

A Pleasure

By

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Version 26.06.16

A Pleasure

Chapter 1

I was still buzzing when I got home. The Bryansford presentation had landed. That clean, electric certainty where every word goes exactly where you put it, and the room knows you've won before you do. I'd walked out of the boardroom at three with my blood running warm, and the rest of the afternoon was noise around that feeling. The first thing I'd done in the cab home was send the team flowers and a thank-you each. The second was decide I wasn't going to bed.

I let myself in and dropped the bag by the door. The condo was tidy in the careful way it always was when I'd barely been in it. Straight to the bathroom, shower hot, the day off in pieces on the tile. Bergamot and cedar. The soap I'd been buying since London. Stupid quantities, so I'd never run out.

Hands moved over my skin with more attention than the wash required. Late nights. Weekends. Work that took water and steam and time to come off.

Twenty minutes later: hair half-dried, black top, dark jeans. Tonight was a jeans night, not a heels-and-collarbone night. Boots that changed how I walked. I checked the mirror once, fast. Done. Keys, phone, card. I grabbed the duffel from the hall closet on the way out. Not because I'd need it. But I'd learned that lesson exactly once.

The September air hit my skin as I crossed the garage. I slid into the cool leather seat and turned the stereo on. ♪ Goldfrapp, *Black Cherry*, track two. Same album I'd been driving on for the last five years. Reliable in the way the right music is when you don't want surprises in your own head. I took the long route across the river. The conference-circuit hotels were part of my rotation; nobody saw the same face twice. Almost five years in, the system ran without me thinking about it. Friday at this hour, the road was empty. I let the music do its work.

I was passing through Allston when I heard it.

From somewhere behind. The bass found me before I clocked the beat and could brace for it. It bypassed everything above the neck and landed in my whole body at once. Stomach tight, instant heat, a throb between my legs that made my thighs clench. And then I was gone.

Dark room. Green laser cutting through smoke. The tack of rubber against rubber, a body pressed to mine and both of us slick with it, bass so heavy you stop being a person and start being a pulse. A sniff, a swallow, warmth flooding up from the chest. Time bends. The pulse becomes the beat, the beat becomes a rolling orgasm that bleeds across hours and days until you surface on a Tuesday, crashed out behind some stranger's sofa, no idea what district you're even in. *Fuck, Carlisle.*

My hands were locked on the steering wheel. The light ahead of me was green. I don't know how long it had been green. The car behind me flashed its high beams.

I breathed. Unclenched my fingers and thighs. Swallowed. The taste in the back of my throat was just air. Just September. I was thirty-one years old, sitting in my car at a green light in Allston, and for the turn of a light change I'd been twenty-two on a dance floor in Brixton with my jaw clenched, eyes all pupil, and latex slick against my thigh.

I'd loved that life. Loved it enough that it nearly consumed me. Loved it enough that I'd wanted to let it.

I put the car in gear and drove.

* * *

The lobby was marble that didn't quite finish at the back wall, where the budget had clearly gone. I

checked in with the card that wasn't linked to anything and headed for the bar. The room could wait. The room always waited.

The bar was called something forgettable. They always were. The lighting did the job. A four-piece in the corner was working through covers, the singer a man in his late forties who'd done his time and didn't need to push. Something I half-recognised. I took the corner. Bulleit, neat, two fingers. The order was its own small pleasure. He poured and didn't try to make conversation. I appreciated that.

The bourbon hit warm and smoky. I let it sit on my tongue before swallowing and my shoulders dropped a fraction. Friday night crowd. A few suits winding down, two of them arguing about something sporting they'd probably been arguing about since college. A couple leaning in by the window, second or third date. She was doing most of the talking, he was doing most of the smiling. A woman alone near the back, laptop open, glass of white untouched beside her. Actually working, not posing. *I'd been her plenty of times*. She wasn't tonight's project.

I was halfway through the bourbon when someone sat down two stools over.

I didn't turn. I let my peripheral do what it does. Tall, lean, dark-skinned, hair cropped almost to the scalp. White shirt, sharp dark blazer, no

jewellery except a watch she didn't need to check. Grace Jones without the war paint.

She ordered a gin and tonic without consulting the menu and set both hands flat on the bar like she'd just bought it. Late thirties at most.

Most people fidget. Check their phone, touch their hair, scan the room. This woman didn't. She sat the way I sat.

Okay.

I let two beats go before I turned my head. She turned hers at the same time, which told me she'd been waiting too.

"The Bulleit," she said, nodding at the bottle by my glass. "You either love bourbon or you're punishing yourself."

"Can't it be both?"

"I'm guessing, love," she said. "People who are punishing themselves drink vodka."

"People who are punishing themselves drink *bad* vodka. Good vodka is its own reward."

"Spoken like someone who's done the research." She turned on her stool, all the way toward me, deliberate, giving me a look as long as the one I'd given her. I sat and waited.

"Monique," she said. No last name. No handshake. Just the word laid face-up on the bar. Smooth, no hesitation. A card played from the top of

the deck. I knew that move. I'd been doing it for years.

“Alex.”

“Are you staying here, Alex?”

“I have a room.”

“So do I.”

The covers band moved into something with a Sinatra feel. The bartender drifted away. He knew this part.

“Another round?” I said.

“One more.” She smiled then, properly, and it changed her face. Opened it, softened the jaw, made the whole architecture less polished and more trouble. “Then we'll see.”

* * *

Chapter 2

The second drink was where the work happened. Almost no facts. She was in town for a conference, leaving tomorrow. The conference type stayed unnamed. So did my job. We talked about the band (she heard music well; told me the bass player was probably better than the gig was asking him to be), about bourbon, about Boston in September. She

lived somewhere warmer and wouldn't say where. I liked that she wouldn't.

She asked if I came here often, deadpan, daring me to flinch. "Not here specifically." Honest, and a door I left open. She asked if I was seeing anyone. I said no with enough finality that she didn't follow up.

She was sharp. Dry. The half-second pause before each answer wasn't hesitation. She was selecting. I worked harder than I usually did.

"You're very contained," she said, halfway through the second gin.

Interesting.

"Contained?"

"You listen more than you talk and you sit very still. You haven't touched your hair once." She tipped her glass at me. "Most people fidget. You don't. It's discipline or discomfort, and you don't look uncomfortable."

"Maybe I'm just boring."

"Boring women don't wear boots like that."

I laughed. She'd earned it.

"Discipline," I said. "Learned, not natural."

"That takes work." She held my gaze. Even the bar quieted. "Is it ever exhausting?"

I hadn't expected that. Most people who notice composure compliment it. I took a sip. Considered lying.

“Sometimes,” I said. “The alternative’s worse.”

She nodded once. Slow. Set the gin down. The analytical edge went out of her face. What was left was invitation.

“So. Your room or mine?”

“Yours.”

The answer came from the part of me that had already thought about it, which was every part.

* * *

Her room was seventh floor. Mine was fourth. We rode the elevator and didn’t touch.

She walked ahead of me down the corridor, key card already in hand. The back of her neck above the white collar, dark skin against the clean line where the buzz cut started. One side faded shorter than the other.

The room was standard business-class. King bed, desk, view of a parking lot. Her suitcase on the rack, clothes folded with a precision that suggested she didn’t waste motion. A book on the nightstand. The lamp on, the overhead off.

She’d planned for the possibility of not coming back alone.

She set the card down, turned, and kissed me first. Slow, testing. Gin on her mouth, salt under it. I let her run the kiss for as long as it worked for me. Then I stepped forward, caught the back of her neck, and kissed her like I'd been waiting to since the second drink.

She made a sound into my mouth. Approving. Her hands closed at my waist. The blazer had to go. I pushed it off her shoulders and she let it drop and didn't look down to see where it landed. The woman who'd folded her suitcase clothes was standing on a crumpled blazer and giving it nothing.

Her hands went under my top. Flat against my ribs. I broke the kiss to pull the top over my head. She looked at me, chin tilted, eyes slow, and the look did its work. I unhooked the bra and her thumbs were already at me before I'd dropped it. My breath caught and went uneven on the way out.

“Off,” I said. Mouth at her ear. “Everything.”

She stepped back and stripped. Shirt unbuttoned and tossed on the chair. Pants stepped out of, kicked aside. Underwear gone in the same motion. I watched. Lean and strong. A body she'd built by using it. The buzz cut made her neck look endless. A muscle moved at the shoulder as she straightened. A line of small dark text on the inside of her bicep, too faint to read in the lamplight. I

wanted to trace it. Find out if the skin there was as soft as it looked.

I kicked off my boots, slid off my jeans, and lay back. She came over me and her weight settled. Hip bones, breasts, the heat of her thigh between mine. I drew breath in fast. *Lying back first. Not how I do this. The day was mine. Tonight she could do the work.*

“Sensitive?” Her mouth at my temple.

“Impatient.”

She kissed down me with the same care she’d shown at the bar. I let her. Which wasn’t nothing. Surrender is discipline of its own kind. Her mouth paused at my hip, tongue along the line of my tattoo, and I could read the question in it: *who are you, what does this mean.* She didn’t ask. She kept going.

When her tongue found me, my hand went to the back of her head. The buzz cut prickled against my palm. Nothing to grip. Only the warm curve of her skull under my fingers. She was good. Paying attention. The shift of my hips. The catch in my breath. Slow, circling, pulling back the second before I’d have tipped.

She caught the barbell on her tongue. A small pause. Then a low approving sound, and she went on. She didn’t ask about that, either. She used it. Tongue around the metal, then around me, then

both. When I was close, I pressed her head down. She stayed where I'd put her.

I came with my jaw tight and my back coming off the bed and a sound I'd deny later. She stayed until I went still. When I opened my eyes she was watching from below my hips. Pleased with herself. And right to be.

Not bad yourself.

"Your turn," I said, and rolled her onto her back before the afterglow could make me lazy.

Her mouth opened. The quip starting. I kissed it out of her. She could be smart later. Right now I wanted her speechless.

I worked down her throat. Lips, then tongue. Caught a nipple between my teeth. The gasp came up through her. Whole-body. My hand went between her thighs. Slick on my fingers before I'd reached her. She'd been ready a while — since the ride up, maybe since the second drink — and just too composed to show it. I cupped first. Flat pressure. Her hips pushed up. I held a moment longer than she wanted. Waited. Then two fingers in, and her back arched and her hand reached for the headboard.

"Fuck." Low. Rough on an exhale.

I curled them. Found the place that tightened her grip — the one most people can't tell you they have, because no one's taken the time to find it.

Worked it until her hand gave up the headboard. My mouth went lower. When my tongue reached her she swore again, louder now, her thigh shaking against my cheek. I set a rhythm and felt her wind up under it, and there it was: the cold, clean pleasure of the thing. Not her body. Mine. The steadiness. Knowing exactly what I was doing and how long it would take.

She tried to hold back. Some do, the first time. Before they trust the falling. I read it in her stomach. Her breath was too careful.

I worked harder with my tongue and watched her face. Eyes shut. Lips parted. Past words. Breath shaped around something she needed out. I pressed in deeper. Caught the second she stopped managing it.

Her orgasm was loud. The cry muffled into her own forearm, the rest of her gripping me in waves. I stayed with it until she went limp.

“Good girl,” I said, more to myself than to her, and pressed my lips to the inside of her thigh.

I rested my cheek on her leg. Her hand fell into my hair. Fingers light. The only sounds left were her breathing and the building settling around us.

Not done yet.

I slid two fingers back into her on my way up her body. Her breath caught — surprise in it; she’d thought we were done. We weren’t. Her hand tightened in my hair and pulled. I kept moving,

fingers steady inside her, curled on the third stroke onto the place I'd already mapped. This time I didn't pull back. I wanted the greedy version of her, the one that stops being polite about what it needs.

By the time my mouth reached her throat she had already climbed. Faster than the first. The second always came easier. The third would too. She couldn't brace for it the same way. Her hips lifted off the bed and stayed there.

I pushed her back to the mattress, propped on my elbow at her shoulder. Her face was up close. Jaw tight, breath shallow, and pulse beating at her temple. The line of small dark text on the inside of her bicep was inches from my mouth now. Still couldn't read it.

Her eyes met mine. I held the look until hers went unfocused. The build was done. I kept the rhythm steady and watched her come apart. Loud, no forearm this time. Her fist twisted at my scalp. Her other hand grabbed my wrist and held on while I pulsed. The peak came and kept coming.

Speechless. Just the way I'd wanted.

I drew my fingers out slowly. She let go of my wrist. Her hand eased from my hair to my neck. I lay back beside her, arm under her shoulders. Fingers light at her ribs.

Worth staying for.

She was good company. She had a body I could have spent hours with. She laughed at the right things.

And I was already thinking about the drive home.

She must have noticed me shift, because her hand stilled.

“Stay?”

I sat up and looked at her. “I should go.”

“Should, or want to?”

“Both.” Her face was open. I liked her enough to be honest. “I’ve had a great night. And I’m better at leaving than staying.”

She studied me. Whatever she saw, she accepted.

“At least shower first. You smell like me.”

I laughed. “I’ll manage.”

* * *

Chapter 3

I got dressed in the half-dark while she watched from the bed. Bottom half first, then top. Muscle memory, the order I always did it in, because at some point in my twenties I’d realized that fumbling for a bra in a

stranger's room at two in the morning was a problem worth solving once and filing away. Phone, keys, card. Everything accounted for.

“Alex.” Her voice stopped me at the door. I turned. Propped on one elbow, sheet at her waist, and in the lamplight she looked like someone I could have had a second drink with. Maybe a third.

“If you're ever less good at leaving,” she said, “look me up.”

“I don't have your last name.”

“No,” she said. “You don't.”

Her smile was the real one. I smiled back and took the door.

* * *

The corridor was too bright after her room. I took the stairs down — on the stairs you can't change your mind. Concrete cold under my boots, my own footfall and nothing else. I didn't stop at my floor. The bed up there would stay untouched; I'd settle the key card with the front desk on the way past. Tidy. The way I liked it.

The car was cold. I sat with my hands on the wheel a moment. The parking garage was the flat

orange of sodium lights, everything the same non-color. My skin did smell like her.

I started the engine. The Pike was empty, the city-asleep version of empty, and I drove with the window cracked and the radio off. The cold air sorted me out. By the time I reached my building my pulse was normal and the night was already filing itself away.

I showered. Set the alarm I didn't need. Lay awake a while, not sleeping, not quite thinking — or thinking around the edge of something I'd decided not to look at head-on. There was a question in it somewhere. I didn't pick it up. Things you don't pick up at two in the morning are usually gone by a reasonable hour.

It was a good life. The system worked. I'd built it that way.

Most of the time, Carlisle.

* * *

Saturday and Sunday were Saturday and Sunday. I ran, lifted, cleaned the apartment until it looked like nobody lived there. Ate well because I liked to eat well. Read half a novel and abandoned it at the point where the heroine made a choice I could see coming

three chapters away. I spoke to nobody except the barista on Newbury Street who knew my order but not my name.

Monday was wall-to-wall. Hair up, bun tight, heels on the marble by eight. A client call that ran long, a design review that should have been an email, and Cassandra in one of her moods, which meant everyone walked a step faster and laughed a beat less. I was coming out of my third meeting, coffee in hand, already drafting a reply to a vendor email in my head, when I rounded the corner by the lobby corridor and nearly walked straight into someone.

A woman. Small, slight. Auburn hair, half-loose around her face. She shrank back, startled, and I caught myself before the coffee did anything dramatic. Coffee intact, composure intact.

“Sorry — I wasn’t watching where I was going,” I said.

She looked up at me. Her lips parted, but what came out wasn’t quite words. A stumble of syllables, half-started and abandoned. Her eyes were golden-hazel, wide. A flush was climbing her neck. Her hand had frozen mid-gesture, as though she’d forgotten what it was for.

“Alexis, meet Kaylee.” Blaire was beside her, clipboard in hand, running the new-hire tour. “She’s starting as Rose’s new assistant.”

I took her hand. Small. Slightly cold. I gave her the grip I gave everyone. Warm, brief.

“A pleasure.” I meant it the way I meant everything at work. Politely, precisely, already moving on. “Unfortunately, I’ve an appointment that I can’t be late to.”

I released her hand, nodded to Blaire, and kept walking. Through the double doors, down the corridor, toward the conference room where the vendor call was already two minutes from starting. My heels found their pace on the marble.

Halfway to the conference room, it came back without being asked — that stalled hand, the face that had forgotten to manage itself. *File it, Carlisle. Not your department.*

I didn’t look back. The coffee was getting cold.

THANK YOU & FREE STUFF

Thank You

Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed this short story. If you have a minute, I would really appreciate a review on Amazon or your book platform of choice ♥. If you'd like to see more of what Alex gets up to next, check out the Branding Her excerpt below.

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* * *

Want to see what Alex does next?

Branding Her: Episode 1 - Beginnings

The same hallway. A different pair of eyes.

The rest of the interview went well. Blaire slid the offer across the desk — it had been drawn up before Kaylee walked in. She took the pen and signed her name.

Beaming, Kaylee walked with Blaire toward the front of the building. Blaire told her the best lunch spots, the parking garage, and other casual information. As they rounded a corner, a woman emerged from a side hall and nearly collided with Kaylee. Kaylee shrank back.

“Sorry — I wasn’t watching where I was going.” The voice was low. Measured. Kaylee looked up into piercing green eyes and striking bone structure.

Strands of dark hair had escaped from an otherwise neat bun, framing the face before her. Something caught in Kaylee's chest. She tried to respond, but what came out wasn't quite words — a stumble of syllables, half-started and abandoned. *Brilliant, Kaylee. Really articulate.*

“Alexis, meet Kaylee. She's starting as Rose's new assistant.” Alexis took Kaylee's hand. The grip was warm, confident, and Kaylee's pulse skipped. Long fingers.

“A pleasure. Unfortunately, I've an appointment that I can't be late to.” With that, she was gone, down the hall into another part of the building.

“Everyone is always so busy around here. No matter, I'm sure when you start you'll have plenty of time to meet everyone.” As they approached the door, Kaylee turned and thanked Blaire, then found herself back on the busy streets of Boston.

She had done it.

* * *

After a packed subway ride into the city, Rose greeted her at the office lobby. The first day was perpetual confusion and learning. Kaylee met everyone in the office, was assigned her desk, and

had her first assignment for Rose before the clock struck midday. “Fast-paced” seemed to be an understatement. By the time lunch came around, her head felt like it could float away. A firm rap on her cubicle wall made her turn.

Kaylee’s eyes drifted up the navy dress skirt and white blouse to that sharp jaw, a half-smile already forming. Alexis worked in a different department, but frequented Kaylee’s office area enough that they would work together on some assignments.

“Grab your things. I’m taking you to lunch.”

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