



Bar 42, Reading

Sophie Tennant had never seen her date in real life, but she knew he was brown-eyed, brown-haired, slightly built, and a scumbag.

Please, at least let him be tall. She stood inside the doorway of the bar, scanning the room. To her relief, he wasn't an early bird. She smoothed down her red dress and rubbed her lips together to make sure her red lipstick was still fresh, both actions unnecessary because she knew she was wrinkle-free and she'd put on the lipstick in her car five minutes ago, after adjusting the adhesive tape around her thigh and beneath her bra. Sophie went to the bar, ordered a tonic water with ice and a slice, and brought it to her preferred table in the corner, facing the door with the light behind her.

It was the third time this month she'd been in Bar 42 and she was beginning to wonder if the bar staff thought she was desperate, a hooker, or both. She didn't like to be noticed and would have preferred to go somewhere else this time, but Keith had suggested it in his text.

It was a good location, anyway: not too dark, not too light, and just busy enough. Sophie'd had bad experiences

with noisy, crowded pubs before, hours of work down the drain because some idiot beside her was talking too loudly. And the less she thought about what had happened in the unlit car park of that country pub two years ago, the better.

No, Bar 42 was fine. She didn't want to risk Keith getting cold feet by seeming to be reluctant about anything he suggested. It had taken her long enough to set this up.

She checked her watch, although she knew it was two minutes past six. She caught herself jiggling her foot and stopped it. She put her hands palms-down on the table, her fingers curled slightly so that her bitten nails were hidden. She could do the dress, she could do the shoes and the makeup and the hair, but she drew the line at false nails. They were hell to get off.

When she looked up, he was coming through the door.

He stopped and surveyed the room, much as she had. Then he spotted her and made a beeline for her table. 'Sophie?'

'Yes.' She stood, and instead of shaking her hand he kissed her on the cheek.

He wasn't tall. Okay, he was taller than her, but she was five foot four in three-inch heels, so that wasn't difficult. She thought maybe five foot five, five six.

Why were so many of them short? She could do a thesis on this if she ever went to university. He was clean-shaven and smelled of the cologne that had the advertising campaign promising that hundreds of sexy women would fall at the feet of the man who wore it.

'You smell nice,' she said, and he looked pleased with himself. Sophie supposed that if Keith believed the crap she'd written to him online, he'd believe anything, even advertising.

'You're even more beautiful than your photo,' he said to her. 'Would you like a drink?'

'I'm fine, thanks.'

'I'll be right back, then, keep a seat warm for me.'

She watched him go up to the bar. He was wearing a pinstriped suit and a striped tie, both fashionable enough. His shoes were very glossy. He was probably considered rather a snappy dresser.

Keith returned with a glass of red wine for himself and sat in the chair nearest her. 'To the lady in red,' he said, raising his glass. She pretended to sip a bit and drank her tonic water.

'I'm glad you agreed to meet me,' she said.

'You asked so nicely.'

She laughed. 'Well, I didn't want to wait another day of texting and chatting online,' she said truthfully.

'Oh, but it's been such fun, hasn't it?'

'It certainly has.' It was the challenge that did it: how to be a little bit leading without taking the lead, a little bit suggestive without actually suggesting anything. She'd learned a lot since the first time she'd done this, particularly how to keep her distance whilst seeming to get close.

She fluttered her eyelashes and took a sip of her tonic water. The move looked good; she'd practised it in front of the mirror many times.

She saw him notice, but he didn't take it further. Instead he leaned back in his chair and asked her, 'So how was your day?'

She'd prepared for small talk, too. She had any number of anecdotes about office work from her time as a police file clerk that she could polish up and serve as if they were recent news. Leaving out the bits about the police, of

course. She didn't plan to use many of them. She was getting paid by the hour, but this wasn't the kind of work she liked to dawdle over.

'How about you?' she asked after she'd finished her false tale about her day at the office. 'I actually don't think you ever told me what you do for a living?'

'Oh, I own my own travel agency.'

'Really? Oh, how exciting. Do you get to travel a lot?'

She sounded like a bimbo and this was getting her nowhere, because Keith immediately launched into a travelogue of his recent trip to Kuala Lumpur (or 'KL' as he called it) instead of flirting with her or, even better, suggesting they have sex.

'Oooh. And what was the food like?' she bimboed.

Keith's fiancée Catherine wasn't a bimbo. She was a nervous, intelligent woman, training to teach secondary-school French. Catherine, strictly, wasn't Sophie's client; she'd been hired by Catherine's father, Mr Piers Birkbeck, who even sitting down towered over his daughter in Sophie's small office.

'I don't trust him,' said Mr Birkbeck, and Catherine had shaken her head and twisted her thin hands.

'I think he's very friendly and very busy, that's all,' Catherine had said. 'Really, Daddy, there's nothing in it.'

'Nobody's going to take my daughter for a fool.'

'I love him, Daddy.'

Mr Birkbeck ignored his daughter's plaintive words and looked straight at Sophie. 'You get the dirt on Keith Martin, whichever way you can.'

Now, getting the dirt, Sophie hid a wave of contempt for Keith behind her interested smiles and nods. His fiancée trusted him, and this was how he repaid her.

'What about you?' Keith asked at the end of his

recitation of Malaysian menu items. 'Have you travelled much?'

'No, I've hardly left Reading. I'd love to travel, though.' Maybe he'd offer to whisk her away for a dirty weekend in Vietnam or wherever.

Mr Birkbeck had given Sophie a list of Keith's inconsistencies. They were the kind of things Sophie had heard dozens of times before. 'He says he's working late but then when Catherine rings he's not in the office. He spends hours on that damn computer of his at night and he protects everything with passwords. He locks his mobile phone in a desk drawer. What kind of man does that?'

'He's very private, Daddy, I told you. People like their privacy.'

Including you, Catherine, thought Sophie, feeling pity for this woman who was so obviously overwhelmed by both the men in her life. Sophie didn't particularly want to know Keith's dirty little secrets either.

'I want you to follow him and tell us what he's up to,' Mr Birkbeck said. 'What is your fee structure again?'

Dirty little secrets were her job. Sophie had followed Keith, and photographed him on several evenings entering and leaving the house of a female colleague. The blinds were drawn, so she couldn't get any pictures of what they'd been up to. It wasn't cast-iron proof, but several of Sophie's past clients had had success with confronting their partners with similar photos.

'He did say he was at the office that night,' Catherine had said, reluctantly, when she saw the photos. 'But all this proves is that he was lying, not that he was cheating. He could have been working at her house, after all.'

Working on getting his rocks off, was Sophie's own

private opinion. But all she'd said was, 'All right, I'll try another angle.'

Keith knew more about computers than Catherine did, but not more than Sophie. A trawl through his hard drive found the internet dating sites he'd been visiting, and revealed his username. Sophie printed off page after page of chat transcripts and presented them to Catherine.

Catherine read them right there in Sophie's office, with her father looming over her shoulder. At the end her cheeks were pink as she looked up from the paper and said, 'But he's not doing anything. He's just flirting in these places.'

'Three of the women gave him their mobile numbers.'

'But we don't have proof he ever rang them, let alone met up.' Catherine shook her head. 'I mean, it would be one thing if he were having cyber-sex or whatever it's called, but these conversations are pretty tame.'

Tame or not, if Sophie ever were to have a fiancé – which was looking more and more unlikely the more she got to know about men in general – she'd haul off and punch him if he spent hours online with strange women, no matter what he talked about.

'I'll look for something more definite,' she'd said, 'but it might mean I have to get involved.'

'You catch him,' said Mr Birkbeck grimly. 'Nobody hurts my little girl.'

Sophie used one of her online personalities and visited the sites until she recognised Keith's username. Luckily he'd approached her quickly. An hour or two of carefully constructed flirtation later, Sophie gave him her mobile number.

Catherine had gone through the transcripts. Her cheeks went even pinker, and Sophie knew that these meetings were drawn-out torture for her. Surely it would

be easier for her if she just accepted that there was something dodgy going on without knowing the sordid details?

Mr Birkbeck read them with relish, grunting with contempt at intervals. Sophie wondered if his motivation was as straightforward as he'd said. There had been that man last year who'd been a voyeur and was getting his kicks out of the photos Sophie took of his wife and her lover. But then Mr Birkbeck handed the transcripts back to her and wiped his hands on his pinstriped suit, as if the paper had been covered in a fine film of grime.

'We're this close to nailing the bastard,' he said, and Sophie watched Catherine flinch. She was even thinner than when she'd first come into Sophie's office; her hair looked brittle.

Sophie spoke directly to her. 'Are you sure you want to take this any further, Miss Birkbeck? Maybe the fact that your fiancé hasn't been caught doing anything unforgivable yet means that you should forgive him and move on.'

Catherine raised her head and looked Sophie straight in the eyes. She was too thin to be pretty, but her eyes were clear hazel, bright and beautiful.

Her father answered for her.

'Nobody does that to my little girl,' he said. 'If he's cheating, I want you to get him good.'

Catherine stood up and left the room.

'I'll get him good,' Sophie said, watching her go.

Now, in Bar 42, wearing a digital video-recorder strapped to the inside of her thigh, and a scarlet dress she wouldn't be seen dead in during her normal life, Sophie nodded and chatted and made her tonic water last.

Sophie herself didn't need the proof. Even if she hadn't caught him at it yet, she knew that Keith Martin was a cheater. She'd seen enough of them in her time to

recognise this particular type: the cologne, the shoes, the compliments, the lack of height. He was a short man making up for his shortness through his conquests.

‘Would you like another drink?’ Keith asked her.

‘Oh, no, thank you, I’m fine.’

He stood. ‘I insist. That one must be lukewarm by now, we’ve been talking so much. What is it, vodka or gin?’

Sophie glanced at her drink. The ice had all melted, so she couldn’t protest that it wasn’t lukewarm. ‘I’ll have vodka, thanks. And tonic.’

‘I’ll be right back, don’t get lonely.’ He winked at her and went to the bar.

Tall men didn’t have so much to prove. They were impulsive in their sins. They didn’t need to impress you. A flash of thigh, a bit of cleavage, lick your lips and Bob’s your uncle, you’ve caught a tall man.

Short men, on the other hand, could take ages.

She stopped her fingers tapping on the table when Keith came back with their drinks. She gave him her best smile.

‘So how has someone like you managed to stay single?’ she asked, and then pretended to look worried. ‘You are single, aren’t you?’

‘Free as a bird. I guess I never met the right woman. How about you? You must have loads of boyfriends.’

‘Oh, you know, nothing serious. I guess I haven’t met the right person either.’

Keith raised his glass. ‘Here’s to meeting the right person.’

She took the smallest sip she could and suppressed her grimace. Sophie wasn’t much of a drinker even when she was off duty, and the vodka tasted terrible to her, even with the tonic to mask it.

Time to get a move on. She leaned forward on the table

in a pose she knew enhanced her cleavage. Slowly she rubbed her finger around and around the rim of her glass. She met his eyes, held his attention for a moment, and then dipped her gaze to his lap. When she raised her eyes to his again she could see that her carefully learned flirting techniques were having an impact. Keith's pupils had dilated, and he licked his lips. The camera probably only captured the lip-licking, which was too subtle to count as proof for Catherine.

'Tell me, Keith,' she said, making her voice husky and warm, 'what would you like to do with the right person?'

'Well,' he began hoarsely, and he had to clear his throat before he could speak properly.

She caught her lower lip between her teeth, leaned forward a little bit more, and widened her eyes. Amazing, really, how female sexual posturing required you to look like both a little girl and a slut.

'I would probably start by buying her a drink,' Keith said.

'And then?'

Keith's left thumb was rubbing against his index finger, slow caresses that matched her stroking of her glass.

I bet you have a really filthy mind, Sophie thought at him. I bet you try to do all sorts of things you wouldn't dream of asking your fiancée, you bastard. That's why you spend so much time talking, trying to get inside your women's heads, so once you've got them, they're putty in your hands.

'I'd find out what sort of person she was. Really get to know her. Inside and out.'

'And?'

Tell me. Tell me what you want to do to me so I can record it and get the hell out of here in time to watch CSI.

‘And . . . well, this is a little embarrassing.’

‘Oh, Keith, nothing you’d ever say would make me judge you, you know that.’

She leaned forward more, close enough to breathe in his cologne. Close enough, nearly, to touch. Certainly close enough so that the camera masquerading as a dress button would pick up his adulterous desires.

‘I’d want her to know who I really was, too. No secrets between us. Only the pure truth.’

‘Oh, Keith, I think that’s sweet.’

You lying, cheating, mealy-mouthed, height-challenged, time-wasting scumbag.

He smirked. ‘I suppose that deep down, I’m just a romantic at heart.’

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik beeped electronically out of Keith’s suit jacket pocket. Keith retrieved his mobile phone, looked at the number, and smiled at her apologetically. ‘I’m sorry, Sophie, I need to take this. Please excuse me.’

‘Of course.’

He stood and went outside. Through the plate-glass window she could see him, standing with his back to her, answering his phone. It wasn’t his fiancée; Catherine knew Keith was meeting with Sophie tonight. Most likely it was another of his fancy ladies, trading more conversation about being romantics at heart.

At this rate, she wasn’t even going to make it home in time to catch the late movie. Sophie quickly dunked her hand in her drink, fished out the ice cubes, and put them in her plain tonic water. She shoved the mostly full vodka glass to the side of the table next to the empty glass from Keith’s first drink. Lucky thing the bar staff were inefficient at clearing tables, or she would have had to ‘mistakenly’ spill the vodka and tonic on the floor. And with the

chivalrous charade that Keith had going on, it was unlikely he'd let her go to the bar herself to buy a non-alcoholic drink.

He returned to the table, snapping his phone shut. 'Sorry about that,' he said, and then paused before sitting down. 'Would you like another?'

Even with the ice in it, her tonic water was only a quarter full. 'No, thank you,' Sophie said, 'I was just thirsty, I guess.'

'Nothing wrong with that.' He slid into his seat. 'We're here to have a good time and enjoy ourselves, after all.'

I'd enjoy myself much more if you got on with trying to have your good time. 'So we were talking about romance,' she said, smiling winningly.

'That we were. What do you think is the most important aspect of a romance?'

Sophie pretended to consider. 'Mutual attraction?'

'That's interesting. Me, I think it's trust. How can you love someone if you don't trust them? Love without trust can't be real love, can it?'

Sophie would have smirked at the irony, but she had a bimbo image to uphold. Still, she couldn't resist saying, 'Or you could say that people in love might trust someone who wasn't worthy of it.'

'Did you hear that thing on the radio the other night? About women who are hired to try to trap guys into making a pass at them so their wives can find out if they're cheaters? What's it called – sugar-baiting?'

Sophie shrugged, making sure to do it in a way that would make her breasts bob. 'I don't know, I didn't hear it, I'm sorry.'

'Now maybe I'm old-fashioned, but I think that's sneaky and dishonest.'

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Sophie said. ‘I mean, the guy doesn’t have to take the bait, does he? Nobody’s forcing him.’

Keith grinned suddenly, and Sophie felt a measure of relief, because if this conversation went on for much longer she was going to be sorely tempted to bring up the little matter of his fiancée.

‘You’re right,’ he said, ‘nobody’s being forced. Listen, I’ve got a great idea. There’s a lovely little Italian not far from here. Would you like to go for a meal with me?’

Sophie mentally saw the evening stretching out and out, through Prosecco and antipasto, marinara sauce and red wine, with, if she was very lucky, Keith making a fumbled pass at her over the tiramisu.

Meanwhile, the adhesive tape holding the wires in place under her dress was beginning to itch, and if she was going to be more than two hours she was going to have to change the batteries on the video recorder. ‘That sounds gorgeous,’ she said, and stood. ‘I just need to visit the ladies’ before we go.’

She tried to put a spring and a sway in her step, as if she were irrepressibly joyful about an Italian meal with Keith Martin; instead, halfway across the room she stumbled in her three-inch heels and had to grab on to a chair for momentary support. The rest of the way to the loo she muttered under her breath about the stupid, impractical things that men found attractive.

Tape adjusted, battery changed (whoever said these recorders had quick-change batteries had never worn one of them inside a hold-up stocking), Sophie leaned on the sink and studied her reflection in the mirror. As always, for a moment she thought she was seeing someone else. The black eyeliner and mascara made her plain grey eyes appear

smoky and seductive; the glossy red lipstick plumped out what she'd always thought of as a no-nonsense mouth.

This was a uniform, a tool of her trade, she told herself. Something she'd studied and practised for hours – no, years – to get right. Usually when she was in full get-up she didn't study any more than the makeup in the mirror to make sure she'd applied it correctly. That was all her subjects were going to see, anyway: the mask, the image she'd created for their benefit.

But she was in there, underneath. If she looked hard.

The door to the women's loos opened. Sophie, self-trained to notice everything, glanced over.

Keith was in the ladies'. He hadn't stuck his head through the door; he was standing right inside, watching her.

'Are you all right?' he asked. His voice sounded merely friendly and concerned, but the expression on his face had gone back to that pupil-dilated, lip-dampened desire.

Instinct told her not to move, but instead stay leaning on the sink, her hair falling over one shoulder. He'd only see the mask, only notice the act. A honey trap only worked if you became a blank screen on to which men projected their own wishes.

'Hi there,' she said.

Keith kept his eyes on her, and moved swiftly. With his foot he swept the chair that stood by the sinks underneath the door handle.

Bingo! He was the quickie-in-the-lavatory type. She needn't have changed the battery.

'You drank that drink really quickly,' Keith said, still all smooth concern. 'Are you feeling a little lightheaded?'

He wanted her to be lightheaded.

Again acting from instinct, she nodded, and then

gripped the sink harder, as if she were trying to keep from falling down.

He came up behind her. Sophie watched him in the mirror without turning her head.

He put his hands on her hips: lightly, but to Sophie it felt as if he were holding her to keep her from running away.

'You're a beautiful woman,' he said. 'I can see why you thought I'd be tempted. How do you feel? Your legs weak? Having trouble focusing your eyes?'

She nodded. He thought she'd drunk the drink he'd given her. So this was how the scumbag got his kicks.

He stroked upwards along her rib cage, and Sophie watched, picturing the camera capturing every single thing. If she could get him to admit drugging her drink, she'd have him and good.

'Wh-what's happening to me?' she wavered.

'Don't worry, love, you won't remember a thing in the morning.'

'My drink – did you spike my drink?'

His hands were like spiders, creeping over her, close to the wire taped to her skin. She could end this, but one more second – one more chance for him to say what he'd done and what he wanted—

His fingers touched the wire and he stopped.

Keith Martin's smile was wide and dangerous.

'I know who you are,' he said, murmuring in her ear so close she could feel his breath. 'I know my bastard future father-in-law hired you to catch me.'

Sophie's heart leapt, her body tensed, and in a split second she had corrected herself so that she lolled forward slightly.

'You think you're so smart, with your lines and your manipulation,' he said, and bit her ear lobe. One of his

hands rapidly followed the wire down her body to her inner thigh. His fingers curled around the recorder and pulled at it through her dress as he pressed his erection against her from behind.

‘You know, when I planned this, I thought I’d get rid of the camera, but now I don’t think I want to. I want to watch afterwards. I want you to watch and see what you made me do.’

He pulled her skirt up. The mirror was too high for her to see her bare legs, and therefore the camera wouldn’t catch it either. ‘Don’t,’ she slurred, still pretending to be too drunk to resist, but knowing there would need to be evidence that she hadn’t consented to sex if she wanted to get him for attempted rape as well as drink-spiking. ‘Don’t touch me. Why are you doing this?’

‘Catherine and I would have been quite happy, you know.’ He punctuated his words with a sharp nip on the skin of her neck. It took all her willpower not to flinch. ‘She adores me. She wouldn’t have cared about anything else, as long as she had me. It’s her father that hatched all of this up. Her father and you.’

She heard the rasp of his zipper going down.

Evidence. Evidence. Think of what they needed to put him away. Wait until the last possible minute.

She clenched her teeth and gripped the sink tightly. She had the advantage here. He only saw the mask. One movement and she could take him out. Keep calm. Wait.

She felt hot skin on the back of her bare thigh.

‘You bitch,’ he muttered, his breath heavy with lust. ‘You deserve this.’

He put both of his hands over hers and she was trapped, pinned between him and the sink, and panic exploded in her. Bracing her stiletto-heeled shoes on the

tilled floor, she wrenched her right hand from under his, brought her right arm back behind her and drove her elbow into his stomach.

She whirled around. His expression was almost comically surprised, his body doubled over in pain, his hands clutching his middle, his trousers sliding down his legs.

‘My mistake,’ Sophie said, pulling down her dress. ‘I thought you were only a scumbag.’

She gave him a right hook to the jaw and he collapsed on the floor.

She stood there, framing him in her button camera for her own personal satisfaction, and then she pulled the chair from the door and hurried out into the bar.

‘Don’t touch that drink,’ she ordered the barman, about to clear her table, and dialled the police on her mobile.