

The Field You Started Out In.

The room was exactly how Cassie remembered it. Calculated bohemian chaos. Pre-Raphaelite women lolled across the walls, fire in their hair and languor in their eyes. Every available surface was scattered with half rolled cigarettes and fanned open books of poetry, most of it in French. Richard hadn't changed at all. It was quite reassuring, in a way.

She tried not to be sorry that his cliché hadn't become any more sophisticated with age, but it stung somehow that this place felt so familiar. She tried not to inhale the atmosphere too deeply. The smell of him still had the power to move her.

A hand slid up her arm, making her jump. She looked up into the melted chocolate of Ged's eyes and made herself smile for him. Richard would have known that her eyes remained cautious, but Ged clearly didn't. He bent to kiss her waiting lips and squeezed the arm his warm hand still encompassed.

She felt a thrill of sensation navigate her insides at his touch, but her attention wasn't really with him. She was watching the kitten-like stretch of the dancer as she unfurled herself from Richard's bedspread. The girl was younger than the rest of them. Gemma, or something. Richard strode into the room, his hands full of cans, a roll up dangling from the skin of his bottom lip in that way

that had always annoyed Cassie. He caught her eye as he thrust the chilled cans in her direction and he winked at her as she took one. Her stomach jerked once and was still. Bastard.

She turned away from him as she popped the tab of the strong lager and she wondered if he would ever grow up. She heard Ged thanking him politely for the can of bitter he was given and she realised in a vague way that she hadn't thanked him herself. He would have had a fit if she had. Would have teased her for it all night.

They had never bothered with please and thank you in the past. They had communicated with stroking fingers and embracing eyes. They had no need of politeness. Everything they owned was shared equally between them, most conversation sub-vocal.

Now somebody else shared his stuffy little bedsit. Someone else was curled in his arms as the four of them strove to make polite conversation. A headache began to push behind Cassie's eyes as she drank the too-cold lager from the sharp edged can. Part of her wished her lip would catch on the metal. That she would spill and bleed and have to be excused from the ordeal they had managed to trap themselves into. The tickets had been bought in hers and Richard's names nearly a year ago. They had bought four, hoping to take another couple with them. Now they were the other couples and it had seemed madness to waste the opportunity they had both been longing for since last January.

'Sod this, let's go to the pub,' Richard said suddenly, springing to his feet and spilling the girl into the wall as he lifted his soft bulk gracefully to his feet.

He shot Cassie a grin that made her think of long-toothed predators and she found herself grinning back at him. His springy facial hair was in his fingers as he spoke, an annoying habit she had always deplored when they had been together. Now she watched the dark brown hair curl over his fingers then coil back to his lip as he stroked the cavalier beard and moustache.

She hated him suddenly and had to turn away. His eyes never left hers until she couldn't see him any more. Neither of them noticed Ged lifting the girl to her feet behind them. They had moved into the hallway to get coats and hats and scarves. This November was the coldest on record, Richard had told them when they first arrived. His eyes had been sliding over Ged's brown leather jacket and pressed jeans. He liked the scarf, he added, nice touch. Although, it was a long way to the nearest desert.

Cassie hated the way he put her friends down. She always had. He placed a fedora neatly on his overgrown hair and wrapped his chequered old man scarf around his thick throat.

'Why him?' he whispered onto the back of her neck. She hunched her shoulders and turned to glare into his eyes. They were very nearly the same height and tonight she had decided to wear boots with heels. Their faces nearly collided as she moved, but he did not move away. His eyes sparked a challenge into her, which she quenched with a glance.

'He fucks better than you did,' she hissed and his lips parted immediately.

'But I bet he doesn't make you cry,' he murmured, hardly any sound coming out of his mouth. She watched the words form on his lips, then she closed her eyes and turned away. The other two were reaching past them now, pulling down their coats and jabbering away to each other like children.

Richard raised a single eyebrow at Cassie and before she would stop herself, she had smiled. Satisfied, he turned away from her and threw his arms around the girl.

'Come on Jenna, love, get your skinny bones cuddled up tight! We don't want you going down with hypothermia, do we?'

Cassie made herself watch as he wrapped the girl up in warm layers, her face upturned to him like a cat basking in the sun. She felt Ged come to stand behind her and she leaned back against his chest. His solidity held her up. She bobbed on the tide of his breathing for a moment, then impulsively turned to kiss him. She knew Richard was watching, but he made no comment. He simply reached past them both and flicked the door off the latch.

'Last one down the stairs is a cissy!' He clumped through first and left the stragglers to lock up behind him. Cassie considered leaving his flat open, but Ged pulled the door shut behind them both.

'Can't be too careful around here.'

She stroked his cheek and wrapped herself around his arm as they followed the other two down the crumbling staircase and out into the sharp night.

The Philharmonic was packed to the door. Pushing past boozy-breathed smokers in the doorway, Richard dragged his little kitten after him into the crowd. They were eaten up within seconds and Cassie felt panic clutch her as she lost sight of them.

'He's at the bar already. How the hell does he do it?'

Ged led her through the Friday night throng with an assurance she could not feel. Within moments, she was being crushed up against Richard and felt something hard in his pocket digging into her hip. The silver flask. Her cheeks filled with heat. He still had it. She wondered if kitty-cat liked the inscription she had paid extra to have engraved on the side. She wondered if the kitten ever felt jealous of *her*.

There was currently an exclusion zone around puss in boots, as she unwound her outer clothes from around that feline body. Men melted just a few inches away to allow her the space to unveil herself. Then they kept the gap just large enough so that they could admire the flexing and curving image she presented them with. Cassie felt elbows in her neck and smoky breaths across the top of her head. There was no reason for any other woman to feel insecure around Cassie. No reason at all.

A glass was thrust into her hand and she saw with surprise that it was a neat Jack Daniels with ice. A drink she had not even attempted since the first night she had slept with Richard. So hung over she had barely been able to raise

her head from the pillow the next day, she had sworn never to touch the stuff again. Trailing the back of his fingers along her naked thigh, he had promised her a cure for her headache it had taken him all day to effect. She blinked across at him now, but all she saw was a flash of teeth between his too red lips and he was gone into the crowd once more. Beside her, Ged was tugging her arm. He had a pint in his hand and he wanted to lead her to where the other two had gone. Her head already spinning, Cass followed him, the material of her woollen coat still tight in his fist.

They stood in the panelled corridor between the Brahms and Liszt snugs, leaning towards each other to talk, and away from other people in order to hear. Four heads, closer than they would normally be, four voices lost in the tide of other people's Friday night excitement. Cassie could not swallow properly, but she forced down the whiskey in gulps. Ged had questioned her with a look when he saw her drinking it, but she shook her head. Tell you later, her expression said. He didn't give the impression he was looking forward to the explanation.

After their second drink, Ged went to the toilets and with a mischievous look over his shoulder, Richard went after him.

Cassie took a step forwards as if to follow them both, but a long pink fingernail touched her arm with just a little too much pressure to be comfortable.

'Leave them. They maybe need to clear the air.'

Cassie blinked. The kitten's breath was sweet with lipstick and something that smelled like cherries. Her teeth were slightly stained with whatever foul, reddish cocktail she was drinking and in the tobaccoey light, it looks as if she had bitten her tongue.

'Why would they need to... I don't understand.'

Pale cheeks flooded from beneath with heat. The girl wanted to speak but couldn't find the words.

'He talks in his sleep,' was all she would say and before Cassie could confirm that she knew that, they were back.

'We're leaving,' Ged said gruffly and he took Cassie's arm tighter than he seemed to mean to.

She stiffened under his touch and her eyes skittered to Richard.

'Come on, Jen, let's go. Show starts in ten minutes! Better not be late, my first salary cheque paid for these fucking tickets.'

Cassie looked from his manic, excited eyes up to Ged's deadened gaze. Neither man spoke, but she noticed a slight puffy redness below Ged's right cheekbone, a shadow beside Richard's straggly beard. Jenna was staring up at Richard with an expression of sick awareness and Cassie felt the ground spinning beneath her feet. She couldn't work out quite what had just happened, but suddenly she did not want to leave the heat and the sweaty bustle of the pub. She wanted to stay here, locked in its hot damp embrace for the rest of the night.

'Come on, Cass, this was your surprise, remember. You've waited a long time for this, haven't you? It's just for you. Just you.'

Ged stiffened as he made out Richard's words, spoken directly to Cassie. She blinked too fast and could not find any way of answering the beseeching wetness of his eyes. Not now, she wanted to say, don't look at me like that now, for Christ's sake. Not in front of them. Not on this night of all nights.

It was Jenna who left first. Cassie wanted to call after her. To explain that to Richard, the grass was always a damn sight greener in somebody else's field, but the crowds were just too dense. She saw Richard glance over his shoulder, but he made no move to follow the stricken girl. He just kept looking at Cassie.

'Well?' his lips formed, eventually.

Ged had let go of her at some point. He had moved away without her noticing. Richard was beside her, practically inside her coat with her. His big soft fingers found the edges of her hips and stroked curves grown unfamiliar to his hands. The flask dug into her and she felt the edge of the dark wood panels at her back begin to press her back towards him.

There was a swell of noise at the door and a moment of shocked silence.

'Shit, there's been an accident,' someone shouted and a wave of heads craned to see.

'Some girl's been run over.'

'Just flung herself across the road without looking, silly cow.'

'Is she dead?'

Cassie felt the world slowing and begin to spin out of time. Richard's eyes turned slowly from her face and the moist exhalation he made as he turned warmed her cheeks for a moment. Then he was gone and sound and movement flooded into her dampened senses like an aftershock. She did not flinch. Did not even try to move.

People crushed into her, eddied her about on the crest of their resumed conversations. She felt their warmth, their motion, but she remained still in her little harbour, unable to make herself leave its protection.

She had never known him look back over his shoulder in his life. The next field was always meant to be the greenest one.

The next field.

Never the one you started out in.

It just didn't work that way.

Slowly, she slipped her arms into her thick black wool coat and wrapping her arms around herself tightly, she made her way slowly out into the darkness.