

Chapter 22

a deleted scene from *Russian Dolls*

by Cristelle Comby

'Please,' I say. 'This hurts. It's atrocious.'

I don't get a reply to my moan. The woman who stands behind me merely puts her hands on her hips in an expectant pose.

'It *hurts*.' I beg again. 'This is going to end in broken bones, I'm sure.'

'Alexandra Neve, stop whining!' Her tone is fed-up. 'Put your foot down and man up.'

'Man up?' I echo. Oh, but I'm all for that. 'I'd love to *man up* – a man wouldn't have to endure this torture of a dress, not to mention those hideous shoes.'

'Those shoes are exquisite,' my mother snaps. 'And I know what I'm talking about. Now stop fidgeting and let me finish lacing your dress.'

'I look stupid,' I whine again.

I look in the mirror once more and barely recognise the woman staring back at me. My mother has wrapped me in a long, strapless red evening dress that laces up the back. My hair is pinned high in a sophisticated bun, with only one or two locks that fall on each side of my face.

'You're gorgeous,' she counters, pulling the laces even tighter.

‘Corsets were trendy in the sixteenth century,’ I remind her. ‘Why couldn’t I wear trousers? Trousers are current.’

‘Oh for the love of God, stop complaining, Lexa.’ She yanks the laces hard. That effectively shuts me up, for it knocks the breath out of me.

‘There,’ she says with a touch of pride. In the mirror, I can see her take a step back to admire her handiwork. ‘Absolutely perfect.’

‘I... can’t... breathe,’ I wheeze.

She beams at me, her eyes welling with pride and joy, and I know I’ve lost the fight. Damn! I take two reluctant steps back, almost toppling over because of the high heels she brought back from the shop, just for this occasion.

‘And I can’t walk,’ I add with a pout. I won’t survive the night. I know it.

A car comes to pick us up at seven that evening and drives us straight to Mansion House. Our invitation was signed by the hand of the Lord Mayor himself, and it was the sort of invitation you can’t decline.

It takes me longer than it should to get out of the car. I’m in a sweat, out of breath and already fed-up with this entire evening when I finally manage to extract myself. My mother and I are escorted inside and taken to a large, richly decorated room full of guests. I’m suddenly glad to have dressed up for the event (not that I would ever admit that to my mother), for I would have looked startlingly out of place in jeans and Converse trainers. The people in this room are not men and women, but *gentlemen* and *ladies*. There are no other words for it. They are all so gorgeous and perfectly dressed; I feel like I’ve just stumbled into a Victorian duchess’s dream.

‘Oh *my*, Alexandra. You are breathtaking,’ a familiar voice says to my left.

I’m confident my cheeks have instantly coloured as red as my dress, as I turn to face DS Stenson.

‘Isn’t she just?’ my mother replies. ‘And to think she wanted to wear trousers.’ She tuts and I turn a shade redder.

I wish I could say something, but I’m so out of my depth that words elude me.

‘Detective Sergeant Matthew Stenson.’ He shakes my mother’s hand.

The young man is all smiles. He's wearing a dark blue suit and a light blue shirt with a lovely striped blue tie. He even trimmed his beard a little shorter for the occasion. I feel faint all of a sudden, and it's not only because of the dress.

'I know,' my mother is telling him. 'Her father would be so proud if he was still here.' *Huh?* I have no idea what they're talking about. I feel as if I have missed several sentences of their conversation. Gosh, not only do these clothes make you look stupid, but they also lower your IQ.

Thankfully, Stenson doesn't seem to have noticed that I had zoned out on them and he's still smiling at us good-naturedly. He excuses himself to return to the group of Scotland Yard representatives. My eyes follow his departure, and I catch a glimpse, in the distance, of a perspiring Langford wearing a hysterically ridiculous green bow tie. I immediately feel better about my dress.

A man crosses my field of vision for an instant. He's tall, and he moves swiftly through the crowd. There's nothing strange about him; he's dressed in a black-and-white suit, and he mingles amiably with the rest of the guests. What draws my attention is his eyes, which I only glimpse at for a short instant. They're icy blue, like a frozen lake on a winter's morning. Dimitri's man; one of the two who was at the bar. He gives me the briefest of smiles before disappearing into the crowd again. Well, what a small world it is, if I were to believe in coincidences. I make a note to try to get my hands on the guest list.

'Is that your professor?' my mother asks, and I turn to look at the person who has caught her attention.

'Yes, it is.' I guess the cane in the newcomer's hand is a big clue for everyone.

He's also dressed up for the event, I notice, as I move closer to him. He's wearing a black suit, a white shirt and a black scarf neatly tied around his neck to hide his scar. It suits him wonderfully well and accentuates his lean stature. I half expected to see him enter the room in one of his trademark turtleneck pullovers.

'You look quite dapper, my dear sir,' I say, finally coming to stand in front of him.

He stops in his tracks. 'Do I? I was afraid I looked like a penguin, in all this black and white.' He tilts his head to the side as he folds his cane. 'Although I have been told this is the kind of suit that such an event requires.'

'You're perfectly in tune with the rest of the guests,' I assure him.

I move to my usual place by his right side, and he offers me his arm, frowning as I take it. 'Heels?' he questions, an eyebrow rising above his dark glasses.

'Alas.' I shouldn't be surprised that he noted the five-inch difference in my stature. 'And a long red dress that ties in the back, like in the olden days.'

'You don't seem too happy about it,' he quips.

'What gave you that impression?' I shoot back, and we start walking to where I left my Mum. 'It was my mother's idea. I swear to you, this is torture. I can barely breathe.'

He chuckles. 'Well, I didn't want to come, either,' he assures me.

The night moves agonisingly slowly, and we're introduced to several key guests until even the Lord Mayor addresses us with a few words of thanks for helping out the Metropolitan Police in this high-profile case. Egan remains calm and collected at the words, and I manage to stutter an approximation of 'Thanks. Pleased to meet you.' My words are hesitant, and my voice lacks its usual strength. If anyone asks, I'll blame it all on the dress.

A select few journalists are also present, and although we make it clear that we're not in the mood for an interview, we cannot escape the obligatory photo shoot. They take us to a quiet corner of the room and insist that we pose for them. It starts with only Egan and me until we're joined by the Lord Mayor and some other important man whose name I forget.

Once we're finally left alone, we relocate to the terrace and find a quiet corner near a low wall that separates this area from the gardens.

The air is neither cold nor warm, and only the faintest of breeze disturbs this perfect spring night. Music and friendly chatter drift through the large opened doors, but they're a mere distant hum in the background.

I look at the friend standing by my side and find that I don't know what to say. I'm reminded of the time we stayed locked up in the safe house. I felt similar back then — our relationship strained, each of our actions cautious and unsure. Why is it that everything gets more complicated once the trepidation disappears? It is as if we

don't know how to be friends without the thrill of a case or our own impending death. I let out a deep frustrated sigh.

'Ah, this is a sound I haven't heard in a while,' Egan smiles, next to me.

'I've missed you,' I blurt out, my mouth speaking ahead of my brain once more and I curse myself at the unwanted admission.

Egan's smile falters at that, and he turns away a little. 'I'm sorry about that.' He sounds regretful. 'I've been rather busy.'

'I know,' I rush out. 'Sorry. I didn't mean it as a reproach.' I don't know what I meant. 'It's... it's just how I felt. I don't know.'

I sigh again, and this earns me a new smile from my friend. 'Damn, I do that a lot, don't I?'

'I daresay it is what I've missed the most about you.' His smile turns slightly smug. 'I've grown accustomed to your sighs, I suppose.'

I punch him lightly on the arm, before understanding dawns on me. 'You missed me?'

His smile disappears as he nods, his Adam's apple bobbing tellingly. The air of smugness is gone, replaced by something I could only label as melancholia.

'I was wondering,' I start and stop when I notice how revealing my voice is. I swallow and try to keep my emotions in check before continuing. 'I was wondering why we grew apart like that. I mean—' I sigh, words eluding me again, '—I don't know what I mean.'

'Yes, it seems to be a recurring problem, tonight.'

'Ash,' I chide him.

'Sorry,' he gives me a tentative smile. 'I think I understand what you're trying to say.'

I wait for him to say more, but he seems to have finished.

'Do you wish to elaborate?' I ask, and he remains silent for a long time.

'I wasn't that busy actually. Maybe the first couple of days, but then...' he lets his sentence hang. The words should hurt, but they don't. I hadn't been that busy myself either. Somehow, I feel we both have the same problem, and we're both reluctant to admit it.

‘I don’t think I’ll be coming back to UCL,’ I admit finally. ‘I can’t imagine sitting in those dusty old rooms for hours on end, listening to lecture after lecture. Not— not after everything that’s happened.’

I’ve been researching the private investigation industry. I didn’t know it, but nowadays you don’t even need a licence to take up this profession in the UK, although it is recommended you join the Association of British Investigators if you want to be taken seriously. I ordered the brochure.

Egan lets a soft sigh of his own escape his thin lips as his shoulders droop a little.

‘It’s been quiet and dull without you around,’ he admits eventually. ‘Almost unbearably so.’

I chuckle at that and instantly feel bad when I see his face close off again.

‘I wasn’t laughing at you,’ I reassure him. ‘It’s our situation that I find funny.’

He raises a questioning eyebrow at me.

‘It turned our lives upside down, this, changed everything. And instead of accepting it; accepting that things are now different, we both tried to revert to our old ways.’

‘We’ve spent weeks feeling miserable because we’re too stubborn to own up to our feelings. That, my friend, is funny... in a pathetic kind of way. And I dare you to say it isn’t true.’

There, I’d said it. I guess one of us had to — had to take the first step. We’re at a crossroads, I know. It is finally time for us to stop skirting around the issue and come to a decision. Anxious, I plant both hands atop the nearby low wall and wait.

‘We almost died,’ Egan says. It’s not a reproach, the tone too matter-of-factly. It’s as if he had just announced that the sky is blue.

‘But we lived.’

There’s a sharp intake of breath at my words, as he takes in the full meaning of them. Neither of us had ever felt more alive than we did during those couple of weeks when we were working on Irina’s case. I know it, and so does he.

I feel my friend take a step closer to me and suddenly his upturned palm appears in my peripheral view. I turn my back to the wall and lean against it as I take the offered hand in mine and grasp it tightly.

'When was it that we crossed the point of no return?' he asks.

'I don't know. I never saw it.'

He smiles at me, and I smile back.