

## Rare Edition

I'm scared. What will she think of me?

Perhaps I should explain. It all started with Messenger, you see.

*Tom Rossiter: Does the library have a copy of James Clerk Maxwell's "Electricity and Magnetism"?*

*Library1: Yes this is a university library you know. Can't you find it on LibBase?*

*Tom Rossiter: Yes I know where we are. I mean a hard copy.*

Weirdo, I thought. I had to go and look in the stack, which is two floors down. It was July. By the time I got back I was sweating and cursing.

*Library1: Have completed archaeological dig. Come and get it.*

Fifteen minutes later he turned up. I want to say this straight away: he wasn't attractive, not in the classical sense. However, his eyes were a strangely-dark blue and his chest was large and muscled. One can't help but notice these things.

'Hi,' he said, holding out a hand. 'I'm Tom. I've come about –'

'Maxwell,' I said. His hand was warm, which I suppose it would be, in July. 'Here,' I said, fetching the prize from my desk.

'Wow,' he said, opening book and running his hand over the pages. 'The real thing.'

'Third edition, edited by Thomson. So – why the hard copy? Are you his Demon or something?'

'Hey, physics joke! I didn't expect –'

He broke off. I just happened to be looking into his eyes at that moment, so he must have picked something up.

'– a mere librarian to know anything about physics?' I said, trying not to smile.

'Sorry,' he said, blushing a little. He tried to change the subject. 'Yeah, I like physical things – I mean, I suppose that's physics, isn't it – I mean, I like to hold things in my hands, to feel them . . .'

That had me staring at his hands. *Focus*, I told myself. 'As a matter of fact I did physics,' I said. 'Well, for a couple of years.'

He leant on the counter (and no, he wasn't looking down my cleavage because (a) I haven't got one, not to speak of, and (b) I was wearing a modest high-neck tee-shirt. I'm like that.) Anyhow, this leaning-forward brought his curious eyes closer to mine; so I had to keep talking.

'Then, – well, I dropped out. Had a fling, travelled in Africa, you know. Came back and sponged off my parents. Then I thought I'd better get a grip –' I broke off. 'Sorry, what am I saying? You don't want to hear an old biddy's life story.'

He gave a smile; my stomach gave a lurch. 'You're not an old biddy,' he said. 'Thanks for the book.'

These days you can't get any information about anyone at all, unless you're in HR. All I could find out was that he was a postgrad in Leonie Clark's group, so he'd be in his mid-twenties, max. Then I cursed myself for a cradle-snatcher, and went off to the gym to pound something.

*Library1: Found something that might interest you. Third-floor coffee bar, 3 pm. Hilary.*

Oh my God, I invited him for coffee! What am I doing? Was it just because he'd never asked my name? And now I've put it in a message, just so he knows who his aged stalker is?

*Tom Rossiter: Lucky me. You're buying.*

I was all over the place. I could hardly lift my coffee cup, so I let it go cold while I waited.

He slouched in, ten minutes late. 'Hey, Hil,' he said.

'Call me that again,' I said, 'and you will be the first person, ever, to be thumped over the head with a second edition of Newton's *Principia*. A hill,' I went on, 'is a tall, pointy thing. I am neither. My name's *Hilary*.' I shoved the book into his hands.

'Wo – ow,' he said, taking it, and his face lit up.

I got him a coffee. 'Actually, I agree with you,' I said. 'About books. They're so lovely to hold, to feel the paper under your fingertips.'

'I like the way they smell, too,' he said, shoving his nose in the *Principia*.

Well, we agreed on that too. We chatted. We laughed. Turned out he'd done a gap year before coming to uni; now he was applying for a salaried research post. He had an older sister and two nephew-handfuls in Hastings, and his dad had died last year.

'Both my parents died,' I said. 'First Mum, then Dad. Nine months ago they were both still here. You know, one goes, then the other.'

'My mum's fine,' he said. 'But I suppose she's got the grandchildren.'

'Yes, well,' I said. 'Dad didn't have that. I'm an only child. And Okehampton's a long way from here. He couldn't stand living alone, I suppose.' *Like me*, I didn't add.

'They must have loved each other,' he said, his eyes far away.

*Oh God, oh God.* The words were out before I could think: 'D'you want to go out for dinner?'

Mario's Italian. Modern, echoey; but food good. He ordered veggie risotto; I ordered lasagne just so that I could dribble it down my blouse like I always do. We drank Chianti. While we waited for our meals to arrive, I stood up and said:

'Tom, I'm sorry. I can't do this. It's too weird. You've got your whole life ahead of you – it's ridiculous. I'm so much older than you. Do you know how old I am? Do you –'

'Of course I know, Hilary,' he said. 'You're forty.'

'How –?'

'You've got one of those mugs on your desk. Fabulous at forty.'

I had to sit down then, because (a) he'd taken my hand and (b) our meals came. He reached over the lasagne and dabbed my eyes dry with a napkin. 'And I think your mug's right,' he said.

Ooh.

The next time we had a meal, he came back to my flat afterwards. I'm sure Mrs Goring – that's the landlady – saw us going in, but I was too flustered, too uncertain and too deliriously happy to care. And we made love, still tasting of curry, our bodies slick and sweaty in the hot August night and his hands rough on my back like the crackling pages of a first edition.

For the next three weeks I floated around on a cloud. Some nights I had to rest because I really am forty, and one weekend Tom went off to see his family. He confided in me that he'd been named after Tom Cruise. 'But I don't have his good looks,' he said. 'I think Mum was a bit disappointed.'

'Never mind,' I said, 'you're a lot more intelligent. I mean, look at your taste in women.'

Then one day he asked me what it was I saw in him. I know this tactic: when somebody says it, they mean, what do I really see in you? I reassured him, but the worries began. And *then*, I realised I was two weeks late. I went to Boots and got a kit: positive. I got another one: positive too. I read up about it – *Pregnancy Warning for Older Women* on the NHS web site. Higher risks. Congenital abnormality. Tom's life in shreds, his world turned upside-down, having to care for a sick child and an elderly wife.

So I ran. My parents' house was on the market, but I still had the keys. Drove straight down to Devon, weeping all the way. Raided Lidl and grabbed anything I could find off the shelves, anything to keep me going for a few weeks. But no alcohol. I wasn't going to do that yet.

Three days later the doorbell rang. It was him, standing there on the step as if he were just dropping in, as if it were no surprise that he'd found the house. Found me.

'Tom,' I said, 'No. You need to go away. You don't want to be mixed up with me. Now just –' and I looked in his eyes and my voice was shaking – 'get back in that bloody car and go home.' The voice inside my head was going, *yeah, don't even offer him a coffee. Be nasty, be cruel. He's got to go.*

'Hilary,' he said, and I think maybe his voice was shaking too, 'I know.'

My throat went tight. 'Tom,' I pleaded, 'will you please –'

'I pretended I'd left my wallet. Mrs G came into your flat with me. I saw the *Clearblue* boxes.'

'You knew what they were?'

'My sister's used them –'

I wagged a finger then, but *that* was trembling too. 'Tom, have you any idea of the risks? If this baby's born, there's no telling what could be wrong with it. Physical. Mental. Anything!'

'I know,' he said.

'This is all *my* fault,' I said. 'It's my responsibility. Don't ruin your life, Tom.' And I actually started closing the door: this'll work, I told myself, this'll get the message across.

'Does it matter that I love you?' he said.

I stopped. I had to lean against the wall because my legs were wobbly, and I couldn't see because I had to cover my eyes with one hand so he didn't think I was crying. But it was a bit of a giveaway when I tried to talk (lips still wet and bubbly). 'You're a b-bloody fool, Tom.' I meant it to be stern but it came out like a squeak, and I was sobbing, you know like when you have to stop now and again, to suck in your breath? He had me in his arms by then, pulling me against that hard firm chest, while I pushed my face into his warm neck. 'I'm getting your shirt all wet,' I said, squeezing my eyes tight. He stroked my head.

We're off to meet his mother tomorrow. I've never been so scared in all my life. *Mrs Rossiter, here's the sad old bitch who's seduced your lovely son, who's going to ruin the rest of his life.* But then I look in Tom's eyes, and he smiles, and I begin to think we might manage it.