

# Linguist Blues or: The Consultant Who Didn't Exist

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Sam Crooks wasn't the kind of woman who hit on my kind of woman on the street.

I mean, don't get me wrong. It's not like I think of myself as particularly attractive, though I know that I move like a person who does. ("Fuck, you're arrogant," Vicky had informed me just that morning and laughed.) And that's supposed to be sexy, right? However, for one thing, my fashion sense hardly screams at the supermodels on this planet to come and take me now – not that I'd complain if they did. It tends more towards a flashing, neon-colored warning sign on how I might bite, approach at own risk. I'm talking long black coats, Doc Martens, multi-colored hair, t-shirts that say *Fuck you, I'm tired*. Which befitted the situation right then, because I hadn't had my first coffee yet. More accurately, I was about to let a little magic dance along my fingertips to get that coffee faster. No matter that I suck at conjuration, I was rapidly deciding to take my chances with that Starbucks cashier anyway...

The Starbucks lady rolled her eyes and waved me off at that same moment, forfeiting our debate on the cost of extra creme. My hand uncramped, reached for my coffee cup, and next thing I was glaring at the rainy Boston sky again.

"Hey," said a redheaded supermodel when I stepped out of the shop. "You're a demon."

I blinked. First thing I noticed were spades of that enviable, gleaming red hair. Then I had to force my gaze off an equally captivating neckline. So her face entered my line of sight, including a mischievous smile and, oh. Make-up. Shiny, colorful, super feminine

make-up. By which I mean not the Gothic kind where you heat up the eyeliner to make the line blacker. As an afterthought, I attempted an estimation of the woman's IQ, and as usual I was forced to settle on a pretty unflattering figure. I mean, sky blue eye make-up. And a dress with flowers on it. I'm never picky about clues when it comes to IQ estimations.

"Not the greatest compliment I've ever gotten," I said, looking at the rain and towards the subway and everywhere that wasn't that neckline. *Sometimes you're such a human.*

Her smile grew into a smirk. "No. I mean... that's not what I meant. I saw the spark you conjured up at the counter. You're a demon."

"Oh. *Oh.*" That sure got my attention. "That. Demon. Yes. You...?"

Oh joy. I even sounded like a human – exactly like the kindergartener I had eaten last week.

The woman had green eyes – that kind of rare cat green that people usually have to fake with contacts. Real green eyes and red hair... hah. Like a witch. Demon witch. Thingy.

Yeah, well, so my ability to pun improves proportionally to my caffeine intake.

"Yes. Me, too." She glanced at the rain, but the sight didn't seem to fill her with much enthusiasm, either. "How would you feel about having your coffee inside?"

Hell, I shouldn't. Vicky was expecting me back, and I had to finish the paperwork for college. I had to unpack, fill my fridge with things to eat that hadn't once walked around and talked, drink more coffee. I'd just arrived two days ago.

"Why not," I said and held the door open for her.



You see, it all had begun with *The Function of Magic Items in Fairytale Novellas of the Berlin Romantics*. This was not the name of a rare medical condition. It was the title of my master thesis. I made for a terrible Conjuror even for a purebred demon, but I was good with words, so I'd gotten a degree in literature, among the humans, back home in Hesse. And I liked fairytale novellas. They were short. Literature researchers know to appreciate that. I'd originally wanted to write about Mephisto, but the secondary literature for that would have been hell, if you'll excuse the pun – if anybody but a literature person would even get that pun. Turned out that it would have been wiser to put up with all the footnotes.

I don't know exactly how the news managed to travel from my human professor's desk into an inbox of the Demon Bureau of Investigations. What I do know is that I handed in the thesis in July, and in August two stern-faced Conjurors in black suits appeared on my doorstep. I got out of the dungeons after my dad posted bail, but my personal horror story had only just begun: accusations of willful endangerment of the demon underground's secrets, willful breaches of the disinformation laws en masse, disregard of the black list, the one with the prohibited writings we were banned from sharing with the humans.

I knew the black list well. All my schoolbooks had been on it back when. Hadn't even guessed that it might include romantic fairytale novellas.

Turned out it didn't, too. The people who made the black list probably hadn't even been able to spell "fairytale novella." With neither confidence nor patience left, I sat before a judge in chains while laymen discussed something they couldn't grasp, learning that I should have foreseen the endangerment of the demon underground if I wrote a

paper on mentions of magic in *The Romance of Little Red Riding Hood* by Ludwig Tieck – a Berlin poet memorable for his bisexuality only, who'd been no more demonic than a fork. Either they hadn't read my thesis or the concept of fiction went over their heads as well, and no expert took the stand on my behalf. The German demon community is tiny, after all. It didn't have any literature researchers other than I. The whole production took much longer than it had any right to take.

Long story short. As soon as they allowed me to leave, my very wise mother pushed a suitcase at me and I ran. Our only newspaper had written about me. The entire Underground knew who I was. They all looked at me as if I were a monster. An acquitted monster, I tried to object. My mom, wise yet again, told me to keep running.

I had a human blogging pal in Boston.

What should I care that they'd recently been fighting some kind of dirty clan war here?

I didn't plan on even *looking* at any demons.



Five minutes in, I decided that my IQ estimation of Sam could have been wrong.

Ten minutes in, I *wanted* it to be wrong and started ignoring anything that might have pointed to the contrary.

"I'm a lab assistant in the Astral Institute," she said while sipping at her latte macchiato with a straw. She'd surreptitiously added a shot of blood from a flask and transformed it into a *sangue macchiato*, if you will. "As a child I wanted to go into law enforcement, but I'm not very good with the attack magics. Little control of the elements, zero telepathy." She shrugged.

A Veil dampened the noises of Starbuck around us to a murmur. Same happened to our conversation to the rest of the world. Sam's doing, certainly not mine. She was powerful.

I watched a strand of her hair come loose, sliding down her neck, coming to rest softly on her shoulder.

"I'm no good at magic overall," I said. "Hence the post-grad at the Boston University." I smirked. "If they accept me and I'm here anyway, maybe I could write something about those biographies that were published about your clan wars and that clan hero, what's her name, Calypso Iveragh? Our newspaper was full of her." Sure, become a target to the next vengeful demon agency. But damn, just think about it... "The Rhetoric Of Pathos and Ethos In The Media Depictions of Tobin Todd and Samantha Crooks...' Oh, wow." I raised a questioning eyebrow at her. The names of those who had put down the Boston clan rebellion had travelled around all the world. Samantha, Sam – right. So, okay, sometimes I'm a little slow when it comes to politics, as my master's thesis impressively illustrates. "You...?"

She just smiled.

"But didn't they say you had a torrid affair with that wunderkind dude, Todd...?" Maybe my gaydar had let me down completely, but that was a risk I was willing to take.

"Eh," she said. Her smile broadened.

Or maybe not. I smiled back.

"Show me Boston?"



I'd been shown Boston during previous visits. Multiple times. So what – it wasn't about that.

My mood took a rapid turn for the better. I sleepwalked back to the apartment with that kind of doofus grin that only the prospect of a date can trigger. (And sex. But if I allowed my mind to go there, I wouldn't make it to university any time soon.)

When I entered the apartment, I was hit by a wet towel.

"There you are, slugabed," greeted Vicky. "I thought you wanted to ride in with me." My roommate stood in the door to the bathroom and reached for another towel to dry her hair. I peeled mine off my face and put it away. "So Vincent still hasn't called. Johnny has, though." She smirked. "And I think this guy from last night is pulling a stalker thing on me now..."

Sometimes I have speculated that I'm a lesbian because Vicky absorbs the heterosexual energy from the air around her.

"Which one was Vincent again?"

"BMW. Athletic. Tall. Chinese." Considering she only dated inside the Chinese community, and I couldn't tell cars apart any better than my human happy meals, that constituted a particularly useless description.

Manhandling her towel turban, Vicky walked to the window and had a look outside.

"They're all athletic and tall. Which of them is stalking you?"

"Not sure. Athletic, tall." I rolled my eyes but joined her at the window. As expected, nothing out of the ordinary could be seen on the street. "Pretty old, but sexy. Earrings. Bald. I don't get how I don't remember him from yesterday."

"So you might not even know him?"

"That would be a shame. He says we danced." With a last mournful look she turned away from the window. "Ah well. Now he's gone. You gonna come with to Johnny again tonight?"

"Nope. Go do the dirty without a chaperone. I have a date."

I managed to dodge the towel, this time.



“So. Wait. You can only think if you have words. But you can make new words, although you have to think to do so. And names are not words. And the first word ever invented was a name.” Sam’s current pizza slice stilled in midair as she frowned in concentration, starring off into the night. I detest the metaphor but yeah, when she looked at me and smiled, there were butterflies, and they did the thing. “That’s the worst hairsplitting I’ve ever heard of.”

I laughed. “Wittgenstein would disagree. He’s the ultimate hero of language philosophy, aside Searle.”

“What did Searle say?”

“That every statement has four levels of meaning. I’ll spare you the list.” I tried to gain control of another slice of cheese-dripping pizza, but failed. Instead I looked at Sam. “You honest-to-god want to talk about linguistics?”

“No, I’m just looking for an in to get that thesis topic out of you.”

“I see. Won’t happen.”

“‘The Tell-tale Topic?’”

“Funny.”

“‘Silence of the Thesis.’”

I snorted.

“‘In A Thesis Darkly.’”

“There are things that should remain forgotten. Better wait for my comparative analysis of ‘Lord of the Rings’ and Kafka’s ‘Castle.’”

“Or Aristotle’s rhetoric in the news items about Calypso.”

“Accurate.”



In my mind, I was rapidly assembling a china platter to place my heart on and then hand to this woman. I can tell well enough if a person is humoring me or actually listening to my academic rambles, and whether they understand what I'm talking about. In the majority of cases they don't have the slightest clue, because let's face it, the intricate detail of language and literature is a little too much for most of those dumbasses out there. And doing this in a second language didn't exactly improve my teaching skills.

But Sam Crooks *understood*. And she had *fun*. And smiled at me, every now and again.

Of course that was just the part of the evening before the balls and chains.



"My brother Jamie died in the war," Sam told me while we strolled down a boardwalk along the Charles River. It had stopped raining; the breeze from the sea stirred her hair, and the smell of salt and harbor hung in the air. "Gregory was injured a couple of times, he's in law enforcement, and Freddy, that one time. But Jamie was murdered. He worked for the Secret Clan."

"What about you?"

"I had an opportunity to discover that I'm not very good at the attack magics." Her short smile was void of humor this time. "We stood in support of Clan Iveragh, so we had to cut ties with the Dunleys – you've probably heard of the Dunleys..."

She shuddered visibly, although it was summer and warm.

I took her hand and warmed it anyway.



Vicky's apartment building was accessed through one of those narrow back alleys that are so typical for American cities, those quiet passageways that suddenly shut out the big city noises and created their own little universe contained in a handful of yards. An upward glance at the darkened windows told me that my roommate was still busy somewhere else, likely in the bedroom of an athletic, tall Chinese American man who drove a BMW.

Unlike yours truly, Sam was able to conjure up the Paths of the Upper World, so she brought me home. We came to a halt in front of the building.

When she turned to leave, I didn't let go of her hand.

Not my most cunning plan, but successful.

She smelled of cinnamon.

Lips running along my jawline. I shuddered and closed my eyes.

"Somebody's gonna have my neck for this..." Sam muttered.

"Huh?"

"Made a promise." Lips. Kisses. "Behave myself tonight."

"You can have mine instead. Uh. My neck. Or something." Again, my punning had been impaired. I pulled her closer to me. It should have felt cheap, the two of us, in some skanky Boston alley, puddles all around. But there was nothing cheap about those touches and kisses and the feel of Sam's breasts against mine.

And apparently I didn't have that much in common with the humans after all, because I was still capable of logical thought. I thought, for example, that there was a bed not that far away, that I needed to avoid one-night-stand signals, and that coffee invites were terrible clichés yet effective social protocols. The biggest part of me, however, thought, *who cares*, and *go for it*.

I felt fingers sliding down my back and others on the back of my neck. Sam, I observed, had no problems sending very firm signals...

“Attention! Secret Clan!” barked a bass voice with a heavy Boston accent. “Duck, Sam!”

The last thing my brain managed to record was a snapshot of fanning red hair, illuminated by curse fire.

Somebody spat out a swearword as I fell.



All my dignity, gone poof with a curse.

Again.

The world swam in front of my eyes, then transformed into the fairly clear contour of a... warehouse. Of course. Sure. I closed my eyes again, tried to suppress a whimper.

“...wasn’t necessary whatsoever,” I heard an indignant voice, familiar... Sam. “You didn’t even wait for my report.”

“You *kissed* her, Sam. On a *mission*! A *suspect*! We thought *maybe* you’d lost a little bit of your objectivity!”

“Oh come on, Greg...”

“That’s enough.” The bass. “What did you find that *is* pertinent to the mission, Sam?”

“Well, not... not much, really. She kept changing the subject when I asked about her paper.”

“I knew it,” hissed Greg. “You’d wonder why, huh?”

“Because it keeps attracting law enforcement agencies?” I said and opened my eyes. Three blank faces looked back at me. I frowned and repeated the sentence in English. It took me a moment to decide whether I should add a “goddamnit” or a “for fuck’s fuck.” I chose the latter.

That had been one hell of a stunner. I didn’t even have a headache.

But, oh, yay. I was chained to a chair like in a shit human movie. My palms already sweated profusely, and inside of me, a feeling of betrayal mixed with good old straightforward fear. I could feel my heart pounding madly. The courtroom in Frankfurt had been enough to do me in already, the Secret Clan managed without trying. In my age, you start going on dates with a sense that this might be the one date, the one woman – the one that might change your whole life. Quite obviously, I hadn't had any *idea*.

Shit. And the Secret Clan was... the Secret Clan. Infamous for its cruel efficiency long before the Boston Clan Wars started – more like since the first couple of demons came sailing in on the Santa Maria and played their merry part in annihilating all the natives. Not the shitty five-man-sized bureau of investigations back home, but the secret service of secret services, *Men in Black* with a little bit of Stasi mixed in for flavor, if you believed the newspaper. Shit shitty shit.

I should have become a teacher. Teachers were at least sort of competent in my field, and they had calm, pleasant lives. Nothing like this.

I glanced at Sam. She stood behind the other two and had the decency of lowering her eyes.

"So," said the man with the low voice, snapping a badge open and shut in front of me. I looked at him for the first time. He seemed athletic enough, and tall, and Chinese, and he was bald and wore earrings, and why was that familiar again?

Hallelujah.

"My name is Carter Lim," he said shortly and way too businesslike for my taste. My gaze was glued to the sparks of charged magics flittering across the fingers of his left as if they could barely wait to burn me into a little heap of ashes. "We would like to ask you some

questions, Ma'am. Are you the demon of German citizenship Simone Achenberg?"

"I am." Panic usually triggers my sarcasm but this would most definitely have been the wrong time for sarcasm. I looked past Lim in hope for help from the other guy. He was a freckled redhead about Sam's age – Greg – who looked at me as if I had at least tried to seduce his sis... oh.

"Are you the author of an unauthorized academic paper concerning magical items?"

My fallen pride attempted a last twitch. But how would it help to point out that those magical items were all *fictional*? Nothing. I'd been there, done that before. "Yes."

"Do you admit to having contacted a demon called Anthony Tickle after your arrival in the United States?"

What the... "No. Because it's not true. I didn't." Nervously I tried to move my hands in the cuffs but unlike the cuffs in the serial killer novels, these didn't give. My meager magics certainly wouldn't help me out of here either. This was so not good. "Who is Anthony Tickle?"

"He calls himself Johnny Chang," Sam said, answering the bass guy's gaze defensively. Me she didn't look at once.

Between its many beats, my heart sank for two very different reasons.

"I didn't know that he's a demon," I defended myself faintly. I didn't even have any kind of interest in him. *Vicky* had an interest in him.

Lim threw me a look with the cross-lingual meaning of, *yeah, sure*.

"Really," I said, because I was starting to make some room for anger. "This is absurd. Firstly I was cleared of all charges. Where I'm from, that proves my innocence. Secondly, did you even read past the

abstract? I'm sitting here because people don't have any clue whatsoever about either one of my specialties and because I know somebody who knows somebody. Because of *fairytales*. Seven-league boots. A damn genie in a bottle. The singing, springing lark." Rolling my eyes I slumped back down. "Don't tell me your super-secret clan doesn't have literature consultants, either."

Lim just looked at me. I shrank further back and eyed his sparkly fingers.

Belatedly it occurred to me that at best, there was a memory veil waiting for me in my future. It would delete all the memories of this interrogation. The clan of American superheroes wasn't called secret for the funsies. It was double secret. It was secret even among the secret demon community.

Brave new world.



A small eternity passed, filled with military-style questioning. And yet another investigation of the biggest mistake of my life: a.k.a. my master thesis. And with my growing hate for Vicky or maybe straights or humans in general, or straight humans at least, because they invited tall, athletic men into their apartments. At least, now I knew why Sam's kind of woman hit on my kind of woman at Starbucks.

"I think she's clean," Lim finally told Gregory, his hand making like it would vanish in his pocket soon, where it couldn't hurt me anymore. "Take care of clean-up while I contact Lorca..."

He didn't get to finish. A smear that I belatedly identified as a messenger veil shot through the room and penetrated his chest. Lim's eyes narrowed; demon red glinted in his pupils for a moment, and magic sparks chased along his fingertips like blood spatter.

“Secure Achenberg,” he said curtly. “Get her away from the line of fire, Crooks. Tickle’s discovered our surveillance. Lorca has opened fire, and will try to drive him towards us.”

Looked like Lorca was succeeding, whoever she or he was. Lim and his cronies had barely gotten into motion when the rumble of a magic discharge could be heard outside.



The good news was that Sam’s brother unchained me. The bad news was the consequence of that: I was supposed to leave the secure-looking, well-fortified warehouse.

“Move!” hissed Gregory Crooks, pushing me forward gruffly. “And if you’re stupid enough to try running, I won’t hesitate to use the good curses on you.” As if I were crazy.

As if I could seriously think clearly in a dangerous situation.

Crooks maneuvered me out of the building; I recognized the port docks. Ducking for cover, he towed me along the wall, behind us screams, explosions, lights flashing in the corner of my eye. I tried to turn, saw Sam behind me – pretty pale herself – and, not far away, demonic curse fire, like fireworks.

After a hundred meters or so, Crooks pushed me between two cargo containers. I fell without ceremony. Before I could orient myself, I was hit by a conjuration that sucked away all my magic powers, then covered Sam and me with an illusion veil. “If she tries to get away, stun her,” Crooks told his sister and vanished in the direction of the fight.

Furious but powerless, I leaned the back of my head against the container. Sam huddled up next to me, fingers crooked, attack-ready. Even if it hadn’t just been stolen from me, my own magic would have

been too meager to even bother with that. I didn't bother trying to look useful, either. Or composed.

A long moment passed in silence. In the distance, the hubbub of battle still raged on. Every now and then, far-away magic discharges briefly illuminated our hideout.

I couldn't believe it. I'd ended up in the middle of a battle.

That kind of thing was supposed to only happen in novels.

"I suppose," said Sam, "that 'sorry' doesn't even start to cover it."

"Nope." Somewhere close-by, something blew up. We flinched. "It so very much doesn't."

"Gregory talked me into it. I usually only do desk work."

"Well." I wasn't in a forgiving mood; mostly I was angry at myself. "I guess that's what all the fraternity rules are for."

Tense silence.

Were fights *supposed* to take this long?

The novels always claimed that they were over in a heartbeat.

I wondered if Vicky was okay.

"So what is all of this even about?"

"Anthony Ticklely was sworn to Clan Dunley during the war," Sam said. "After the clan surrendered, he killed the real Johnny Chang and took his identity."

"Why didn't you take him into custody sooner?" Rather than ruining my evening – hell, my whole stay. At this point, nothing in the whole wide world would have made me remain in the United States any longer than it took me to book a plane ticket.

That opening for a librarian in Reykjavik suddenly sounded very attractive.

"Because we knew he was in contact with other suspects, but we didn't know exactly who. Something about handwriting analyses and



letters, I don't know the entire..." She interrupted herself and suddenly seemed to listen for something intently. I automatically did so as well.

No explosions anymore. Steps getting louder.

Gregory turned the corner. I hated that I couldn't make out a single scratch on him. He seemed to be brimming with adrenaline. "We got him," he said, out of breath. "The human police is on the way, we've got to evacuate *now*."



They transported me to their headquarters, a nifty mansion on the Beacon Hill, where the rich and important resided, demon and human alike. I suppose they thought it didn't matter what I saw, since somebody would take care of my memory, mafia-style, soon enough anyway.

Sam urged me onto a chair in a parlor and handed me a cup of hot tea. The hall teemed with any number of busy-looking people. The team of this Lorca person had dragged Tickle off to god-knows-where. Gregory Crooks and Lim were conferring with a young man with uncombed hair in a corner of the room. Closer to me, two men dressed in those old dusty robes that only served ritualistic purposes anymore were immersed in a deep conversation as if I and my ears didn't exist. One was middle-aged, the other more of a Saruman. Sam lurked in the background and threw me guilty glances, which I ignored.

Magic heated up the entire building, so pervasive even I could feel it.

"...don't have to worry too much that this will happen again," said the younger of the two men in the abracadabra clothes. "The situation was quite unique, after all. Usually a trivial handwriting analysis would have told us the names of Tickle's contacts, but the magic signatures

the persons used were forged, and we had no qualified handwriting expert at disposal.”

“Big surprise,” I muttered into my tea cup and updated my list of incidents where the absence of a language specialist ruined my life to three. Sure, I bet that they had physicists and lawyers and other such types galore. But handwriting experts? Literature researchers? Linguists?

Philistines.

“Beg pardon?” The younger man interrupted his conversation and raised his eyebrows at me.

My social skills are *nada* not even taking into account the awful day I was having, but now I lost my patience on top of it.

“Big surprise,” I said in a louder voice. “Never hear of the concept of a consult?” They would have adulterated the memory of some poor local academic instead of mine in that case. I would have preferred that. “Seriously, how hard can it be to keep two letter writers apart? You don’t need a specialist. Any linguist can do that. You’ve got the signature. You’ve got the handwriting. You’ve got their goddammed grammar.” I grimaced. “I’d probably have kept them apart by their comma usage alone, and I just minored in language. In a different one, even. But what would I care?” As if, in this circumstance, I would take anybody seriously whose population voted for people like George W. Bush, who should have been eaten at the first awful metaphor he used. “I’m just somebody whose life is ruined because *not a single soul* is able to understand a paper on fairytales, as if it was *so hard...*”

“That’s her, the petite one who’s talking to Rupert,” said a voice. I turned to see Gregory next to who I by now knew to be the woman Lorca. “It should be enough to erase the last twenty-four hours.”

I swallowed hard. Lorca was a disconcertingly tall and stone-faced Latina who didn't at all look as if she cared about the finer ethics of telepathy.

"No," said Sam and suddenly stepped forward. "Wait. I've got an idea."

"Huh," said the aforementioned Rupert and looked down to me with a thoughtful look on his face. "And a good one, I believe."



"Well then, Miss Achenberg, welcome to the research unit of the Secret Clan," said the folk hero Todd with the unkept Harry Potter hair, and smiling curtly as he took the contract back from me. He then signed it himself. "We will contact you as soon as the Tickleby documents are ready for your evaluation."

Wordlessly I watched him sort out the carbon copies and the binders. My head was still swimming from the second surprise twist this evening. I sat in Tobin Todd's office, obviously the holy sanctuary of the headquarters, where demonic energies positively boiled. Next to me sat Carter Lim, who had been interrogating me with military psychology and grim stares less than an hour ago. Sam had volunteered to vouch for me, but her brother and Todd had exchanged various embarrassed looks of the straight male variety, so Lim had been made to pinch-hit. I did what I always did in confusing situations. I became very calm and collected and accepted Todd's offer with all the shreds of dignity I had left.

I didn't care a fig for the politics of the Boston demon clan world or its secret services – secret clans, whatever. It's not like I was even American. But that was decidedly beside the point.

You did not refuse offers to make easy money and to work in secret service organizations. Having a foot in the door was everybody's dearest dream. It was the safest method of escaping political control and memory erasure. Also accusations of breaching the disinformation laws.

And I definitely preferred the Secret Clan over the Demon Bureau of Investigation. Here at least they admitted to it after they screwed up.

"There you go," said Todd and handed me my copy of the contract after veiling it in an illusion charm. "If you'll excuse me. I will have somebody call you a cab."

He left. For one long, uncomfortable moment silence filled the room. Looked like Lim didn't want to leave me alone in the sanctum.

I studied my fingernails and pondered if there was anything else left to take care of.

Sam.

Sure, dream on.

Thinking for a moment long, I reached for my inside pocket and searched my wallet.

"Hey, Carter," I said. I had made concessions. Addressing my ex-kidnapper and interrogator politely by their last name was not one of them. What can I say – everybody needs a defense mechanism.

The agent raised his eyebrows in an otherwise unmoved face. I held out a card. Not mine, of course.

"You remember my roommate, the one you lied to?" I said. "She thinks you're hot. Call her."

I would have been ready to shove the card in his pocket against his protest.

"Thanks," said Lim and tucked it away.

When I turned towards the door, Sam was waiting for me.



In a mansion such as this one, it was necessary to be led to the door. I suppose it also didn't do to let newcomers wander around on their own, but you could still easily get turned around in the corridors. Neither one of us said anything as we crossed the foyer, where there were people. At the front door, Sam stepped out onto the stairway along with me. Midnight had long come and gone. The cab hadn't materialized yet.

"I suppose," she said, "that 'sorry' doesn't even start to cover it."

"We've done that already," I said.

"It's worthy of repetition."

"Are you even gay?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Are you serious?"

The corner of my mouth twitched despite myself.

We waited in silence.

"How about dinner?" she suddenly asked.

"Huh?"

"Would dinner start covering it?"

I only raised one eyebrow. Because I could. "Are you serious?"

"Well, you also would want to figure in the memory erasure I prevented, and the job offer I pushed for."

"Yeah, sure."

"Plus, my eternal, painful embarrassment, because I didn't act very professionally. They'll never let me live it down."

"Don't tell me you want pity."

"No." She smiled. "Just dinner."

My cab rolled to a stop on front of us. I hesitated for a fraction of a second.

"*Just* dinner? That would be a pity." I turned away with a wink.  
"Call me."

Despite everything, the night had known its highlights. I'd liked the kiss before it had been interrupted so rudely. Well – really I'd liked all of it before it had been interrupted. And I liked the consultation contract with the secret service, which would make the demon underground into a better place for sure. Never mind Vicky's gratitude once the tall athletic man transformed himself into another notch on her bedpost.

But I also liked turning to have a last look through the rear window and to see Sam's gaze following the car, until it was out of sight.

Want to let Patricia know how you liked the story?

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Patricia's lesfic exists in German as well and can be found at [www.patricia-penn.de](http://www.patricia-penn.de).

### **About The Author**

Patricia is interested in obscure trivia, good cognac und true crime. She spends her days teaching companies marketing, living in the Taunus Mountains close to Frankfurt, Germany alongside her Golden Retriever. On occasion she has also been known to knit or to debate what should happen next with a horse. Her last girlfriend emigrated to Mexico – hopefully not because of her.

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