

## THE HYSTERY APP

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Vic's first novel, *Black Art*, featured Arty Shaw, the world's first female-to-male transgender detective. It was named one of Kirkus Reviews' top 100 books of 2012. Vic's second novel, *A Very Civil Wedding*, was a finalist in the 2014 Next Generation Indie Book Awards (Fiction: GLBT).

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# THE HYSTERY APP

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Liberation  Publishing

Published by Liberation Publishing 2015  
P O Box 567, Jersey, JE4 5WN, Channel Islands  
www.liberationpublishing.co.uk

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ISBN 978-0-9574088-6-9

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*For those women of the past  
whose lives are now lost to us*

One of the things about equality is not just that you be treated equally to a man, but that you treat yourself equally to the way you treat a man.

*Marlo Thomas*

## Streaming to a screen nearby

*The music video on the wall of screens in the pizza restaurant played a feed from one of the satellite music channels. The blacks and greys of a threatening urban landscape chosen to complement an aggressive rap anthem were replaced with the bright white background of the video for the current number one, a song called Grrl Power that had provided young women with their phrase of the month: 'Don't touch what you can't afford'.*

*On screen a pale-skinned blonde, wearing nothing more than a strip of flesh-coloured silk bound around her breasts and making a V between her legs, was surrounded by five muscular, dark-skinned male dancers, wearing torn checked shirts, ripped jeans and hard hats. The dancers began the song by tapping out a rhythm with their steel-capped boots that was then taken up by the electronic drums that throbbed behind the melody.*

*'My mamma told me when I was just a little girl,' the soloist knocked her knees together and struck a cutesy pose, 'that nothing in this life is free. Your daddy should have told you that 'cos, boy, the biggest cost to you is gonna be me.'*

*The catchy chorus picked up the tempo. 'Credit cards: don't cut it.' The soloist began to grind her crotch on the thigh of the nearest dancer who held his hands up in the air but was clearly enjoying eyeballing the girl's writhing body. She pushed him in the chest and he fell down theatrically. Moving to each dancer in turn and repeating the pantomime, she sang, 'Pay-day loans: forget it. Overdraft: you can stuff it. In hock: you don't get it.*

*'Ooh, don't touch what you can't afford...'*

## Time

‘What time is it?’ Dr Honor Smith, senior lecturer in women’s history at the University of Royal Tunbridge Wells, stood in the doorway.

Once upon a time, the ‘situation room’, as Honor liked to call it, had been a pretty, high-ceilinged study-cum-spare-bedroom that caught the first rays of the morning sun in the Georgian house she shared with her civil partner and their daughter, Charlie. Now it was filled with technology, and the troublesome sun had been blocked with a blackout blind. A bank of six twenty-seven-inch screens hung on one wall, beneath which sat wire racks of matt black boxes in a variety of sizes, winking with blue, green and red LEDs. Set back from the wall, surveying the kit and filling the width of the room, was the control desk on which sat a variety of input devices, piles of papers and half-filled notebooks containing calculations, theories and jottings that Honor had no hope of deciphering and three printers—one A3, one colour and one laser. An anglepoise lamp was emitting the only light in the room, apart from the blueish ambience coming from the screens. In addition, at a quick count, there were four dirty coffee mugs. There was probably another one lurking somewhere.

Sat at the desk was Dr Brogan Miller, professor of biophysics and computer engineering at the same university. Her short dark hair was sticking up where she had unconsciously run her hands through it. Honor knew from experience this meant that things were not going smoothly. In the first months of their relationship, Brogan had tried



patiently to explain what it was that wasn't going smoothly and Honor had tried to understand the laws, mechanics, computer models and algorithms that drove Brogan's world, but it had been a lost cause. Brogan, for her part, still endeavoured to share her passion for her subject but Honor had long since given up trying to understand and, twenty years later, she knew simply to read the signs that pre-empted a problem.

She stepped forward and ran a hand across Brogan's shoulders. Beneath her palm, Brogan's muscles were tense. She continued to run her hand back and forth, smoothing the mini crumples in Brogan's un-ironed pale blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up so that, Brogan said, the cuffs did not fray from rubbing on the desk. Honor had stopped counting how many of these identical shirts Brogan owned. It was what her partner liked to wear and, having no interest in fashion, it was easier for Brogan to keep buying the same. Honor wished she would not wear them straight from the laundry basket without putting an iron to them first, though.

'Are you coming to bed?'

'In a minute,' Brogan mumbled.

'You said that—what time is it?' Honor looked at the bottom right-hand corner of one of the screens. 'Jesus! Four hours ago.'

Brogan didn't say anything and continued to edit the code she was working on.

Honor leaned over and put her arms around Brogan's neck, pressing her cheek to her wife's ear.

'What's the problem?'

It did not occur to Brogan to ask how Honor knew there was a problem. Instead she said, 'The

satellite's up, she's powered and sending and receiving okay, but I'm just not getting a picture.'

'Okay. Would sleeping on it help?'

Brogan didn't answer Honor's question.

'Brogue, it's three o'clock in the morning. C'mon.'

Honor rubbed her cheek against Brogan's, and Brogan caught the scent of her perfume mixed with clean bed linen, and that peculiarly warm smell that a body exudes after just waking from sleep.

Brogan reached up and squeezed Honor's arm. 'In a minute. Just let me finish this line of code.'

Honor sighed and, releasing Brogan's neck, sat on the spare chair she had insisted Brogan install in the situation room for occasions such as this. Honor pulled her knees up to her chest and rested her chin on them.

Brogan flicked a glance at her. Honor was dressed in those silky pyjamas that she liked because the hang of the satin showed off the curve of Honor's breasts. 'Cold?' she said, without stopping the stream of typing.

'No. I'm fine.'

'My big fleece is on the back of the door.'

'You're not going to be more than a minute so I won't need it,' Honor said, being provocative.

Brogan ignored her.

Honor looked at the screens. One of them was showing a live feed of her. She must have sat in front of the camera on Brogan's desk. She looked at the screen and ran her fingers through her honey-blond hair, trying to comb its sleep-disturbed state into some semblance of the soft wavy bob that she liked to see in the mirror before she left the house each morning. She gave up.

Brogan stopped typing and said, 'You see your image? Well, that's what I should be getting there.' Brogan pointed to the blank screen on the top row. 'And I'm not. It all worked when we tested it in the lab. I'm completely stumped.'

'Would the distance be a factor?' Honor attempted.

'No. The signal's really strong. Look.' Brogan indicated a line of green dots illuminated on one of the smaller black boxes in the rack. 'And I'm sending and receiving the data with no problem. Unless...'

Brogan brought up another screen of code, tapped at one of the keyboards again and ran the revision. Brogan shook her head. She leaned back and ran her hands through her hair. 'I don't get it. It should work. It worked down here. Why doesn't it work up there? Something has to have changed with the satellite between here and there.'

Honor yawned. 'Maybe she knows what time it is and that she can shut down because all sane people are in bed.'

'No, she doesn't.' Brogan's eyes lit up and she stared at Honor. She clicked her fingers. 'No. She doesn't.'

Brogan brought up the screen of code again and started typing feverishly.

Honor stood up. 'I can see you're going to be ages yet. Charlie's got to be up for football in three hours and I'm guessing you're not taking her.'

Without looking up from the code, Brogan said, 'I'll take her. I promised I would.'

'Yeah, right.'

'Sit down. Sit down again.'

Honor sighed. She was here for a while longer.

‘Okay, but if this doesn’t work, I’m going to bed, and I don’t want to be disturbed just as I drop off so you’re sleeping on the couch.’

She took the fleece from the back of the door and pulled it on. As she sat down, she tipped the chair backwards slightly to zip up the fleece.

Brogan compiled the code and ran it. The blank screen on the top row fritzed into life and the image of the chair appeared. After two seconds, the chair tilted, seemingly of its own accord.

Brogan laughed and punched the air. ‘You’re a genius.’

‘Great! What just happened?’

‘The fourth dimension,’ said Brogan animatedly. ‘The satellite knew where in space to pick up the signal, in other words that camera there, but not when. I added an extra variable—time—and it came bouncing back. The question is: why did our baby need a date and time? Why would distance mean that time becomes a factor? The only thing that’s changed is she’s just got further away. Everything else is the same.’

‘I don’t know. Can we talk about it tomorrow? We’ve established I’m a genius but geniuses need their beauty sleep before they can conduct semi-sensible conversations about quantum physics. I’m really happy it works, darling. Now, please can we go to bed?’

‘One second,’ said Brogan frowning.

‘What now?’

‘Where are you?’

‘Here?’

‘No, where are you?’ Brogan pointed to the screen.

‘Oh, I see. I should be in the picture, shouldn’t

I?’

Brogan’s frown deepened. ‘Do something for me, spin the chair.’

‘Why?’

‘Just spin it. Go on.’

Honor shrugged. ‘Okay.’

Honor spun the chair like a child visiting their parent’s office, going round twice. She stopped and they both looked at the screen. Two seconds later, the chair spun around, twice.

Brogan shook her head. ‘That’s what I thought.’

‘What? Why can we only see the furniture?’

‘I don’t know, but that’s not what’s worrying me. There was a time delay. Did you see it? There shouldn’t have been a delay. There was a gap between you spinning the chair, the code being relayed and the screen showing the chair spinning. That’s not possible.’

‘A couple of seconds, tops.’

‘But there shouldn’t be. It should be live. The picture should be only milliseconds behind you.’

‘It has a long way to travel,’ Honor suggested. It seemed reasonable to her that the return signal might be delayed on its journey from outer space.

‘No, no, I coded the time so that it used the variable *Now*. At the point at which the programme ran, the variable was calculated; at which moment, you were sitting down doing up the fleece which made the chair tip. Do you see? It means that the feed isn’t live. When I introduced time as a factor, the feed wasn’t live any longer.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘Neither do I.’ Brogan tapped at the code again. ‘What time did you say it was when you walked in?’

‘About three.’

‘Can you be more exact?’

‘Er, the screen said, three-oh-two.’

‘Okay.’ Brogan ran the code again. The image on the screen jumped as the chair changed position.

‘If I’m right,’ Brogan said, ‘in about a minute, the chair will move.’

‘Brogue, this is weird.’

They watched the screen carefully. Brogan was right; about a minute into the feed, the chair swung out slightly and then settled back to sit opposite the desk.

‘What was that?’ Honor asked.

‘That was the moment you first sat down after putting your arms around my neck.’

‘But how did...?’ Honor let her question hang. She wasn’t sure what she was asking. It was too late at night, or too early in the morning, for physics, computers and Brogan’s world.

Brogan grinned and her eyes sparkled. ‘I don’t know, but it’s massive.’

Honor smiled sympathetically. ‘It’s not much good if you can’t see anyone.’

‘Don’t you get it? We’ve just travelled backwards in time.’

‘Nooo.’ Honor’s eyes widened.

‘Yes,’ Brogan nodded. ‘You’re a historian. Let’s see how far back we can go. Pick a date.’

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘Pick a date.’

‘Okay, the twenty-fifth of December 1890.’

Brogan ran the code and entered the date in the request box she had just made. The screen jumped and Brogan’s familiar office chair disappeared to be replaced by the end of a single bed. The bedpost was a utilitarian iron one,

painted, with a brass knob capping it.

‘What the...? Brogue, what is this?’

‘I think it’s this room on the twenty-fifth of December 1890 at eleven in the morning. Reach over and spin the camera. Let’s see if we can see any more.’

Gingerly, Honor leaned across the desk and turned the little camera on its stand. The picture on the screen panned with her movement. There was no doubt that it was the same room. The dimensions were the same but the decor was unrecognisable. The walls were covered in a rich flock wallpaper from the skirting to a picture rail at eye level. From the picture rail hung a set of accomplished watercolours of country scenes. The window was framed with a pelmet and a set of heavily embroidered curtains in peacock blue and green. A wintry light poured through the large sash window and semi-circles of frost were visible in the corners of the panes.

‘Take the camera over to the window and look out. There should be enough cable to reach.’

Honor watched her own progress on the screen as she moved the camera around the desk and pointed it at the blackout blind. The picture showed the view from the window of a well-kept formal garden, white with frost, mostly laid to lawn with an ornate bird bath marking the intersection of two treacherous-looking paths; the water in the bird bath was frozen over. The borders on either side of the garden were bare, silvered earth but their collection of brown spiny twigs hinted at a profusion of summer roses.

‘Nice garden,’ said Brogan.

As she made the observation, the gate at the

bottom of the garden opened and two girls who might have been aged anywhere between thirteen and eighteen came through. They were dressed identically in long velvet skirts, with a small bustle and a nipped-in waist, with a half-cape about their shoulders, each carrying a fur muff that hid their hands. Following them was an older woman, her right arm held at an angle that suggested she was leaning on someone. Dressed in a long over-cape of heavy cloth with fur trim and an elaborate wide brimmed hat set forward on her head, she was talking and gesturing to her invisible companion.

Behind her came three more women. The first was somewhere between the girls and the older woman in age, her waist painfully small and her sleeves fashionably puffed between shoulder and elbow. To Honor, the black silk tie at her neck suggested a scholar, an educated woman.

There was no mistaking the class of the last two women of the party. Their skirts were not fashionably tight about the waist and the cloth, even from a distance, was coarse. Their plaid shawls looked thin against the cold of the day and their small black bonnets were suited to a time thirty years previous. They spoke quietly to each other, their heads bowed in a servile manner.

As the party disappeared under the lea of the house and out of the camera's range, Honor said, 'Brogue, what have you done? What is this?'

'I'm not sure. I need to speak to George tomorrow. He's the physical cosmologist, not me.'

'Why can we see them? When you used the chair, we couldn't see me. How are we seeing them?'

'I don't know. It needs investigation. Did you



notice the older, well-dressed woman? She was on someone's arm. Why couldn't we see him? Assuming it was a him.'

Honor shook her head. 'I don't believe what we just witnessed; history happening live.'

Honor began to laugh. As she did so, the door of the room opened on screen and the educated younger woman entered. Removing her hat pin and then her hat, she threw them down on the bed, revealing a simple low chignon at the back of her blonde head. She walked forward to the window and stood where Honor was standing one hundred and twenty-four years in the future. Honor moved back to frame the woman better on the screen.

Honor and Brogan watched as the young woman's lower lip trembled and she began to cry. Taking a handkerchief from her sleeve, she wiped her face, trying to control her tears. There was a knock at the bedroom door. The young woman sniffed and said, 'One moment.'

Her caller didn't wait and entered the room. It was the older woman from the garden, her outer garments discarded, wearing a red silk day dress, her reddish-brown hair piled in curls on top of her head. Seeing the younger woman upset, she rushed to embrace her, reassuring her with soft hushes.

'What am I to do?' asked the younger woman. 'Your husband tells me your daughters are to be married and will no longer require a governess.'

'Ssh. My husband does not make the domestic arrangements, I do. If *I* require your services, he will permit you to stay. I promise.'

The younger woman looked up into the face of the older. The older woman took the handkerchief from her and tenderly wiped the younger woman's

tear-stained face.

‘Now, no more.’

The younger woman nodded obediently.

‘That’s better.’

The older woman stroked the younger woman’s face with the back of her fingers and, putting her arm about the younger woman’s waist, leaned in and kissed her. The younger woman responded, twisting her fingers into the back of the older woman’s hair.

The kiss ended and they stayed in one another’s arms for a moment longer.

‘Will you join us for luncheon?’

The younger woman nodded.

‘Wash your face and come down.’

The younger woman kissed the older woman lightly, with less passion but no less affection than before. ‘Thank you,’ she whispered.

The older woman smiled and, turning, left the room.

Brogan cut the feed, and the screen that, seconds before, had been filled with marvels from another age went black. They sat in silence for a moment, reliving what they had just witnessed.

‘Wow,’ Honor exclaimed. ‘When I looked up the 1891 census for this house, I had no idea that we had a couple of “sisters” living here.’

‘Oh, please! Even I know that they didn’t call themselves “sisters” in those days.’ Brogan grinned at Honor who, shaking her head in disbelief, grinned back.

‘Brogue, you know that this is beyond significant, don’t you? Not just for your field but for mine, too.’

Brogan nodded slowly.

‘This has the power to revolutionise the way history is taught. What we’ve just seen reveals a hidden history not evident from any surviving documents. It’s huge.’

They sat in silence again, absorbing the enormity of their discovery. Then Brogan said, ‘Do you still want to go to bed?’

‘Seriously? D’you think either of us could sleep now? I want to know what happens to the governess. Wait while I dig out my research about this house.’

Honor turned to go but Brogan caught her hand and stopped her. Catching Brogan’s intent, Honor bent down and kissed her.

‘I have a very clever wife,’ Honor said.

Brogan smiled. ‘We make a good team.’

Honor stood up. ‘Don’t think this gets you out of taking Charlie to football, though.’

Brogan’s smile widened.

## Space

‘Well, what do you think?’ Brogan stopped the feed and spun her chair to face her colleague, Dr George Andronikov. Honor looked expectantly at the professor, waiting for his expert verdict.

Professor Andronikov removed his reading glasses and placed them on the control desk. He ran a hand across his chin and stroked the moustache of his white Van Dyke goatee slowly.

George Andronikov, a Russian by birth, had defected from his country in the 1970s in protest at the restrictions placed on academics by the Soviet regime. A dent in his scalp, visible beneath the few wisps of white hair on his crown, was testament to his time spent as a guest of the KGB before he was finally able to get out. Brogan had known the professor since she joined the university as a lecturer in 1993.

‘Tell me, what were you working on? What was the original purpose for the satellite?’

‘After what happened last year and the revelations about how much our government know about what we do in cyberspace, Honor and I decided to protect our right to privacy. We would rather release our research into the public domain on our own timetable. So, I was working on a personal satellite. It started as a means to evade “Big Brother”.’

‘Also, we got sick of using Wi-Fi in public spaces that locked us out of LGBT websites because they were blocked by the service providers as pornography, even though they weren’t,’ Honor added.

‘The technology changes but the machinations

of government remain the same.’ The professor shook his head. ‘I came to the West to be free.’

Honor smiled wryly at the professor’s irony.

‘We do a lot of our research work from home and, rather than sending data via email or walking about with it on a pen, we can upload it to the satellite cube. Its onboard storage has a much greater capacity than anything a pen, phone or camera can hold and we aren’t exposing the data to theft or eavesdropping,’ Brogan explained.

‘We call her Big Sister,’ Honor said and smiled.

‘*You* call her Big Sister,’ Brogan corrected. She turned back to the professor. ‘I added some neat little bolt-ons to the basic idea. All our GPS-enabled devices are synced with it, our mobile phones, tablets, the car’s sat nav and a number of these.’ Brogan reached across the desk and handed the professor a small black cube, about the size of a casino die. The cube was emitting a green light from behind one of its smoked faces. It had a hole in one corner through which a key ring was threaded. ‘When the light turns red, the battery is dying. At which point, you sling it and register a new one with the satellite. They’re really cheap to make.’

‘Very neat.’ The professor rolled it around the deep lines in the palm of his hand.

‘I call them fobs: find objects by satellite. You can attach them to anyone or anything: children who aren’t old enough for a mobile phone, grandparents with Alzheimer’s, your bike, your luggage, parcels you need to track, the cat—the list is endless.

‘I’ve designed some software to communicate with the satellite cube, tracking all the synced GPS

devices and fobs, and showing you where they are in real time on a map. Having your own satellite means that nothing is lost, anywhere in the world, ever.'

'Fun,' the professor smiled. 'So, how did the camera feed come into it?'

'Well, that goes back to my original idea. I'm working on a nanotech project at the university that identifies cancer cells in a blood sample. It can take more than twenty-four hours for the results of testing to become apparent so I needed some way to be able to take my work home with me or, at least, monitor the feed at home from the microscope at the uni.

'We tested the software and Big Sister in the lab. It worked and we got the microscope to send back pictures. Everything was good to go so I arranged with an old friend at Stanford to add our satellite to the next payload. She launched from the International Space Station a fortnight ago and I've been trying to get her working ever since.

'Last night, Honor came to remind me that we have been known to share a bed. She kept talking about how late it was, and whether Big Sister knew what time it was and whether she had shut down in protest. I realised that the satellite didn't know what time it was and wondered whether the program required a fourth dimension. The GPS coordinates of the remote device, in this case the camera on my desk, gave her a position in space—three dimensions—the where and what to film, if you like, but I hadn't provided the when to film. I added a time variable and the result is what you've just witnessed.'

Professor Andronikov shook his head. 'I have

never seen anything like this, Brogan. It is a unique breakthrough.'

'We know. We haven't been to bed. We've been playing with it ever since. It's so exciting, not just for scientists, but history departments will be rocked to the core, too,' Honor said.

'What I need to understand,' said Brogan, 'is why? Why the satellite worked down here but didn't up there? What changed when it got up there and why did it require a fourth dimension in order to work?'

'There's also the question of why we are all invisible but women from some time ago are visible. We haven't seen any men so far.'

Professor Andronikov held up a thin finger to silence Honor. 'One question at a time. Dr Smith, I truly do not know why only women from the past are visible to Brogan's device. One might guess at a number of reasons but they would be just that: guesses based on no evidence. Brogan's questions may be a little easier to answer and, with further research, might be substantiated.'

Professor Andronikov leaned forward confidentially. His small brown eyes glittered and the white, almost translucent, liver-spotted skin of his pale face crumpled as he narrowed his eyes to address Brogan.

'This is a hypothesis, only a hypothesis, you understand?'

Brogan nodded.

'I would say that your satellite has intersected with a phenomenon that, until now, has been hypothetical in nature.'

'Are we talking about a fold in the fabric of space-time?'

‘Possibly.’

‘A wormhole?’

‘Well, let us not get ahead of ourselves.’ The professor held up his hand. Brogan noticed it was trembling. ‘As I said, we need to do more research to establish what is happening in the area of space surrounding the satellite.’

The professor frowned and his face became a relief map of deep rifts and accented scarps. ‘What you have discovered, Brogan, is utterly unique. It is also highly desirable. Governments and corporations would pay large sums of money for this technology. I advise you to tell no one of what you have found until we understand more about it.’

Brogan nodded. Professor Andronikov looked at Honor, who nodded, too.

‘Good. Very wise. Now, ladies, I promised my wife that I would be back for lunch at twelve and I am overdue.’

The professor picked up his glasses from the desk and folded them into their case.

‘I will consider the best course of action to take and speak to you on Monday, Brogan. In the meantime, I suggest you write up your findings so far; the more detail, the better.’

On his way out of the house, the professor repeated the words, ‘So exciting, so exciting,’ at least twice. He said them again as he shook Brogan’s hand at the door.

‘I’m hungry,’ Brogan said as she shut the door on the view of the professor’s reversing estate car.

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Honor. ‘You didn’t have dinner last night.’

‘Didn’t I?’

‘No. I brought you up a plate but you didn’t



touch it.' Honor had learned not to be offended by Brogan's absentminded rejection of the meals she prepared when Brogan was working. It wasn't personal.

'Sorry.'

'It's okay. The empty bed, uneaten meals and one-sided conversations were all worth it, my brilliant, brilliant scientist.'

Honor kissed Brogan triumphantly.

Brogan held Honor in her arms as she said, 'Let's play down the brilliant scientist bit until we know what's happened. I can't really take credit for a freak collision between Big Sister and a fold in space-time.'

'When you were talking to the professor, I was thinking,' said Honor, as she spread tomato sauce on her bacon sandwich, 'that we should try taking the camera on a walkabout of the house. Our research has been confined to one room so far and, interesting though it is to see the changing decor over the years, it is a spare bedroom; it's not the liveliest of places in a house. If, as you said, you've synced my tablet with the satellite then I could try waving it around down here. I'd love to see the kitchen when the house was first built.'

'Okay,' responded Brogan, through a mouthful of bacon butty. 'But I'll need to load a little piece of software on it first that will grab a feed from Big Sister and enable you to see what you are filming, so give me a couple of hours.'

## Streaming to a screen nearby

*'Tonight, we ask: is the lack of importance placed on sex education by the school curriculum to blame for the increasing number of teenage mothers, or is the benefits system making it economically attractive for teens to get pregnant?'*

*'This is Ashlynn. She's a mum of four and she's eighteen. She had her oldest child, Beyonce, when she was just fourteen. Her youngest child, Shakira, is three months old. Ashlynn left school at sixteen with no qualifications. She has never worked.'*

*'Cos, well, if I'm honest, like, the government sez I'd be better off working but, by the time I've paid someone to look after them kids, I'm gonna be skint.'*

*'Ashlynn and her children live with her mother, Chantelle, in a three-bedroom council house. Chantelle works at the local supermarket as a cashier. She has worked all her adult life. She took time off to have Ashlynn and her brother, Liam, but returned to work as soon as possible.'*

*'We wouldn't have managed if I hadn't worked when the kids were growing up, you know. It was what you did in them days.'*

*'It is the end of the working day for Chantelle and she returns home with tea for the children from the supermarket's end of day giveaways. Ashlynn is upstairs. She is getting ready to spend the evening with friends at the local pub.'*

*'Hello, babe. Are you off?'*

*'Yeah, King's outside.'*

*'Ashlynn claims King is the father of Shakira. He denies it. Although he still sees Ashlynn socially, they aren't together anymore...'*

## History

‘Got it?’ Honor asked as she entered the situation room.

‘I’ve got it, all two hours of it,’ Brogan confirmed grimly.

Honor sat down beside Brogan and put her tablet on the control desk. Their mood, upbeat at the start of the afternoon, had turned sombre.

‘I can’t believe what we just witnessed,’ Brogan said.

‘It didn’t really end the way I thought it would.’

‘You can say that again.’

‘When the doctor certified that the cause of death was tetanus, it never occurred to me to question it.’

‘Why would it? You’re not a chemist.’

‘What do we do with the video now?’ Honor looked at Brogan.

‘I don’t know. Keep it with the other research you’ve done on the house. You might want to publish it one day.’

‘I feel like we should report it to someone, if only to get the bust of that bastard removed from the town hall, but I can’t see anyone being interested after all this time.’

‘And what would you say?’ Brogan raised an eyebrow. ‘We’d like to report a murder that we witnessed. Oh yes, Madam, and when did the crime take place? 1891.’

‘We’d be laughed out of the police station.’

Three days ago, on the morning of the discovery, Honor had found her research on the house’s history in the loft and they had established

that the family of 1890 consisted of Mr and Mrs Robert Harrison, a local politician and philanthropist, and his wife, fifteen years his junior; their son, William, whose presence in a room was only evident to Honor and Brogan when one of the women addressed him in conversation; the Harrisons' twin daughters, Mary and Elizabeth; Miss Wendell, the governess; a cook; and two maids.

Teasing out the end of the story involving Mrs Harrison and Miss Wendell had not been easy. Honor and Brogan had to experiment with the tablet in different rooms and at different times until they became familiar with the house's daily routine. Honor's study of women's lives during the Victorian era meant that she could take a guess at where individuals might be found at certain hours of the day and night, which enabled them to hang around in that location, filming an empty room, until someone showed up. Once they picked up one of the family or staff, they were able to use the mobility of the tablet to follow that woman from room to room.

Due to their interest in Miss Wendell, the schoolroom—Charlie's bedroom at the top of the house—became a frequent jumping-off point. Brogan and Honor discovered that Mrs Harrison and Miss Wendell met most often after morning classes when the children went down to the kitchen for lunch. It was in this room on the 28th of May 1891 at midday that the affair between Mrs Harrison and Miss Wendell came to a crisis point.

'How was William today?'

'The same. The change in him is inexplicable.'

He used to be such a kind, giving boy and now...’ Miss Wendell shook her head. ‘Don’t think me vain, but I rather fancy William used to be a little bit smitten with me.’

Mrs Harrison laughed. ‘I cannot fault him for that.’

The older woman moved closer to the younger and, placing her arms about Miss Wendell’s waist, she pressed their bodies together.

‘William is probably becoming a man. It’s not something to worry over unduly; although should his sullenness turn to rudeness you are to inform me at once.’

Miss Wendell frowned. ‘I don’t know. I wonder whether perhaps he knows about us. In my experience, children can be surprisingly perceptive.’

Mrs Harrison shook her head. ‘He doesn’t know. How could he?’

Miss Wendell searched her lover’s face and, after a moment, gave a slight nod.

‘Now,’ said Mrs Harrison, a smile playing about her lips, ‘when are the children returning?’

‘I have given them an hour with cook,’ replied Miss Wendell, returning Mrs Harrison’s smile.

Mrs Harrison bent close to Miss Wendell and whispered something, too quiet for Brogan and Honor to catch with the microphone, before kissing her deeply. Their kiss became more ardent as Mrs Harrison, pressing Miss Wendell against the teacher’s desk, moved her thigh in between the younger woman’s skirts. Miss Wendell chuckled as she grabbed a handful of Mrs Harrison’s skirts, pulling her closer.

There was a loud thud as the door handle of the schoolroom door hit the wall with some force.

Miss Wendell and Mrs Harrison jumped apart, frightened by the noise as much as by who they could see standing in the doorway. Brogan and Honor could only guess at who had interrupted the two women. The empty doorway told them the intruder, or intruders, was male.

The intruder addressed the shocked women.

Mrs Harrison started to reply, 'We were... I was...' but an explanation failed her and she petered out.

The intruder said something further, which caused Miss Wendell to say, 'William, how could you?' confirming to Brogan and Honor that William was present.

Something further was said by the invisible party in the doorway before Mrs Harrison, drawing herself up to her full height and looking magnificent, said, 'I feel no guilt, Mr Harrison. Why should I? What I have done, you have done. Did you think I was not sensible to the women you have had over the course of our marriage? Should I have been a man, I would have sought a divorce long ago.'

It seemed likely to Brogan and Honor that Miss Wendell had been correct in her assumption that William's moodiness had been as a result of discovering his governess's affair with his mother. Jealously, William had then told his father and arranged for them to catch the two women *in flagrante delicto*.

A week later, Brogan and Honor witnessed a conversation between Mrs Harrison and Miss Wendell that made clear how different the lives of the two Victorian women were from their own and

how very dependent women were on men then.

‘He refuses a divorce. He says it cannot be adultery as we are two women.’

‘You spoke to him of divorce? Oh, Sarah, you are fortunate that he refused.’ Miss Wendell sat down heavily on her chair in front of the schoolroom’s row of three desks.

‘Would it not free us to be together?’

Miss Wendell shook her head. ‘Your husband’s real reason for refusing a divorce is that the court proceedings would be reported in the newspaper, our affair would be revealed and he would be shown to have been cuckolded by two women; two women who would also be ruined. We are fortunate that your husband is a man of standing who wishes to avoid a scandal.’

Honor had discovered plenty in the town’s archives about Robert and William. Robert Harrison had been an enthusiastic adopter of new technology and had been instrumental in the success of the town’s new electricity works. His son was no less involved in the town’s history, being one of the men responsible for the building of the public library in 1921. The role of their wives in their triumphs passed undocumented.

‘What are we to do?’

Miss Wendell sighed and placed her head in her hands. ‘Ever since he found us out, an axe has hung over our heads, my head especially.’

‘I know, my darling. That is why I went to force the matter with him.’

Sarah Harrison knelt beside Miss Wendell and took her hand, pulling it to her breast. ‘We must be patient. He has done nothing to part us or do harm to us, yet. He may not. He may be content with the

services of his mistress and, so long as we are discreet, he may not seek to take action against us.'

Miss Wendell rose and extricated her hand from Sarah Harrison's grasp. 'Do you really believe that he will allow this situation to continue?'

'I don't know, but should we not make the best of what leniency he has shown us?'

Miss Wendell moved to the small window in the eaves and looked out. 'Leniency? Ha! Sarah, you do not know as much of the world as I. A man wronged in love is more dangerous than any woman scorned. He is playing with us as a cat toys with a mouse.'

Sarah Harrison moved to join Miss Wendell at the window. She placed her hands on Miss Wendell's shoulders. Miss Wendell turned to face her lover with tears in her eyes. 'We may not be pariahs yet, but we are prisoners. Our lives are in his hands. He has the power to ruin us utterly. We have nothing: we have no money, save what I might earn were my reputation to remain intact; we have no recourse to law; we are physically weaker than him and fettered by our skirts; and, those who you count as friends now, will evaporate should our crime ever be revealed. Mark my words, he *will* seek revenge for what we have done, what you have done, and when he does it will be merciless.' Miss Wendell's voice cracked as a sob escaped her.

Sarah Harrison pulled the younger woman's head onto her shoulder and stroked her hair soothingly.

'Ada, you must prepare yourself for some bad news.'



Having watched hours of video taken of Sarah Harrison and Ada Wendell's fruitless discussions that went back and forth and round and round their predicament, Brogan and Honor recorded the conversation that tipped the women's affair from being merely scandalous to dangerous.

'Mr Harrison has informed me that I am to dismiss you from our service. If I protest, he will ensure that you never get another position. The character he will give you will ruin you.' Sarah Harrison's voice wavered as she imparted the news to Ada Wendell.

'We thought that such a thing might happen,' Ada Wendell said flatly. Her shoulders were hunched as she sat on one of the schoolroom chairs, her head down and her hands tightly bunched in her lap. 'And should I refuse to leave this house?'

'He will have you removed by the police. I can do nothing to stop him.'

Sarah Harrison sat down opposite Ada Wendell, their knees touching, and, reaching over, she took the young woman's hands. Ada Wendell looked up and, staring fiercely at her lover, said, 'I love you and will fight with every breath I have to stay with you.'

Sarah Harrison shook her head. 'It is hopeless. He is a powerful man. We must do as he says and you must leave. If we comply with his wishes, I know he will give you a good character. I know he will keep his word. We must accept this is how it is to end.' Sarah Harrison's voice trembled.

Ada Wendell frowned. 'You will not fight for what you want? Do you not love me?'

'Yes, yes, I do, but I cannot see how it can be.'

Ada Wendell's expression softened and she

said, 'I have been thinking there might be a way. Your husband wishes to avoid a scandal, seemingly at all costs. What if we were to place a price on our silence?'

'What do you mean?'

'What if we were to demand of him the price of two tickets from Southampton to New York, one way, in exchange for not placing the letters we have written to one another into the hands of a gentleman of the press?'

'But we have not written any letters.'

'I know, but your husband does not know that and, besides, it would be a work of an hour to write one or two as a sample that he might review. It would provide us with the means to leave here, to leave him, and to start anew, somewhere where we are not known. We might travel as sisters.'

Sarah Harrison released her hold on Ada Wendell's hands. 'Blackmail. We cannot.'

'Why? He is doing the same in asking you to dismiss me or else he will ruin me.'

'We cannot do it because I cannot leave my children.'

Sarah Harrison began to cry. Feeling hopeless and unable to offer any comfort, Ada Wendell watched her tears fall.

'Then, I suppose, we really do have no option but to comply with his demands,' Ada Wendell said bitterly.

Brogan and Honor had to work backwards from the culmination of the events that followed to discover who had been responsible for putting the strychnine in the coffee on the evening of the 11th of June 1891. They witnessed the murderer's

accomplice at work in the kitchen preparing the victim's coffee cup with the grains of rat poison, ready to be dissolved by the coffee as it was poured from the silver coffee pot into the cup, the murderer then administering the dose by passing an innocent-looking cup of coffee to the victim as they did every evening after dinner.

They witnessed the overturning of the side table, lamp and coffee cup as the first of the violent convulsions took hold of the victim and the murderer running from the room to summon the family doctor. They were chilled by the murderer's sly suggestion to Dr Barnes that the victim might be suffering from the dreaded tetanus, brought on by the sudden arrival of summer following the Great Blizzard of March and the unseasonably cold temperatures the country had been experiencing until now.

They witnessed the struggle to get the victim up the stairs and into bed, whilst the murderer's accomplice cleared away the coffee cup, washed it and replaced it in the china cabinet. Finally, they endured the thrashing of the bed-clothes as the victim underwent wave after wave of agonising convulsions of the spine and limbs, each one tenting the bed-clothes higher and longer than before, until two hours later the sheets lay still and Robert Harrison was dead. His death certificate would record that tetanus was the cause, not poisoning by strychnine at the hands of his wife and her lover, the children's governess.

'I find it hard to believe that William didn't say anything,' said Brogan, the day after they had witnessed the murder. 'I mean, the little shit

started the chain of events that led to his father's murder.'

Honor smiled sadly and reached for a manila envelope. 'Take a look at this.' She handed Brogan the marriage certificate she had just received in the post from the General Registry Office.

'Really?' Brogan exclaimed, reading the names on the certificate. In beautiful neat script, the document stated that William, town councillor, son of Robert and Sarah Harrison, had married Ada Wendell, governess, daughter of John and Hannah Wendell (both deceased), on the 20th of July 1893. Sarah Harrison, widow, had been one of the two witnesses to the marriage. 'You're telling me, after what we just saw, that Ada went into that marriage willingly?'

'No. William resorted to a little blackmail of his own and Ada was forced to marry him or he would reveal his suspicions about his father's death to the police. I did some more research whilst you were lecturing this morning.'

'Oh, that's not fair. You were supposed to wait for me.'

'Sorry, I couldn't resist.' Honor wrinkled her nose. 'Obviously, I could only record Ada and Sarah's side of the conversation, but it was fairly obvious what was going on. They were backed into a corner by a man again. The only way for Ada and Sarah to be together was for Ada to marry William.'

'So, the murder was all for nothing?'

'Yep.' Honor paused. 'It makes me so angry, Brogue.'

'What?'

'My subject. Sometimes it is just too painful to teach, you know?'

Brogan didn't really *know* so she stayed silent as Honor wrestled with something inside her.

'The damage done to women by men, time and time again, throughout history, is overwhelming.'

'Well, at least Sarah and Ada got a bit of their own back for womankind,' Brogan offered.

Honor shook her head. 'It's not a win, being forced to take a life because you have no other option. Men forcing women to become criminals, men imprisoning women against their will, fathers selling daughters into marriage for favours and social position, husbands certifying wives as insane and locking them up when their views become inconvenient, men raping underage girls because they're stronger and they can, it's barbaric and it doesn't stop. It's still happening right now, somewhere in the world.'

'I know,' Brogan said and squeezed Honor's shoulders reassuringly. 'But you know what? Big Sister might provide us with a way to change all that.'

## Penetration

‘So—’ Brogan interrupted herself as she reached for a packet of green beans from the shelf of the supermarket.

‘Where are they from?’ Honor asked.

Brogan turned the packet over. ‘Kenya.’ She put them back on the shelf. Honor had taught her long ago that they didn’t buy from countries with a bad record on LGBT rights.

Brogan picked up a packet of snap peas. ‘Italian.’ She put them back. They didn’t support the governments of sleazy womanisers either, which Brogan rather regretted. She was fond of an Italian red. So, she treated herself to a bottle when Honor was away at a conference.

Brogan found a packet of asparagus and held it up. ‘Spanish.’

‘Okay,’ Honor nodded. Brogan put it into the trolley.

Whilst Honor went off to select rice and breakfast cereal for Charlie, two products that Brogan always got wrong when it came to Honor’s politically correct shopping list, Brogan wandered down the dairy aisle. She knew she couldn’t do too much damage if she chose British cheeses.

Honor returned with a sour look on her face. ‘I’ve just been propositioned over the cornflakes.’

‘Really? Was she good-looking?’ Brogan grinned.

‘It’s not funny and, no, *he* was not good-looking. When I said I was shopping with my girlfriend, he said he’d always fancied a threesome.’

‘He was probably joking.’

‘No, he wasn’t. God, why do they assume that

all lesbians really want is a good seeing-to by a man?’

‘Ignore it.’ Brogan pushed their trolley on.

‘No. It makes me so cross that he thinks he’s entitled to suggest it.’

‘He’s just an arsehole.’ Brogan knew from experience that Honor was getting ready for a fight. Their trip to the supermarket could be about to become a heated debate or, if Brogan played it right, she could defuse some of that heat and Honor’s encounter wouldn’t spoil their Saturday.

‘Our relationships are always seen as some sort of consolation prize for women who can’t attract a man.’ Honor picked up a pint of milk.

‘Do you think that’s still true? I think most people understand we don’t want a man in our bed; that we don’t find them attractive.’

‘That may be true for many people but not for the people that make our laws—’ They stopped to select some cold meat and Honor cut short her train of thought.

They were standing in front of an array of warm, delicious-smelling breads when Honor picked up her thread again. ‘Because we live in a society that is still male-dominated, the significance of penetration in the sexual act is paramount to legitimising and categorising a relationship. Our relationships don’t count because we can’t penetrate our partner—at least, not in a way that they recognise.’

A middle-aged woman reaching for a bloomer caught Brogan’s eye and raised an eyebrow. Brogan smiled weakly.

‘Take my subject for example,’ Honor continued as they wheeled away from the woman shopper.

‘The trouble with women’s history is that, however hard we try not to, it is always passed through a patriarchal lens.’

‘Okay.’ Brogan was not good at multi-tasking. Trying to keep up with Honor’s argument, make the right noises to enable her to vent satisfactorily and select the right groceries was testing her powers of concentration.

‘The “penetration test” is constantly applied to the study of history. Were the two protagonists of the piece “properly” married? Did they “do it”? Look at the pages and pages of speculation written about Catherine of Aragon or Marie-Antoinette’s wedding night.’

Brogan picked up a six pack of German beer and moved away to select a couple of bottles of French wine.

On her return, Honor continued, ‘This obsession with whether a couple “did it” has been adopted wholesale by those studying women’s history and that’s a problem. How do you know when two women consummate their relationship? Is it the point at which they engage in sexual activity? Is it their first kiss? Or is it when they make an emotional attachment?’

‘Good question,’ Brogan said as they wandered past the soft drinks towards the chocolate biscuits.

‘As most women know, we are capable of the most intense binding friendships, equal to the fidelity found in the best marriages, but no sex is involved. Young girls have their BFFs. During teenage, those bonds develop in intensity, sometimes spilling over into experimental sexual activities, sometimes not, but as all-consuming as any heterosexual partnership and as devastating



when they end as breaking up with a boyfriend.'

Two acned teenage boys were selecting chocolate from an 'on offer' display. The one closest to Brogan swivelled his eyes towards Honor and Brogan heard him say, 'Bloody hell,' in a tone of disbelief. His friend giggled.

Honor continued, oblivious to her audience, 'As adults, those friendships may lose their heat but not their loyalty. I know women who wouldn't hesitate to take a bullet for their best friend but wouldn't for one second consider putting their life on the line for their husbands. Does that make them lesbians?'

'I think if you asked them, they would say "no".' Brogan threw a bag of cashew nuts into the trolley.

Honor picked up the bag and turned it over. The nuts were from India not Nigeria. That was borderline acceptable so she let them fall and said, 'I think you're right because they pass their relationship through an all-female version of the "penetration test" and, because they haven't "done it" with their girlfriend, they aren't lesbians.'

As they got to the self-service checkout, the man from the cereal aisle was also scanning his items. He looked away sheepishly as he recognised Honor.

'What, no proposition for me and my girlfriend?' Honor said loudly.

Taking his till receipt hurriedly, the man turned his trolley towards the exit. 'I was just paying you a compliment, love. Geesh!'

'I'm not your love,' Honor said at his retreating back.

A flush appeared on Honor's cheeks and her green eyes sparkled. She always looked at her most

stunning when she was wrestling with a point of principle. Brogan had a strong desire to pull Honor to her and kiss her. Instead, she grinned at her wife and said, 'You're amazing.'

Honor's flush deepened as she saw the desire in Brogan's eyes. 'Thank you, and hold that thought until we get home.'

Brogan laughed.

As they were loading the car, Brogan said, 'So, what's all the feminist stuff today really about? Don't tell me the asshole in the store set you off.'

'He did, but it's more than that,' Honor sighed. 'I keep thinking about Ada and Sarah.'

They climbed into Brogan's Jeep and fastened their seat belts.

'I've been thinking about what you were saying about Big Sister being a way to change how women are treated by men and, by extension, society.'

'Oh, yes,' Brogan said over her shoulder as she reversed out of the parking space.

'What you have found has the potential to sweep away attempts to categorise women's relationships based on what we do or don't do in bed and to concentrate instead on what women get from their relationships with other women and, more importantly, what those relationships have enabled us to achieve.'

'Even I know that would be an amazing breakthrough for your subject,' Brogan said as she put the Jeep into first gear. 'But I don't want you to get your hopes up. We don't know enough about what is causing the temporal anomaly or how long the effect might last. It could be very unstable.'

They joined the queue waiting to exit the car

park.

‘What time does Charlie get back from Shalini’s?’ Brogan asked.

‘She’s sleeping over.’

‘Perfect.’ Brogan smiled and ran her eyes over her wife’s body.

‘Honestly, I can’t take you anywhere,’ Honor said.

Brogan leaned across to kiss Honor but was interrupted when the driver behind them hooted for them to move on.

The drive home was frustrating. As the driver, Brogan was expected to concentrate on the road but all Brogan could think about was Honor and what she wanted to do to her when they got home. Honor didn’t make it any easier by insisting on teasing the inside of Brogan’s upper left thigh or her left earlobe and neck at traffic lights. On more than one occasion, Brogan missed the lights changing and was honked at.

On arrival at home, they found Charlie having a crisis over Shalini, whose mother had dropped Charlie home early due to a row that had broken out between the two girls. Brogan tried to get to the bottom of what had happened whilst Honor prepared dinner but Charlie didn’t want to talk about it to Brogan.

Being Charlie’s birth mother, Honor had always been the closer parent to her. Honor was the one Charlie went to when she grazed her knee or wanted to ask a sensitive question or needed a hug. It wasn’t that Charlie didn’t go to Brogan, she did. But, if there was a choice, Honor was the favoured mother always.

It was possible that Charlie instinctively picked up on Brogan's ambivalence to motherhood. It wasn't that Brogan didn't like children, she did and they liked her. It was simply that Brogan had never seen herself as a mother and Charlie's arrival didn't change that view. In Brogan's mind, you could either concentrate on your career or concentrate on raising a child, you couldn't do both well. Honor, on the other hand, had been open with Brogan about wanting children and a career, which she seemed to manage to do successfully, but then Honor was exceptional. Brogan had done all she could to support Honor in her choice.

As Charlie began to walk and talk, Brogan became more interested in the little person she could see emerging. She was fascinated by the child's developmental stages and the process by which Charlie grew and learned and made choices and discoveries. There had been times when Charlie's overt preference for Honor had hurt Brogan a little, but she had never complained. She recognised that Charlie's needs filled a need in Honor, one that she herself did not feel, so she let the matter drop, disappearing into the background when Charlie needed some Honor-time. Now was one of those times and Brogan took on preparing dinner whilst Honor talked to Charlie.

As Brogan overheard Charlie describing the deep hurt she was feeling at Shalini's duplicitous adoption of a girl called Gaynor's fashion advice, she couldn't help thinking that Honor had been right about the depth of women's relationships with each other.

By the time Charlie was reassured that her disagreement with Shalini would blow over in a

day or two and dinner was completed, Brogan and Honor had lost their mood of earlier. So, Brogan went to check her emails and Honor chivvied Charlie into bed.

When Brogan finally got into bed Honor was reading.

'I've had an email from George Andronikov. He wants to meet. He says he has some news,' Brogan said.

Honor put her book down. 'Really?'

Brogan picked up her e-book and swiped it open. 'Yep. We might get an answer to why Big Sister is behaving the way she is and, more importantly, how stable she is.'

## Streaming to a screen nearby

*'It's eight o'clock in the evening and Cheryl, Nadine and Tracey are waking up in their hotel room in Ibiza. In two hours they will hit the clubs and bars of the town. They won't return to their room until the sun begins to come up tomorrow morning. In a fortnight's time, back in the UK, Nadine is getting married. The trip to Ibiza is her hen party.'*

*The girls, identical with their straightened dyed-to-almost-black manes, fake tans, French tips, Brazilian waxes, Perspex heels and micro bikinis, move between the bedroom and bathroom mirrors. There is no giggling and not much talking, except to ask to borrow a tool necessary to their beauty regimen. Their look is a serious business, and it takes time and concentration to get right...*

*'It is just after midnight and Cheryl and Tracey have been chatting to Chris and Ollie, two sales executives from Basildon in Essex, for an hour. In the two hours since they left the hotel, they have had six cocktails each. Nadine is not with them. Flynn, who she met for the first time last night, caught up with the girls at the second bar that they went to and invited Nadine back to his hotel. The other girls have not seen her since.'*

*'Yeah, Nad has definitely pulled. That bloke was well up for it last night but she made him wait. She's such a fucking cock tease.'*

*As Cheryl addresses the viewers, Ollie's hands come round from behind her and, grabbing her bikini top, pull it apart revealing her breasts. Cheryl screams but, rather than cover herself, she wiggles her chest at the camera...*

## String

'Take a look at these two photographs.' Professor Andronikov was in an ebullient mood. He smiled broadly as he pushed two prints of a close-up of part of the night sky across his desk towards Brogan.

The professor's email had said very little except that he had made progress towards an explanation for the strange behaviour of Big Sister. Brogan had not liked to get her hopes up but, when she arrived in the cosmology department of the university and saw George Andronikov rubbing his hands together looking like he had just become a father for the first time, she could not stop her heart from pounding against her chest wall in anticipation.

Trying to control her shaking hands, Brogan slid the images to her. In amongst the fine-grained stars, planets and distant galactic specs was the bright white glow of a quasar. Both pictures were of the same quasar. There was nothing especially remarkable about them. 'It's a quasar. What am I looking for?'

'That's correct. It is a quasar. It is the same quasar, but this picture was taken at a different angle from this picture; the angle in question being one 680,000th of a circle, which is a significant number for cosmologists who know what they are looking for.'

Professor Andronikov pushed another photograph towards Brogan. This one was taken from further away and showed the quasar and its twin side by side.

'I don't understand. How is this possible? Has the quasar sub-divided?'

‘No. It is the same quasar and it is whole. The effect is caused by gravitational lensing,’ Professor Andronikov beamed.

‘The light from the quasar is being bent by space-time?’

‘That’s right. Something has caused the geometry of space-time to bend between us and the quasar.’ The professor’s face turned grave. ‘Brogan, I believe that what you have discovered is significant. If it is what I think it is, it would be the first of its kind and of huge importance to our understanding of the earliest moments of our universe.’

‘What are we talking about?’ asked Brogan cautiously.

Professor Andronikov lowered his voice. ‘I think we are talking about a cosmic string. Well, two cosmic strings, to be precise.’

Brogan had heard of cosmic strings. They were infinitesimally fine strings of infinite length made of incredibly dense matter left over from the Big Bang. As the universe expanded and took shape, they streaked their way across and between galaxies and stars like the cracks that form in water as it freezes into a block of ice. They were simply a by-product of the universe’s creation with no known purpose. Until now, they had been theoretical.

‘I need to spend some time at Jodrell Bank to confirm my initial findings, of course. A radio map would show the strings clearly; one side of the string would show up as slighter hotter than the other. I am pretty certain that the results will prove conclusively that the singularity we are witnessing is a cosmic string.’



The professor leaned back in his chair and smiled smugly.

‘Okay. Supposing it is a cosmic string, what does that mean for the satellite?’ asked Brogan.

‘In truth, I am guessing. Based on what you’ve told me, I can make a reasonable conjecture.’ The professor smiled again, unable to hide his excitement at what he had to reveal. ‘Cosmic strings aren’t static. They whip around. At the point at which your satellite detached from the payload, I believe that it was caught by the lashing of a string, or pair of strings, and entwined within them.

‘Although the strings themselves have no gravity they do have what are known as *interaction regions*: regions where they have warped space-time to such an extent that they draw in matter caught in the region at close to the speed of light. Your satellite got caught in such a region and, programmed to maintain an orbit, began to orbit the string.

‘I have used our facilities to track your satellite and found it. It has broken out of the Earth’s orbit and is maintaining a tight orbit about something—my conjecture is that it is the strings. It is also travelling at incredible speed. It is taking a split second to complete one orbit. Using Gott’s solution, under these conditions, a closed timelike curve would have been created—in other words, the conditions for a time machine to exist.’

Brogan groaned. ‘I’m not that familiar with Gott’s work. I was rubbish at temporal mechanics and avoided it whenever possible. All that stuff about causal loops and grandfather paradoxes did for me. It’s one reason I chose biophysics and

nanotech as my specialty.'

'I confess that I have a soft spot for it,' nodded the professor, smiling at the memory of his student days spent reading science fiction novels smuggled in from the West. 'I never thought I would see the day that I would put theory into practice.'

Brogan forced her memory back to her earliest days as a physicist, before she specialised, and dredged it for some relevant information. 'From the little that I remember, I take it that my satellite is travelling backwards in time because of the warping of space-time geometry caused by the string. Like the light from the quasar finding a two routes to Earth—one faster than the other—the satellite is also taking a short cut and, in effect, beating the speed of light. And, if you can beat the speed of light, you can travel backwards in time.'

'Well remembered. It is a little more complex than that but, in essence, that is it.'

'You said that you think there are two strings. Why two?'

'Gott's solution requires two entwined strings to set up the time-travel loop. Your satellite leaves point A, orbiting the first string to point B. Now, it can look back at point A and see itself starting out on its mission, but it has not yet travelled backwards in time. So, it sets off again, back to point A and returns before it set off. Now, it has achieved time travel!'

'Okay,' said Brogan, knowing that she was going to regret asking her next question. 'Don't we now have two satellites at point A, both setting off on an orbit, and isn't that one of those time travel paradoxes that isn't supposed to happen? You're not supposed to be able to meet a past version of

yourself.'

'You're right. If this was happening *exactly* as I've just described, we would see billions of versions of your satellite cube orbiting the strings, which we don't. I think the explanation lies in the fact that the satellite's speed and the topological defect combine to deliver it back to point A ahead of its original existence at those exact co-ordinates in space. So, while satellite one continues its orbit in our space and time, satellite two starts a new orbit in the same space but at an earlier time. Satellite two's orbit generates satellite three, which is earlier still, and which goes on to generate satellite four, and so on, back through billions of iterations. In effect, your satellite is corkscrewing backwards through time.'

'Which is why the programme wanted a time variable. It needed to know which iteration of the satellite I was addressing.' Brogan grasped what the professor was saying.

'Precisely.'

'So, how far can we go back in time?'

'How long has the satellite been up there?'

'Ten days.'

'It is a guess, but I would think that you could go back eight million years quite comfortably by now to before the start of human life as we know it, when we were still apes. In another seventy days, the satellite will have wound itself back sufficiently for you to see your first dinosaur.'

'Really?'

The professor shrugged. 'It's a guess. Try it. What's the worst that could happen?'

'Honor and I have been concentrating on women's history—not surprisingly. We haven't

gone back further than a hundred years or so. I hadn't thought about pre-history.' Brogan's eyes began to well with tears as the full impact of what she had created hit her. 'Oh, my God.'

'Are you all right?' The professor was alarmed by the sight of his normally calm colleague, Dr Miller, overcome.

Brogan waved her hand. 'I'm fine. It's just a bit too much to take in.'

Up until now, Big Sister, the tablet app, Ada and Sarah had all been a bit of a gimmick. Brogan and Honor had shared the thought that Brogan's discovery was big without thinking too deeply about the implications of what they were really saying with that acknowledgment.

The professor waited while Brogan blew her nose and regained her usual composure.

'If the satellite is going further and further back in time, what happens when it reaches the Big Bang?' said Brogan, tossing her screwed-up tissue into the wastepaper basket.

'An interesting question.' The professor paused for thought. 'It is logical to assume that the satellite will be unable to travel back any further than the moment that the cosmic string came into existence, but whether on reaching that horizon the timelike curve will close down and destroy the iterations of the satellite, meaning they would begin again, I do not know. By my calculation we are talking forty-six years into the future, so we have time to study the question in depth.'

Brogan nodded. They were silent for a moment as Brogan took in all the professor had said.

'Do you have any thoughts on why we can only see women?' she asked, changing the subject.

‘I think I know why the women you see are deceased and you aren’t able to capture women who are alive but, as to why only females, your guess is as good as mine.’

‘Honor has an idea about the question of women, which I will share with you in a moment. Anyway, I’m sorry, go on: why dead people?’

‘We all have a lifeline that runs through time. Yours and mine are unfinished. Any decision we make today could affect tomorrow or the next day or twenty years into our future. We are a work-in-progress, if you like. Our lifelines are subject to change. However, for those who are dead, their lifeline is complete. Nothing can ever be altered about their lives. I think it is this completeness that enables their lives to be replayed via your satellite. It is pure conjecture, but it is the best I have for you at the moment.’

‘It’s better than anything I’ve got,’ Brogan laughed.

‘What was Dr Smith’s suggestion?’

‘Oh, well, could the reason that only women are visible be to do with the unique connection they have to their young? Honor explains this better than me, but her idea is to do with the evidence that exists that memories, phobias, and certain likes and dislikes can be passed from mother to baby in the womb. I think it’s called something like *transgenerational epigenetic inheritance*. Maybe that transgenerational link might make women’s imprints on time stronger. The vibration that women leave behind on the timeline might be easier to collect.’

The professor pulled a so-so face. ‘It’s an interesting thought.’ Women and their role as the

bearers of the next generation were outside his area of expertise. 'But not one, I think, that is within my power to prove.'

'How stable are the strings? I mean are they going to collapse tomorrow?'

The professor shrugged. 'They are a natural phenomenon so who knows? Tomorrow or in forty years, only time will tell.'

Brogan laughed at the professor's unintentional pun. 'Only time *will* tell.'

## Discovery

‘You haven’t told me what Dr Andronikov said.’

Sitting on the sofa, leaning into the crook of Brogan’s shoulder where she had snuggled herself after dinner, Honor looked up at Brogan and took a sip from the glass of red wine she was nursing.

‘No, I suppose I haven’t.’

It had been one of those weeks where they both had back-to-back lectures, essays to grade and reports to write. They had barely seen one another. Honor had tried to insist that they spend Saturday evening as a family, but Charlie had made plans to go to the cinema with Shalini, which left Honor alone with Brogan and determined that her other half should not spend their precious downtime in the situation room working.

‘Are you sure you want me to go into the technicalities? What there are of them, anyway.’ Brogan was surprised and slightly sceptical of Honor’s interest.

‘If I’m honest, not really. Give me the layman’s version.’

‘Okay.’ Brogan took a sip of her wine and stared into the fire for a moment, wondering where to start for the layman. ‘So, the satellite broke free of the Earth’s orbit and is now orbiting a pair of cosmic strings. You don’t need to know what those are, just accept they are singularities left over from the Big Bang and that when two are intertwined they have certain properties that make time travel possible.’

‘With you, so far.’

‘At the moment, our satellite is busy winding itself back in time. As we speak, it has reached the

Miocene era. It will be looking down on an Earth with no humans; mammals and birds that we would recognise as ancestors of present day creatures; and a climate that was changing from warm to cool.'

'Really? But I had no idea that we could go that far back.'

'Nor did I, until the professor pointed it out. It's logical, of course.'

'And have you?'

'Gone that far back? Yep.'

Honor sat up and stared at Brogan. Sometimes Brogan's casualness surprised even her. 'What was it like?'

'Empty.'

Honor punched Brogan's arm. 'Honestly, Brogue. You're the first person to witness prehistory at first hand and all you can say is "empty".'

'Ow,' said Brogan, rubbing her bicep. 'Well, it was empty.'

'Did you see any animals?'

'No. Where we are now was grassland as far as the eye could see and the climate seemed much the same as today, cool and temperate.'

'Brogue, it sounds amazing. You have to show me. I want to see the world before we came along and littered it with motorways and industrial parks and high-rise tower blocks.' Honor snuggled back into Brogan's shoulder.

'Okay. Later.' Brogan took another sip of wine. 'So, George reckons that it will take about forty-six years for the satellite to wind itself back to a time where the cosmic strings did not exist. At which point, who knows what will happen. But it might



never get to that if the strings collapse before then.'

'Is that likely?'

'We don't know.'

Honor thought for a moment. 'Even if we are granted the full forty-six years, that's not long in the scheme of things. It's only one lifetime's worth of study. We'll be in our eighties when Big Sister dies.'

'But you'll be the proud owner of a massive portfolio of data on women through the ages and I'll have advanced the search for the theory of everything.'

Honor sat up and shook her head. 'Brogue, it's too much.'

'I know what you mean. I couldn't take it in either.'

'No, I mean, yes, it *is* too much, but I mean it's too much for one person to research in that time. We need thousands of historians working on this, each allocated a time and place. Even then, I'm not sure we'd get it all done.'

Honor looked serious. Their leisurely evening together was threatening to become work.

Brogan shrugged. 'We'll just have to get what we can from it, and hope that George is wrong and that it doesn't collapse.'

Honor wagged a finger at Brogan. 'Wait a minute...'

Brogan waited and looked at Honor expectantly. She knew from experience when Honor was about to be brilliant.

'What if we had millions of researchers working on it?'

'What? No university has got that sort of manpower at its disposal.'

‘I’m not talking about a university. I’m talking about the Internet.’

Brogan shook her head. ‘No.’

‘Why not? The app that you’ve made for my tablet, we release it. We upload it onto the net and people download it to their devices for free. They record whatever era interests them at their particular location. It’s the only way to do this. We harness the power of the Internet to gather as much data as quickly as possible. We design a website that can host people’s videos and encourage them to upload their recordings.’

‘Whoa. Okay. It’s a great idea in principle but releasing the app means Big Sister is no longer ours. We won’t have any control over how it is used or who uses it.’

‘True but, in exchange for the loss of control, we will have an archive of data that will significantly advance the study of women’s history and the women’s movement.’

‘I’m not keen. You never know how a new technology is going to be used by society and the consequences of that.’

‘What’s the worst that could happen?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘The worst that could happen is the strings collapse or Big Sister dies tomorrow and we know that we didn’t do everything we could to harvest as much information as possible.’

Brogan thought about it for a moment. Honor was right. They would never forgive themselves if they didn’t maximise the opportunity for study that Big Sister offered.

‘Okay,’ she said slowly. ‘I’d need to do a lot more work on the app and design a website to

capture the uploaded movies, which wouldn't be difficult but would take a certain amount of time. Of course, I'd need to speak to the guys in the computer lab at work about hosting the data. There could be massive amounts, more than the servers can cope with, if this thing takes off.'

'Brogue, I think this could really work.' Honor grasped Brogan's arm, her eyes alight.

'It'll be the biggest research project you or I have ever undertaken. How will you manage the results?'

Honor released her grip on Brogan's forearm and thought for a moment. 'Obviously, the videos would need to be carefully indexed and a really good search engine constructed to access them, but you could do that, couldn't you?'

'Hmm,' Brogan nodded, her mind already skipping through the algorithms necessary to improve the app.

'Stop programming in your head,' Honor said.

'Sorry?' Brogan came back to Honor.

'You were already programming in your head, weren't you?'

'Er, yes.'

'Good. That means you think this is going to work.'

Brogan held up a hand. 'I didn't say that.'

'Darling, you didn't have to. I know that look. I think that the *Hystery* app has just gone viral!'

'The what?'

'The *Hystery*—H-Y-S-T-E-R-Y—app.'

Brogan laughed. 'We're not calling it that.'

'Okay,' said Honor and, placing a hand on Brogan's thigh, she leaned in close, her lips nibbling Brogan's earlobe.

‘We’re not calling it that,’ Brogan repeated, trying to resist Honor’s seduction.

‘No?’ Honor whispered.

‘It’s too Seventies-feminist,’ said Brogan as she stretched her neck away from Honor’s butterfly kisses.

‘You know Charlie’s sleeping over at Shalini’s?’ Honor said, in between planting light kisses on Brogan’s neck.

‘Yes?’ said Brogan, the tone of her voice indicating that she was weakening.

‘Yep. And you know what we were going to do last weekend when we got back from the supermarket and didn’t?’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Well, we’re down here and our bed is upstairs.’

‘Uh huh,’ said Brogan and, turning her head, kissed Honor’s lips as they rose to meet hers.

‘Seems a shame to waste the opportunity, then,’ Brogan grinned.

‘Does, doesn’t it?’ said Honor as she stood and, putting out her hand to Brogan, pulled her off the sofa and into her arms.

They got halfway up the stairs when Honor, hungrily undoing the buttons on Brogan’s blue shirt, unable to contain her desire any longer, pressed Brogan against the wall beneath the photos of their family history and kissed her hotly. It was only when Brogan’s head knocked a portrait of Charlie in her school uniform and set it askew that Honor relaxed and allowed Brogan to be the aggressor as Brogan manoeuvred their conjoined bodies up the stairs to the bedroom.

Falling onto the bed, Honor swiftly straddled Brogan and fumbled with Brogan’s belt and fly

buttons until Brogan caught her hands, kissed her and whispered, 'Slow down.'

Smiling wickedly, Honor stopped and, in reply, kissed Brogan slowly and deeply.

'Nice,' Brogan moaned.

'You like?' said Honor, staring into Brogan's grey-blue eyes.

'Mm-hm,' Brogan nodded as she worked her mouth down Honor's neck to her collar bone.

Grasping the bottom of Honor's T-shirt, Brogan lifted it up, over Honor's stomach and breasts. Honor pulled it over her head, arching her back as she did so and offering up her lingerie-clad breasts to Brogan. Brogan kissed the soft mounds above the lace as Honor slid her hands beneath Brogan's shirt collar, over her shoulders, and pushed the shirt down and off Brogan's back. Running her hands up Brogan's spine, Honor undid the clasp of Brogan's bra and released those familiar, firm breasts with the russet coloured nipples that, like Brogan's lips, turned a dark puce when she was turned on. Brogan's breasts were one of Honor's favourite parts of her partner and one of the quickest ways to elicit a response from Brogan. Naughtily, taking a nipple between her teeth, Honor gently teased it with the tip of her tongue.

'Uh, God,' mumbled Brogan, her forehead against Honor's shoulder.

Searching for Honor's mouth with her own and putting a stop to Honor's teasing, Brogan remonstrated with her wife by kissing her hard and, taking the lead, rolled her over onto her back on the bed. Honor's arms thrown back in surrender, Brogan held them down as she kissed Honor's mouth again and pressed her thigh against the

crotch of Honor's jeans. Brogan could feel Honor's heat through two layers of denim, but she wasn't ready to go there yet.

Releasing Honor, Brogan looked deep into her eyes and, without losing contact, gently pulled down the straps of Honor's bra. The white lace crinkled and Honor pulled her elbows through the straps so that the sheer material now fell loosely across her breasts, the rose pink aureole of her right nipple half visible to Brogan. Using two fingers, Brogan traced a path down Honor's sternum, hooking the centre of the bra and dragging it slowly off Honor's breasts.

It was as she allowed her gaze to linger over Honor's milky-white breasts laid bare before her that Brogan noticed the raised red rash on the underside of Honor's right breast, alongside the inside of her arm.

'What's this?'

'What's what?' asked Honor, her sexual stupor suddenly evaporating.

'This rash.'

'Oh, it's nothing.'

'Have you been to the doctor?'

'No. It's probably just a reaction to my deodorant. I bought a different brand this week.'

Brogan shifted her weight off Honor, and Honor sat up.

'Don't stop. I was enjoying that,' Honor said as she ran her fingers over one of Brogan's breasts, but the moment for that had passed.

Ignoring Honor's ministrations, Brogan frowned and, gently pressing Honor's breast with her fingers, took a closer look at the rash.

'Does it hurt?'

‘A bit of a dull ache. Nothing much.’

Brogan moved Honor’s breast aside to see the extent of the discoloration beneath it. She shook her head.

‘What?’ asked Honor, a note of alarm in her voice.

Without answering, Brogan got up off the bed and looked down at Honor sternly. ‘You’re going to the doctor tomorrow, and no nonsense about being too busy.’

‘It’ll be gone in a day or two.’

‘Just get it checked out,’ Brogan said firmly.

Unable to hide the concern on her face, Honor nodded.

Brogan knelt beside her and placed a hand on her thigh. ‘You’re probably right, it’s probably nothing but best to get it checked. Okay?’

‘I’ve been so scared that it might be... you know.’

‘Oh, darling, don’t be silly.’ Brogan rubbed Honor’s knee. ‘How long have you had it?’

‘About a month.’

‘A month? And you haven’t done anything?’ Brogan frowned.

‘I know I should have done.’

‘Yes, you should have done. Honestly, Honor, you’re hopeless. If it is, you know the earlier you catch it, the better the chances.’

Honor nodded and a large tear ran down her cheek. She wiped it aside swiftly.

‘Look, it’s probably, as you say, a chemical reaction to something. Getting it checked will just confirm that you have nothing to worry about. Okay?’

Nodding, Honor reached for Brogan. Sweeping

her into her arms, Brogan held her tightly. Their naked bodies felt cold against one another.

END OF SAMPLE



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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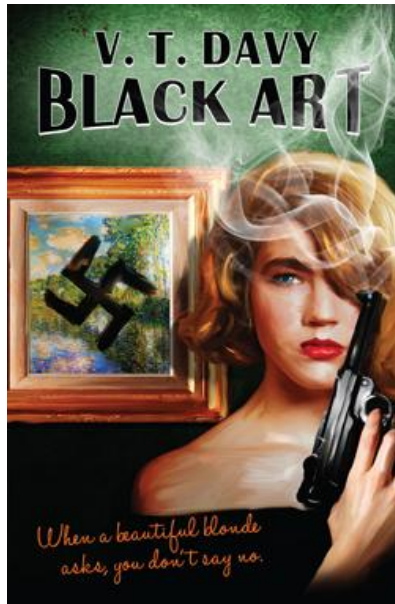
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# BLACK ART

by V. T. Davy



"I would have married her before I went away to war too, just to make sure that someone else didn't. She was beautiful. It started in her eyes and spread to the set of her mouth and the tilt of her chin. In both pictures there was a confidence, a courage, a spirit of defiance... Not the 'smile though your house is rubble and you're sleeping in a tube station' spirit of the Blitz, but real steel. The kind of backbone that would make you do extraordinary things. Things that the rest of us wouldn't do."

Arty Shaw, a genealogist working on a peculiarly British island in the English Channel, is asked by a television company to research Helen Valentine's family tree. The award-winning British actress wants to know the truth about her grandmother's wartime exploits and Arty is her choice to do the digging; which is just fine by Arty. When a beautiful blonde like Helen Valentine asks, you don't say no.

Arty's investigation reveals that Helen's grandmother, Kay Marett, was half-Jewish and running resistance ops against the German forces occupying her Island. When Kay disappears in 1942, a concentration camp seems to be her likely destination, until Arty uncovers a trail stretching from the Island, across Europe, to Cold War Dresden. As Arty learns more about Kay's extraordinary wartime adventures, obstacles to the truth begin to appear in the form of a star of the Island's amateur theatre, and two menacing East Europeans in suits. Arty must challenge his deepest beliefs to discover what happened to Kay.

Written in the hard-boiled, noir style of detective fiction from the 1940's, Arty Shaw is the kind of investigator you want on your side. Transsexual and proud of it, with a moral code that means breaking the rules now and again, and a world weary cynicism that takes nothing at face value, Arty won't stop until the truth is out. And that can make you unpopular with the wrong sort of people.

Praise for *Black Art*: "Davy, in his debut, spins an engrossing mystery that shines a light on a

lesser-known aspect of World War II history. The straightforward story allows the reader to follow Arty's process every step of the way... which grants the story authenticity and humanity. ...It's rare to find a novel that blends genres so well, with such a fully fleshed-out, distinctive protagonist at the center.

“An extremely satisfying read, as thrilling as it is humane.” - *Kirkus Reviews*

*Black Art* was awarded a Kirkus star, awarded to books of exceptional merit, and went on to be named one of *Kirkus Reviews* top 100 Indie books of 2012. It was a finalist in the 2013 USA Best Book Awards (Fiction: Gay & Lesbian).

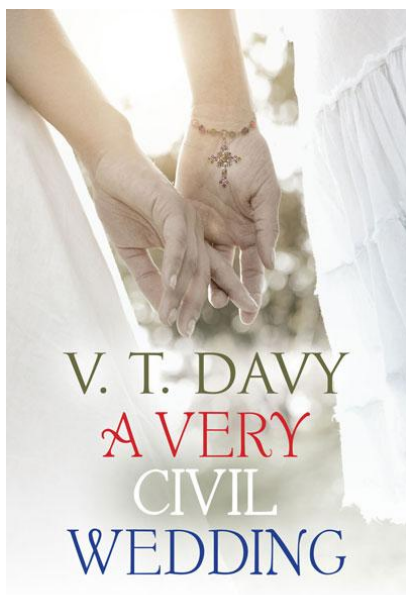
*Black Art* (ISBN 978-0-9574088-0-7) is available from Amazon (all countries) and all good book stores. It is available in paperback or for digital readers.

Amazon Kindle link:

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# A VERY CIVIL WEDDING

by V. T. Davy



“One day the Princess will be Queen and, when that happens, she will be the Supreme Governor of our organisation. At which point, we will be in the position of having as our leader someone who is, in the eyes of the Church, unmarried and living in sin. Unless we ask the Lord to bless her marriage now, how can we continue the same relationship with

the Crown? And what then for the spiritual life of the nation? We are the Church of England, we advise, and guide, and influence our lawmakers, and we've done so since Henry the Eighth's day."

When Princess Alexandra, the eldest daughter of the Prince of Wales, wishes to marry her long-time partner, Lieutenant-Commander Grace Stephens, their wedding has the potential to cause a constitutional crisis. When the couple go further and request a blessing by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the British establishment must find a way to accommodate the wishes of the woman who will one day be the Supreme Governor of the Church of England.

In this thoughtful and thought-provoking novel, V. T. Davy examines the relationship between the Monarchy and the Church; the arguments for and against same-sex marriage; how some of Britain's oldest and most revered organisations have acted to give equality to homosexual men and women, and become stronger for it; and, what happens to institutions when they refuse to embrace the demands of an enlightened society. The novel's surprising conclusion is that those most damaged by institutionalised prejudice are often the people you would least expect.

It is a book that will test the opinion of every reader wherever they stand on these issues.

Praise for *A Very Civil Wedding*: "This is not a romance but a thorough exploration of hypocrisy and discrimination challenged by those with

character and morals beyond the mere words of scripture and fanaticism. It is fun to read and entertaining if you want to see how the wheels of power might turn in one of the most British institutions, i.e. the Anglican church and the royal family in the unlikely event of same-sex royal wedding. Well done!" - *Curve Magazine*

"I felt as if I were glued to my television watching one of those brilliantly produced PBS dramas from Great Britain that take multiple seasons to unravel. Yet, I was reading this instead. Nevertheless, the drama and sense of episodic encapsulations were extraordinary and delightful. I totally recommend this!" - *Rainbow Book Reviews*

*A Very Civil Wedding* was named a finalist in the GLBT category of the 2014 Next Generation Indie Book Awards.

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