

ENCORE

"I collected a package from the post office for you. Who is J Carter?"

"Carter? I've no idea, what's the address?"

"Have a look, it's on lying on your desk," Emily said, flouncing out of the study with her suspicious, "What have you been up to . . .," air.

Puzzled, I turned the small package this way and that. "It's from Pietermartizburg," I called out.

No response.

I shrugged and slit it open. It contained a CD with no markings.

I slipped the disc into my PC and heard the strains of, *Night time sharpens, heightens each sensation* "

Instant panic grabbed me.

I hit the eject button. My mind raced, *where can I hide it?* I slipped the disk into my briefcase and flipped a digit on the combination lock.

Only then did I allow my immediate surmise to rise to full consciousness, *Oh god, could it be from her?*

Then grabbing a blank CD, I slid it into the cover and tossed it in the waste basket just as Emily walked back into the study, "Why are you doing that?"

"It's a bloody blank CD."

"What? Why would someone send you that?"

"Search me. The world's full of nutters."

"Well, don't just give up. There's got to be a reason. Why don't you try and contact the person at that address?" she said, lifting the CD out of the waste basket.

Oh god, I thought for a moment, *here she goes on another one of her crusades*, before responding, "Great idea." I picked up the wrapping, "Who do we know in Maritzburg?"

"A Maritzburg address? Possibly one of your long lost floozies."

"Oh cut that out Emily, you know better."

"Do I? The way you flirt with those dollies at work"

I ignored her usual dig as she spun round and left – but with the blank CD in her hand. Doubtless she was going to play it. *She should have become a detective.*

Turning to my laptop I called up the MailCheck website, typed in the address on the package and pressed enter.

Almost immediately the screen blinked back at me: *The street could not be found in the suburb or city*

I picked up the package wrapping again and tried to read the postmark. It was smudged and I couldn't make out the letters. However, Pietermaritzburg contains sixteen letters and the postmark was no longer than eleven. I tossed it back into the bin.

My mind was in a whirl. *If it's a cunning subterfuge it must be from her from her . . . But why a Maritzburg address when it was posted elsewhere? Then it clicked, of course you idiot, it's from her, it's her clue. She was born in Maritzburg. And it's twenty years later . . .*

My mind flashed back to 1990.

Ever since school I've had a dream of an other worldly romance where we meet in an imaginary fantasy garden for a few brief hours and then part forever, sustained by those few hours of intense love and happiness before a life of unrequited love beckoned. I've since realised that I have Mr Dickens to thank for this bitter sweet fantasy. His utterly dreary set work – Great Expectations - made an incredibly negative impression on my fourteen year old mind. I wanted Estella to love Pip so I created a fantasy garden where I was Pip and the girl was Estella and just for a few hours she was not that cold, cruel, heartless creation of Dickens.

One fateful day my firm appointed Jenny as my new development programmer. She was so like Emily in many ways, yet very different. Naturally, she came without the baggage marriage inevitably acquires.

Mainframe computers were pretty overworked compared with today's crop and time on them was not always readily available. As a result we spent a lot of time together just waiting for output. Inevitably, as we began to get comfortable with each other our natural affinity developed and we began to fill those periods with personal details.

I was enchanted with her from day one and she gradually became my fantasy garden love. We were both married so, although we flirted mercilessly, I could never summon up the courage to cross that fine line and tell her what she did to me and how I felt about her.

By the time Jenny began to mesmerise me Lloyd Webber had already had a hand in transforming my fantasy as I'd become totally bewitched by The Phantom and Christine Daaé.

I played the CD until Emily threatened me with all sorts of dire consequences. To me *The Music of the Night* is the greatest love song ever written and it transported me to my fantasy garden and that imaginary lady who so enchanted me – by then a fascinating fusion of Jenny/Estella/Christine.

Naturally I'd shared this besottedness with everyone I knew, particularly with Jenny. I used to flirt and tease her by mouthing odd verses from the song to her on long, boring nights while we waited for our computer runs to finish. Perhaps I unconsciously let my all feelings slip out because it became clear that she was intrigued and enchanted by my fantasy.

Jenny knew that my real world with Emily and my fantasy garden were parallel worlds that would never impinge on one another. This was something that Emily could never, would never, understand or accept. Perhaps that knowledge was one of the factors that tempted Jenny into my fantasy.

One memorable day she surprised me with, "My friend Anne, who works for Rennies Travel, has a couple of free tickets which she cannot take up and she's offered them to me. As Emily is visiting a friend in Australia and my Bill is Rallying in Brazil . . ." she paused as she noticed my reaction. My throat tightened and my pulse beat a little faster as I realised I was being manoeuvred into a corner where I both wanted to and didn't want to be. Do we really want our fantasies to materialise?

She smiled and went on, "You've frequently told everyone how you'd like to go to London, just for a weekend, to see the Phantom, here's the opportunity - so let's do it."

Those stunning eyes bored into me as they twinkled mischievously.

My mind whirled, *This is what I wanted, this is what I'd dreamed of . . . I so wanted Jenny, but I loved Emily, and what about . . .*

She reached across the desk and took my hand, snapping me back to the moment.

It was the first time we had touched like that and I instantly turned into a submissive jelly, "Oh yes, I'd love to," I blurted out. And then the remnants of my Calvinistic upbringing kicked in and I quickly added, "I can book us a couple of rooms in the Royal Horseguards, I've stayed there before, and it's near the theatre and . . ."

"What do you mean a couple? Oh no."

"Well . . .", I blurted out before she interrupted, "You big tease. You've dangled me on the end of a rope for far too long. I've long ago realised that I'll have to seduce you to fulfil your fantasy. And I will." and her triumphant smile conquered what remained of Calvin as I crossed that fine line.

She had sussed out my weaknesses, understood my fantasy, and struck like a viper.

We left Cape Town on a Friday night arriving in a sunny London early the next morning. Once we'd booked into the hotel, London was at our feet and we devoured its offerings like two star-struck kids in Disneyland.

After a romantic dinner we drifted off to the Phantom. There we underwent an experience that lifted us both to an ethereal level of fantasy and romance.

Vita Sackville-West wrote, ". . . *to hope for Paradise, is to live in Paradise, a very different thing from actually getting there.*" However, early that Sunday morning, in the Royal Horseguards, for that one brief span, with no ties and no tomorrows, time stepped aside and allowed Paradise to reign and shower us with feelings of ineffable freedom and joy.

My fantasy garden had been fulfilled and laid to rest in that magical night in London yet now, as I remembered the rash promise I'd long forgotten, my emotions began tumbling around inside me – had she remembered?

In the magical afterglow of that night we'd wondered around London like two star-crossed lovers and had come across the word 'vicennial' on a building hoarding. Somehow it enchanted us (*it sounds so deliciously naughty, she'd said*) that we popped into the nearest bookshop to find a dictionary. There it was: *vicennial: adjective: occurring once every 20 years*

"Ray what a wonderful word. Let's promise that, wherever the world may find us twenty years from now, we'll come together for an anniversary encore. Go on, let's."
"You know my fantasies only too well," I laughed and – rashly - promised.

The package temporarily forgotten, Emily broke my reverie with, "Ray, I need a few things from Pick n Pay, please pop down and get them."

"Of course possum," I said, leaping at the chance to sneak the CD into the car.

The speakers sprang to life and *The Music of the Night* transported me back twenty years and assailed me with all sorts of emotions. As the song wafted towards its close a vague sense of anticipation and unease, yes, unease, gripped me. As the last notes faded away a voice, an unmistakable voice, awakened long forgotten feelings, *It's nearly our vicennial so I'm inviting you to our promised encore. I know that you will always be in love with your fantasy girl and I want to be that fantasy girl one last time. My number is 072 224* the recording broke off abruptly as I reached forward and pressed the eject button.

I drove on in thoughtful silence for a while wondering how to break the news to her that, while I dearly wanted to meet her again, I was not the same person that took off from Heathrow twenty years earlier and, besides - fantasies fade

