

The broad, shiny yellow nose of the InterCity 125, pride of Britain's High Speed Train Fleet, slid alongside the next platform with a teeth-grinding screech, piercing the comforting world of Chantelle's headphones.

Descending from the grubby local train, she placed a three inch, nude heel cautiously into a dirty puddle. But there was no option to dawdle as a crowd of teenagers jostled from behind, eager for the thrills of the big city, "Hurry the fuck up!" It was well known anyway that in these cooler climes, northerners never walked slowly.

What a pain having to come back into town after work, she reflected as she quickened her pace, but she had felt the need to get changed and smartened up. She hoped Alex was going to be worth it. Thinking of him softened her irritation, he had always been really nice to her, though she would never have seen them as an item before they were both put on the Hitaxi project, a month ago. She wondered what his idea of a first date was and why he hadn't offered to meet her from the train. It was funny how you could work with someone day in, day out for years and feel quite close yet know very little about their life outside.

She passed from the dim railside of a wet Tuesday evening in October to the harshly-lit shopping mall of an intercity station. Even though she trod this route every day, she was still intoxicated by the intense coffee odour and repulsed by the greasy scent of fast food. Crossing the concourse, she focused on avoiding the end-of-rush-hour crowd, as intent on escaping the city as the teenagers were on getting into it. If you wanted a cross-section of the city's working population, here it was, she thought. She brushed past an exhausted nurse presumably at the end of a long shift and almost tripped over the wheels of a solicitor's briefcase. A glazed call centre worker walked straight into her. This morning she had been scratched by the high gloss talon of a nail technician, brushing her metallic hair from her plastic face.

Clearing the melee, she headed impatiently for the exit, pulling a scrap of paper from her pocket. 'Sapphire Lounge, 89 Empress Street' it said. The venue for her date. It was funny because she knew Empire Street well enough but she couldn't ever remember seeing a Sapphire Lounge. She didn't have a clue about the building numbers so she didn't even know which end it might be at. Never mind, it sounded nice. Classy, she dared to hope. She had always wanted a classy date but it hadn't happened yet. Too many years wasted with Billy, her ex of four months. How she didn't miss him! In his own words, he was a professional Mind Reader. Mind reader! Deluded fool more like, she couldn't remember how she had ever got with him.

Billy was harmless, you'd get more aggression from a bluebottle, and he could be quite sweet most of the time, but the trouble was that he lived in his own fantasy. It was a shame he hadn't got a proper job when they left school, like her. That might have given him an inkling of what the real world was like and how it worked. But with just three GCSE passes to his name, he was never going to get a job in the economic climate of the twenty-teens. And so that was how he came to set himself up as a self-employed Mind Reader called Professor Ivan Insyte. Chantelle thought he was wasting his time but, to her surprise, he did manage to extract a fee from the odd landlord looking for something different to

offer on a Friday night. Never more than once though. Billy was touchingly hard-working and persistent, and never flagged from promoting himself at every opportunity but the big time never came. The gigs in town, the private parties – he was always on the verge. Chantelle often thought he was on the verge of driving her mad. He was obsessed with mind reading and thought about little else. He was always trying to read her mind and failing miserably. Whenever they argued and she stormed off, he would always shout after her that he knew where she was going. He never did.

So she had high hopes of Alex. And now the rain was stopping. Passing the bickering horns of the taxi rank in the chilly, damp air, her spirits began to lift and she attempted a steady pace in her unsteady shoes. Glancing in through the steamy window of the bakers, she realised the same worker she had seen that morning was still there, no doubt on a 12 hour shift to get enough spider biscuits, sticky parkin and treacle toffee made for Halloween. She, Chantelle, was the lucky one then. For tonight at least she was young, free and single!

Leaving the environs of the station, she approached an old quarter where the alternative heart of the city beat. She turned right into a short street lined on either side with a towering converted Victorian mill. The crumbling reddish brown brick was restored and the great iron doors replaced with smart new glass and electronic entry systems. Chantelle envied the residents with such a cool place to live, and so close to the action.

At the end of the street she turned left into one of the quarter's arterial roads, a long, wonky street of inconsistent width, scattered with a random collection of original shops, cafes and bars. She paused by the window of an ethnic clothing boutique, coveting the intricate fabric designs. In a momentary daydream she sat opposite Alex in a restaurant of glass, marble and steel wearing a dress made of the lilac fabric, with a glass of bubbly in her hand and a linen napkin at her elbow.

She pulled out her mobile to check the time. Seven twenty. She'd better get a move on. The rain had stopped now, so she released the top spring of her umbrella and slid the runner in and out a few times to shake off the drips. As she folded it up, a familiar figure materialised at the edge of her vision. Even before she had identified it, she stiffened instinctively. Suddenly she knew who it was and span towards them accusingly.

"Billy! What the...?"

No! It could not be him! He could not be allowed to spoil her precious evening!!!

"You see, it's true! I can read your mind!" shouted Billy, impossibly delighted with the extraordinary coincidence.

"Go away!" Chantelle felt childish. "I'm busy! I can't talk to you now!"

She could feel tears close to the surface.

"Busy? But you're not doing anything! I could be your knight in shining armour," he called approaching, "I could take you for a drink, maybe fish and chips later if you're a good girl!"

Chantelle was panicking. She knew what Billy was like, persistent as hell, it could take an hour of argument to shake him off. And he was NOT going to ruin the first decent date she had had in years. She would NOT allow it.

She glanced around her as he got nearer. She had to escape before he reached her. But how? Where to? She didn't even know where she was going.

Then suddenly she was decisive. She stepped out of her shoes and, grasping them in one hand, her bag in the other, she was off. First she ran as fast as she could across the road,

"Ow! Ow! Oooh! Youch! Shit, shit, shit!" she sobbed to herself as her unaccustomed feet crossed the brutal tarmac. A narrow alley beckoned.

"Oh God." It looked filthy, she couldn't think about what her feet were touching, she just kept running, running until she emerged from the other end into a street she didn't know well. She turned left and tried to keep up the pace but her feet hurt unbearably and she thought she had cut one.

What now? Billy's voice was now booming from the alley and she knew she was losing her advantage. She cast around for a bolt hole. A broad shouldered bloke in jeans and an apron was lowering a metal shutter at the front of a café. She rushed towards him.

"Please, please, could... I... just..." Her breath had gone.

"You OK?" Apron Man asked, looking her up and down appraisingly. "Need to shake off a difficult friend? It's OK, we haven't quite closed yet, you can be my last customer. Come on in..."

She followed him down to what turned out to be a cavernous basement with wooden benches and tables and, along one side, a wide serving counter. A handful of diners were finishing off, engrossed in conversation. They paid her no attention to her. Through a pavement level window she saw a pair of Doc Martens thunder past and dimly heard Billy's mournful bellowing.

"It looks as though you could do with a little first aid," said the kind stranger and Chantelle realised she had been leaving a trail of blood drops. "Come through to the kitchen."

Chantelle followed him through and sank gratefully onto a stool waiting, feeling her breathing slowing.

After a few minutes Dan, as he introduced himself, returned with a large glass of water and a first aid kit.

"Oh, thanks" said Chantelle, reaching to take them.

"Drink the water and let me take care of the rest" Dan said, "It's OK, I'm trained."

He winked and set about cleaning up her foot and patching the wound with what was clearly professionalism. She took a good look at him and decided he was a pretty attractive guy. Kind AND good-looking! There was a first. Actually, when she stopped to consider it, kinder and better looking than Alex. Alex! Why hadn't he met her from the station?!! If she'd been on his arm, that would have

been the ultimate snub to Billy and her feet wouldn't be cut to shreds now. On the other hand, she wouldn't be sitting here now with her foot cradled in Dan's strong hand...

"So how come you know how to do this stuff?" she asked Dan, "I guess you don't give every customer a footwash and first aid...?"

"Ha, no! Most of them have to make do with soup and a sandwich" he laughed. "In fact the café's not mine. I'm just looking after it for a friend who's doing the South East Asia travelling thing. I work nights so it fits in nicely, I'm really a mortuary technician."

"A what?"

"A mortuary technician. I cut up bodies for post mortems. I'm a demon with a knife!" He smiled.

Chantelle felt herself blanching.

"In fact, this set of knives," he gestured, "are an old set from the last mortuary I worked at."

She felt faint. He looked at her and laughed, "Finish that water and don't panic! I'm also a demon at sterilisation."

Chantelle felt an urgent need to check the time again.

Thanking Dan, she carefully pushed her damaged feet back into her heels and hobbled back onto the street. Her head was reeling and it was by now seven forty so she must go directly to the Sapphire Lounge. She sincerely hoped she wouldn't bump into Billy again.

She tottered gingerly back through the alley onto the main thoroughfare and resumed her route. By the time she reached Empress Street – uneventfully – she had recovered some of her optimism. She noticed a queue forming outside a shuttered entrance and went along to check the name above. Sure enough, it was the Sapphire Lounge. She sighed with relief.

Alex had told her to get in the queue and text him, so she did. His reply pinged straight back.

'Already inside go in & get table be along in a bit 😊'

'ok' she responded, mystified.

She noticed the club didn't open 'til eight. Another ten minutes on her sore feet! She tried to distract herself by listening to the other customers' conversations but she couldn't concentrate. The Sapphire Lounge looked like a gig venue so she wondered whether they had come to see a band. Maybe it was a secret gig! And what was Alex up to? Was he a roadie or something? Or maybe he was in the band? Maybe he was even the lead singer, she liked that possibility. He might say something like, "And this one's for somebody very special in the audience..." And the spotlight would fall on her and she would blush suitably and all the girls would be jealous...

It was eight o'clock and a long haired bloke with a beer belly the size of a barrel shuffled up to the shutter, keys dangling, and released the lock.

Once the shutter was up, the customers pressed forward to get out of the chill and find a good spot. The entrance to the lounge was down a short flight of stairs which opened into a large, square room. Along one wall was a low stage draped in glittery silver and crimson. On the far wall was a dingy bar with a well-worn, polished wooden counter.

Round tables and solid wooden chairs filled the remaining area. Each table was covered with a gingham cloth and bore a candle and a plastic rose in a vase. It definitely wasn't classy. But Chantelle knew some of the best gigs happened in some of the unlikeliest venues so she tried to look on the bright side.

The choice at the bar was hardly extensive so she settled for a bottle of cider which she took to a table halfway back. She glanced around the room, scouring faces, hoping to see Alex, but there was no sign. She was surprised at the Lounge's popularity and modified her hope from a classy dinner to a good gig. It did seem a bit strange though, that there were no instruments nor amps set out on the stage. If we have to sit through the soundcheck, we'll be here all bloody night, she thought.

After a few minutes the lights slowly dimmed. Chantelle looked around again for Alex but he was STILL nowhere to be seen. She fiddled anxiously with her phone. Should she text him again?

Now it was dark, only the candlelight remaining. The audience quietened down, exchanging the final, nervous remarks of anticipation versus apprehension.

Then a flat northern voice came over the sound system, "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this evening's show." Chantelle thought that he could hardly have sounded less enthusiastic.

"Well, this is what you've all been waiting for. They loved him in Paris, they loved him in Rome, they even loved him in Doncaster. And now here he is to perform especially for you."

The lights suddenly came up to reveal the rear view of a man, naked other than a leather thong around his waist and between his buttocks, standing in the centre of the stage.

"I present to you, Mr Alexei Alexandrovich!"

And before he even turned round, Chantelle knew.