a gas fitter from Burnley.”

“I don’t particularly fancy him, apart from obviously I’m delighted that other people do and he happens to look a bit like me. I don’t even imagine I would spend any time with him. I could just see it working out. He probably isn’t even a very nice person. I just think I would suit him.” Kira remained nonchalant and absurdly upbeat.

“Why would you want to marry him then?” Evidently Aldous believed in love. Not that depressed then, Kira noted. She had been yanking Aldous’ elusive cheerful chain for years, with varying degrees of success.

“It’s a bit strange, it just kind of feels right. I can see exactly how it could work, and I can see where I fit in. I’m writing the book for him now. Besides which Aldous, you don’t get it at all. It isn’t about who you are, it’s about your level of cheek. That’s why celebrities are celebrities, because they understood that in the first place.” She maintained her cheeky spoilt brat tone.

“I never thought about it like that.”

“You never do.”

Later that afternoon, Aldous read over Kira’s initial notes for the book. “Is he likely to understand this?”

“According to his qualifications, he is actually very clever, although he appears to think cleverness is unpopular. You know what Yanks are like, he probably thinks he would be considered a ‘dweeb’

or a 'dork' or some such if anyone thought he actually had a brain. I calculate that this should springboard him way beyond anything he has time to do with his workload. Should take me seven years or so and then that rather ramshackle, seat-of-the-pants empire he is building could look rather beautiful."

"You're really serious about this? How old is he?"

"A few days older than me. Not about the marrying bit, Aldous, I'm not that crazy. Love isn't about possession; it's about achieving great things. I wouldn't want to cramp his style. Like I said, my twin is a bit of a slapper, and he's made far too many mistakes to pull off anything like this by himself. I'm not sure I even want to meet him, to be honest. He would have to want to meet me." They watched one of Sam's videos.

"You see what I mean now? How long do you think that would last with me?"

"About twenty seconds." Aldous was still confused. This guy was a plonker. Not only that, he was a vegan. Kira didn't like vegans. She liked the countryside. She liked lichen, moss and insects, wool and the wild lands of her not-suitable-for-crops homeland.

"Exactly, but in my hands..."

"A lethal weapon for mass-cultural change." Aldous saw the light at last and pumped a fist in front of him, trying to look Stalinesque and triumphant, whilst trying to imagine the tall blonde playboy party animal rejecting a bunch of bikini wearing airheads and being cheerily henpecked by a short fat Scottish woman who liked economics and embroidery and rarely left the house. She was right though, Sam Redwood did look horrifyingly like her. Same eyes, same hair, same irritating, self-satisfied smile even. Oh god, not two of them. Like the drama masks in theatres, one happy, one sad. Carrot and Stick. What hope for mass consumer capitalism and thoughtless consumption? He pushed back his glasses.

"You're catching on, Aldous. And as long as we keep him in girls, all I have to do is sit at home and pat the fluffy white cat. Or the leopard, or the ginger. As I've said, love isn't all about kisses and flowers. Sometimes it's a bit more important, not just for you but everyone else. He's only really interested in work and girls anyway. I can see Redwood's dream quite clearly, and it's entirely compatible with mine, which is all that really matters. With that gob, I can take over the world!" Aldous and Kira chuckled at this surreal but hugely amusing vision. Kira dropped her tone back to sanity. "And even if I can't, at least I will have written this. Who cares why, as long as I get it done. You have to use what's in front of you."

"I hesitate to point this out Kira, but he's a vegan."

"Oh, no, he's a raw vegan. I'm one too, most of the time, it's slightly different. He wears wool, for example, and probably likes native African drums. Vegan on health grounds, rather than boring the pants off everyone at dinner about their dreadfully inferior morals. Raw vegans bore on about herbal supplements, organics and how marvellous they look and feel instead."

"I hate that bastard, that's why." Peter beamed. He had just put the finishing touches on a cartoon of Sam Redwood for his youtube channel. It was particularly tasteless, even by Peter's usual standards. "And anything with his name on it gets more hits. Points make prizes, Lovely. Plenty of people hate Redwood once they get to know him. Even Mrs Redwood there will, sooner or later." Peter had spotted Kira in one of her youtube videos and had laughed at the odd resemblance.

“Hey great. Serves him right for ripping off all those noobs.” Lovely’s thighs weren’t fat today. She was happy. She took a long drink of water and pressed on the boil on the back of Peter’s neck. “Do you think we should do something about that? It looks kinda nasty?”

“No, just leave it until it gets big enough to video when you puncture it. We can get a few hundred dollars out of it. It’s evidence of detox from fruit.”

“When are you leaving to see Degnan?”

“He wants the video for next month, so it won’t be long now. It’ll just be a few days. I can see Ferdie and Tom the runner when I’m over. The usual, I just hang around the place for a bit, say it’s world class, make sure he fills it for the summer, and away we go.”

“That’ll cost a bit, the flights?”

“We’ll be ’right, love, don’t worry.”

This was the problem. Peter never worried. Lovely was wondering if he ever would worry. She wanted tits. Big tits. The irony of her obsession with her weight was that it did not appear to apply to her flat chest.

“Ferdie’s just written that book about Redwood. We can get a great video out of interviewing him. Trip will pay for itself.” Ferdie was a Canadian who had worked for Sam Redwood during his careless younger days. Flippant comments and careless management, coupled with a flagrant disregard for Ferdie personally, had filled Ferdie full of sufficient hatred for him to make his living by writing gossip books about his former employer. Peter generally enjoyed his company for around 15 minutes before the moaning would start. His visit would be short, just sufficient to get the video before inevitably Ferdie would start to complain about the amount Peter ate, the boring emphasis on cycling trips during his visit, and anything else he could think of. How Ferdie’s wife could listen to that was beyond Peter, but hey who cared when he could probably get a thousand bucks or so from the hits on his video and advertising on the website. He could get sufficient mileage out of that to put something towards his beloved Lovely’s nice new tits.

“You’ve been a great asset, Malcolm. Thank you for all your input.” Barry Crispin couldn’t hide his disappointment at Malcolm’s departure from the Stoic Centre.

“It’s been a tremendous pleasure.” It hadn’t, but this was how people seemed to conduct themselves here. Barry had been an unsmiling, ungrateful bastard, frankly, and Malcolm was delighted to be going. He looked around Barry’s mustard yellow, lost in the 1960s office. Dull and airless, he thought, much like Barry himself. Malcolm had by now, written but was yet to publish, his first book, a spiritual insight into the moralistic divine joy of eating vegetables. Knowing as he did, that a variety of cults had used a similar low protein approach to its followers in the 1960s and 70s, he knew that the beautiful skin and low aggression approach to diet would ensure a loyal following in the years to come in addition to being genuinely healthy. He had made some great contacts, and gathered some useful intelligence about the market from his stay at Stoic. The right spread had, however, come up for sale, and Malcolm had determined to secure it.

After the ingratiating and somewhat gruelling goodbye, Malcolm picked up his bags and threw them into the back of his new partner’s van. A pretty 50 something divorcee in a long red skirt trimmed with bells, she didn’t smile terribly much, but had the figure of a girl thanks to her

adherence to the Stoic principles of healthy living, and a great bank account thanks to the investment banker that had traded her in after her three children left home, routine for rich Americans. They were headed to a dustbowl out west, to a sprawling compound Malcolm had spotted. It had been on the market for so long that they were getting six months grace before the mortgage kicked in, and although Malcolm had made more than enough from his art collection to pay cash, he thought the offer worthwhile based upon his business projections.

It was a lengthy drive. Malcolm wondered how Celia was doing. He emailed her as they went through a township with wifi access. At the next pitstop of their five day journey, as they ate a disappointing and probably non-organic green salad, he got his reply.

“I’m marrying Herman Juskic, next month. I would ask how you are, Malcolm, but I don’t care.” Herman Juskic was a bald, grossly overweight plastic surgeon with a reputation for a terrible temper. Malcolm smiled. ‘The best wife money can buy.’

Aldous showed the video of Sam to his brother Harry, Kira’s former boyfriend.

“Oh yeah, that’s her gone all right.” Harry looked disdainful and pulled on the razorblade on his necklace.

“Why though, he’s a total twonk? Is it money?” Aldous didn’t understand why his former drinking buddy would want to end up with what appeared to be a smarmy Californian asshole. He had seen Kira demolish grown men in political argument after fifteen pints of cider in the past, why would she choose to throw herself away on this cornball?

“Well, it’s like this, you know Kira one way, and I know her the other. She doesn’t waste any brains around me, that’s for sure. He’s Jewish, he has a work ethic, and the irritation probably makes her laugh. Kira has the luxury of not giving a shit about money, she won’t care about that. Money is a bit like sport to her; she likes watching it but doesn’t really understand the need to have some. She’d probably prefer it if he worked in the local chemist so that she could demand things on the high shelf and ask him for complicated stuff he didn’t have so that she could look terribly disappointed.”

“Kira has a thing for Jewish dudes?”

“Major thing for Jewish dudes.”

“She never mentioned it? I don’t think he’s Jewish anymore?”

“That won’t matter – it’s the nose. She can’t resist the nose. She likes to think she isn’t superficial, but that nose – she won’t see past that for years, if ever. He’s a bit of a ladies man, is he?”

“How did you know?”

“Yeah, she loves slutty men too. That’s Kira gone, yup, that’s her dude. Slutty, Jewish, work ethic. She probably hasn’t heard a word he’s said, so she won’t know how annoying he is. She explained it to me once, but I don’t really remember what she said.”

“Who knew?” Aldous shook his head.

“Ever tried passing a rabbi with Kira in the car? She’s like a little puppy, nose pressed up against the glass. She probably hasn’t even noticed that he’s just an incredibly annoying hippy. Oh look she’s

got that jacket he's wearing too. Oh well, might as well find myself a crack whore." Harry shrugged and selected Call of Duty on the computer and shut the browser. "Look on the bright side, if they ever actually get together they will vanish for a couple of years before she tires him out and kills him. If the blisters don't get him the heart attack will. I hope he likes being humiliated; she likes to get you really angry before she bangs you senseless until you can't move. You have to be pretty healthy or she sends you back to the shop and asks for a replacement."

"That's the other weird thing, she says she wants to marry him but she doesn't want to meet him."

"That just means she really likes him. She'll get bored, she always does."

"Oh that's good." Aldous, feeling slightly better and certainly more enlightened, went to polish his shotgun. He had no idea his friend was so complicated. Or so randy, for that matter.

"Dmitri, I would like water only." Anastasia was watching a video of Fatima, the super-hot Iranian supermodel. Anastasia often wondered if she was, in fact, a lesbian. She thought of her obsession with beautiful women more as inspiration to keep her harsh regime intact, but as time went on, she found herself less and less interested in looking at men at all. They talked such rubbish on her website.

She and 'open husband' Dmitri were not at all rich, but they had enough not to worry about the day to day business of gym visits, food, makeup and she had another TV appearance coming up, this time on some cheap talk show hosted by a transvestite and a grinning ape of a presenter. She supposed this would be another attack on her 'mystic group,' fast being considered a potentially dangerous cult on tabloid Ukrainian TV. There was a limit on how much there was to say about her life, she found. It just wasn't that exciting, but still they would ask questions and questions and find something to object to.

She was hungry, but she had had her five hundred calories of vegetables for the day and wanted a smaller waist. She wanted to go to bed, but didn't want to make love and since Dmitri was bringing her the water, it meant he was in the mood.

"I like the grumpy ones, they want attention bad." Sam eyed the serious contender at the front of the open classroom on the beach. She had already complained about the size of the room she had paid four thousand bucks for and the lack of Wi-Fi.

"I'm not sure that's what she wants, Sam."

"Of course it is, that's what they all want." Sam delivered his motivational talk about feeding your spirit with super nutrition and allowed the audience to drift out of the room, watching his apparently attention seeking guest slowly prepare to go back to her hut.

She was putting her notebook into her bag. Bitterly thinking about the asshole that had just left her with the rent for their enormous brownstone apartment back home, she wondered how she was going to manage after having spent this now exorbitant amount on a stupid retreat. He wandered over and placed a hand on her ass, casually he thought, and smiled at her.

"I'm just going now." Horrified and wide-eyed, she was too shocked to do more than back off hastily. This retreat had been a big mistake. Huge. And now this creep was trying to feel her up. What the fuck? First James leaving her for her own sister, and now this?

"Ahm, I'm sorry, look I heard about the lack of Wi-Fi. Would you like to come up to the house

tonight – you can get internet access there.” Sam feigned genuine concern and played what he thought was his role to the hilt.

“Oh, right, thank you yes.” Maybe he was a nice guy after all. She pushed her fringe from in front of her eyes.

She went out to the house that evening, a short walk from the hut she had been moved to since it had a couple of bars of internet access so that she could continue to berate her sister and ex-boyfriend whilst complaining to her mother of her misfortune.

Sam was posing in a sarong with a glass of some green liquid she could not identify as she approached. What a ridiculous man, she thought bitterly. She opened her laptop to proceed with her painful vendetta.

“You need to relax, would you like a massage. I’m famous for them, you know?” Sam twinkled helpfully.

“No, no that’s fine thanks, I won’t be long.” She brushed a palm frond from her shoulder since she had squashed herself as far away as possible from Sam, who was spreading himself all over the brightly coloured cushions on the bamboo sofa. What crazy porno drug was this guy on? She quickly dashed off a few more lines of bile to her mother.

Half an hour later during her massage, she was about to turn over on the lounge when he uttered the immortal words.

“Can I see your boobs please?”

The result, instant nausea. She had no money left, her family were assholes, her ex-boyfriend was an asshole and now supposedly super well-balanced nice guy life guru Sam Redwood was an asshole.

“JUST BACK OFF, SLEAZEBAG.” She didn’t stop to do up her bikini, just pulled the t shirt over her trailing straps and grabbed the laptop as she ran out of the house.

Redwood was nonplussed. ‘Can’t win ‘em all. Plenty more outside.’ He gazed down at the beach below. Sure enough, several naked people of varying degrees of attractiveness were screaming and laughing as they ran around. Sam wasn’t fussy. This was what they really came for, to dump their inhibitions and behave like wild children. Normally that was what they paid him for. ‘Can’t please everyone.’

He indulged himself with a spot of DIY lurve for the good of his lymph node drainage whilst looking, perversely, at pictures of Anastasia glowering coldly at the camera in full make up on his computer before retiring alone for a change, with a book.

“Eyegazing builds trust.” Joe led Hilary to the rug by the fire. “You’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen in my life, sweetcheeks.” His now long tangled hair shoved behind his ears, he gave her the best puppy dog eyes he could muster. He had found his queen.

“Ok” Fantastic, thought Hilary. Cute and randy. Ye olde eyegazing is getting a bit tired in terms of entertainment but looks like I’m in, lucky me!

Hilary, ever the genteel well-mannered English rose, tried to look fascinated for the next hour as she practised building trust with the only slightly irritating Joe. She spent the time calculating how many children and animals she could possibly fit into the next thirty to fifty years and counted her many blessings. She would miss England, she thought, but not that much, and the Americans seemed to like her degree of charming English understatement. Her first public appearances hadn't gone all that well, but Joe made it so easy it would not be long before they would be Alternative Health Royalty.

“It's like this rather charming cottage industry. Take a look at one of Johan's films. You could easily do that.” Leo, a small, frantic man whose Ukrainian ancestry was becoming more obvious by the year fluttered at Kira in his usual bird-like way.

“I'm not sure you really understand how this works. Besides which, my book isn't about wild, raw, herbal, super or any other kinds of food, and I do not appear to be particularly thin or glamorous, nor is that my priority. Who's looking at a carer over forty?”

“We could be building a market for the book right now. I could design you a website.”

“I think the general idea is to write the book first. I have to go write the book.” Kira picked at a walnut Leo had thoughtfully provided in order to impale Kira to his sofa long enough to watch all his favourite films for the last decade.

“What is it about, then?”

“I'm not sure you would understand, but I am a bit pushed for time and no, thank you, I do not want to be filmed talking in a supermarket. I have to go look after my mother now.” Kira got up and gratefully moved away from the devil walnuts.

“I think you're just a parrot.” Leo was not looking forward to being alone, so he tried starting an argument.

“I think you have two degrees but have yet to see any classical academic work. Can you tell me when in the course of your psychology or media degrees you did any classical academic work?”

“OK.” for once Leo looked chastened.

“You just have to accept some of us think on a slightly bigger scale, hence the actual work takes a bit longer. I know it's a bit hard for you to take in.” Kira realised she had changed a lot since she had last seen Leo. Leo had stopped her hard-drinking ways ten years before, simply by not joining in. He was a tiny-in-stature, super polite, passive-aggressive Svengali film director, but she had not previously noticed the smallness of his outlook. Either this was new, or she was more confident than she used to be. “But if my legacy is going to consist of a book, it is going to be a world-altering and very serious book, judged by very serious people.”

“We could open a chocolate shop?”

“No thank you.”

Malcolm and Valerie had to sweep twenty thousand square feet of boards before the air was breathable. The main house at the compound had evidently not been in use for some time. “I'm not sure we can grow much here.”

“We can soon find out, it probably just needs an irrigation system. Even the Egyptians managed to have crops.”

They created a one room living area to do them for the interim and Malcolm thought with joy about what he could do with the rest whilst Valerie wondered whether they were both crazy. It was thirty miles to the nearest small town, and there seemed to be nothing but dust between them and it. Acres and acres of dust, and no emergency source of water if the supply failed. Malcolm decided to take a very long drive around the land to see if a solution was apparent to this immediate problem, and took a tent and water carrier with him. Valerie took a small pot of dust and added water to it to see if it could grow anything on the window sill. She chose a tomato.

Peter had had enough of Ferdie after two days of listening to his whiny voice complaining of the heat in his current tropical location. Ferdie’s new Tahitian wife seemed to have taken the role of translating his every thought, which compounded the long, long list of complaints. Privately, Peter could see how unfair it was that Ferdie had completely adopted Sam Redwood’s business model whilst continuously dissing him, but he was damned if he was ever going to admit it. Sam Redwood was a real shit. A travelling snake-oil salesman with an attitude problem and he had far too much money. Peter had watched his flatmate die from anorexia trying to look good enough for Sam Redwood, and seen her become more and more miserable over months when he, as usual, rejected her after a lengthy exchange of extremely superficial conversations by email. Such is the nature of the hedonist. No point if it isn’t in the next ten minutes.

He was now on the bus nearing the destination for Tom the runner’s new place in the hills. Not a thrilling man to be around, but a solid and precise speaker who had given up his IT career at 39 and become a professional athlete. A remarkable story, and a remarkable person, and he agreed with Degnan’s teachings about fruit, which was a bonus.

Degnan had been his usual grim self, shouting at some girl even in the course of making the promotional video about his ‘world-class’ retreats. Peter had spent the few days relaxing rather than joining in the multiple daily workout sessions with the wealthy parented young customers. At this point, he was longing to see Lovely. He hoped she would be longing to see him.

Sam was overjoyed when he got the email about his infomercial contract. “I’m gonna be on network TV!” The past months had been spent building up the new joint business venture with his friends Don and Michael. There were the usual misconceptions amongst the fans, particularly as neither Don, nor Michael, were vegan and a number of the products on Super Superfood Supermarket’s inventory were, as such, quite the opposite, but Sam had never been a radical vegan anyway. Vegan on the grounds of health and enthusiasm for the work, and the women, rather than the browbeating and moral high ground.

Sam, unfortunately, was also more interested in socialising than reading when socialising was available, and so precious little additional research, far less thinking, got done in the presence of people. It stood him in good stead for making a little money, not so good for the quality of his written work. Even Hilary had displayed some suppressed dismay at his last book, which had consisted of a list of products rather than much actual content, and Hilary and Joe now had millions of good, green reasons coming in every year to like him. Slightly more than Sam, in fact, but that was another story.

Sam stretched out in the hottub and allowed his eyes to wander over the girl sitting 10 feet away at the other side. A young, shorthaired model this morning, clearly not with her mind on him at all.

He would soon sort that out.

“What can I tell you, I’m unstoppable.” He thought aloud, for the sake of making noise in her general direction.

“Sorry?” the girl looked up, slightly perturbed by the unexpected sound.

“I’m so sorry, I’m Sam Redwood. You were at the event last night?”

“No, I work here.” She wasn’t smiling. Sam already knew he was out of luck.

He tried conversation, but she was demure and disinterested. At length she mentioned her fiancé and she had obviously never heard of Sam in her short life. Sam was reminded of the dull ache of rejection, a low stomach pain he didn’t experience very often these days. Never mind, he thought, the retreat is next week. Easy pickings.

He mentioned the young ‘goddess’ on his facebook page for his meagre fans later on that day.

“Pff that just means she said no.” Kira, stuck on her book, looked at this with characteristic irritation. In the previous months whilst she lost the first two hundred pounds they had had some very odd interactions, including his throwing a tantrum over her comment that he ‘resembled a rutting stag’ beneath one of her own videos, which had left her very confused about whether to even bother trying to talk to this guy. On one had they thought the same way about lots of stuff and she had tracked his locations over 5 weeks watching the same video of hers every day, on the other he seemed to deliberately try in his updates to seem as vain and dumb as possible, to which she would invariably respond by being as grumpy and irritated as she felt. It always made her laugh to think about these interactions but which Sam was real, was he the empire-building, sex-obsessed eccentric of her dreams, or could he possibly just be a workaholic , narcissistic idiot savant of some kind? She kept her attempts at communication to once a fortnight or less, but despite thinking about potential arguments with him with some degree of pleasure, remained confused as to whether she was doing the right thing at all. By this time the book was entirely directed at boosting his career using Kira’s developing cultural economic hypothesis. Kira found the idea of fame horrifying, and the coincidence of Redwood seemed to be the answer to many potential problems as well as providing some degree of motivation. Their similarity could be used to get her message across to the world without her being too publically involved, and she in turn could remove the stigma of Redwood’s previous indiscretions, which were littered across the internet. A two tiered attack, on a two pronged problem and no messy relationship necessary. Fun maybe, but not necessary.

Sam was however, a slow payer with a terrible weakness for women apparently, amongst many other minor and seriously major sins. She wondered if she was doing the right thing. If this was her best hope, there didn’t seem to be any, especially as his direct social skills appeared to be as limited as any other swinger she had ever attempted conversation with in the course of her quest for an honest slut. Given that she was aware that actually meeting him in person was a bad idea, this was not necessarily a deal breaker, not that there was a deal to break. His UK events tended to involve his ex, whom Kira had had a run-in with a couple of years previously. The ex probably didn’t remember, but Kira did. That was insignificant in comparison with the pain Kira anticipated, of either finding him an empty vessel, or having to say goodbye to him at all if he wasn’t. She wondered if Peter Pipkin the cyclist was a better option, but whilst extremely honest and with, Kira perceived, potential for greatness, Peter had made too many enemies and seemed only to be interested in making more. Kira was stumped as to a solution. She really didn’t fancy being famous when she didn’t even particularly want to leave the house.

Sitting at yet another airport reviewing his own social network Sam Redwood wondered who on earth this cheeky woman was? She had seemed quite nice at first, then as the months wore on she had seemed to become more and more miserable. Sam could feel her pain, which wasn't normal for him, and he wasn't enjoying it. He preferred, quite rightly, to remain disassociated as a rule. She was also too smart to be a fan, so what did she want? It became obvious, the closer his visit to London came, that she would not be paying to come to see him with the rest of the fans. An enemy then! He blocked her from facebook after a romantic (she thought) reference to an error and facial slip that he immediately recognised. Bitch!

"She's just some crazy woman, I don't know. Hey, I should get used to having stalkers I'm gonna be on TV."

"She knows you." Don did not believe a word of it. Something he did not quite understand had happened, but not for the first time Sam was clamming up and there was no doubt that the 'crazy woman' was in emotional bits all over her tiny youtube channel. Don shrugged as he put the phone down. "Not the first, probably not the last."

A few days after the blocking, Kira discovered it and promptly released a feature length film pointing out the error of Peter and Sam's contentious ways and trying to reach a resolution by teasing them both, interspersed with some rather bizarre performance art in case they couldn't handle a full length lecture, a video she did not leave up for long but knew both of them had seen it. She also launched a full scale attack of text based internet fury on Sam's approval only channel before the usual collapse in despair.

She was devastated. Kira was, after all, a rather lonely recluse. The book was put on hold. Kira simply couldn't face leaving the house, never mind the prospect of having to talk about the book to anyone. She ejected the remaining boyfriends and shut herself away to make art.

Johan took one look at the nettle and dandelion patch he normally raided on a daily basis and ran towards the low slung ranch house. It wasn't a particularly dry season. The patch was browning, however, and several of the 'weeds' had grown oddly, seemingly overnight. He ran his fingers through his lustrous russet curls.

"There's something wrong with the weeds, dad." Johan looked distraught. "Have you been spraying anything?" He wiped his hand on his jeans.

"No son, nothing unusual. We're organic. I can't spray anything unusual. Let's go and have a look." Johan's father reached into the kitchen drawer for the soil test kits before making his way outside to join his beloved crazy son.

Zeb Toledo laughed. Sam was always funny briefly, but a less emotionally healthy life advisor Zeb was yet to meet. "Yeah, just riddled with insecurities, ain't you?" he joked with Sam as Sam boasted of his so far very minor recovery from the disaster at Ragma. He was only half kidding. They had met as children, sent away to summer camp at a very expensive hothousing event by a couple of the more famous network marketing and public speaking gurus of the 1970s. They had assumed the same roles as their mentors. Toledo was the motivational expert and bigger earner, whilst Redwood had taken the health angle favoured by some lost in history millionaire-maker guru Toledo wasn't terribly interested in. Toledo looked on Redwood with some contempt when he looked at the balance sheet. Redwood was 'managing' on a measly ten million turnover and a few hundred

thousand a year from his busy schedule of small speaking events, whilst Toledo was drawing nearly \$100 million as a result of bigger locations, heavier investment in writers and a team of people who ensured that Toledo at least looked more successful on paper. Toledo knew Redwood would never match him. He was too obsessed with himself to ever catch up. Physician, heal thyself, he privately thought, but ever the professional, he often entertained himself by listening to Redwood's nonsense on the phone. Now Redwood was going into the thrilling world of network TV sales. Zeb suppressed a yawn. Would this guy ever stop yacking?

"Have you any idea how much these guys make? And the women..."

"Yeah right, good luck with that Sam, I gotta go, the writers are waiting. Always great to hear from ya. And have a good birthday."

"Birthday? It's not until August...."

"Get in touch when you aren't a miserable, conniving, little piece of shit that can't keep it in his pants or hang on to his business," Zeb muttered as he replaced the receiver. "Then you might make some real money and be able to afford some real writers." Zeb smiled distantly and kissed his beautiful brunette wife, who laughed at his Sam-weary expression, and rubbed his half shaved chin before yanking up the scruffy ill-fitting jeans favoured by modern motivators. He headed out to the helicopter waiting on his front lawn. Even the writers appreciated a good entrance.

Malcolm needed some help and some earth moving equipment, but he got both from a kindly neighbour. They redirected the river nearer the house, and soon the dust died down to the point that they were able to open a window or two during the summer months. The book had sold well, and his many fans in California were more than happy to make the long trip north to holiday in an alternative sunshine state.

Now that his immediate garden was green he rolled the old barrels out of the barn and filled them with the newly fertile earth to form an easy to keep, walk through garden. Valerie loved this. Even as they approached their dotage, they would be able to grow their own food without bending too much and it was far easier to hold her gardening classes with the wealthy escapees from frantic moneymaking that eagerly paid for the retreats Malcolm held on his compound.

Sam and his new friend Will turned up during the summer and Malcolm duly blessed them by making a video of their visit. Will, a cynical hedge monkey new ager from England, was writing Sam's new book, designed to feed from the non-religious spiritual element of the market. Malcolm had a look at it and was relieved to find it was no challenge to his own market whatsoever. None of his customers would spend long on this, he thought. Entry-level stuff. Redwood sure did love his noobs. He had done something similar when the raw vegan beauty expert, Zinca had shown some sign of success. Redwood had brought out an infomercial beauty book of Ragma products. It had been awful too. Sam was not blessed with imagination, Malcolm would chuckle to himself occasionally.

"Yeah I'd never be able to get girls like this back home. I'm what's known as a skank in England." Will was, as usual, sounding gravelly and wasted on some 'super fantastic green' he had brought with him. He shook his limp brown dreadlocks from time to time, as if something was living in them and trying to burrow.

Malcolm could see what the appeal was for Sam. Like Barbie and her ugly neglected friend, he laughed to himself. I don't know what a skank is, but you can't write for shit, either, he thought. He was curious about it, however. "Have you actually read the book, Sam?"

“Hell no, I trust ya Will.” Sam laughed. Will had started to appear during Sam’s more esoteric events, speaking about the relationship between paranormal events and their impact on spiritual health. He had a rather small following. “Will’s been telling me all about the masons. We’ve put a little pyramid on the cover, look.”

“Yes, yes I see that.” Malcolm suddenly could not wait for these clowns to leave. “Would you like to come and give us some advice about the garden, Sam? I really value your opinion.” The only thing Sam truly enjoyed in life was the garden, not that he saw much of his own. They talked at length about appropriate planting, pruning, seasonal variations. Malcolm wondered why they hadn’t talked like this before. Suddenly Sam was a demi-god. “Have you thought about doing a book about this, Sam?”

“How many chicks do you think want to spend time with a gardening geek?” It was the first time Malcolm had seen any trace of a reality check from Sam.

“Is that all that matters?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Sam looked away, unsmiling.

Some degree of Aspergers, perhaps? Malcolm’s medical brain flickered into evidence. He stopped it in his tracks by distracting himself with talk of yoga.

“I think it’s time we severed contact with Degnan.” Peter had returned to Oz a harder and more efficient businessman and had booked Lovely’s breast op. They were sitting in Peter’s mother’s garden, eating watermelon.

“What’s up?”

“He says he plans to do fasting retreats. He tried a couple and he says it’s much better for the older people. That’s against everything we’ve been telling them.”

“Yeah, we don’t want to be dealing with older people though, do we?”

“It shouldn’t matter if they put the hours in. Don’t make excuses for them. I hate fat lazy people.” Two days after this conversation a large red milk lorry smashed through a barrier and hit Peter. Lovely rented them a small house and continued to make videos without saying a word. Peter, for once, didn’t say much either.

The doctors claimed he may not walk properly again. Peter was having none of it. Lovely was left with the job of lugging several large boxes of fruit per day into the small house since he wouldn’t consider a change of diet. Thankfully the ebooks, website and youtube videos continued to provide sufficient income every month, but things were not looking so good.

“You haven’t told them have you?”

“Of course not.”

“Good, we can still make videos, I’ll just have to be sitting down and we hide the wheelchair, right?”

“Sure.”

Lovely bought some second hand gym equipment for Peter to use on his upper body, healing proceeded far in excess of what his doctors had predicted, normal for a raw vegan. After a few months he could bench press his own weight. He was, however, still unable to walk.

Peter was getting fat. Lovely didn't like fat.

Peter had broken bones and the acknowledged raw vegan expert on bone health was his arch enemy Sam Redwood.

Richard White looked at his young nephew with contempt. "I told you to keep him."
"I couldn't risk it. You know what we have to do. If he had any idea what was going on he could have turned on us. In any case, Redwood is a liability, always has been, always will be."
"He's more of a liability left in a position to undermine our plans. He could do that without even knowing he's doing it. Don't forget our aims. Now you have to find some way of growing this business or you have to dump it and buy bigger. His figures are looking good from where I'm sitting. It might be an idea to buy him back in. Honestly, after that coup with Organimarket your cousin pulled off and you go losing the goose just when we had him."

"With respect, Uncle Richard, you don't know what I had to work with." Dwayne shook his head and squeezed his eyelids together. "Unless we provided him with the Hefner mansion on wheels, we couldn't have pulled it off."

Hilary and Joe were married that year, the now famous Dr Malcolm Swartz married them, as an ordained minister of a small church in the Midwest, he was able to 'work' whilst he attended and ticket sales proved popular amongst the ardent fans. It was a charming event. They decided to move to Paraguay, and bought a spread there whilst advertising the surrounding land to other keen types.

Hilary rescued horses, and Joe worked on the business whilst enjoying life at the new gentle pace they had set themselves. They had staff for the more mundane tasks of day to day life, and they made their daily videos for the fans as more of a royal event than a chore. Life was blissful. In only a few short years Joe had created a small empire that pretty much ran itself. When they chose to, they could attend events in North America quite easily, or not, as the case may be. Joe had clearly become a deceptively sharp operator and well worth watching.

"I don't get it, but there are some herbicide traces, son, you were right."

"What can we do?"

"Well nothing for these nettles, here are some soil kits, take a walk around the place and see if you can find a clean spot. I need to find out how that got there. It happened just this week, you say?"
"Yesterday they were OK, today they aren't."

"That means some time yesterday or the day before. OK, Johan, I'll ask around." Johan had just gone up several notches in his father's estimation.

Kira had never cried so much in her life. Every day seemed to have some new trigger. She wondered why. By the time the artwork was ready to be mounted she surmised that it must be very salty.

It wasn't like rejection was new to her, in fact she had, at times, orchestrated failure, and she had a rather cruel sense of humour herself. She couldn't work it out at all. She tried everything to move on, and failed miserably each time.

She knew it had something to do with the past few years, the transition from graduate with a career ahead of her, to the sickness and death of her friends and family, and the fact that as a carer, she had no real prospect of changing the future on her own terms. For some reason his refusal to even acknowledge her had ended a chapter of her life. She was no longer a person with a future, but a person with a past, struggling to see what life had to offer within the tiny constraints she had been presented with. Finding out that her family were not very nice people via the series of events surrounding the series of deaths hit her particularly hard and her friends, for the most part, had not been particularly helpful.

It wasn't that she couldn't take it when someone was horrible, she was used to it from her family and friends alike, but it hurt her a great deal that it seemed to her that he regarded her as mad. After years of rejection from jobs she could easily do, and relationships she could have functioned perfectly well in, she was finally rejected even in conversation by the one person that had seemed to offer hope that things could turn out well. The investment she had made in the book was a surrogate for job, children, house and pension, satisfaction in any of which she lacked and had little prospect of resolving.

She wondered how many other people had been in the same position, and felt even more sorry for Sam, which made her cry even more because if he had any idea what he was doing to his own life, never mind other people's, he would probably stop, and that would not be good either, for all the other people like herself who had no hope left.

Even if he had cared about her at all, which he evidently didn't, they were as trapped as each other. Other people would exclaim at the wonder of his apparently fun life, and she simply felt terribly sorry for him. His life looked terribly lonely. Kira always felt particularly alone in crowds. But that had been the whole point of the project in the first place. Bigger venues, a wider scope of argument, more glory and less work unless he wanted it. All she really wanted was a reason to do the work, especially since her own life was ostensibly over as far as she could see and she didn't like people very much anymore.

The twenty or so other members of the 'inner circle' finished whatever they happened to be doing in the dimly lit room and relaxed where they were. Sam started to drum on a large native African drum he was particularly fond of that particular week. They formed a circle and danced to the single drumbeat, clapping and assuming the roles of whatever they imagined a tribe to be. This was what Sam called a reasonable night's entertainment. Tomorrow was the last day of the inner circle's retreat. Few of them would have believed, the month before, that they would wind up naked together celebrating the lunar eclipse in the same room they had spent hours listening to Sam telling them about the secrets of nature.

"Will you be joining us again for the equinox?" Sam smiled sweetly at one of the participants as he stood with his bags in the morning.

"Hell yes." Umberto had not had this much fun in his entire life. The whole trip had been paced perfectly. Boy, that guy was really gifted. What a trip!

Little did the 'inner circle's spouses waiting at home realise, quite how enlightened their beloved partners were becoming from their visits to the Redwood retreat.

Anastasia had a letter. Unfortunately it was in English. She phoned around the followers until she found someone to translate for her.

She had been invited to appear with another human doll for American TV, all expenses paid and another very small fee. She jumped at it. She and Dmitri would have 4 days to enjoy seeing the USA for the first time in exchange for an appearance with a well-known American male human doll from San Francisco.

She spent the afternoon in the apartment selecting suitable clothing for the trip, to take place in four months' time. Dmitri looked on, bewildered by her sudden excitement.

Lovely quietly researched supplements for bone healing online as Peter recovered from the crash. He was still in a great deal of pain and had become considerably heavier for her to lift. Fortunately she was getting stronger from singlehandedly manhandling the boxes of fruit and was able to manage – just. She tentatively brought up the matter of the supplements with Peter. She knew he wouldn't be very happy about supplements, natural or not, because of his strict diet. All she could do was try to steer him towards fruits with sufficient nutrients to help him heal and let the doctor argue with him about what treatments were best for his legs.

"I'll bloody well do without that." Peter snapped at her when she suggested a list of things that might help him heal. She could tell, from the level of vitriol, that he was recovering, but she wondered if there was anything they were missing to help him walk again. The additional weight wouldn't help, she thought. She tried cutting his banana ration to stop him gaining, but still he seemed to get heavier every day, and he was always hungry. She tried cheering him up by taking him outside, but of course, since he didn't want anyone to see him in a wheelchair, never mind so fat, he preferred to stay indoors. Lovely herself noticed it was getting harder to not gain, as she wasn't able to cycle or be out as much as she used to be. She was stuck in with Peter watching loud sporting events on TV. This was particularly hard on her when she looked in the mirror. She felt guilty for worrying about it, and guilty for the nice new tits, which made Lovely feel very sad.

Sam, knowing nothing about the accident, sued Peter over a number of satirical videos he had made. He was hurt and confused at Peter's continuing vendetta, which seemed to have become more rather than less furious of late. Opinion amongst the fans varied pretty much by national boundary.

"Suing is terribly American."

Hilary and Joe were in Peru, researching new products for their empire. A new berry with magical properties had been 'discovered' by an enterprising farmer. Hilary and Joe duly did their best to find some traditional history of its use, but were able to discover precisely nothing. A wasted, and rather expensive trip. They had been conned. Infuriated, they took a well-deserved holiday.

Kira's weight loss had stopped dead. She tried to rally briefly in July and started work on an online network along the lines of the book that she couldn't face looking at. Creating a website was mind-numbing, she found, but she knew this was a better hope of getting people to take action based upon the very serious and possibly over-heavy to be popular, book. Being an artist made her confident that, although she couldn't face working on the book at the moment because of her misery, ostensibly over the Sam issue, she could get on with other projects bit by tiny bit. Finally,

in a state of utter despair, she settled on making Sam the final panel of her key artwork.

“You like the pink one, don’t you.” Her mother was almost blind “You touch it differently.” This made Kira weep again. When would the weeping stop? The whole thing was ridiculous. Ghost, her online friend even thought it was ridiculous and he had had several online affairs. Kira had never seen the point in such nonsense so why she was letting this upset her so much when her entire interaction with Sam had been a few indirect sentences was a mystery.

The artwork had taken seven years to complete. It was the key piece of a collection Kira had been building for years, about love as a creative process rather than the usual time-killing exercise in futility, based upon Plato’s Symposium, a book she had urged all of her muses to read. Love as divine inspiration rather than ‘bestial’ demand. She honestly believed he would understand it, being a worker rather than a traditionalist. It was a screen, hinged so that it could physically cuddle you, and a cushion so that you could hide inside it.

Kira decided to offer it to Sam, and thus kill several birds with one stone. Break her run of bad luck, give him a gift and move on to complete the rest of the work.

On Christmas Day that year she made him a video announcing that she wanted him to have it. Ghost, her last remaining friend, who hated Sam with untold passion for no reason Kira could fathom, decided he could no longer be friends with her as a result of this ‘crazy’ gesture. Kira was now entirely alone.

Sam probably didn’t even see the video. When she emailed his agent to request an office postal address to send it, she was told that she couldn’t have one. She tried explaining about the book, the business, the investors she had wanted to involve in the business, and that the gift was an important gesture.

“Thanks for reaching out.” was the exceptionally rude response from the bitter neglected agent, who hadn’t had her dose of Sam sex therapy for months.

Kira knew that to some extent, this was a difference in culture, that unless she waved a large wad of cash under their noses, she would continue to be treated like shit. Yanks don’t understand finer feelings nearly as well as they understand hard cash, she thought. A paradox of the feudal class system is that it keeps the wealthy civilised and reasonably humble in general conversation with nobodies, enabling the world to continue to function.

Kira the academic and now Kira the artist had now officially been deemed worthless by a supposedly motivational speaker. She had allowed herself to be persuaded to survive in order to be completely destroyed by her one good reason for continuing to live, it seemed.

Sam looked at himself in the mirror after he closed the lid on the earth toilet with some relief. He looked old. He could see grey hair. He was bored. It was not one of his better days. He was in Bali, at a yoga event for the over-privileged, overpaid and over-aged consumers that flocked to exotic locations every year to mingle and enjoy secretive escapes from their very normal lives. Sam as a rule, loved people. His quest to encourage the bored and unmotivated hoards to take control of their health and live happier lives was evidence enough of that. It was simply much easier to sell them products and courses than persuade them any other way. People do love to consume, and buying something is so much easier than actually thinking. Sam had learned this the hard way, after several idealistic years of trying to persuade them to network market the products he passionately believed in.

His self-deprecating sex habit was not because he didn’t like women, on the contrary, Sam was a

little scared of them and wanted them to have whatever they wanted. What they wanted, since he had become famous, tended to be a notch on the bedpost with his name on it which it was easy and pleasurable enough to provide. Persuading people of either gender to drop their inhibitions was not difficult for him at all, in fact.

The book with Will had not been particularly well received although he had received the usual 'you've changed our lives' fan mail, which he did not read. He felt it was really Will's book, and Will had got boring quite quickly. Sam was fond of meditation and yoga, but not a big believer in psychic healing or paranormal events.

Sam reflected briefly that it might be nice to cuddle one of his children now and again. He had had a vasectomy after the first twenty three opportunists had dropped one or two on him. Mercifully, they didn't seem inclined to publicise it as long as they were well provided for. He wasn't too interested in seeing the mothers for the most part, but the children he missed greatly. Much as he admired Alexander the Great, however, he didn't want to match his fertility record and he hadn't even attempted to explain the sheer volume of her grandchildren to his mother. All he really wanted to do was work.

He didn't really like the look of this week's crop of hopefuls, but yoga provided endless opportunity for both him and them to exchange wordless promises, and so it was that Sam had serviced two of his clients the day before, and thought sadly that he was likely to be kept similarly occupied for the rest of the week. The people who paid for these courses were rich and persistent. It seemed to him sometimes that he had very little control over anything that happened to him.

He cheered himself up by pretending to be a faintly nasty female performance artist called Wanda on his fanpage for an hour before returning to the organisation of the SuperSupermeet, an event designed to provide months of opportunities for ticket and product sales. 'I am a supersupergenius,' Sam reminded himself as he tapped away on his netbook. He sipped on some particularly disgusting tea, sent to him by yet another opportunistic yippie smallfry and vetoed it in the strongest possible terms before settling for mineral water.

Malcolm was very happy to see Robin Swayze at the compound. He welcomed him into the now whitewashed main house and showed him around the thriving garden area before they settled down to chat.

"How are things going since Stoic?"

"Well, I'm not rich, Malcolm, but I can say what I want and I don't have to put up with Barry Crispin anymore. I'm no longer vegan, by the way. I hope that isn't a problem."

"That's going to be interesting during classes. Are you still raw?"

"Oh yes, it's just a little raw goats milk. You don't have a goat, do you?" Robin looked around with great seriousness, as if searching for the goat somewhere in the room.

"Sorry no. The classes you are doing this week are mainly diabetics. Would you mind not mentioning it?"

"Well I've kind of admitted it on video. How about I mention it and then talk about more general stuff?"

"Yeah, that sounds OK." Malcolm was relieved. Robin was a stickler for his integrity, but an

admission of goat's milk shouldn't upset the classes too much.

Anastasia's plane touched down in LA on a muggy afternoon in September. She still didn't speak a lot of English, but she was wildly excited. Dmitri was a bit disturbed by her enthusiasm. Surely she couldn't be serious about a move to America? Dmitri could think of nothing worse. Too many fat, overdressed, over-friendly people and, today at least, far too hot. She checked her makeup for the hundredth time in a small mirror before they could leave the plane on the off-chance anyone would photograph her, but no one was there. Just a car and driver had been sent, to take them to the hotel to relax for the evening before her TV appearance. Dmitri was relieved. Not that famous yet, he thought. The idea of losing her shouldn't worry an 'open husband,' but it did.

The event was packed out. She had to stand and pose with a man who had had, even by Anastasia's standards, rather a lot of plastic surgery and who apparently hated her. She couldn't actually talk to him, since her English was still extremely limited and he, naturally, didn't speak Ukrainian, but she was well aware that he didn't like her at all.

Anastasia, having been pilloried in the Ukrainian press, stoically got through the event by resorting to glum faced doll mode. Thank goodness for Dmitri, waiting in the wings, she thought. America seemed just as hateful as home. "Fake! Fake!" they shouted.

At the back of the audience, Gary Bocelli clapped loudly. "Beautiful! Bravo!" He was, quite literally, Anastasia's biggest fan. Gary was five hundred pounds, however, so he didn't want to block the view for the other fans. He found a small step at the back of the room that he guessed would take his weight to stand on.

She talked at length, whilst being translated by an overexcited frowsy woman wearing inappropriate fur boots, about the ease with which she had achieved her seemingly impossible looks. She did this often, completely unaware that she was making something that most 'experts' made look impossible, very easy. Anastasia could have made millions out of pretending that her looks were hard to achieve. Instead she would sulk, shrug and repeat that it was very simple, "Liquid raw diet" she would repeat, which nobody seemed to want to dwell on. Instead they would go on and on about her plastic surgery, which in fact had been minimal. Why was everyone so obsessed with spending money? She really wanted to talk about her music and mystic experiences, but no one seemed to want to let her.

She had scored one unwitting success, however. Gary resolved that day never to eat cooked food again.

Johan wondered about the wisdom of what he was about to do, but he did it anyway.

"Can I have the bottom fields?"

"What for, son, they are grazing land, and those trees at the bottom mean you can't grow much there?"

"I'd like to see if I can encourage wild food. I'll go find the plants we need, and we can see if they will take if I actually plant them."

"You think they will sell?"

"A lot of my fans are in cities, they love the books and the courses, but they don't get to use the

information much. I want to let them try the stuff I write about.” Johan felt as if he were ten years old again, asking for a transformers’ toy.

“I’ll have to give it a bit of thought son, I don’t know where I’d put the cows. By the way, there was a stripe of herbicide dumped on my land by the farm thirty miles down. I tracked down the source after a few phone calls. Some maniac down there is using Whiteinc GM crops and a leaking crop spray plane.”

“Can you sue?”

“Not sure it’s worth it unless the other neighbours want to make it a joint case. We only lost a few hundred dollarsworth. I sure let him have it over the phone though. Well done for spotting it.”

“White industries seem to want to poison the whole country. Don’t these stupid farmers realise modifying a gene in agricultural crops means nature compensates for it by modifying the genes all down the line? They’ve already found GM compensating weeds and insects.”

“All they see is the money. It’s up to organic farmers like us to make sure as much of the food supply is safe from these ‘superparasites’ as possible. White industries will just keep making more chemical solutions, and more genetic modifications until the good ole’ boys on the big operations are producing food which is not only inedible but unrecognisable, all for White’s profit margins. We just have to pray for ‘em and hope we can protect our own.” At least Johan’s father agreed with him about some things. “We have to count ourselves lucky that other countries have seen the light and banned them outright, otherwise the entire global agricultural supply could be contaminated with genes requiring White Industry chemicals before we know it. As it is, North America is already in bad trouble.”

“If you look at it next to battery farms with animals sick from eating cheap GM grain it’s pretty frightening isn’t it? It really scares me that people have to eat that stuff.”

“Not so nice for the beasts either, son. At least ours get a bit of a life before they go to market. Did you see that cow down at the lake swimming last year? I tried to tell this guy about it at the farmer’s meet. Intensive dairy farmer and he point blank refused to believe me when I told him cattle could swim. He’d probably keel over and die if he stopped to watch them socialising. I don’t suppose you’ll keep the livestock after we’re gone?”

“I don’t know dad. The manure is good, and there’s a market for raw milk, but you know my heart’s not really in sending them to their deaths.”

“They get a better life here. You have to bear in mind it’s not just for you. You can’t change the world, son, but you can protect your own. Whilst they’re here, they’re in our care, and I don’t just mean veterinarians.” Johan’s dad was slightly encouraged by the possibility that Johan would keep some cattle for the premium quality grass fed manure and raw milk ‘as God and nature intended,’ as he thought, so he tried to press the point home. There are other ways of keeping the land natural, you know. Harvey Davies has a shooting estate sixty miles up the road. You should take a look at his wild food supply.” He shot Johan a teasing smile.

“I couldn’t do that dad. I just couldn’t kill anything or take money for that.”

“Well, I’m sure Harvey would be pleased to see you. He hasn’t seen you since you were a boy. I’m sure you’ll find some interesting plants up there. That land’s not been touched with chemicals or anything for sixty years or more.”

“You’ve got a point there, dad.” Johan looked at his father, frowning. His father smiled contentedly into his book. Maybe the land would be safe from the insidious invasion of White industries genetically modified industrial agriculture after all.

“You can have the fields, son. I’ll think of something. I think we should go up and see Harvey, though. Just for a beer or something.”

“I don’t drink beer.”

Johan’s father rolled his eyes.

At last Lovely pulled up outside the house in the van they had bought for still-hiding Peter so that they could get out occasionally. It had been eight months since the accident. Peter, through sheer strength of will, was now able to get on his feet for a few minutes at a time before he would collapse back onto whatever was nearest to catch him. Lovely was now on her own with producing the essential youtube videos that constituted their income. They had increased their income by multiplying the number of channels, but putting the same videos on all of them, trebling the hits with new tagging on all the channels. Monthly income, thereby, was slightly up despite the number of actual videos being down. Their official stories varied from; ‘Peter is in Thailand training for a race’ to; ‘Peter is busy on a public speaking tour.’ The reality was that Peter was now so fat that he could not appear, even photoshopped frame by frame, in his own videos.

Today however, both Peter and Lovely were delighted to take delivery of Peter’s new exercise bike. He reasoned that since he could stand, he could probably manage a few seconds on the bike, and, being a bloody minded Auzzie, he resolved to try this as often as he could.

The screams weren’t nice to listen to. Lovely, having tried to stop him, would go out in the van until fifteen minutes had elapsed, then return to administer the pain killing gels that made his struggle bearable. She was very glad he was fighting the ominous diagnosis, but since both were aware that it was highly unlikely that he would be cycling professionally again, they wondered quite what the future was going to be.

Peter remained cheerful. “It’s OK Lovely, once I’ve got my legs back, I can start making videos about recovering from disaster and the numbers will go up even more.”

Lovely wasn’t sure about this, but hoped he was right, since her waist had got at least 3 inches bigger since his accident and so she didn’t really enjoy doing the bikini videos anymore. She was enjoying slightly more freedom since he was now able to go to the toilet by himself but she hadn’t managed to solve the bikini problem quite yet.

She was glad, however, that Peter was the most stubborn pig-headed man in the world.

Zeb Toledo strutted across the lawn from the helicopter, ignoring the mobile ringing in his pocket. He wanted to see Bethany before doing any more business today. His beautiful wife came first just once a day, and coming in the door was a crucial moment for anyone’s wellbeing.

Bethany ran to the door to meet him. She had read somewhere in the dim and distant past that men liked this, and pleasing Zeb was all that she had to worry about.

After their routine hug of delight, Bethany looked up. “Have you heard from Norm?”

“No, I just ignored a call from him. Problem?” Zeb removed his sunglasses, squinting down at her.

“You can call him back after a drink. It sounds important.”

Zeb followed Bethany inside and they silently enjoyed their daily drink together in the verdant

solarium. It was a pace-changing routine they had set years before. Nothing must ever interfere with the half hour when Zeb arrived home.

“Oh God. Yes.....No, don't do that, I'll have a chat with the lawyers and get back to you.” Zeb was reeling. Two of his fans had been taken to hospital from one of his satellite events. An enthusiastic course leader had kept them too long in the 'hot tank,' an endurance event which 'took you to your inner limit' in order to improve your self-motivation and profit making potential. Zeb had made only one brief appearance at this event, but it had his name all over it. He would have to think of a positive outcome to announce from it, alongside calculating how much it was going to cost him in lost revenue and compensation. “Give me the name of the trainer and the location?”

Sam flicked on his laptop. He was naked. He had just finished a rather small health food event, not even really worth doing for the money, but anything to keep the ball rolling. Sam liked to work, as Kira had once put it, like a 'blind man running at a wall.' He wanted to check his email in case the TV company had got in touch. They had.

Dear Mr Redwood,

The backing material for our show is now complete. If you could bring your team in to complete the filming between the twentieth and twenty fifth, and have your people let us know your needs. It's so great to be working with you. We love your work. It's so good to know you are with us on this project.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Mirabelle Goodson

Mirabelle, thought Sam excitedly, what a foxy name, I wonder what she's like? It was getting a bit cold in the hotel room, so he picked up one of his longer tops and draped it over his lap. He looked at the homepage. The news about Zeb caught his eye. He thought about calling him to offer commiserations and then remembered the reference to his birthday. It was only June. He felt a bit small. He twiddled a nipple briefly and called down to reception. “Is that Julie? What time do you finish?”

She wasn't due to finish for an hour so he pretended to be an irritated yogi from the Punjab for a while on his fanpage and toyed with the idea of dressing. The rest of his work was all taken care of. He had just finished absent-mindedly smothering himself in coconut oil when she knocked on the door. Damn he had forgotten! Maybe she would like that? He deftly dived in to the ensuite to put the shower on and stick a towel over himself before he answered the door.

Julie, hotel receptionist, aged twenty two, was rather surprised when a very oily and slightly chubby older man in a small towel with dry hair and a running shower invited her inside. She politely said nothing about it and remained looking cool whilst enjoying a rampant fit of the inward giggles while Sam hurriedly got dressed in the bathroom. She liked him already.

Kira knew on some level that the mistake she had been making for years was letting the people around her determine her self-worth. Her friends had never had much confidence, so it wasn't terribly surprising that they had no confidence in her.

Sam had not seen the artwork that he turned down and he hadn't even done that personally. She arranged to make a pop video, in which she thought she would feature the artwork so that he could at least see it. She realised that an apology was unlikely to be forthcoming given that he had now

had nearly two years to talk to her following the mysterious blocking episode, but she thought, what was the point in spending seven years on an artwork and not showing it to anyone, and how dare this guy be so rude when he regularly told his fans to be nice to people in case they were useful? It wasn't even just about her now, she had made such a fuss that other people had been in touch, including one who had paid to see him, to say he had done something similar to them. One of them even suggested he was married as the reason for the blockings, but Kira doubted that was true. If Redwood was in love, she thought, the whole world would hear about it with tiresome regularity. In any case, why should that stop him speaking to her? She wasn't even in the same country?

Two years she had spent on the first book, before she had spoken to him at all, several months grinding away on the website and seeking out now defunct, thanks to Redwood's agent, investors, and then a further year on the artwork, and still he didn't seem to be able to show her the tiniest bit of courtesy. She had, every so often, made a video directed at him but none of them really made sense even to her. She just knew she was very hurt and couldn't understand why communication, which had seemed abundantly clear before, was now impossible. She had seen him completely ignore a male academic who was trying to work with him, so she didn't think it was a gender issue. Nationality possibly? There was no way of knowing but since it had happened she had been so angry and upset that it was now impossible to imagine communicating with him anyway.

She remembered years before, a corporate scandal she had unearthed where a huge company had not been able to be seen to take advice from her because she had been employed as a data processor. She had been told at the time that unless she charged them for the information as a consultant, they couldn't be seen to take it. That situation had ended up with the company stealing the information from her car before firing her, rather than admit they had a problem. She had won out in the end, by calmly enabling the removal of the CEO from outside the company amidst her friends and family trying everything from calling her a liar, to suggesting she was crazy, but their reaction then had been absurd too. Denial is much easier than admitting a problem for most people, which is how corruption thrives and how entire economies crumble. 'Yes' men, employ 'yes' men, employ 'yes' men. Crushing the confidence out of most of the population via debt or inadequate emotion reduces contention too. The only way to survive these things was to ignore everything and bulldoze your way through the bullshit.

She was aware of still having oddly emotional feelings for the guy, but since she had stopped watching him a couple of years before in case that fed it, she wouldn't even allow herself to look at a photograph of him. She wasn't sure if this was helping or making things worse. She was even surer now that her decision to never meet him was the right one, but how to resolve this issue about the work? The work was all that really mattered in the first place. There was no point in her tangling herself up in running a giant network with no focus for her. If she couldn't clarify the issue to him about the work, the work would not achieve its aim, and she had spectacularly failed to communicate this to him at all, despite many and varied attempts. This was more of an intuitive issue, she had felt very strongly this was the cause of his significance to her. No matter what her former friends thought about the superiority of fame, Sam was more of a case of taking notoriety and turning it into glory for the joy of having done it. No matter what they thought about Sam, he was made for greater things than even he would ever realise, the only thing she was quite sure of. Did it really matter that much, if he was so much of an idiot that he couldn't manage a simple discourse? She thought it did. Kira had never been afraid of being disliked, she reasoned, so she wasn't afraid of dealing with people she wasn't necessarily best friends with.

All Kira really needed, she eventually decided, was to stop being around weak people and working in terrible jobs for pin money and finally allow herself to be defined in the hope of being taken more seriously. "Shun the weak." as Harry had said, many times. Ironic, it was on the artwork, the context of rejection - "I remain free to be undefined." She had predicted her own downfall even as

she orchestrated it. She smiled at this neat bit of self-delusion of control over anything.

She had a lot of artwork and a pile of old stuff to sell, so she set about the stuff first. Next would be the shop for the artwork, and whilst preparing that, she thought, she would write her first novel. What she really wanted was Global cultural economic theory, but in the meantime, due to the lack of any recognisable feedback from anyone, some art and scandal would do. She had no reason to care about the future of humanity, since she didn't see much of a future for herself.

Gary Bocelli, Anastasia's five hundred pound fan, had been as good as his word. The first few weeks he was eating nuts by the handful, but the loss of additives from the pre-packaged food he was used to were gone so he lost one hundred pounds very quickly. He joined all the usual raw food forums and learned more about his diet.

The second hundred pounds was more difficult, but still reasonably rapid as he had learned not to eat nuts by the handful and was slowly increasing the amount of vegetables in his diet. By the time he was two hundred and fifty pounds he was able to take up walking and had started socialising at raw food events offline, meeting the people that later provided him with further contacts to help him in his new life. His weight loss had slowed by this time to a snail's pace, and so he took up juicing. Still a young man, he bathed in MSM to help his skin shrink with his weight loss. He started a website and began to take speaking engagements to help other people with an extreme weight problem.

When this stopped working, Gary water fasted for one hundred days until he finally reached his goal of one hundred and sixty pounds, whereupon he took up tantric yoga and was rarely heard from. He credited many of his new friends and particularly his new American business contacts for his weight loss, but he didn't once think to mention Anastasia.

Anastasia, entirely unaware, continued to spend her days uploading ten second youtube videos of her waist from her mobile and photoshopping suitably off-the-wall pictures of herself for her stream on Facebook. Just enough to get the ad to appear, and her fans duly clicked. Enough for her to live on, and no more.

The baby's screams were deafening and wouldn't stop. Joe and Hilary looked at each other in despair and called one of the nannies.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She's a baby. That's what babies do. It's probably healthy. They do this a lot when they are new. Something to do with the lungs."

"How long does it go on for?"

"About three years, give or take." The nanny smiled patronisingly and picked up the tiny baby. The crying stopped.

"Phew." Joe went outside and sat in the garden with some relief. It was times like this he missed his football buddies.

It had not been a good month for Malcolm, although his trees were growing beautifully around the main house and he was very pleased, thanks to Sam, at the results in the garden. Several irate and

very overweight diabetics had left the course early because they couldn't stand the food. Malcolm felt a bit deflated. One of the remaining course participants unknowingly comforted him when they expressed their untold delight at not having to buy insulin any more. She was a very large black lady who had struggled with her medication costs for years. Now she was loudly saying she planned to use her apartment balcony to grow food to reduce her grocery bill and how marvellous she felt. Out of the thirty original participants, only twelve had managed to get through the entire month without making any mistakes, complaining or making an outright escape. Worse, one wag had announced this defeat online, and so now there was a record of it forever. Malcolm wondered what on earth they wanted? They were well informed in the course handout what they could and could not eat, and they wouldn't get a better opportunity not to cheat than being thirty miles from the nearest grocery store.

How to resolve the motivation issue, he pondered? Spirituality clearly wasn't enough for everyone. Part of the problem was that going straight onto a raw diet from the normal food they expected alongside their usual doses of insulin was causing them to become dizzy, tired and extremely grumpy, and Malcolm's prescription of lectures, yoga and sun worship wasn't quite cutting it. There had to be an answer. Malcolm decided to meditate on it.

Zeb wasn't out of trouble yet. A further incident at one of his 'rebirth by fire' events had created another three lawsuits. He was all over the internet for three days before he managed to regain control of the media output. Remarkably, he managed to curtail the reports in under a week, but for some potential devotees, the damage was done.

The magic of Zeb Toledo evidently had limits, after all. Takings were plummeting and booking statistics did not look good. Zeb was, of course, a long way from destitution, but two hits in a row when Zeb was globally recognised was far from good news. Zeb decided to take his perfect wife to Morocco, to their small lime-washed mansion in the hills, and spend a couple of weeks in the pool to rethink his strategy.

It was a beautiful day, the sun shone, the trees shivered in the breeze and the water softly bubbled in the middle distance. Dwayne was playing golf at his very expensive club near Beverly Hills. He had bought another three health food businesses that week. He wondered what it was like to be considered the successful child of the family. Being paid to discredit an industry was not his idea of rip-roaring success, but Dwayne was not a natural rebel. White Industries now had a five percent stake in the American health food market, and since their share was still staggering along in profit as per Richard's instructions and they had another couple of major players in their pockets, they now had a little natural health specialising lobbyist in Washington.

Dwayne supposed that by the time the other operators in the industry had sufficient understanding of the big picture to fight back, it would be too late and he would be considered a success within the family, but he was tired of being thought of as the family stooge. He idly wondered, as he took his put, what would happen if he rebelled. He looked down at his increasing girth as he missed the seventeenth hole. Maybe he should try some of his own products? He laughed to himself as he pictured himself appearing at Uncle Richard's breakfast table in a bandana and tie dyed shorts. It was all in his name, there really wasn't any reason why he should play along with the family plans, he thought.

"No harm in exploring the possibilities." He said to the caddy brightly. The caddy, who was a bit bored of watching Dwayne play golf badly and had no idea what he was talking about, smiled

encouragingly in anticipation of his customary tip.

Peter wondered if now was a good time to tell his followers the truth. He had been getting around the problem by doing all the website and coaching work whilst Lovely made the videos, but lately, since she was less glamorous as a result of caring for him, she was becoming increasingly reluctant to make any. His weight was dropping, but he was still, by comparison with his previous appearance, grossly overweight.

“No, it’s not time yet, Peter. You can’t let them down like this.” Lovely was horrified by the idea. “If you want me to keep going with the videos I will, but you can’t let them see you like that.” “I don’t want you to be unhappy, Lovely.”

“I’m happy, Peter, as long as you keep getting well and you aren’t under any pressure? Let’s just keep things as they are, I’ll get out and lose some weight and we’ll keep going with the swimsuit videos. How is your inspirational recovery book going?”

“It’s not bad actually. Want a read?”

“No, thanks, I’ll wait until it’s finished.” Lovely was not one of the world’s avid readers. She was quite sure that Peter would write the best inspirational recovery book ever. She decided not to bother with bananas today. She wasn’t throwing up at all anymore, since Peter was in the house all the time, but she was really fed up with her new ‘ordinary’ body. The sooner he was on a real bike the better. He was now able to manage almost an hour on the exercise bike without screaming.

Sam was in make-up, preparing for his commercial video. The make-up lady was in her mid-fifties, he supposed, a neat figure with carefully dyed and styled black hair. He hadn’t been out for a couple of weeks since there had been no appointments, retreats or yoga bookings. “Would you mind locking the door? I feel a bit exposed.” He knew that admission of vulnerability was endlessly intoxicating for the ladies.

“Sure.” Sandy, a non-raw food devotee who had been exercise addicted since her teens assumed that he was genuinely nervous and did as she was asked.

“That’s a really great figure you’ve got. What do you eat?”

“I’m low carb, have been for years. It’s really the gym that does it.” Sandy was justifiably proud of her nipped waist, the result of a nightly corset and daily gym visit.

“Can I see your thighs? They look really amazing.” Sam bit his lip and looked at her roguishly. “Sure.” Sandy, catching on, decided to humour him in a moment of impulsive naughtiness and slowly, inch by inch, raised her skirt.

“Little bit higher?” Sam looked up at her, still biting his lip. Sandy’s best black knickers were now on display. “That fabric, what is it?”

“You’re interested in ladies underwear?” Sandy was starting to laugh. “Would you like to see my bra too, it matches?”

“That would be very sweet of you. Yes I’m truly fascinated by this particular fabric. You’re very kind.”

Sandy, now with her blouse unbuttoned to the waist with her skirt somewhere around her stomach

smiled indulgently whilst Sam closely inspected the ‘absolutely amazing’ material of her lingerie. She hadn’t had this much fun in at least a fortnight.

She blinked a lot when he got to running his finger under the lace. She was even more pleasantly surprised when she saw her breasts out of the bra and dangling in the mirror as she was rear-ended over the make-up counter. “Oh my.”

“This lingerie is truly magnificent from both sides.” pondered Sam studiously. “Truly magnificent.”

Harvey Davies was an incredibly strong man. Even through his thick shirt he rippled as he walked. He also smelt of whisky, unfortunately, but it didn’t seem to affect his physique, whatever he was drinking. Johan and his father watched him stride around the land he had known since birth with the ease of one of his own deer. Johan had already spotted several species he was interested in and they had discussed a regular harvest.

“Tell you what Johan, I have more than enough business, if you turned the farm over to wild land, you could harvest the wild food while I extended my hunting and fishing operation here. We could give that some thought.”

“I don’t think I could have any part in hunting.”

“Son, we are trying to come up with a way for us all to get what we want. You want wild plant food, I want the farm safe, Harvey wants to expand.”

“There must be another way to do it.” Johan remained stubborn.

“It’s OK George, let him be.” Harvey could see the old man’s frustration. “He needs to think about it. There’s no hurry yet, is there?”

“You never can tell, Harvey, you never can tell.” The old man stooped and coughed for full dramatic effect and noted with satisfaction the alarm on Johan’s face. ‘Carpe diem’, he thought. “You never know what’s going to happen, son.”

Harvey caught on immediately. “Yeah, George, I know what you mean.” He said in a resigned tone. “And here’s me with no son, either.” He put a comforting arm around George and they both turned away from Johan to conceal their slight smirks.

Kira couldn’t bear to watch Sam’s commercial. He had ended up making two, one as himself, another, a kind of media-normalised version. Both were unspeakably ghastly. The ‘Austin Powers’ shirt he had clearly chosen himself, had a frankly repulsive collar height in the first version, the lumpy over-tight one that had presumably been forced upon him in the second equally bad. What she heard of the words before she gave up was not palatable to her either. ‘How sad’ she thought, thinking of the magnificent plans she had for giant stadium events and inevitably, cried some more. This was getting her nowhere. She needed to get the plans underway even if she had to take care of the whole damn thing herself.

The comments under the commercials on youtube were very interesting. Sam was bringing health to an entirely new market, one of people who did not see much beyond their televisions, and who bought, in some volume evidently, based upon what they considered to be ‘popular’ and ‘normal.’ Sam had done the right thing, she thought. It was not the end of the world, by a long shot. Naturally

the former fans thought it was a scandal, but who cared about that. Everything seemed to be a scandal for these people. All that really mattered was that more fat, sick people would start to think about getting well, on that at least, she and Sam agreed.

Perhaps she should just accept that the path had split, not that it had ever really been together. She still wasn't sure why she was quite so hung up on Sam. He was like a combination of the two worst relationships she had ever had, all rolled up into one awful person. The thing with promiscuous men, as she had said some months ago to Ghost, was that they most feared emotional intimacy. Once you broke through that, it was like being the best woman in the whole world. They would still be incredibly unfaithful, of course, but at least you had the comfort of knowing that they would always come back because you, at least on some level at least, were better. She guessed that it was a case of hating being wrong – she didn't like having her trust violated, so the best way of avoiding it was to start out with the premise that it was going to be. That seemed a bit sad really. A bit tragic, and a bit self-defeating since she had started out wanting nothing apart from a brief conversation and didn't even get that.

On the other hand, it kind of ruled out a lot of basic problems other people had with more basic relationships. You didn't have to worry about jealousy, for example, because you were inevitably right. She remembered one particularly amusing scene where she, as a tiny twenty four year old, had held off an enormous, irate husband from his attempts to kill her boyfriend at the time, knowing full well that he was seeing the man's wife and she wasn't supposed to know about it anymore than he was. She had been amused at his incoherence at the time, the poor bewildered man didn't seem to know whether to break it to her or not.

She wished that Sam didn't matter, and wondered, as she worked on her novel, why on earth he still did. She had, after all, never had any intention of even seeing this person, never mind any of that. What a lot of soul searching over nothing. She pondered the nature of what people refer to as 'chemistry' and decided that it evidently wasn't anything to do with biology at all.

Malcolm rang off the call from Sam and beamed at Valerie.

"That man is a genius! A genius!"

Valerie was bemused. Sam was many things, she did not think a genius was one of them. "What on earth did he say?" She turned to water her tomatoes.

"I'll talk to you about it later I need to go and make plans!" Malcolm was suddenly elated and rushed off to his office. He picked up the phone and first dialled Joe, then Don, then, in a fit of over-excited joy, Gary Bocelli. Fantastic!

Zeb had a couple of months off, so he tried to relax, but found he was having some difficulties. Sleeping and chest pains, mainly. The new events weren't selling so well. His doctor suggested he was suffering from acid indigestion as a result of stress. What should he do? He could ask 'yacking Sam' he supposed, but it still wasn't August and he rather enjoyed the thought of his last belittling anti-motivational conversation with him. After a characteristically swift search online, he found Dr Malcolm Swartz. Anti-stress retreat. That might do it, and although it was a raw food retreat, sucky Sam need know nothing about it. He picked up the rather flashy gold phone in his cavernous grey silk marble hall and dialled in his booking.

Dwayne put down his fork and called the waiter over. "I'm so sorry, may I order a rare fillet steak?" He really couldn't face another day of salad. He was prepared to admit that he had felt a

little better since he had attempted to improve his diet, but the lure of perfectly cooked steak at the five star restaurant was too much for him. “A little pesto and parmesan, yes.”

Richard White laughed. “Not giving up the meat yet then? Dwayne isn’t a health food junkie after all, everyone!”

The White family were gathered around the table for one of the larger festivities. Varying degrees of evil were represented, from genetic modification to chemical production, to marketing, to business strategy specialists. The White family had employed the methods of Philip the Good to incorporate all facets of the business through family links, from marriage to multiple affairs with progeny.

They all cheered dutifully and took a unified swig of champagne.

Dwayne didn’t really want his steak by the time it arrived, but he smiled at them all and ate it anyway. He decided it might be time for a long vacation away from the family before the next part of his allotted project.

“Perhaps I could use the house in Hawaii at the end of the month, Richard? Just for a few weeks R and R?”

“Of course Dwayne, we can’t have you tired during your next task, can we?”

Malcolm worked like a man possessed to prepare the land for his event. The earth mover was brought in again to flatten a large area behind the garden, a pagoda was built, and three of the outbuildings were prepared for the speakers and higher paying guests to stay in. The diabetes festival was not going to be easy to manage alongside his anti-stress retreat, he thought, but it shouldn’t be impossible.

Valerie had her doubts. “Shouldn’t we postpone one of them?”

“We could, but we would have to use the savings for the mortgage this month. It’s OK, the anti stress residents should be far enough away in the lodges.”

“What if they actually want to participate? I don’t think there is much that’s anti-stress about a speaking event?” Valerie did have a point, two hundred tents containing diabetics for a week was not likely to be considered anti-stress by many of the far wealthier customers in the lodges. Malcolm resolved to ask around, and promptly forgot. When he finally remembered, he shrugged. He had a lot of land.

Anastasia looked at the dull scrub land stretched out in front of her. Dmitri was measuring out the dry patch in the middle of the field.

“We need to build a road, Ana, that is the only problem with this area.”

“Yes, we build a road, and a path here and plant trees in the wet area.”

“You know what a ha-ha is?”

“Ha- ha?”

“Yes, it was used by English aristocrats in gardens. We can build a ha-ha on the wet area, put trees behind, then the land stays dry.”

“You are very clever Dmitiri.”

Anastasia and Dmitri had just taken possession of their new land, an old farm near the city where they currently lived. The old farmhouse was a wreck, but in this field, they thought, they could start their mystical village for the customers of Anastasia’s courses, where the international fans of her photos and videos could also come and visit. A new home, and a new centre for operations. There was a similar, beautiful village in Siberia that Anastasia had researched, hand built by the residents. Anastasia hoped, however, that in this case the mystics and fans would pay for Dmitri and her to build their perfect mystical utopia. Anastasia’s training in architecture and Dmitri’s expertise in building and landscaping would at last be used for something they wanted, for a change. Life was looking sweet. The land here was extremely fertile for growing vegetables, too. They could create their dream.

Johan’s father put the finishing touches on his will, and signed it off.

“Thank the good lord for Harvey.”

His wife was not so sure. “He can’t change the rules on us, can he?”

“No, no, it’s absolutely tight with the lawyer. Harvey gets operational use of the land, provided Johan is named owner and harvests both spreads. This way Johan gets to do what he likes with his wild plants, and Harvey keeps it in profit. Win-win, really.”

“What happens when Harvey dies?”

“That’s up to Harvey and Johan. Johan gets this place anyway, if Harvey wants he can leave him his, now it’s just up to Johan to make a goddamn profit out of his wild plants. Either way I can stop worrying about it now. You need to persuade Johan to have a son already, he’s getting a bit past it to be single.”

“I’ll try, George, I’ll try.” Johan’s mother wondered gloomily if she knew any amazing women that could distract Johan from his amazing wild plants.

The evening sunlight streamed into the airy bedroom from the horse paddock. Joe was packing for his trip to the Swartz ranch. Hilary wasn’t going.

“What are you going to do about the letter?” Hilary was perched on the lilac coverlet she currently favoured on the bed. She didn’t like being away from Joe at all, but it was only a week, and the baby, in addition to the horses, needed her.

“From Dwayne White? Nothing, we don’t need to do anything.”

“We don’t have to give a definitive ‘no’ at some point?”

Joe turned to look at her. He was dreading leaving Hilary for one second, never mind a week. “The only downside of getting that letter was that it means that we can’t ever float the company. We are stuck with a very successful company that we weren’t planning to sell anyway. It’s not a problem, sweetpea.”

“I can’t help feeling that he won’t leave it there.”

“He won’t do anything this week, he’s in Hawaii until September. Besides, Dwayne isn’t exactly Mr Hardcore businessman. His valuation was like totally massive, someone else will bite his hands off.”

“That’s what worries me. Why is a White so interested in the health food business?” Hilary was troubled.

“It’s nothing we have to worry about this week, babydoll.”

The driver called from the main room. Joe zipped his bag, hugged Hilary and made for the door. “I’ll call you when I arrive.”

“OK.”

Annette looked at herself in the full length mirror with some satisfaction. Hold up stockings, new knickers, tight skirt. That should cover it. Sam was in town. She gave her hair an extra brush. When she arrived at her office, she was unusually unpleasant to her receptionist before entering her office and checking that the key was in the lock. She checked her hair again and settled down to run through her duties for the day. Eleven am was the only appointment that mattered. Sam arrived at the office looking particularly irritated. He smiled at the receptionist and walked straight in. Annette was at her desk.

“Hi Sam,” she pouted and rose from her seat to greet him, “Do sit down.” She licked her lips.

“Hello. I hear you’ve lost me \$43,000. Then there is that tent at the festival. I am not happy.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, that woman seemed crazy. Rambling on about all this academic bullshit. What would she want you for?” Kira, irate as usual, had made a video in fury at not being able to wave her artwork goodbye for no apparent reason.

“I said I’m not happy.” Sam cut across her sneering. “I think you had better fetch two towels and a glass of ice cubes, oh, and a cushion, and maybe some tape.” He did his best to look furious. “And for the record, I don’t know what she wants either, she keeps making these random films yelling at me for no reason. She can’t be a very good researcher if she doesn’t know about my rap sheet. Anyway, she’s a nobody. Who cares? Go and get what I asked for.”

Annette rose and slithered out of the office to fetch the items. With great satisfaction she stood in front of his chair and laid them out on the desk, enjoying the audible effects on Sam’s breathing of the skirt and slightly overtight underwear. She then followed her usual routine and locked the door. “Give me the tape and then show me your hands.” He proceeded to tape her wrists together in front of her, then briskly removed her skirt and dropped her knickers to her knees. “Turn around and bend over.”

After examining her fabulous rear end, he gave her a resounding spanking, audible in the office outside, where the typists giggled and whispered to each other “At least she’ll be in a good mood today.” When it had reached the pleasing rosy pink he favoured and she had stopped flinching he figured that was probably satisfactory. He was getting a little bit bored with this, but she seemed to like it. He picked up the glass of ice and inserted two cubes of each into each orifice before pulling her panties back up and cutting the tape from her hands. She looked stricken. Over already?

“Put your skirt on and put the towel over the cushion on your chair before you sit down.” This was new, thought Annette. She didn’t protest, however, which she regretted later that day. They talked business for a while, until Sam figured from her ability to sit still that the ice had melted. “You can get up now, and turn around.”

Annette dutifully showed him the large wet patch on the back of her skirt. “Either you find me very, very exciting, or you’ve peed your pants. Unbutton your blouse and show me your breasts.” Annette had realised by now she was not going to be able to stand up in the office today and would be the last to leave, but this was what floated her boat. Sam tried to look as bored and irritated as he could and tugged nastily at each nipple before getting up and moving towards the door. “Thanks, I’ll see you in six months.” He didn’t bother waiting for her to cover herself up before he unlocked the door and left the office, door as wide as Annette’s shocked eyes.

“Job done.” He flashed an angelic smile at the blushing typists as he left for his next appointment. He was more bothered about the tent than the \$43k artwork. Kira was a nobody anyway, it didn’t matter about upsetting a nobody, and ‘can’t lose what you never had’ was his personal mantra as far as the valuation of the artwork was concerned. Nicely primed for his next appointment with Sharifa the tantric goddess, he bounced down the stairs and out into the street.

Zeb’s helicopter landed at the back of the Swartz ranch, too far away from the house but within sight of the lodges. He used his mobile to dial Malcolm and got the pilot to carry his bags to his new home for the month. Looking over at the house, he saw the preparations for the Diabetes Festival and frowned. “Is there some sort of event going on?”

“It’s not until next week but yes, a diabetes meeting.” Malcolm was a little nervous. Zeb was a big name, big spending client, for the next month anyway.

“Interesting, mind if I sit in?”

Phew, thought Malcolm. “No, no, we’d be honoured, Mr Toledo.”

“Great. Call me Zeb.”

He looked around his lodge house. No cooker? No TV? No computer? What on earth was he going to do for the next month? This would drive him crazy. There weren’t even any books worth reading on the small bookshelf. All divine hippy nonsense.

He had brought a couple of zingy bestsellers, but they wouldn’t keep him going long at his usual speed reading rate. “Uh, Malcolm, what is it that I am expected to actually do for the next month?” “Relax?” offered Malcolm, with a slight sense of amusement. “You can help in the garden, walk, meditate, and we do offer classes here, but no stress. If you want to hand your phone in, we’re happy to take it.”

“Whoah this is hardass relaxation, Malcolm, I’m not sure I’m cut out for this.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine.” Malcolm laughed at this admission of potential failure from the great Zeb.

Peter was now fully back on his feet and bike. Lovely was very happy. He was losing the weight he had gained rather slowly, but he could not enjoy the eleven to twelve hour cycling days he had been used to before the accident. So it was that a still rather beefy Peter addressed the fans to

explain what had happened and announce his new book.

It initially went down like a lead balloon. Peter hadn't considered that he was now going to appeal to completely different people. Instead of 'angry young vegans with nothing better to do than soil sports clothes', he was now in the 'hopeless yet determined people who had actually had a life' category. Whilst he got many rousing cheers from his old fans, the numbers gradually dwindled on his videos. Lovely would have to take the lead with the old crowd whilst he searched for the new ones. Peter put Lovely's coaching rates up and his own down and started yet another youtube channel for his inspirational recovery videos. This met with some small success, but so many people had known Peter from his previous incarnation, running down every other health spokesperson with his insistence on mammoth quantities of fruit and exercise, that he ran into a lot of opposition.

Lovely was still not happy with her increased waistline, and so the new videos were somewhat more sedate. She was happy to be considered more valuable, by Peter and fans alike, but she still wasn't all that happy with the bikini videos. She pondered the difficulty of losing three inches once you had them, and looked around for a solution. Peter certainly wasn't the devil-may-care driven cyclist he used to be. She decided that the answer was to enter a race herself. It wasn't as if they were going to have children, she reasoned, Peter had very strong views about population control, she might as well devote herself to sport.

Kira had now released her novel, too. 'The Raw Scandal' was not an instant success, but judicious reinvestment in marketing ensured that at least in terms of numbers, it was sufficiently successful to attract a large publishing house for her next release. Kira was not rich, but she was at least now defined as something, even if it was a scandalmongering author. She was in London, at a publishing event in a horribly large function room, in her best brown velvet dress, on the phone to Aldous.

"I really hate this. I wish you had come. All these positively hideous and very annoying authors keep expecting me to want to have brief incompetent sex with them. I don't think they get out much. I wouldn't mind but they all seem to want to pretend they are terribly erudite and witty. I wish I hadn't put quite as much sex in the book now."

"Ha ha, the sooner you are in demand the better. Have you found a publisher for the academic book yet?" Aldous knew from experience that 'All these authors' probably consisted of two being a bit over friendly.

"Are you kidding? All these people care about is numbers. I'll need to punt a few more scandals before I can get someone to take on an academic book. This is frankly embarrassing."

"Hurry up and get rich and famous."

"I'll do my very best. Oh cool, David Mitchell is here. He really is erudite and witty, and he won't want any sex. Speak to you in a bit, I'll go and see if I can chat him up."

A ping on her phone told her something had sold from her embroidery store online. She stitched whilst she wrote. It didn't bring in much, but she felt more in balance working that way. She was working on an ebook about embroidery, not really for the money so much as the sheep farmers. By the end of the evening, Kira had managed to secure herself a guest spot on a popular comedy panel show by amusing a young up and coming type from a fairly minor TV channel. The travelling up and down from Scotland wasn't really her idea of fun, but she supposed, the publicity would be OK.

Gary had arrived. Really arrived. He was on the Swartz ranch with some of his favourite Raw food authors. Sam was due to arrive in a day or two, fresh in from a hot-tubbing speaking tour of Canada. Zinca was floating around looking diaphanous and lovely, Joe was collapsed in a hammock in the garden of the newly refurbished outbuilding they had been allocated for the week. A sea of tents stretched into the distance on Malcolm's land. There was, somewhat incongruously, a smell of cooking coming from some of the newbies' tents. Johan patted Gary on the back.

"So I hear you are quite the tantra connoisseur these days."

"Yeah, I don't think Malcolm wants me to discuss that though. I probably have to talk about weight loss and discovering your spirituality again."

"I don't know, Malcolm loves his yoga. I'm not sure what I'm doing here, to be honest."

"I think we're supposed to put on classes and stuff as well as the speeches. Encourage them to take an interest, basically. We should probably draw up a rota or something."

"I guess he will come and talk to us later."

"I guess."

Malcolm appeared, quite late and flustered from the number of questions he had been asked by the demanding diabetics. Quite a few long term raw-food-recovered diabetics had come just to show support for the speakers, so there had been a lot of socialising to do in addition to making sure they all had what they needed. It was going to be a long week.

"OK we've set you up a marquee if you want to organise anything in there, and there is a stage built for the main event with loudspeakers. Have you got everything you need until it kicks off tomorrow?" They did.

"Right if you can decide amongst yourselves what you want to do in the marquee or maybe set up stalls or something. Really whatever you want to contribute is fine. We will be doing our usual classes during the day and they have a list of those and they can check availability in the marquee as and when you want to do anything. Sam, as you probably know will be flying in from Canada in a couple of days too. We have a big rally planned for Friday's finale, and you will all want to do something for that. It's the afternoon, so you need to figure out what order you want to go in. I'll call back in this evening after the gratitude meal."

"OK"

Dwayne pulled up at the lush Oceanside property he called home and pulled two of the four bags from the trunk of the car. He was tired and the month long parking at the airport had cost a fortune. Grumpily he went inside, dumped the bags and grabbed the enormous pile of mail from the cage at the side of the door. Throwing the 'duds' to one side, he found what he was looking for. He was now the proud owner of another very large health company. Siren Shout foods was his. No word from Joe, he really wanted that one, too. He wondered if he should call? No, too keen. It was a good offer, he couldn't be seen to want it too badly.

Anastasia and Dmitri were now living in the first building of their mystic village. Destined to be the main public area, it was a bit large for daily living, but they had everything they needed. They

were sleeping on the backstage in the theatre, curtained off from draughts. Anastasia couldn't help feeling a little lonely away from the town, but she was proud of what they had managed so far, and a few of her customers had built small huts in the surrounding fields to spend weekends with them, which could only be a good sign. They were renting them small plots to garden and put temporary shelters up. She and her sister would prepare enormous lunches for them in the future cafe, which brought in enough cash to get by, whilst they sought investors and help for the next building on the plans, their hostel.

Both money and the schedule were tight, but they were confident they could persuade enough people, both online and off, to provide the cash they needed, and they were, for the most part, happy with progress so far. Anastasia had had another two trips abroad, and several 'gifts' from her many male admirers had helped keep them positive about the future despite a fairly low bank balance. If Anastasia had any doubts, she didn't let Dmitri know about it.

Somewhere in Ottawa, Sam was sharing another hot tub with some friends after another successful day on his speaking tour. He had wowed these fans with a heroic speech about organic Canadian farming and keeping your dreams alive. He was feeling a little jaded. He looked around the large tub, and realised he had already had sex with five out of the six other occupants on previous visits. He enjoyed his evening without bothering to close on any deals that evening, and went to look at the internet.

The usual abuse from Peter's fans, the usual hero worship from his own fans, his number one fan and self-proclaimed 'Redwoodess', Claire, who Kira had always thought was Sam himself because she was so unspeakably dull, was as usual inexorably boring the pants off the devotees on his facebook page: 'Sam does not like soy. Sam likes to take his tea hot, black and without sugar.' There was nothing for him to do at all. He made up some victorious sounding sentences for his status updates, and decided to go to bed with some chocolate. Then he saw an advert for 'The Raw Scandal' and decided to buy it. In only an hour, he was more incensed than he had ever remembered being in his life. Enraged, he checked the sales figures. Ignoring the time, he called his brother, Domenic, the lawyer, to discuss action.

"This bitch says I have satyriasis! This book is full of lurid scenes of me and random women. She says I need black willow and a camphor locket."

"Do we really have to discuss this now? It's late, and it must be even later for you. What is satyriasis?" Domenic yawned.

"Some sort of old fashioned European term for sex addiction. I looked it up."

"I think you should maybe just take that one on the chin, Sam. No such thing as bad publicity. Has she at any point suggested that you're bad at your job or that your products are bad?"

"No."

"Well it doesn't affect your income then, unless you include upwards. Do you really want to be suing some fat, lonely and according to you, repulsively ugly woman for writing a slightly racy novel that isn't even definitely about you? She probably doesn't have anything for you to sue her for anyway. Does she actually have any money Sam? I think I should also point out to you as your lawyer that she did try to talk to you for months before she did it." Domenic had watched a few of Kira's videos, and felt quite sorry for her trying to deal with his brother. He knew from experience how difficult that could be.

"I want you to hurt her. I don't care how. A letter or something. Why should I talk to her? She's a nobody."

"If she's a nobody there's nothing to sue her for. Give it up Sam. Have you actually finished the book yet?"

"No."

"Let me know how it ends. I'm going back to sleep. Try not to get too uptight, now, won't you?" Domenic had always been led to believe that his brother's diet, meditation and general regime was supposed to render him laid back. He wondered when that was going to happen. "What's the name

of the book again? I must get a copy for mom.” He smiled at his brothers puffing at the other end of the phone.

Thanks to Peter’s extensive experience and relentless coaching, Lovely had won her first endurance race. She was happy. Peter was also happy, and managed to quell the inevitable feelings of slight jealousy with feelings of intense pride. To make things even better, she almost had her waist back.

Peter’s inspirational channel was starting to do a little better thanks to some heartfelt ranting, and his book started to sell on his new website. He had learned to drive, and was had started speaking tours in hospitals. He was offered a place coaching for the Paralympics. They had now financially recovered from the accident as a result and moved nearer the city, to a bigger house with a pool. “It almost makes me feel a bit religious, Lovely. I think we’re going to be OK.” Peter was preparing to take Lovely to see a new cycling shop. Lovely smiled. No more vomiting required either. She was getting leaner and leaner thanks to her training programme, and the fans seemed to enjoy the increased bikini video output without Peter. She put on a dress, for a change, and they went shopping.

Sam arrived at Malcolm’s in a small plane he had chartered. He walked the other five miles across the scrub land to the main house. He had finished Kira’s book. He wasn’t quite so angry now, but he was going to see if he could persuade the other ‘characters’ to sue. He tried to figure out why she had done it, and couldn’t understand it at all. Some people were obsessed with fame, he guessed. He did not, of course, consider that his being polite for five minutes could have averted the entire situation.

Directed into the building housing the rest of the speakers, who were taking a break from mingling amongst the campers, he walked in, spreading his arms in characteristic star mode. “I’m here!” The others looked up, drowsy from the heat. “Good to see you, Sam.”

Sam thought he would wake them up a bit “Have you seen this?” He waved his Kindle.

“Oh that, yeah.” Joe yawned “I don’t get to do anything very exciting really, do I? You seem to have all the fun in it. I’ve never played tennis though, I don’t know where she got that from.” “What is it?” Johan squinted at the cover page. “Wow that’s one big piece of embroidery.”

“Oh yeah, she made that for me apparently. I didn’t let her have an office address so she could actually send it. She’s crazy.” Sam warmed to his topic. “I just have that effect on some people.” “Yeah you drive me crazy too, Sam.” Zinca did not smile as she passed through the room. “Oh yes, I read this. You think it’s about you?”

“Of course it’s about me. Who else would it be about?” Sam was confused. How could anyone fail to recognise him?

“The main character doesn’t really look much like you. The only similarity really is that he wears a poncho.” Zinca remained unsmiling as she teased Sam. She was still a bit annoyed with him about his beauty book. “Or are you telling us that you’re fat?” She needed him further.

“Can I read it Sam?” Johan asked. “Am I in it?”

“Oh yes, and she has some very interesting ideas about land ownership. I think you’ll be quite annoyed.” Sam honed in on a possible ally. “And you Gary, you are some sort of tantric guru in this.” He exaggerated for effect. He revelled in the idea of them reading about his alleged virility

as they did so.

“Ok I’ll give it a read and pass it on to Gary tonight. Is that OK Gary?”

“Sure.” Gary was quite pleased at the idea that he was considered a Tantric guru.

“I’m not sure what you’re so excited about Sam. New media directions are a good thing.” Joe had already figured out why Kira had done it. “I think it’s quite smart actually. No moralising, no hippy stuff, just lots of action and a few recommendations sneaked in.”

“It’s not smart if it makes me out to be a crazy swinger.” Sam was getting quite annoyed now.

“You’ve been cultivating that idea for years Sam, relax, it’s no biggie. If we’re lucky we’ll get a few hundred more hits out of it, for a while anyway.” Joe went back to his reading. “You should thank her.” Joe had never understood why Kira was in the slightest bit interested in Sam anyway. Much as he liked him, Sam always seemed too into himself to even notice someone actually caring about him. “You might get more excitement out of Peter, amputating his arms and legs was a bit harsh, I thought. She was a bit mean to Lovely, too, although it worked out in the end.” Joe started to laugh. “Look on it as slightly twisted fan fiction. It would make a good film.” Sam was stunned. No-one thought it was a big deal?

Kira released her second book, a small ebook on scruff embroidery, as she called it, which she didn’t imagine would sell terribly well, but might help to promote her online embroidery store. She was running through her savings, however, and knew she had to put out another four novels before she would be safe to move on with the business idea. She wasn’t keen on debt, it was too worrying, so she delayed and delayed moving on with it. She really wanted to finish the Cultural Economic hypothesis, but the idea of it seemed quite far away now.

Sam seemed determined to be a super salesman for the rest of his life, and since he was doing rather well at it, she thought she might as well leave him to it. He would probably sue her anyway, she thought, just to insult her even more. What a shame, she had wanted such great things for him, but never mind. ‘Pearls before swine,’ as Harry used to say. Kira had been trying to do things for people who didn’t understand it for years, so it was no surprise that this attempt had failed too. It was a shame, she couldn’t think of a more suitable model for her hypothesis, or a more deserving candidate for her full attention. She had already run through all the raw food leader options, and he had seemed the least concerned with niche elements. Part of being a good businessman rather than the cleverness she sought, she concluded sadly. Too flaky. That was rich, coming from her, she giggled to herself.

Kira was finding the public appearances easier than she anticipated. Her reclusive nature had never been due to shyness, more a sense of disgust and inability to handle too much input. She had lost a bit of weight, because of the endless photographs, but still wasn’t really interested in her looks. Lots of male fans wrote to her about ‘Raw Scandal.’ It really wasn’t all that scandalous. She presumed it was because of the group sex scenes. Given that she didn’t particularly like crowds, she didn’t imagine she would particularly enjoy that, so she took these emails with a hefty pinch of salt.

Her third book ‘The Family,’ was a story about her own forthcoming murder. She typed and stitched on.

Anastasia now had almost fully occupied steel and glass hostel accommodation for her guests, and

increased her output online. She was surprised at the number of worldwide male fans that came to stay, to see her in person and relax for a while in the strange little township that had sprung up alongside her utopia. Dmitri and her were planning houses, and had managed to secure not only permissions, but water and power and a name for their village. 'Valeria' was looking as if it was going to be successful, but their income was still very slow. It was hard for her to contemplate charging any more for her mystic services, so she sought more human doll opportunities to help fund the project. The fans, both mystic and more corporeal, were very generous, both with time and donation.

She wondered how to speed things up.

“You need to get a move on, Dwayne. We need fifteen percent. I know it’s a lot to ask.” Uncle Richard tapped his wineglass.

“The only way I can do that is by either bullying people into selling, or persuading them to float, and I can’t do that personally. I’ve bought all the shares that came my way this month just to get to twelve. The health food business doesn’t quite work the way we’re used to.”

“OK so we need to put the idea into their heads. Contact your cousin Brian, give him your email list, let him handle it.”

The day of the finale at Malcolm’s was here. Robin and Barry had arrived, and were studiously avoiding each other as the line-up of speakers was finalised and the crowd gathered. They had half an hour each. Malcolm would talk about spirituality and the medical benefits of his green raw sprouted diet, Joe about avoiding narcotics, meditation and health products, Gary about his inspirational weight loss and the benefits of yoga, Zinca about raw food and beauty, Johan on wild foods, Robin on longevity with a stunning collection of examples, Barry about the history of the Stoic Centre and finally, as Sam as demanded, a full hour of Sam talking about organics, diabetes and superfood solutions. A long day for the audience, they drifted in and out and bought products from the marquee throughout the day.

Zeb stood at the back, waiting for Sam to come on. Malcolm stopped by after his spot to see how he was.

“Better, thanks, this is really interesting. What sort of figures are we looking at?”

“For the week? We’ve brought in about two hundred thousand, a bit extra on the products, but that was a bonus for the speakers. It’s been a lot of work and time, though. I think we’ll make it yearly.”

“It’s not bad, how much are the speakers getting out of that?”

“Well, I’m on favour rates for this one, I couldn’t say what the normal rate would be.” Malcolm was not going to be drawn on that one. He knew Sam would be upset if he told Zeb.

“Would you mind if I spoke after Sam?”

“I’d be honoured, Zeb.”

“Can I plug my ipod into those speakers?”

“Yes they can do that.”

“Don’t tell him, will you?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

As the afternoon went on, Malcolm was kept busy providing for the crowd, and thought no more of it until Sam took the stage. Sam wouldn’t mind, would he? Zeb and him were old friends. Everyone knew that.

Sam talked for his hour, from organic farming, to superfood research, to the benefits of various supplements, all available from his store in the marquee. The audience were, of course, thrilled. As he drew his show to the end, he gently filled his audience full of hope and optimism and felt he had done his usual superior job. Until he caught sight of Zeb behind him. He froze.

“Great job, Sam.” Zeb plugged in his Ipod. A banging tune got the audience jumping up and down. After the usual overlong bouncing, Sam announced the great Zeb Toledo with rocks in his heart. After twenty minutes Zeb had convinced the crowd, with no health knowledge whatsoever, that they could conquer anything. They were wild with excitement about their futures. He felt rather smug as he closed the afternoon. Sam was waiting in the wings.

“What are you doing here?” He was visibly unhappy, for once.

“Having a rest, actually. Nice to see you, again.” Zeb walked back to his lodge smirking. Sam couldn’t touch him. Ever.

“I wonder why Sam left so quickly? He sold quite a lot today, and he forgot his Kindle.” Gary put down the machine. “Is anyone going to see him to give it back to him?”

“I doubt he will care. No new chickies here, that’s probably why.” Johan was preparing to leave. “Malcolm will mail it to him. Give it to him. What did you think of the book then?”

“Not a whole lot of scandal, good title though. Is he really that prolific with the girlies?”

“I doubt it.” Johan laughed. “But it was quite funny to see his outraged expression.”

“Yes he doesn’t change his face much, does he?”

“If it ain’t broke don’t fix it, he’s made a fortune out of that face. Wanna come back to the farm with me? I’m working on some wild food products. I’d really appreciate it if you would try them.”
“Sure, I’m not busy until next week.”

Six months later, Kira was now on her fifth novel. She had a limited but reasonably steady income and started getting quotes for the web development. She was finding it hard to stop writing now. Even the embroidery was falling behind, as was the housework. The cats were liking knowing where she was though, tapping away on the keyboard in bed day in, day out. She got a few invites to appear in various places talking about the books, but she wasn’t inclined to accept many of them. A face for radio, she thought.

She wondered what Sam had thought of the book. She didn’t suppose she would ever get an answer to that either, unless he sued her. What an incredibly rude man. The few exchanges they had, he

had seemed quite nice, if a bit shy for a supposedly legendary womaniser. Overexcitable, she supposed. She wondered if she had made enough money yet to merit a conversation with him. It probably wouldn't make any difference, it was hardly obvious what one's income was on a facebook page.

A few very expensive handbags sold, one artwork. She was reasonably pleased about that, she supposed, but the one she had made for Sam still lurked in her studio, taunting her. She really didn't like going down there anymore. She really didn't like going anywhere. She had so utterly convinced herself that she was repulsive that she hadn't wanted to go out in two years. This was not all because of Sam, Aldous had announced that she was fat after she had lost the initial 200lb so she had become convinced she would never look good enough for the rest of the world and had given up shooting and fencing. That was OK, she supposed, she didn't see herself much and who else was looking? She could just about manage the shopping and the medical appointments for her mother but that was it. She had tried a couple of times to go back to swim, but hadn't enjoyed it at all. Kira was aware that this was ridiculous, but it didn't seem to make any difference. She just thought she had better get on with making as much money as it took to get people to treat her like a human being, however much that was.

Kira frequently wished that she had never bothered with raw food. She would have been dead by now instead of slowly degenerating, trapped in her beloved home with nothing ahead of her but being forced out of it by her siblings, probably on the day her mother died going by their track record. Longevity, like Cultural Economic theory, doesn't mean anything to someone with no future. She again pondered why something so small could hurt her so much. Far worse things had happened to her than being blocked on facebook. It had been more than two years now, how long was it going to take to get back to the first book? She supposed there was no real reason to write it now anyway. Did it really matter if humankind consumed itself and the planet to death? Probably not, even if they did listen to her, which they probably wouldn't. She wondered gloomily if Oppenheimer, who used to refer to himself as 'the loneliest man in the world' had ever dumped a project for similar reasons, and decided that he probably had. How many other people out there, that no one had ever heard of, were dumping projects for stupid day to day reasons? It didn't bear thinking about.

Joe arrived home and was delighted to see that Hilary had planted up the winter garden. She was sitting in the garden near the paddock when he found her, with the baby cooing softly in her lap. "Nice day at the office, toodlepips?" she smiled.

"Yeah it was OK, something like really weird happened with Sam and Zeb Toledo."

"Zeb Toledo? He was there?"

"Yeah, I always thought they were friends. I don't know what he was doing here, but he did some sort of thrillkill speech at the end and Sam bolted."

"Childhood rivalry?"

"Dunno. Have you heard from Dwayne White?"

"No but I imagine we will. Any other news? Did we sell much?"

"Yeah it was OK, I'm sure the videos will do OK too. Oh yeah and Sam got hysterical over that insane woman's book. That was quite funny."

"Well, we didn't see that coming at all, did we?" Hilary laughed. "Any news of a new book from

him?”

“You know Sam, he’s probably too distracted doing something random with someone ‘incredibly amazing’ that he’s picked up on the side of the road. Best pray that it’s a dude or nothing will get done.”

Anastasia still didn’t have a home of her own. She was getting fed up. They had sold the first three houses so quickly that they were now working on their second three. She hoped one of them would be hers, at least until they could build something suitably pink, perfect and doll-like. Cash flow had improved to the point that she could afford to get annoyed about sleeping backstage in the theatre. It wasn’t all that pleasant living on a giant building site, but they were surviving and that was all that mattered for the moment.

A letter arrived, translated into Ukrainian by a not-so-professional American translator. “Our client, a great fan of yours, wishes to spend the night in your presence and is willing to pay whatever you ask for this to take place.” What on earth did that mean? Wishes to spend the night in your presence? Whoever it was was welcome to watch her and Dmitri sleep if they wanted. She decided to put an exorbitant price on it in the hope that this oddball went away. To her surprise, Mr White accepted her long list of terms the following month.

Don and Michael had got the crazy idea from somewhere that they wanted to float Super Superfood Supermarket on the stock exchange. Sam was getting frustrated.

“No, that’s what happened with Raha. If you put shares up for sale, the Whites will buy them and then we have the same problem all over again. We have no need at all to float it. I just don’t know where you are getting the idea from.” He shook his head, where had this come from?

“But if we release all this capital, we all retain twenty percent, we can do all sorts of stuff. You can start satellite events with people from your raw food education courses, turn you into another Zeb Toledo. It’s your dream, and we all get cash from it too.”

“I don’t care about that. I care about keeping our independence. You have no idea what it’s like being voted off your own board. If you insist on doing this I’ll sell my shares and split.”

Michael and Don looked at each other. They knew perfectly well what this would mean. Sam was front man, and they both knew it. Michael didn’t particularly like big public appearances and Don was busy at home most of the time.

“We need to give it some thought at least Sam.” Don tried, warily.

“No we don’t. We are never ever going to float this company, I don’t care about the money.”

“Look Sam, I’ve watched you for years working and working to stay in the same place. All I’m saying is that if we do this, you can finally get to where you want to be. More courses, retreats, marketing, bigger events. Name syndication.”

“Maybe it’s not all about the money, Don. Maybe it’s about the freedom and being in control.” Sam remained defiant. “I’ve been telling the people that for years. Maybe it’s true.”

“Maybe it’s just about chicks.” Michael laughed. He had read ‘Raw Scandal’ too.

Sam puffed angrily “Don’t mention the war.” He snickered despite himself. “I’ll get my own back, you see if I don’t. And for the record, I don’t want to be another Zeb Toledo, either. We’ll get there

in the end, but we aren't letting go of this company.”

“It isn't much good to you if you're dead, Sam.” Don was genuinely quite worried about Sam's seemingly unlimited capacity for flogging himself to death with work, whether it was useful work or not didn't seem to worry him.

“If I'm dead I don't imagine it will bother me much, do you? I haven't worked this hard for this long to end up getting sucker punched out of my own business more than once. No, no floating the company, no mergers, no sleeping partners, no nothing. I may be an idiot, but I'm nobody else's idiot but my own.” Sam grinned. “Ooh, I have a date. I have to go.”

“No shit.” Michael and Don laughed their heads off.

“Shut up.” Sam got up and grabbed his jacket. “She's amazing.”

“Aren't they all?” Don wondered what all these women thought about Sam. Maybe they were all just passing the time until death. “Have the best date ever!”

Johan finally released his range of dried, preserved and freeze dried wild food products. A lot of the fans, of course, were angry and announced that they felt he was betraying them. They had bought ebooks and courses on how to find free food, and couldn't understand why he wasn't now releasing that information for nothing. Johan sighed. He gave away plenty of information, intended as loss-leading to encourage new people to buy his books. Now he had gone to all this trouble to make the produce available to people who could not get to national parks or private wild areas like his own to gather their own, and still people complained. How else was he supposed to make his living, never mind preserve the farm?

His project to try cultivating wild food had met with limited success, but he was encouraged to try more replanting in the hope of actually harvesting a crop of some sort. The packaging and cost of FDA approval on his wild food range had used up almost all of his money, and he was taking small film contracts to live on whilst he tried to make his project work. He figured if he could get the wild food range to work before his father died, he would not need to be working what would otherwise be two hunting estates. He didn't feel right about that, although the fans did not know about his father's deal with Harvey, if they were ever to find out he thought they would complain. They certainly did about everything else, including the high quality of his videos, perversely enough.

His mother had introduced him to a young farmer's daughter, Peggy, who taught survival courses in the nearby national park, and he enjoyed a few afternoons harvesting during long walks with her. Naturally she was fascinated by his obsession with wild food. He wasn't that attracted to her, if he was honest, but he thought, with the practicality of most men, that he could easily be happy with her. So, he was reasonably content. All he had to do now was make the wild food products work, he thought, and keep on with the work he had devoted himself to.

Peter was over the moon when he got the email from the TV company. They would have to move house again. He had got a job commentating on sporting events. Together with his coaching duties, motivational tours and their videos, they were now very comfortably off. He looked back at some of his videos from a decade before. Shouting his head off about now comparatively impoverished authors. He felt a bit bad about that. Maybe he should take them down?

He decided, at length, that since he would have to be selective about that and he didn't actually

regret them, to leave them up for now. He was aware that now that he had some money, he was at increased risk of litigation, but since it had been so long ago now, most of the authors had, superficially at least, forgotten about it and since he was on another continent, they would be unaware that he was now considerably better off than they were.

Serves them right for not eating fruit, he thought.

Lovely was still doing her bikini vegan promotional videos, but now had severe sun damage to her eyes from her daily training and was getting a bit leery of being the oldest babe in town. She started recruiting young female cyclists to appear in her videos. There was only so much you could say about eating a diet of fruit, she found, so she had to research other vegan literature to make her videos. Fortunately no one ever seemed to think of verbal plagiarism.

Kira was in Los Angeles, signing copies of her various books in some giant bookstore she had lost track of the name of. She had been touring for six weeks. She was very bored, but Aldous had reappeared when he had been fired from his job in a ceramic factory and she had employed him as a PA for the companionship when travelling. She was doing quite well now, but wasn't particularly looking forward to either the irate raw foodists, fans of famous chefs, or lovers of authority that would inevitably drift in to give her a piece of their minds. Didn't they have anything else to do? She had found this quite upsetting at first, but, quickly realising that the drama attracted more people to the book signing queue, hence her books, decided to roll with the punches. Aldous fluttered around trying to look busy. She tried asking him to sit down, but he was determined to look as if he was earning his free trip to the USA. No-one was more surprised than Kira when Sam, looking for his date, wandered in. She spotted him in the doorway. "If he's here for me then get rid of him. He probably isn't, but keep your eye on him."

"Why?"

"I can't handle it. Just get rid of him."

Sam spotted 'Raw Scandal' on the book pile next to the queue. The bitch is here! I think I'll surprise her, he thought mischievously and joined the line of oddly mismatched people.

Aldous did as he was asked and spoke to Sam. "You aren't really here to see Kira, are you?"

"No, I was just passing, but I'll say hello whilst I'm here." Sam looked bright and friendly. Aldous felt bad, but he knew from previous experience if he let it happen she would hit the roof, swiftly followed by verbally chopping him into tiny pieces and feeding him to the seagulls.

"She wants you to leave. I'm sorry." Aldous had a strong sense of deja-vu.

"What?" Sam did not understand this at all. Surely everything she had done was to meet him?

"She says she doesn't want to see you."

Given that Kira had gone to great lengths in the previous years to repeat that she didn't want to see him after he had blocked her from facebook, and presumably from attending his events, this should have made sense to Sam, but it didn't.

"What's wrong?" Sam presumably imagined that Kira tried to give away years of her time and work to random strangers every day.

“I don’t know, but if I let you anywhere near her, she’ll get super-super-angry with both you and me. Would you mind just leaving it?”

“Right, sure.” Sam left the bookstore, stunned. She had really meant it. Why would she go to all that trouble and then refuse to see him? What was it with this chick? He wasn’t used to being repelled from anything. A little outraged, he tottered down the street and found his date in the smaller, funkier bookstore. She was, of course, ‘like totally amazing.’

“Because if I see him, he’ll know how much pain he’s caused. It’s pointless. I’ll just have to wait until it goes away.” Kira was tearful again. “I’m sorry you had to do that, but you know what it’s like. Besides which, he would probably say something facile and cheerful, and then I would want to throttle him.”

“Might it be better to throttle him? I could help?” Aldous did his best to stop Kira’s weeping. She laughed “Yes, it probably would. Poor Sam, it’s not his fault. I can’t even blame him for anything. This sucks. You have to remember though, it’s all just a mortal delusion so it doesn’t really matter.” Why couldn’t he have just either spoken to her or taken the stupid gift? She could have got on with the serious book and the website instead of all this messing about.

It was probably too late now anyway. Now she was a novelist. How tiresome. She decided to launch her online business as soon as she could, to avoid the indignity of becoming a hideous–brief-incompetent-sex-demanding author.

Malcolm was inspired when he read ‘Raw Scandal.’ He had started work on his own book under a pseudonym. The illustrated story of ‘the fisherman who found the goddess’ was a children’s book about ecology, natural medicine and the dangers of too many packaged foods. He worked on it between classes and consultations as his retreats continued. Zeb had given him a ringing endorsement, and his lodge prices had to be raised to cope with the super-rich Americans looking for a complete rest from their frantic, selfish, demanding lifestyles.

Even Herman had called him, to offer congratulations and an assurance that he would be sending some of his own recovering star patients, who naturally wanted to hide whilst they recovered from surgery to maintain their ‘miracle’ good looks. Malcolm suspected from the conversation with Herman that things with Celia were not going well. He sniggered a little, but Celia hadn’t been a bad wife, just the sort of wife one wants when one is on the way up rather than trying to kick back a little, as Herman must be. She had put Herman on a strict diet, which he was not enjoying one little bit.

Malcolm considered inviting him to stay, and quickly rejected it when he remembered Herman’s temper. No, leave them to it, we all get what we deserve in life, he thought.

Joe calculated what he and Hilary were worth to the company as ‘assets’. He figured it had to be between a million and a million and a half a year. They had made, and kept, the company successful through tours, videos, research and general management, not to mention the book tie-ins over the years. He couldn’t afford to sell it to Dwayne even if he wanted to, it was worth too much. Not that he wanted to sell it, but the idea of accepting the huge new offer, wriggling out and starting over was quite appealing. Unfortunately Dwayne had learned his lesson from Ragha and was trying to lock them into the company and buy it at the same time.

Joe was not amused by this idea, but the offer was ludicrous. Sam had done pretty well out of the coup at Ragha, but that was Sam and they had stupidly kicked him off the board. This offer made it

very clear they weren't going to be that stupid again. Hilary wouldn't like it, but they would be made for life.

They were made for life anyway, though, and they didn't really need to worry about it. Did they?

Dwayne arrived at the village, tired from the long journey but looking forward to his luxury stay at Anastasia's mystic retreat. Uncle Richard had apparently arranged something special for him to celebrate their now twenty percent stake in the American health food market. This was slightly more than they needed, and it was all nicely in profit waiting for the next phase of the plan. He unpacked whilst scoping his surroundings. Nice, architectural steel and glass everywhere, the furniture was a little cheapskate by his usual standards, but he figured he wasn't going to need to be too flashy here. He didn't speak Ukrainian, of course, but he had a cute little translator with him from back home to make sure he got by and 'relieve any frustrations' he might have during his visit. Nice one, Uncle Richard, he thought, looking at the neat, black-haired thirty- something. He, in turn, had no idea that 'relieving any frustrations' meant tolerating the advances of a slightly chubby, dishevelled and not-particularly-stressed American. He just imagined that he was being paid this much to be yelled at, which mercifully hadn't happened yet. So far, everything had remained nicely polite.

As evening fell on the second day, the public building lit up and they could detect movement in the glass-fronted café. Dwayne suggested that they go and see if anything was happening.

As they entered the double-height smoked glass doors people of all ages in, by Dwayne's way of thinking, very ordinary clothing, smiled, nodded in their direction and carried on chatting. It all seemed very serious and intense by American standards, but these people took their mysticism seriously. Anastasia was considered something of a divine presence at these meetings, so said the translator, picking up on the conversations around them and whispering to Dwayne.

Dmitri spotted the stranger and went over to try conversation via the translator.

"You will be coming to the main house tonight. You will see Anastasia, and I will do as you requested. First you will be attending the event."

"OK." Dwayne licked his lips when he saw Dmitri's burly arms. There would be no translator needed at the house, he hoped. Just enough to get him in the door.

When morning came, Dwayne emerged, black and blue and deeply satisfied. He had spent the night looking at Anastasia nude and posed with exquisitely placed lighting whilst being resoundingly beaten by Dmitri. He was a happy man.

Unfortunately, whilst he had been away, his impatient Uncle Richard had been busy on his behalf.

Sam was a little bit irritated by the bookshop episode. He hadn't even seen Kira in person, although looking at her videos, she wasn't really worth seeing anyway. Who the hell did she think she was, asking him to leave? What had she wanted from all this, if not to see him? He had read somewhere she was rather wealthy now, although obviously nothing in comparison with his own riches. He ran a quick search on her on the internet. A few mentions, a few photos, nothing more. She looked a lot better in the photos than she had in the videos, but that wasn't saying much, he thought. She still didn't seem all that bothered about the whole 'thin' issue, which was annoying. She had been so much prettier when she was. Shame. It never clicked that she had stopped caring the minute he had upset her. Not for a minute. She was just a nobody, so why would it matter anyway?

Since Sam was blessed with the attention span of a small, small goldfish for anything but work, he

turned his attention to the news and forgot all about her. Organic farming seemed to be taking a smattering of hits across the US and Europe, e-coli outbreaks from battery farmed manure being put on the vegetables, contamination from GM chemicals and careless planting.

Then he saw the first of the health food scandals. High oxalate levels appearing in cauliflower, powdered glass in a big name consignment of chromium, 'natural poisons' in a variety of herbal medicines. Nothing that affected his own products, but quite a comprehensive list of things all happening at once. What was going on? He emailed Joe to alert him to the list of recalled products he had found, just in case he had any on his stock list. He emailed his own producers and outlets to make sure they were extra vigilant.

Peter, an internet fiend, had already seen the scandals, and revelled in making videos about it. Both his channel and Lovely's had smug videos about the folly of American health food sales and the wonder of fruit.

It didn't occur to them that no one was actually checking the fruit until the first fruitarians died.

"Do you think many of them will die?" Aldous poured Kira another cup of green tea. It was several months later and the first American deaths from health food and organic products had been reported.

She looked up from the news online. "Probably a good few, however many it takes White Industries to get the point across. Shame about that hypothesis I was writing isn't it?"

Aldous remembered the notes "Yes. Aren't you bothered?"

"Everyone is going to die Aldous. The beauty of Economics is that is merely a figure. You don't really concern yourself beyond that. That's how White Industries think too. Just avoid buying anything from the colonies until the thing plays out. White Industries have the US government cornered, and they have considerably more money."

"You don't think maybe you should get back to writing the hypothesis now?" Aldous was amused at Kira's Victorian reference to the colonies and chuckled a little despite himself.

"Bit late now, the great American chemical food and drug war is well underway. It might have been useful to get the public talking before it happened, rather than when the media are getting everyone hysterical about the dangers of health food and organics. They're extolling the virtues of conventional medicine and the fabulous low prices of chemically enhanced crops and battery farmed animals now. Besides, there's a good few years work in it yet. I'm not a miracle worker. Codex Alimentarius will also be affected, as the rest of the world follows whatever happens in America. So yes, we will probably see an outright ban on herbal medicine and organic produce."

"What's Codex Alimentarius?"

"Oh it's this rather neat way of stopping poor countries competing on the global food and medicine market by setting impossible standards for transporting food and drugs over borders on the grounds of public health. It means they can shut down alternative food sources and drug supplies anytime they want. They've been setting this situation up for years."

"Are we safe?"

“For the moment, not forever. We’re better at finding ways around things like that in Europe. White Industries are typically Yank and brash about it, but I’m sure the other integrated pharma/agricheical companies will catch up, or else some other idiot that wants to line his pockets with cash will have another stupid idea.”

“You seem so relaxed about it.”

“I cried my river at the time, Aldous. I’m just not that worried about it now. Crying for a couple of years is not my idea of a rip-roaring good time.” Kira put on her ‘devil-may-care’ expression and stared out of the large bay window.

“I just assumed it was about Sam.”

“Of course it was. The entire thing was about Sam. I told you, you have to use what’s in front of you. I don’t like people that much. He does. There’s always a reason for seemingly random events like that. I thought he would understand, but he didn’t join the dots. Too bad, how sad, he’s not as smart as I gave him credit for. I strongly suspect that old Indian chief that said you can’t eat money was cursing them.” Kira let out a hollow laugh. “Anyway, let’s go and play some croquet. Why should I worry about it anymore? I’m going to ‘think beautiful thoughts and not worry about the future,’ as Sam recommends. Perhaps I should take up beach volleyball or something. Concern myself about stupid things like my stomach muscles or my hair. Hang out at the ‘mall’ with my cheerleading buddies. Go to pop concerts.”

Aldous fervently hoped she would not do that, but knowing Kira, she would at least try it for a while. “How is the new business going?”

“Very well, but not well enough to counteract this. All I can do is make it a tad easier for these people to communicate. It’s all going to get a bit nasty.”

“You mean to the point of actually assassinating a few people?”

“That’s right, the cuddly-wuddly laid-back herbal hippy types will have to rub a few select individuals out. They probably won’t figure it out until it’s far, far too late, and even then they probably won’t do it. Peter and Lovely look as if they could just about manage it, I doubt very much the rest are up to it. Oh there’s Don, isn’t there, he knows how to use a nice big gun. Nah, I still don’t think he’s up to it. They’re all stuffed.” She smiled brightly.

“All because you got blocked on facebook?” Aldous shook his head in wonderment.

“No, but it was predictable and it could easily have been avoided had I not been blocked on facebook, hence too stupidly upset to write the damned book. There is nothing to say the morons would have actually read the hypothesis. I doubt very much they would have. ‘Cultural economics, what does it have to do with us, man? Like totally not relevant, brah.’ You can imagine, can’t you? The most I wanted from it really was a bit of political awareness at the senate so that the Whites didn’t get quite so much power. That’s what I wanted Sam for, rabble rousing, but never mind, shit happens. Now lots of people are going to die and we are going to read endless stories about marvellous people inventing chemical solutions to anything and everything. You know me, I get very uptight anticipating doom and then when it actually happens I’m fine. Death is probably good for the planet anyway. Most people don’t do much apart from make more people and consume. Anyway, let’s play, you are very welcome to win today, I’m not worried about a thing. We can check the death count after dinner. Ten quid says it’s up.”

They wandered onto Kira’s newly levelled croquet lawn and played hilariously badly. Aldous was

astonished but somehow relieved that Kira had recovered the stone cold, frosty heart he knew and loved.

Zeb looked at the thousands of people in the audience from behind the wings. He had done conventions like this before, of course, but this one was quite special, and surprisingly well paid. He was about to address the Chemical Industries convention in Seattle. A special celebratory convention this year, celebrating the doubling of profits across the industry.

People were buying chemical solutions to an ever increasing range of problems in droves, thanks to the reassuring and, as usual, wildly enthusiastic and not terribly independent media coverage of the current boom in chemical products and over the counter pharmaceutical cures. It had been a bit like the 1950s advertising of cigarettes over the last few months. Daily accounts of the healthy and liberal use of chemicals to make food cheaper, houses cleaner, factories more efficient and products more useful. No-one really noticed, but 'scientific' had become the most used 'buzzword' in their daily news. If it was 'scientific' it was good, if not it was very, very bad. 'Scientific' was good, 'natural' a little dirty and old fashioned. People laughed when they thought of these old 'natural' products. The industry had beaten off all that was old fashioned, to promote all that was new, and therefore good. Victory for mass-market capitalism. Down with everything else.

The usual heart rate raising loud tune meant that it was nearly time to go on. Zeb psyched himself up for his speech, written for him by a team of four crack rhetoricians.

"We are in a new era." He began "An era in which the efforts of people like yourselves are celebrated as never before..."

The speech went on for some time, scientists who had been named as heroic were feted and cheered from the crowd in the enormous hall. One scientist had even made the front page of the New York Times for his chemical solution to MRSA, which of course even he knew would not last for long before it would come back, far worse than ever. No-one cared about that though, the next solution would pay them even more than this one. For every problem, a profit-making solution. For the few that knew and understood this, hospitals became killing grounds, places where you knew you were likely to find infections no one had ever seen before and for which nature had no fast answer because both problem and solution were man-made.

Children across the country had developed allergies to things they had never been allergic to when they had been allowed out to play, thanks to the media's constant warnings of paedophiles around every corner. This had already boosted the chemical industry as people developed hygiene neuroses thanks to the allergic sniffles of their indoor dwelling progeny. Now adults had also started to show signs of sensitivity and reluctance to do simple things like walking along a busy street. The constant pressure to retain economic growth meant that people obsessed over what was new. You only had to say new, for them to prick up their ears, and 'new' meant 'scientific' now. 'Old' meant 'natural' and 'natural' was dirty and germ ridden. Only the chemicals seemed safe, as long as everything was clean and chemical enhanced, there would be no problem that could not be cured by more chemicals and more 'safe' conventional drugs.

Zeb concluded with another congratulations to the poor innocent chemical workers and scientists for their hard work and breathed a sigh of relief. He went offstage and grabbed his pullover on the way back to his helicopter on the roof. Thank goodness he was going home to Bethany.

Uncle Richard was pleased with the results so far. "I am very happy, Dwayne, very happy. I thought after your mystic trip to the Ukraine maybe you weren't one of us, but you are doing extremely well."

"Thank you. I trust it will be all right if I make another trip?"

“Yes, of course, perhaps I should join you. It seems you had rather a good time.”

“Very enlightening, yes, Uncle Richard.” Dwayne was unaware of it, but Richard already knew exactly how enlightened he was. Just in case of any problems later, when he upped the death toll. He was quite sure Dwayne’s long term boyfriend Edvarado would not appreciate it if he knew about Dwayne’s taste for naked women and their brutish husbands.

“Actually takings are up, well done Sam.” Michael looked up from the laptop in front of him.

“It’s not me really, we have a good reputation and most of the products are labelled as ours now. I’m still getting jeered at the events. No chicks to speak of either, before you ask.”

“Is there anything we can do about this?” Don wondered.

“I don’t think we have the revenue to fund a media war. The long term fans are unaffected.” Sam looked despondent. “Hopefully we can ride it out just by being us.”

“Maybe we should invest in some additional marketing for Sam Redwood foods?”

“Be cautious, Don, we don’t know how bad this might get. They could drag it out for years.”

Michael cautioned. “I reckon our strong point is the emphasis on superfoods, Chinese medicine and own brand supplements. We can easily drop a few additional stock lines in the meantime.”

“And we have to keep testing everything. We have to stay on top of that.”

“How long are we going to have the money for that, Michael?” Sam, for once, looked worried. “I can plough the book revenue in, but it isn’t much.” He would have offered his share of the TV sales profits too, but that was paying for his many children. “I could see if Annette wants to call in some media favours.”

“Yeah, that might be worth a try. Get on some discussion show or something.” Don pondered.

“Are you crazy? I don’t do discussion. I was thinking more internet ads, newspapers. Quotes and such. You wanna do discussion, you go for it, I don’t wanna get lynched by some science geek. Knowing my luck it would be a chick, too.” Sam pondered his generalised lack of female attention and ‘wood’ of late. The picture was not rosy. “Hey, tell you what though, we could sell some water filters to the old faithful?” He brightened a little at that prospect. “We might not get any new prospects, but we can keep the old ones alive.”

Joe and Hilary had dropped fifty percent of their stock lines, and were contemplating more.

“We should have taken the offer shouldn’t we?” Hilary looked gloomy.

“We’d never have forgiven ourselves. The downside is we can’t quit. We have to ride out the storm and hope it dies down. There are still a few thousand diehard fans, and we have plenty in the bank, don’t worry, honeybee.” Joe was worried, however. The media storm had been blowing for weeks now, and it was showing no sign of abating. The death toll from ‘freak’ health food incidents was now in the hundreds, and the Republican party had responded in typical fashion, calling for an immediate ban on all health food products and alternative health supplements. The factions of the entire population associated with the parties were splitting, gun-toting militarists shouting about stupid hippies and abusing them in the street. Investors withdrawing cash from ethical business, in case it was somehow tainted with anything ‘natural.’ Some of the health food related incidents had spread to Europe, although, Joe noticed, not nearly as many. What could be causing this massive supply chain problem?

The Whites had plenty of money and two lobbyists in Washington for their many health food businesses. In fact, their businesses and their associates seemed to be suffering more than anyone. It just didn’t make sense. Superficially at least, they were presenting arguments to defend alternative health, and their rather weak counter strikes against the tsunami of enthusiasm for all that was ‘scientific’ were all over the media. Obviously a very expensive operation, too, defending their companies against the mounting weight of evidence against them.

What on earth was going on? Joe wandered out to socialise with the horses, taking his spirulina, chia and mango green smoothie with him. How could this situation possibly happen?

Peter looked up from packing his bag. “Are you ready Lovely? We have to go now if we’re going to catch the plane.”

“Sure.” Lovely, fresh from her latest cycling victory, finished wrapping sports clothing into tight rolls, zipped up her bag and picked up the passports. “Will Ferdie be up when we get there?” “Hopefully not.” Peter could imagine the list of moans he could look forward to. But the summerhouse is open, he said so.”

On the long drive to the airport they snuggled together in the back seat as Lovely’s father drove. It was going to be a tiring, hot trip in the Australian summer heat.

Johan peered across the wooden table at his father. “I don’t have to decide this quickly dad, do I? This could all blow over, and it certainly shouldn’t affect my products forever. I don’t have any suppliers to worry about. The whole product comes from me.”

“All it takes, son, is one White Industries crop spraying plane claiming to have sprayed the wrong farms and you’ve had it. I think you should consider keeping livestock.” Johan’s father had been ranting about the evils of the White family for the last half hour. He knew in his heart this was all down to them.

“You think I should put polythene over the bottom fields?”

“It might be an idea to protect something, yes. You can’t protect it all though. You have to hang onto the land, Johan, don’t let them get the land. Did you even get into profit before this hit?” His father knew it was borderline at best, the wild food products had been slow to sell at all. “Couple of weeks’ worth and then it all kicked off.”

“They have more than enough money and resources to kill everything that doesn’t suit them, including you son. It’s wise to be ahead of the game. I think you and Harvey should discuss starting a few sheep at least.” Sheep had a lower quality requirement than cattle, and the land could still be left wild if Johan was right and it would all blow over. His father remained as practical as ever as he tried to compromise with his son.

“I really don’t want to be a sheep farmer dad, but I see what you mean.” Johan knew that if the wild plants were affected, the whole wild ecosystem he was carefully allowing to generate could break down. He was learning to appreciate his father’s determination to keep his land free of White Industries GM chemical-enhanced profits.

Gary was at Ferdie’s place on the tropical island in the West Indies he had chosen for his home. “Gee, Ferdie, It’s so unspoilt here.”

“Not really, this is the tourist bit, the rest of it is the same as everywhere else. Only one fruit death here, but it’s only a matter of time and then it will be the same as everywhere.” Ferdie looked up from putting the finishing touches on his new book, the working title and filename of which was ‘Sam Redwood ate chicken soup once.’ He tried to think of a better title as Gary wandered out to the pool. He couldn’t think of one, but it would come to him eventually, he thought.

His lovely wife pottered around the baby fruit trees she was bringing on for planting, chemical free in the garden later in the year. “You should stay on, Peter is coming later.” She called to Gary. “Oh good, yes, I might get a later flight tomorrow and say hello.” Gary was not a fan of Peter’s, but he thought the new, less slim line version, might be marginally more fun to be around and tease him

less. Gary did not have a lot to say about sport. Peter did not have a lot to say about Tantric Yoga. “What do you think I should call this book? Can you take a look, Gary, and tell me what to call it?” Ferdie said softly in his charming French-Canadian accent. “Yeah sure I’ll take a look.” Gary replaced Ferdie at the computer and started to read.

The Whites had gathered for another family event at their favourite restaurant. Everyone was as usual, dressed in their best designerwear and the table was set for the lynchpins at the very top of the White Industries tree: Richard, the patriarch, Eddie, head of the genetic engineering division, Casper, who had by far the biggest job as CEO of the chemical companies, Belinda, his wife, from Strategy and Planning, Dwayne’s cousin Oscar, the media whizzkid, his sister Lynne, Operational Development, Dwayne’s brother Colin, political and legal decision maker, and of course Dwayne, the general floating dogsbody and whipping boy. They were celebrating Richards sixty ninth birthday.

“I’d just like to say Richard, how marvellous you look, and congratulations to everyone for a marvellous year.”

“Thank you Casper, you have done particularly well. I hear you got a personal mention at the Chemical convention as achiever of the year.” Richard gave a warmish smile. “I am very pleased with the way things are going.”

They ordered the most sumptuous seven course meal they could muster without vomiting, and sat in the usual state of family political role playing, pretending to laugh and joke for Richard’s benefit as he tucked in to his usual foie gras, lobster and wild mushrooms.

Dwayne thought gloomily that he couldn’t wait for his flight to the Ukraine for another dose of Dmitri-therapy.

“What a strange time to get this? What do you think Aldous, do we want ‘an estimated’ two and a half million for the film rights to ‘Raw Scandal?’” Kira took a swig of Scottish spring water and looked up grumpily.

“Some sort of backlash, do you think?”

“I doubt it. Ah yes I see, it’s an American film company. They won’t stick to the story, they never do. They’ll probably cast someone ridiculous in the main roles too. Have a look online, does White Industries have a film division?”

Aldous ran a search on the computer “Yes, they do, but it isn’t that company.”

“Get the number of their film company, will you? Is it a biggish one?”

“Yes, very, they bought it six months ago.”

“Great. Get on the phone to them and offer them the rights for five million.” Kira got up and walked to the window where one of her cats sat, mewing absent-mindedly.

“Why? They will make a mockery of it? Do you actually want more people to die?” Aldous was very confused now. This was cold even for Kira.

“More people will die anyway. Make it ten million. And it’s on condition that it goes into production within a month and is released within six. That should keep the film division busy.”

“Kira, why are you saying these awful things? You don’t care about money, you are the least corruptible person I know? What is going on?”

Kira shrugged. “I didn’t get the keys to the raw food Ferrari I needed to stop them, instead I got blocked on facebook, why should I care? I’m a nobody, remember? If I don’t do it, someone else will. Let them talk you down from ten million. I’m not greedy. It’s not really about the money anyway, it’s just an arbitrary figure when it gets to that amount. We can put it into the business.” The raw food Ferrari meaning Sam, surmised Aldous. Why on earth did she think so highly of that twit? “OK if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. What’s the death count like on the database?” Kira had several people across the world monitoring and entering the deaths from health and organic food related incidents to keep score in her Google documents.

“Nearly three thousand as from this morning. It should pass it today.”

“What’s the country data looking like?”

“Mainly America, North and South. Increasing in parts of Asia.”

“Possible wind issue, do you think?”

“Possible. It looks more like people ordering stuff from the US to be honest.”

“It hasn’t peaked yet, then. The big wave is still to come. Right, Aldous, let’s see if we can make a deal with the devil.” Kira flashed Aldous a joyless smile.

Malcolm was on the phone to Sam. “I’m just not sure it’s worth doing this year, to be honest.” He had looked at the prospects for this year’s diabetes festival and thought the returns might be too small for the authors to consider.

“Malcolm, to be honest I think it might not either, but let’s do it anyway. You’re relatively safe out there and can give them chemical-free produce for the week. We have to keep as many people aware of the alternative as possible.”

“You’ve seen all the stuff about me in the papers?” Malcolm was depressed about the coverage of his former career that had been stumped up by a nosy ‘science’ journalist.

“Forget that, it just means more people know about you. After ‘Raw Scandal’ came out I thought it was real nasty but I had so many chicks after my hot bod. It was great. For every sharp intake of breath there is a customer waiting to happen. Don’t forget that. The old stoners are probably all buying from Joe after what they dug up about him.”

“Right.” Malcolm couldn’t really see the parallel between being considered a hot rampant ready-for-anything stud and a failed doctor or weedhead football player, but never mind.

“We need to get together and talk anyway. Is Zeb likely to be there this year?”

“It was an accident that he was there last year so no.”

“Give him a ring, will ya? Don’t tell him I asked. He mustn’t know ‘I’ve been nice to him.’” Sam chewed his lip, and smiled a little.

“Sure Sam, I will.” A very puzzled Malcolm did as he was asked. A free month in the anti-stress lodge should cover it, he thought as he phoned Zeb.

Peter woke up in Ferdie’s summerhouse drenched in sweat. Something had happened in the night. He felt terrible. Lovely had got up early to train on Ferdie’s wife’s bike. He was alone. He tried to move. He ached all over. He decided to try and sleep it off, whatever it was, but he was terribly thirsty.

A few hours later Lovely came back to find him fast asleep and very flushed. She tried feeling his forehead. He was roasting hot. Not again, she thought.

She went into the house and found Ferdie, still editing his book, now entitled Raw Revenge.

“Peter is sick.”

“He isn’t hot is he?”

“Very.”

“That’s how the fruit sickness starts. We need to call a doctor, I’m sorry. I hope you insured?”

“No, we don’t usually bother.”

“I’m sorry. We really do need to call one. The other guy died.”

“OK” Lovely wasn’t unduly worried given the amount they had in the bank. They had come here to plan their investigation into the fruit deaths. She didn’t want Peter to be one of them.

On autopilot, she went and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and took it out to him. What could possibly be causing this? It couldn’t just be chemical spraying, they had done that for years and the fruit was fine. Something in the water? That would be detectable, surely. The deaths had mainly, but not entirely been in the USA. Only a couple in Australia. What could it be?

Joe, not surprisingly, was the first to figure it out. Kira had thoughtfully provided a rundown of the entire White family, including the extended family and middle management, on her online network, part of the business. She hadn’t included much in the way of a clue, but she had been extremely informative in her news article ‘Names to look out for in chemicals and genetic modification.’ “They’re at war with themselves. It’s all fake.”

“Is the world really that corrupt, are you not being a bit paranoid, Joe?” Hilary held onto their daughter’s hands as she tried to toddle.

“Who does this benefit in the end Hilary? I had no idea the world was this sick. No wonder Kira says she doesn’t bother watching the news. All the money they’ve spent is nothing compared to what they’ll make.” Joe was despondent. “We’ve been being set up for years.”

“There must be something we can do.”

“All they have to do now is make sure the organic crops start to fail and they’ve pretty much won the media war. They’re probably breeding GM insects right now that can take care of anything

organic without anything being detectable.”

“Is that possible?”

“Yeah they already did an official release of GM mosquitoes in Florida a couple of years back. Covered on the news.”

“We’re screwed, aren’t we, cuddlemonkey?” Hilary sent him a bemused and rather rueful smile. “Looks like it. Time we retired, honeypops?”

“This is not what I want happening under my name, Richard.” Dwayne was, for once, openly furious. He had returned from another trip to the Ukraine, refreshed and happy, that morning. When he had checked the online news, Kira’s death statistics had been released. “You have to stop this now.”

“You must be joking Dwayne, we aren’t going to do this twice. We’ve come too far to stop now. Out with the old, in with the new. Just wait till you see what I have hatching in the factories.” He smiled coldly. “If you interfere, Dwayne, you know what happened to your brother.” Kieran froze. His brother had drowned in a yachting accident five years ago. As this information sank in, it occurred to him that his brother had never seemed particularly interesting or rebellious. What could he have done?

“What are you saying, Richard?” he tried.

“I think it’s pretty clear, don’t you? Just keep your nose out of it and carry on as normal. There’s a prize for the correct response.” Richard raised an eyebrow.

“What prize?” Dwayne elected to play along.

“Wait and see, Dwayne. I have something very special for you when we’ve completed the operation.”

The conversation turned to more general matters and Dwayne outwardly remained composed whilst he inwardly churned. He hadn’t realised he was a member of the Borgia family. Something goes wrong and they terminate you? What was wrong with these people? Was the business so important that it was worth killing thousands of people? He had always known he was a bit different from the rest of the family. Now he realised all that he suffered from was compassion and a lack of fear, bordering on stupidity.

Kira and Aldous finished watching the early edit of ‘Raw Scandal – The Triumph of Science’ and made some tea in silence. Aldous broke the silence as they sat down, Kira’s cat returning to his usual place on her shoulder, purring loudly as they did so. “Well, was that really worth selling out for?”

“Oh, yes, I think it’s perfect. Sam looks like a rapist, Joe looks like a drug addict, Malcolm looks like Dr Evil. Peter looks like a treehugging Kim jong il. It’s perfect. After the final edits are complete I think they will get exactly what they want out of it.”

“Couldn’t you veto it or something? “

“Why would I want to do that? Don’t worry about it Aldous. You have to understand, this is how a

free market political economy with no commercially independent media, a constitution that supports business lobbying and no monarchy to talk them down, actually works. Soon they will start talking about changing laws in response to public hysteria. That's what happens in the land of the free. They never learn. It's one long team game of booing and cheering."

"What's monarchy got to do with it?" Aldous still retained the stupidity of his father, thought Kira. "When something like this happens in our country, we have the equivalent of someone at the keyboard of a computer game to comment on it. It's like a safety catch on a rifle. Charles was one of the first major opponents of GM adoption, and he took a big risk coming out to say so before anyone else had really thought about it. The fact he's an organic farmer himself probably helped, right enough, but I've told you before, that's what our aristocracy is really for, protecting the actual land itself. Also, the law is a matter for the crown, not the state, so the state can't make kneejerk laws for purely political reasons. The Royals don't get a choice about being Royal either. I don't really know why I keep having to remind you of that. Jewel encrusted slavery is still slavery, and they take their slavery very seriously, unlike the rest of us."

"Right." Aldous had heard this before, but he always had to go through it again.

"We keep them rich because we need someone who doesn't care about money to think about the nation and promote it. Digging it yet?"

"Sort of, yeah." Aldous was too full of the socialist rhetoric he'd heard as a child about 'rich toffs' to ever really accept Kira's feudal hypothesis. He had heard it many times before, but it still didn't sink in.

Kira knew perfectly well they would be having this conversation again in another six months in some other context, so she moved on. "So, I'm guessing you didn't like the film then?" There was a long pause. "I don't understand why you're letting them do this to themselves. Do you hate America?"

"Not really, but you know me Aldous, I'm fully capable of laying siege to Carthage, or wherever else, when I want something." Kira bestowed Aldous with her cruel empress look. "The film is perfect. The sooner they put it out and the American public go wild for all that is scientific the better." The cat climbed down into Kira's lap and wriggled contentedly as she picked up her sewing. She impishly battered her eyelashes at Aldous. "I think the ducks are on the croquet lawn again. If Sam should contact you, please inform him he now has cause for a lawsuit against White Industries, should he want one, not that he'll win. I do not wish to speak to him." She offered Aldous her well-practised flirty-stubborn expression, one of the range Aldous knew extremely well.

"I think I'll stick with the ducks, thanks." Aldous chuckled as he went out to herd the naughty ducks back to the pond. He had no idea what she was up to this time, but it was always fun waiting to find out. Sam wouldn't understand her in a million years, he giggled as he passed her artwork 'Raw Sex Object' in the hallway.

The speakers at Malcolm's event this year included Zeb, doing motivational classwork all week in addition to speaking at the finale. Since Zeb's diary had become less frantic since the 'rebirth by fire' incident, he was quite keen to do some work for a month in exchange for his private pool and lodge in the anti-stress zone. In fact, he was positively enjoying himself for the first time in years, talking to people for a change instead of at them.

Peter and Lovely had also joined the rest of the speakers at the event, this year renamed the raw event to attract more campers. It had taken Peter months to recover from the fruit poisoning. He

was now enjoying more green salads as a result.

Malcolm had provided a second refurbished outbuilding, but they all found it more fun to gather in the living room to read, swap recipes and annoy each other for the week.

“I’m telling you, it’s all them. They’ve created a fake ‘nature versus science’ war using their own companies.” Joe, wide-eyed, was waving his arms in the air as he spoke.

“Don’t be so paranoid, Joe, that would be a very expensive war.” Sam was disdainful.

“Think about it Sam, who benefits at the end if the science fad wins.” Don caught on. The thought of his beloved bison eating from non-indigenous land horrified him. They could just crop-spray everything, he thought. Rumour had it that White Industries had enough chemicals to crop-spray the whole world twice over with pesticide and weed killer.

“The insects, man, they’re breeding insects.” Joe was still arm flailing.

“What can we do?” Gary was at the window, looking at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life. He was still half in on the conversation as he wondered what to say to her.

“Yes, we can’t stop this, we don’t have the money. Unless we asked the farmers?” Johan knew this wouldn’t work even as he said it. Few produce growers operated on a massive profit basis, even fewer organic growers.

There was a lengthy silence. Gary wondered if the girl would even look at him. She would probably tell him to get lost. He was probably too thin for her now, he thought morbidly.

“I say we kill them.” Lovely stood up. “I say we kill them all.” The stress of the last couple of years suddenly fell away as she contemplated this in a beautiful moment of clarity. They all looked at each other. Did they really have no option?

“Wouldn’t the management just take over where they left off? Should we take them out too?” Zinca didn’t look remotely phased by the idea of killing anyone. She toyed with the ends of her beautiful hair and looked quite cheerful about the idea.

“I’m pretty sure the management didn’t decide to spend millions of bucks buying up health food companies in order to destroy the entire industry.” Sam said. “This is crazy. You’re all crazy. I have to think about this.” He went to his room, grabbing a handful of trail mix from the coffee table as he left. Gary decided to approach the most beautiful girl in the world. Sometimes you just know, even if she is twice your weight and a total stranger.

Anastasia had learned quite a lot of English since Dwayne’s visits had become a regular affair. She now had him hogtied at the bottom of the pedestal under her bed. Dmitri stood with a sturdy foot on his chest as she spoke.

“You have done homework?”

“Yes mistress Ana.” Dwayne was really learning a lot about himself these days. “I believe.” He had practised meditation, astral projection and ‘regressive time travelling’ in the course of his studies, and had found he quite enjoyed it. He still wasn’t all that sure how enlightening it was, but if it made mistress happy it was all good.

“Good. Your uncle. He has insects. Not good.”

“You aren’t suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?” Dwayne looked extremely nervous. He didn’t want to die in Anastasia’s service. It was far too expensive to include his own demise. The township was getting quite large now, and he was aware he had funded a significant part of it with his visits. He was currently on the floor of the main bedroom of Anastasia’s pink palace.

“Think of Edvardo. Find the insects before release.” She stared at him, scowling as usual. How the hell did she know about Edvardo? Or these insects, whatever she was on about?

“I think they are all over America, even I can’t find them all. How do you know all this?”

“I see it in out of body experience. Insects must not get out. You must believe, Dwayne.”

“I believe.” What the hell was he being set up for? He had to stop coming here, he thought. This was getting dangerous. However she knew these things, if the family found out he was prying, he knew what would happen to him. Could Richard somehow be testing him, he wondered? He stopped wondering as Dmitri commenced lightly kicking him in the flank. Ahhh, that was better. “Thank you mistress.”

“God loves science! God loves science!” The audience chanted as the stars of Raw Scandal – Triumph of Science posed on the red carpet on their way into the flashy premiere.

A rash of new ‘scientific’ churches had sprung up in the midst of the craze for new pharmaceutical and chemical solutions. The newspapers were full of triumphant stories, large and small, of modern marvels of scientific invention. The Republican party were leading in all the polls as the Democrats were seen to be dragging their feet over the mysterious alternative health deaths. Hippies were discarding tasselled tops and sandals for cardigans and leather pumps.

GM farms were considered to be producing the best premium products and the farmers would appear, smiling on the news, boasting of better produce with better profits, all thanks to the wonders of chemistry and genetic engineering. How long would that last when they had wiped out the organic market? The profits would shrink overnight in the face of ‘essential’ price increases. The American news, of course, did not report the developing nations who had lost entire crop markets thanks to gene implantation to reduce the need for imported ‘natural’ solutions. It did not report the subsistence and small farmers forced into industrial city jobs, or worse, starvation, by large companies and politicians alike obsessed by profit and economic growth at any cost. It was prevented from reporting any negative effects at all, in fact, but nobody noticed.

Sam watched this on a big screen whilst sitting with his friends in a bar in LA. His heart sank. Even he had lost hope. They were probably finished, he thought. He had more than enough in the bank not to worry too much, and the children were taken care of, but to lose his life’s work to a fake media war and a family of mass murderers was not his idea of a great ending to his own story. Maybe the others had been right. Whatever was the case, he couldn’t just sit here, and he was having difficulty getting it up these days, something he thought could not be a coincidence. He put in a call to Zinca on his mobile.

“Game on.” He hung up and sipped his bottle of filtered spring water, shipped from his Hawaiian garden. He didn’t realise it, but they didn’t have long to save the organic crops. The release date for the GM insect soldiers had already been set.

Aldous picked up the phone. To his surprise Craig Ferguson was on the other end, although he didn’t recognise his voice at once. Craig was now presenting the ‘Late show’ on US television, which had massive audience figures. Kira, for once, agreed to take the call.

“I’m amazed you remember me. That party in Dowanhill must have been twenty years ago, Craig.” Aldous could only hear one side of the conversation. How on earth did Kira know all these people? Every time they went anywhere they would bump into another one. For a woman who didn’t like leaving the house she seemed to get around a lot.

“Glad you liked it. Sure I can do that. Next month is fine. Thanks.” Kira replaced the receiver.

“We have to go to America again.”

“Is that wise, Kira?”

“No, but let’s do it anyway. See if you can get another couple of TV dates for us whilst we’re there.” She reviewed the death toll. Just over four thousand.

Gary and the ‘incredible’ Natasha warmly kissed one another goodbye as he headed off to Malcolm’s.

“I’d ask you to come, but it’s only a week. If we are lucky I should be back. Please don’t go anywhere.”

“That is OK. I won’t.” Natasha was looking forward to eating something other than green vegetables while he was away. She was still twice the size of him, but already the raw vegan diet he was encouraging her to try was working its magic. She had had to think very carefully before getting involved with some skinny stranger into apparently sexy yoga, but he seemed nice enough, and after he had explained about his former size, she felt it might just be safe to believe him. Gary stroked her hair and kissed her again before grabbing his bag. “See you soon.”

He headed off to the train station, where he narrowly avoided missing the interstate. When they had planned this out, in anticipation of Sam’s eventual agreement, they had arranged that it should be done in a week or less, in different locations across North America. They all had their allotted jobs to do, it was just a question of getting them done.

Dwayne had spent the last month frantically trying to find out where the insect breeding factories were, but with limited success. He wondered whether it might be worth showing some interest.

“Uncle Richard, how are you planning to finish off your job on health food and organics?”

“Now, now Dwayne, you know I’m not going to discuss that.”

“You know, since you’re seventieth is next year, it might be smart to consider ‘training me’ a little?” he tried to sound more like the rest of his family.

“It’s my seventieth next year and I will be leaving you a legacy of the strongest company in the world, thanks to my work and my decisions. That’s important to me, to know that I did that for all of you.” Dwayne was astonished to see any self-awareness at all from Richard, so he pressed on.

“Specifically, I was wondering if I could help with the organics project. I’m not very busy at the moment, is there anything I could do with that? If anything were to happen to you....”

“Nothing is going to happen to me, and the organics project will be released next week. It’s already set up and there is nothing for you to worry about.”

“What if you wanted to delay it?”

“Why would I want to do that? We’ve been working on it for years.”

“I’m not suggesting you should, but what if you actually wanted to delay it? Could it be delayed?”

“I don’t like the sound of this conversation Dwayne. I have no intention of delaying it. Should I want to, I would call Eddie, he has his instructions, beyond that he has no idea what is going to happen either. He isn’t directly responsible for anything, he just has to do as he’s told. As do you.”

“Sorry, Uncle Richard, of course.” Dwayne decided to give up at that point. Eddie would give nothing away, of course but at least he had some sort of lead. Not a chemical project then. Insects. Anastasia was right. They would have to release them all over the country though, so they had to be connected to the chemical plants, not the genetic engineering labs. Very smart – the wrong path to the right place.

Casper and Belinda White of the chemicals and planning department were swingers. They regularly attended swing parties at houses near their home and had enjoyed a variety of strangers over their years together. Richard was of course aware of this, but prudently did not let them know that he had any inkling of their chosen pastime. It had been decided amongst the group, therefore, that Sam and Zinca were best placed to ‘take care’ of them. And so it was that Sam and Zinca, not bosom buddies at the best of times, had taken to going to swing parties in Casper and Belinda’s local area. Zinca had managed to keep out of the ‘action’ so far, but Sam was, of course, in his element.

Zinca carried a small black leather case to these parties, and as usual, she had it with her tonight. “Call yourself a vegan with a leather handbag?” Sam asked irritably, as they got out of the car outside the painted bungalow.

“Well you called yourself a vegan for long enough wearing wool, didn’t you, Sam? Besides, I need to be equipped.”

“Equipped for what? We’re supposed to remove them, not turn them on.” Sam assumed that the case contained a variety of sex toys, and was annoyed that he was unlikely to discover what they were.

“If we ever manage to actually find them, you may or may not find out.” Now you go ahead and do your thing and I’ll wait by the table with food in case they drift in. These parties are very dull. I hope they turn up soon.” Zinca was very tired of the inane conversations with strangers. Most of them seemed to expect not to speak much beyond a hello, which made it difficult to extricate yourself from their intentional activity, swinging. You couldn’t blame them, she supposed. It really wasn’t very nice of her to go to swingers’ parties and not actually swing. This was the fifth one this week, however, and she was getting a bit tired of it.

At ten o’clock or so they walked in, dressed, Zinca supposed, appropriately. She brightened a little at that. Casper made straight for her.

“Hi.”

“Hi, would you and your wife like to join me somewhere a bit quieter?” Zinca had picked up the lingo in the course of her rather boring week.

An hour later, she located Sam in the ‘hot room,’ with six strangers of both genders and hissed into

the darkness. "It's time to go."

"Man. Right I suppose I have to leave you lovely people, so sorry." A couple of people, their mouths evidently full of something Zinca was thankful she could not identify in the darkness, murmured acknowledgement.

"Where are we going then?" He said as he dressed hurriedly. "Are they here yet?"

"Been and gone Sam, been and gone. He had a nasty looking fungal infection in his toe, we could have cured that."

"What did you yell me for then? Oh, Oh, you mean like gone gone?"

"I am afraid so, Sam, you missed the action." Zinca tried to look seductive as another few people passed them to join the others in the hot room. "I think we should go now though, before the crowd thins out." She clasped her small leather case. "Shame you never got to see what I had in here. Quite old fashioned. You probably wouldn't approve of the CFCs." She smiled. "Let's go home. I don't want to miss my favourite Ukrainian soap opera."

Oscar White was in Zeb's helicopter. Zeb had been asked to take him on a tour, incorporating a visit to Malcolm's. He was under the impression a possible land deal was being struck from what Malcolm had said, and so he didn't think anything of it when Malcolm had asked him to give them a lift. They were having lunch anyway, so why not go away for the weekend? Oscar for his part, had no idea where they were going. They had just assumed it was something Zeb liked doing with clients offering a million or so for a corporate convention.

"Now you know I'm going to have to take Zeb out of the way, do you both know what you have to do?" Malcolm was visibly shaking at the prospect of what lay ahead.

"Yes, I think we are pretty clear, aren't we Valerie?" Gary felt surprisingly calm. Valerie nodded. "Let's just hope it works."

"Time that old river bed was filled in anyway. It's going to be a long, long day tomorrow, that's for sure, trying to explain this away to Zeb."

They watched as the helicopter landed at the back of the dusty expanse behind the house.

"Here goes." Malcolm moved forward to greet his guests, only one of whom would be leaving in a couple of days.

The following day, they walked talked, practised meditation. Oscar seemed like a nice guy, too, Malcolm was grateful that he was in charge of distracting Zeb. In the afternoon Malcolm took Zeb to the main house to 'talk business' while Gary and Valerie took Oscar out to the earth pile, left over from the river redirection. One of the neighbour's diggers was right next to it. Gary taught Oscar to sun dance. Valerie jumped into the cab of the digger and commenced lifting earth and dumping it in the river. She had a pile of lime next to it, she put this into a particularly deep crack in the river bed nearby.

Strange sort of relaxation, with a digger right next to you, thought Oscar, just before the digger dropped a large scoopful of earth on top of him. What just happened? He thought, when it all went dark. That's heavy, he thought as the digger ran over the top of the earth on top of him. He didn't think much after that. Valerie scooped him up along with the earth and dumped him onto the lime

in the deeper ravine. She shifted the rest of the earth pile on top, and then both riverbed and Oscar vanished into the ground, perfectly flat after she had finished moving the pile they had been dancing on.

Gary clapped as she jumped down. "He seemed so nice too, apart from the nasal congestion, that was distracting. I'm sure we could have helped him get rid of that."

"Yes, shame isn't it? I feel a little bad too." They had no idea how close they still were to losing the remaining organic and herbal medicine industry. If they had, they wouldn't have worried about what they were doing at all.

Lynne White had been allocated to Michael and Don. Don had taken the long flight south to stay with Michael. Michael proudly showed him his chosen weapon. An old Chinese blowpipe, beautifully enamelled, and a small box of darts.

"So we have to get her in an enclosed space out of CCTV reach. That's tough. Are you sure we shouldn't just take her shooting or something?" Don scoffed.

"She walks through Chinatown every day. Just stop and ask her for the time next to an alley or something. There are lots of canopies and stuff to stop us getting caught on CCTV, don't worry." Michael was soft voiced and as usual, very calm.

When they finally got around to it after Lynne left work that day, it did not go smoothly. The dart Michael blew bounced off her neck and Don had to bundle her into the alley behind a trashcan, whereupon Michael grabbed one of the remaining poison darts and stuck it in her neck by hand. Messy. They left her where she was and wandered through the back of a Chinese medicine shop, owned by a friend of Michael's before emerging from an adjoining casino some time later.

"Shame about the bad skin."

"Yeah, dairy didn't agree with her at all." Don agreed as they returned to the car. "I quite liked this shirt, damn."

Colin White, Dwayne's remaining brother, emerged from the Senate building. He had been working that day and now had to make the long drive 200 miles south to get back to his usual office for the following day. He got into his car, made his way out of the city and drove into the wild expanse between him and home.

Peter and Lovely, thanks to some intelligence gathered by Joe, expected him to be on top of the hill they were sitting on in forty minutes. They sat and enjoyed the view until they spotted the car coming up the long dusty hill towards them.

"Go for it Lovely." Peter hid behind a large boulder.

Lovely took her top off and stood proudly displaying the famously fabulous tits. She motioned as if looking for a lift. The car duly stopped by the cliff top.

"Hi, would you like to come out and play first. I'm only going to the next town." Colin could not believe his luck. A gorgeous Australian backpacker, he assumed, wanted some attention and company. Colin, a rather bloated forty something, had not had any female attention in years, and he didn't even have to chat this one up.

As he stood outside his car, viewing the fabulous breasts, Peter cracked his skull open with a large rock. He swung round to see his attacker briefly as Lovely finished him off with a second rock. "Done and dusted, Lovely."

"Yip. Gloves on, bag over the head, stick him in the car with the bikes."

They did so, and drove the car to a cliff on another road, where he would be less likely to be discovered. They took the bikes out and put him in the driving seat. Together they rolled the car off the cliff, in traditional motion picture manner, and watched as it crashed into the crevice below the cliff. There was no satisfying motion picture explosion to go with it. Just as well they were wearing gloves.

"They shouldn't find it for a while, should they?"

"Shouldn't think so, Lovely. He wasn't supposed to be here. Bit out of shape, wasn't he?" Peter rubbed his chest.

"Can we go home now?" Lovely put her top back on. She was a little chilly.

"I should think so, we have to cycle the 100km to the next town first, love."

"Should have remembered to get more water."

"I'm sure we'll find some on the way."

Joe and Hilary had decided to make more indirect arrangements for the dispatch of Eddie White, head of the genetic engineering division. He was in Venezuela, making arrangements for the expansion of the insect project to the cacao and berry plantations, just in case the superfood market managed to survive the death of health and organic food. Plenty of vigilante groups and hired killers there, thought Joe, and via the South American verbal contact network, the job was organised. Eddie was due to vanish the following day. He was terminally greeted by a passing gunman as he left the home of a charming transsexual he had met in a bar.

When the job was done, Joe was notified via the untraceable village grapevine. Phew, he thought.

Peggy, posing as a kitchen assistant, had been working in the White family's favourite restaurant for two weeks prior to the allotted week they had allotted to 'get the job done. Richard was due for his Tuesday lunch. Fortunately his taste for wild mushrooms made the job a relatively simple one. Peggy just had to make sure his wild mushroom soup was more wild than usual.

It wasn't as straightforward as it might appear. The chefs at the restaurant were extremely fussy, and Peggy didn't want to make any of them ill, so she settled for a hefty garnish of raw as it sat on the hotplate for the waiter, rather than trying to include her special mushrooms into the soup as they were making it, fresh for him as usual.

By dessert he was feeling a little ill, by coffee pulling at his collar. By the time he got back to his car, Richard knew he was not going to survive. What had he done to deserve this? All he wanted was glory for the family business. He tried to force himself to move the car. The sensation was leaving his limbs. He frantically tried to give Eddie the order to go ahead with the organic plans

without him, but of course Eddie did not get the message. Instead, a Venezuelan prostitute saw it, dismissed it and replaced the sim on her nice new phone.

Peggy was fired, of course, that afternoon, for her ‘unattractive’ soup garnishing, but no one thought much more about it until the body was found and the ‘mysterious’ Helen, AKA Peggy, had simply disappeared, back to Johan’s farm in a faraway state.

Kira survived make-up and was backstage before the show. Craig fluttered around nervously. She had never seen someone so frantic. He hadn’t changed a bit.

“Now, you’ve seen the show haven’t you? You know what to expect?” Craig hadn’t actually remembered her at all, but it suited him that she thought he did, so he pretended to be a friend of hers as they waited to go on.

“Yes, Craig, it’s fine. I know exactly what to expect.”

The usual introduction to the show, a stuffed monkey was involved on this one. Kira waited, surprised to find herself slightly bored by the whole idea by the time she was called onto the set.

“Now Kira, you’ll be glad to know I’ve seen the film and read the book. You don’t look like I expected you to look.”

“How nice. I’m not a hippy, no, unless I avoid the hairdresser for a while.”
The audience laughed.

“I couldn’t help but notice Kira, that they were a bit different from each other. Did you like the film at all?”

“Yes, I think the film suited its purpose perfectly.” Kira gave a thin-lipped smile.

“Are you sure? I gather from the book that you don’t like science?” Craig waved his head around, implying that either he or she was a little stupid.

The audience laughed again, cued to verify that she was stupid.

“Yes I’m sure. I don’t actually dislike science; I think you’ve missed the point of the book a little there. I am not sure when this idea, that anything natural was automatically unscientific, was first mooted but it’s not correct. Nature isn’t incompatible with science, it’s incompatible with industrial processing.”

“Oh?” He tried his expansive shocked look.

“The book wasn’t really about alternative health and science at all. That was the plot, but it wasn’t the main theme of the book. The film has made the main theme of the book clear to anyone that has actually seen and read it.”

“What do you mean there Kira?” Craig was genuinely interested now. Kira warmed up.

“Well, it’s really all about the role of cultural economics. The main character in the book is a cultural economist. I didn’t remind the reader too often right enough, but that’s what the book is really about.”

“Tell us more?” Craig was still putting his entertainment face on, but this was clearly news to him. “Sometimes it takes a small fat ugly nobody to show how an entire nation can be manipulated by any company which has been allowed to integrate far too many businesses and make far too much profit.”

This was way too serious a point for Craig’s job not to be on the line. “So its profit you don’t like, then? You don’t like profit? Or feeding the world?” He tried to bring things back on track by implying that science alone provided these things.

“We’ve been able to feed the world by conventional means since the mid-eighties. The reason we don’t is to stop poor countries competing with a labour advantage. For the benefit of the audience, one out of the 1.8 people dying per second are in poverty related conditions so that you can all work, so that you will vote the right way and go shopping. As for profit, it’s perfectly OK too, until one company can afford to buy such a large proportion of an opposing industry that they can destroy it. Destroying the market for health food has cost the culprit a billion at most, a tax deductible drop in the ocean for some companies. They don’t even have to sabotage the supplies in the real world, someone was just in a hurry. It’s all in the book, if you look more closely.”

“And you based this in America? Do you hate America?” Craig was so nervous that he was trying to attack her now. Kira remained calm.

“No, I hate that no one seems to be able to see that integrated corporations are now bigger than countries and the real economic war is what used to be considered macro versus micro, as in – government versus business. The old economics is effectively obsolete. As I demonstrate in the book, and hopefully the audience are realising right now, it is now possible to manipulate an entire country’s voting, consumer, faith and individual self-belief from the comfort of an office chair. People need to be educated to vote with their wallets. The American people, in particular, need to have something to compare themselves to, and they need news and programming that isn’t sponsored. We know, Craig, that the UK, for example, isn’t exactly angelic. But we also know, because we are small and supplied with the relevant information via a non-commercial media, that we are not always right. All I wanted to demonstrate to the American people is to be very wary of what they see and hear, because none of it is independent. It is all bought and paid for.”

Craig was stunned. He had expected a stupid hippy, angry about the ‘brave new world’ manipulation of her little raw vegan story. He had not expected this. The subject was now way too heavy for his audience, he heard his earpiece ping with the yelling of the manager in the crow’s nest. He moved his earpiece where he did not have to suffer the pinging.

“What’s the answer?” he said, dropping any of his professional expressions. This would either make or break his career, he thought ruefully, but it was great TV.

“The answer is to legally prevent any company do something like, for example, genetic modification purely for the purposes of selling their own chemicals, or sponsor news programmes on every single channel, for another example. It’s pretty obvious that having someone patent your agriculture, produce your food, sell your food and then produce the ingredients to medicate your illness is a bad idea. We should force such companies to split and declare interest and research so that it can be externally investigated. That way biotech companies can monitor each other and government steps in when the analysis becomes dubious, rather than the current system of accepting a company’s own findings. The system of corporate representation and lobbying on things like daily diet advice is also wrong, which is why I picked on the raw vegans. The World Health Organisation says nine to fifteen portions of fruit and vegetables per day, not five. We are told five in the UK and USA to enable the eating of more industrially manufactured products because the industries are

represented on the nutrition boards. There are many examples of such corporate sponsored scandals, these are the most screamingly urgent ones. If your audience would be interested, I have the death rate statistics on the health food and organics scandal. I can show you how obvious it is that it was a corporate set-up to anyone outside the country.”

“We have limited time on the programme, Kira, I’m sorry, this is fascinating.” Craig was being yelled at to get her off. Kira smiled.

“Thank you very much Craig, it was very kind of you to have me.”

The audience, stunned and confused, had to be cued to clap. Aldous, sitting at the back, reached for his mobile to get the first possible flight home. Kira with a bullet in the head wouldn’t pay his wages, he thought.

Aldous brought the bags into the house. Kira drove off in her shiny red sports car to pick up the cats. She could never resist getting the cats back. She found it hard to consider that she was home without them. The phone rang. Aldous picked it up.

“Hi it’s Sam Redwood. I’m looking for Kira Cedar?” Aldous nearly fainted with shock. Kira must have gone up in the world, he thought.

“Try back in an hour. We’re only just back. Can I tell her what you want?”

“I’m not sure. Tell her it’s business, anyway.”

“OK.”

When Kira finally got back and unboxed the cats, Aldous wondered whether to tell her. No, it would spoil the lovely surprise. He decided to go out so that she would have to answer the phone herself. Kira was startled when it rang again. Should she answer it? It might be one of her horrible relatives.

“Hello?”

“Sam Redwood.”

“Oh really.” She wasn’t annoyed, but she wasn’t expecting a good call, either.

“I saw you on the Late show.”

“Right. I just assumed you were phoning to sue me or something.” Kira had never really got over him suing Peter. Suing was deeply uncool, she thought. He would probably want to sue her for not being a twenty one year old cheerleader or presuming to try to give him a present, she thought.

“No. I just wanted to say I liked what you had to say.” He sounded defeated. She wondered why.

“Is that it?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Great, well do call back when you have something else to say, won’t you? Have you unblocked me yet?”

“Are you still pissed about that?” he now sounded amused. Kira generously decided to interpret this as ‘gentle.’

“Of course I am. I want to write the goddamn book already. You’re a really crap muse, you know that?”

“Write the goddamn book. And save my number, OK?”

Wow, what had Kira done to deserve this? “Sure.” It probably meant nothing to him, but it was everything to Kira. She put the phone down and started to weep. Aldous found her hiding in bed when he got back, still crying, the cats mewling and pawing at her.

“What did he say? Is he taking the artwork?” Aldous was appalled. Kira was not usually one of the world’s weepy women.

“Oh, no, just to go ahead and write the book. That was big of him wasn’t it? And he told me to save his number. Only because I got on that frightful TV show. Oh God, he’s a horrid boy, simply horrid. He probably doesn’t even understand there’s anything wrong with that. He probably thought it was a sodding networking opportunity to make him more pawpyoolaaahr.” Kira sniffed and drawled.

“You should have been able to tell from the poncho and the Hawaiian shirts.” Aldous laughed heartily as he went to ‘pick up some chicks.’ The ducklings had again strayed from the pond.

Kira looked at her tear streaked face in the mirror and agreed at last that yes, it was probably time she stopped giving random assholes the benefit of the doubt. She had wanted to give that one the world on a platter, but he only understood how to give and take, not how to be given to. She ought to have been used to it, but she wasn’t. Not one of them had understood it, and she supposed nobody ever would, no matter how much bullshit they talked indicating they might possibly ‘dig it’. Finer feelings, were, like Kira, out of fashion.

“No-one is ever going to understand it, are they Aldous?” She said when he came back.

“No, I’m afraid not.” Poor Sam, thought Aldous, he probably thought he was doing her a big favour by acknowledging her at all.

“Why not?”

“You choose to function in a different world than everyone else. They are all trying to get what they can with the limited time they have, and you keep trying to give them something they don’t expect. It doesn’t add up to most people, especially the ones you tend to pick. They think you want something they don’t have in return.”

“I think that’s a shame.” Kira looked child-like and petulant. She quite liked her magical inspired world of wonder, where random frogs were princes waiting for magic fairy dust and everything had a pleasantly chaotic, easy causality. “It’s much nicer in here. Why shouldn’t I give people presents if I want to?”

“It is a shame yes, but you really should stop trying it, it makes you miserable, and that was the worst one ever. He probably thought you were an obsessed fan.” Kira’s muses had never before included anyone remotely well known. They were generally selected for what was missing rather

than what was already there. Aldous often wondered what the criteria was.

“Oh I think he knew I wasn’t a fan. I don’t know about it being the worst, at least I got to demonstrate Cultural Economics in action, even if I am a tiresome novelist now. And I made a lot of art.”

Aldous shook his head. “Yeah, but what do you get out of it? Apart from being miserable and now probably in danger if you set foot in the USA again? And please don’t say it’s not about what you get out of it again, I’ll scream.”

“I won’t.” Kira smiled naughtily. She loved being naughty, especially to Aldous. She would miss him when he went back to his normal job. She would be all alone again, to dream of pretty things, lofty gifts to random strangers and swift methods of fixing giant insoluble problems.

“Are you going to write the book?”

“Probably not, I have no reason at all to care what happens to humans in the future. I didn’t have any reason to care before Sam, and I have no reason to care now. I’m a nobody, and I don’t matter. The back of the artwork is a gravestone, after all. You can never underestimate your own significance, even when asking for nothing and giving to people that don’t really deserve it.”

Dwayne couldn’t understand why he’d been left off the hit list for the rest of his family, but he was very happy to be alive. All those trips to the Ukraine had saved him, but he would never find that out. Now he was a very busy man, reorganising the White family business. The Health food businesses were sold off, compensation paid out to the victims’ families and he sold the film company, which still left him with an enormous genetic engineering and chemical company to sort out. Kira’s appearance had caused a minor but intense public discussion of what business should and should not be able to do in the USA, which meant his days were possibly numbered even at that.

The police looking into the sudden deaths, had, of course, been to see him. He blithely told them, that, knowing his family, they had all decided to kill each other but they were welcome to investigate whatever they liked. In any case, he was more interested in finding the potential ecological time bomb his uncle had created in the form of the insects. They seemed to be concentrating on Zeb now, he would take them on long helicopter tours of the dusty expanse surrounding Malcolm’s land in the vain hope of finding Oscar.

The fruit insects appeared to have fallen away as fast as they had appeared, at least, he thought so. The sharp decline in demand for fruit had meant no deaths for a while, so he assumed the fruit insects had some sort of terminator gene, which was a relief. If the labs, however long it would take him to find them, were ever opened, who knew if or how the presumably large captive population of anti-organic insects would have evolved?

The Best Romance Ever

“Why do his eyes look so filled with hate?” Aldous adjusted his glasses and looked at Kira. They were watching ‘the international health expert’ Sam Redwood’s gadget infomercial on TV.

“I don’t know. It is very aging. He looks tired, old and bitter.” Kira was surprised to find she was not as upset at seeing Sam again, after two years of avoiding looking at him, as she thought she would be. “One thing is for sure, it won’t be anything to do with me. I’m way too insignificant. Try the bit of fluff on the screen next to him, maybe she said no.” The corner of her mouth twitched in irritation.

Sam, unusually thin by his normal cuddly standards, continued to talk about the virtues of drinking greens whilst glaring hatefully out from the screen. Occasionally flicking a blonde curl from his face, he deftly demonstrated the wondrous seed crushing qualities of his gadget, smiling at the cute female sidekick whilst continuing to look homicidal whenever he looked at the camera.

“He is probably hungry. Or maybe this is his new ‘older guy’ sexy look. I don’t know. It looks more like his new ‘older guy’ scary look from here. At least the shirts have improved.”

“Kira, how long have you been in love with this guy now?” Aldous frowned.

“Three or four years, maybe?”

“Have you tried talking to him?”

“No point, he is screwing his staff and they won’t let me. I don’t know whether it comes from him or them but same difference, I don’t get to communicate with him. It’s probably just as well, because at least fifty percent of the time I am furious with him.” Kira lobbed another bit of cacao into her mouth along with the blueberries. “I could always pretend to be a stranger until I had him cornered, but to be honest my apparently god-like beloved and I don’t get on particularly well and we can spot each other under assumed names at a hundred paces.”

“I gathered that from the last time you spoke.” Aldous laughed at the recollection of Kira’s fury at Sam for not accepting Kira’s gift of her artwork, ‘Raw Sex Object.’

“What do you see in him? He still looks like a twat to me.”

“The oddest things set him off and he gets furious. I imagine he thinks he is so impossible to get on with that he doesn’t really like people getting too close, so he keeps everything nice and superficial. My version of exactly the same behaviour is to avoid people entirely. We are the opposite, and yet exactly the same. It’s strange, all I exist for is making the guy happy, and yet the minute I even see a picture of him this deranged child takes over my mind and I say terrible things to him.” Kira paused only to sigh. “The only answer to it is exactly what I am doing, which is to try to avoid even seeing him. It doesn’t help much, we should really just have the titanic fight until one of us, probably me, expires. All I know is that I have never met him, I don’t get on with him, and I miss him every minute of every day, which is, of course, absurd. I should reinstate the team of ex-boyfriends to take my mind off it, but they were hopeless, and besides, that’s why they got the boot in the first place. It’s not really me, is it, the lovesick look?”

“Not really, no, and you don’t even like hippies.”

“Or vegans, schmaltz, hedonists or utilitarians. It’s God’s idea of a horrible joke.” Kira sighed. “Or beards, for that matter, and I don’t imagine for a second he likes short fat Scottish bitches. It’s going to be unresolved forever, whilst I get fatter and fatter and eventually decompose in a miserable twisted heap.”

“Time for a new project, Kira.”

“Yep, I think so too. It’s a shame Aldous, I can think of at least one excellent gentleman that I would have liked to marry, and now I can’t. Love sucks, especially this version.”

“How did the artwork appraisal go?”

“I am reasonably talented apparently.” Kira continued to look glum.

“Great!”

“I suppose so. It’s always the same, you look at your own work, and you think a five year old could have done it because you remember all the things that went wrong. Other people just see the result, so you don’t really know until you show it to people. You have no idea the courage it took to show that thing after Sam rejected it, and he hadn’t even seen it. He was just being a self-important dick. Considering he talks about ‘grace’ so much, he doesn’t appear to know what it is.”

“He looks like he’s probably a bit self-important all the time to me.”

“Nah, just a Yank avoiding being touched by anything. You get a similar effect with over-educated oiks over here. They have to be told what to like by someone with more money than them. It’s the only way they can tell if they’re doing something ‘*kewl*.’ And you have to remember he likes to be stressed. I was a nasty sounding person when I overworked too. It leads to all sorts of horrible flippant moments because you’re thinking about something else.”

Aldous giggled happily at the thought of all those thoughtless rich people as he went to feed the cats. Kira hurriedly switched Sam’s hate-contorted face off and continued to sew, idly wondering if her own forsaken expression was any better than his.

Sam, international health guru extraordinaire, looked out of the drab hotel window at the roller-skating blonde. Five years ago, he thought, I could have tapped that. He turned back to the computer, where his book on gardening still lay unfinished. The now familiar cold feeling crept over him as he pondered whether to work on that or his presentation for the next day.

Business was, as usual, doing well. The TV endorsements were making him money, but not as much as he had hoped, and the demands on his appearance and time were frustrating. Now spending more time in NYC, and considerably less time doing what he loved with the smaller health shop venues, he did not feel life was treating him well. The increase in fan numbers had slowed down considerably. Where had it all gone wrong? He patted his tummy and wondered if he dared eat anything. He decided not.

Nothing had really changed in terms of his attractiveness, of course, but Sam felt he was losing his mojo, and it wasn’t a good feeling. He gloomily wondered what would cheer him up. Everything seemed stale and routine, just ‘ticking over,’ and to make things worse, Sam was lonely. He usually functioned at a pace that ensured he was never really aware of being lonely, but things had slowed

below his preferred level thanks to the income and restrictive nature of the TV work. Worse than that, the anticipated chat show appearances had not yet materialised and he seemed to be in an unaccustomed rut. Same locations, same subjects, same long term relationships with the groupies that ran his business. Kira had pointed out in one of her many irate videos that this was now stifling his opportunities, and he suddenly had the feeling that the stupid bitch might be right. Surely not? Sam scowled at his wrinkles in the mirror as he pondered the fact that he even remembered this.

The gardening book was designed to push him into a more established mid-life, middle class market. The lack of prospective chicks in this market was depressing in the extreme. Older women were far too complicated and far too challenging if you kept them around too long, a fact he was painfully aware of from the increasing demands of his groupie staff. He had arranged his life to avoid the tedium of long term relationships by employing the keenest and furthest away female fans to run various parts of the business, on the basis that he would drop in to 'service' them now and again, but after years of this arrangement, it seemed they all felt they had a claim on him. So it was that what had started as a stable of sexually available workers had turned into a gaggle of nagging wives.

He turned his attention to the new material online under the search term of his own name, a monitoring habit he kept to every Sunday. The usual vitriol from purist vegans, mooning from lonely women, yet more disagreements from aspiring self-professed health gurus. Deftly, he clicked dislike and reported each youtube video that he felt was negative about him. Why didn't people who didn't like him just leave him alone to work? Why did they feel the need to answer back? Didn't they know how much he cared about promoting health? Didn't they understand the sacrifices he made for them every day? What was stopping these envious, unhappy people from living their own lives, rather than trying to interfere with his? Say what you like about Kira, at least she removed them after receiving her dislikes, although she had curtailed his disliking habits by impersonating him for her pop video, repeating the same image of his 'thumbs down' negativity over and over again. She looked particularly fat, of course, and the jacket she had spent a month making for him was far too big for her, making the hideous vision even worse. Ah here she was, popping up on a video after months of saying nothing about him whilst she made cartoons and videos for the pop video she had mercifully abandoned making. What was she saying this time? "OLD! She says I look old!" Sam exclaimed aloud at Kira's usual scathing affection. He realised that he couldn't really click dislike as she would know she had gotten a reaction and would probably retaliate. The only thing to do with bitches like that was ignore them until they dried up and hopefully died. Sam's heartrate had doubled as he had watched her laughing about what could have caused his sudden aging. He looked in his notebook. Cathy, 25, with the spectacular breasts – she was nearby. "Old indeed!" He called Cathy and invited her to his hotel room. No need for wooing with Cathy, he thought with satisfaction.

Tatania Harris looked at her elderly husband with bristling contempt. "What do you mean you aren't attending the Whitehouse? You can't say no to the President. You can't possibly expect me to go through the paparazzi alone?"

David was seventy four, had been Hollywood royalty since birth as a result of his gorgeous mother's ascent to stardom in the forties, and was currently recovering from a rather expensive bout of leukemia. "I would rather stay home with the kids. We've seen all this before. We don't need them anymore, Tatania."

Like hell we don't, thought Tatania. A still fiercely ambitious Cornish woman in her mid-forties, she retained her drive despite the inevitable fading of her famous looks. She wasn't maintaining her celebrated rear end for no reason. She had always known, of course, that her husband lacked her

drive, but he had once been an excellent career move. He had enabled her to crack the all-important American market and become an A- lister, invited to the Whitehouse, on this occasion, to increase the popularity of a flagging president. “Get a grip, David. Life is too short to waste opportunities.” “Yes my love, which is why I am not going to waste the evening at a party when I could be enjoying my children before it’s too late.” David sighed. “Feel free to invite someone else. Maybe Clooney would go with you?”

“I don’t want to go with Clooney, I want to go with you, darling.” Tatania purred. David was the established all-American star, not her. She tried in vain, however, David was shaking his head as he stroked the heavy, metal-plated armrests on his expensive dining chair. “Oh for God’s sake, David.” Tatania lost her patience. She tossed her much admired strawberry blonde waves as she rose from the intricately veneered table, gracefully managing to miss banging her now slightly scrawny hips on the edge. Americans had no taste for the comforting British middle aged curve, and so neither did Tatania. Her looks continued to suffer as a result, necessitating many trips to the plastic surgeon.

“You’ll be fine on your own, darling.”

“I suppose I’ll have to be. Maybe I should try it for a bit longer than tomorrow night.”

David looked at her. Her career had not been going quite so well, of late, he knew that. But why was she so bothered? They had more money than anyone deserved, why couldn’t she just make the effort to understand him, for a change? They had more than enough, and time was short. He was 74, and who knew if he was really clear of leukaemia, or worse, another form of cancer? Why couldn’t she just take a few days off the gym and the overwhelming ambition for a change and enjoy some time with him? “If that’s how you feel Tatania, I am sure you can have some time to yourself.” He so wanted her to be happy and stop wanting so much out of life, but if what she needed was time to think, so be it.

Interpreting this as his not caring about her anymore, the huge and fragile ego of the prima donna kicked in. “Are you seeing someone?” Her blood pressure rose as she expressed her passion for her multi-millionaire meal ticket. She donned her best ‘proud but raunchy’ expression and assumed her most impressive ‘wounded wife’ pose by the fireplace.

“Of course not, I just want to stay in. If you really want to spend some time on your own, you should do it. I don’t want you to be unhappy for a single minute. We’ve been through a lot in the last year or two. I will completely understand if you want a break.” David, desperate to indulge his beloved, dug the unfortunate hole deeper.

“FINE!” Tatania flounced out of the room to scream for the staff. “I need a packer!” she yelled as she ran up the huge staircase. “And the stylist! Tomorrow night is the Whitehouse dinner!” Unaccustomed to feeling unwanted after years of ensuring quite the opposite, she was not used to the knot sitting uncomfortably somewhere around her waistline. She satisfied herself by bullying the PA, the packing assistant and flirting with the stylist as she prepared for her lonely appearance at the Whitehouse. “Not *my* packing, you idiot, HIS! I am not going anywhere!”

Malcolm kissed Valerie good morning and ran his hand to the small of her back. The Arbory Retreat, as it was now known, had done well that year, thanks to several rallies under some common health problem banners. The Diabetes Festival that Sam had come up with had borne Malcolm sufficient fruit to enable him to enjoy a couple of months off every year, time he valued as time to spend with the delightful Valerie. With an agility not normally associated with a septuagenarian, he

rolled over and sprang out of bed when he heard the ringing of the telephone.

Several minutes later, Valerie emerged from the bedroom to see a naked and bewildered Malcolm still standing by the phone. “What’s up?”

“David Harris wants to come here. Indefinitely.” Malcolm was usually so calm, now he just appeared to be stunned.

“*The David Harris from the movies?*”

“Yes. He says he needs a break. I didn’t even know he was into this kind of stuff.”

“He’s been ill, he will be into every kind of stuff to make him better. It was on the news. My, we have gone up in the world.” Valerie smiled. “I hope you said yes?” She raised her eyebrows. “Of course I said yes. He doesn’t want anyone to know where he is, though.”

“Best we keep him in the house then, just in case we get any flying visitors.” Malcolm didn’t get too many since Zeb Toledo, the public speaking megastar, had stopped visiting in his helicopter, but you couldn’t be too careful with such an important guest, he surmised. They made up the guest suite in a state of subdued excitement, adding some exuberant foliage plants from the garden in pots for the private courtyard, settling down to their last week of freedom before their honoured visitor was due to arrive, fresh from his holiday in the Maldives.

I’d better touch up my roots, thought Valerie, patting her hair, as she happily went about the house, checking ionisers and mopping tiles.

Alex, the pool boy, was very surprised to find his trousers around his ankles after he was ordered into the house to see Tatania. A weekly visit was usually sufficient to maintain the large pool at the Harris home and he had assumed that he was in trouble when she screamed from the window for him. He had found himself efficiently stripped down to almost nothing and was now wondering if he was, in fact, dreaming. The strawberry blonde head of the famous actress now bobbed rhythmically at his groin. Could this really be happening? Suddenly, just at the point where he was starting to forget who it was and enjoy it, she stopped. “Now, boy!” She appeared in front of him and flung the gold silk dressing gown open to reveal her still very impressive body, clad only in equally impressive underwear.

“Please, I’d rather...”

“Shut up! Now.” Her rather menacing tone dropped somewhat, to a growl.

Alex blinked. He couldn’t really want to say no to her, could he? He supposed he wasn’t a real man unless he did it, and besides, who would dare to turn her down? ‘Once more into the breach,’ he thought, as he made an obligatory lunge forwards. It appeared to have been the correct course of action.

Sam looked up irritably from his copy of *Homes and Garden*. This crap wasn’t really his bag, but the marketing masterplan had to work with his age. Aging sucked. He stuck his chin out in mute protest at his homemaking enslavement at the hands of the empire-building money god, and tugged at his beard.

Molly and Happy looked at each other in despair. Would he ever be in the mood? He looked so fed up. They had already tried getting naked. It had failed to distract him from his surly reverie with the interior magazines. "Can we put some music on Sam?" Unaccustomed as they were to actually talking to him, they felt a little nervous.

"Of course you can, I'm not your pa." Sam snapped. Happy jumped. This was not like Sam at all. "Have we done something wrong?" Molly's eyebrows formed a sharp arrow as her eyes widened. The pink plaits, which almost reached her equally pink nipples, heightened the overall effect. Sam noted this, softening somewhat.

"I'm sorry, ladies, I'm just tired of studying this BS. Come here." He put the glossy magazine down and opened his arms for his beloved chicklets. Molly and Happy were suitably overjoyed.

Aldous removed the headphones and closed the browser on Kira's company website. "I think that's as much as we can do today. The call centre reported excellent figures."

"Oh good. Any idea how the booksales on Raw Scandal 5 are doing?"

"26 a day or so, it seems to be doing very well." Aldous picked up his jacket.

"Oh good. Maybe I will be rewarded for my efforts in my next life."

"You've devoted a tenth of your life to this guy, you know that? And he still can't manage an email. Doesn't it piss you off?"

"It is what it is, Aldous. It makes me feel better, and besides, maybe one day I will want to write about something else and the audience will already be there. This isn't about trapping him and I'm not really interested in screwing him. I doubt very much I have sufficient skill in that direction. If he wants to talk to me, I'm easy enough to find and he has more than enough determination to figure out how to do it." Kira paused, frowning. "Given the unusual circumstances he really has to come and get me if he decides he wants to. There's no point in chasing somebody who has women coming out of his ears and an obsession with his own freedom, however fake that freedom is, unless he wants to be caught. "

"Do you think that's likely?"

"Not really, no, by the time he grows up and smells the roses I will be decrepit. He will probably end up in his dotage watching his very much younger wife screw the gardener. He will enjoy that and feel that he has achieved the American dream. At least he won't be bored."

Aldous collapsed in a fit of giggles. This was most unusual, Aldous usually saved his chortling for when Kira wasn't looking, assuming that her jokes were unwittingly at her own expense. Given that Kira's jokes tended to be very much witting, this annoyed her slightly, but it was nice to have company now and again and it gave her time to see to her mother.

Kira tried to avoid bridling. "It's a shame he couldn't see past the gender issue really, I should have pretended to be a man when I spoke to him. I think he might have preferred it if he had gone for the stadium route rather than this shackled TV career of his. I could have got past the 'feelings' issue if I wasn't so damned hurt, but that's not really his fault. It's my personality problem. Still, I don't suppose you can really tell these things until you try, can you?"

"Well, in a way I suppose it's a good thing. You would have broken your back for him doing it that

way.”

“I’ll probably do that anyway. It’s a bummer being so convinced you are right about something as pigging irrational as this isn’t it? At least I didn’t spend seven years writing up the academic work only to find out he was a plonker.” Kira laughed. “We can’t have the general population knowing how the world really works now can we?”

Tatania’s fury with her indolent and now absent husband seemed only to increase with time. The staff whispered amongst themselves about her increasingly erratic and unpleasant demands on them, and wondered if milder-mannered David would ever come back.

“I WANT LOBSTER! WITH BELGIAN BUTTER! AND A RIPE AVOCADO MASHED FOR MY FACE!” She was screaming from the top of the extravagant staircase. A procession of unsuitable males had been visiting the house, and the associated increase in activity was increasing her appetite to the point that action would soon be necessary if she was to keep up with the public appearances. Worse than that, several shopping trips had resulted in calls from frantic shopkeepers trying desperately to be tactful about their missing stock.

George, the house manager, was a worried man. He put in a call to David.

“Oh right the sex thing, yeah we’ve had that problem before. The stealing is new. Send her to a clinic of some sort for a month. That usually cures it.” David was used to Tatania’s moments of aberration, and remained entirely calm. Given his reputation, this was not entirely surprising. His own exploits had, at one time, been the stuff of legend, and he had attended a few clinics himself. George did as she was told and Tatania was duly packed off to a remote retreat under the pretext that it was a very exclusive holiday that David had sent as a gift. The staff heaved a collective sigh of relief as they lined up on the driveway to wave her off to Switzerland.

David Harris opened his eyes, wondering where he was for a split second before realising he was in someone else’s bed. He looked first to the left, then the right, eyes widening. What the heck had happened last night? The last thing he remembered had been meditating on the porch as the sun went down. He frantically tried to remember what had happened after that, but he could not imagine how he had ended up sandwiched between Malcolm and Valerie in their bed. Surely he hadn’t talked them into....?

No, no, he was quite sure he hadn’t. Could meditation be so advanced that he would forget this stuff? Gingerly he slid down the bed, under the sheet and out the bottom before wandering to the shower, noting that he still had some clothes on, at least. The mirror told him that he had been crying, but strangely he physically felt better than he had felt in two or three years.

He showered, changed into another set of expensive linen clothing he had purchased, judging it suitable for such a place, and wandered out to the garden to weed. He was amused to find he was enjoying the sheer boredom and simplicity. Would Tatania calm down and let him go home? She had not yet even noticed that she had no way of contacting him and that he was effectively missing. She would be at the nunnery he had chosen for a month, so he figured the storm would break in five or six weeks.

Malcolm appeared, at length, and gave him a gentle wordless hug. He accepted this and continued to weed, wondering at the pace of life at the Arbory. Why wasn’t he bored? He was missing the

children, right enough. He wondered if he should have them brought here too. Too noisy, he thought, and besides, he had plenty of other houses he could go to if he got bored. No, for now, the Arbory provided a welcome change from the screeching Tatania and he was learning a lot about the joys of introspection. He smiled as he thought about his late father. He would have strongly disapproved of introspection of any kind, a real man's man, he thought.

“Dipshit hippy shite!” exclaimed Aldous. “You have to eat something!”

Kira had stopped eating. She hadn't eaten for a week, so far, and was showing no interest in starting again. “It would be if I was fasting and talking spiritual bullshit Aldous. I just don't want to.”

As long as Aldous had known her, she had always been fat. Even when Kira was thin, she was fat. Aldous preferred flat chested women, and so Kira was fat no matter what she did, not a great incentive for her to particularly care whether people liked her appearance or not. It was a choice between being fat, or having men assault her in the street whilst women abused her for her buxom appearance, and so Kira usually preferred taking the fat option. Eating had the added advantage of shutting her up, she found. A silent Kira was always more popular.

Aldous didn't like Kira all that much, and so the fact she had stopped eating bothered him only because he felt he shouldn't be eating either, since he was also fat. At various times in his life, he had loved her, but he had never liked her.

“Is this because of Sam? Do you think he will like you any better thin?”

Kira laughed. “No, Sam has other reasons to find me repulsive. I still don't want to go out and I still don't brush my hair, I just can't be bothered eating. You've never complained about me eating, why would you complain when I don't?”

Aldous tried another tack. “Why don't you get on and write the academic book?”

“Why don't you go through the email and leave me alone.” Kira did not want to talk about the book, of all things. “What's the point in a book when the one person I wanted to read it, won't read it? That's all finished now. He made a fool of me, even if it was by accident. Several times! Fools don't tend to write great works of brilliance.” She poured another glass of water and looked out of the window. “The irony is that the company is doing well enough to actually hire him now, and I can't bring myself to do it. Feelings are such messy things, aren't they? It's not his fault, it's mine.” “Who is Leonard Davenport?” Aldous tried to cut through Kira's morose rant.

“God, some millionaire I used to date. What on earth does he want?”

“He says his parents are dead, and he would like to take you out.”

“What a little shit he is.”

“Why?”

“If his parents are dead, he is now worth twenty seven million pounds. He is dangling a money bag at me,” Kira laughed. “He is an absolute tosser, and the money won't last him long, he can't stop gambling. Diamonds, as far as I remember. That's how they made their money.”

“Are you going to go?”

“I didn’t really like him when I was skint. I do not imagine that has changed now that I’m not. I’m afraid the people who marry for money don’t get the easy life they imagine. It’s a bit like being overpaid for work. A horrible sick feeling.”

“I think you should go.”

“Maybe you should go instead?”

“It might take your mind off things.”

“It will just make it worse.” Kira put the glass down. “Apparently I have a faithful heart. Can you just open the rest of the mail please?”

“Raw Sex Object has won a prize?” Aldous hoped this would lift her mood somewhat. His hopes were dashed.

“So what.” Kira angrily twitched at the curtains, much to the amusement of the Bengal cat sitting on the window sill.

“So we are going to New York?” Aldous was sure this would cheer her up.

“What?”

“You, and Raw Sex Object. New York.”

“Have you any idea how much it will cost to take that thing on a plane?” Raw Sex Object, the gift Kira had made for Sam, which he had rejected via his agent, weighed around 40 kilos. “I don’t really like New York City. They get so frightened when you smile.”

Aldous became exasperated “They are paying.”

“You take it.”

“They want a photograph of you with it.”

“God no, smiling and fat in NYC, no thanks.”

“I’ll book a flight. It is next month.” Aldous turned to the keyboard, frustrated by Kira’s misery. Kira’s voice rose a notch or three. “I DO NOT want to go to NYC, particularly not with that failure of a thing. Don’t you get it? It’s meaningless. How did I even end up in the stupid competition?” “I entered it.” Aldous knew this meant he was about to get a roasting. He was surprised when Kira’s voice lowered, rather than rising to a scream.

“Right....So I have to go?”

“Yes. I’ll come if you want.”

“OK.” Kira started to cry. Again. Aldous got up from the computer and went to make tea.

Tatania looked up at the belltower and wondered whether it would be possible to somehow get to the top. She had no idea how long she was expected to stay in the silent order of nuns, but in her current hyper-aroused state, the 2 hourly calls to prayer were quite a relief. She didn’t have to think

about anything as long as she was in the nunnery, because despite there being no one to talk to, there was always something else to do.

Only the senior nuns seemed to have access to the bell itself, and there seemed little way of volunteering to join the cleaning team, since she was unable to speak to anyone. All instructions were issued via hand gestures, and in her case at least, seemed to involve prayer or scrubbing something suitably humble. Tatania had fixated on the bell simply because it was the only thing available to aspire to.

The mother superior, sensing this, had responded by ensuring that Tatania had endless floors, stonework and threadbare carpet to scrub. She was to have nothing shiny, and nothing was to be done for her. This, she reasoned, was the fastest way to slow down Tatania's overrunning emotional engine.

'Humility in all things' it said in French above the archway. As if you needed reminding, thought Tatania as she wasted another expensive nail on scrubbing yet another expansive grey stone floor. She was feeling faintly murderous towards David, and spent her time thinking of ways to restore her failing ego.

As time went on, however, her mind cleared and she began to enjoy the lack of strategic planning involved in enforced domestic drudgery. Soon she would be home, free to do as she pleased, and although she doubted that she would ever be asked to play a nun, it was all good experience.

Sam smiled as Candy 'dismounted' and gently kissed him before making her way to the side of the bed. The hotel room was as sparse as it was drab, and she caught a glimpse of her dyed hair and tired neck in the mirror across from the windows.

"You're still totally amazing."

"I know, but I gotta go. Bill will be getting tired of the kids." Candy rose to put on her silk shirt and the flannel pants she had worn before her arrival. "It was good to see you after all those years. How long has it been?"

"Twenty five years. You look great, you really do." Sam was well aware he was being insincere, but he revelled in the joy of superficial pretence. It was only when he bumped into his old friends that he realised how well his complex regimen actually worked, since he was more usually in the company of other health enthusiasts. Candy, formerly condescending and out of his league, was, at forty three, a mere 3 on Sam's objective looks chart.

"Yeah, you haven't changed at all either." Candy did not sound nearly as overjoyed about it as Sam.

Kira had now taken to wearing a steel boned corset most of the time, which had changed her shape somewhat alongside her new food-free regime. Aldous was hoping this new feature would not last, as in her upright garb she was more prone to fits of indignant fury. Still fat though, he thought, with his customary smug defeatism. It would be a long time before she looked the same size as the women *he* favoured.

Kira, oblivious and with no intention of favouring Aldous in any way whatsoever, continued with

her campaign of self-sculpture. The rise in blood pressure aside, the corsets were rather comforting and made her feel slightly less unloved. She also suspected that forcing her organs back to where they were supposed to be from her usual concertina posture, bending over her sewing or computer, would improve her overall functioning. It certainly appeared to be the case, although not being able to bend down at the waist was a tiny bit of a pain when dealing with her mother or indeed, the garden. This, together with a few litres of water and green tea every day, seemed to be producing the desired effect. Kira had long since given up being 100% raw, it just didn't suit her either mentally or physically, but she still held to the principle. If in doubt, drink something, if very hungry, make sure there was a vast quantity of raw vegetables to hand. The omission of fruit had brought the curls back to her hair, and she was relatively happy with her appearance by the time the trip to NYC became imminent.

"You do realise all that is pointless?" Aldous watched Kira pluck an eyebrow and fluff up the curls. She had become uncharacteristically feminine of late. He did not like this at all.

"Generally speaking it is a waste of time over which women collude in the hope of getting some time to themselves, yes." Kira smiled and smoothed down the pencil skirt over the corset. Her breasts looked scarily huge to Aldous, accustomed as he was to Kira's usual combat trouser/sweater combination to minimise them.

"Why are you bothering? It's not like anyone will care. You are over forty." Aldous hoped this would bring the less glamorous, more cynical Kira back to him. She may have been built on a more cherubic scale than most people, but at least she was stimulating company.

"I'm in the mood, Just let me do it, I am usually thinner when I'm in the girly mood. I can't keep writing books about raw foodists and look crap, can I?"

"You can't expect to lose 200lb at your age and compete with an eighteen year old in a bikini, that's all I'm saying."

"Jeez you don't know much about sex, do you?" Kira shook her head. "In any case, the principle is to outgrow the object of devotion, not attach yourself to it. I told you, it's about the work. Shit happens, but work is work. My failed romance has won a prize!"

"Do you think you will get through customs in that thing?"

"We will just have to wait and see, won't we? Grab your bags, cutesy-wootsy-poppety Aldous dahlink."

Aldous prayed that Kira would not be this cheerful for the next seven hours, so that he could enjoy his travel videos of Iceland on the flight.

"**W**hat do you mean I'm booked on Thursday?" Sam was confused. Annette had slotted a date in his work diary without his noticing. "In NYC? That means I have to travel back tonight? Are you trying to kill me?"

"It was very last minute. It's a good rate." Annette was very satisfied with her cut for this appearance. The mysterious Oodle company had been very generous for only a couple of hours work. She rubbed the back of her smartphone as she flexed her fingers.

"It better be. What am I doing?"

“I’ll brief you when you get back to town. It’s an afternoon job. Nothing you can’t handle.” Sam frowned. He had seen this name ‘Oodle’ somewhere before, but he couldn’t remember where. He tried running a search online. Nothing came up apart from a few random pictures of people he had never seen before. They did not look very healthy. “What do they want me to talk about?” “You don’t need to talk at all. Just appear. That’s what they wanted. Just a few pictures, that’s all.” Annette adjusted her underwear as she put down the telephone.

Tatania touched down at JFK one hour before Kira. Not that she knew, of course, but she re-entered her reality of pampering and privilege just one hour before Kira was due to leave hers of seclusion and fiercely guarded privacy to make her artistic debut in the USA.

Tatania made her way through the airport, picked up her personal assistant and bodyguard and donned her dark glasses, assuming that the paparazzi had been informed of her arrival. They had not. Tatania was unsure whether to be happy about this or sad. Lack of attention was not a good sign. She called her house manager.

“Any sign of that bastard David?”

“No, ma’am. He is staying away as instructed.”

“I’m sure you can find him if you really want to, George. Let him know I want to talk to him, will you?” Tatania did her best to sound sweet.

“Certainly ma’am. Will you be back for dinner?”

“After a little shopping. Send the dresser to Vida, will you?” Vida was Tatania’s current favourite in clothing design.

Aldous decided that priming Kira a little couldn’t hurt. The organisers of the award had requested maximum publicity. She had elected to avoid the corset for a day or two, as setting up Raw Sex Object necessitated a lot of bending and she didn’t really want to have to worry about it. Aldous looked at her, twiddling away with the panels, kicking the base into shape. The frame had originally been in his brother’s bedroom.

“What do you think Aldous? Is there any way of altering those spotlights at all?”

“I don’t know. Who do you think will turn up, Kira?”

“Probably nobody, just like the rest of my life. Do you think it’s socially unacceptable to advertise for a sperm donor?” Kira sank to floor level and polished frantically at a small scratch on the wooden platform supporting the artwork.

“Why do you want a sperm donor?”

“I don’t particularly want to do what everyone else does and pretend to have a relationship when I’m in love with someone else.”

“How can you be in love with someone you’ve never met? You would probably hate him.”

“Don’t ask me. I just know it is so, and he doesn’t want me. So is it socially unacceptable to just post an ad saying something like – fancy having a child before it’s too late? Lady, 43, plump,

doesn't care about your hobbies or your good sense of humour. Busy looking after mother so doesn't want to live with you. Vile family background etc etc. Talking of which, remind me to call the respite unit and check on her, will you?"

"Why don't you try having a relationship?" Aldous felt strongly that Kira's more unconventional traits should be discouraged.

"Because that's gone so well in the past, hasn't it? Who the fuck would want to be part of my family?" Kira plucked a bit of fluff from the artwork and prepared to bang a panel pin into a loose area of carpet.

Aldous knew this to be the case, but he didn't want Kira to start crying again, so he tried to change the subject. "Have you any idea who your customers are?"

"I'm not really interested. I'm just glad they seem to like it." Kira's clothing line, handbags and hats had sold surprisingly well. "Some of the names seem vaguely familiar, but I'm sure it's coincidental. There, I think that should do it. Does it look OK from where you are?"

"Yeah it looks OK to me."

"Great. Ok let's get changed." Kira stood back from the screen, cocking her head and adjusting the top spotlights on the panel at the back of the room. She was covered in plaster dust from the floor she had been rolling about on. "The Japanese top I think. Did you pack it?"

"Yep."

Sam examined his appearance in the mirror. He had managed to deflect the light from the worst of the wrinkles, and ensured that his curls were crisp, shiny and perfect for the photos. At least he was allowed hair for this event, unlike the TV appearances. He was a little annoyed at Annette. He had been unable to find out anything much about the Oodle company, and she had neither asked them nor been able to answer his questions. All he knew, was that he was being paid five figures for a couple of hours at some downtown venue which was apparently very fashionable with journalists. He grabbed his jacket, didn't bother with a bag since he still had no idea what he was appearing for, and headed out to the crowded and dark subway. He would normally have walked, but it was hot, and pictures were the only things Annette had mentioned as a requirement.

One hour later he entered the oddly shaped building, grateful for the blast of air conditioning in the cavernous white entrance hall. He was directed towards the 'main hall' by a grim faced receptionist, whereupon he entered a large white room filled with a variety of works of art and a somewhat stranger variety of people. He scoped the room for someone recognisable, and could find no one. One area had a crowd of excited Japanese with cameras, another had some very serious arty Scandinavian types, still another had some rather overdressed people seemingly trying to outdo each other for attracting attention. He tried scrutinising these.

"Oh my God, it's Lady Julep." Sam muttered audibly, "And Big G Minor." He spotted several more greater and lesser entertainers clustered around one object. It slowly dawned on him, but he couldn't see all of it so he went closer to be sure. Yes, indeed, it *was* Raw Sex Object, Kira's gift that his agent had rubbished. The bitch had actually paid him for coming here. Sam supposed he would have to be nice to her in front of these potentially useful new friends. She must be some kind of crazy control freak. He had always had that impression of her. Thank God she was usually in a different country. He looked around the room to see if he could spot her.

Aldous, stuck in a mannerly chitchat with the gallery owners, spotted Sam just before Kira entered the room, having finally made it into her brown Japanese Kimono top. She still hadn't remembered to brush her hair, he sighed. Tangled brown waves everywhere and no makeup at all. She looked taller than usual, however, thanks to some platform wedges. Aldous wondered if he really should drag her back through the door and brush it for her, and then decided not to. She was hopeless. He extricated himself from the oddly crude American version of polite conversation and joined her. "Who are all these people? Why are they here?" Kira looked confused.

"Don't you recognise the clothes?"

"Some of them, oh yeah that blonde bit has one of my handbags. The big black dude over there is in that jacket I made for Sam. Are these all customers?"

"Haven't you seen the videos?"

"What videos?"

"They're musicians. Quite famous, some of them. Your clothes have been in a few videos."

"Really? I should put my prices up." Kira did not smile, but seemed a little more relaxed. Aldous looked over her shoulder and spotted Sam, who was staring in horror at her bottom.

"Ah I see the guest of honour is here. Go and talk to Rivron and I'll be back in a minute."

Aldous greeted Sam. "She will be ready in a few minutes."

"I take it you are the Oodle company." Sam looked miserable.

"Correct. The gallery owners wanted a few pictures of the muse and artist together. Come and meet Kira." Aldous smiled to himself. He wasn't sure how Kira would take it, but he hoped it might resolve things once and for all.

Sam allowed himself to be led over and stood behind Kira as she chatted with Rivron, the gallery owner, a tall thin bespectacled man with a nasty purple silk tie. Aldous tapped her arm. Sam was transfixed as she swung round, blue white skin and a wide face to match the huge hands. To his surprise she looked horrified.

"What are you doing here?" She looked at Aldous. "Did you do this? He isn't a whore, Aldous." She looked back at Sam. What a strange looking man, she thought. I wonder why I find him so compelling? She cocked her head, unsmiling, unblinking.

"You didn't know? You look amazing, by the way." Sam did his best to go into oily mode, since his fee was rather huge. He held out his arms, offering a hug.

Kira knew this was not the case. She was not 21, a hippy, vain, or stupid. "Shut up, shut up. That shirt is hideous. Take it off this instant. You can wear this." Oblivious to the crowd, she took off the kimono top and held it out to him. The Japanese, thinking this was the beginning of the event, started to applaud and take photographs. The rest of the crowd turned to witness the small, rotund and incredibly pale woman waving her very expensive top at Sam.

"I like this shirt." Sam looked annoyed and paused, noting the paint splattered mammaries. The

paint was a variety of shades. “You could kill someone with those. You have good skin, you should exfoliate.”

“Alas I cannot kill anyone with them, it’s been tried. Hurry up and put this on. I will find something else.” Kira’s sour yet quizzical expression did not change. “Did you bring the velvet, Aldous?”

“I did indeed.” Aldous smiled. This was like watching the Discovery channel. Would the lions mate or kill each other in the attempt? Sam took the top.

“You want me to put this on here?” Regaining awareness of the now fascinated crowd, he looked at Aldous in panic. The funny little woman was starting to look cold under the blast from the air conditioning unit. Either that or she was very pleased to see him. “What do you see in me anyway?” “You would have made more money if you ran away, but you didn’t. It doesn’t mean I approve. You’ve worked very hard. Why were you so horrible to me? You’ve wasted years of my time, not to mention money.” Kira still looked rather challenging for Sam’s taste, so he elected to say nothing and looked at Aldous.

“Duck behind Raw Sex Object, there is room and the crowd will love it.” Aldous was always helpful. “I’ll take the shirt.”

Kira went to the backroom of the gallery to put on her brown velvet alternative and the audience exclaimed and giggled as they knocked back yet more wine. When she emerged, she was rubbing her head. The unkempt waves now looked almost styled into a curly heart shape. The gnome like roundness was now rather more comfortingly concealed beneath dark brown cotton velvet. “Can you fluff up his hair a tad, Aldous? Yes that’s better. OK we are ready now.” Kira had managed to restyle Sam in under 3 minutes, all told.

The professional photographer took the obligatory shots of artist and muse standing with Raw Sex Object and the audience politely applauded.

“May I have the camera? And can we have the lights down apart from the spots?”

Gosh, thought Aldous, Kira is assertive today. “Can you sit inside the object please?” Kira tweaked the positioning of the object to cuddle Sam as he sat cross legged on the mat. The lighting brought down, Kira lay on the floor and started to take shots of Sam inside her artwork.

“Think cold and heartless thoughts for me?”

“I don’t do cold and heartless.” Sam frowned.

“You do now. This is my gig, not yours. Think Caligula rather than Dionysus, for once.” Kira took shots continuously, rolling around and moving up and down to get the required angles.

Half an hour later Kira was filthy from the gallery floor, but had taken about a hundred shots of Sam with the object. The photographer transferred them to computer and the lights were brought back up for the audience.

Sam, now uncomfortably stiff, longed for the cover of darkness. Was it possible that *anyone* could make his dick hard, just by looking at him for long enough? Why was he so turned on? He thought about dead birds for a few minutes, staring at a small spot on the floor until he judged it safe to get up. He joined the crowd as a slide show of photographs flashed on the huge display screen.

“I’m beautiful.” Sam was delighted. The audience duly clapped. “I really like this top.”

“Keep it, as long as I can burn that shirt.” Kira did not look at him, and she still did not smile. Sam did not know how to handle this at all.

“Thank you. What does the back mean? Love immemorial? Am I the Sam in big letters?”
“People I should forget forever. Love is just wasted energy if you happen to be me. Fortunately I have learned how to productively redirect it from my years of experience.”

Sam felt strangely hurt. “It’s never wasted.”

“Of course it is. You don’t give a shit about me, and that’s entirely normal. Even my own mother doesn’t. I’m the one that’s weird. It’s fine. It’s just normal.” Kira turned to address the audience and patrons of the event.

“Thank you so much for the opportunity and prize. Thank you, everyone for coming, and thank you for wearing my stuff. I really appreciate it. Please enjoy the rest of the wine.” She turned to leave. Sam looked at Aldous.

“You can go now, if you want. Or stay and do some networking. She won’t come back in. She’s very timid, and she’s probably in tears. She does that angry thing to protect herself.”

“OK.” Sam felt as if he had been punched in the face. These crazy British people were far too efficient. “Can I have my shirt back?”

“No. She wasn’t kidding about burning it. Thank you for coming.” Aldous shook his hand, and went the way of Kira, out from the back of the gallery.

Sam took a moment to gather his thoughts before introducing himself to Big G Minor, a man who would definitely benefit from some health advice. A few of Kira’s admirers shook his hand and chatted for a while. Sam carefully took time to engage with a few of the recognisable ones, glancing at the door Kira and Aldous had gone through, hoping that they would reappear. After an hour, he realised that they would not. He felt rather abandoned. It wasn’t as if they were friends of his. He looked again at the artwork. Pink imprisoned chaos for romance on the spring panel, Conventional order and lush green on the summer panel. Off centred tradition for the autumn panel and Grey Gothic stonework for the winter panel. The story of any relationship told in wool and surprisingly ordered design. Quite smart, he guessed, for a crazy person.

He wondered briefly what she would have done if he had accepted it. It was too late now. There was no way of ‘unhurting’ her, and no real reason to anyway. It wasn’t even as if she was even cute.

“**Y**ou never mentioned that Raw Sex Object wouldn’t be coming back with us.” Kira pouted as she and Aldous tolerated the tedious movie on the way home.

“The gallery want to display it for six months. They will ship it back, don’t worry.”

“As long as they don’t try to sell it.”

“Are you worried that dear Sam will propose and you won’t have it? You might as well get some money out of the thing.” Aldous was feeling waspish.

“No, no. I just wanted to leave it to him in my will, along with the beginnings of the academic piece on the netbook.”

“Why bother? It’s not like he gives a shit.”

“Jeez, why do you people act like this? Do you honestly think love is restricted to people who get drunk, accidentally end up fucking, and then slowly learn to tolerate each other?” It was Kira’s turn to get rather irritated. ‘You people’ now included all of her friends.

“Reality check, Kira, he doesn’t like you.”

“He doesn’t know me. I don’t know him either. It’s between the ears, not the legs, don’t you get that?”

“Evidently you didn’t spot the look on his face when he saw your backside.”

“My backside doesn’t do much thinking.”

Your brain doesn’t either, thought Aldous. Smell the coffee, you stupid cow, and write the book for yourself. He knew her well enough, however, to know that she wouldn’t, or couldn’t, do that. He sighed. “Even if he did feel the same way, would you honestly want his life?”

“I would hate it Aldous, and the cats would not approve. He would have to want to be with me, as opposed to the other way around. It isn’t a goer. Ownership is not an option, if you want to put it that way. Do you see the great Redwood toppling to come and live a quiet life? I don’t, and I don’t like sharing either. Not one bit.”

“What on earth is the point then? He would just use you to get the material, anyway. Look at the guy’s history.”

“Genuinely unconditional love from a member of the opposite sex is a rare thing, Aldous, and it only happens under very unusual circumstances. Once you consummate it, it’s gone. The ‘painful longing’ pink romantic period is the most productive bit.”

“Productive? Who told you love was productive?”

“You need to read an old translation of the Symposium.” Kira laughed. “My father had a work equals love ‘thing’ going on. That is probably at the centre of it. At least this way neither of us can fuck it up.”

“You always were a bit odd.”

“Art is about making the intangible tangible. Love is my art. That sounds good, doesn’t it? We should make that a catchphrase of some sort. Ooh we are almost at Reykjavik. Goody, let’s buy expensive green tea when we stop. The beautiful blonde people might smile at us if we try really hard.”

Tatania had casually spent another \$30,000 on a couple of dresses after much fawning from Vida and the dresser. Rising from the plush sofa provided for clients of her stature, she finished her champagne and resolved to persuade George to put her in touch with David. She really owed him a bad turn this time.

She picked up the store magazine on her way out to the bulletproof house car the dresser had brought to pick her up. She was looking forward to getting in the pool back at the house. The

regime at the nunnery had restored her waistline after the food and sex binge that had preceded it, and she happily planned to return to her daily rituals of self-worship.

The driver announced that they were being followed, probably by the press, and took a turn through one of the poorer neighbourhoods. Tatania played with her expensively maintained and now dyed hair and idly wondered why these people were so poor? Didn't they want to work, she wondered? These were the very people who paid to see her, she realised, looking for a touch of glamour in their obviously miserable lives. She congratulated herself on working her way out of the tiny village she had been born in. Hard work had got her where she was, she thought proudly. That, and judiciously choosing who to sleep with, of course. Why couldn't these people do that? Instead of paying to see her, they could be where she was if they wanted.

At length, they pulled up the long silver gravel driveway to the white mansionhouse in the Hamptons. This was David and Tatania's third house, a getaway they liked to use only twice a year for social reasons. It was so nice having one's own space rather than relying on hotels, she thought as the driver opened the door for her.

"That will be all for today." Tatania didn't bother to say thank you anymore. "Just pass the bags to the dresser, she will deal with them."

The front door was opened for her by George, the permanently single, portable and long-suffering house manager.

"Good afternoon, is there anything I can get for you?"

"I want David on the phone."

"Mr Harris is not available by telephone at present. He is attending a very important engagement." George did not think a sweat lodge appropriate to mention to his lady boss. "I can try again on Tuesday, he should be available then."

"Very good, George, I can wait. I'll have a sorbet by the pool. Gin sorbet."

"Madam." George demonstrated a rather practised backwards retreat towards the kitchen. She was definitely calmer. Thank God.

David imagined that he was on the fifteenth mile of the long trek back to the main house at the retreat. He was dehydrated, he knew that, but the seemingly crazy person running the lodge appeared to be invincible. Apparently David was considered invincible too. He was not used to being treated like this, but he was sort of enjoying the unexpected hardship. He spent a lot of time sucking on pebbles and imagining the long drink of cold, cold spring water and bowl of vegetables he would enjoy when they got back. He was longing to speak to Tatania. He wondered if she was ready to resume their relationship.

At great length, the house appeared on the horizon. One mile to go, and a river. Thank goodness. David stopped to soak his head in the river and take a drink as the stalwart instructor continued to power on towards the house. David struggled to catch him up.

Malcolm was on the computer when they reached the main compound, making one of his daily pronouncements to jolly on the heroic vegetable eaters on his facebook page. He was arranging a particularly expensive juicing trip to Israel, and so preparing them for a hard fortnight's retreat involved much encouragement to stick to the programme.

David did not fancy much more of this, and as he glugged down his liquid vegetable lunch, wondered which house he would go to, to avoid Tatania's fury for a bit longer.

Sam put in a call to Annette.

"How did it go with the crazy British people?"

"How do you think? Short, fat and insane, with a sidekick to match."

"You made twenty five G."

"HOW MUCH?"

"Twenty five G. That's what the snivelling gimp guy offered, minus my cut of course. And you are in Art New World this week, and Oest magazine for women next month if you fill in the questionnaire they sent."

"How so?"

"They liked the photos. Some press dude got a few of the star studded crowd and the arty ones are popular with the glossies. A star is born!"

"Wow. Crazy British people not so crazy." Sam wondered if he should say thank you and quickly dismissed it as beneath him. If they were stupid enough to pay to give him publicity, that was up to them. "Stupid bitch might come in handy after all. Hey, if this keeps up maybe I'll have to be nice to her."

"**B**astard!" Kira exclaimed "BASTARD!" It was the first time she had dared look at Sam's page in a very long time..

Aldous looked up from his book. "What now?"

"That wanker is recommending some bullshit artist."

"Don't do anything silly."

"Why the fuck not? He's a wanker. He's always going to be a wanker. FUCK HIM!"

"Serves you right. You'll never learn, will you?"

"I make Raw Sex Object and he rejects it without even seeing it and now he is patting some teenager on the back for using software that went out with the ark!"

After a lengthy tirade on Sam's fanpage, Kira went downstairs and stuffed her face with vegetables until she was in pain. Aldous appeared at the door.

"All done? You have to stop doing this to yourself."

"I know. Maybe it will be better now that I despise myself AND him."

"At least you tried, Kira. It's more than I would have done. It was sort of brave, in a kind of crazy

way.”

“There was nothing brave about it. It was my last genetic imperative before giving up. I might as well be dead.”

“You didn’t actually want to be with him anyway. He’s an asshole.”

“He is very screwed up, but no, he isn’t an asshole. I am. I am for even trying to make things better for him. What was I going to get out of it?”

“Far be it from me to point this out Kira, but as you’ve said yourself, since you fell in love with him you’ve had better health than you’ve had since I’ve known you, you’ve created a hell of a lot of art, you’ve written several books, you started the business. That was all you really wanted.”

“Why didn’t he just accept Raw Sex Object? I could have written the proper book by now.” Kira made a rare reference to the neglected academic book. Aldous knew this meant she was *really* upset.

“As per usual, Kira, he couldn’t accept it because he is a stupid selfish fuckwit that thought you wanted something and didn’t want to acknowledge that you had any looks or talent. That is all you need to know.” Aldous turned to go back up to the computers. “Let’s go to Findhorn. I’ll polish the car, and you can pack.”

“I think it was Mauss that wrote ‘The Gift.’” Said Kira. “Capitalists don’t like presents” She looked childlike again. Aldous wondered when the aging was finally going to catch up with her.

“Indeed. Please don’t cry, it’s a long drive if we want to get there before dark.”

“I need to hurry up and grow out of him. I’m not sure how to do it beyond becoming famous myself, and I don’t want to. If I’m ever going to write the proper book I have to separate it from this mess.”

Aldous was not sure how Kira’s misconnected brain worked, but this almost made sense. “I get it. You need to outgrow him to get your mojo back.”

“Yes! What a pain!”

Tatania picked up July’s copy of Vogue and leafed through it. It had been four months now, since her lonely visit to the Whitehouse, and she still didn’t feel ready to accept David back into her space. Several pages were devoted to Kira’s pictures of Sam against the backdrop of Raw Sex Object.

“What a strangely handsome man?” she pondered, murmuring to herself. “He seems to get more handsome by the page? I love those colours.”

She had heard about David’s long sojourn at the Arbory, by now, and wondered about the marvels of Raw food. She wondered if she might need a little consultation with the ravishing Sam. She smiled to herself as she imagined the headlines she could make, stepping out with a charming, attractive and apparently very stylish hippy at the cutting edge of fashion. She could send the clippings to David in LA now that he was back at the house there. A plot hatched in her idle brain. Yes, she thought, this could be just the thing to revive David’s passion.

She called for her PA.

“Talk to the chef about raw food. I need a consultation with this guy.” She waved a finger at the magazine. “I would like to try it.” She smiled to herself. “Let me know when to expect the call. I will take my swim now.”

Tatania’s PA picked up the magazine. “Ooh he is cute!”

“Isn’t he? Find out everything you can about him. I don’t want any surprises. Oh, and I would quite like to know what that thing is behind him. Can you locate that for me too? Join me for dinner and let me know what you have. We shall eat raw this evening!”

“Sure!” The PA scuttled off to the kitchens, where she found Tatania’s chef lurking at the back door, smoking a long hand-rolled cigarette. “Enrique, Tatania would like to try raw cuisine this evening? Can you do that?”

Enrique’s heart sank. How terribly dull, he thought. Endless salads, no doubt. He would have to look online to see what could be done. “Yes, of course. I will take a look. Dinner will be at eight, however, I am not a magician.” He stubbed out the cigarette on the wall and washed his hands before making a dive towards his computer. Enrique was well used to odd demands from his mistress, but this one might demand new ingredients, new skills, new equipment. The first thing he spotted was the low temperatures. He checked his top of the range oven to see if the temperature would go down sufficiently far. Just, and he would probably have to keep the door open. After twenty minutes of looking, he had a list of ingredients for this evenings taster feast for the two women and the staff, and he had his assistant head out in the house car to pick them up. Goji berries, raw chocolate, fresh coconuts, something called maca that he had never heard of. Hempseeds, spirulina, raw flax seeds, apple cider vinegar. He sighed as he put some raw almonds he had already in to soak in spring water. If they hurried he might just make it.

He decided to make vegetable towers and a spiced mayonnaise for their starter, a tossed salad of greens with cucumber, avocado and sweet chilli for a main and the infamous goji, cacao and coconut mousse to finish. She would be delighted with that, surely. A bit rich and fatty for every day, he thought, but hopefully she would only want this once. The last thing he wanted was to stop cooking, he thought, as he zested some limes for the towers. He pulped his vegetables, garlic, ginger and wasabi along with the soaked almonds and put them into the cool oven to dry out as much as possible in the time he had. Hopefully the fan would help, he thought. In the absence of a dehydrator and without being able to turn the temperature up, 6 hours was not a lot to dry out his tiny creations.

To Enrique’s surprise, Tatania wandered in after her swim. My, she was keen. This was most unusual.

“I would like to try this for a few days, Enrique. Find out everything you can.”

“Madam.”

“The kitchen is nice and cool, you must be enjoying it.”

“Oh yes.” Enrique gritted his teeth. If it kept her out of his way, he would enjoy it a whole lot more. By the time the assistant returned with Enrique’s initial list, he had made another, and instructed the assistant to make a long list of purchases online. A lot of these recipes, he realised, had been created purely to sell products, but if Tatania was to be kept in the style to which she was

accustomed, her diet would have to be prepared to death. A green salad simply wouldn't cut it, and Enrique had been on the receiving end of a thrown plate of food more than once. The average raw foodist might be content with a smoothie and green salad, but not Tatania. Her tastebuds had to be tickled at every meal. Although he did not approve at all, particularly of the possibility of having to prepare vegan meals every day, he certainly was impressed to be learning skills he could incorporate into his career. One for the resume, even. Enrique longed to have the magic quantity of dollars required to leave, but it was never quite enough to fulfil his dream of a celebrity restaurant. "Don't forget the liquidiser, it seems to be the most important thing." He continued to chop and deseed a variety of vegetables for his salad, throwing the seeds in the open oven alongside the towers on a baking sheet. A meal fit for Queen Tatania.

Sam supposed he should really call Aldous to thank him for the appointment, especially since his speaking engagements had now doubled thanks to the exposure in a variety of glossy magazines. Journalists now regularly attempted contact and he had had to ensure that Annette did not repeat her formerly disparaging behaviour with strangers trying to make contact with his office.

He did not consider that it would be worth apologising to Kira. She was merely another in a long line of stupid stubborn bitches who would not take no for an answer, he reasoned, and now that she was well off, even more worthy of contempt than before. Why couldn't she just smile or say something nice occasionally? Who did she think she was exactly?

Satisfied that both his conscious and subconscious assumptions were entirely correct, he put in a call to Aldous, who was spending his morning surveying the media containing references to Raw Sex Object on Kira's behalf.

"Aldous, Sam Redwood here."

"Good morning, one moment, I will take the call in the other room." Aldous took the cordless phone out of Kira's bedroom office, away from the unsuspecting Kira, hard at work on her next collection of somewhat brightly coloured wearable artworks. Aldous was always mystified by her work, it just seemed to grow on its own, with no planning or thought from Kira whatsoever. Sam appeared to be very loud in Kira's fevered brain in comparison with her previous work.

"What can I do for you Sam?"

"It's just a courtesy call really Aldous. I just wanted to thank you for the gig. I've had a lot of exposure I wouldn't have had otherwise." Sam slowed his speech to a crawl to hide any trace of nervousness.

"It's not really me you should thank, Sam. I don't pay the bills. I'm just looking through some of the articles just now, in fact. You might be interested to learn that Raw Sex Object is now attracting six figure offers." Aldous, depressed as usual, did not feel in the slightest bit phased by his apparent brush with fame. Six figures were no longer all that impressive, since he was dealing with the daily figures from the business, but as he was talking to an American, he felt that mentioning money was appropriate.

"Great news, Aldous. Great news. If anything else comes up, I'm sure I can oblige. Just get in touch in the usual way, won't you?" Sam practised an urbane, assured manner as he tried to edge onto safer ground with Aldous.

"I'm pretty sure it won't, unless Kira changes her mind." Aldous did not sound as if he was smiling.

“Was she mad at you?” Sam frowned.

“Worse. She hasn’t once brought it up.” Aldous had known Kira for a long time. Pauses were usually extremely pregnant in the course of their many strands of conversation. “She is waiting to flay me later.”

“Aww I’m sorry Aldous.”

“Would you like to speak to her? I’m sure she would appreciate cheering up.” Aldous reasoned that the sooner the Kira-storm broke, the better.

“No, no I better go. It’s getting kinda near lunch. Thanks again Aldous.” Sam backed off hastily. “Ok. Goodbye Sam.” What a creep, thought Aldous. No manners at all. Touting for business using a courtesy call without a trace of courtesy. Typical Yank. He ended the call and returned to Kira, who was frantically punching at a steampunk sculpture with her delighted cats clinging to the huge wool bobbins, kicking furiously as they rolled across the floor.

“Would you like some tea, Aldous?” She looked up. “I’ll be finished in a moment?”

“That’s what I’m supposed to be here for.”

“I need to be upright for a bit. Anyone interesting on the phone?” Kira hid her needle under a pillow with a brick on top to prevent the now hysterical cats from running off with it. Aldous had always wondered what it was doing on the bed.

“Not really no. Bit of a timewaster. Yes, I’ll have the tea.”

When Kira returned with the tea, Aldous tried to break the stalemate.

“What did you think of him, when you met him?”

“I didn’t think anything. He was paid to be there. That is all.” Kira sounded less tense than Aldous had anticipated.

“Do you not think persisting with the Raw Scandal collection is a bit superfluous now? You got what you wanted for him.” Since Sam was now moving in more exalted media circles, which Sam would undoubtedly be perfectly happy with, Aldous imagined that Kira’s work was done. She was making herself ill working on the collections, in typical Kira style, night and day.

“We are on target, beyond it even, but I need to consolidate the position before I move on. It won’t be long now, don’t worry Aldous.”

“He’s never going to grow into the person you want him to be, Kira.”

“As Aristotle said, to acquire a virtue, one must first pretend to have it. This is merely a rehearsal, Aldous. We have more important work to do later.”

“But Kira, if he doesn’t understand, surely it’s a waste of your time? It’s not like he would ever admit you did anything anyway. He’s just an opportunist famewhore. He’ll just drift from person to person getting stuff from them. You could never trust him.”

Kira looked up from her artwork and her tea, slightly bemused by the sudden fury of Aldous.

“Don’t worry about it Aldous. I’m remarkably efficient. When the time is right to move onto the next task, I’ll move on.” It was rare that Aldous expressed any caring at all in regard to Kira. She appreciated it. “In the meantime, we still have a lot of work to do. We’ve had one lucky break, is all, and that’s really thanks to you. As for the rest, if he gets an opportunity he has to take it. It’s all good. For what it’s worth I think Sam is a lot more innocent than people seem to think he is, he doesn’t realise how it comes across. He thinks he is being motivational and go-ahead, and we interpret it as blood sucking. Either that, or he is jaded and needs a bit of cossetting anyway. I don’t think I want to know which.”

“For such a cynical person, you’re a sucker, Kira. He won’t lift a finger for you. Ever. You could move mountains and he would still sneer at it, or use it as evidence of HIS enormous talent.” Aldous sniffed.

“Welcome to the family Sam, you’ll fit right in.” Kira arms outstretched, made her ‘Liberace’ face and laughed. Aldous smiled despite himself and finished his tea, wiping away a stray tear on Kira’s behalf that he did not want her to see.

Tatania replaced the receiver and turned to her hapless PA. “Sam will be coming to dinner on Friday, let the chef know, will you? Has my box set of Raw Scandal arrived yet?”

“I’ll just go and check for you.” Harriet, the PA, lifted Tatania’s empty glass on the way to the kitchen. Enrique was busy blending vegetable juices to get just the right flavour combination for his dedicated mistress. “Enrique, her glass is empty again. Sorry.”

“It’s OK, here you are.” He handed over a fresh iced glass of spinach and apple juice. “She’s looking good on it though, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, I guess. Can I have whatever you’re eating for lunch? That Redwood guy is coming on Friday.” Harriet had very quickly become dissatisfied with her lighter raw food life, unlike her super focussed boss, who was enjoying a newfound glow.

Harriet made her way to the hall, and found the parcel of books waiting. Not satisfied with ebooks, Tatania had purchased paperbacks of Kira’s books, to be displayed in the dining room during Sam’s visit. Whether she would actually read them was another matter. Harriet picked up the parcel, along with a hemp dress that Tatania had purchased, and made her way to the dining room to place Raw Scandal 2-6 on the sideboard next to David’s taxidermy collection. Reflecting that taxidermy and veganism probably didn’t mix, she wondered whether she ought to mention it? Harriet shrugged and took Raw Scandal 1 and the expensive hemp dress back to the poolside to join Tatania.

Sam was overjoyed when he got the news of his dinner date. “You didn’t charge a fee, Annette? Tell me you didn’t?”

“Expenses only. Someone has to look after your interests, Sam.” Annette sniffed. A name like Tatania Harris was a major threat, but there was nothing she could do about it. There was nothing to worry about the other groupies, but a big name like that would be nectar to Sam.

“She’s so beautiful, isn’t she? I better watch some of her movies before I go.” Sam was as excited as a small child, eyes wide and shiny. “What should I wear?”

“Wear that cobalt blue shirt with the high collar. And the medallion. That’s always a winner.” Annette suppressed a mean smile.

“I should get my hair done.” Sam looked in the mirror. “She deserves a good first impression, doesn’t she?”

“Sure. Maybe you could put a tint in it or something. All the ladies love tinted hair.” Annette was close to sniggering but she managed to maintain a deadpan expression. She wasn’t going down without a fight, even if she was significantly outgunned by Tatania Harris. “You could do with a nice thick gold chain on your wrist to go with the medallion. And maybe a nice big chunky ring on your right hand.”

“Ok I better go get sorted out! Thanks Annette!” Sam, wide eyed and only a little over-excited bounded out of the agent’s office and off to find his organic hairdresser.

Tatania decided to entertain her guest in the Summer Pagoda, rather than engage a team to remove the extensive collection of taxidermy from the large dining room. Friday was spent decorating the garden with citronella torches and Chinese lanterns. As far as she had been able to investigate, Sam was not a drinker, although rumour had it he dabbled with the occasional herbal high. She had tested a few in the course of the week but had been left unimpressed. She was, however, delighted with the high end hemp dress, and tucked a large flower under her left ear, admiring her newly clear skin and more delicate figure in the mirror.

Tatania usually spent at least five hours of her day in her gym and the pool with one of the trainers, but her new diet had reduced her need and interest in this sufficiently for her to have read all of Kira’s books. That woman seemed crazy, Tatania thought, spending her time bashing out books about Sam. What was she doing it for? Sometimes she seemed blindly besotted, other passages revealed a sharp observation bereft of anything resembling sympathy. Very clever, she supposed, but what was she trying to achieve? Men liked to be worshipped, everyone knew that, didn’t they? As for her self-parodies, Tatania was unsure whether this woman understood that the image she portrayed of herself was inconsistent, made you feel unsafe. One minute she was a psychotically strong and rather cynical woman, the next, a quivering wreck that seemed to shrivel at the mere mention of Sam’s name. Surely this Kira female realised that all she really had to do was conform to the thin raw ideal and turn up with a few compliments, not waste all this time writing free books and torturing herself? The Sheep in Wolf’s clothing artwork, in honour of Sam, was quite interesting, but again what a timewaster? What was the point in hand embroidery in this day and age? And what sort of a medium was wool? Wool for a vegan? Tatania resolved to ask Sam what he thought of it. She couldn’t understand it at all. Why would anyone do all this work with no hope of a return on the time investment? And in such an inefficient way? Some of the books indicated she was a carer. Why try to do anything when she would not be able to capitalise even on the exposure? And when she didn’t appear to even want to?

Noting the time on the clock, Tatania carefully used coconut oil to even out her skin, put a shine on her lips and a light dusting of sun shimmer powder on her cheeks. Pretty as a picture, she thought, as she looked at her svelte figure in the hip-hugging hemp dress. She plumped up her breasts a bit and slipped her feet into an unconventionally comfortable pair of flat shoes to match. She had swithered over whether to greet him from the pool, perhaps swimming naked in her diamond necklace, and had decided that the chlorine might put him off. Instead she drifted down the carefully maintained archway of hibiscus to her pagoda, leaving Harriet to answer the pinging intercom on the front gate, sounded by a rather anxious Sam.

“Hi. I hope you had a good journey to get here?” Harriet battered her eyelashes at Sam, who was holding his neck ramrod straight and doing his best to stare into the middle distance as per Kira’s instructions at the photoshoot. He was very nervous.

“Yes sure, it was fine. Is the car OK there?” He gestured vaguely at the rental car he had left strewn across the driveway.

“If you give me the keys I will park it for you. Come on out to the garden, Tatania is waiting in the Pagoda.”

“Sure.” Sam allowed Harriet to lead him down the hibiscus path to the carefully lit pagoda. Sam had expected the place to be amazing, but even he was rendered speechless by the opulence. The smell of the citronella was vaguely stimulating. Even at that, he was unprepared for the vision of loveliness that was Tatania in her equivalent of a natural look. She led him to a well upholstered bamboo futon.

“I thought we could sit here.” Tatania had prepared the lighting to be most flattering on her side, naturally. She peered at him. He was more carefully managed than she had expected, in terms of his appearance, and seemed very uncomfortable. “Tell me about yourself.” Tatania purred, tilting her head to one side.

Sam swallowed. Tatania was amazing. Totally amazing. More amazing even, than she had been in the 6 year old film of hers he had sat through the night before when preparing for the visit. “I didn’t expect to talk about me.” He leaned forward and made eye contact, to express his ardent fascination. “I love your movies.”

“Thank you, I love your health books.” Tatania fluttered. “We have a meal prepared for you. Would you like to eat just now? Or some juice? The chef is very good.” She picked up the intercom and ordered without awaiting his answer. The sooner he was at ease the better, she thought. She flicked a wave of hair behind her shoulder, a gesture she regarded as youthful and carefree, and moved slightly closer. “You can tell me what you think of our cuisine.”

“Do you have a bathroom out here?” Sam felt he had better slow proceedings down a bit. He took his time in the bathroom, making entirely sure he was more relaxed before rejoining the ultimate in dinner companions.

Aldous was surprised to find himself included in Sam’s mass text the following morning. His heart sank when he saw the message. No need to tell Kira, he thought, unless Sam made it to an actual event with Tatania. He was quite sure Kira would explode on a nuclear scale when she heard about this. He busied himself dealing with the day to day of the business and attending to Kira’s absent minded questions, and thanked his lucky stars that he was no longer expected to mix cement for the ceramics on a daily basis.

A few days later, the story broke and Aldous was forced to present the issue to Kira, who was hard at work stitching a seedpod for a ludicrous bouquet hat she was making. To his surprise, she was not at all worried.

“Aldous, when it is right, it’s right, and when it isn’t, it isn’t. I’m sure Sam will do fine.”
“What on earth?”

“Let go of your preconceptions. Not everyone has to sit miserably in a room together forever?”
“Isn’t the whole point to sit happily in a room together?”

“If that was all love was, Aldous, *we* would have married each other years ago. Sam will learn something, and he will probably make a lot of good contacts. He’s good at that.” Kira barely

looked up from her sewing. “Why do you imagine this would bother me? The whole point of staying away is so that it never has to become an issue? I don’t particularly want to stalk the dude or make him unhappy.”

“Kira, would you do me a favour?”

“Shoot.”

“Go on a date? Anyone will do. Just go on a date. Please, I can’t bear the thought of you ending up freezing in an empty house in your old age.” Aldous tried his pleading voice. It did not sound authentic.

“Fine, just don’t plaster the internet with pictures and pithy adverts demanding a ‘good sense of humour.’ Make sure they know I don’t drink or eat out.” That would cut out a good few, thought Kira with carefully bridled joy. “I don’t want to make it too easy for you.”

Sam was in awe of his new conquest. He liked to tell anyone who would listen just how ‘awesome’ he believed her to be. As a result even Don, his closest friend, was avoiding him and so he was spending more time with Will, the English parapsychology hedge monkey.

“Guess that’s bombed the Scottish bitch out then.” Will laughed “Did you shag her?”

“Who? The Scottish bitch was never an issue. Honestly, have you seen her? WTF not even a 2? Tatania is like totally amazing.”

“Yeah you should get yer feet under the table there alright.” Will rolled his next spliff, chuckling. “When are you seeing her again?”

“Tuesday, she is busy with Conde Nast shooting some pictures. We talked for like an hour last night on the phone. She says I’m to go up to the house for a couple of days next week or so.” “What about the Supermeet?” Will was confused. Sam would never let a woman interfere with work normally. He had a big conference coming up.

“I can leave after the dinner speeches on Sunday. I can’t wait to see her. She’s so cool. Woody was saying on the phone how much fun she is.”

“Yeah.” Even Will was starting to find Tatania a bit dull, but he was impressed with Sam’s pulling power. “What about those twins you were doing?”

“Oh I don’t see them all that often. Tatania says she plans to keep me busy. Isn’t that neat?” He tugged on his beard, smiling at a joke that Tatania had never told, as foolish adults are prone to do. “Yeah Sam, it’s neat. Big league. You better behave yourself for this one.” Will lit his neatly rolled treat and silently prayed that Sam would not become too domesticated for the epic parties he and ‘lovecloudboogie’ the raver liked to hold on Sam’s behalf.

Sam arose from the chair and headed for the pool. “I better stay in shape too, the competition will be fierce for a piece of *that* ass.”

David Harris looked at the picture of his wife wrapped around the younger man and sighed. She was really angry with him this time, he could tell by the dangerous expression in every picture. Women were so terribly complicated. A bit like cats really. Who was this Sam Redwood anyway?

When he discovered that Sam was some sort of raw health guru, he placed a call to Malcolm and had his PA dig some dirt. Most enlightening. He wondered if Tatania would know, or care, about the guy's reputation.

Investigating further, he found what he was looking for. A very expensive present, he thought, but worthy of his errant wife and her new lover. He smiled to himself. Everything had a price....

Kira wondered, as she looked at the magazine, if these people knew how obvious this faux relationship was. Sam was smiling into the camera, looking very pleased with himself with his arm around Tatania. Tatania was giving her 'I may be over-age for Hollywood but I'm still full of juice' look and both were strangely individual considering this was a very glamorous 'couple' picture.

"I suppose it will do both their careers the world of good." She flicked at Aldous.

"He wasn't good enough for you anyway."

"Any idea how many people said that to me? People I liked, people who are now long gone? What does it even mean? How can multi-millionaire chick magnet Sam Redwood not be good enough for an impoverished geeky carer? I may not be quite so impoverished, but I'm still a shy geek."

"That's not how 'good enough' works, Kira, you know that. Even you deserve better than that cretin. Oooh take a look at this woman that just announced she wanted to kiss him on his fanpage. Isn't she gorgeous?"

"Gorgeous ain't gonna cut it unless she has five horny friends to join in." Kira looked despairing.

"Much as I like getting all this work done, this is killing me." She thought about the many thousands of women who had looked in the mirror and decided they would never look good enough for Sam. It was a depressing thought. Kira had long since decided not to worry about it. If he couldn't see the value in her work, then he wouldn't see much value in her no matter how thin she was. Kira had always been of the opinion that the right person would recognise you even if you were drenched head to foot in orange paint singing nursery rhymes, and Sam, to all intents and purposes, had decided not to. Kira was well aware that this was probably a blessing. Life with Sam would probably have been a nasty, brutish and short nightmare even if any of this had been rational, but it still hurt like hell, and she still couldn't look at him or listen to him without the occurrence of nausea and white-hot blind fury.

She had been somewhat heartened during a very difficult radio interview transcript that she had happened to find online. Sam had been asked a question he could not possibly answer, and he had responded with a panic burble which had clearly been inspired by her. "Uh, we need Hollywood to take an interest...ya know,culturally." She had perceived this as a glimmer of very distant hope, but now thought he would probably just have lifted this as he had the rest of his work, without any regard for her at all. One speed, probably, she mused, and a bit slow at that. She smiled as she thought about the sweet Yank hippies wittering on about 'high vibrational' people. "Nope, you ain't vibrating high enough for me, Sam, and you probably never will, no matter how much 'Ormus' you consume." Earthbound and yet ungrounded. Very similar to the principle that people who choose to study psychology do so because they are concerned about their own mental health, she supposed. In short, the grubby and out-of-character emotional situation that she had always known would be hopeless was probably by now, even more hopeless. Was she in love with a verbose, sociopathic literary kleptomaniac? Or did she just hate herself? Was it really just an excuse to avoid so-called 'normal' life on earth? It couldn't get much worse. Sadly, she got up and threw a suitably grim dress over one arm as she went to bathe before the blind date Aldous had arranged for her. Someone

very tiresome and dull, probably. She supposed she should exfoliate.

Tatania stretched out a perfect leg and sighed. She did not like the way the fat seemed to be separating from the muscles these days but she did like the super soft skin she was developing as a result of her new diet. She was spending a lot of time thinking about beautiful things and had stopped worrying about David. If David wanted her back, she reasoned, he would have to win her. She turned over to allow the masseuse to take care of her skin brushing regime and anoint her with the extra virgin coconut oil she was now using as a result of Sam's advice. She had invested in several of his higher end products, and was secure in the knowledge that she was giving herself the best possible care. Blissed out by her morning regime, she sighed again. Life was good. She was in several magazines and newspapers, speculating about her apparent separation from David and new romance with Sam. It was only a matter of time before the next film role came her way.

Harriet, the PA entered with another exotic pot plant, sent by the exuberantly besotted Sam. "Where would you like it?"

"Stick it by the pool. I hope it doesn't require care this time. Look it up, will you?"

"Of course."

"And tell Enrique to hurry up with that lemon and wheatgrass thing he makes, will you?" Tatania called after the retreating Harriet.

"Sure." Harriet stopped and looked in the hall mirror, shaking her hair a little. Hopefully Enrique wouldn't be too busy for a quick fumble in the computer room before she had to return to her duties.

Sam felt a little guilty after Holly and Molly left, but what could he do? He had a long standing relationship with them. Tatania was sufficiently adventurous not to have ruled out 'partying' with him and a few friends, making her even more awesome, but he was not sure about seeing people without her. Maybe he should just ask her what she thought? She was so cool, she would probably think it was OK.

The gardening book lay unfinished on the desk. He smiled at it. He didn't need it now, he was on his way, thanks to his blossoming wild and exotic affair with Tatania. A life of impossible glamour was beckoning, and Sam was ready for it.

He examined his appearance in the mirror and after picking at a couple of curls pronounced himself perfect. Picking up the potted orchid in the hall, he adjusted his short collared shirt and made his way out to the awaiting limousine in the driveway. He had been summoned for a few days, to Tatania's private island. He was a happy man. Throwing his bag in the trunk of the car, he clutched his orchid tightly to his chest as he got in. Only the best for his woman, he thought happily. As they pulled into the airport, Sam was ushered by a smiling and compliant brunette hostess to the private plane that Tatania had chartered for him. He would be travelling alone today, Tatania had gone on ahead. He marvelled at the extravagance of these people. What a life they had! The buxom hostess assured him that he was to ask for ANYTHING he wanted. Sam breathed a sigh of relief. Holly and Molly were safe then. Tatania really was the best chick ever.

They landed at dusk, after a uniquely satisfying flight, and Sam stooped to pick up the fallen orchid from the floor of the plush aircraft, carefully putting the crumbs of earth back into the pot. A few smears were left on the silk carpet but there was nothing he could do about that. How many

silkworms had died to produce that? Grabbing his bag he allowed the now clinically professional assistant to usher him out of the aircraft and into the jeep that waited below to whisk him to Tatania's island paradise.

"This is like Redwood heaven." He smiled at the cute red-haired female driver, attired in a neat cream linen suit. "How far away are we now?"

"Ten miles away, or so. If you get tired just let me know, I have refreshments packed for you. Hang on though, it's a bumpy road."

Half an hour of miserably rough roads later and they pulled into the gates of the Harris complex, an over-designed modern build which had mercifully been concealed in a clump of large palm trees. Crossing the bridge over the natural pool, Sam glanced at the brightly coloured birds and gossamer fine lighting system that had been installed to render the garden impossibly beautiful no matter what the time of day. This was wealth beyond imagination. Sam was suitably impressed.

Tatania was dressed in her usual tasteful and carefully designed way. A coffee swimsuit and dark brown sunglasses, with a suitably flimsy wrap. She was gorgeous. She dismissed the thick-set blonde Finnish trainer from her side as Sam approached.

"Isn't it funny Sam, how you don't notice how bad normal people smell until you go raw?" She smiled seductively and tilted her head as she reached up to stroke his beard. "Jorgen smells of chicken." As she kissed him Sam noticed that she tasted of chicken. He did not feel this was the time to be bringing it up, so he ignored it and smiled back.

"I brought this for you. It's very rare." He handed her the orchid.

"How delightful, Sam." Tatania simpered as she quickly dispatched the orchid to the corner of the room. "Now, what do you have to teach me about my body today? I do hope you aren't too tired after your flight."

Sam recognised his cue and put his arms around the priceless and well-maintained waist of his prize. He was sure he could think of something. He smiled down at her. "I'm never too tired for you, Tatania."

David was frustrated. What drug was this Kira Cedar bitch on? He had now tried offering a quarter million for Raw Sex Object, and she was still turning it down. How long would it take for the stupid bitch to crack?

He turned from the computer to his date for that night, a well-worn but respected actress from the erstwhile A list, and grinned. "What do you say, honey? Let's go and remind ourselves what a rollercoaster looks like. We can take the helicopter and grab some food while we're at it?"

Rivron, the gallery owner at the other end of David Harris's email, was equally frustrated. How much did Kira honestly think Raw Sex Object was worth? One hundred and twenty five thousand bucks ought to be more than enough to get her to part with it. Either he would have to drop his hefty cut, or she would not be selling it. He should have made it a condition of the competition, he thought ruefully, tugging at the thinning hair on his head.

He bashed out another email to Aldous, upping the offer to two hundred thousand, indicating it was definitely a final offer. Surely she would go for it this time?

Kira did not like her date. He was French-Lebanese, a bodybuilder, and seemed very fond of her. He was a very nice boy, but not really her thing. Too good looking, and too interested in the gym. Conversation was limited, and he was a terrible backgammon player, despite the typical boasts of Middle Eastern players about their prowess on the board. She was relieved that he was thinking of moving home and would not be nearby for much longer.

She decided to try someone older than her, someone that couldn't run too fast, that might appreciate her. Oddly, it seemed to be that the most athletic that appreciated her most, watching her sew for hours after their more frantic interests. One moderately famous martial artist had managed a marathon fourteen hour stint of watching Kira before finally succumbing to sleep on the studio divan.

Kira preferred sitting around working with Aldous most of the time. This dating malarkey was just timewasting when she had plans for Sam to carry out, and yet more work to do.

"Kira! Raw Sex Object! It's at two hundred thousand!" yelled Aldous.

"It's not for sale."

"Jesus Kira, how much do you want for it?"

"I don't want anything for it, I want to give it to Sam."

"He doesn't want it, this mad person at the gallery does! Just get rid of it and move on." Aldous swivelled round in the chair. "How much fun can we have with that sort of cash? We can treat it as play money."

"I said no." Kira stabbed at a large golden coin she was stitching on her next big piece of work 'Predate,' featuring two easily recognisable figures and their relationship with earth. Sam would never know she had said no anyway, even she thought she was being a little crazy, but she was quite sure she did not want to part with it unless something very special was on offer. "Tell Rivron it's not about the money." She smiled at this as she stitched. Ah the cunning ploy of the genuinely non-mercurial, or the exceptionally greedy. Kira chuckled at this as the Bengal painfully clawed his way up her leg.

"Right that's it, Kira. You are crazy. I am going to find you the dullest date ever to punish you." Aldous was half angry, half amused as he trawled his list of suitors for Kira.

"Sounds good. No younger than 60 please, I want a bit of character, for a change. Well run-in, as a preference. If there are any bits hanging off, we can always sew them back on."

"You are such a bitch, Kira." Aldous laughed.

"Thanks."

Sam and Tatania had had a shaky but pleasurable few days of hedonism. Tatania had never considered all the things vegans shouldn't really be doing, but trying to get Sam onto a horse had proved impossible, never mind showing him the aviary. She had now learned a few things she didn't know about yoga, not that that was particularly interesting, and of course the sexual gymnastics had been exemplary even by their Epicurean standards.

As the evening sunlight dimmed, Sam was now sitting above her head in an old tree and talking about nature. Tatania was beginning to become aware of the decline in her passion as a result. “Won’t you come down, Sam? We could go and enjoy the pool before it gets cold?” She rubbed her shoulders to emphasise her point.

“Oh, sure we can yes.” Sam descended. “Don’t you wanna go and look at the moon again? You’re totally amazing, Tatania. I love looking at the moon with you.” Sam gazed at her, dewy eyed, adoring.

“Umm, not tonight I think.” Tatania ran a hand down Sam’s inner thigh. “I have other plans.” She pressed a concealed button on the fence behind her to summon one of the maids, a broadminded dusky local girl who liked to indulge her mistress.

“Oh yes.” Sam was delighted at the new arrival. “Yes I think we should head for the pool.” They gave the voluptuous maid a meaningful hug and headed back towards the exquisitely lit pool.

Rivron sighed and looked around his smart, minimalist beige office. Not about the money! He hated dealing with artists. They were all crazy. He played with his spectacles, dusted off his cashmere trousers and looked at a rather violent piece of sculpture he had lodged in his office. He didn’t think emailing David was a good idea until he could solve the problem. Just what did this woman want? The emails between him and Aldous toed and froed a few more times before he decided what to do. He emailed David. A plan was formed. He outlined the plan to Aldous and awaited a reply.

“Yes, Aldous, that’s fine.” Kira did not look up from her typing. She was working on the next book, a rather short thriller in which Sam’s character narrowly avoided being horribly mutilated on most of the pages by relying on a team of faceless bikini-clad women.

“Thank God.” Aldous sent the agreement email to Rivron and sighed. He pushed back his glasses.

“How was the date?”

“Better, but no cigar, I’m afraid.”

“How so?” Aldous looked quizzical.

“Oh there’s nothing actually wrong with him Aldous. It just isn’t right. Devoid of meaning, so to speak.”

“You better hurry up and pick one, Kira. You’re no spring chicken.” Aldous pursed his lips.

“Strangely enough, comments like that don’t help. I shall take my mother’s example and remain a spring chicken until I die, thank you.” Kira shook her head and kept sewing. “What sort of a saying is that anyway? Why are we supposed to conform to chronology? Fuck settling, fuck it. I’d rather be romantic and lonely.” She put her laptop down and arose from the chair, turning towards the wild ragdoll cat sitting at the window, who immediately bit her as hard as he could, with an accompanying angry burble. “Thanks Sam.” Kira addressed the cat very seriously. “I love you too.”

The cat purred and proudly sat up straight, yawning.

Tatania dusted down the haute couture dress she had selected for tonight’s big bash, a ballroom

affair with big league actors and producers mingling for the purpose of future deals. She had elected to use this as a tester event for Sam. She was less concerned about him misbehaving in front of the more important amongst her friends than about his motives for seeming quite so fond of her. One thing Tatania loved was playing games, and games like this were her speciality. She had told him to wear something suitable, and was astonished when he turned up in a velvet smoking jacket and no shoes.

“I don’t think that will quite work for you Sam.”

“No?”

“No, the dresser will take care of you.” She called for her stylist, who led Sam to David’s very large wardrobe. Thinner though Sam was, he still had trouble finding something to fit amongst the lightly built David’s clothing.

At length, and after much discussion, he emerged in an old purple waistcoat, collarless shirt and checked trousers which had clearly been very expensive thirty or so years before.

“Perhaps he will start a fashion.” Tatania laughed with the dresser. Sam suddenly felt very cold. The old cynicism kicked in, the cynicism that had protected him through years of learning to ignore the opinions of people who frequently came to hate him, for no real reason other than they had grown out of him. He decided to add the smoking jacket to this outfit anyway, just to spite the pair of them. “Don’t pout Sam, it doesn’t suit you at all.” Tatania suddenly sounded sharp, manipulative. Sam’s blind faith eroded even more. The dress she was wearing incorporated exotic feathers, gemstones and silk, he noted. When had she stopped trying to please him? He smiled and looked straight at her. “You look beautiful honey.” Sam beamed, with the shiny self-protective gushing that had protected him for years. “Just beautiful.”

Glad to have him back on board, Tatania smiled back, unaware that she had just brutally killed the beautiful seed of true love she had been unwittingly propagating in Sam. “Let’s go meet the stars, Sam.”

David was delighted with the deal that had finally been struck with Kira, especially as she did not know who was buying Raw Sex Object. Maximum publicity one month after taking ownership, on the date he planned to deliver it to Tatania, was exactly what he felt Tatania would appreciate, and it would crush any residual pet-owner like affection she would have for this Sam character. He congratulated himself on his wicked cleverness. A bit like a movie, he thought cheerfully. She would love the evil glamour of it.

Dandling his youngest child on his knee, he watched the swans in his pond outside drift by. It would be good to see her again after all this time, he thought, and she would have the hurt out of her system.

He rang for another cup of coffee, a habit he had distinctly failed to kick, and picked up another glossy magazine with yet more pictures of the happy couple. Not for long, if he had anything to do with it. He smiled grimly and prepared for another game of tic tac toe with his child.

The glittering event was full of big name stars, people Sam could only have dreamt about before the entrance of Tatania to his life. He mingled as hard as he could, greeting healthy and unhealthy alike with a reverence that even people who knew Sam well would have been astonished at. He worked the room so hard, in fact, that he entirely forgot about Tatania, who was wondering whether

she should have brought him at all. He finally remembered a full two hours after their arrival at the event. Where was she?

He rushed around the room, but could not see her at all. He looked out into the gardens surrounding the palatial whatever-it-was that they were in. A house, a hotel, a club of some sort? It seemed far too big for anyone to actually live in. Finally, he headed into the lobby, whereupon he spotted Tatania descending the stairs, laughing with a small crowd of people and obviously high as a kite on some substance Sam did not immediately recognise.

“Aww Sammmmyyyy,” she drawled. “Sammyyyy, I was so bored! Have you met everyone yet? Absolutely everybody?” She raised a beautiful arm and stared down it, sulking for dramatic effect. Her companions laughed.

Sam leant forward and kissed her hand, hoping that this would placate the off-centre Tatania. “I’m so sorry, Tatania. I just assumed you would be so in-demand that I would have to amuse myself.” Sam wheedled, twinkling up at her in a practised manner he knew from experience frequently worked with the more well-heeled clients. “Come and dance with me.”

“No Sam, I think I want you to myself for a while.” Tatania continued to sulk. “Come out to the fountain and let us ruin my dress.”

Ah, frisky. Sam understood frisky. He would love to ruin that dress, but it had cost at least forty thousand, and looked it. “Wouldn’t you rather get naked? We could start a trend!” He started to remove his jacket.

“Nooooo Sam, you don’t understand. David bought me this dress. Let us ruin it together.” Tatania’s eyes started to roll slightly as she struck another statuesque pose.

Oh right, thought Sam. Now I understand. She doesn’t care about me at all. He felt a little hurt, but was not surprised. He could not, and did not really want to, compete with this lifestyle, and Tatania was very much about the lifestyle. He wondered how long he could possibly spin this one out. He would try keeping quiet until she had at least taken him to a political event, he thought. “Come to the kitchen, Tatania, I think we need a little water.” He took her firmly by the wrist and gently pulled her out of the way of her giggling companions. He felt a little teary, but he wasn’t going to give the game away. Poor Sam. He had been merely a pawn in a very long standing game of emotional chess between the super sophisticated Tatania and David.

“Doesn’t she look marvellous though? He’s worked wonders with her.” Kira was pleased. She had received her cheque from Rivron that morning, for two hundred thousand dollars, and a written assurance of the A-list publicity the gift was going to attract from the buyer. She felt it entirely fitting that Raw Sex Object should be bought as a gift. She had put the money into the business account to enhance the publicity campaign and was quietly content about her unreasonable artwork profits for the year.

Uncharacteristically, she put her toe-boots on and headed for the door of the bedroom she and Aldous habitually worked in. “I’m going for a walk.”

Aldous was startled. “What? How long is it since you last did that?” Kira noted his hyper raised eyebrows behind the glasses with amusement.

“Two years I think, give or take. I’ll be back in an hour or two.”

Aldous wondered if the staying in habit of Kira's related to money, since she would not normally allow herself out even if she wanted to go, and she never stopped working on something, even when half asleep. It wasn't really in Kira's nature to think much about money. Security seemed more likely. Aldous decided to settle on the latter, but he was suitably alarmed by this new and unexpected development. How long would it be before she was brave enough to venture further without him?

Rivron banked his hundred thousand and thanked his lucky stars that Kira was an awkward bitch. The gallery was safe for at least another year. He ordered his assistant to fetch some over-priced coffee from the nearby Starbucks and contemplated his next big deal, a large painting of Jesus and Lady Julep entwined in a strangely sexless pose. Once he pulled that one off, he thought, he could relax and be 'exclusive' for at least two or three years. He called the packers for Raw Sex Object, even though it wasn't due to leave the gallery for a week or two, and contentedly surveyed the gallery. Bunch of no hopers, he thought, but thankfully there was no accounting for taste.

Sam ran his elbows down the backs of Tatania's legs, an old Maori remedy for decalcification he loved to torture people with. He smiled grimly at her discomfort.

"I think you can stop now, Sam. I'm not sure I really like that one." The chills running up and down Tatania's spine were becoming more oppressive.

"No, no, I'm sure you can take a little more, sweetheart." Sam was really enjoying himself for the first time in weeks. "It's very good for ya."

The Paris hotel room they were ensconced in was opulent, to say the least, and was costing a sweet twelve thousand bucks a night. Sam looked around the room, unsure whether to be delighted or disgusted. How many fruit trees would that money plant? Still, he reasoned, she had invested in almost all of his most exclusive products now and since feeling the benefit, he imagined she would continue on her new regime.

"Moulin Rouge, darling? Shouldn't we get ready?" Tatania prayed that this would disrupt his concentration sufficiently to stop her current programme of expert care.

"But of course, my sweet." Sam went to shower whilst Tatania arose from the massage table with some relief, shaking her head. Who on earth enjoyed that? Her legs shaking from the unexpected stress, she made her way to her dressing room at the far end of the opulent suite. Sam's phone rang as he emerged from his shower. Still naked he answered the call, from Don, for the first time in weeks.

"How are ya doing, Sam"

"Fine, fine. Back to normal, you'll be glad to hear." Sam's voice sounded deeper than it had when he had been uncharacteristically besotted. Don was relieved.

"Glad to hear it. Where are you?"

"Paris. Going to the Moulin Rouge tonight. Maybe a private cruise or something."

"Aren't ya done with *her* yet? I need to discuss some Super Superfood Supermarket business with you. When can I talk to you?" Don was irritated. Still with her. This had to be the longest

relationship Sam had had for a long time.

“I’m pretty sure it won’t be long now, Don. I can talk to ya anytime. Just not tonight OK?”

Don had been getting the same answer for weeks. “Fine, I’ll get a decision from Leo.”

“That’s fine. Sorry. Like I said it won’t be long. Bitch has played me like a violin. Seems to think I’m the pool boy or something.” Sam ended the call and used the rougher towel to stimulate his skin before dressing. Maybe Tatania would have one of her ‘treats’ in the way of staff for the evening.

Kira and Aldous were on holiday, at a beach somewhere in South Carolina. They had been quite sure they would be the ugliest people in town, judging by the tourist channel on TV. Hence it was their second last day, and their first trip to the beach.

“We’re the thinnest people here!” Kira exclaimed. “Let’s run down the beach for a laugh.” They duly ran down the beach in true ‘Baywatch’ style, just to show that they could, unlike the other people on the beach.

Lumpy though they both were, Kira and Aldous were comparatively neat. The TV channel had been entirely misleading. Pictures of impossibly slim, glamorous waitresses in restaurants serving improbably huge servings were on several local channels. Like a metaphor for the rest of the world. Fat people, like the disabled, were becoming invisible in terms of positive representation.

“How are you feeling, Kira. Do you think you’re ready to let go of everything?”

“I think I’m ready to do our first festival, but I’m not sure what you mean?”

“Does the company have a spare ten million to burn Kira?”

“Oh it won’t be burnt. We have thirteen million fans. I’m sure attendance will be fine. And if it isn’t, that will be fine too. We started with nothing remember? I think it was a whole five thousand I invested initially if you remember. There’s a certain freedom in being cheap.”

At long last, Tatania had gotten around to taking Sam to a political event, a plush dinner. She had her dresser take him shopping, this time, and so Sam was currently standing in a very expensive gentleman’s outfitters being plucked at by a slim and outrageously gay assistant, who was marking out the tailoring with chalk. Sam loved being admired by anyone, so he was quietly enjoying the attention.

As his fitting for the suit concluded, Tatania swanned in from her own shopping and kissed Sam lightly on the cheek. “Ready?”

“Sure.” Sam assumed his adoring look as he followed her to the limousine.

The event, which they were due to attend the following week, was a dinner for two hundred or so luminaries at a suitably intimidating location out of town in the Washington area. This was what Sam had been waiting for. At last he would get to mingle with movers and shakers on a national level. He felt this was what he had been working for all his life.

After the obligatory studio photographs they had to individually sit for on the way in, presumably for record keeping purposes, they were frisked and taken to seats at long heavily loaded tables. Sam looked around. There was nothing that he could eat, but he was used to that. He tried to engage the elderly politician next to him in conversation. He appeared to view Sam as a peculiar

species of alien, and so he failed. The rest of the evening was taken up watching the rest of the room become merry on vintage wines and brandy. The entertainment appeared to consist of a lot of back patting and wheezy guffaws. Tatania dragged him from one VIP to another, introducing him before dominating the conversation with amusing epithets about speculative inappropriate behaviour from Sam. "Left to himself, he probably would have come barefoot, and insisted you do the same." Very funny. Sam realised he was out of his depth, even if she had given him the chance, which Tatania apparently had no intention of doing. The suit, tailored for him, now felt like a cage. The sooner he was back in his own small pond the better, he thought. He was somewhat less than a guppy here. More like plankton.

After another two or three hours of ritual humiliation at Tatania's side, Sam was relieved to get back into the limousine. "Can you drop me off at a hotel please? Any one will do."

"Certainly not, Sam. We haven't even begun our evening yet." Tatania was irritated. "You will be coming back to the house with me. Don't you want to slip into something more comfortable?"

"Not really, Tatania. I think I just want to be on my own." Sam felt deeply tired.

"Nonsense. You will come back to the house, and that is that. Enrique will make you something marvellous."

"Fine." Sam sighed. At least he had gotten what he had come for, even if it had fallen rather flat.

Aldous loaded the bags into the taxi and waited for Kira to run up the driveway behind him. They were flying to NYC for the media event that was to accompany *Raw Sex Object's* leaving the gallery for its new home.

"I wonder where it's going? Who could it be?" Kira murmured as they drove to the airport. "Who cares, the price was right." Aldous still marvelled at the price Kira had got for artwork he and his brother had dismissed as nonsense for years. It came more from their depression than reality, but it had hurt Kira a great deal. She had at least, given up the corset wearing this time, and was back in the usual scruffy outfits he was more familiar with. The first day he had ever met Kira, she had been wearing a pair of large clown trousers and a combat jacket, hair having been cropped off with scissors in a fit of self-protective misery after being the victim of yet another sexual assault. Several hours later, they touched down at JFK and were guided into a rickety yellow cab. They would be staying overnight at a hotel Kira had last been in in 1998. No air conditioning, but appropriately moody, and it was February in any case. They made the journey in silence, looking at the oft-recorded views they recognised from years of TV shows. The route from JFK to Manhattan appeared to have been particularly well covered by exported American media.

Aldous checked them in, and they went to the small twin room they were to share. Aldous thanked God that she no longer smoked. Once they had shared a room and he had spent the entire night awake thinking Kira would not live until the morning, such was her history of self-destructive smoking. Now Aldous was the only smoker, and he would have to hang out of a window, or go down to the street, where tanned people would stare at his blue tinted Northern skin and perfectly normal Scottish lumpiness. He had been impressed by her fame, however, on that trip. Kira was well known in many places outside the city she actually lived in. He frequently marvelled at this. How come all these people liked Kira so much? She was just....well....Kira?

They settled down for the evening, preferring to avoid the gathering Valentine's day crowds. Men were taking their mistresses and bits on the side out this evening, leaving the big day free for their wives and girlfriends. Both Aldous and Kira found this extremely depressing, and so they stayed in.

Sam had just finished his masterclass in Nutritional awareness, and was preparing his papers to leave, when the auburn haired model approached his table. Having had years of practise, he recognised what she wanted. The event was at a large hotel. He invited her to join him for a mineral water in his suite.

He was due to fly back to NYC that evening, to stay in his flat before joining Tatania for Valentine's day, but he was sure he could fit in some more pleasurable socialising. He felt after several months being dangled around by Tatania, that he had probably earned it.

Rivron had decorated his gallery with oversized ribbons and warped hearts in preparation for the expected media frenzy surrounding the departure of Raw Sex Object to its new home. David, true to his word, had surpassed himself. The Gallery was mobbed with journalists and photographers. Raw Sex Object, crated some weeks before, had been wrapped in shiny red paper with a giant bow. David turned up to make a speech and send it on its way to Tatania.

The awaiting media were supplied with studio pictures of Kira's work and pictures of Kira and David Harris shaking hands were taken as Rivron rubbed his hands. A press conference was held, with David and Kira answering questions about how honoured and happy they both were. Rivron was a top flight gallery owner now, he smiled.

Sam made his way to Tatania's for his Valentine's visit with a heavy heart. He knew he was on borrowed time, and wondered what fresh pain she was going to inflict this time. Did she really need to be so offhand about his feelings? Regardless of how he himself had treated other people in the past, he felt he deserved better than this. Going up to the house felt more like a duty today. He guessed this was how people who had been married for a long time felt, and shuddered at the mere thought.

Still, at least dinner would be good, he thought. Enrique really was very talented, and there was always plenty of scope for working it off, even if he didn't like Tatania very much anymore. He made it to the door, having been buzzed into the driveway by George the house manager, and was ushered in by Harriet.

"Oh Sam, hi, we have a very special item here today. Tatania is very excited." Sam handed the phial of one of his more expensive product lines over to Harriet. "Guess you can keep this until she needs it then." His already heavy heart sank even further. "Where is she?"

"Sunlounge." Harriet smirked and headed for the kitchen. Perhaps Enrique would be ready for a quick grope before dinner. She certainly didn't have to worry about pleasing Sam anymore, that was for sure, thanks to David's little Valentine's 'gag.'

Sam proceeded down the stone corridor to the sunlounge, where Tatania was dancing by herself with a gin in one hand, looking very pleased with herself.

"Oh hi darling, how are you today?" She smiled nastily as she saw Sam. "I'd like to take some pictures of you. Would you like a drink?"

"No, no thanks. Pictures?"

"Yes, with the lovely present David sent me. I'd love to get a few more shots of you with it. Naked perhaps." Sam did not like her expression one bit. "Why don't you have a seat, over there?" she pointed towards the corner. Sam's gaze followed her finger.

Something inside Sam shattered when he saw Raw Sex Object. He felt something fragment with the shock, almost tangibly. David had sent it? Kira had sold it? All so that this woman, this woman that he had loved could use it to torment him? What had he done to deserve this? To be treated like this, as a mere appendage to an object. He wondered at the cruelty. Why couldn't she just dump him, like a normal person, if she was returning to David?

"We've come full circle, Sam. This is where you came in." Tatania giggled. "Why don't you let me get a few shots with you and David's lovely present? He can enjoy them when he comes back." "No, no thanks Tatania. I'm glad to hear you are happy, at least." Sam thought recriminations would just come across as whining, which wasn't in his nature. He had been pretty cruel himself in the past, and enjoyed similar discomfort in others. He wasn't going to give her the satisfaction. "I think I'll just go."

"Suit yourself, guru." Tatania laughed and swigged down some more gin. "Tell Harriet I'll have a medium rare steak on your way out, will you?"

Sam was surprised at the crowds at the Oodle Festival, held just outside Berlin in the July of that year. He was there to see Kira, but he did not quite know how to go about it. He had been texting Aldous since that morning.

Finally at five pm, during the Aoki set, he felt the phone vibrate, and headed for the nearest security guard that bore the Oodle logo, a rune in black and white. He was led up a seemingly endless flight of open backed stairs to a small office. Once within, the volume was almost bearable. Sam was surprised that his ears were suddenly so sensitive to the unfamiliar music.

"Yeah well I've never liked E-heads much anyway, have I?" He could hear Kira laughing as she rattled off another pseudo-grumpy offhand comment. "Let me just fetch some more tea." Aldous emerged, smiling at Kira's old lady griping. His face fell when he saw Sam in his uncharacteristically miserable state. "That was quick. She should be able to talk to you now, if you insist. Have a seat." He motioned to the couch in the outer room. "Have you changed your hair or something? You look different?"

"No, just fat." Sam said miserably.

"Ah yes, eating, we all suffer from that, Sam. You look a bit better actually." Aldous was not joking. The wrinkles that had become apparent had evened out somewhat, although from the neck down Sam was certainly more comfortable looking than he had been during the Tatania period and despite a more 'at ease' appearance he did not look happy.

At length, Kira appeared with the teapot. "Oh, right, we need another cup then." Kira, not exactly slim at the best of times, had been enjoying rather more raw cacao than was good for her of late. She vanished and returned with yet more of it, along with three cups. "What can we do for you?" She poured the tea. "Not what you're used to, I'm afraid. White leaf, with lemon."

"That's Ok." Sam sipped his tea. "Anything is better than how I feel." Aldous took this as a cue to vanish back into the inner office.

"What can I do for you, Sam?" Kira sounded almost stern.

"How do you do it Kira?"

“Do what?”

“How do you turn how you must feel into something like this? I mean, you were so hurt, and you created all this? How do you do it?”

“Years of practise and then picking on the right person, Sam.” Kira smiled, perching on the edge of the long sofa. “Are you here looking for advice from an expert in failure? Life gave you lemons, and you decided to delegate to a lemonade maker?” She sounded amused.

“I can’t think straight. It hurts so much. I loved her. So much. I didn’t realise until she destroyed it, bit by bit, deliberately. She was so cruel. I just don’t understand why she was so cruel.”

“You can’t really say that Sam, because I do not believe for one second that you know what love is.” Kira’s smile dropped. “Do you mean that the idea of being with her made you happy briefly, and then it didn’t?”

“She meant the world to me, and she didn’t care at all.”

“And you want to ask *me* about this? Are you kidding? Are you expecting me to feel *sorry* for you?” Kira was not angry, exactly, but she wondered why on earth he would have come all this way to have this particular conversation with her. Two years of academic work binned because of him, and seven years’ worth of Raw Sex Object judged worthless without his even looking at it. What a nerve!

“Do you still love me, Kira? I mean, how do you feel now? Do you hate me?”

“What sort of irrelevant question is that? You’re here to feel better, not fish for emotional gifts from me.” Kira was aware of becoming slightly irritated. “I think I preferred you as an untameable stallion.”

“I don’t know, I guess I just thought...”

“You just thought you would shoplift some comforting nonsense and then go on your merry way. It doesn’t work like that. I’m your harshest critic, in case you hadn’t noticed. You’re here because you feel you’ve lost something, and you think I can somehow give it back to you because you know perfectly well how much I care about you, isn’t that right?”

“Something like that, yeah. I got a hell of a shock when she showed me the artwork. I knew it was over the minute I saw it. I don’t know, I’m so confused.”

“You lost the game, Sam. That’s all that’s wrong with you. You played a game and you lost. She won. You didn’t even know you were playing, so she had an unfair advantage. Did you make a lot of good contacts when you were with her?” Kira was crisp and business-like.

“Yes, yes I did.” Sam was instantly more upright in his chair.

“Well in that case, you got what you needed, and you are now free. Lucky break really.” Kira looked at him, still unsmiling. “Unless of course, you particularly hankered after a career as Mr Tatania, and I don’t think you really did, any more than I would be happy for 15 seconds as Mrs ‘Cuckold’ Redwood.”

Sam grinned. “You’re right.”

“Feeling better?”

“Yeah, can I have a hug?” Sam looked more like his normal self. Kira was suitably gratified.

“No. Run along and sleep with a few dozen more silly space cadets and some more of your staff and you will feel much better. I have no time for ‘below stairs’ behaviour like hugging.” Aldous, re-entering the room, laughed at this reference to Victorian upper class living. “I am sure that in the unlikely event you are ready to get some *real* work done, you will find a way to let me know. Until then, I suggest you continue sleeping around as much as possible. And find out what grace is, you don’t appear to know. I have no time for this BS.”

Sam was slightly aghast. Was she actually dismissing him? “I thought you...”

“You mistake me for some passive, compliant child you can manipulate. I am not a stuffed toy.” Kira sniffed. “Now get on with your life, and stop feeling sorry for yourself, unless you want to. I have work to do. This is all for you, you know. The work won’t do itself. You may be too emotionally impoverished to do anything for me, but the feeling is not mutual. I’ve rarely felt so sorry for anyone!” Kira looked very annoyed.

Aldous smiled at this typical Kira behaviour. I love you, therefore you should sleep around a bit until you’re quite, quite sure whilst I get on with all this work for you, regardless of the outcome. He had seen this before with other situations. Kira’s emotional ‘computer’ was not flaw-free, and at times appeared to have the calendar set at the year 1850, when honour and duty were still in vogue.

“Confused, you will be, Sam.” Aldous referenced an old American TV show.

“Totally. Should I go now?”

“Yeah. Unless you plan to propose formally, and mean it, or do a deal with her so that she can get some more work done for you. Either is probably fine.” Aldous laughed. “That’s just Kira. You’ll either figure it out, or you won’t.” He smiled affectionately at Kira, who was looking slightly furious at the end of the sofa. “She’s a lady, and she’s made her mind up. You have the ball in your court, Sam.”

Sam was not sure he really wanted the ball, but he got up from the sofa and straightened himself out. Would he even know what to do with the ball? Probably not.

“Thanks. I’m glad I came.” He headed for the door.

Sam’s ears burned with Kira’s bellowing as he escaped the office and descended the stairs. “Honestly Aldous, that horrid man is *SO AGGRAVATING!* I *HAVE* to marry him!” Sam allowed himself an uncertain smile at the shrieks of laughter from Kira and Aldous as they cheerfully returned to work.

The Best Husband Ever

“He's like a total gentleman.” Erica blushed slightly as she gushed about her new husband. “He takes out the trash, I never have to fill the dishwasher, he takes real time with the kids.” Julia, Erica's sister, looked sceptical.

“It doesn't exactly fit with what I've read about Sam Redwood.” What happened to all the girls?”

“Oh, he's left all that behind him. He's really just into work now.”

“Well I guess the great thing about misogynists is that they don't really understand equality, so you can easily just role play your way through almost any situation.” Julia, the feminist in the family, smirked slightly as she adjusted her turtle-neck sweater in the mirror.

“Oh no, Sam loves women.”

“Yeah, I heard on his last podcast.” Julia had suffered listening to Sam giving his delta-male opinions on fascinating subjects such as the quality of breasts on starlets way out of his reach in an effort to please the interviewer, who had sounded unphased by his efforts. Julia was of the opinion that Erica was being had, but she stuck to dropping heavy hints rather than upset her more feminine sister.

Erica stared at her sister, unblinking. “I only know what he's like *with me*.” She was aware that she was wailing slightly. “He even slowed down for me this morning, on our run.”

“Yeah? That was big of him.” Julia, who actually got on slightly better with Sam than Erica, gave her sister a withering look. “Just make sure that pre-nup is breakable.”

“Oh no, we are so happy, we will be married forever.” Erica twiddled the beads dangling from her throat. “He is like so cool. I got a big parcel of stuff to make more macrame with this week. He really cares about my problems, ya know? He even switches his smartphone off sometimes.”

“Yeah great.” Julia was now very bored with this conversation. “Let's go, we are going to be late for yoga.”

Sam, meanwhile, was attending to his business marketing his forthcoming event in Canada on the computer. He had so far latched onto a performance artist from Toronto. He had become mesmerised by her thumbnail photograph on Facebook, which showed her in a rather tight PVC corset.

“Goofy, you seem a little goofy.” he tried “Can you answer your direct messages?” The girl had failed to realise she was talking to Sam, as she was only eighteen. “Wanna chat?” She continued to ignore him, rather frustratingly. Sam was keen to present his accessibility in this particular case.

Irritated, he turned to an older woman, who seemed a little more savvy. Although she knew it was him, she wanted to talk about herbs, which seemed rather tiresome. Sam sighed and looked at the rest of the fans commenting on his page. None of them seemed relevant to this particular campaign. Tired of this game, he turned to the bug on his window sill. He suppressed the urge to crush it, instead waving it out of the window. Nobody was watching, but he was not sufficiently irritated to express his American masculinity in traditionally violent fashion. He decided to fill the dishwasher.

Maybe Erica might want to make some babies later if she didn't have too much to do. He might even ask her what she wanted to make for dinner later, if he remembered!

Sam dimly remembered doing all this for himself, but it wasn't his job now, he reasoned. Getting married was the most sensible decision he had made. It freed up so much time for more hook-ups, and more kids were always welcome. Now that he had reversed his vasectomy, he was the proud father of 27. He guessed he needed a bigger house. He settled down to some online porn, and worked on his lymphatic drainage.

Erica, pleasantly stretched from the yoga, was looking forward to trying some macrame. She could make a plant pot holder, maybe a chair eventually. She noted the neatly trimmed lawn as she walked up the path, and entered the house, feeling pleased as she looked at the cleared kitchen. Sam was so considerate!

“What do you think we should have for dinner, darling?” Sam cocked his head to one side, smiling fondly at his lovely wife.

“I was thinking of some quinoa?” Erica moved towards the fridge.

“That would be lovely, darling.” Sam breathed a sigh of contentment as the little woman prepared his dinner. He went back to the computer to see if he could find any more Canadians to attend his event. He was in luck, a hot little girl from Montreal was on his page. He quickly chose an account to give her some encouragement. “I'm heading out after dinner, honey.”

“OK.” Erica couldn't really say no, he had been working so hard all day. He really was the best husband ever.

They ate together, gazing across the table. Sam was aware of being bored out of his mind, but it was tolerable for the sake of domestic bliss. He would be seeing his business manager, a lady of only 40, that he had known for twenty years after dinner. Erica could only think of what a perfect life they had.

“Is that a new sweater?” Sam smiled. “It's really lovely. You know you look great in green. I love you.”

“Ooooh I love you too. Yes, I got it at the market. I'm going to do some macrame tonight.”

“That's marvellous, darling. I gotta go. I shouldn't be too late.” Sam got up from the table with some relief at the thought of getting out. He bent down to kiss Erica and headed for the door.

Erica cleared the table, washed the floor, cleaned down the fridge and the surfaces, saw to their daughter and settled down to learn some macrame, blissfully unaware of Sam's appointment.

Some hours later, Sam pulled his trousers back on and thanked Kiki for her time. “Do you think it would be OK if we tried something a little different next week? A little, ya know, darker?”

Kiki nodded silently. She had known for years that conversation with Sam was somewhat limited, and therefore pointless. She was unsure how his marriage was working, but she was relieved that he had found someone that hadn't become bored with him. That had always been a worry, since Sam only seemed to have one distant, superficial speed. That wasn't to say it was a bad thing. Kiki

had had a taste for promiscuous men for years, and was aware that platitudes were a good weapon if you didn't really want to engage beyond the physical. It had not worked well for Sam's relationships however, so Kiki and the rest of the stable had breathed a sigh of relief that Erica seemed to be just as skilled at empty conversation as he was. She watched as Sam crushed a beetle on her floor and clenched his fist. Something different at last. Sam often seemed like a coiled spring, perhaps something a little darker indicated some actual passion.

As Sam left the apartment building to return home, a small child tried to ask him for the time.

“No.” Sam swept past the child and moved away. He checked his smartphone. The pesky Dr Cedar was trying to message him again. Some time-wasting bullshit, nothing to do with money. What a waste of time! She seemed to be saying she had several years of work she wanted to discuss. What use was that to him? It wouldn't sell any health food. He sneered as he blocked her. Probably just wanted to talk shit, like the rest of them.

He checked his fan page for any potential Canadian hotties, and decided it was time to go home.

“How has your day been, darling?” Sam had allocated fifteen minutes to listen to his wife, as he had read somewhere that this was a big part of the male-female divide and an important part of being the best husband ever.

“You're such a good listener, Sam.” Erica blinked.

“Wanna go to bed, baby?”

Dr Kira Cedar had been trying to talk to Sam for weeks. She had been working on a slightly whacky piece of ecological economics, tracing the history of marketing and food politics in the course of explaining how the general public's lives had been misled to the point of mainstream consumption, mainstream illness, and mainstream chemical cures. She could not understand why he only wanted to talk bullshit. She had tried to cultivate Sam, since she and Sam had seemed to get on rather well since their fortieth. Sam, however, only seemed to want to pretend to be a variety of different people and talk nonsense, so it was taking rather a long time.

Finding herself blocked, she realised that she would never be able to cope with interacting with anyone, never mind the public. If people liked reading rubbish, how would she ever persuade them to read her book? She had wanted Sam to use the information, since it was an upgrade of what he was doing and would probably ensure global fame. What had she done? Did Sam only like stupid people?

As Kira had taken up this project because she was effectively trapped at home taking care of her mother, she was not in a position to be presenting anything, nor did she want to. What use was the book, if nobody would read or talk about it? She had nobody else to discuss it with?

Falling into a deep depression, Kira abandoned her work and took up sewing. She became quite famous for it. The research festered in a drawer. Kira became lonely. Her friends fell away as they were aware that this melancholy had begun with the Sam incident. Her confidence waned. She stopped leaving the house.

Sam had seen her videos, he didn't understand any of it. She had seemed interesting, to the point of becoming a slight manic obsession for a few weeks, but why was she so upset? She must be insane.

Thank God he was married. At least he knew those rules.

The Best Love Letter Ever

Kira picked up her laptop. How long had it been since she had fallen in love with Sam? It was a ridiculous scenario, the man was merely a picture on a page, a voice in a video, a figure who did not even identify with his own public image. She had avoided even looking at him for years, and yet, he still dominated her thoughts, her actions, her mode of being. She did not blame him for this. She had chosen it. Even as a form of madness it had surpassed her life as it had been before. She felt, in short, better about her repressive obsession that she had ever felt about her suppressed reality.

It was time, however, to release herself from at least part of it. She had to break out of it to become the person she needed to be. She needed to fledge her wings, and so she sat down to tell him, for good or ill.

Dear Sam,

As you may or may not know, I have struggled for many years with my feelings for you. I never intended to explain this to you fully, but I now find that if I don't I will continue to make myself ill under a variety of alternative pretexts. I am tired of doing this. I have no idea quite why you are my Achilles heel, but I am past caring. You are welcome to keep my heart, as I believe that you are the safest place I could put it, but I do need my brain back to progress the project from this end. Therefore I am going to go through this point by point, not in an effort to capture you, but in an effort to free me. The 'play space' that you occupy in my brain has been a source of great comfort, great anguish, great delay and great inspiration, so this is a risky move, but I fear it may now be necessary.

As the years have gone by, I have gone through a number of phases in terms of my thoughts. I am aware that as a gratificationist you will find this unnecessary and a fine example of overthinking, but I am your opposite, and so I like to savour and celebrate life's moments, good and bad. My bittersweet regard for you has been the very finest of those. I shall go through the phases one by one, and hopefully this will explain the reasons why:

Cynicism – the Hedonistic Utilitarian

You may remember my comedy sketch from years ago in my highly critical and yet complimentary moment of creative movie madness. I spent six weeks making this film, and even I had no idea why I was doing it. For the benefit of the audience, the sketch goes thus:

A lady, tired of being single, invites all of her single friends to her house for a party, intending for them all to bring a male friend. Only one of her friends brings a male with her. He is the most beautiful man she has ever seen. They get to chatting. They get on well until she tries to invite him on a date.

“No, he says, I cannot get involved with anyone.” He looks upset. She asks him why? “I am a hedonistic utilitarian.”

“I am sure we can work it out?” she persists.

“No,” he is almost weeping “You don't understand. I am a *Hedonistic Utilitarian*.”

He then stands up, calls the ladies to attention, pointing to his groin. “Hey ladies, I have something here that will maximise the pleasure for the greatest possible number of people in this room.”

This is a philosophical gag which basically insinuates that you are rather over-generous with your affections. Whilst your reputation would indicate that there is some truth in this, it also indicates that I am too inadequate to regard myself as standing up to the competition. I am however, amazed that I had sufficient confidence to put that together with my extensive critique of the raw food 'counter culture' and my edited criticism of your book.

So then, I wanted your attention, but I was damned if I was going to be disrespected as I got it, no matter who you were. Amazingly assertive for somebody with no real hope of ever having the confidence to see you in person, never mind make my case as the most stimulating nobody you have never met. This act of creation was nothing to do with conscious thought and everything to do with a strange and wildly strong physical attraction based on nothing more than instinct and a few exchanged words. I am still astonished at this to this day. Clearly I am stronger and yet weaker than I think.

Abstraction – the Birth of the Artist

On my inevitable rejection at the hands of the 'Redwoodess' and the rest of the stable, apparently (none of them seemed to be able to check a facebook profile which makes me wonder about your IQ selection) my 'useful repression' kicked in and I started to work. As you know, my work very quickly got into some of the major magazines, so there is something to my father's 'don't work unless you can't help it' approach. Personally, I think they are still very much in development, but without further stimulus and space to work, perhaps the artwork element should run secondary to future non-fiction writing. In any case, I was so upset that I could only create artwork, and so I have the website as an example of the time wasted on nurturing imaginary relationships as a form of self-development. It is gratifying to know that even when I can barely speak with misery, that I can still work, however.

A point to note here is that the ego is essential to well-being, and essential to the creative process. Subverting the ego is a dangerous thing, and leads to anger in people who do not understand what has upset them. Perhaps you should rethink some of your techniques, as this is costing you money commercially. I chose to turn my energy to creation, others decide to make efforts to destroy – therein hangs a problem which has dogged you for some years.

Analysis – the Birth of the Author

As I have mentioned in previous work, love is, when intellectualised, a lack of something. A form of penis envy, if you want to look at it that way. So, I had to run through the things I did not have to figure out why I needed you so urgently. Confidence, fearlessness, selfishness, reckless drive in the face of endless opposition were all features that I had some reason to perhaps be jealous of?

Many of my companions at the time were jealous of those things without further thought, leading to more expressions of their anger. I, meanwhile, considered why I would criticise someone so much more than I? How would I rebuild myself to develop these things? How would I feel when I did so? I concluded during this period that if I wanted you, I had to develop all these areas in order to

meet you halfway, rather than be yet more detritus in an already over-cluttered life. How long will this take? I still don't know, but I work hard at some of the more important internal elements.

Will there ever be an outcome? Probably not, but on the way to my idea of precious happiness I believe that the benefit is all mine anyway, regardless of my hopelessness in terms of making money. As allegories go, the labours of Hercules have sprung to mind a lot, Dionysus. I must point out, however, that my restraint and absence have produced more than any one night stand you have ever had.

Rationalisation – the Fatal return to Reality

And then I made the fatal mistake of letting someone back into my life to distract me. This irritates me. I thought my melancholy was alleviated, but instead it was compounded by fear and the depressive elements of allowing reality to stop the flow. Let this be a lesson to me. If fantasy and imagination beat reality, there are times when you should not allow reality into your life at all.

Loving you has by far surpassed any real relationship I have ever had. It has been the best insanity ever, in terms of developing me, and beginning the process of becoming me, rather than allowing my compassion to hide me from the world. For this I must again say thank you. I would never have been forced out of my shell if it had not been for this irrational and very silly period of my life.

Denial – the Decline of my Health

People can be very cruel, and very manipulative. Again jealousy reared its ugly head, my friend making food the issue preventing my moving on. Having indulged this idea by playing the gracious host, nearly destroying myself in the process, I can verify that food is no substitute for love, and no panacea for expressing emotion you do not wish to feel. Nor is simply shutting the door on your feelings.

I have never been so instantly on fire as I was when I discovered that you were married, and rarely been so inspired. You, unfortunately, make me feel. Not good, not great, not special. Feeling at all is apparently something I have delegated to you as your department. I am forced to admit defeat. You apparently don't need to do anything. I am at your mercy. You are welcome to keep my heart, I am sure it is extremely safe, as you don't even know you have it.

The Future

For my next trick, given your 'busy' state, I must repair my wound in the course of healing yours. I must finish this project, and I must follow a path I never expected to have to take. I wish you well with your family. Love is about adding, not taking away or giving ground.

Kira put down the laptop. She knew she must never send it, but she was glad that she had said it, even to herself. She had a lot of work to do. Life was short, and there was so much still to do....

The Best Sex Study Ever

“Pull it tighter, Aldous.” Kira gasped as she hung on to the door handle. Aldous duly pulled the strings on the corset as hard as he could.

“Surely you can't expect to get through your day without breathing, Kira.” He handed her the ends of the string. “That is as tight as it will go without cutting you in two.”

“Thanks. It's to remind me not to eat.”

“Isn't there a better way of doing this? You could always hire a personal trainer?” Aldous looked at his rather uncomfortable looking friend.

“Interacting with puny humans is how we got into this mess in the first place.” Kira tied the ends of the string. “Besides, personal trainers cost money.”

“You have plenty of money, Kira. Why don't you start taking an actual wage?”

“That is company money, and I don't do all that much for the company. How is it going anyway?”

“Fine, Kira. Things at the office are just fine. I am thinking of dating my secretary.” Aldous blushed slightly. He was not sure that this would work for Kira. You never knew what the reaction was going to be.

“Oooh. Good. Is she small and Spanish looking, and a bit P J Harvey?” Kira looked excited.

“Where are you thinking of taking her?”

“She likes bird watching, so I thought I might take it up.” Aldous concentrated on giving Kira's cat the evil eye rather than meet her gaze. “I think she might be with someone though.”

“Why are you asking her out then?”

“She seems to want to go.” Aldous looked morose.

“Great, go for it then. It will be nice to see you happy.” Kira perched on the edge of the bed and looked longingly at her exercise bike. “Perhaps I should try dating again, once I have got rid of the extra Leon weight.”

“So, next year then? Is there any point at your age?” Aldous looked as if he genuinely wanted to know, unaware of the wound he was inflicting.

“I don't need to actually do anything with them. I could just take them out and chat. It's an excuse to get out, I guess.”

“Oh God, not this again. Do I have to find them?”

“No, poppet, no. I have plenty of time to do that myself.” Kira picked up her laptop and selected a browser. “What shall I research this time? Doctors, lawyers, engineers?”

“Why not cut to the chase and research them via their sexual preferences? You do appear to be a bit odd in that department?” Aldous cast a critical eye over Kira in her tight-lacing. Why she would

choose to go to all that trouble and then smother herself in a giant jumper he would never understand, but he had to admit she did look slightly better in it.

“Good idea, I could just throw in some standardised questions and figure out what I actually wanted in the first place.”

Whilst Aldous was relieved that Kira was no longer concerned about upsetting Sam, after eventually discovering that he was, in fact, married all along, he did wonder about her reasoning. She had effectively wasted her last few years on beating herself up over him. He pondered whether she had now left it too late. She was not the most trusting of souls at the best of times, so why she had invested so much emotion in such a bad bet he did not know. She could not possibly be recovering this fast, so presumably this wish to date was some sort of rebound. In the meantime, shouldn't she be proving her mettle by getting on with the original book? Aldous had read her notes, it was not entirely clear why her self-belief was quite so shattered.....

“Would a magnificent and yet very small sample of sexual behaviour be a good seller, do you think?” Kira was already evaluating the book sales from a book about dates that she had not made yet.

“I am sure it would, but is that what you want your name on?”

“It doesn't matter what I put my name on if it doesn't sell, now does it? That is rather the point of the project in the first place.” Kira glowered at him. “I need to get better at this, is the point.”

“OK.” Aldous picked up his cardigan. “I need to get back to the office. Oh, Harry sends his regards.”

“Harry can keep them.” Kira grimaced as she thought about Aldous' brother. He seemed to have found religion, for the umpteenth time. How dull.

“Kira, are you OK? I mean it's been really stressful recently. Leon is gone, Sam was married, your mother isn't exactly saying much. Do you really want to take on a new project?”

“Well, I seem to be responding to it by losing weight, getting fitter, and actually wearing all these corsets. I am also writing a lot and trying to get over my fear of my own face, so I think I am probably doing OK?” Kira frowned. “Maybe I just needed a full stop of some sort. They are probably all narcissists anyway. Or maybe it's me. I don't know.”

“Narcissists? I can see why you would say that about Sam.....”

“Actually, despite his high score on the test we ran, I think he is the least likely narc out of the three of them, not that it is really any of my business.” Kira put on some fingerless gloves. It was cold in the studio. “Entrepreneurs have to develop a kind of faux narcissism to get through their day. I have always had the impression that Sam is a very brave and rather flippant version of me, so I like to ignore any bad bits. I was a pretty evil boss once, and it was really just inexperience and carelessness.”

“Tell me about it. You really shouldn't do that. You need to grow out of him.” Aldous headed for the door. “As long as you are sure that you're OK?”

“I'll survive, I always do.” Kira climbed onto the exercise bike. “I'll see you later Aldous. Let me know how you get on with your secretary.” She put her headphones on, with the intention of

playing some very loud drums to block out any actual thought whilst she punished her enormous legs, still huge from her ministrations to the deceptively satanic Leon. So far she had taken 2 inches off her arms, 7 inches from her waist and 4 inches from each leg just by addressing her social media chores from atop the bike and taking a walk twice a day.

She was aware that she was now at war. Not with Sam, she didn't blame him for anything, probably not even things he was actually responsible for, but with the forces that had altered her life so drastically over the previous ten years. The people making inept decisions about her father, who now seemed determined to kill her mother, the family that had tried to ruin her to get their parent's money, the inadequate employers, the insecure women, the emasculated men. Taking it all into account, Kira had originally perceived it all as a massive cultural problem that was solvable via the dispensation of the right information. If only she could distribute it, this was something she could actually do something about.

Sam's life had taken a different direction from where he had been seven years before. He was, for practical purposes, no use to her now anyway. Married, with domestic concerns, and a massive following of obscure sub-groups that whilst useful to him, were no use at all to her. She would have to do the job herself. She guessed that this was a good thing. It would force her out of hiding and into the public gaze. A challenge far beyond the one she had originally considered when she had picked Sam as her muse in the first place.

The laughable part was that Sam would have benefitted far more from this project than she ever would, had he chosen to talk to her in the first place. It couldn't be helped now. Kira pedalled on, thinking ruefully about the paradox of self-belief and consideration for others. She was now guilty of the same thing, she guessed, side-lining people in favour of personal achievement. Having just witnessed where it had taken Sam, she wondered if she would respond any better if someone approached her in the same way. Probably not. It had not helped that the moment at which they had met was one in which they were both at just the right point of sadness, where their cynicism had met and briefly intertwined. He had become more of an irritant later, when he was more cheerful.

At least he was extremely wealthy, she was sure that this would give him some personal satisfaction, although when she glanced at his work she saw evidence of some complacency and aging. She did not like the look of it.

She had predicted at the time that he would end up a part of her, rather than the other way around. Even she had felt that this was madness talking at the time. Now it seemed, it would probably come true, unless she proved inadequate for the task. Kira thought that she probably still was, but in the meantime it would not hurt to rule her appearance out of her failure. She would create her alter ego, in the hope that her alter ego would do a better job than she could.....

The first thing she did was find an alternative muse, a world famous politician that she had admired when his glorious mistake had changed history. Eye catching and popular, she began to create an alternative history and glamorous furniture for him. She had, oddly, started on this project the year before discovering that, as far as Sam was concerned, all was lost, so, she surmised, this was a good place to start expanding her persona. Clearing the studio, was, therefore, at least as important as shedding her uncomfortable skin, as was writing the book she had promised him. This was to take about a year, she figured, during which she would also complete her fiction project for Sam, which had been designed to give reach rather than make any money. She also had a box full of sewing needing finished, but this was temporarily abandoned in favour of putting time into her appearance and writing.

Many 5am starts and investments in clothing were required to repair the damage. She tried to be pragmatic about this, since she would also probably require a little surgery at some indeterminate point. Studio work was to be done in the middle of the night, and care for her mother took up most of the conventional morning. She also had courses to finish, to complete the only money-making portion of the project she had planned. Kira was extremely busy, which was always Kira's favourite place to be. The long walks and frantic movement seemed to be improving her mood, and the corsets certainly improved her sex drive, which had for a long time been ignored in favour of laughing at Sam's imaginary soul mate humour. She wondered what she should really do about this, since her appearance still did not match her imagination? At length, Kira came back to this idea of the sex study. How would she go about this, without having to spend time away from her mother?

And so, Kira returned to the idea of exploring her sexuality through the medium of social research. She commenced her study by conducting a general series of interviews with random people, male and female, which proved strangely popular with interviewees old and young. This took three months. Kira was always thorough.

Aldous appeared at long last, carrying some iced water. "Stop for a minute, Kira. I can't stay long."

Kira turned off the chainsaw and removed her goggles. Carefully avoiding the ducks, she crossed the croquet lawn and joined Aldous at the table.

"You are thinner."

"Yep. That's what happens when you avoid food." Kira sat down with a slightly flat air. "Much as I love food, I do like wearing clothing I don't actually hate and being able to move around a bit."

"How is the study going?" Aldous was genuinely curious. He did not get this much juicy gossip often.

"Beta males are better in bed but neglected in favour of bullshitter alphas and pseudo alphas who then ignore what women want. That just about covers it." Kira looked gloomy. "A lot of married women are extremely unhappy and seem to think relationships are about tolerance rather than happiness."

"So everybody is having a crap time then?"

"Yep. The only people having any fun seem to be either role playing at relationships or selfish and very single, which leads me to believe that the path to happiness is probably polyamorous."

"I don't think I would be very happy with that." Aldous was gagging to tell Kira about his very full sex life with his secretary, but he hedged slightly as he waited for her attention.

"I used to think it was the way to go, now I think I would just like to curl up with one half decent and motivated person. Having done it, I'm a bit fed up with long-term polyamorous. It is too much hassle keeping up with all the narratives, and none of them are very happy. The only good part is that they don't always turn up" Kira yawned. "Besides which, cats don't bring iced water."

"True."

"How is the sexy secretary?" Kira glanced at Aldous.

“I moved in to her place last week.” Aldous looked smug.

“Excellent news. What are you doing here then? Shouldn't you be sucking toes or something?” Kira chuckled, waving away a passing bee.

“Thought I would check in. Are you going to find someone then?”

“If I can find someone with sufficient imagination and wit to extend their moods into their sexual behaviour, then I guess you will find out. It does not seem to be an easy bar to hit.” Kira pouted. “I cannot believe how hung up people are.”

“I think they get hung up because there isn't enough time to think about this stuff?”

“No, they are cornered into roles. They look at their parents and think – I am a man so I must spend Saturdays at the pub whilst she goes shopping etc etc. Even some of the wilder ones I was with were like that. Children kind of reduce your sexual IQ too. Maybe it's a choice. Children or sexual expression?”

“That kind of makes sense.”

“I've found since turning 40, that men like to delineate too much too. At least two of the exs assumed because I had not got myself knocked up that I didn't like kids. That kind of puts the kibosh on bothering when I have so little time left. You are either a rather dull and nagging madonna with child or a slut, apparently. Well, sorry boys, but I don't have time for bullshit hang-ups.” Kira finished her water. “Why can't I just find someone that doesn't lie to me and can not only give but accept something slightly more interesting than his orgasm, followed by a cough?” Kira laughed, despite the tragedy of the situation. “So I have decided to meet some swingers.”

“Some what?” Aldous was aghast.

“Swingers aren't going to lie about it, are they? I have a date set up next week. Male model, likes wearing stockings. Nice lighting. What do you think?” Kira showed Aldous a picture of a suitably hunky chap in his very small pants.

“Seriously, you have a date with him?” Aldous was extremely impressed.

“Why not? I also have a date with this guy. Now he is a sexual dominant. I am sure he will be interesting.” Kira showed Aldous a picture of a guy who appeared to be about the same size as the garage door they sat next to.

“Not sure you are going to be giving him much of a spanking.” Sublime to the ridiculous, Aldous thought.

“No, but he was chattier than the others.”

“There are more?”

“Oh gosh yes, I have a psychology professor dom, an IT manager submissive, a tranny actuary who wants to go shopping and a hotel owner in the pipeline. It all sounds terribly entertaining.” Kira stretched out in the sunlight and shut her eyes.

“Is this safe?”

“Probably not, but who cares what happens to me? I briefly considered meeting a few women, and then decided they would probably put me off for life.”

Aldous had to concede that Kira was right on this occasion, nobody, including him, truly did care about what happened to her. At least she was probably stronger than them, he thought. Besides, what was he going to do about it? “Where are you finding them all?”

“That would be telling.” Kira laughed. “Seriously, it is quite easy.” She had prepared a mission statement years earlier. It almost described Sam, she recalled, apart from the lack of basic manners. She had always imagined whomever she ended up with would be reasonably polite, ideally extremely polite. None of these people, apart from the psychology professor, were even close to the character she had sought, and he sounded slightly dangerous. “It’s OK, I wasn’t planning on rushing into anything.”

Some weeks later, Kira had completed dates with a surveyor who thought that foreplay consisted of asking her to make him tea, who had then become irate that she did not participate in the tea-making; the swinger, who had not wanted to chat at all, and had rather upset her by appearing in stockings within seconds of her arrival; the psychology professor, who had wanted to bind breasts blue and who was very insecure about his looks; and the submissive, who was disappointed that Kira did not wish to play with him on first meeting. This was simply not Kira’s way. Kira was a slow burn long-termer, she realised. She was just not acquainted to this fast-food approach to sex that they seemed to expect. She very quickly learned that one’s sexual proclivities were not the way to meet like-minded people. Did like-minded people even exist? She decided that after the next batch, she would try ‘switches’ - people who liked to change roles, to see if she could find the relevant grade of potential activity that way.

The following night it was the turn of the hotel owner. She duly appeared at a bar around the corner from his hotel.

“Oh, gosh. Are you sure you are submissive? You look as if you might punch me.” He was reasonably attractive, and yet he seemed very inexperienced.

“Not particularly either way. I was looking for a particular kind of person, rather than launching into ripping my clothes off.” Kira sipped her pint of water.

“I would like to see you in a split skirt and stockings. I want to obliterate your face.”

Kira looked down at herself. Had he actually looked at her? Did he have any taste at all? Anyone could see she was more of your ‘purring velvet with claws’ type. This would not do. This would not do at all.

Fortunately, the following night was the turn of the huge chatty dominant. He was very friendly, had a lot of submissives on the go, and was part of the BDSM scene, so a lot more confident, despite the fact he was the size of at least four people. He explained that submissive women were some of the most bossy women he had ever come across, perpetually demanding, perpetually asking for what they wanted. Being a dominant was not so difficult. It was a question of encouraging people to tell you what they wanted. Kira felt a lot more positive about this, although she balked

at the idea of the request that one of his submissives had made. She had wanted to eat faeces. Kira saw him twice, but on his request to meet some of the others said no, she was still considering the matter.

She considered the matter for some months, until she attempted to meet some switches. One submitted within two dates and insisted on being naked, even when introduced to her mother. The other was charming, but very bitter about caring for his mother, which became irritating very quickly as Kira was in the same situation, minus the huge degree of bitterness.

Finally, Kira tried to meet another author. He had seemed interesting, intelligent and polite. This awkward episode ended up with Kira receiving a phone call from a rich Bangladeshi in Saudi asking whether she would be interested in 'Doberman Pinschers and nuns.' Kira politely declined.

“So, what's the verdict?” Aldous was concerned at Kira's continued loneliness.

“Confidence is key. Persistence is key. I have a very low tolerance for people.” Kira looked gloomy. “I don't want any more phone calls from freaks.”

“But what kind of deviant are you?” Aldous looked quizzical.

“None the wiser. I think I will stick to repressive art until some irritating, intelligent and charming clown amuses me enough to make me want to do anything with them at all.”

“Back where we started then.”

“That's about the size of it.”

Evil Money

“I’ve never liked it, never.” Kira picked some resin out of her hair and flicked it across the room. She picked up a chisel and chipped at some stubborn beads on her table.

“People who have money always say it doesn't matter.” Aldous despaired of Kira's altruistic tendencies. “You don't know what being poor is like.” He pursed his lips, only slightly contemptuously.

“Don't I? I don't think you quite understand, Aldous. Money is really just tiddlywinks. The love of money is an ugly thing. It's justifiable to have enough for whatever you're doing, but craving it, and certainly craving it above your obligations to other people - that's basically a major sin.”

“Sin? You are talking about it from a religious perspective? Since when are you religious?” Aldous despaired of Kira's more altruistic tendencies, which usually involved rather irritating practical help rather than actual money, since she usually didn't have very much due to the endless new projects she engaged in, funded by a mysterious process he could never identify.

“More from a moral perspective. I have seen a lot of moral ambiguity in my family. I don't like it. I love work, but money? Money makes people nasty. It clouds their judgement and makes them stupid. That is why I don't like money.” Kira looked away, resolute, and scratched her ear.

“Try telling Rupert Murdoch, or Bill Gates that. Billions.” Aldous sneered.

“They won the computer game. It's about as meaningful. It doesn't make them worthy. Worthiness is a different thing.”

“That's why you continue to obsess about Sam, despite all that money.” Aldous started to laugh. “Seriously, would you rather he had nothing?”

“Sam is welcome to his manias. They aren't necessarily mine. I like what he has done with his resources and ideas. I like how it's changed me. That is what is important. Money is a different thing. I thought you understood that? For the record, if he had happened to work in some random health food shop I would still have been a startlingly regular customer. I thought you understood that, too.” Kira was getting bored. “Look, do you want me to show you how meaningless money is?”

“How do you plan to do that?” Aldous looked annoyed.

“Well, you know how I tend to disappear for months at a time and then turn up and take you out etc? I usually rake in a pile of cash when I am not busy entertaining you. Why don't I show you how dull money is? Money isn't original, it has no new ideas and it doesn't improve you as a person. It's just a figure. It is time-consuming and useful only for other projects.”

“OK, show me.” Aldous looked confused.

“Give me a tenner.” Kira held out her grubby, paint-stained hand. Aldous produced the tenner.

“OK I will return it in six weeks, with the money I have made from it, just to show you how arbitrary and meaningless it is.” Kira yawned.

“OK.” Aldous took this as a sign to leave. He wondered what Kira would do with his tenner?

Six weeks later as promised, Kira telephoned Aldous. “If you want to meet up, I have something for you.” Aldous was intrigued.

They met up at a local cafe. Kira looked plump, as usual, and fresh-faced. Aldous sat down, ordered some coffee, and awaited her verdict. Kira produced a wad of notes and handed it to him.

“There you go. You can count it if you like.” Kira looked at Aldous, a quizzical expression on her face as he counted it.

“Seriously? Eleven hundred quid?” Aldous was impressed. “How long did this take you?”

“About ten hours a week. I could have done it faster or slower. It really depends on how you think about it.”

“How did you do it?” Aldous was aghast.

“Well, you know how I have always told you that start-up capital is a random figure? I applied my resources, time and motivation to the issue of the most basic business transaction.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I could have bought a share in something and seen how it did, which would have taken no time and some limited knowledge, but I figured that was dull sport, so instead I used it alongside my existing resources.”

“Your existing resources being?”

“My skills, capital equipment and time. What I am trying to explain to you is that money is essentially useless without those.”

“What did you actually buy?” Aldous frowned

“Well in this case, I bought some printing paper, stamps and phone calls with it. That produced some back office work, which I did, and that made this money. I could equally have purchased some packets of chocolate bars and sold them for a profit, or created a recipe of some sort and found a way of making use of that. The point is that this eleven hundred pounds came from applying things other than money to a very small amount of it. It isn't rocket science, Aldous. The opportunity cost of sitting complaining that you haven't got enough money is actually making some.” Money is not the goal, it is a by product of networking and applying knowledge to a problem. It's just a score sheet for the purposes of easy barter.”

“Right, so what you are saying is that as far as you are concerned, the amount of it is meaningless, the effect on you as a person is meaningless, what matters is the associated things, like having the equipment in the first place and knowing how to use it? That is not the same as hating money.” Aldous was faintly annoyed at this circuitous way of looking at things.

“The opportunity cost of focusing too much on money itself, is in many cases, gaining knowledge or a quality of - I guess what I would call spirit - that I much prefer, is what I am saying. Not that money itself is at fault, but people who only care about it often fail to notice the important stuff, like

how to make life better.” Kira's eyes widened. “Being comfortable is great, being obsessed is neither useful nor attractive. Look at my family. How did my parents manage to produce people so obsessed with money that they don't care about other people beyond trying to gain more than them? That is what makes money evil. Life is not about seeking some bullshit status that means you get to pretend you are more important than somebody else when you really aren't very interesting at all.”

“Right – I think I get it now. So you love Sam despite the money? You get more bonkers by the year.” Aldous chuckled as he sipped his coffee.

“Sam found a way of achieving self-expression and amassing high-score points at the same time, which is admirable. We share a lot of interests, which is rather lovely, and I would like him to be happy and not doubt anything. In the event we ever did get together, I would feel bad if I wasn't capable of avoiding his money, so that makes things more complicated at a practical level.” Kira sighed. “So I guess I had better make some money in the hope of distant happiness, whilst I indulge in some of my own self-expression. The money thing has made things a bit more complicated than they might normally be. You know what I'm like, Aldous.”

“Yup, I sure do. So, where is your first hundred million going to come from?” Aldous smiled indulgently. Kira was a lady, despite her shabby appearance. She did not like being trifled with.

“Well, I have a few ideas I'm working on. A little speculation for some more passive income, some development of the stuff I have already worked on, some work to cope with the day-to-day stuff, and I need to work on the material I need to distribute to as many people as I can get it to so they don't have to suffer so much. We live in an age of mutual contempt. I don't think it is good.” Kira looked sad. “I want to enable people to think differently and be free of all this spite.”

“You can't save them all, Kira.” Aldous looked at Kira, worried for her. He knew what she was taking on. Kira looked up, tearful.

“I can try to explain why their lives are being made worse, and when they know how to get out of it, maybe they will make things better. I don't want them to suffer like this.” She looked away again, sipping her mineral water, wiping a stray tear from her eye. “We need to help them cut through all this bullshit. There is no need for it.”

“Good luck, Kira.” Aldous gathered his cash and stood up, looking forward to telling the boys this improbable story. Kira was clearly an idiot. Why had she just handed him all this cash instead of keeping it? Crazy!

The Best Madness Ever

“Why don't you try thinking about it another way?” Leon frowned at Kira. “You never seem to deviate from this position of not being good enough.”

“Look, there is no other way to think about it. I have a job to do. That has been the case ever since I met him. I am the problem.”

“Why do you feel you have to work so hard for his affection? He won't even speak to you.” Leon screwed up his face. “Your non-relationship makes no sense?”

“It makes perfect sense to us. I can't bear to look at him, he can't bear to look at me. Every time we go anywhere near each other one of us ends up extremely upset. It is much safer if we avoid each other.”

“But you said he seemed quite pleased to see you?”

“Yes, and I was pleased to see him, but it is in the nature of our awkward characters that it is always teetering on the edge of a huge fight. Negotiation is bound to be difficult.”

“He seems to be winning on that front.” Leon pursed his lips. Kira was different since she had met Sam. Less anxious, and yet still consumed by Sam. If anything, more than ever.

“Not at all. I still lack confidence, and I am too easily distracted. This is about head space, and life goals. It is not about ordinary things at all. If it was I would starve for a year and turn up in a bikini with some exceptionally good aphrodisiac, now wouldn't I? What on earth would be the point in that? He has plenty of women. Even I wouldn't be crazy enough to dissuade him from such a convenient and comfortable arrangement if that's what he wants.”

“What about what you want?”

“I want him to be happy. I don't want him to be unhappy. Neither of us will be happy until I do the damned work, regardless of how he arranges things with his genitalia.” Kira was growling now, impatiently twitching at the computer.

“But you said he didn't know anything about what you were doing? Isn't he just an asshole really? What do you get out of this?”

“Being difficult or unaware doesn't make you an automatic asshole, I'd just like to point that out. You are right, of course, but if I remember correctly, I was being an actual asshole the last time we had any dealings with each other, because I was hurt. Sam doesn't usually tolerate 'feels,' for all his chosen pithiness.” Kira looked blank. “Trust me, it is much easier if we make it a public only relationship. I don't want to have to eat his cubs anyway. That is what lions do.” Kira got up and rubbed her sore back. “I just want to kick his ass with impunity, and nine years ago there was no question of my ever getting to do that. He can keep his bits to himself apart from that if he wants. I just love the idea of making him bloom, and for that he needs to be challenged now and again. Safely, by someone who cares. It is in the grand tradition of the super-Greeks.”

“I wish somebody loved me like that. Have you ever considered that maybe he loves you too?”

“God no. Trust me, you would not want an imaginary relationship this contorted.”

“Why not? Maybe he longs for a soft cuddly twin who doesn't take any shit from him.”

“I think Sam's love of control is well established. I don't want to end up looking pinched and terrified. I want to be loved, not moulded, thank you. Besides, can you imagine how the Yanks would take a fat chick? America hates women, never mind women who don't conform to the delusional rules of trophy-hunting success. I'm not in the business of ruining careers.”

“Is that why you're hitting on the Foreign Secretary?” Leon was quite pleased with this development, especially as it meant a host of new opportunities emerging from Kira's creative brain.

“No, I actually like the Foreign Secretary, and he is big and kind enough not to mind me creatively crying on his shoulder.” Kira looked up. “Besides which, he needs a good shake too. His health needs some attention. Nagging from crazy strangers is almost tolerable.”

“Everyone will assume you agree with his politics, however. They may not take it well.”

“They can take it however they want. He is the only one in the party that cares about the public or credits them with any brains at all. If the English will insist on continuing to vote for them, we might as well give the UK to the only decent one, assuming we can woo him away from his evil paymasters at some point.”

“Can we do that?” Leon stared at the wall. This was so bonkers, it actually might work.

“Of course we can.” Kira rethreaded her needle as she worked on her latest figurative work. “We can do whatever we like.”

“You used to say that to your mother.” Leon smiled.

“She is still here, so I am still saying it to her.” Kira nodded towards the large flowered tube on the table. “Poor mum. Why are people so stupid?”

“They do what the Reich tells them, and the Reich wants anyone disabled dead.”

“True. Let us not talk of it just now. We need to get another grant application in.”

“When is it due?”

“5am?”

“Are you crazy? People work on these things for months!” Leon was dumbfounded.

“I only found out this morning. I just need a few photographs. I will write it up tonight.” Kira seemed remarkably calm. “I've been writing business plans for years. It isn't difficult.” Kira smiled. “I could even make an application for 'beneficial to the community' schemes and include the new project.”

“There is nothing beneficial to the community about the Conservative party.” Leon spluttered.
“Especially not as you seem hell-bent on promoting the Foreign Secretary, of all people.”

“Everything will be fine. A national-scale project will help enormously with the scheme for Sam. I had better finish some of the old stuff though, just in case anybody ever actually buys any of it.” Kira's work had not sold recently. She seemed blissfully unconcerned, as she did not rely on it for income. Kira's life seemed to be a very long learning curve. Leon wondered if she realised how little time she had to perfect the over-arching work-of-art that was her endlessly expanding brain. “Don't worry, Leon. I just need to get more work to fund it. Look what fun I had after Brexit, and it didn't cost me anything at all!”

“So, basically the idea is we get the Foreign Secretary, who is just as crazy as you, into Number 10. Then what?”

“Then I will need a proper publisher to appear, as if by magic, and take the Conservative books I am working on. Once I have a publisher, it will then be time to return to the original book, which theoretically removes all politics as we know it and creates an entirely new landscape for debate. Sam has no idea how clever he is. I shall take great delight in presenting it to him.” A twinkle seemed to sparkle in Kira's eye as she glanced at Leon.

“Are you sure he is the clever one?”

“He is the key to my lock. Why do you think I hold him in such precious esteem, even when he insists on being silly? There is nothing either of us can do about that. We shall just have to make it a rhetorical question.” Kira seemed to be glowing as she smiled, and returned to her sewing.

Introducing Lucifer Ogilvie

“And now for something completely different!” Lucifer beamed as he flexed his fingers in his customary manner before strenuously signing a piece of paper.

“Honestly, Lucy, what is different about you building yet more bridges.” Russell Fidget-Jones sighed, checked his pocket-watch and looked out of the window. “It’s your favourite trick. Every time there is a problem, along comes yet another bridge. How many bridges have you started now? Nineteen or something? Don’t you think someone will catch on eventually?”

“Of course not! Bridges are wonderful! Everyone loves bridges! They are a symbol of hope!” Lucifer grinned.

“Let us take a rational look at this, Lucifer. You make some of the worst speeches I have ever heard, you accidentally persuade the population to make a disastrous decision to leave Europe, and you think you can make it all go away by building a bridge to take people toumm..... Europe?”

“Yes! I’m a genius!” Lucifer was unusually pleased with himself.

“And what about this dangerous haggis-eating revolutionary that wants to make you Prime Minister? Where did she come from?”

“I don’t know? I’ve never met her. She has spiffing taste in politicians though?” Lucifer looked up brightly.

“You’re asking me to believe that a revolutionary Scottish Nationalist is prominently supporting a senior hard-right Tory for no reason at all?” Fidget-Jones looked stern. “You don’t think the Services will start taking an interest?”

“They haven’t mentioned it. I am sure it’s nothing serious.” Lucifer frowned. “I’m not all that hard right really, and I don’t think she is really all that revolutionary.”

“The public think you are. You vote as if you are. Why would she see something different?”

“I’m sure I don’t know?” Lucifer swallowed.

“Just as long as you know where your loyalties lie Lucifer. People will talk.” Fidget-Jones looked fondly at Lucifer.

“I really don’t think it’s a problem. She’s an artist. It’s probably just the hair. They all like the hair.” Lucifer looked down at his paperwork with an unusual level of interest. His mop of unruly white-blond hair had been his best asset for most of his life.

“Honestly, Lucifer, did you see the video she posted this morning?”

“Yes, yes I did.”

“Probably best if your supporters don't include flag-waving rebel nationalists wearing masks really, all things considered, Lucifer.”

“I think it adds a touch of mystery and glamour, personally. I especially liked the chest-beating.” Lucifer assumed his most beguiling expression as he flirted with Fidget-Jones' elusive sense of humour.

“Very well, Lucifer, we shall wait and see how the situation develops. We mustn't let anything get in the way of the 'Liliput government' project.....The investors must be kept happy, you know.”

“Yes, sir.” Lucifer nodded sagely. “Although technically speaking, we are supposed to be serving the voters too, you know.” Fidget-Jones snorted as he laughed.

Three hundred miles north Kira and Leon worked tirelessly on the props for their project. A host of new skills and visualisations were required to create Kira's vision. Lucifer must be put in charge of the UK. Vision and motivation were required to move the country forward, she reasoned.

“Why are we helping the English again?” Leon looked confused.

“There are sixty million or so people that aren't Scottish on this island. They are too stupid to know what is about to happen to them if we don't do this.”

“Yeah, and not only do they hate us, they keep voting for these idiots. Look at your stupid pal across the road. You tried to help him, and look what he is doing to you now. Tories are all dumb as rocks.”

“We can't help them with that. Now and again, however, the Great British machine gets a chance to operate properly, and it would be nice if it was actually in our lifetime.”

“When was the last time that happened? They don't know what their class is for any more, even if you and daft Lucifer do.”

“Oh gosh, the fifties? Tiny Rowland and Jimmy Goldsmith killed off the end of it. Remember them? I was only five or six, and even I knew Tiny was gorgeous.” Kira looked wistful. “If only I had been old enough to run off with Tiny. He was quite a dish.”

“Enemies of the people!” Leon bristled. “Kill them all!”

“Odd to think that income distribution was actually fairer then, isn't it?” Kira strapped a large flag-pole to her forearm. “How about this one? It's a bit lighter than the one this morning.” She pulled her mask up and balanced the flag on one hip.

“Don't let the sixty million English people you want to save see you with that. They will probably want to kill you.” Leon shook his head.

“Too funny.” Kira giggled. “We had better make some special ones up, just for them.”

Three thousand miles to the west, Sam wondered why this made him so mad? It was just a video of a little fat lady waving a flag. He couldn't even see her face. Why wasn't she working on his book? Why wasn't she strapped up in a corset so she would look right? How much patience was he expected to have?

This was totally irrational, of course, he realised as one of his children messily clutched at his ankle under the computer desk. He must try to forget about it. People often strayed from the path, particularly ones that you carefully ignored. He tried to feel happy for her, whilst being dimly aware of boiling with rage that she appeared to be warming to a speaker so careless, so offhand, so irritatingly relaxed whilst messing with world politics. How dare she!

He often quite enjoyed his rage. The exhilaration of the unadulterated selfishness; the internal visualisations of punishment; the unfairness that he was not, for the moment, the centre of the universe. He liked being unfair. Unfairness made him feel special. Feeling special was a nice sensation. He smiled. He would savour his fury later, for the benefit of one of his friends. At least Kira was useful for something.

Kira worked on her manifesto for weeks. The music video format seemed like an oddly natural process. The changes she had undergone whilst thinking about Sam had meant that communication was a vastly different process than it had been at university. In many ways she was ruined, she thought. Instead of bothering to write anything, it was expedient to do everything visually. The music had to be right. The visuals had to be right. The content had to be well-reasoned, and yet very simple so that the viewer didn't have to work too hard. Most interesting, like writing a child's book.....

Ode to David Avocado Wolfe

My sugar is as sweet as honey
I hear he has a lot of money
It's not convenient for me
Cos women, at least 33
Stay hanging on his ever mutter
His whispers set their hearts a-flutter
So sweetheart doesn't notice me
I wish I'd found him in a tree

Alas I am but short and fat
I don't think he would go for that
And yet my stubborn heart it waits
Oblivious of its broken state
I do not even look at him
Fingers recall, o'er work they skim
I wonder if I'll ere recover
From my sweet non-existent lover

There is my dear he is so handsome
Seducing him would cost a ransom
Without him life is dark and grey
But there is nothing I can say
He is busy, fighting long
'Gainst bad nutrition, often wrong
You are not right, he is no nancy
The foolish twit that I do fancy

My baby thinks that I'm quite stupid
He knows not that I'm struck by cupid
My lovely gorgeous nice love rocket
I think he needs a camphor locket
I mean nothing to this man
Love is quite cheap, comes in a can
And so it's pointless as you see
Good fortune will not come to me

My story's sad and very lonely
And yet i think of one thing only
I'll make some artwork, stuff my face
Perhaps I'll take up making lace
Because I'm worthless, brain no use
And now my heart's become obtuse
So what's the point, I'm getting older
No reason to become much bolder
He doesn't care, he doesn't speak
So destiny it looks quite bleak

Nonnet for David Avocado Wolfe

My lovely dove, my sweet peace pigeon
Your blender, neat and in the kitchen
Dreams of you go through our heads
Good or bad, in soft beds
Tasty smoothie yeah
No stevia
Beetroot pink
Nice Sink
Ah

Not a poem for David Avocado Wolfe

I have tried so hard to think well of you
Tirelessly worked to make silk purses
When the silk was old and tattered
But there is something wrong with the way you see things
All you see is dark
And yet you talk of light
No-one can tell you how you really look
If you have never seen yourself
No-one can make you feel better
If you are determined not to feel at all.

Asefru for David Avocado Wolfe

My dear, when young a bad boy

Was perhaps unfair

Entered fast, went in too hard

Now he spreads his love and joy

Entreats us to share

And understand him as bard

His wealth and fame make him coy

Not able to care

Concealed behind his own guard

Anacreontic for David Avocado Wolfe

I see, delightful creature,
That I will never feature,
No matter how I'm trying
I always end up crying
So now I sit here sewing
Although my time is owing

Blason for David Avocado Wolfe

Darling's hair is the colour of cold farm sludge
His eyes compare somewhat to treacle fudge
In summer, his skin takes an orange hue
His hair becomes red, as if fire has ensued
His feet are so shapely, as if made of marble
His words are contrived as to not be a garble
Who could fail to adore my sweet as he stands
Ladies fall to worship in small giggling bands
T'would be rude to ignore any eloquent speeches
I am quite sure he smells of sweet ripened peaches

Misc. poetry for David Avocado Wolfe

I simply do not care
If people stop and stare
I long since gave up trying
In favour of more crying
It was not your fault
The wound and the salt

They badmouthed me, near
They lied, went too far
Was unable to cope
My only hope
Dashed. Heart rended
Life and love ended

You did make me laugh
Being slightly daft
Ever the cynic
No need for a clinic
It now seems so sad
No need to be glad

My friends they were right
No need for the light
Used to burn in my eyes

No big surprise
That life is quite boring
Might as well spend it snoring

Who wants to hear
A whimsical seer?
Not you
Then who?
So now I will eat
Grow too big for my seat.

Balliol Rhyme for David Avocado Wolfe

My name is David Avocado Wolfe
There is nothing 'bout you that I do not engulf
I'm the king of all things raw and healthy
And people do say that I'm very wealthy

How do I know?

I suppose she is beautiful
In a non-visual kinda way
But they are all beautiful
So how can I tell?
I have to measure it somehow
So I ask my friends
Is she beautiful?
And when they sneer, I sneer
When they leer, I leer
Their envy tells me
Success or fail?
I was born to sell
Not to tell
If something is good or bad
It all makes me glad
So how do I know?
Some want money
Some want fame
All she wants
Is more than I want
For me

About the author: Ina Disguise lives in Scotland with cats. I'd forgotten how much the poems made me laugh. I detest poetry, but Wolfe likes it, so I had a mad moment.

