

TARA GUHA

UNTOUCHABLE  
THINGS



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**Tara Guha** was born to an Indian father and English mother and spent her childhood in the Ribble Valley, passing many a wet day writing poetry and music. After studying English at Cambridge she embarked on a career in the classical music industry in London, promoting artists including Placido Domingo, Paul McCartney and Dudley Moore.

Over the years she has also been a freelance journalist, charity worker and has trained as a counsellor. Tara is a keen amateur pianist, singer and songwriter and lives in the hills of West Yorkshire with her partner and two daughters.

*Untouchable Things* is Tara's first novel.

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*For my family, who believed.  
And for my younger self, who didn't.*



## PROLOGUE

For the third time this week he is watching her scream.

Watching, not listening.

After the first time he tunes out of the less interesting part, the sound. The vibrato is uneven, the pitch wavering, the timbre too harsh. But the face is mesmeric, eyes contracted to penny slots while the mouth gapes to spew its cheap auditory prize. Munch, of course, is behind some of the distortion, stamping *The Scream* all over anyone who expresses horror. Even the pretty ones.

But the scream is hers too, and his by default. Not that she knows he is here, not as such. The invitation is tacit, a door left ajar. A paying peephole where he ogles with the others.

She has it down to a fine art, that slight shake of her head, almost a nervous tic, sending a ripple effect down the length of her hair until marigold tresses swing around her like the arms of twirling children. People approach at their peril. She likes it that way: look but don't touch. All her power wound into her hair, like Samson.

Her body holds no fear as it ripples through a series of postures designed to tantalise. Virgin, whore, mother, lover, a sequence choreographed especially for him. And it works. It works as she knows it will and she thrills in his powerlessness to do anything but watch.

His hand twitches and he stretches it slowly so the knuckles crack. Quick glances of disapproval: the watchers must stay silent. They must abide by the protocols of the genre, contain themselves until a glorious ovational climax.

It costs him nothing to wait.

For the fourth time this week he is watching her scream. Watching, not listening. Watching with the mute button on, pressing pause here and there to savour a particular expression, a line of her body. She moves like a dancer. Her hair is a responsive partner but a limelight stealer, forever trying to pirouette off but dragged back, like a recalcitrant Siamese twin. It shimmers in a weightless red-gold haze but he knows its truth, how it slumps into his hands hot and heavy and sticky.

*You're staring at my hair.*

Who goes here? Witch, spirit, dream? Curls converge to make a veil, darkened to rust and hiding her face.

*You remind me of someone.*

*Do I?*

Perhaps there is no face. Perhaps it's just bones under there, freckled skin peeled away to leave the gasp of eye sockets and a toothless grin. He hears rustling, the squirming of caged limbs and realises it's him, writhing, palpitating so that people are craning their heads to look. His neighbour shuffles away a little, crosses her leg with some difficulty so that her booted foot points passive-aggressively, Britishly, in the other direction. He thinks about crossing his own leg and sending one pristine Italian shoe in to remonstrate. He laughs, possibly aloud, and refocuses his gaze.

She has a face, he can see that now, but he can't tell which one. Her hair has fallen back into rank, a mutinous army ready to surge, jostling on her back, a teaming mass, a plural. Flickering memories project onto the exposed visage: Abigail. Ophelia. Julia. Rebecca. He can channel surf, one jab of his thumb to flick between them. But he can't be sure they're not in cahoots to confuse him, the mouth of one with the eyes of another, a high stakes game of *Guess Who?* He narrows his eyes to focus but the effect is to separate them, to see double, quadruple, until they have claimed the stage and evaded his remote control. His head throbs and his vision pixelates, spilling them – her – into patterns of dancing dots.



Flies crawl down from his hairline and when he dashes them, his hand comes away wet. The sucked taste is salt, and it soothes him.

For the fifth time this week he is watching her scream.



## ACT 1 - SCENE 1

When she bows she lets the roar of the audience fall on her like a wave.

Tonight it's a tidal wave, pressing down on her head, booming in her ears until she wonders if she'll ever fight her way up again. She must. She has something left to deliver.

She raises her head, stands tall, stares out at them. She feels the ripples of shock spreading up from the ground to the gallery to the upper circle and back through her body. She is dripping and shivering, her hair matted into dark soaked tresses trickling a thin stream across the stage. The director's idea, reminding the room that Ophelia is dead, drowned, done. Blurring the line between art and life. The clapping shudders and stills, people horrified to find themselves applauding a suicide. She forces herself to stay with it, letting them feast on the sight of her, her nakedness skimmed with sopping white cotton, medusa coils of thick red hair slapped to her breasts. The classic male fantasy of Ophelia as neurotic virgin, laid out to arouse and shame the paying voyeurs. She shudders and it's not for effect. She is being sacrificed for a higher purpose.

The silence is louder than the applause, pulsating like a giant heart in her ears as she stands. But she is not done. She is in the round, heated by the gaze of those behind her waiting for their turn. Slowly she pivots, rotating like a ballerina impaled in a musical box. Swathes of gasps follow her round as she is revealed to each section of the house. She turns again into blinding lights. Squinting would spoil the effect so she suffers the white beams that will imprint purple

circles on her vision for the next half-hour. She turns and lets them gawp, crane their heads, clench their fists. Then one voice cries out from the front of the stalls and the floodgates reopen, the audience bellows and she is felled once more.

*Goodnight, ladies; goodnight, sweet ladies; goodnight, goodnight.*

**Thank you, Miss Laurence. To clarify, you met Seth Gardner on September 27th 1996 after a performance of *Hamlet*?**

Yes, in the pub.

**Which pub would that be?**

The usual.

The Red Lion off Hanover Street. It was a favourite. She knew the landlord, Des. That night her hair was still damp, glowing like embers as Seth would tell her later. She was first in, first to the bar, looking to numb the places where so many eyes had burned.

*Clunk.* Eyes slotted into the gaze of another, a jigsaw completed, freeze frame of a shutter coming down. A dark-haired man sitting at a table is watching her. A moment stretched.

Then, turning back, her friends, the post-mortem, the babbled deconstruction and congratulations. A quick glance over her shoulder, the table now empty. A casting director? The usual chit-chat. *My agent isn't returning my calls. Is yours any good? Have you got anything lined up afterwards?* The older contingent banging on about the demise of rep.

She doesn't want to do this, not tonight. Instead she plies people with drinks, makes them laugh, reminds them it's a day off tomorrow. But by pint number three people are making their excuses. Drastic tactics are needed. She sways to the bar and orders three tequila slammers.

*How now, fair Ophelia?* The voice pours deep into her ear

like warm water. She turns and he is right there, next to her, the dark-haired man from across the room. Close up she sees that his eyes are the wrong shade of green and she can't look away from them. They drip amusement.

"It looks as though Rosencrantz has just exited pub left. So might I avail myself of one of these?" She's vaguely surprised at his cut-glass English accent. The hair, the eyes, suggest something other. She sees the curve of his mouth, plush as a woman's. Then a hand reaching, she's transfixed for a second before her ears pop and she grasps both his drift and the glass.

"No, you may not. I don't generally buy drinks for strange men." If he is a casting director she's blown it now.

"Not even a strange man who loves Shakespeare? You were amazing tonight."

A laugh, her laugh. Too far gone for self-deprecation. "Thank you. I was, wasn't I?"

His laugh, louder, more sonorous. "And modest too. It gets better." He stretches a serious hand out to her hair. "You must have been cold though. Look at you. You're still wet."

She is wet, suddenly, but not in the places he means. He has her hair in his fingers. If she tried to leave now, would he stop her?

There's a commotion to her right and an inebriated Hamlet, risen from the dead, lurches forwards.

"Becks, I gotta go. Lucy'll kill me if I'm late again. Oh... hello." He smiles at the man, tries to stand upright.

He thinks it's a casting director.

"Jez, meet..."

The man's lips stretch and curve. "Seth."

"Seth thought we were wonderful tonight. Isn't that right?" She giggles, her grip a little too tight on Jez's arm.

"Indeed I did. An electrifying performance."

Jez shoots a quizzical glance at Rebecca and she shakes her head. Then he grins and slaps the man on the back. "Cheers, mate, glad you enjoyed it. Here, have my drink. I've

really got to go, Becs – will you be all right?”

“Maybe I should come with you.” The pub chatter is swelling, filling her head, and the faintly stubbled cleft on the man’s chin is an unknown quantity. Jez winks and bends to kiss her cheeks.

“Nah, stay, you look like you’re having fun. Be a good girl, eh? Call you tomorrow, darling.”

**You left the pub with him?**

Yes. Yes, it was stupid and the only thing I could have done. I don’t expect you to understand.

**You had a boyfriend, Miss Laurence?**

Rebecca, please. Yes, I did. What difference does that make? Nothing happened.

**Could I take your boyfriend’s details?**

Is this relevant? We’re not together now. And why all the sudden questions? Has something else happened? Is there something you’re not telling me?

**Your ex-boyfriend’s details?**

I’ll fetch my address book. Here. (Jason Fletcher, 116a Reynolds Road, perfect boyfriend material.) We’d been together two years I think at that point.

**Thank you, Miss Laurence. Was there anything else about the earlier part of that evening that stands out in your mind? Before you went on your way with Mr Gardner?**

Not that I can remember. It was the third night of the run, we knew what we were doing. Oh yes – I’d forgotten. Backstage before the show. Some flowers...

It was impossible not to smile at her own reflection. Each red-gold tendril coiled softly and separately over her shoulders

like a pre-Raphaelite painting. Her face, pale at the best of times, bleached translucent under the lights, but tonight it didn't matter. For the first time she felt perfectly physically matched to a character.

She stepped back in case anyone was watching but couldn't resist another furtive primp. People were milling about chatting, adjusting each other's costumes; comfortable background noise like a distant radio. In general her unusual – some said startling – look gave directors a headache casting her. Blondes and Mediterranean types always did better. On too many occasions she'd been told that her appearance would distract from the part, that she wasn't how they imagined a character to look. She wore more wigs than a drag queen, and of course there was stage make-up, but this time – she *was* Ophelia, simple as that.

Unsettling, given that Ophelia's life consisted of being screwed around by men and then going mad. Not quite the script Rebecca had in mind for herself. But she had to acknowledge some kind of affinity that went beyond looks. Getting into the role was no more challenging than slipping on a favourite dress.

What did that say about her? She wanted to follow the thought but that feeling ambushed her, the one that buckled her legs like being kicked in the back of the knees. She leant on a chair for a second. Here she was, twenty-eight years old and playing Ophelia. Her whole intestine seemed to straighten and re-coil at the thought. On Tuesday, her parents would be in the audience, holding each other's hands as they watched her take the stage. They hadn't always been sure about her choice of career, but they had supported her through it all, the big parts in student productions, the bit parts in fringe productions, the tears and the nearly giving up and the lack of anything approaching an income.

“Ten minutes, boys and girls.”

The scene around her exploded into action. She had to jump back to avoid the sharp lip of a passing shovel; the

gravediggers meant business. Intonations of lines started up around her like a sudden burst of prayer. She closed her eyes, waiting for her body's response.

Here it was, the surge of giddiness on the in-breath, held... held some more, then rushing out like tiny waves to her fingertips. Eyes blinked open like a doll. In front of her was Ophelia's fragile face, attempting, but not quite pulling off a smile. And then a beep from the table, making them both jump. She frowned. Ophelia would not be answering a mobile phone. But she couldn't help herself, moist fingers sliding over still unfamiliar keys.

*BREAK A LEG, DARLING. I LOVE YOU. J XXX*

Jason. Her frown deepened before smoothing into the wisp of a smile. Ever since she'd jumped on the mobile phone bandwagon he'd sent her the same message before every performance, capitals bellowing at her. It had become part of her pre-performance ritual; not as extreme as many – she liked to think she was pretty rational, for an actor – but it soothed her as it irritated her, the sameness of the message, night after night.

The rustle of plastic and Leah appears from nowhere, face almost hidden by a huge bouquet of flowers. She doesn't want to talk to Leah now, she needs to focus.

“For you-hoo!”

“What?”

“You're supposed to say ‘*For me?*’ Look. Aren't they amazing?”

She half takes the flowers from Leah but she's not ready for their weight one-handed and they nearly fall between them. Leah makes a grab.

“Hey. Be careful. These are mega bucks.”

Rebecca puts down her mobile, takes them properly this time and sees a blur of colours bleeding into each other. The smell is like a punch in the face. “Who are they from?”

“Dunno. There's no note.” Of course Leah would have already checked. “Not exactly Jason's style, innit?”



Not exactly. And now Rebecca is irritated with the flowers, wants them to go away, and she knows it's just nerves but she actually wants to shout *fuck the flowers* and throw them across the room, but there's Leah to appease so she smiles, says "I wonder," and places them with exaggerated care on her bag. "Sorry, I need to..."

"I know, babe. See you in the pub."

She closes her eyes against the waves of lily sweetness, wonders if she might fall asleep like Dorothy in the poppy field. Breathe. She shuffles away a bit and a *boom* rushes up from her stomach, like she's falling upwards. She clutches the back of a chair and her eyes open on Anthony Lambury doing Tai Chi across the room, left leg wobbling precariously under purple robes, arms flailing like a puppet and it breaks the fall and she can smile, and then start over. When she looks back towards the mirror she is relieved to see Ophelia gazing at her through glassy eyes.

There was magic on stage. She always loved acting with Jez but the connection between them was like a power line tonight, fizzing and sparking. Ophelia barely spoke in the first two acts but Rebecca knew how to reel the audience in, draw every eye to her so that each person was implicated in what was to follow.

It's only now she thinks, *I never found out who sent the flowers.*

## SCENE 2

Why would a sparrow be hovering by the large, glass doors of Draper & Sons if not to buy a piano?

Or to play one. The sparrow, who also went by the name of Catherine, hopped a little on twig-like legs made twiggy by tan tights and tried to summon the *chutzpah* to go in. The wind teased her mousy, shoulder-length hair like a curious kitten. Mist clung in droplets to the slightly oversized, red wool coat, a cast-off from her extravagant sister and the only possible entry permit she had. She fluttered along the glassed

length of the building, a sparrow with a death wish, twittering ever so quietly to herself: “I can do this. I can play this role.”

She needed to look serious. In this coat she could be a peacock, strutting disdainfully around the instruments, even preening. No, not preening. Preening might draw attention to her scuffed boots and shapeless jeans. Instead she should move swiftly, a hawk swooping down on its prey, seizing it before anyone had time to challenge her. Even if she was pulled off she would have filled her mouth by then, the taste dripping out of her, ravaged hunks to take home.

With a haughty inclination of her head she spins on her heel and collides with a woman behind her. Instant apologies, retreat, the gathering of resolve over again. A tide rising inside her, threatening to cut off her ability to act.

In the end it was the rain, swinging in from the West, from a tourist-soaked Carnaby Street, that drove the sparrow to seek shelter in an unfamiliar habitat. It paused briefly in the entrance, considering hurling itself back at the double doors, and then found it surprisingly easy to hop forward, avoiding the brazen overtures of electric guitars and drum kits, until it arrived at the foot of the curved central staircase.

Heel-toe, heel-toe, with a little hamstring tensing thrown in, is all it takes to mount the stairs, slowly like a queen, all poise and gravitas. She knows it’s important to get into role early, lest a jittery entrance reveals her imposture.

*I’d like to buy a piano.*

*Can you show me your best pianos?*

*I’m in the market for a top-of-the-range grand piano.*

She scratches the last one – too American, new money, all show. This establishment values modest understatement. Though not in matters of footwear. She hopes no one looks at her feet.

She’s reached the halfway point and there it is, the first gleam of ebony. Keep going. Heel-toe, the thrusting young uprights materialise first, bit by shiny bit, top down, coffins that turn into keyboards, perched, finally, on three funny little

feet. Heel-toe and the veterans appear, the grands, grumbling away at the back.

She halts. Row upon row of pianos basking in the lights, a colour swatch of browns and blacks. Rosewood, mahogany, ebony, maple: a blinding mass of perfection. She feels herself growing smaller, as in the face of the sea. Breathe. Look at ease. You are at home with expensive pianos. You know that under their dazzling veneer all they want is to be touched properly, responsively. And you know how to do that.

She emerges as a child reaching the top of a fairy tale tree, stepping out into a different land. A tang of woodiness cools her nostrils and the hush that ghosts over her face is not a silence but a breathing presence. A piano choir watches her, waiting for her next move. For a second she breathes with them. And then the jolt of eye contact with a dark-haired man smiling at her next to a black Yamaha upright. Tall, polished, intimidating, looking disconcertingly like his product. If she's a sparrow, this one, under his sober suit, is a jay. Do jays eat sparrows? His feathers puff out as he strolls towards her, smiling.

“You look like the proverbial child in the sweet shop.”

And you look like... but his words goad her and she lifts her chin. “I’m here to buy a piano.”

“Well, you’ve made it to the right place.” Something untrustworthy – sarcasm, perhaps – glitters green in his eyes. It’s as if he has seen into her, watched her halting progress outside the shop. Has he? He’s talking again. “Anything particular in mind?”

“Well...” she flicks her eyes as if to survey the room. “I’m after a grand. Something with a big bass.”

“I see.” His eyebrows arch into inverted smiles and she clenches her fist against a rising blush. “I presume it’s okay to try one or two out?” Stand still. Mirror his self-assurance. Ignore the fact that he’s just glanced at your shoes.

“I can’t see that being a problem. It’s the back right-hand corner you need, if I’m not mistaken.”

*You're not.* She nods thanks and reins in her legs to walking pace. Is it still there? Why is he following her?

Stretched out in the corner she spots the focal point of her dreams for the past three months. Steinway Model B, Hamburg 1928. She wants to run her hands down its length, lay her cheek on its cool mottled surface. And she wants to be alone.

“Ah, the Steinway.” The salesman looks at her as if she has answered a question correctly.

“Yes, I – I tried it once before and I guess I fell in love.” She can’t quite meet his gaze.

“Well, be my guest.”

She pulls out the leather stool, adjusts the height slightly and is still. Her fingers strain towards the keyboard but her mind is negotiating enormity, the need to do the instrument justice. What is most fitting? Bach, to show off the clarity? Beethoven, for the brazen power of the thing? Or Chopin for both? Chopin it is. She dives in, finds herself in the slow movement of the E minor concerto, fingers plucking out the notes even though she hasn’t looked at it for more than a year. She watches herself play a little slower, more indulgently, than she might have done in front of her teacher, lets herself soak in the sound.

Feather touch on the right hand runs, hear that crispness, each melody singing out like ice-cold champagne on a hot day. Notes rush up to meet her fingers, ripple through them leaving a river of sound. And sweeping her to the big chords, increase pressure, bigger, bigger... the whole world is resonating with E major and she’s no longer in control, she could stay there, wants to stay, but cool keys caress her right hand and gently guide her down. It wasn’t exactly what Chopin had written but it told his story.

At the final chord she finds she can’t lift her head, can’t emerge, won’t emerge, even as she remembers her surroundings, the salesman. Perhaps he’s wandered off. But when she raises her face, there he is, sitting on one of the nearby stools, staring out of the window with his back to her.

Without warning he snaps round and gets to his feet. The movement shocks her, an expletive in church, and she raises a hand to protect herself. He is moving in on her with a brisk sense of purpose. About to start the sales pitch, no doubt. Her game is up.

“Well, you’ve made up my mind for me.”

“Sorry?” She tries to stand, foggily, stumbling as she pushes back the stool. Always the same after a moment like that, when the music passes through her, like she’s forgotten how to use her limbs. Fluidly he reaches over to move the stool away.

“I feel like we’ve had sex. Even though I was just watching.”

She feels her eyes expand into outrage. And then another suited man appears from nowhere, clutching some sort of pamphlet.

“I’m terribly sorry to keep you waiting, sir. Here’s the updated catalogue.” A quick disapproving glance at her as he holds out his hand.

The man smiles but doesn’t accept the catalogue. “I won’t be needing it now. I’ve decided to take this one.” His vague wave of the hand could have been meant for Catherine or the piano.

“Sorry, sir, I’m not sure I understand.” The second man’s face is elongating in wonder, prompting Catherine to shut her own mouth. What is going on? She ducks her head against the barrage of sales patter – excellent choice, methods of payment, delivery dates – peppering her like hailstones. A name, spoken and then spelled: Seth Gardner, without the ‘e’. The ground is swaying slightly and the top of the stairway urges her to get out of this strange land before it moves on and leaves her stranded. The two men are so busy with each other it will be easy to slip away unnoticed.

“Excuse me!” At the ground floor exit she hears a shout. A hand on her arm. She turns into the green-eyed piano purchaser, lit with the shop lights and a smile that is more

mischief than apology. She pulls away her arm, surprised at the sudden rush of anger. He moderates his smile. "Look, I'm sorry for that. You just seemed to assume I was a salesman so I, er, carried on the role play." It isn't much of an explanation. She moves toward the darkness behind the doors where umbrellas are hurrying past. "But then I heard you play and, well, I just had to take the piano. I wasn't that serious about buying, but what you did in there... it was one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard."

A smile is worming its way through the seal of her lips. She tries to check it. "Thank you. It's an amazing piano. I hope you enjoy it."

A muscle twitches on his barely stubbled cheek. "I shall certainly enjoy listening to it. I don't play myself, never taken the trouble to learn."

Words are sucked from her mouth. He's buying a £70,000 piano and doesn't play? "Well, I hope others enjoy it then." She means to be cutting but it comes out wobbly, tear-tinged. "I've got to go."

Once again a hand on her arm. "Don't go yet. Come back into the warm and give me a chance to explain. I just need to finish the paperwork upstairs but why don't you let me buy you a coffee afterwards? There's a great little place round the corner."

**And that was the first time you met Seth Gardner?**

Yes. Sorry, I know I've probably given you more detail than you need. It's just... I remember everything like it was a film.

**Could you speak up, Miss Jarret?**

Sorry, it's nothing. I just miss him, that's all. I - sorry...

**Do you need to take a break?**

No. No, I'll be fine. I know this is important. I'll try again.

### SCENE 3

Can you tell us about the rest of the evening, Miss Laurence?

Now, there's a question. It would be nice if she could. It was certainly a night to remember, she's sure of that, but remembering is the problem. The shape of it was there, later, to admire, but the little details, whole hours in fact, were smudged and indecipherable. There was another round of tequilas, almost certainly. Then Seth's suggestion of taking a taxi to his club in Soho, which had made her laugh as she pictured leather armchairs and cigars. Of course, she'd got into the taxi anyhow, which made her laugh again as she imagined the disapproving tug of Jason's eyebrows. He never got cabs, insisting on consulting his *A to Z* at every opportunity to work out a walking route, even when her shoes were killing her.

One street blurring into the other, no idea where they were. It didn't matter. Seth was talking to the cabbie about which roads were best at this time of night and she leaned back into the seat, content to let the men blabber on about one-way streets and no left turns. His voice rose and fell like a babbling brook of her childhood. *Mellifluous*. The word surprises her. She tries it out in her mouth, savouring the effect on her tongue. At some point after that she may have drifted off.

"... are you?"

She judders, comes to, and looks across, reaching for an expression of alertness. The taxi has stopped. Seth's eyebrows are raised.

"Sorry?"

"I said, you're not going to bail on me, are you?"

She sits up. "Not me! Are we here?"

He grins and jumps out, appearing at her side like a magician to open her door and bowing as she makes a less-than-dignified exit.

“And put that away, please.” It’s a good job. She doesn’t have more than a tenner on her. He offers her his arm, this man she’s just met, and she takes it, regretting the tequila and her shoes, cursing the cobbles. She inches forwards like a geriatric.

“Lucky we don’t have far to walk, eh?” He leads her to a black door with a gold knob. No number. No sign. He knocks twice, heavily. “*Now* why are you laughing?”

She bites her lip. “Because we’re knocking on a random door in the middle of Soho. Part of me expects a mad hatter to open it.”

“Ah, the magic threshold. You could have a point. Follow me, Alice.”

A suited man was holding the door open and smiling. Other men seemed to appear from behind him like a cabaret trick, taking their coats and offering drinks. “You know I don’t play cards?” she hissed as she followed Seth upstairs.

“Shame.” He pushed open a heavy double door and blaring house music almost knocked her backwards.

Rebecca blinked. Shadowy bodies gyrated in the smoke and she smelled dry ice. She turned to Seth; his mouth was moving but she couldn’t make out the words over the music. He smiled and let the door close. Abruptly the sound was sucked away.

“Later, perhaps?”

She shook her head and followed him upstairs into a lounge area replete with sofas, soft lighting and jazz. Rebecca felt her senses sharpening.

“You like?”

They were sitting next to a window that stretched the length of the room, like a giant spy hole over the city. Blue-black sky and swirls of smoky cloud gave way to jagged rooftops and, below those, silent traffic and moving figures. Neon flashes lit the glass.

“It’s amazing. I’ve never been anywhere like this.”

“Welcome to Wonderland. I’ll tell you if you start shrinking. Mind if I smoke?”



She shook her head as he took out a silver cigarette box from his jacket. She had never seen anyone use a cigarette box. She was going to ask about it but he tucked it away again quickly. She looked around, wondering how many places like this were hiding in plain sight alongside the London she knew. The waft of burning as he lit his cigarette smelled of danger and possibilities.

“The Singapore Slings are excellent.”

She dragged her gaze away from the window, towards the drinks menu and instantly gave up. “Suits me. Sorry, I just can’t stop looking. It’s like we’re suspended in our own little bubble, but right in the middle of everything.”

Seth exhaled a thin stream of smoke, signalled for the drinks and leaned in. The lights caught his eyes and they gleamed. “Exactly. Look, we’re sitting here sipping our cocktails, having a private conversation, but any time we want we can jump down into the melee.”

For a second she actually wanted to jump, could imagine the arc her body would make against the night sky as it leapt and fell. She gripped the table edge with tingling fingers. He looked at her as if he could read her mind.

“I think we’re going to have a lot of fun, Ophelia.”

“Me too.” But something clanged inside and she dropped her gaze.

“Ah, don’t tell me. You have a boyfriend.”

She looked up with a wooden smile. “Ten out of ten.” Her energy levels were sinking.

“Well, don’t look like that about it. Isn’t that supposed to be my reaction rather than yours?” Seth tapped his cigarette.

“I suppose so. I...”

“Look.” His touch on her hand made her start. “I never expected a woman like you to be single. Believe it or not, I’m not here to seduce you, I’m just enjoying your company. Not that you’re not a tempting proposition, of course.”

“Thanks... I think.” She knew she was blushing and hoped the candlelight would mask it. *A woman like you.* She

felt about fifteen.

“Look, here come our drinks. We’ll have one and then I insist on taking you downstairs.”

It was two in the end – a mojito to follow – and she had time to examine him as sips of swanky cocktails flamed her insides. He was easily the best-dressed man she’d ever seen. Everything – navy blazer, lilac shirt, even his jeans, even his shoes, for God’s sake – looked made for him. Perhaps they were.

“You’re looking at my shoes, Rebecca.”

“Sorry. How do you keep suede so pristine?”

He laughed but flicked his hand as if casting aside her question. “Let’s go and dance.”

And that was where the evening became blurred. He sends her spinning like a top and whips her back with a flick of his wrist. She is squealing like a child wanting more, wanting him to stop, sometimes graceful, sometimes stumbling into his arms. Each time she completes a revolution his face is there, steady, two cat’s eyes guiding her home. She knows he is a good dancer and that she must yield to him as he throws her back over his arm, trust that he will hold her up. Sometimes his lips move and although he is looking at her she can’t be sure that he is talking to her. She wants to dance a tango with him, to grasp his face in her hands then pull away, but she is at his mercy, spinning around him and finally, now, begging him to stop.

Then they are outside again on stripped streets. He squeezes her hand. “Back to reality.” A group of men rounds the corner, shouting. One of them waits behind to vomit into a bin. “But any time you fancy, the portal is there.”

“Thank you. It’s been amazing.” She throws back her head and lets sticky hair trickle down her back. Clouds sail hurriedly through a starless sky. Lit by a streetlamp a single leaf is wheeling and swirling, hurtling in the wind. She sighs as she watches it disappear. “What time is it?”

“Oh, you know. Early.”

She grabs his hand and squints at an expensive watch. “God, it’s not really 3.15 is it? I have to get home. Do you think I can get a cab around here?”

“Don’t worry about that.” He turns to face her. “There’s something I wanted to ask you first.”

She steadies herself. “Go on.”

“How do you fancy joining a group?”

“A group? What sort of group?”

“I suppose you could call it a creative arts group.”

“What?” She laughs. “Down at the community centre, that sort of thing? I didn’t have you down as the type.”

“Not exactly.” And he’s not smiling now. “Meetings are at my place. Friday nights usually. The Friday Folly, we call ourselves.” He looks so serious that she squeezes the smile from her face like a naughty child.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have laughed. What happens at these... meetings?”

“Oh, someone shows a painting, someone reads a poem, that sort of thing. You could sing us some songs of madness. Then we get drunk and feast on home-cooked food. Of course, if it sounds a bit too odd for you...”

“I didn’t say that.” They size each other up, two gladiators in a ring. A smile starts on his face and passes over to hers. “Okay, sounds as crazy as the rest of this night, so yes, I’ll come to your Friday Frolic.”

“Folly.” He kisses her, leaving a cool spot on her right cheek that she wants to touch. “Good. I’ll be in touch. Now, I think your carriage may be arriving.” He puts his foot into the road and waves at the yellow light. “Unless I can tempt you with further frolics?”

“No, thank you, I’ve been tempted enough already.” She didn’t mean that quite as it came out. The cab pulls up as she tries to explain and Seth puts his finger on her lips.

“Goodnight, sweet Ophelia.”

And then he is gone and she is staring at the space he has left.