

Laura

It had been tricky, but Jason had eventually managed to persuade the rest of the appointments panel that she was the right one for the job. True, she wasn't the best-qualified by a long chalk; or even, in terms of perceived ability, the best suited. But boy, was she a looker. And the body... As soon as she'd walked in to the interview she'd been the one he'd wanted. And, as it was his PA they were interviewing for, his opinion was of course the one most relevant.

"Samantha," he greeted her on her first day, rounding his desk to shake her hand – holding on to it just the slightest fraction of a second longer than was strictly necessary.

"Mr Carling," she responded, her velvety-soft voice, honey-blond hair, sapphire blue eyes and ultra-bright smile reaching down into his nether regions and setting his heart pumping.

"Oh, less of the formalities. Call me Jason."

"Jason, then. And if it's okay, I prefer Sammie."

"Sammie it is. Welcome to Goodrow and Turnball Solicitors." Turnball and Carling soon, he added silently. As soon as Old Man Goodrow finally slings his hook to Retirement City and I can persuade that ancient goat Turnball to give me my well-deserved partnership. Hell, he thought, I've been here five years now, it can surely only be a matter of time.

With the twin pleasant prospects in mind of promotion and Sammie's presence in his office on a daily basis, he busied himself with showing her to her desk and apprising her of her duties.

For a few weeks he trod carefully. Although there was no ring on her finger it was inconceivable there wouldn't be another man in the background, and he didn't want to become tangled up in anything complicated. After a few weeks he began to find excuses to get her to work late, gauging her reactions, whether she became agitated and had to phone someone to let them know where she was. When it seemed she was perfectly happy to comply with the late hours and didn't appear to have to explain her absence to another, he decided that now he could look for a chance to re-evaluate their relationship.

His opportunity came when he was invited by Goodrow and Turnball to attend a seminar at the newly-appointed Hilton Hotel in Manchester, a distance of 300 miles or so from their base in Guildford. For such an excursion, the partners suggested, it would be invidious for him to make the journey there and back in the same day. An overnight stay would be quite in order, in one of the Hilton's vacant rooms, paid for out of company funds, of course. And Miss Watson...? If he required the presence of his Personal Assistant (Oh yes, he assured them quickly, he would not be able to function without her), then she, too, could be accommodated, in an adjoining room if possible for ease of interaction.

"Ease of interaction..." He knew the type of interaction he was after, and boy, he couldn't wait.

When the day came they travelled together, meeting at the office at 6am and then he driving the distance in his Turbo Porsche. The seminar itself was such first-grade stuff that he yawned his way through it – really, it was the kind of information he'd picked up during his first couple of years in articled clerking. As the last session ended he turned to Sammie, assiduously taking notes beside him. "Drink?" he suggested. "God, I need one, don't know about you."

She smiled, and at such close quarters he noticed for the first time how her eyes sparkled when she did so. "Okay," she replied. "There should be time for one before dinner."

One before – and plenty after, he promised her silently.

They shared the one drink, then went to their rooms to freshen up before dinner. As he showered, he imagined her similarly occupied, the hot water coursing over her delicious body, her hands massaging the shower cream into a foamy lather – steady, he told himself as his excitement became all too evident. Mustn't betray any signs when we meet up, there'll be plenty of time later.

The dinner was five-star, and he ordered a bottle of Krug champagne to accompany it. Old Goodrow and Turnball wouldn't stick their hands in their pockets for that little luxury, he reckoned – but the rewards at the end of it would more than compensate for the expense to himself, he was sure. Throughout the meal he made sure her glass was topped up more frequently than his, ordering more of the same when they reached the end of the bottle. After they'd eaten they found a comfortable sofa in the bar area, and a third bottle of Krug appeared, with fresh glasses, and he poured again, leaning as close as he could, breathing in her perfume and her looks in equal measure.

He'd been stunned by her dress when she'd appeared at his door so they could go down together – it was a House of Ilona Ascot style strapless evening dress, in electric blue satin. As they lounged on the sofa and he was able to run his eyes over the length of her profile, his longing for her reached melting point. To his delight, a remark she made as they chatted confirmed that there was no man currently on the scene – not that it would have made a difference by this time, his need for her, exacerbated by his share of the bubbly, was so intense.

At around 11pm she got to her feet. "I suppose we need to sleep," she smiled, swaying a little haphazardly. "We have to check out at 10am, and you have a long drive ahead of you. We'll be going straight into the office when we get back I assume?"

Bugger the office, he thought, gazing at her intently. There's only one place I'm thinking about at the moment... He grabbed the last of the champagne as he in turn stood, along with their two glasses.

He restrained himself all the way up in the lift, but as they reached her room and she turned to bid him goodnight after swiping the credit card-style key in the lock he made his advance. "Please," she gasped, drawing away as his lips sought hers and instantly sounding sober, "no, Jason, please."

He withdrew, staggered. Surely – *surely* – she couldn't be rejecting him? "Please," she repeated again – "it's not – I mean, I'm flattered, and it's not that I don't find you attractive. But," she continued, gesticulating wildly as if trying to convince herself of her argument as much as him, "I'm really not looking for a relationship at the moment. And if I was, I'm afraid that office romances have negative connotations for me. So," she concluded, the merest hint of sadness in her voice, "I'm sorry, Jason – I'm really sorry."

She turned as if to go into her room, but found that the door had relocked itself, so she fumbled in her handbag for the swipe-key again. He stared at the curve of her back, her elegant neck, in astonishment. The *bitch* – leading him on, making him buy all that champers – how the hell did she think she was getting *that* without some payback? And all the promise contained in her smiles – did she think she he didn't know what she meant by every one of those?

He raised his hand, the one holding the champagne bottle, as if to strike. But instead he dropped the hand again and said, in as normal a tone as possible, "Look, I'm really sorry, Sammie, yeah? Tell you what – no hard feelings, hey? Let's go inside and finish this bottle, shall we, just to be friends, then I'll go and we can get that sleep you were talking about. Yeah?"

She turned and looked at him doubtfully. "Well..." she hesitated.

He gave her his most winning smile. "There's only a glassful each," he urged. "Honestly, it won't take five minutes."

"Well, okay," she agreed, still uncertainly. Opening the door she passed through, holding it for him to follow.

Once inside, he plonked himself down into one of two leather armchairs either side of a small mahogany coffee table. His room was, of course, similar to this one, and as he poured their drinks he looked towards the door of the en-suite shower room trying to think of a reason he could give for her to leave him for a vital second or two.

To his satisfaction, however, she immediately said, "Excuse me, I just have to go and..." Leaving the sentence unfinished, she carried out his wish and stepped through the door into the en-suite.

Working quickly, he took from his inside pocket a twist of paper and, unwrapping it, added a tiny pill to her drink. He used his fountain pen to stir it, making sure the tablet dissolved fully. By the time she returned he was already sitting, legs crossed nonchalantly, sipping his champagne.

Still hesitant, she seated herself the other side of the table, and picked up her glass. "Cheers," he raised his. "To Goodrow and Turnball. And good colleagues."

She raised hers in turn, saying nothing, and quaffed the champagne in one go. She looked at him expectantly, as if willing him to drink his glass quickly and go, but he lingered, sipping it slowly. If he had the timing right...

He had. She collapsed suddenly, as if pole-axed. He smiled triumphantly, stood and finished his drink in one go. Then he bent, scooped her up in his arms and, moving over to her bed, deposited her onto it. He took his trousers off slowly, savouring the moment, and then, removing both his own and her undergarments, he set to work gratifying himself.

After he'd finished, he carefully wiped all traces of his presence from her, then pulled the bed's luxurious duvet from beneath her prone body. He undressed her, finding the catches of her bra a brief awkward obstacle, then slipped her nightdress over her head, manhandling her roughly to tug it down over her bottom and thighs. Then he covered her with the duvet and left, closing the door behind him. In the morning he'd be able to convince her that he'd left well before she'd fallen asleep. Those were two of the useful side-effects of the drug. Hazy memories and extreme suggestibility.

*

It was one morning several weeks later that she came into work having obviously been weeping, and mid-morning, as he was tidying up some correspondence, she burst into tears once more.

"What's the matter?" he asked, affecting concern. To emphasise this he placed his hand in parental fashion on her shoulder, taking her distraction as a chance to knead her bra-strap gently.

Between sobs she told him. Icy fear shot through his bowels and his hand plummeted away from her shoulder like a stone. Pregnant! How the hell...!

Well, he berated himself, it was obvious *how* the hell, but surely... He cursed inwardly. Why the blazes hadn't the stupid cow been taking precautions? Any woman in her right mind... And then he remembered. Damn! She hadn't been in a relationship. So she'd probably had no need to be on the Pill. He swore a few more oaths, and hoped to God that she'd been with someone else since.

He questioned her carefully, utilising all his skill as a solicitor to ensure she couldn't see an ulterior motive in his attention. By this, he elicited the fact that no, she hadn't had a boyfriend in the last couple of years, so there could be no doubt the brat now growing in her stomach was his. Damn again! To his intense relief, however, she seemed unaware of this possibility, and part of her distress was not having the first idea who the father could be – though how the hell she hadn't put two and two together and come up with the obvious he couldn't fathom; perhaps she wasn't quite as intelligent as he'd taken her for, or perhaps she was merely naive – in either case she could, hopefully, be as manoeuvrable as she was on that night in the Hilton. He'd have to act quickly. It surely couldn't be long before she started working out dates...

Fortunately for Jason, he was equipped with a mind that he considered to be of laser-like brilliance. It took him no longer than the rest of the morning to think out as perfect a scheme as he could conceive, and calling her into his office, he set about putting it into action.

*

Sammie was still on leave recovering from the effects of the abortion he'd persuaded her to have (for her own good, he'd made her believe) when, with carefully contrived documentary proof of fraudulent dealings he managed to convince Goodrow and Turnball that she was too much of a risk to retain in their employment. Because of the slight chance he might somehow be incriminated should she have to appear in court, he persuaded the partners not to take further legal action against her, but to his satisfaction he learned that her discharge letter – effective immediately – had been delivered to her address and, as of now, she was no longer an employee of the firm of solicitors. With a sigh of relief he sat back in his comfy office chair. And that's that problem out of my life, he told himself.

*

Over the course of the next five years Jason had several different PAs, none of whom he considered one hundred percent beddable, though this didn't hold him back when the opportunity arose. At least he didn't have to revert to the Rohypnol again – the ones he slept with were more than willing to oblige, and he made extra sure that precautions were being taken. In each case he soon managed to persuade Goodrow and Turnball that the woman was for whatever reason unsuitable to remain as his PA, and so a steady procession of assistants passed through his office. And still no partnership, though rumours of Goodrow's imminent retirement were always there in the background.

And then, one day, came Laura.

As soon as she was interviewed he knew she was the one he wanted. Devastatingly beautiful, she had eyes of emerald green, auburn hair and a smile dazzling in its intensity. Not unlike that other girl, he thought – what was her name? Samantha, that was it. He searched his memory. Yes, there was certainly a strong resemblance. This girl, though, had something even more about her. Whatever it was, it set his heart racing.

He got his way, and Laura was installed as his PA a week later. On the same day, Goodrow and Turnball called him into Goodrow's office and told him the news he'd been awaiting for so long – as from two months time, the office was his. His partnership was assured!

The celebration took place the evening after he'd been installed. He'd insisted that Laura be transferred with him – there was a new solicitor being employed in Jason's old office, and he categorically did not want any other man having the pleasure of her assistance. At the celebration he made sure he spent as much time in her company as possible, topping up her glass every time it nearly emptied, monopolising her conversation in order that no-one else could whisk her away. As the drink flowed she became steadily more mellow and giggly, flirtatious even, and when the evening drew towards a close, he became bold. "Say, Laura," he slurred, leaning close to her. "How about afterwards, you and me..." The last part he whispered directly in her ear, and hearing it, she giggled again.

"Your place?" she whispered back, and his eyes widened. Wow, this was going to be the ultimate!

Politeness dictated he say goodnight to everyone else, but as soon as he could he grabbed her hand and almost ran from the building. Hailing a taxi he gave his address and settled back. To his astonishment Laura leaned in close and began nibbling at his ear and neck, her hands straying over his midriff and down towards his trousers. By the time they reached his apartment building he was bursting – as they ascended in the lift they devoured each other's lips with unbridled passion.

Inside his apartment, they made straight for the bedroom. "One minute," she gasped, as his hands fondled her gorgeous body and fumbled to relieve her of her clothing. She pushed him gently away from her. "How would you like to do something daring?"

"What?" he frowned. She wasn't going to reject him, was she? Not after all this promise.

She told him, and his mouth fell open. God, not only was this going to be a fantastic night tonight – he'd be able to replay it over and over!

She delved into her handbag and brought out a miniature camcorder. Smiling coquettishly she set it up where it would point directly at the bed, and pressed the 'on' button – then, with another giggle, she draped herself onto the bed.

*

Jason wasn't unduly perturbed when Laura didn't appear for work next morning. After their sexual gymnastics of the previous night he thought she'd probably be catching up on some sleep – he himself could have done with a lie-in, but his responsibilities wouldn't allow it. And her absence did obviate any awkwardness she might have in his presence.

He'd awoken early to find she'd already left his apartment. To his consternation she'd taken the camcorder – but with any luck she'd give him a DVD or something when she appeared again. He had no

thought that she could use the film in some way against him. They were both single, they were both of consenting age, so no problem.

When she didn't appear again the next day he was more concerned. Really, he'd been lax with her yesterday, for good reason, but this was taking it a bit far. He pulled rank to borrow another secretary for the day, and determined that he'd have a stern talk with Laura tomorrow.

But the next day she was absent again, and in fact did not turn up for the rest of that week. On Saturday he had the temporary secretary try to call her, but the contact number he had for her was unobtainable. In exasperation he sent the woman round to Laura's address – only to be informed, when the woman returned in confusion, that the place didn't in fact exist.

Disturbing thoughts began creeping through his mind. Something was amiss, and no doubt. He determined that when he had time, he'd investigate.

The email arrived that afternoon, bearing her name. No message, just a file attachment titled "Tuesday night". The lack of a message angered him further, but at the same time he was delighted to receive the film – not only for the satisfaction of having it, but also it relieved his fears that Laura might be up to something. Saving it onto his laptop hard-drive he looked forward to the pleasure of viewing it in the privacy of his home that evening.

That pleasure was not to come. At five o'clock that afternoon, just as he was beginning to think of home, the temporary secretary crept into his office. "Mr Carling," she gasped, sounding fearful – and then she didn't have time to continue, as the door was thrust open from behind her and in strode a contingent of police officers, a plain-clothes man at their head.

Without preamble the leader said, "Mr Carling? My name is Inspector Dobson. I have reason to suspect you of offences relating to sexual practices against minors. We have a warrant here to search your office and your home, and to take into custody yourself and any equipment or possessions we consider relevant to our investigation. Would you stand and move away from your desk, please?"

Numb with shock, Jason did as he was told. His mind seemed to be frozen – he could neither take in what the Inspector was saying, nor open his mouth to protest. A uniformed constable came forward and handcuffed him; then, as the Inspector was ordering another constable to, "Bag up that computer," he was led out and deposited into a waiting police car.

Later, still reeling, Jason faced the Inspector and another man – a Sergeant Matthews – over a plain wooden table in a dingy room labelled "Interview Room One". He'd regained enough mental capacity to call Mr Turnbull, who sat beside him, notebook at the ready. Between the four men, in the middle of the table, was his laptop, back towards him.

The Inspector dealt with the formalities of the interview, then asked Jason, "Mr Carling, do you recognise the laptop computer in front of you?"

"Well, yes," Jason said hesitantly. "It's mine. The one I use at work, I mean – and take home at night when I have to prepare for a case."

"And you're certain of this?"

Jason frowned. "Well, yes. I mean, at least I think so. Assuming it is, it'll have my name on the introductory screen."

"Like this, you mean?" said the Inspector, turning it towards him.

"That's right," Jason acknowledged, recognising the screen. "That's definitely mine," he added, as the policeman turned the computer back round.

The Inspector nodded at the Sergeant, who tapped a few keys. "And do you know about a file on your computer – a file titled 'Tuesday Night'?"

Jason's jaw dropped. "Well, yes," he stumbled. "But that's private."

The sergeant looked up and spoke for the first time. "I'll bet it is."

"You admit you know of that file?" the Inspector queried again. Jason nodded, bewildered.

"For the tape, please, Mr Carling," the Inspector said.

"Yes, I know of that file," Jason snapped. "So what? There's nothing wrong with a bit of harmless fun, is there?"

The policemen exchanged a glower. "Are you saying you believe this to be harmless?" the Inspector barked.

At that point Mr Turnball spoke up. "Excuse me, Inspector, but my colleague – client, should I say? – seems uncertain as to where your enquiries are leading. As am I. Could we perhaps see this file you speak of, for clarification?"

The Inspector raised his eyebrows. "Well, if you insist, Mr Turnball. But I warn you – it isn't pleasant."

Turning the computer back towards Jason and the old solicitor, the sergeant clicked the mouse button. "Feast your eyes," he snarled.

The scene on the film that started playing was familiar to Jason, and very much what he was expecting to see. There was his bedroom, the bed hidden from view temporarily by his back as he stripped himself naked – just as he remembered it from that night. And then he climbed onto the bed and knelt to begin taking the girl's clothes off – "*Shit!*" he exploded, causing Turnball beside him to jump. His eyes bulged. The girl on the bed – for Christ's sake, that wasn't Laura. That girl was – his breath caught in his throat – that girl was young, tiny. Christ, she could only be about five!

His brain numbed as the scene became more appalling. He was only dimly aware that old Turnball was glaring at him in disgust, his eyes were fixed immovably on the horror before him. Sweat poured down his neck, even though the interview room was cool. At the end of the film he still couldn't tear his eyes away. He didn't even see the Inspector stand, or feel himself being tugged into a standing position. "Jason Carling," the Inspector said formally, "I am charging you with offences relating to sexual practices against a minor. You have the right to remain silent..."

*

The trial was a formality, and Jason was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment, despite his fervent pleas of innocence. Mr Turnball had refused to find a barrister for him, and had made it quite clear that,

whenever he was released from prison, his position would no longer be there for him. He was taken to a secure unit where, despite being kept more-or-less in isolation, he was still subjected to thrashings by other prisoners who managed to get access to him – and, indeed, by the wardens, who not only turned a blind eye to the other prisoners' thuggery, but also took every opportunity to add their own beatings when they could get away with it. Several times he was threatened with stabbing, and on one occasion he was attacked in the shower by a convict threatening to castrate him without a knife – fortunately, this time the warders had to intervene as the governor of the prison was making a routine inspection of the place.

In the first few months he had no visitors, and no communication from the outside world – so he was astonished to receive a letter one day, franked with a postmark not far from where he lived. Opening it he skipped to the signature, and was further astonished to read "Samantha Watson" at the bottom. Who...? Then he remembered. Hell's bells, he hadn't seen her for five years! What the blazes did *she* want?

"Mr Carling," the letter began – no "Dear", and no "Jason" as he remembered he'd instructed her to call him.

He read on. "This will be brief, as I have no real desire to write to you – I have been advised by my psychologist to do so, as it may help relieve some of the trauma of what happened to me five years ago at your hands.

"I remember now the details of that night at the Hilton Hotel in Manchester. What you did to me, how you abused me and then had me dismissed on trumped-up charges. How you forced me into an abortion, from which I've never recovered, as if you cared.

I'm glad that you've been condemned to a prison sentence, even though I was surprised at the nature of your crime. I feel that justice has been done for me, and I can continue to live my life with some closure.

"Incidentally, regarding my baby; although the foetus was very newly formed it was old enough by the time I had the abortion for the surgeon to be able to tell me the sex. It was a girl..."

As he read the next sentence the letter dropped from suddenly nerveless fingers. "You probably won't be interested to know that I gave her a name. Laura."

He never read the rest of what she had to say. Another group of prisoners appeared at his cell door, menace on their faces and makeshift weapons in their hands. And as they entered and closed the door after them, a figure appeared in the corner of the cell – a young woman with auburn hair, emerald green eyes and a smile that dazzled. "Laura?" he gasped. Then, as he stared, she slowly metamorphosed into the form of a five-year-old girl – the one in the film. As the other men advanced on him and he shrank into the corner wetting himself in fear, the apparition giggled – the giggle he remembered all too well from the adult version of Laura. And as the blows began to rain down on his unprotected body and head, she slowly vanished from sight.