

The Strange Case of Dr. Slaughter and Mrs. Lovelace

Concept, Direction, and Editing

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by

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Prologue

Step into the shadows of Swinging 1960s London, where transformation becomes terror.

Set against the authentic backdrop of 1960s London—from the vibrant boutiques of Carnaby Street to the sterile corridors of University College Hospital—this meticulously researched psychological horror novel plunges readers into a rather dodgy world where identity itself becomes a weapon.

Every cobblestone street, every mod fashion trend, every social nuance has been carefully recreated to transport you to an era when London was the center of cultural revolution. But beneath the surface of this glittering decade lurks a chilling exploration of obsession, deception, and the terrifying lengths to which someone will go to become worthy of love.

When modern chemistry meets ancient desires, the results are both scientifically fascinating and deeply disturbing. This is not merely a period piece—it's a haunting examination of how far the human psyche can fracture when reality becomes negotiable and identity becomes fluid.

Prepare for a journey through time that will leave you questioning everything you thought you knew about the nature of self, the power of transformation, and the thin line between love and possession. In this London, the greatest horror isn't what lurks in dark alleys—it's what emerges from the laboratory of a bloody brilliant mind consumed by desperate need.

Welcome to 1960s London. The revolution will be terrifying.

Cast of Characters

Dr. Malcolm Slaughter

Age: 28

Occupation: Anesthesiologist resident at University College Hospital

Background: Born into a middle-class Manchester family, Malcolm was always the outsider—awkward, intense, and brilliant in equal measure. His undergraduate studies in biochemistry at Cambridge were marked by both academic excellence and social isolation. Standing barely 5'7" with thinning brown hair, pale complexion marred by acne scars, and thick-rimmed glasses, Malcolm cuts an unimpressive figure in the gleaming corridors of UCH.

Personality: Brilliant but deeply insecure, Malcolm harbors resentment toward the world that seems to reject him. He's methodical in his work but erratic in personal relationships. His colleagues find him competent but unsettling—he has a habit of staring too long and making inappropriate comments. His fascination with consciousness-altering substances stems from both scientific curiosity and a desperate desire to escape his own skin.

Motivations: Malcolm believes that personality is merely chemistry, and that with the right formula, he can transform himself into someone worthy of love and acceptance. His experiments begin as self-improvement but gradually become an addiction to the intoxicating freedom of being someone else entirely.

Wendy Whitrose

Age: 24

Occupation: Boutique manager on Carnaby Street

Background: Born Wendy Pemberton to old money, she married rising rock star James Whitrose at 19, drawn to his rebellious spirit and musical talent. Her world shattered when James died of a heroin overdose after only two years of marriage. Rejecting her family's wealth and the drug-soaked music scene that killed her husband, she now lives modestly above a Carnaby Street boutique that she manages called "Kaleidoscope."

Appearance: Strikingly beautiful with shoulder-length auburn hair, green eyes, and the effortless style that defines Swinging London. She favors mod dresses, go-go boots, and the geometric patterns that Mary Quant made famous, but always with a subtle elegance that hints at her upper-class origins.

Personality: Wendy possesses a natural warmth and intelligence that draws people to her, but she's become wary of getting too close to anyone. She's passionate about fashion and art but maintains strict boundaries around drugs and the hedonistic lifestyle that surrounds her daily. She sees herself as a survivor, determined to build a meaningful life from the ruins of her past.

Evangeline Lovelace (Dr. Slaughter's Alter Ego)

Appearance: The drug doesn't merely change Malcolm's behavior—it somehow transforms his physical features. As Evangeline, Malcolm becomes a stunning woman with flowing blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and perfect skin. Standing nearly 5'9" in heels, with a figure that would make Twiggy jealous, Evangeline embodies everything Malcolm believes he lacks.

Personality: Evangeline is everything Malcolm wishes he could be—confident, charming, and magnetically attractive. She's witty and vivacious, with an infectious laugh and an encyclopedic knowledge of the latest fashions and music. However, beneath the surface charm lies Malcolm's obsessive nature, now focused entirely on Wendy.

Supporting Characters

Genevieve Pemberton

Age: 20

Occupation: Art student at Royal College of Art, part-time vocalist for "The Piccadilly Underground"

Background: Wendy's younger sister, more rebellious and willing to embrace the full spectrum of 1960s counterculture. Unlike Wendy, Genevieve never knew real tragedy and approaches life with the fearless optimism of youth.

Appearance: Petite with short-cropped black hair and dramatic eye makeup, favoring mini-skirts, striped tights, and vintage military jackets from Portobello Road.

Personality: Artistic, impulsive, and fiercely loyal to Wendy. She serves as both a bridge to the music scene and a protective younger sister who becomes suspicious of Evangeline's intentions.

John and Jane Pemberton

Ages: John (52), Jane (48)

Background: Old money family with estates in Kensington and the Cotswolds. John made his fortune in shipping, while Jane comes from a line of minor aristocracy. They disapproved of Wendy's marriage to James and now hope she'll return to their world.

Personalities:

- **John:** Traditional but not unkind, worried about his daughters' choices in the changing world of 1960s London
- **Jane:** More rigid in her thinking, sees the counterculture as a dangerous threat to proper society

Dr. Richard Hartwell

Age: 35

Occupation: Senior anesthesiologist and Malcolm's supervisor

Background: A competent doctor who recognizes Malcolm's talent but is increasingly concerned about his erratic behavior and the rumors of drug experimentation.

Role: Serves as both mentor and eventual nemesis as he begins investigating Malcolm's activities.

Marcus Webb

Age: 30

Occupation: Photographer and regular at Kaleidoscope boutique

Background: Part of the emerging London fashion photography scene inspired by photographers like David Bailey, Marcus captures the energy and style of Swinging London. He becomes an unwitting witness to Evangeline's increasingly erratic behavior.

Tommy Morrison

Age: 28

Occupation: Detective Inspector, Metropolitan Police

Background: Working-class Londoner who's seen the dark side of Swinging London's drug culture. Initially skeptical of the wealthy and their problems, he becomes personally invested in protecting Wendy.

Sister Catherine Murphy

Age: 40

Occupation: Head nurse at UCH

Background: Sharp-eyed Irish nurse who notices the correlation between Malcolm's odd behavior and missing pharmaceutical supplies.

Chapter 1: The Gray Man

September 1966

The patient was dying.

Not in the drama

tic way they showed in the films—no gasping, no final words whispered to loved ones. Just the steady, mechanical decline of numbers on machines that beeped with increasing urgency in Theatre 3 of University College Hospital. Blood pressure dropping. Oxygen saturation falling. Heart rate climbing toward that dangerous territory where Malcolm Slaughter earned his keep.

"Pressure's down to eighty over fifty," announced Sister Murphy, her Irish accent cutting through the antiseptic air like a blade through gauze. "Faith, we're losing him sure as anything, aren't we?"

Malcolm's hands never wavered as he adjusted the flow of halothane. Steady. Precise. The way he did everything that mattered. "Increase the fluids. Two units of O-negative, and get me another amp of adrenaline, won't you?"

Dr. Hartwell glanced up from the patient's opened chest, his surgical mask failing to hide the concern in his eyes. Blood pooled in the cavity despite his careful sutures. "Malcolm, if we lose him—"

"We shan't." The words came out sharper than Malcolm intended. He softened his voice, though it still carried that odd, nasal quality that made people lean away during conversations. "Trust me."

And they did. That was the thing about Malcolm Slaughter that nobody could quite reconcile with the rest of him—when it came to keeping people unconscious and alive simultaneously, he was bloody brilliant. His colleagues might avoid him in the staff room, might exchange those quick glances when he walked past, but when someone's life hung in the balance, they wanted his pale, steady hands on the dials.

The adrenaline hit the patient's system like a slap. Heart rate stabilised. Blood pressure crept upward.

"There we go," Malcolm murmured, more to himself than anyone else. He had a habit of talking to the machines, the monitors, sometimes even to the patients themselves. Never to the other staff, if he could help it.

Sister Murphy caught his eye over the patient's draped form. "Right brilliant work, Doctor. Proper job, that was."

He nodded once, a quick jerk of his head that sent his wire-rimmed spectacles sliding down his nose. The compliment should have felt good. Should have. Instead, it just reminded him of all the things he couldn't fix with perfect drug calculations and steady hands.

Two hours later, after the patient had been wheeled to recovery with a pulse and working kidneys, Malcolm stood in the hospital's cramped staff washroom scrubbing dried blood from beneath his fingernails. The mirror above the sink reflected back what it always did: a thin face made thinner by shadows, muddy brown hair that refused to hold any style, and skin the colour of old parchment. He'd tried growing a beard once. Made him look like a consumptive.

The door swung open behind him, bringing with it the sound of laughter from the corridor. Dr. Sebastian Ashworth entered, still pulling off his surgical cap, dark hair falling perfectly into place without any effort at all. Malcolm had watched this performance dozens of times—the casual way Ashworth ran his fingers through that hair, the unconscious smile that seemed permanently fixed on his square-jawed face.

"Blimey, what a save in there, Slaughter," Ashworth said, moving to the sink beside Malcolm's. "Thought we'd lost him for certain when his pressure crashed."

Malcolm turned off the tap with unnecessary force. "Just doing my job."

"Come off it. That was proper artistry, what you did with the gas mix." Ashworth was one of the few who made any effort at conversation with Malcolm, though it always felt like charity. "You've got hands like a bloody pianist, haven't you? Absolutely smashing technique."

A pianist. Malcolm dried his hands on the rough hospital towels and considered this. He'd tried piano lessons as a boy. His mother had insisted. Three months of scales and simple melodies before the teacher had suggested, as gently as possible, that perhaps Malcolm's talents lay elsewhere. The memory still stung, fifteen years later.

"Right, well." He folded the towel with mechanical precision. "Early morning tomorrow."

"Hang on." Ashworth caught his elbow as he moved toward the door. "Fancy a drink? There's a crowd of us heading to that new place in Soho. The Cromwellian, I think? Supposed to have birds in cages. Live ones. Should be quite the scene, actually."

The invitation hung in the air between them. Malcolm could picture it—Ashworth and his crowd, all easy smiles and confident laughter, surrounded by the kind of women who looked like they'd stepped out of the fashion magazines Sister Murphy kept hidden in her desk drawer. Women with long legs and longer hair, geometric dresses that showed off figures Malcolm had only studied in anatomy textbooks.

"I've got research to catch up on," he said finally.

"Research." Ashworth's smile dimmed slightly. "Right, of course. That rather keen personality study thing?"

"Psychochemical intervention." The words came out defensive, clipped. "It's legitimate work."

"I'm sure it is. Sounds terribly clever." But Ashworth was already turning back to the mirror, adjusting his tie. "Well, if you change your mind..."

He wouldn't. They both knew it.

Malcolm walked home through Bloomsbury as the September evening settled over London like a worn blanket. The streets buzzed with the kind of energy that seemed to pulse through everything these days—young couples in bright colours, groups of girls with hair teased high and skirts that would have scandalised his mother, blokes with guitar cases slung over their shoulders heading toward basement clubs Malcolm had read about but never seen.

The Beatles' "Yellow Submarine" drifted from an open window above a coffee shop where teenagers sat around small tables, gesturing with cigarettes and talking too loudly about art and revolution and all the ways they were going to change the world. Malcolm pulled his grey mackintosh tighter and walked faster.

His flat squatted between a used bookshop and a tobacconist's, the kind of narrow Georgian building that had been chopped into awkward rooms for people who couldn't afford anything better. The front door stuck, as always. Malcolm had to put his shoulder into it, a daily ritual that left a permanent smudge on his coat.

Mrs. Fletcher, his landlady, emerged from her ground-floor lair as he wrestled with the door. She wore the same floral housecoat she'd had on since spring, and her grey hair was wound so tightly around curlers that Malcolm wondered if she ever took them out.

"Doctor Slaughter." She made his title sound like an accusation. "Those blokes were here again today."

"Which blokes?"

"From the council, or the health department, or some such. Asking about smells. Chemical smells." Her watery eyes narrowed. "I told them I hadn't smelt anything particular, mind, but they said there'd been complaints."

Malcolm's stomach clenched. "What sort of complaints?"

"Fumes, they said. Someone thought there might be a gas leak." She stepped closer, and he caught the sour scent of gin on her breath. "You're not doing anything dodgy up there, are you, Doctor? Only, with your line of work and all..."

"Just studying," he said quickly. "Medical texts. Nothing dangerous."

She watched him climb the narrow staircase, and he felt her eyes on his back until he reached the third-floor landing. His key turned in the lock with a soft click that seemed abnormally loud in the silence.

The flat consisted of two rooms and a kitchenette that barely deserved the name. The front room served as his study—medical journals stacked on every surface, a desk pushed against the window that looked out onto the sooty brick wall of the building opposite. But it was the second room that mattered.



Malcolm locked the door behind him and flicked on the overhead bulb. The light revealed what he'd spent the last eighteen months creating: a proper laboratory, compressed into a space the size of a large cupboard. Glass apparatus lined makeshift shelves. A Bunsen burner sat next to rows of labelled bottles containing compounds he'd acquired through careful manipulation of hospital inventory sheets. The air carried the sharp bite of chemicals and something else—possibility.

He pulled off his jacket and hung it on a wooden chair, then rolled up his shirtsleeves with the same methodical care he brought to everything. A notebook lay open on the workbench, its pages covered with his precise handwriting. Formulae. Calculations. Observations.

September 15th: Third iteration of compound M-7 showed marked improvement in test subject's confidence levels, lasting approximately 4.5 hours. Some minor physical side effects—flushing, elevated heart rate. Subject reported feeling "like a different person entirely."

The test subject was a laboratory mouse, though Malcolm had taken certain liberties in his notes. The mouse had indeed become more aggressive, more social with the other mice. But mice couldn't report feelings. That particular observation had come from Malcolm himself, during his first and only self-administered trial.

He uncapped a beaker of pale-yellow liquid and held it up to the light. The latest batch. Months of refinement had led to this—a compound that didn't just alter brain chemistry, but seemed to reach deeper, into whatever made a person fundamentally themselves.

The first time he'd tried it, three weeks ago, the change had been subtle. A loosening of the tight knot of anxiety that lived permanently in his chest. A strange urge to speak to the girl behind the counter at the chemist's, to smile at strangers on the street. It had lasted only an hour, but for that hour, Malcolm had felt like someone else. Someone better.

The second time, the effects had been stronger. And strange. His reflection in the laboratory mirror had seemed different—not just the absence of his usual nervous expression, but something about the shape of his face, the line of his jaw. Impossible, of course. But the feeling had been so vivid, so real.

He measured out exactly three millilitres into a clean test tube. His hands—steady as rock in the operating theatre—trembled slightly as he raised it to his lips.

The compound tasted like bitter almonds and copper pennies. Malcolm closed his eyes and waited.

The change began, as always, with warmth. Not the pleasant warmth of a summer day, but something more intimate—as if his very bones were heating from within. His reflection wavered in the small mirror he'd mounted above the workbench. The same thin face, the same colourless hair, but somehow...

Different.

Better.

His shoulders straightened without conscious effort. The perpetual tightness around his eyes relaxed. And when he smiled—actually smiled, not the careful grimace he deployed during hospital small talk—the face in the mirror smiled back with genuine warmth.

"Right then," he said to his reflection, and was startled by the confidence in his own voice.

For the next hour, Malcolm Slaughter felt like the person he'd always believed he was meant to be. He cleaned his laboratory with efficient grace, humming a tune he'd heard drifting from that coffee shop. He made notes in his journal with handwriting that seemed more fluid, more alive. He even considered walking back out into the London evening, finding that club Ashworth had mentioned, striking up conversations with beautiful strangers who wouldn't look through him as if he were made of glass.

But the compound's effects were temporary. They always were. As the warmth faded from his bones, Malcolm's shoulders curved inward again. The smile slipped from his face. The mirror showed him exactly what it always did—a grey man in a grey room, surrounded by the detritus of other people's real lives.

He made a note in his journal: *Compound M-8 shows enhanced stability. Duration approximately 60 minutes. Subject reports significant mood elevation and increased social confidence. Some unusual perceptual changes warrant further investigation.*

Outside his window, London swung on without him. Music and laughter and the sounds of people who belonged in the world they'd inherited. Malcolm Slaughter carefully cleaned his equipment and began planning his next experiment.

After all, if you couldn't be born into the right life, perhaps you could simply mix one up in a laboratory.

Chapter 2: Kaleidoscope

The dress was wrong.

Not obviously wrong—the cut was perfect, the fabric expensive, the colour a shade of electric blue that would have looked stunning against the model's pale skin. But something about the way it hung on the wire mannequin made Wendy Whitrose's teeth ache. She circled the display, arms crossed, auburn hair falling across one shoulder as she tilted her head.

"It's the belt," she said finally, to no one in particular.

Kaleidoscope hummed around her with the Tuesday morning energy of Carnaby Street's most successful boutique. Three girls barely out of school clustered around a rack of miniskirts, whispering about pocket money and weekend plans. Near the window, a photographer's assistant held fabric swatches up to the light, muttering on about colour temperatures and editorial deadlines.



Wendy stripped the offending belt from the mannequin's waist and tossed it into a basket behind the counter. Better. The dress needed to move, to flow with a girl's stride down these narrow streets where every step was a statement.

"Excuse me." The voice belonged to a woman in her thirties, impeccably dressed but wearing the careful smile of someone venturing into foreign territory. "I'm looking for something for my daughter. She's... well, she's fifteen, and she's been going on about wanting to look more—"

"Modern?" Wendy supplied, not unkindly.

"Exactly." Relief flickered across the woman's face. "But nothing too..."

"Scandalous?"

The woman laughed despite herself. "You understand perfectly."

Wendy did understand. These were the negotiations that filled her days—mothers trying to navigate the space between their daughters' desires and their own fears, girls pushing against boundaries they weren't entirely sure they wanted to cross, blokes pretending they belonged in this new world of bold patterns and revolutionary hemlines.

She selected three dresses from different racks, each one a careful compromise between fashion and propriety. The mother fingered the fabrics with the concentration of someone learning a new language.

"The green one," Wendy said quietly. "It's rather sophisticated without being... theatrical."

"Yes." The woman held the dress against herself, checking the length. "Yes, I think this will do rather nicely."

After the transaction, after the careful wrapping in Kaleidoscope's signature silver paper, Wendy found herself alone with the constant hum of Carnaby Street filtering through the shop's front windows. A busker had set up across the narrow street, his guitar case open for coins, singing something by The Kinks in a voice that cracked on the high notes.

She should eat. Had meant to eat lunch, but then the fabric delivery had turned up, and Mrs. Morrison from three shops down had stopped by to have a gossip about the new club opening near Oxford Circus, and somehow the afternoon had dissolved into inventory and small talk and the peculiar exhaustion that came from being constantly, professionally cheerful.

The bell above the door chimed. Wendy looked up from the receipts she'd been pretending to organise, expecting another customer. Instead, she found herself facing Genevieve.

Her sister stood in the doorway like she was auditioning for a role in someone else's life—black hair freshly cut into a sharp geometric bob, eyes rimmed with liner thick enough to survive a rainstorm. The military surplus jacket she wore over a shift dress covered in op-art spirals should have looked ridiculous on someone barely five feet tall. Instead, it looked like rebellion distilled into fabric and attitude.

"You look like you haven't eaten," Genevieve said straightaway.

"Hello to you too."

"Don't come the innocent with me." Genevieve moved through the shop with the easy confidence of someone who'd been raised in beautiful spaces. She touched a velvet jacket, straightened a necklace display, examined the electric blue dress Wendy had been fussing over earlier. "This is absolutely gorgeous. Very Courrèges. Where did you find it?"

"A designer in Chelsea. Young girl, probably not much older than you."

"Everything's happening frightfully fast these days, isn't it?" Genevieve settled into the chair Wendy kept behind the counter, folding her legs beneath her in a way that made her look younger than twenty. "Sometimes I feel like if I blink, I'll miss the entire revolution."

Wendy almost smiled. "Feeling revolutionary today?"

"Always." But something in her sister's voice had gone serious. "We got a gig."

"Another coffee house?"

"The Marquee Club."

The name hung in the air between them. Wendy's hands stilled on the receipts. "When?"

"January twenty-fourth. Opening for some American chap named Jimi Hendrix" Genevieve paused, as if she still couldn't quite believe it. "Finally, a decent-sized place to play."

They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of the opportunity settling between them. The Marquee Club wasn't just another venue—it was the place where careers were made, where the music papers sent their photographers, where record executives came to discover the next big thing.

"You'll be brilliant," Wendy said finally.

"Will I?" Genevieve's confidence had cracked slightly, revealing the uncertainty underneath. "What if we're not ready? What if we get up there and everyone can see that we're just... kids playing dress-up?"

"Then you'll be in good company. Half of London is kids playing dress-up these days."

Genevieve laughed, but it sounded forced. "Mummy and Daddy don't know yet."

"They'll find out."

"They'll have opinions."

"They always have opinions." Wendy moved around the counter, settling onto the small sofa where customers sometimes waited whilst their friends tried on clothes. "Remember what Daddy said when I married James?"

"That musicians were professionally unreliable and personally irresistible, and that the combination was dangerous for impressionable young women." Genevieve's impression of their father's patrician drawl was wickedly accurate.

"He wasn't wrong."

The words slipped out before Wendy could stop them. Genevieve's expression shifted, became more careful.

"Wendy..."

"It's fine." But it wasn't, not really. Two years since James had died, and she still couldn't mention him without feeling like she was walking on broken glass. "He just... he had this way of making everything seem more vivid. More possible. Even when it wasn't."

James Whitrose had been twenty-four when she'd met him, all cheekbones and nervous energy and a voice that could make three chords sound like a prayer. He'd played small venues then—basement clubs where the air was thick with cigarette smoke and ambition, coffee houses where folk singers competed for attention with conversations about art and politics and the various ways the world might be improved.

She'd been nineteen and fresh out of finishing school, attending one of those concerts with friends who thought it would be amusing to see how the other half lived. James had noticed her during his second set—the girl in the expensive dress sitting at a corner table, trying to look like she belonged in a world of turtlenecks and protest songs.

He'd written a song for her that night. Called it "Kensington Girl," which had made her wince even as it made her heart race. The lyrics had been simple, almost naïve, but the melody had stayed with her for days afterward.

They'd married six months later, despite her parents' reservations and his manager's concerns about the potential impact on his carefully cultivated image as a working-class troubadour. For two years, they'd lived in the space between her world and his—comfortable enough financially, thanks to her trust fund, but never quite fitting into either the aristocratic circles she'd grown up in or the bohemian scene that had claimed him.

The drugs had started small. A joint shared after particularly good performances. Pills to help him sleep when the adrenaline from shows left him wired until dawn. Everyone was experimenting then—it was part of the landscape, as natural as long hair and miniskirts. But James had approached it with the same intensity he brought to his music, always pushing further, always convinced that the next high might unlock some essential truth about himself or his art.

The heroin had been different. Not part of the scene, not something they talked about in mixed company. It had turned up in their life like a particularly charming houseguest who gradually revealed himself to be a thief.

"I found him in the loo," Wendy said quietly. "Sitting against the bathtub, still holding the syringe. He looked... peaceful. Like he'd finally found whatever he'd been looking for."

Genevieve reached across the space between them and took her hand.

"The worst bit wasn't the dying," Wendy continued. "It was realising that I'd been losing him for months, and I'd convinced myself it was just... artistic temperament. The way he'd disappear for hours, the mood swings, the way he'd look at me sometimes like he couldn't quite remember who I was. I thought it was about the music. I thought if I was patient enough, supportive enough, he'd come back to me."

"You were twenty-one."

"Old enough to know better."

"Were you?"

Wendy considered this. Had she been old enough to recognise the signs, to demand answers, to choose her own safety over his self-destruction? Or had she been exactly what she'd appeared to be—a girl raised to be decorative and accommodating, thrust into a situation that required skills no one had thought to teach her?

"I don't know," she said finally. "But I know I shan't do it again."

"Do what again?"

"Fall in love with someone who's already in love with something else."

The bell above the door chimed again. A group of teenagers tumbled in, all elbows and laughter and demands to see the "absolutely wild" dresses in the window. Wendy smoothed her skirt and rose to greet them, sliding back into her professional smile like putting on familiar clothes.

But Genevieve remained seated, watching her sister navigate the careful dance of customer service. There was something different about Wendy these days—a wariness that hadn't been there before James, a way of holding herself slightly apart even in the middle of a crowd. She'd built a good life here on Carnaby Street, surrounded by beautiful things and interesting people, but it felt like a life constructed specifically to avoid any possibility of real surprise.

"We should get dinner," Genevieve said after the teenagers had left with two dresses and a handful of costume jewellery. "There's a new place in Soho that Marcus mentioned. Supposed to have the most brilliant bolognese outside of Italy."

"Marcus the photographer?"

"Marcus the photographer. He's documenting the scene for some American magazine. Says London is the most photogenic city in the world right now."

Wendy locked the till and gathered her coat from the back room. "Everything's photogenic when you're twenty-five and the future looks like it's going to be better than the past."

"Cynic."

"Realist."

They stepped out into the early October evening, joining the stream of people moving along Carnaby Street. The air smelt of coffee and cigarettes and the particular mixture of optimism and rebellion that seemed to hang permanently over this part of London.

"You know," Genevieve said as they walked, "there's going to be an after-party. After the Marquee Club show. You should come."

"I don't think—"

"Not to the party. To the show. You should come to the show."

Wendy glanced at her sister, surprised by the intensity in her voice.

"I want you there," Genevieve continued. "For luck, maybe. Or just... I want you to see what we've been working toward. What all this has been for."

"All what?"

"The late nights, the rehearsals, the arguments about whether we should sound more like The Byrds or more like ourselves. The whole beautiful, ridiculous project of trying to make something that matters."

They passed a record shop where "Paperback Writer" leaked from speakers mounted above the door. A couple stood pressed against the window, lost in conversation or each other. Street lamps were beginning to flicker on, casting pools of warm light onto the pavement.

"Right then," Wendy said. "I'll come."

Genevieve's smile was incandescent. "Really?"

"Really. But I'm not staying for the after-party."

"We'll see about that."

They turned onto a side street, leaving the main bustle of Carnaby Street behind. But even here, London hummed with possibility—lights in windows, voices from doorways, the sense that somewhere nearby, someone was creating something that had never existed before.

Wendy pulled her coat tighter against the October evening and tried not to think about the last time she'd felt this kind of anticipation. Tried not to remember how dangerous it was to want things, how quickly hope could curdle into heartbreak.

But as they walked toward dinner and conversation and whatever the evening might bring, she found herself looking forward to January twenty-fourth despite herself. To seeing Genevieve on stage, to being part of something larger than her carefully controlled life on Carnaby Street.

To the possibility that maybe, just maybe, she was ready to be surprised again.

Chapter 3: The Formula

The breakthrough came at three in the morning on a Tuesday, when Malcolm's hands were steady but his mind was fraying at the edges.

He'd been working for six hours straight, ever since returning from a particularly brutal shift where he'd nearly lost a child during what should have been routine surgery. Seven years old, appendectomy, routine as anything. But something had gone wrong with the anaesthesia calculations—not wrong enough to kill her, thank God, but wrong enough to send Malcolm home shaking.

Dr. Hartwell had covered for him. Made excuses about equipment failure, faulty monitors. But they'd both known the truth: Malcolm's attention had wandered at precisely the wrong moment. He'd been thinking about the compound, about the modifications he wanted to make to the molecular structure, about the way the last trial had made him feel like someone else was wearing his skin.

Bloody dangerous thinking in an operating theatre. The kind that cost licences and lives.

Now he stood in his makeshift laboratory, tie loosened, shirtsleeves pushed up past his elbows, surrounded by the controlled chaos of serious experimentation. Glass tubes caught the overhead light. Chemical equations covered every available surface in his precise handwriting. The air tasted metallic, sharp with possibility and the lingering bite of failed attempts.

Compound M-9 sat in its beaker like liquid starlight—colourless, odourless, completely unremarkable except for the way it seemed to catch and hold the light. Malcolm had been staring at it for twenty minutes, lab notes spread before him like tarot cards.



October 15th: Increased dopamine precursor concentration by 12%. Added trace amounts of synthetic testosterone blocker. Theoretical result: enhanced confidence without aggressive side effects. Duration estimated at 90-120 minutes.

Theoretical. Everything about his work was theoretical until someone swallowed it.

Malcolm measured out exactly three millilitres with the same precision he brought to surgical doses. His hands didn't shake—they never shook when it mattered. The test tube felt warm against his fingers, though that might have been his imagination. Everything felt heightened at this hour, when London slept and left him alone with his obsessions.

He'd told himself he was conducting legitimate research. Psychochemical intervention in personality disorders. Groundbreaking work that could revolutionise treatment for depression, anxiety, the various ways human brains betrayed their owners. He'd even sketched out papers he might publish someday, journals that might take him seriously if he could produce data worth their attention.

But that was academic fiction, and Malcolm had never been good at taking the piss out of himself for long.

The truth was simpler and more desperate: he wanted to be someone else. Someone who belonged in rooms full of laughter, who could make conversation without rehearsing it first, who might walk into a club like The Cromwellian and have beautiful women look at him with interest instead of that particular brand of polite dismissal he'd become rather expert at reading on strangers' faces.

Malcolm raised the test tube to his lips and swallowed.

The taste had evolved over nine iterations—less bitter now, with an almost floral aftertaste that reminded him of the perfume his mother had worn to church on Sundays. He lay the empty test tube on his workbench and checked his watch. 3:17 AM.

The change began in his fingertips.

Not warmth this time, but something more fundamental—as if his very cells were remembering a different configuration. The sensation spread up his arms, across his chest, settling deep in his bones with a certainty that felt almost geological.

Malcolm's reflection in the laboratory mirror wavered, features blurring like a photograph left too long in developer solution. His face seemed to narrow, cheekbones becoming more prominent. The perpetual slouch of his shoulders straightened without conscious effort.

Then the real transformation began.

His hair, thin and colourless as old parchment, darkened to honey blonde, growing longer as he watched. Not impossibly long—nothing that would require explanation to colleagues—but long enough to frame a face that was becoming something else entirely. His skin cleared, losing the pallor of too many hospital nights, taking on the kind of luminescence that belonged to women in magazine advertisements.

Malcolm's body shifted beneath his clothes. Shoulders narrowing, waist defining itself, chest developing curves that had never existed before. The changes were subtle but unmistakable—less like transformation than like remembering how to be someone he'd always been meant to be.

When the shifting stopped, Malcolm stared at his reflection and saw a woman looking back.

Not just any woman. A beautiful woman, the kind who moved through the world with unconscious confidence, who never had to wonder whether she belonged somewhere. Her eyes—his eyes—were the same brown, but brighter somehow, framed by lashes that cast shadows on cheekbones that hadn't existed ten minutes ago.

"Bloody hell," he whispered, and even his voice had changed. Higher, softer, with an accent that suggested expensive schools and family money.

Malcolm—she—raised a hand to her face, watching the reflection mirror the movement. The skin felt different under her fingertips, smoother, warmer. Real in a way that made the scientific part of his brain scramble for explanations that wouldn't come.

This was impossible. Molecular chemistry could alter brain function, could change behaviour and perception, but it couldn't rewrite DNA. Couldn't restructure bone, redistribute tissue, transform male anatomy into female. Yet here she stood, undeniably herself and undeniably other.

She moved carefully to the full-length mirror mounted on the laboratory door, taking inventory of her new body. The clothes hung wrong now—shirt loose in the shoulders, trousers too long and too wide. But beneath the ill-fitting fabric, she could see the elegant lines of someone who'd never doubted her right to exist in the world.

"Hello," she said to her reflection, testing the voice that emerged from a throat that felt subtly different. "Hello, gorgeous."

The words came easily, naturally. No rehearsal required, no careful consideration of tone or timing. For the first time in his adult life, Malcolm felt like he was speaking without a script.

She walked to the window overlooking the narrow street, moving with a grace that belonged to someone who'd never had to think about how much space she occupied, who'd never apologised for existing. Three storeys below, London slept on, oblivious to the miracle taking place in a converted bedroom above a tobacconist's shop.

The euphoria hit her in waves. Not the chemical high she'd expected, but something deeper—the intoxicating freedom of being someone who fit in her own skin. Someone who might walk into a room and have conversations flow toward her instead of around her. Someone who belonged.

Malcolm had spent his entire life as a spectator, watching other people live with an ease that seemed as foreign as flight. Now, for however long this lasted, she was someone who might actually muck in with the world instead of observing it from the margins.

She practised walking back and forth across the small room, getting used to the different centre of gravity, the way her hips moved beneath clothes that no longer fit properly. Everything felt natural, instinctive, as if some part of him had always known how to be her.

The laboratory clock chimed four times. Already, she could feel the first hints that the transformation wouldn't last forever—a subtle loosening in her chest, a slight dulling of the euphoria that had carried her through the first hour. The compound was metabolising, breaking down, preparing to return her to the grey existence of Malcolm Slaughter.

She found paper and pen, documenting the experience with the same precision she brought to surgical notes:

3:17 AM - Initial ingestion. Effects began within 2-3 minutes. 3:20 AM - Physical transformation complete. No discomfort during change. 3:25 AM - Full psychological integration. Subject reports complete sense of embodiment in new form. 4:15 AM - First signs of compound metabolisation. Estimated duration 90-120 minutes confirmed.

But the clinical language couldn't capture what it felt like to inhabit this body, to speak with this voice, to see the world through eyes that expected welcome instead of rejection. The transformation wasn't just physical—it was existential, a complete rewriting of how she related to everything around her.

As the clock approached five, the changes began to reverse themselves. Hair shortening, features coarsening, body returning to the familiar configuration of disappointment and compromise. Within ten minutes, Malcolm stood alone in his laboratory again, pale and thin and absolutely ordinary.

But the memory remained. The knowledge of what it felt like to be someone else, someone better. The certainty that whatever force had enabled this transformation, it was real and it was his.

Malcolm cleaned his equipment with mechanical precision, but his mind was already racing ahead to the next trial. The compound could be refined, improved, made to last longer. The experience could be repeated, studied, perfected.

For the first time since childhood, Malcolm Slaughter felt hope. Not the desperate kind that had driven him through medical school, the hope of proving himself worthy of respect. This was something different—the hope of becoming someone who didn't need to prove anything at all.

Someone who simply was.

He labelled the bottle that had held Compound M-9, then opened his notebook to a fresh page. At the top, in his careful handwriting, he wrote: Evangeline Project - Phase Two.

The name had come to him during the transformation, rising from some part of his subconscious like a prayer finally answered. Evangeline. It suited her perfectly—elegant, sophisticated, the kind of name that belonged to someone who'd never doubted her place in the world.

Malcolm began sketching modifications to the formula, ways to extend the duration, to make the transformation more stable. Outside his window, dawn was creeping across London's rooftops, bringing with it another day of hospital corridors and professional competence and the exhausting performance of being someone he'd never chosen to be.

But now he had an alternative. Now he had Evangeline.

And she was going to change everything.

Chapter 4: First Contact

Malcolm had never owned a dress.

This became a problem on Thursday night, October 22nd, when he swallowed the refined version of Compound M-10 and watched his reflection shift into Evangeline's familiar beauty. The transformation was smoother now, more complete—he'd managed to extend the duration to nearly three hours through careful molecular adjustments. Long enough, he'd calculated, to venture beyond his laboratory.

But Evangeline couldn't very well walk the streets of London in Malcolm's ill-fitting trousers and surgical scrubs.

She stood before his wardrobe, examining the limited options with growing frustration. Nothing remotely suitable. Malcolm's clothes hung like grey ghosts—shapeless jumpers, conservative ties, the uniform of someone determined to disappear into institutional walls.

The solution came from an unexpected source: Mrs. Fletcher's niece.

Malcolm had heard the girl through the thin walls over the past few months—visiting from Manchester, apparently, staying whilst she looked for work in London's fashion industry. He'd glimpsed her on the stairs once: tall, blonde, roughly Evangeline's size, with the kind of geometric mini-dresses and knee-high boots that suggested she understood exactly what decade she was living in.

More importantly, she'd left a suitcase in the hall cupboard downstairs. Mrs. Fletcher had mentioned it in one of her rambling monologues about young people these days—something about storage space and temporary arrangements.

Evangeline descended the narrow staircase with the careful confidence of someone who belonged wherever she happened to be. The hall cupboard wasn't locked. Inside, beneath winter coats that smelt of mothballs and disappointment, sat a brown leather suitcase with brass corners.

The dress she selected was absolutely spot on: sleeveless shift in electric purple, hitting several inches above the knee, with a geometric pattern that seemed to vibrate under the dim hallway light. She added white go-go boots and a pair of silver earrings that caught her newly blonde hair like fragments of mirror.

Looking at herself in Mrs. Fletcher's hallway mirror, Evangeline felt the last traces of Malcolm's anxiety evaporate. This was who she was meant to be. This was how she was meant to move through the world.

The October night welcomed her like an old friend.

Carnaby Street pulsed with its usual Thursday energy—not quite the weekend madness, but alive enough to make every step feel like possibility. Evangeline walked with unconscious grace past the boutiques and coffee houses, drawing glances that Malcolm had never received, smiles that had nothing to do with politeness or pity.

Music leaked from doorways. Conversations in multiple languages created a linguistic symphony that seemed to match the rhythm of her heels on pavement. This was London at its most seductive— young, confident, absolutely convinced that it was rewriting the rules of how people were allowed to live.

The party found her rather than the other way around.

"Darling!" A woman in a silver dress materialised at Evangeline's elbow, champagne glass in one hand, cigarette in the other. "You're exactly what Marcus needs for the next shot. That dress is absolutely divine—where did you find it?"

Before Evangeline could respond, she was being guided up narrow stairs toward what had once been someone's flat and was now a photographer's impromptu studio. The space buzzed with the controlled chaos of creative people working past reasonable bedtime. Models draped themselves over furniture whilst a photographer—Marcus, presumably—adjusted lights with the intensity of someone conducting surgery.



"Absolutely smashing," the silver-dress woman continued, steering Evangeline toward a group clustered near the window. "You have exactly the right look for what we're documenting. That authentic mod elegance—not trying too hard, you know? Some of these girls look like they're wearing costumes."

Evangeline found herself handed a glass of wine and introduced to a rotating cast of names and occupations that blurred together in the warm haze of acceptance. An art student from Chelsea. A musician whose band was "just about to break through." A journalist writing about London's cultural revolution for an American magazine.

Everyone seemed to assume she belonged exactly where she was.

"I haven't clocked you around before," said a young chap with perfectly styled hair and the kind of clothes that suggested family money channelled through rebellious fashion choices. "Are you in fashion? You have that look."

"I work in... pharmaceuticals," Evangeline heard herself say. The lie emerged so naturally she almost believed it herself. "But I'm frightfully keen on fashion. Always have been."

"Of course you are. Everyone is these days. Fashion's become the new politics, hasn't it? The way we dress, the way we move through the world—it's all about claiming space, demanding to be seen on our own terms."

Evangeline nodded as if this was a conversation she'd been having for years. Part of her was amazed by how easily she fell into the rhythm of it—the casual philosophising, the assumption that everyone present shared certain cultural reference points, the way ideas bounced between speakers like jazz musicians trading improvised melodies.

Malcolm had spent his life listening to conversations like this from the outside, wondering what secret knowledge he lacked that would grant him admission. Now, as Evangeline, she discovered the secret was simpler than he'd imagined: you belonged by acting like you belonged.

"Are you here alone?" The question came from someone new, a woman with auburn hair who'd appeared beside the conversation like she'd been there all along.

Evangeline turned, and found herself looking into intelligent green eyes that seemed to catalogue details with professional precision. The woman was beautiful in an understated way—the kind of beauty that didn't need to announce itself, that seemed to emerge from confidence rather than create it.

"I am," Evangeline said. "Though I'm starting to think that might have been a mistake. Everyone seems to know everyone else."

"London's smaller than it pretends to be. Especially this bit of London." The woman extended a hand. "I'm Wendy. Wendy Whitrose."

"Evangeline Lovelace."

The name had emerged as if it had always belonged to her. Evangeline watched Wendy's reaction carefully, but saw only polite interest and what might have been the beginning of genuine warmth.

"Lovely name. Terribly romantic."

"Family name, actually. Though I suppose that's the same thing, isn't it? Families are just romance that got complicated over time."

Wendy laughed—a real laugh, not the careful social sound that passed for amusement in most crowds. "That's either terribly wise or terribly cynical."

"Can't it be both?"

"I suppose it can. Are you enjoying the party?"

Evangeline glanced around the room, taking in the photographer's controlled chaos, the conversations that seemed to generate their own gravity, the sense that everyone present was participating in something historically significant without quite knowing what it was.

"It's fascinating," she said. "Like watching a documentary about the present moment whilst you're living in it."

"You're not what I expected when I first clocked you."

"What did you expect?"

Wendy considered this, head tilted slightly in a way that suggested she was someone who thought before speaking. "Someone more... performative, I suppose. The dress, the hair, the whole look—it's very striking. But you seem more interested in observing than being observed."

"Maybe that's what makes it interesting."

"Rather think it is."

They moved naturally away from the larger conversation, finding space near the window where London spread out below them in a constellation of lights and possibilities. Wendy asked questions that suggested genuine curiosity rather than social obligation: what brought Evangeline to London, what she thought about the changes happening in the city, whether she believed the cultural revolution would last or eventually exhaust itself.

Evangeline found herself answering with an honesty that surprised her. Not factual honesty—most of what she shared about her background was pure invention—but emotional honesty about what it felt like to be young in a city that seemed to be rewriting itself daily.

"I grew up thinking there were rules," she said, accepting her third glass of wine. "About how people were supposed to behave, what was possible, what kinds of lives were available to different kinds of people. But London right now feels like those rules are more like... suggestions."

"Suggestions you can ignore if you're brave enough?"

"Or foolish enough. I'm not always sure there's a difference."

Wendy's smile carried something complicated—understanding mixed with what might have been envy. "I think I know what you mean."

"Do you?"

"I married young. A musician—this was a few years ago, when the whole scene was different. Smaller. More... innocent, I suppose." Wendy's voice became careful, precise. "I thought I was choosing adventure. Turned out I was choosing someone else's idea of what adventure should look like."

"What happened?"

"He died. Drug overdose. Terribly romantic in a tragic poet sort of way, except that poetry doesn't pay for funerals."

Evangeline felt something shift in her chest—a recognition that had nothing to do with chemistry and everything to do with the particular quality of pain in Wendy's voice. "I'm awfully sorry."

"Ta. It was... it was a different kind of education than I'd been expecting."

"And now?"

"Now I run a boutique on Carnaby Street. I sell beautiful clothes to people who are young enough to think fashion can change the world." Wendy's tone was self-deprecating but not bitter. "It's a good life. Safe. Predictable in the right ways."

"But?"

"But sometimes I wonder if I'm hiding behind that safety. Using it as an excuse not to... I don't know. Have another go at taking chances."

The conversation had become intimate in a way that felt both natural and surprising. Evangeline found herself leaning closer, drawn by Wendy's combination of strength and vulnerability, by the intelligence that seemed to inform every observation.

This was what Malcolm had been missing. Not just conversation, but connection—the electric feeling of minds recognising each other, of personalities finding unexpected harmonies.

"What sort of chances?" Evangeline asked.

"The kind that might turn out beautifully or catastrophically, with no way to know in advance which it'll be."

Their eyes met, and Evangeline felt a jolt of recognition that had nothing to do with familiarity and everything to do with promise. For a moment, the party noise faded to background static. London itself seemed to pause, waiting to see what might happen next.

Then someone called Wendy's name from across the room, breaking the spell.

"I should go," Wendy said, but she didn't move immediately. "My sister's here somewhere, and she gets anxious at parties when she can't find me."

"Of course."

"But I'd like to see you again. If you'd fancy that too."

"I would."

They exchanged information—carefully vague on Evangeline's part, genuinely warm on Wendy's. Plans were made for coffee later in the week. Telephone numbers were traded, though Evangeline gave the number to a telephone box she'd noticed near the hospital, claiming her flat's telephone was temporarily out of service.

Then Wendy was gone, absorbed back into the party's social currents, leaving Evangeline alone by the window with the taste of hope sharp in her mouth.

She stayed another hour, moving through conversations with the easy confidence that belonged to someone who'd just been reminded that the world contained interesting people worth knowing. But her attention kept drifting to Wendy—the way she moved through the room like someone who belonged there but didn't need to prove it, the careful kindness in how she spoke to everyone, the strength that seemed to inform her careful reserve.

By midnight, Evangeline could feel the compound beginning to metabolise. The edges of her confidence were starting to blur, her reflection in the window showing the first subtle signs of the transformation reversing itself. Time to push off before she turned back into Malcolm in the middle of Carnaby Street.

The walk home felt different than the earlier journey—less like adventure, more like retreat. Every step was a step away from the person she'd been for the past three hours, toward the grey existence that waited in a third-floor flat above a tobacconist's shop.

Malcolm climbed the narrow stairs as his body completed its return to familiar disappointment. By the time he reached his laboratory, Evangeline existed only in memory and the lingering scent of borrowed perfume on his skin.

He documented the evening with clinical precision:

Duration: 3 hours, 15 minutes. No adverse effects. Subject maintained complete psychological integration throughout trial. Social interaction successful—established meaningful connection with target individual.

But the scientific language couldn't capture what it had felt like to be someone who belonged in rooms full of laughter, who could make conversation flow toward her instead of around her. Someone who might inspire genuine interest in beautiful, intelligent women.

Someone who existed.

Malcolm cleaned his equipment and prepared for sleep, but his mind kept returning to Wendy's laugh, to the moment by the window when electric tension had hummed between them like electricity. He'd tasted something extraordinary tonight—not just transformation, but connection. The kind of human contact that made the world feel less like a stage he was watching from the wings.

Tomorrow, he would refine the formula again. Extend the duration. Perfect the chemical process that allowed him to be the person Wendy was falling in love with.

Because after tonight, returning to Malcolm's existence felt less like coming home than like exile from the only life that actually mattered.

Chapter 5: Double Life

The mistake happened during the morning rush on November 2nd, when Malcolm's attention drifted at precisely the wrong moment.

Mrs. Hartley, sixty-three years old, gallbladder removal, routine as anything. Malcolm had administered anaesthesia to hundreds of patients exactly like her—middle-aged women with straightforward procedures, the kind of cases that allowed his mind to wander whilst his hands performed familiar calculations.

But this morning, his mind was elsewhere entirely. Specifically, it was remembering the way Wendy's laugh had sounded during their coffee meeting three days earlier, the particular tilt of her head when she'd asked about Evangeline's family, the moment when she'd touched Evangeline's hand whilst making a point about contemporary art.

The ventilator alarm jerked him back to Theatre 2 with the violence of a fire bell.

"Malcolm!" Dr. Hartwell's voice cut through the surgical suite's controlled atmosphere. "She's not getting enough oxygen."

Blood pressure dropping. Oxygen saturation falling. The monitors painted a picture of systems shutting down whilst Malcolm scrambled to understand what had gone wrong.

Too much anaesthesia. Bloody amateur mistake, the kind that killed people.



His hands found the right adjustments through muscle memory alone—reducing the gas concentration, increasing oxygen flow, administering the cocktail of drugs that would stabilise Mrs. Hartley's vital signs. Professional competence kicking in despite the panic clawing at his chest.

"There." The word came out breathless. "She's coming round."

Hartwell's eyes above his surgical mask carried a weight that made Malcolm's stomach clench. They'd have a conversation later. Multiple conversations, probably, involving patient safety and professional conduct and the various ways people lost their medical licences.

But Mrs. Hartley lived. That was what mattered. That was all that mattered.

Except it wasn't, really. Because Malcolm knew he'd been thinking about Wendy's smile when he should have been monitoring his patient's breathing, and that kind of distraction was a luxury he couldn't afford in a profession where other people's lives depended on his absolute attention.

The rest of his shift passed in mechanical precision—every calculation double-checked, every monitor watched with paranoid intensity. But the damage was done. Malcolm could see it in the way Hartwell avoided eye contact, in Sister Murphy's careful monitoring of his work, in the subtle shift of atmosphere that accompanied professional confidence beginning to crack.

"You look rather done in," Wendy said, studying Evangeline across the small table at The 2i's Coffee Bar.

They'd been meeting regularly for two weeks now—coffee in the afternoons when Wendy could escape the boutique, walks through Hyde Park when the November weather allowed, dinner at small restaurants where the lighting was kind and the conversations could stretch past reasonable bedtimes.

Evangeline had become expert at the careful choreography required to maintain her double life. Timing her transformations for when Wendy was available, constructing elaborate explanations for her limited schedule ("family obligations," "work commitments," "the peculiar demands of pharmaceutical research"). The compound now lasted nearly four hours with careful molecular adjustments, long enough for proper dates if she planned everything precisely.

"Work's been rather trying," Evangeline said, which was true enough. Malcolm's professional life was disintegrating in direct proportion to the time he spent being someone else. "There's a project that's taking up more energy than I expected."

"What sort of project?"

The lie came easily now, practised through repetition. "Personality research. Looking at how brain chemistry affects social behaviour. It's... frightfully complicated."

Wendy nodded with the polite interest of someone who understood that not everyone's work could be as immediately comprehensible as selling beautiful clothes to interesting people. "It sounds terribly important."

"Rather."

They were sitting in their usual corner, the table by the window where Wendy could watch Old Compton's Street afternoon theatre whilst Evangeline watched Wendy. The light caught the auburn in her hair, highlighted the intelligent attention she brought to everything—conversations, observations about passing strangers, the particular way she buttered her scones with architectural precision.

"My sister's absolutely chuffed about the Marquee Club performance," Wendy said, shifting the conversation away from work. "She's been rehearsing constantly. I think she's more nervous than she wants to admit."

"You'll be there?"

"Wouldn't miss it. Though I'm already dreading the after-party. Genevieve has very strong opinions about my social life, or lack thereof."

"What sort of opinions?"

Wendy's smile carried self-awareness mixed with resignation. "That I've become too careful. Too willing to watch life happen from the sidelines instead of mucking in."

"And what do you think?"

"I think..." Wendy paused, considering. "I think she might be right. But I also think there's a difference between being careful and being cowardly, and I'm not always sure which one I'm being."

Evangeline leaned forward slightly, drawn by the vulnerability in Wendy's voice. "What would mucking in look like?"

"I don't know. That's the problem, isn't it? When you've spent two years building a life specifically designed to avoid surprises, you lose track of what kinds of surprises might be worth having."

The admission hung between them, intimate and complicated. Evangeline felt something shift in her chest—not quite the chemical euphoria of transformation, but something more dangerous. The particular gravity that came from recognising someone who might be worth taking risks for.

"Maybe the Marquee Club will provide some inspiration," Evangeline said carefully.

"Rather hope so."

Their hands were resting on the table, inches apart. Evangeline could feel the magnetic pull between them, the particular electricity that seemed to generate itself whenever they occupied the same space. It would be easy to close that distance. Natural, even.

But something held her back. Some instinct that this moment mattered in ways that required careful handling.

"I should probably push off," Wendy said, glancing at the clock above the café counter. "The boutique gets busy around four, and I've got inventory to sort through."

"Of course."

They gathered their coats, performed the small ritual of settling the bill and making plans for the next meeting. But outside the café, as they prepared to head in different directions, Wendy hesitated.

"Evangeline?"

"Yes?"

"I'm glad we met. At the party. It's been... it's been rather lovely to have someone to talk to who doesn't have opinions about what I should be doing with my life."

"Even though we hardly know each other?"

"Especially because of that. Sometimes strangers are safer than friends. Less invested in keeping you the same person you've always been."

The observation struck Evangeline with unexpected force. Wasn't that exactly what she was doing? Using Wendy's lack of knowledge about Malcolm's real life to create space for someone entirely different to exist?

"I'm glad we met too," she said.

Wendy smiled and turned heading toward Carnaby Street, leaving Evangeline alone on the pavement with London's afternoon energy flowing around her. She checked her watch—another hour before the compound would begin to metabolise. Enough time to walk through the city, to practise being someone who belonged in expensive clothes and confident conversations.

But as she moved through the crowds, Evangeline found her thoughts returning to the moment in the café when Wendy had talked about being careful versus being cowardly. The particular sadness in her voice when she'd mentioned watching life happen from the sidelines.

Malcolm understood that feeling intimately. Had lived it every day until he'd discovered chemistry's power to rewrite the basic facts of existence. But for Wendy, the solution wasn't molecular—it was emotional, psychological, the simple but terrifying act of allowing herself to want things again.

The realisation brought with it a surge of protectiveness that surprised Evangeline with its intensity. Wendy deserved better than careful self-protection. She deserved someone who could help her remember what it felt like to take chances, to believe that good things were possible without inevitable tragic consequences.

Someone like Evangeline.

Back in his laboratory that evening, Malcolm stared at his notes from the past two weeks and tried to ignore the obvious pattern emerging from the data.

October 28th: Duration 3 hours, 45 minutes. Successful social interaction. No adverse effects. October 31st: Duration 4 hours, 10 minutes. Extended dinner conversation. Subject reports increased emotional attachment to target individual. November 2nd: Duration 4 hours, 5 minutes. Notable: subject experienced protective feelings during conversation about target's emotional vulnerability.

The scientific language couldn't capture what was actually happening, which was that Malcolm was falling in love with someone who could only love him back when he was someone else entirely. The ethical implications alone should have been enough to stop the experiment. The practical considerations—how could this possibly end well for anyone involved?—should have sent him straight to Dr. Hartwell's office to confess everything and request immediate psychiatric evaluation.

Instead, Malcolm found himself calculating modifications that would extend the transformation to five hours. Six hours. Long enough for proper evenings together, for the kind of dates that built real relationships instead of carefully managed encounters.

Sister Murphy's voice echoed in his memory from earlier that day: "Doctor Slaughter, we seem to be missing rather a lot of pharmaceutical supplies. The inventory doesn't match our records."

He'd deflected, made excuses about paperwork errors and supply chain confusion. But her sharp Irish eyes had catalogued every word, every hesitation. Sister Murphy had been working at UCH for fifteen years. She'd seen doctors crack up under pressure before, recognised the signs of professional competence beginning to deteriorate.

Malcolm should be worried about his career, his reputation, the various ways his life was coming apart at the professionally licenced seams. Instead, he was wondering whether Wendy would enjoy the new restaurant that had opened near Russell Square, whether Evangeline might suggest they try it together next week.

The compound in its beaker caught the laboratory's overhead light, reflecting it back in patterns that seemed to shift and dance. Liquid transformation, molecular freedom, the chemical key to becoming someone worth loving.

Malcolm measured out his evening dose with hands that no longer shook with uncertainty. Whatever was happening to his real life, whatever consequences awaited discovery, they seemed increasingly irrelevant compared to the four hours each day when he could be someone who belonged in Wendy's world.

Someone who might, eventually, deserve to stay there.

The transformation was becoming routine now—the familiar warmth spreading through his body, features shifting with practised ease, consciousness sliding into the confident certainty that belonged to Evangeline Lovelace. But tonight, something felt different.

The possessiveness was stronger. The need to protect Wendy from anyone who might hurt her, anyone who might take advantage of her carefully guarded heart. The certainty that Malcolm understood her in ways that other people couldn't, that their connection was special, worth protecting, worth whatever risks might be required to maintain it.

Standing in her borrowed dress in Malcolm's cramped laboratory, Evangeline studied her reflection and saw something new in her own eyes. Not just confidence now, but purpose. The particular intensity that came from having something—someone—worth fighting for.

Tomorrow, she would see Wendy again. And she would begin the careful process of making herself indispensable, of becoming the kind of person Wendy couldn't imagine living without.

After all, if you were going to fall in love with someone who could only love you when you were someone else, you had to make sure that someone else was too valuable to lose.

Even if it meant Malcolm Slaughter had to disappear completely in the process.

Chapter 6: The Marquee Club

January 24, 1967

The Marquee Club smelt like cigarettes, anticipation, and the particular mixture of sweat and raw potential that belonged to venues where history might be made on any given night.

Evangeline stood in the narrow corridor that served as backstage, pressed against grimy brick walls painted black sometime in the distant past. The space was barely wide enough for two people, crammed with guitar cases and amplifiers and the debris of musicians who'd learned to make do with whatever corners London's music venues could spare them.

"I can't believe we're actually here," Wendy whispered, her voice barely audible over the sound bleeding through from the main room.

The Piccadilly Underground had taken the stage forty minutes ago to warm applause from a crowd that was clearly there for the headliner. But Genevieve's voice carried beautifully over her bandmates' tight instrumentation, and Evangeline could hear the audience beginning to pay attention, conversations dropping to murmurs as the music found its rhythm.

"She sounds absolutely gear," Evangeline said, and meant it. Genevieve's voice had a quality that reminded her of rock singers crossed with something more modern, more electric. The kind of sound that belonged to this moment in London's musical evolution.

Wendy's pride was visible even in the backstage shadows. "She's worked frightfully hard for this. The whole band has. Playing coffee houses and pubs for months, writing songs, rehearsing until neighbours complained about the racket."

They were wedged between a stack of amplifiers and the narrow stairs that led up to the club proper, close enough that Evangeline could smell Wendy's perfume beneath the venue's atmospheric cocktail of smoke and music. Close enough to feel the warmth radiating from her body in the cramped space.

The possessiveness hit Evangeline without warning—a surge of something that felt almost territorial. Wendy belonged to her, somehow. Not in any way that made rational sense, but with the certainty that came from chemistry and proximity and the particular intimacy of shared secrets in dark spaces.

"After this, everyone will know how talented she is," Evangeline said, letting her hand brush against Wendy's arm. The contact sent electricity up her spine, a reminder of all the reasons Malcolm had spent the past three months perfecting his transformation formula.

"Rather. She deserves proper recognition."

"You both do."

"Both?"

"You've supported her. Believed in her. That matters as much as the talent does."

Wendy's smile was visible even in the dim backstage lighting. "You're terribly kind."

"I'm terribly honest."

The songs flowing from the main room were gaining momentum, building toward what Evangeline recognised as the climax of the set. Genevieve's voice soared over driving rhythms, and the audience response was shifting from polite attention to genuine enthusiasm.

"She's winning them over," Wendy said.

"Of course she is. She's your sister."

The comment earned another smile, this one with an intimacy that made Evangeline's chest tighten. These moments—when Wendy let her guard down, when the careful reserve she maintained in public spaces dissolved into something more genuine—were what Malcolm lived for now. What he measured his days against.

The final song ended to proper applause, the kind that suggested an audience had discovered something they hadn't expected. Footsteps on the narrow stairs announced the band's return, Genevieve appearing first with her face flushed from stage lights and exertion.

"How was it?" she asked immediately, seeking reassurance despite the obvious success.

"Absolutely smashing," Wendy said, embracing her sister. "Bloody brilliant. They loved you."

"Did they? It felt gear up there, but you never know how it's coming across to the audience."

"Trust me," Evangeline said. "They went mad for you."

The rest of the band crowded into the narrow space, guitars and congratulations and the slightly hysterical energy that followed successful performances. The corridor became even more cramped, forcing everyone into closer proximity as equipment was moved and plans were made for watching the headliner.

That's when he appeared at the top of the stairs.

Evangeline recognised him immediately, though she'd only seen posters publicizing the show. Jimi Hendrix moved with the kind of unconscious magnetism that belonged to people who were about to reshape entire musical landscapes. Tall, elegant in a way that seemed to encompass both danger and grace, wearing the kind of clothes that suggested he understood exactly what decade he was living in.

The narrow corridor suddenly felt much smaller.



"Excuse me," he said, voice carrying a politeness that somehow made him more rather than less compelling. American accent, soft around the edges in a way that suggested careful cultivation. "Sorry to interrupt. Just need to get to the stage."

The band members pressed themselves against the walls, creating space for him to pass. But as he moved through the corridor, his eyes found Evangeline's and held them for a moment longer than navigation required.

"Hello," he said, the single word carrying weight that seemed disproportionate to its simplicity.

"Hello," Evangeline replied, acutely aware that everyone in the corridor was witnessing this exchange.

"I don't think we've met." He'd stopped moving, despite the obvious need to reach the stage. "Jimi Hendrix."

"Evangeline Lovelace."

"Groovy name." His smile was the kind that probably caused considerable complications for women who encountered it unexpectedly. "You're here with the band?"

"With friends of the band."

"Lucky friends."

The compliment was delivered with the casual confidence of someone who made such observations regularly, but something in his expression suggested genuine appreciation rather than performative charm. Evangeline felt herself responding to it in ways that had nothing to do with politeness and everything to do with the particular thrill of being noticed by someone whose attention mattered.

"Good luck tonight," she said.

"Cheers." He glanced toward the stage, then back to her. "Though something tells me it's going to be a happening night regardless."

Then he was moving again, guitar case slung over his shoulder, disappearing toward the stage with the kind of purposeful energy that belonged to people about to make history.

The corridor felt larger once he was gone, but the air still hummed with whatever had just passed between them.

"Blimey," Genevieve said, breaking the silence. "That was interesting."

Wendy's expression was unreadable in the dim lighting, but Evangeline caught something that might have been surprise, or concern, or perhaps simple curiosity about what she'd just witnessed.

"He seems rather nice," Evangeline said, aiming for casual and not quite achieving it.

"Nice," Genevieve repeated with amusement. "That's one way to describe Jimi Hendrix. Probably more like Mad as a hatter."

They made their way back into the main room as the stage lights dimmed and reset for the headline performance. The Marquee Club was packed beyond capacity, bodies pressed together in the kind of crowd that generated its own heat and electricity. Everyone present seemed to understand they were witnessing something significant, though perhaps not everyone knew exactly what.

Evangeline found herself pressed against Wendy in the crowd, surrounded by the energy of several hundred people waiting for music that might change everything. The intimacy was intoxicating—Wendy's warmth against her side, the shared anticipation, the sense of being part of something larger than themselves.

But part of her attention kept drifting back to those few moments in the corridor. The way Hendrix had looked at her, the genuine appreciation in his expression, the particular quality of attention that belonged to men who were accustomed to having their interest reciprocated.

Malcolm had never received that kind of attention from anyone. Had never inspired the sort of interest that made attractive, successful people pause in narrow corridors and take notice. The fact that Evangeline could generate such responses felt like proof of her reality, validation that she was more than just chemical transformation and borrowed clothes.

When the music started, it was everything the audience had hoped for and things they hadn't known they were waiting for. Hendrix moved across the small stage like he was conducting electricity itself,

guitar sounds that seemed to emerge from some future century mixing with rhythms that were utterly contemporary.

The crowd responded with the kind of enthusiasm that made the club's low ceiling feel inadequate for the energy being generated. This was London's music scene at its most vital—young, experimental, absolutely convinced that art could change the world if you played it loud enough and meant it completely.

Evangeline found herself swept up in the collective euphoria, but her awareness remained split between the music and Wendy's presence beside her. The way Wendy moved to the rhythms, the unconscious grace that seemed to inform everything she did, the particular beauty that had nothing to do with fashion or performance and everything to do with authentic response to authentic art.

"This is absolutely mad," Wendy said during a brief pause between songs, leaning close enough that her breath was warm against Evangeline's ear.

"Rather."

"I'm frightfully glad you're here."

"So am I."

The words carried more weight than the music probably warranted, but everything about the evening felt heightened, significant in ways that extended beyond the immediate experience. This was what it meant to be young in London in 1967—to feel like every night might be the night that changed everything, that every encounter might be the beginning of something extraordinary.

When the set ended to thunderous applause, the crowd's energy remained high, conversations and laughter filling the space where music had been. Plans were made for the after-party, addresses exchanged, the kind of social networking that happened naturally when creative people found themselves in the same space at the same time.

"Are you coming?" Genevieve asked, appearing beside them with the flush of reflected glory from having opened for what everyone now agreed had been a landmark performance.

Evangeline glanced at her watch. The compound would begin metabolising in less than an hour. "I should probably push off home."

"Really? The party's going to be legendary."

"Work tomorrow," Evangeline said, which was true enough. Malcolm's professional life might be deteriorating, but it still required his physical presence during standard hospital hours.

"That's rather a shame," Wendy said, and something in her voice suggested genuine disappointment.

"Maybe next time."

"Maybe next time I shan't take no for an answer."

The comment was delivered lightly, but Evangeline caught the undertone of something more serious. An invitation, perhaps, or at least the suggestion that their friendship had reached a point where Wendy felt entitled to make demands on her time.

The possessiveness surged again, stronger this time. Wendy cared about her. Wanted her company. Was beginning to consider her indispensable to evening plans and social occasions.

Exactly what Evangeline had been working toward for the past three months.

"I should go," she said, but made no immediate move toward the door.

"I'll walk with you," Wendy said. "Just to the street. The party shan't start for another hour anyway."

They made their way through the crowd and up the narrow stairs that led to Wardour Street. The January night was sharp and clear, London's winter air carrying the kind of clarity that made everything seem more vivid than usual.

"Ta ever so," Wendy said as they stood on the pavement outside the club.

"For what?"

"For coming tonight. For caring about Genevieve's music. For..." She paused, seeming to search for words that would encompass something larger. "For being exactly the kind of friend I didn't know I needed."

The admission hung between them in the cold air, more intimate than anything that had passed between them in three months of careful courtship.

"You don't need to thank me for that," Evangeline said.

"Don't I?"

"Being your friend isn't work. It's the easiest thing I do."

Wendy's smile was radiant in the street lighting. "You're going to make me cry if you keep saying things like that."

"Then I'll stop."

"Don't stop. I like hearing them."

They were standing closer now, the natural magnetism that had been building between them for months finally approaching some kind of resolution. The moment felt poised on the edge of transformation—not chemical this time, but emotional, social, the particular shift that happened when friendship acknowledged its potential for something deeper.

"I should let you get back to the party," Evangeline said, though every instinct was telling her to stay, to see where this moment might lead.

"And I should let you get home to your work tomorrow."

But neither of them moved. The street around them buzzed with the energy of people leaving venues, taxis picking up fares, the general excitement that belonged to London on a night when something significant had happened.

"Evangeline?"

"Yes?"

"I'm terribly glad we met."

"So am I."

Then Wendy was moving, leaning forward to press a soft kiss to Evangeline's cheek. The contact lasted only a moment, but it sent electricity through every nerve ending in her body.

"Goodnight," Wendy said.

"Goodnight."

Evangeline watched her disappear back into the club, then began the walk home with the taste of possibility sharp in her mouth. The evening had been everything she'd hoped for—Genevieve's success, Wendy's obvious affection, the validation that came from being noticed by someone like Hendrix.

But most of all, there had been that moment on the street when friendship had acknowledged its potential for something more. When Wendy had kissed her cheek and said exactly the kinds of things that made the increasingly elaborate deception worth every risk Malcolm was taking.

By the time she reached her flat, Evangeline could feel the compound beginning to metabolise. The familiar loosening in her chest, the subtle changes that announced Malcolm's return to grey existence.

But tonight, the transformation back felt different. More like loss than relief. More like stepping away from real life than returning to it.

Standing in his laboratory as his body completed its return to disappointing reality, Malcolm documented the evening with unusual detail. Not just the duration and effects of the compound, but the way Hendrix had looked at Evangeline, the intimacy of Wendy's kiss, the particular quality of attention that belonged to someone who was beginning to matter to beautiful, intelligent people.

Duration: 4 hours, 20 minutes. Successful social integration at significant cultural event. Target individual demonstrated increased emotional attachment. Notable: subject received attention from high-profile individual (J. Hendrix), suggesting transformation authenticity confirmed by external observers.

Someone who was becoming indispensable.

Someone who was, increasingly, more real than Malcolm himself.

Tomorrow he would refine the formula again. Extend the duration to five hours. Perfect the chemical process that allowed him to be the person Wendy was falling in love with.

Because after tonight, returning to Malcolm's existence felt less like coming home than like exile from the only life that actually mattered.

Chapter 7: Suspicion

The inventory sheets didn't lie.

Sister Murphy spread them across her desk in the staff room like evidence in a criminal investigation, which, she was beginning to suspect, they might actually be. Fifteen years at University College Hospital had taught her to read the small signs that preceded larger disasters—doctors drinking too much coffee, nurses taking longer breaks, the particular quality of silence that meant someone was making mistakes they hoped no one would clock.

Dr. Malcolm Slaughter's name appeared too frequently in the pharmaceutical logs for comfort.

"Diazepam, missing four vials last week alone," she muttered to herself, running her finger down the carefully typed columns. "Thiopental, six vials unaccounted for since November. Fentanyl..." She paused, checking the numbers twice. "Holy Mother of God."

The amounts were small enough to avoid immediate attention from the hospital administration, but large enough to suggest someone with specific knowledge was making specific acquisitions. Not random theft—targeted procurement by someone who understood exactly what they were taking and why they might want it.

Someone with legitimate access to the chemist's. Someone who knew which drugs wouldn't be missed immediately, which schedules offered the best opportunities for quiet acquisition.

Someone like an anaesthetist.

The staff room door opened, admitting Dr. Hartwell with his usual morning expression of cautious optimism tempered by institutional reality. He paused when he saw the papers spread across Murphy's desk.

"Working early, Sister?"

"Faith, I'm trying to make sense of these inventory discrepancies." She gestured at the sheets with the frustration of someone who preferred problems that could be solved through proper procedure and careful attention to detail. "We're missing controlled substances. Not huge amounts, but steady as you please losses over the past three months."

Hartwell moved closer, studying the data with the attention he usually reserved for surgical complications. "I say, any theories about what might be happening?"

"A few. None of them particularly pleasant, mind you."

"Such as?"

Murphy chose her words carefully. Accusations required evidence, and she wasn't quite there yet. But concerns could be shared, discussed, evaluated by people with more authority than a head nurse possessed.

"Someone with access is having a go at specific medications. Not randomly—there's a pattern. Anaesthetics, mostly. Drugs that affect consciousness, perception, behaviour."

"You think we have an addict on staff?"

"Sure as I'm standing here, I think we have someone conducting dodgy experiments."

The words hung between them in the morning quiet of the staff room. Hartwell's expression shifted from concern to something more serious—the particular gravity that came from realising a professional situation had become a legal one.

"Anyone in particular you're concerned about?"

Murphy hesitated. Professional courtesy warred with patient safety, personal loyalty with institutional responsibility. But the numbers didn't lie, and neither did her fifteen years of observing doctors under stress.

"Dr. Slaughter has been... right off lately. Distracted during procedures, defensive when questioned about his work. And his access logs show him in the chemist's at all hours of the night."

"Off how?"

"Like someone whose attention is divided. Like he's got something more important than patient care occupying his thoughts. Bless his soul, but he nearly lost Mrs. Hartley last month."

Hartwell nodded slowly. He'd noticed the changes too—the near-disaster with Mrs. Hartley, the small mistakes that suggested a competent doctor losing his professional edge. The kind of deterioration that preceded larger problems if left unaddressed.

"What do you recommend?"

"Careful monitoring. Documentation. And maybe a conversation with a proper copper who can investigate whether these missing drugs are ending up somewhere they oughtn't be."

"Police?"

"If needs must. Though I'd rather handle this internally if we can determine what's actually happening."

The morning shift was beginning to stir around them—nurses arriving for rounds, residents checking schedules, the gradual acceleration that preceded another day of keeping people alive through careful application of medical knowledge and institutional procedure.

"Right then, I'll make some calls," Hartwell said. "See if there are other patterns we should be aware of."

Murphy began collecting the inventory sheets, restoring order to her small universe of controlled substances and professional responsibilities. But as she worked, her mind kept returning to Dr. Slaughter's recent behaviour—the way he checked his watch constantly during procedures, the defensiveness when colleagues asked casual questions about his weekend plans, the particular quality of distraction that belonged to someone living a double life.

Whatever was happening, it was going to come to a head soon. The missing drugs suggested someone taking increasingly serious risks, and fifteen years of hospital experience had taught Murphy that people who took serious risks with controlled substances rarely stopped until someone made them stop.

Detective Inspector Tommy Morrison had seen enough of London's drug scene to spot the patterns before they fully emerged.

The call from University College Hospital was routine enough—missing pharmaceutical supplies, possible internal theft, the kind of case that usually resolved itself through administrative procedure and stern conversations about professional ethics. But the specific drugs mentioned in the report rang bells from previous cases.

Anaesthetics. Consciousness-altering substances. The building blocks of someone trying to chemically modify their relationship with reality.

Morrison sat in his cramped office above the King's Cross station, reviewing files that painted an increasingly concerning picture. Three other medical facilities had reported similar losses over the past six months. Always small amounts, always specific types of drugs, always suggesting someone with professional knowledge having a proper go at targeted acquisitions.

The telephone rang as he was comparing inventory reports.

"Morrison."

"Inspector? This is Sister Murphy at University College Hospital. We spoke yesterday about the missing pharmaceuticals."

"Right, love. Any new developments?"

"Faith, there might be. I've been watching our staff more carefully, and there's a doctor whose behaviour has become... dodgy as anything. Dr. Malcolm Slaughter, one of our anaesthetists. He's been showing signs of significant distraction, possible substance use, increasingly barmy professional behaviour."

Morrison made notes as she spoke. Medical professionals with access to controlled substances presented particular challenges—too much knowledge about chemistry and human physiology, too much legitimate access to dangerous materials.

"Have you clocked him actually taking anything?"

"Not directly. But his access logs show dead peculiar patterns, and his recent performance suggests someone whose judgement may be compromised."

"Blimey. I'll need to have a proper chat with him."

"How do you want to handle this? I don't want to disrupt hospital operations unnecessarily, but patient safety has to be our priority."

Morrison understood the delicate balance. Medical facilities couldn't function if staff members felt they were under constant surveillance, but patients couldn't be protected if doctors were conducting dodgy pharmaceutical experiments during working off hours.

"Let me do some background research first. See if Dr. Slaughter crops up in any other contexts that might be relevant. Then we'll determine the best approach for having a word."

After ending the call, Morrison opened a new file and began constructing what he thought of as a behavioural profile. Medical education, professional competence, recent changes in personal circumstances. The kinds of details that helped explain why previously stable individuals might begin taking increasingly dangerous risks.

The preliminary research revealed a picture of professional competence without personal success. No marriage, few close relationships, the kind of social isolation that sometimes preceded dramatic attempts at self-reinvention.

Exactly the profile of a right nutter who might experiment with chemical solutions to psychological problems.

"You seem awfully distracted," Wendy said, studying Evangeline across their usual table at The 2i's Coffee Bar.

February afternoons in London carried a particular quality of light that made everything seem suspended between winter and whatever came next. The café was quieter than usual, most of its regular customers apparently waiting for spring to resume their usual social schedules.

Evangeline forced her attention back to the conversation, away from the calculations that had been occupying her thoughts all morning. The compound was requiring increasingly frequent adjustments—not just to extend duration, but to maintain the same intensity of transformation. Her body seemed to be developing tolerance, requiring larger doses to achieve effects that had once come easily.

"Work has been frightfully challenging," she said, which was true in ways Wendy couldn't imagine.

Malcolm's professional life was disintegrating with accelerating speed. This morning, Dr. Hartwell had asked pointed questions about his recent performance, his pharmaceutical access patterns, his general state of mind. The kind of questions that suggested institutional concern had escalated beyond casual observation.

"You've mentioned work being difficult before. What sort of difficulties?"

The lie came automatically now, refined through months of practice. "Dreadfully complex regulatory issues with our research. Questions about methodology, approval processes, the usual bureaucratic balls-up."

Wendy nodded with polite understanding, but something in her expression suggested the explanation felt inadequate. "It must be terribly frustrating to have important work delayed by paperwork."

"Rather."

"What exactly are you researching? You've always been frightfully vague about the details."

The question carried more weight than casual interest. Evangeline could hear the subtle shift in tone that suggested Wendy's patience with evasive answers was approaching its limits.

"Personality modification through chemical intervention. Looking at how specific compounds can alter social behaviour, confidence levels, basic psychological traits."

"That sounds..." Wendy paused, choosing words carefully. "Terribly significant. And perhaps controversial?"

"Both."

"Is it legal?"

The directness of the question caught Evangeline off guard. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, are you conducting approved research through proper channels, or are you experimenting without authorisation?"

"Why would you ask something like that?"

Wendy's expression became more serious, the casual warmth that usually characterised their conversations replaced by something more analytical. "Because you're always dreadfully evasive about details, because you never seem to have colleagues or supervisors to report to, because your schedule is irregular in ways that don't match any research position I can imagine."

"I don't understand what you're suggesting."

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm asking directly whether your work is legitimate, because I've become... I care about you, and I don't want to discover that you're involved in something dangerous."

The admission—I care about you—should have been cause for celebration. Evidence that Evangeline's careful campaign had succeeded, that Wendy's affection had deepened beyond casual friendship into something that mattered.

Instead, it felt like accusation.

"Of course my work is legitimate," Evangeline said, hearing the defensive edge in her own voice.

"Then why can't you give me a straight answer about what you actually do?"

"Because it's complicated. Because pharmaceutical research involves proprietary information that I can't discuss casually. Because some aspects of personality modification research are sensitive in ways that require discretion."

"Or because you're taking the piss."

The words hit like cold water. Evangeline felt her carefully constructed persona wavering, Malcolm's anxiety bleeding through the chemical confidence that usually made these conversations effortless.

"I'm not lying to you."

"Aren't you?"

Wendy leaned forward, green eyes holding Evangeline's with uncomfortable intensity. "In four months of friendship, you've never mentioned colleagues by name, never invited me to see where you work, never given specific details about any project you're supposedly conducting. You appear and disappear according to schedules that make no sense for any legitimate job I can imagine."

"I've explained the scheduling conflicts—"

"With vague references to family obligations and work demands that you can never actually describe. Evangeline, I like you. I like you more than I should, probably, given how little I actually know about your life. But I'm starting to feel like I'm having a relationship with someone who doesn't quite exist."

The observation struck closer to truth than Wendy could possibly realise. Evangeline sat in stunned silence, watching their carefully built intimacy threatened by questions she couldn't answer honestly.

"I exist," she said finally.

"Do you? Because sometimes I wonder if you're running from something, or toward something, or if you're just... I don't know. Playing silly buggers with people's feelings."

"That's not fair."

"Isn't it? What would be fair, in your opinion? Continuing to pretend that I haven't noticed how carefully you avoid giving real answers to simple questions?"

Evangeline checked her watch reflexively—another hour before the compound would begin to metabolise, before she'd be forced to abandon this conversation and return to Malcolm's grey existence. But for the first time in months, returning to Malcolm felt like escape rather than imprisonment.

"I should go," she said.

"Should you? Or do you want to, because this conversation has become uncomfortable?"

"Both."

Wendy's expression softened slightly, concern replacing accusation. "I don't want to fight with you. But I need to understand what's happening here. Whether you're someone I can trust, someone I can... whether this is real."

"It's real."

"Then prove it. Tell me something true about yourself. Something specific, something I can verify, something that demonstrates you're not just an elaborate performance."

The request hung between them in the afternoon quiet of the café. Outside, London continued its daily business, people living authentic lives with verifiable details and checkable references. People who existed in ways that could be documented, confirmed, relied upon.

Everything Evangeline wasn't.

"I can't," she said finally.

"Can't or won't?"

"Both."

Wendy nodded as if this confirmed something she'd already suspected. "Then I daresay we need to take a break from seeing each other."

"Wendy—"

"Not permanently. Maybe not at all. But until you can figure out what you're willing to share with someone who cares about you, I shan't keep pretending this is a normal friendship."

She stood, gathering her coat and handbag with the efficient movements of someone who'd made a difficult decision and was determined to follow through with it.

"I hope you sort out whatever you're struggling with," she said. "I really do. But I can't keep wondering whether the person I've come to trust actually exists."

Then she was gone, leaving Evangeline alone at their usual table with the taste of disaster sharp in her mouth.

The compound had another forty minutes before it began to metabolise, but for the first time since he'd discovered transformation, Malcolm found himself eager to return to his own skin. At least Malcolm's problems were honest—professional incompetence, social isolation, the grinding disappointment of a life that had never quite achieved liftoff.

Evangeline's problems were more complicated, more dangerous, and apparently becoming impossible to maintain through chemistry and careful lies.

Walking home through the February afternoon, Malcolm tried to calculate whether the experiment had been worth the risks. Four months of being someone else, someone better, someone worthy of Wendy's attention and affection.

But if that someone couldn't exist beyond the laboratory, if the lies required to maintain her were ultimately more destructive than the truth they were meant to avoid, then maybe transformation wasn't the solution he'd thought it was.

Maybe it was just another kind of prison, more elaborate than the first but equally inescapable.

Back in his flat, as his body returned to familiar disappointment, Malcolm documented the afternoon with clinical precision. But for the first time, his notes included a section he'd never needed before:

Potential for discovery: High. Relationship with target individual: Compromised. Continuation of experiment: Under review.

The compound sat in its beaker, reflecting the laboratory's artificial light back in patterns that no longer seemed to hold any hope.

Perhaps it was time to consider what happened when chemical solutions created more problems than they solved.

Chapter 8: The Pemberton Family

The Pemberton house in Kensington looked like something designed to intimidate visitors into proper behaviour.

Evangeline stood outside the Georgian terrace, studying the perfectly maintained facade with its gleaming black door and brass fixtures. Even the street seemed more prosperous than necessary—wider than normal London roads, populated by people who walked their dogs with the same precision they brought to managing investment portfolios.

She hadn't been invited.

The compound's effects were lasting longer now—nearly six hours with the latest modifications—but requiring larger doses that left Malcolm feeling increasingly disconnected from his original identity. What he remembered clearly was Wendy mentioning this family dinner during their last conversation, before the row at The 2i's Coffee Bar, before the nine-day break from seeing each other.

The brass doorbell produced sounds that echoed through rooms designed for entertaining people who mattered. The door opened to reveal a man in his early fifties with the bearing of someone who'd never doubted his right to occupy whatever space he happened to be standing in.

"Yes?" The single word carried polite inquiry mixed with expectation.

"Mr. Pemberton? I'm Evangeline Lovelace. A friend of Wendy's. I believe she's mentioned me?"

John Pemberton's expression shifted through mild confusion, recognition, and what might have been concern. "I see. And you're here because...?"

"I was hoping to have a word with her. About a project we've been working on. Rather urgent, I'm afraid."

The lie emerged with practiced smoothness, but something in Pemberton's eyes suggested he was accustomed to evaluating the truthfulness of people who wanted things from him.

"Wendy's at dinner with the family. Perhaps you could telephone later?"

"Actually, I was hoping she might have mentioned me. We've become quite close. I feel rather like part of the family, if you don't mind my saying."

"Evangeline?" Wendy's voice came from behind her father, carrying surprise that wasn't entirely pleasant. "What on earth are you doing here?"

She appeared in the doorway wearing green silk that matched her eyes, pearls that had probably belonged to her grandmother. The kind of understated elegance that came from having money for so long you no longer needed to prove it.

"I was hoping we could talk. About our conversation last week. I believe I can explain some of the things that concerned you."

"This really isn't frightfully convenient—"

"Oh, do invite your friend in, darling." A woman appeared behind Wendy with swift efficiency. "We can certainly spare a few minutes for someone you've spoken of so fondly."

Jane Pemberton looked like an older version of Wendy, if Wendy had spent thirty years learning to navigate maintaining social position whilst the world changed around her. Beautiful in the careful way that required professional maintenance, dressed with precision that suggested every outfit choice was strategic.

"Mummy, I don't think—"

"Nonsense. Any friend of yours is most welcome. Do come in, Miss...?"

"Lovelace. Evangeline Lovelace."

"What a lovely name. Family name, I presume?"

Evangeline found herself ushered into an entrance hall designed to remind visitors of their relative position in the world's hierarchy. Oil paintings of people who'd owned significant amounts of England, Persian rugs that probably cost more than most people earned annually.

"Do join us for coffee," Jane continued, leading them toward the formal sitting room. "We were just finishing dinner, but there's always time for proper conversation."

The sitting room contained furniture selected for its ability to make guests feel simultaneously impressed and uncomfortable. Genevieve was already there, curled by the window with the boneless grace of twenty-year-olds who hadn't yet learned to sit properly in formal furniture.

"Evangeline! How absolutely brilliant that you're here. We've just been having the most tedious conversation about my 'career prospects' and whether rock music represents a 'sustainable lifestyle choice.' " Her impression of her parents' concerns was wickedly accurate.

"Genevieve," John's voice carried paternal warning. "Our guests don't need to hear about family disagreements."

"But surely Evangeline has opinions about the music scene? You were at The Marquee Club for my performance. What did you think?"

"It was extraordinary," Evangeline said, settling onto the sofa with careful attention to posture. "Genevieve was absolutely brilliant, but the whole evening felt like witnessing history in the making."

"History?" Jane's tone carried polite scepticism. "Rock music as historical significance?"

"Certainly. London right now is the centre of a cultural revolution reshaping how young people think about art, fashion, social possibilities. What happened at The Marquee Club—what Genevieve accomplished—that's part of something much larger."

John nodded thoughtfully. "Interesting perspective. Though I wonder about the sustainability of cultural movements based primarily on youth rebellion."

"Perhaps they change the world in the process."

"Or perhaps they discover that some aspects of the adult world exist for good reasons."

The exchange felt like a test, intellectual sparring that probably characterised most Pemberton conversations. Evangeline found herself enjoying the challenge.

"I think," Wendy interjected, "we might be getting rather too philosophical for a Sunday afternoon."

"On the contrary," Jane said, "I find Miss Lovelace's observations fascinating. Tell me, what sort of work do you do? Wendy mentioned pharmaceuticals?"

The question carried casual interest, but Evangeline caught the subtle sharpening of attention. Parents assessing their daughter's friends through careful inquiry about professional competence and social suitability.

"Research, primarily. Chemical compounds that influence personality, social behaviour, psychological adaptation."

"How terribly interesting. And where do you conduct this research?"

"Various facilities. Rather specialised work, requiring collaboration between different institutions."

"And your family—are they also in scientific fields?"

The questions were polite but persistent, gentle interrogation that wealthy parents used to determine whether their children's friends came from appropriate backgrounds.

"My parents are in shipping," Evangeline heard herself say. "Import/export with European markets. Rather traditional business, but it's allowed them to support my more experimental career choices."

"Shipping?" John's interest seemed genuine. "What sort of vessels? What routes?"

"Container ships, mostly. Rotterdam to London, Hamburg to Portsmouth."

"Fascinating. I've got connections in shipping myself—Pemberton Maritime has been in the family for three generations. Perhaps our fathers know each other?"

The question hung with the weight of potential discovery. Evangeline felt Malcolm's anxiety bleeding through the chemical confidence.

"Possibly," she said carefully. "Though father's rather private about business connections."

"Of course. Trade secrets and all that." But John's expression suggested he was filing away information for later verification.

The conversation moved to safer topics—London's weather, recent theatrical productions, the city's cultural changes. But Evangeline could feel the family's attention on her in a way that felt different from casual social interest.

They were evaluating her. Not just as Wendy's friend, but as someone who might represent some sort of threat.

"More coffee, anyone?" Jane asked, rising gracefully.

"Actually, I should probably be getting home," Wendy said, standing with what seemed like relief. "Early morning at the boutique tomorrow."

"Oh, don't dash off on my account," Evangeline said quickly. "I was rather hoping we could have that conversation I mentioned."

"Perhaps another time would be more appropriate—"

"It really shan't take long. Just a tick to clarify the concerns you raised."

The insistence was becoming obvious, and Evangeline could see it registering on faces around her. The particular discomfort that came from witnessing someone push past polite social boundaries.

"Evangeline," Wendy said carefully, "I think we should discuss this privately. Not here."

"But I've been thinking about it all week. About what you said, about trust and honesty. I want you to know that you can rely on me."

"I'm sure Wendy appreciates your concern," John said, his tone carrying subtle finality. "But perhaps this conversation would be better suited to a private setting."

"Of course, you're absolutely right. I just... I suppose I wanted your family to know how much Wendy means to me. How important our friendship has become."

The admission emerged with more intensity than intended, carrying emotional weight that made everyone suddenly uncomfortable.

"That's terribly sweet," Jane said, but her smile had become more careful. "Wendy's always been good at inspiring loyalty in her friends."

"She's extraordinary. Really extraordinary. I don't think she realises how special she is, how much she deserves to be appreciated by people who understand her worth."

"Right then," Genevieve said, rising with diplomatic energy. "I think perhaps we should—"

"I mean it," Evangeline continued, her attention fixed on Wendy with alarming intensity. "You deserve to be cherished. Protected. Loved by someone who sees all the remarkable things about you that other people miss."

The silence that followed was profound and uncomfortable. The family's attention shifted from polite evaluation to active concern.



"I think," Wendy said quietly, "we really should discuss this another time."

"Should we? Last week you said you needed honesty from me, and that's what I'm trying to give you. Honesty about how much you mean to me, about how extraordinary I think you are, about how much I want to be part of your life in ways that matter."

"Evangeline." Wendy's voice carried warning. "Please."

But the please only encouraged further confession. Evangeline found herself moving closer, reaching for Wendy's hand in a gesture that felt natural to her but clearly alarmed everyone watching.

"I know you value our friendship," she said, holding Wendy's hand despite obvious desire to withdraw it. "But I think it could be something more. Something deeper. Something that acknowledges how well we understand each other."

"I don't—"

"You do understand me. Better than anyone has in years. And I understand you, understand what you need, what you deserve from people who care about you."

"Miss Lovelace." John Pemberton's voice cut through the confession with authority. "I think perhaps it's time for you to leave."

The words penetrated whatever chemical confidence had been driving Evangeline's inappropriate declarations. She looked around the room, seeing her behaviour reflected in four faces showing varying degrees of alarm and embarrassment.

Wendy had gone pale, her hand still trapped in Evangeline's grip. Genevieve looked fascinated and horrified. Jane appeared to be calculating social implications. John simply looked like a father who'd identified a potential threat to his daughter's wellbeing.

"I'm terribly sorry," Evangeline said, releasing Wendy's hand. "I didn't mean to... I was just trying to be honest."

"I think you've been quite honest enough," John replied.

Evangeline gathered her coat with mechanical precision. The elaborate explanations she'd prepared, the careful justifications, the various ways she'd planned to demonstrate her value—all had collapsed into inappropriate confession and social disaster.

"Wendy," she said at the door. "I hope you'll ring me. When you're ready to talk properly."

But Wendy's expression suggested that conversation was unlikely to happen anytime soon.

The walk back to Bloomsbury felt like exile. Evangeline could feel the compound beginning to metabolise as she moved through the February afternoon, the familiar loosening that announced Malcolm's return to disappointing reality.

Back in his laboratory, Malcolm documented the afternoon with clinical precision, but his notes included observations he'd never needed before: *Subject exhibited inappropriate social behaviour. Boundary violations observed. Relationship with target individual significantly compromised.*

The compound in its beaker reflected artificial light with patterns that no longer seemed like possibility. Perhaps they'd never been possibility. Perhaps they'd always been delusion, molecular self-deception dressed up as scientific breakthrough.

Malcolm cleaned his equipment and prepared for sleep, but his mind kept returning to the expression on Wendy's face when he'd declared his feelings. Not reciprocal affection, but alarm. The

look of someone who'd suddenly realised that a valued friendship had become something she needed to escape from.

For the first time since discovering the formula, Malcolm wondered whether some problems were too fundamental to be solved through chemistry. Whether Evangeline Lovelace had been a mistake from the beginning.

Chapter 9: Crossing Lines

The telephone box on Gower Street had become Malcolm's confessional.

He stood inside the cramped red booth at half past eleven on a Tuesday morning, receiver pressed to his ear, listening to the endless ringing from Wendy's boutique. She hadn't answered her telephone in four days—not since the disaster at her parents' house, not since he'd made those ridiculous declarations in front of her entire family.

"Come on then," he whispered to the persistent tone. "Please, just answer."

But the ringing continued, mechanical and accusatory, until the operator's voice cut through: "Your call cannot be completed as dialled."



Malcolm slammed the receiver back into its cradle with enough force to rattle the entire booth. A businessman queuing behind him shot him a disapproving look—the sort of expression Malcolm had been collecting with increasing frequency as his behaviour became less predictable, more obviously desperate.

He should be at the hospital. Ward rounds started at noon, and Dr. Hartwell had made it clear that punctuality was no longer optional for staff members whose professional competence was already under review. But the compulsion to contact Wendy, to explain himself properly, to somehow repair the damage Evangeline had done, was stronger than institutional responsibility.

The walk back to his flat took him past Kaleidoscope. Through the boutique's window, he could see Wendy arranging a display of summer dresses—bright geometric patterns that caught the February

light like captured optimism. She moved with her usual grace, completely absorbed in the work of making beautiful things accessible to people who understood their value.

Malcolm pressed himself against the brick wall of the building opposite, watching her with the intensity of someone studying a rare specimen. She looked smaller than he remembered, more fragile, as if the confrontation with Evangeline had drained something essential from her usual confidence.

The guilt was immediate and crushing. This was what his experiment had accomplished—not transformation or transcendence, but the systematic destruction of the one person whose friendship had made Evangeline's existence worthwhile.

A young chap entered the boutique, and Malcolm watched Wendy's professional smile appear like stage lighting. They spoke briefly—something about fabric selection, probably, or seasonal inventory—and the chap left with a small silver bag. Normal human interaction, the kind that belonged to people whose lives weren't built on elaborate chemical deceptions.

Malcolm began walking toward the boutique door before conscious thought could intervene. He would go in as himself this time, not as Evangeline. He would explain everything—the compound, the transformations, the desperate loneliness that had driven him to create someone worth knowing. He would confess the whole mad experiment and hope that honesty might somehow repair what lies had destroyed.

His hand was actually on the door handle when Wendy looked up from her inventory sheets. Their eyes met through the glass, and Malcolm saw something that made his chest tighten with recognition.

Fear.

Not surprise or confusion or even anger—fear. The particular wariness that belonged to people who'd realised they were being watched by someone whose attention had become threatening rather than flattering.

Malcolm released the door handle and backed away, nearly colliding with a woman carrying shopping bags from Harrods. The woman muttered something uncomplimentary about people who couldn't watch where they were going, but Malcolm barely heard her. He was too busy processing the reality that he'd become someone Wendy was afraid of.

Not Evangeline. Him. Malcolm. The grey man whose existence had driven him to chemical transformation in the first place.

Somehow, in trying to become someone worth loving, he'd made himself into someone worth fearing.

The laboratory accident happened that afternoon, whilst Malcolm was attempting to refine the compound's molecular structure.

He'd been working for three hours straight, ever since returning from the hospital where he'd nearly put Mrs. Davidson into respiratory distress during what should have been routine gallbladder surgery. The sort of mistake that belonged to first-year residents, not qualified anaesthetists with four years of professional experience.

Dr. Hartwell had been present for that particular disaster. Had seen Malcolm's attention wander at the crucial moment when gas concentrations needed adjustment, had watched him scramble to correct errors that shouldn't have occurred in the first place.

"This can't continue," Hartwell had said afterward, voice carrying the weight of institutional authority. "Whatever's affecting your performance, it needs to be addressed. Immediately."

Malcolm had nodded and made appropriate apologies, but his mind was already elsewhere—calculating modifications to the compound that might extend Evangeline's existence to eight hours, ten hours, long enough to have proper conversations with Wendy without the constant pressure of time running out.

Now, working with chemicals that required precise measurements and steady hands, Malcolm found his attention divided between molecular structures and memories of the fear in Wendy's eyes. The beaker slipped as he was transferring the latest iteration of the compound, sending pale yellow liquid across his workbench and onto the floor.

The smell was immediate and overwhelming—not just the familiar sharp bite of his usual formula, but something more aggressive, more caustic. The spilled compound began eating through the wooden surface of his workbench, leaving dark stains that spread like infection.

Malcolm grabbed towels and began cleaning frantically, but the damage was already done. Months of careful measurements, precise calculations, documented iterations of the formula that had allowed Evangeline to exist—all of it contaminated by whatever he'd accidentally created.

Worse, he'd inhaled significant amounts of the vapours whilst cleaning. Within minutes, he could feel changes beginning—not the familiar warmth that announced Evangeline's emergence, but something more chaotic. His reflection in the laboratory mirror wavered unpredictably, features shifting without purpose or direction.

For twenty minutes, Malcolm existed in a state of chemical confusion—neither fully himself nor successfully transformed into someone else. His face alternated between masculine and feminine characteristics, his voice cracked between registers, his consciousness felt fragmented between competing identities.

When the effects finally stabilised, he found himself looking at a stranger in the mirror. Not Malcolm, not Evangeline, but something that belonged to neither identity. Someone whose features carried elements of both without successfully achieving either.

The realisation was terrifying. For four months, transformation had been controlled, predictable, reversible. Now it seemed like his body was losing the ability to maintain stable identity of any kind.

Malcolm documented the accident with shaking hands:

Accidental exposure to contaminated compound. Uncontrolled transformation lasting approximately 20 minutes. Subject experienced identity fragmentation. Formula stability compromised.

But the clinical language couldn't capture what it had felt like to lose coherent sense of self, to exist in the space between identities without anchoring in either one.

Detective Inspector Tommy Morrison had been watching the building for three hours when Malcolm finally emerged.

The tip from University College Hospital had been specific: Dr. Malcolm Slaughter, anaesthetist, suspected of systematic pharmaceutical theft, possibly conducting unauthorised human experimentation. The sort of case that required careful observation before direct confrontation.

What Morrison had observed was behaviour that confirmed every suspicion outlined in the hospital's report.

Multiple visits to public telephone boxes, always with the same desperate quality of someone trying to reach someone who didn't want to be reached. Extended periods standing outside a boutique on Carnaby Street, watching the occupants with intensity that belonged to surveillance rather than casual interest. And now, at half past six in the evening, emerging from his flat with the particular combination of agitation and determination that Morrison recognised from years of observing people who were about to do something dangerous.

Malcolm walked quickly through Bloomsbury's narrow streets, moving with purpose that suggested specific destination rather than aimless wandering. Morrison followed at professional distance, noting the route that led inevitably toward Carnaby Street.

The boutique was closed now, security grilles pulled across windows that had displayed bright dresses to afternoon shoppers. But lights were still on in the flat above the shop, suggesting someone was home despite the closed business below.

Malcolm stood across the street, studying the building with the focused attention of someone conducting reconnaissance. Morrison watched him check his watch repeatedly, saw him reach into his jacket pocket for what looked like a small vial of clear liquid.

Then Malcolm swallowed whatever was in the vial and began walking toward the building's side entrance.

Morrison had seen enough. Whatever Dr. Slaughter was planning, it was going to happen in the next few minutes, and it probably wasn't going to be pleasant for whoever lived in that flat.

He crossed the street quickly, badge already in hand.

"Dr. Slaughter?"

Malcolm spun around with the startled violence of someone caught in the middle of something they knew was wrong. Up close, Morrison could see that something was happening to the chap's face—subtle shifts in bone structure, changes in skin tone, alterations that didn't belong to normal human anatomy.

"I'm Detective Inspector Morrison, Metropolitan Police. I need to have a word with you about some missing pharmaceuticals from University College Hospital."

"I don't know what you're on about." But Malcolm's voice carried the particular quality of panic that Morrison had learned to associate with people who knew exactly what you were on about.

"Don't you? Sister Murphy has documented significant losses of controlled substances over the past four months. Thiopental, diazepam, fentanyl—exactly the sorts of drugs someone might need if they were conducting unauthorised research into consciousness-altering compounds."

Malcolm's face was definitely changing now, features becoming more refined, more feminine. Morrison had seen plenty of strange things during fifteen years of police work, but nothing quite like this.

"What's happening to your face, Doctor?"

"Nothing. Nothing's happening. I need to go—I have an appointment—"

"With the woman who lives in that flat? The woman you've been watching for the past three hours?"

The question hit like a physical blow. Malcolm staggered slightly, whether from the accusation or from whatever chemical process was transforming his appearance.

"You don't understand," he said, voice climbing toward feminine registers. "She needs to know that I... that we... the experiment is important, it's revolutionary, it's changing everything—"

"What experiment, Doctor?"

But Malcolm wasn't listening anymore. The transformation was accelerating, and with it came the chemical confidence that belonged to Evangeline. Morrison watched facial features shift into something that was undeniably beautiful, undeniably female, and undeniably impossible.

"I'm not Malcolm," the transformed figure said, voice now completely feminine, accent carrying upper-class precision. "I'm Evangeline Lovelace, and I have every right to visit my friend."

Morrison had dealt with psychiatric emergencies before, but never one that came with physical transformation as a side effect.

"Right then, Miss... Lovelace, is it? I think we need to have a proper chat about what's been happening here. Down at the station, where we can sort this out properly."

"You can't arrest me for visiting a friend."

"I can arrest you for theft of controlled substances, unauthorised human experimentation, and harassment. And unless I'm very much mistaken, those charges apply whether you're Dr. Malcolm Slaughter or Evangeline Lovelace."

The logic seemed to penetrate whatever chemical euphoria was driving the transformation. Evangeline looked around the street as if seeing it clearly for the first time—the closed boutique, the watching policeman, the reality that her behaviour had finally attracted the sort of attention that ended careers and lives.

"I was just going to explain," she said quietly. "I was going to tell her the truth about everything."

"Were you? And what truth would that be?"

"That I love her. That everything I've done, all the lies, all the experiments—it was all for her. So I could be someone worthy of her friendship."

Morrison had heard plenty of confessions during his career, but few that combined chemical transformation with unrequited obsession in quite such a disturbing package.

"Right," he said, reaching for his handcuffs. "I think we need to continue this conversation somewhere more private. And you need to see a doctor. A proper doctor, not whatever you've been doing to yourself."

As the handcuffs clicked shut around Evangeline's wrists, Morrison caught a glimpse of light in the flat above the boutique. A woman's silhouette appeared briefly in the window, looking down at the scene unfolding in the street below.

Then the curtains closed, and Morrison found himself walking a transformed anaesthetist toward his police car, wondering how he was going to explain this particular arrest to his superiors.

Paddington Green Police Station's holding area smelt of disinfectant and other people's mistakes.

Evangeline sat on a bench beside two sleeping drunks and an elderly woman arguing with invisible companions, acutely aware that Malcolm's ill-fitting clothes hung awkwardly on her transformed body. The trousers were too loose at the waist, the shirt baggy across her narrower shoulders—the obvious evidence of someone whose physical form didn't match their attire.

She was waiting for Detective Inspector Morrison to return from whatever consultation was required when you arrested someone who happened to be physically impossible.

The uniformed constable who'd escorted her from the interview room looked barely old enough to shave. He'd mentioned that Morrison had been called away, that she was to wait here until his return.

"More comfortable than the interview room," he'd said. "Help yourself to tea from the trolley."

Then he'd disappeared, leaving Evangeline with the dregs of Thursday night arrests and a growing awareness that the compound's effects were beginning to destabilise.

The first sign was familiar loosening in her chest. She glanced around the holding area, noting the lack of proper observation, the casual way the constable had assumed she'd remain exactly where he'd left her.

Fascinating how people made assumptions about well-dressed women, even ones wearing obviously masculine clothing. They expected compliance, the sort of passive behaviour that belonged to someone who'd never considered breaking rules.

They certainly didn't expect escape.

Evangeline moved toward the tea trolley, positioning herself near the exit whilst pretending to examine refreshments. The transformation was accelerating—she could feel her bone structure beginning to shift, carefully styled hair contracting toward Malcolm's unremarkable brown.

The two drunks continued sleeping. The elderly woman continued her invisible conversation. No one was watching when Evangeline's features began the familiar dissolution that preceded Malcolm's emergence.

Within minutes, Malcolm stood where the elegant blonde had been, once again properly fitting his own clothes. The transformation had returned him to his original unremarkable appearance—thin, pale, the sort of middle-aged man that police officers learned to ignore.

He walked toward the exit with measured pace.

"Excuse me, sir."

The young constable had reappeared. Malcolm turned with careful politeness.

"Yes, officer?"

"Are you here about the pharmaceutical theft case? Inspector Morrison's been expecting someone from University College Hospital."

Malcolm's mind raced. Someone from UCH—probably Dr. Hartwell, coming to provide additional evidence. This constable obviously hadn't been briefed about Evangeline's arrest, had no idea the woman he'd left in holding had been replaced by an ordinary-looking man.

"That's right," Malcolm said carefully. "Dr. Malcolm Slaughter. I believe Inspector Morrison wanted to discuss some missing inventory."

"Oh, brilliant. He'll be back shortly. You can wait in Interview Room 3 if you'd prefer."

"Actually, I've just remembered an urgent matter at the hospital. Perhaps I could come back tomorrow morning?"

"Of course, sir. Shall I tell him you stopped by?"

"Please do. And tell him I'll bring the additional documentation he requested."

The constable made a note with conscientious attention. Malcolm nodded politely and walked toward what he hoped was the main exit, every step carrying him further from where Evangeline Lovelace had simply vanished.

The front desk sergeant barely glanced at him as he signed the visitor's log. Just another civilian leaving after providing assistance with police inquiries.

Malcolm walked out of Paddington Green Police Station into the February night, officially a free man whose arrest had become administratively impossible to explain. Evangeline Lovelace was wanted for questioning, but Evangeline Lovelace no longer existed in any apprehensible form.

The transformation had made him effectively invisible to the very people looking for him.

Detective Inspector Morrison returned at half past ten, carrying coffee and grim determination.

"Right then," he said to the desk sergeant, "where's our pharmaceutical thief? The woman I brought in earlier—Evangeline Lovelace."

"Which woman would that be, Inspector?"

"Blonde, well-dressed, rather distinctive appearance. Though she was wearing men's clothing—trousers and shirt that didn't fit properly. I left her in holding about two hours ago."

The desk sergeant consulted his log methodically. "Oh yes, the woman in men's clothing—she was taken to holding as requested, but I haven't clocked her since."

Morrison was absolutely certain he'd arrested Evangeline Lovelace, had personally escorted her into the station. What he couldn't explain was how someone under arrest had simply disappeared.

"Sir?" The young constable approached tentatively. "Inspector Morrison? I think there might have been some confusion about the arrest earlier."

"What sort of confusion?"

"Well, I moved the lady to general holding as requested, but when I checked later, she wasn't there anymore."

"People don't vanish from police stations, Constable."

"No, sir. But there was a gentleman from University College Hospital who stopped by—said he was here about the pharmaceutical theft case. Dr. Slaughter, I think. Perhaps she was released to his custody?"

Morrison felt something cold in his stomach. Dr. Malcolm Slaughter was the primary suspect—the chap whose female alter ego had just mysteriously disappeared.

"Constable, describe this Dr. Slaughter."

"Middle-aged gentleman, rather ordinary looking. Thin, brown hair, wearing a brown overcoat. Said he'd discuss missing inventory with you."

"And you let him leave?"

"Well, yes, sir. He said he'd return tomorrow with documentation."

Morrison stood processing the reality that his suspect had somehow transformed from female to male, escaped custody, and walked out whilst a uniformed officer held the door.

The case had just become significantly more complicated than simple pharmaceutical theft.

Somewhere in London, a man who could become someone else entirely was free to continue whatever dangerous obsession had driven him to risk everything for a woman who was afraid of him.

Morrison reached for his telephone. Dr. Hartwell was about to receive very disturbing news about their missing colleague.

Chapter 10: The Photographer's Eye

"Bloody hell, that's not right at all."

Marcus Webb squinted through his camera viewfinder at the contact sheets spread across his makeshift darkroom table, trying to make sense of what his Nikon had captured during last month's documentation of Carnaby Street's social scene. The American magazine had commissioned him to photograph "Swinging London's authentic youth culture," and he'd spent weeks shooting everything from mod fashion to coffee house conversations.

But these particular frames were giving him a right headache.

"What's not right then?" asked Penny, his assistant, looking up from the chemical baths where she was developing the afternoon's roll. "The exposure's spot on, innit?"

"It's not the exposure, love. It's this bird here." Marcus pointed to a series of photographs featuring a blonde woman in various social situations around Carnaby Street. "Have a look at her face in frame twelve, then in frame fifteen, won't you?"

Penny moved closer, wiping her hands on her apron. She'd been working with Marcus for two years, had seen plenty of strange things through his lens, but she'd never quite mastered hiding her reactions to the more peculiar aspects of London's evolving social landscape.

"Blimey," she said after studying the images. "She looks completely different, doesn't she? Same dress, same hair, but her whole face has changed, hasn't it?"



"That's what I thought. But it can't be two different birds—the shots were taken twenty minutes apart, same location, same lighting. No time for that sort of transformation, is there?"

The photographs showed what appeared to be the same woman at a Carnaby Street party, but the facial structure varied dramatically between shots. In the earlier frames, she looked like a fashion model—sharp cheekbones, perfect symmetry, the kind of bone structure that belonged on magazine covers. In the later ones, her features were softer, less defined, rather ordinary really.

"Could be the angle, couldn't it?" Penny suggested. "Or perhaps she was wearing different makeup?"

"Makeup doesn't change bone structure, love. And I was shooting straight on for both sequences, wasn't I?" Marcus held the magnifying glass closer to the contact sheets. "There's something frightfully dodgy about this whole business."

He'd first clocked the woman three weeks ago, when she'd turned up at various social gatherings with the sort of timing that suggested she was following specific people rather than attending events for their own sake. Always impeccably dressed, always charming in conversation, but always watching. Particularly watching the auburn-haired girl who ran that posh boutique near the market.

"Who is she then?" Penny asked.

"That's what's got me rather puzzled. She introduced herself as Evangeline something-or-other, but she's got this way of avoiding proper conversation, hasn't she? Ask her anything specific about her background, and she gets all evasive."

Marcus had photographed enough of London's social climbers to recognise the type—people who turned up at parties where they didn't quite belong, hoping to network their way into more interesting circles. But this girl was different, wasn't she? She wasn't trying to be seen by important people; she was fixated on one particular person with the intensity of someone conducting surveillance.

"Perhaps she's a journalist?" Penny suggested. "You know how those magazine types are always sniffing about trying to get stories about the scene."

"Journalists ask questions, don't they? This one just watches and listens, like she's collecting information for some other purpose entirely."

The afternoon light streaming through his studio windows was beginning to fade, casting long shadows across the contact sheets. Marcus had been working since dawn, trying to select the best images for the American magazine spread, but these photographs of the mysterious Evangeline kept drawing his attention away from the assignment.

"Right then," he said, gathering the problematic frames. "I think I'll pop round to see Wendy at the boutique. She's been rather friendly with this Evangeline bird—perhaps she can explain what's happening in these shots."

"Good luck with that, mate. Last time I clocked Wendy, she looked proper worried about something, didn't she? Like someone had given her a real fright."

Kaleidoscope was busy with the late afternoon trade when Marcus arrived, customers browsing through racks of mini-skirts and geometric dresses whilst Radio Caroline provided soundtrack from speakers mounted near the ceiling. The boutique had become an essential stop for anyone wanting to understand what London's fashion revolution was actually about—not just the clothes themselves, but the attitude that made them meaningful.

Wendy was behind the counter, helping a customer select accessories for a particularly bold op-art dress. She looked rather tired, Marcus thought, with the sort of careful composure that belonged to people managing stress they didn't want others to notice.

"Afternoon, Wendy," he said when the customer had left with her silver-wrapped purchases. "Busy day, is it?"

"Aren't they all?" Her smile was professional but didn't quite reach her eyes. "What brings you by then? Not shopping for yourself, I hope."

"Actually, I wanted to ask you about those photographs I took at the party last month. The ones with you and your friend Evangeline."

Something shifted in Wendy's expression—not quite alarm, but definite wariness. "What about them?"

"Well, it's rather odd, actually. I've got this series of shots of her from the same evening, but she looks completely different in each one, doesn't she? Not just different poses or expressions—different bone structure entirely. Rather like she's two separate people wearing the same dress."

Wendy was quiet for a long moment, studying the contact sheets Marcus had brought. When she spoke, her voice was carefully neutral.

"That is rather strange, isn't it?"

"You haven't noticed anything unusual about her, have you? Anything that might explain why she photographs so inconsistently?"

"Such as?"

"Well, anything really. The way she moves, the way she speaks, whether she seems like the same person from one meeting to the next."

Wendy set down the contact sheets and looked directly at Marcus for the first time since he'd entered the boutique. "Why are you asking these questions?"

"Because I've been photographing London's social scene for five years, and I've never encountered anyone quite like your friend Evangeline. She turns up at events where she doesn't seem to know anyone except you, she avoids giving specific answers to casual questions, and now these photographs suggest something frightfully peculiar about her physical appearance."

"Peculiar how?"

"Rather like she might not be entirely... genuine."

The word hung between them in the boutique's afternoon quiet. A group of teenagers near the dress racks were debating the merits of various hemlines, their conversation providing cover for what was becoming a rather serious discussion.

"What do you mean by genuine?" Wendy asked carefully.

"I mean rather like she might be putting on some elaborate act. Like Evangeline Lovelace might not be her real name, or her real identity, or possibly even her real... well, her real anything."

Wendy was quiet again, but Marcus could see her processing the suggestion with the sort of careful attention that meant it wasn't entirely surprising to her.

"Have you had similar concerns?" he asked gently.

"I've had... questions. About her work, her background, the way she's never available during normal hours. The way she seems to know things about my life that I don't remember telling her."

"What sort of things?"

"Personal details. Family history. Conversations I had with other people that she shouldn't have been privy to." Wendy glanced around the boutique, making sure they couldn't be overheard. "It's rather like she's been researching me, learning things that would help her seem more intimately connected to my life than she actually is."

"That's frightfully disturbing, isn't it?"

"Quite disturbing, yes. But I convinced myself I was being paranoid, that friendship sometimes creates the illusion of deeper connection than actually exists."

Marcus studied the photographs again, holding them up to the boutique's natural lighting. The inconsistencies were even more obvious here—not just facial structure, but posture, gesture, the fundamental way she occupied physical space.

"There's something else," he said. "In some of these shots, she's watching you with the sort of intensity that's... well, it's not entirely friendly, is it? Rather more like someone studying a specimen."

"Let me see."

Wendy took the contact sheets and examined them closely. Marcus watched her face as she processed what his camera had captured—expressions and body language that might not have been obvious during live interaction but became unmistakable when frozen in photographic time.

"Good Lord," she whispered. "She really is watching me, isn't she? Rather like I'm some sort of project she's working on."

"I'm afraid it rather looks that way, doesn't it?"

"But whatever could anyone want from me that would justify such elaborate deception?"

Marcus had been wondering the same thing. In his experience, people who constructed false identities usually wanted money, social access, or sexual conquest. But Evangeline's behaviour toward Wendy seemed more complex than any of those straightforward motivations.

"Perhaps she's obsessed with you," he suggested carefully. "Some people develop fixations on others, create elaborate fantasies about relationships that don't actually exist."

"But we are friends. Or we were. The connection between us felt genuine, even if her background stories didn't."

"That's rather the point, isn't it? Perhaps she's someone who can't form normal relationships, so she creates artificial ones by becoming whoever she thinks you'd want to know."

The idea was disturbing enough that they both fell silent, contemplating the implications. Outside the boutique's windows, Carnaby Street continued its usual afternoon business—people shopping, socialising, participating in the ongoing experiment of creating new ways to live and dress and relate to each other.

But inside Kaleidoscope, two people were realising that someone they'd trusted had been systematically deceiving them for months.

"Marcus," Wendy said finally, "there's something I haven't told you. About the last time I saw Evangeline."

"What happened then?"

"She came to my parents' house. Uninvited. During a family dinner. And she made... declarations. About her feelings for me. Rather intense declarations that made everyone frightfully uncomfortable."

"What sort of declarations?"

"Romantic ones. She said she wanted our friendship to become something deeper, that she understood me better than anyone else ever had, that I deserved to be cherished by someone who saw my true worth." Wendy's voice became smaller. "It was rather like she'd constructed this entire fantasy about what our relationship meant, and she was trying to make me participate in it."

"How terrifying that must have been."

"It was. Because for just a moment, I could see how much she believed it. How completely she'd convinced herself that her feelings were reciprocated, that we were meant to be together in some romantic sense."

Marcus nodded grimly. He'd encountered obsession before, usually in the context of fans who became unhealthily fixated on models or musicians. But this seemed more systematic, didn't it? More calculated.

"Have you seen her since then?"

"No. I haven't answered her telephone calls, haven't been available when she's stopped by the boutique. I was rather hoping she'd take the hint and leave me alone."

"But she hasn't?"

"She's been watching. I've clocked her across the street, standing in doorways, following me when I leave work. Always at a distance, but definitely watching."

The afternoon light in the boutique was becoming golden, casting long shadows across the displays of bright fabrics and modern accessories. But the conversation had taken on weight that seemed to dim the space's usual optimism.

"Wendy," Marcus said carefully, "I rather think you might want to consider talking to someone official about this. The police, perhaps, or someone who deals with harassment cases."

"About what, exactly? That someone took photographs where my friend looks different than I remember? That she made romantic declarations I didn't reciprocate?"

"About the fact that you're being stalked by someone who may not be who she claims to be. Someone who's been systematically researching your personal life and constructing an identity designed to gain your trust."

"But I haven't got any proof that she's dangerous. Awkward and intense, yes. But not necessarily threatening."

Marcus held up the contact sheets again. "These photographs are proof of something, Wendy. Perhaps not proof of danger, but certainly proof of deception on a scale that suggests rather serious psychological problems."

"What do you think I ought to do?"

"I rather think you should be frightfully careful about being alone anywhere Evangeline might find you. And I think you should document everything—her behaviour, her inconsistencies, anything that might help establish a pattern of harassment if this situation escalates."

"You really think it could escalate?"

"I think people who construct elaborate false identities to get close to specific individuals are capable of behaviour that normal people wouldn't consider. And I think you should trust your instincts about feeling frightened."

The boutique's afternoon customers had gradually thinned out, leaving Wendy and Marcus alone with their troubling conclusions. Outside, London continued its daily business, but inside Kaleidoscope, two people were grappling with the realisation that someone they'd trusted had been systematically lying to them for months.

"Right then," Wendy said, gathering the photographs with hands that trembled slightly. "I suppose I should start paying more attention to who's watching me, shouldn't I?"

"I'm afraid you should, yes. And Wendy?"

"Yes?"

"If you see her again, if she approaches you or tries to contact you—don't engage. Just get somewhere safe and ring the poice straight away. Promise me you'll do that."

"I promise."

But as Marcus left the boutique and walked back through Carnaby Street's evening crowds, he couldn't shake the feeling that promises might not be enough. Whatever was driving Evangeline's obsession with Wendy, it was systematic enough to have lasted months and elaborate enough to have involved multiple false identities.

That sort of behaviour rarely stopped on its own, did it?

It usually escalated until someone made it stop.

Chapter 11: Breaking Point

The new compound was stronger than anything Malcolm had attempted before.

He'd been working for six hours straight in his laboratory, ever since returning from the magistrate's court, combining elements from previous successful formulae with experimental additions that theory suggested might extend duration indefinitely. Dangerous combinations, certainly, but desperation had a way of making risk seem reasonable.

The pale yellow liquid in his beaker seemed to pulse with its own light, though that might have been the exhaustion affecting his perception. Malcolm hadn't properly slept since his arrest, had barely eaten, had consumed nothing but tea and nervous energy whilst calculating molecular structures that might solve his fundamental problem.

If the compound metabolises too quickly, increase the base concentration by thirty percent. If the transformation lacks stability, add synthetic hormone blockers to prevent reversion. If the effects are temporary, make them permanent.

Simple chemistry, really. Just a matter of finding the right combination of molecules to rewrite the basic facts of human biology.

Malcolm measured out six millilitres—twice his usual dose—and raised the test tube to his lips. The taste was sharper this time, more metallic, with an aftertaste that suggested he might have miscalculated something important. But within minutes, the familiar warmth was spreading through his body, bringing with it the confidence that belonged to someone who deserved to exist in the world.

Evangeline studied her reflection in the laboratory mirror and smiled. Perfect features, flowing blonde hair, the sort of natural elegance that made everything else seem possible. But something was different this time—the transformation felt more complete, more permanent, as if her body was finally remembering its proper configuration.

"Right then," she said to her reflection, voice carrying the upper-class precision that belonged to someone raised in the sort of family that owned shipping companies. "Time to sort this mess out properly."

She selected her best dress—midnight blue with silver accessories, the sort of outfit that suggested she belonged at gallery openings and charity events. Her stolen identity needed to look the part if she was going to convince Wendy that their friendship was worth salvaging.

The walk to Carnaby Street felt different this time. Not like the careful reconnaissance missions that had characterised her previous visits, but like someone returning to claim what rightfully belonged to her. Other pedestrians seemed to sense the change—stepping aside on narrow pavements, avoiding eye contact, recognising something in her bearing that suggested she wasn't to be trifled with.

Kaleidoscope was closing when Evangeline arrived, security grilles being pulled across windows whilst Wendy finished the day's paperwork inside. Perfect timing, really. They could have a proper conversation without interruption from customers or staff.

Evangeline waited in the doorway of the shop opposite, watching Wendy move about the boutique with her usual grace. Even from this distance, she could see the tension in Wendy's shoulders, the way she glanced nervously toward the street whenever footsteps passed too close to the windows.

Fear. Wendy was frightened, and it was Evangeline's fault.

The guilt should have been overwhelming, but somehow the compound had transformed even that emotion into something more manageable. Not remorse, exactly, but determination to make everything right again. To prove that their connection was worth whatever deception had been necessary to create it.

"Excuse me, miss."

The voice belonged to a young chap who'd appeared beside her in the doorway—tall, well-dressed, with the sort of confident bearing that suggested he was accustomed to having his attention welcomed by attractive women.

"Are you waiting for someone?" he continued, smile suggesting he rather hoped she wasn't.

Evangeline studied him with the sort of attention that made people uncomfortable. Good-looking enough, properly dressed, probably from a decent family. Exactly the sort of man that someone like Wendy might find interesting if she were looking for masculine companionship.

Which she wasn't, obviously. Wendy had made it quite clear during their months of friendship that romantic relationships with men held no appeal for her. She'd been married once, disastrously, and wasn't eager to repeat the experience.

But this fellow didn't know that, did he? He was watching Kaleidoscope with the same focused attention that Evangeline had been using, clearly hoping to approach Wendy when she finished closing the shop.

"Actually," Evangeline said, "I'm waiting for my friend. The lady who owns the boutique."

"Your friend?" His interest sharpened. "Lucky you. She's absolutely gorgeous, isn't she? I've been hoping to work up the courage to ask her out."

"Have you indeed?"

"I've clocked her about the neighbourhood for weeks now. Always so elegant, so composed. The sort of woman who'd make any chap feel fortunate to spend time with her."

Evangeline felt something dark and violent stir in her chest. Not jealousy, exactly, but something more territorial. Wendy belonged to her in ways that transcended conventional relationship

categories. The idea of this stranger pursuing her, contaminating their connection with his crude masculine presumptions, was absolutely intolerable.

"I rather think," she said carefully, "that you'd be wasting your time."

"Why's that then?"

"Because she's not interested in men. Not romantically."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"Because I know her rather well. Better than anyone else, actually."

The young man's expression shifted from confidence to suspicion. "Are you telling me she's... what, exactly?"

"I'm telling you that she values intellectual companionship over physical attraction. That she's had quite enough of men trying to impose their assumptions about what she ought to want from life."

"Right. And you're an expert on what she wants, are you?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

Evangeline could feel the compound's effects intensifying, bringing with them a clarity of purpose that made everything seem perfectly reasonable. This stranger represented a threat to something precious, something that needed to be protected at all costs.

"Look, miss, I don't know what sort of friendship you've got with her, but—"

"But nothing. She's not available to you, not interested in what you're offering, and frankly rather tired of men who assume their attention is welcome simply because they find her attractive."

"How do you know what she's tired of?"

"Because I listen when she talks about the tiresome presumption of men who think every attractive woman must be waiting for masculine rescue from her presumably unfulfilled existence."

The young man's face was reddening now, either from embarrassment or anger. "You're having me on, aren't you? What are you, some sort of women's liberation type trying to scare off competition?"

"Competition?" Evangeline's voice carried dangerous amusement. "Is that what you think this is?"

"Well, isn't it? Two birds competing for the same bloke's attention, except you're trying to convince me there's no bloke involved?"

The casual dismissal of Wendy's autonomy, the reduction of their complex friendship to crude sexual competition, was more than Evangeline's chemically enhanced protective instincts could tolerate.

"I rather think," she said, stepping closer to the young man, "that you've misunderstood the situation entirely."

"Have I? Because it looks to me like you're trying to keep other people away from your friend so you can have her all to yourself."

"And what if I am?"

"Then you're being rather selfish, aren't you? Preventing her from meeting someone who might make her happy just because you want to keep her for your own purposes."

The word 'selfish' hit like a physical blow. Malcolm had spent his entire adult life being called selfish—by colleagues who thought he was antisocial, by family members who found his company depressing, by the endless parade of people who'd made it clear that his existence was an inconvenience to their more interesting lives.

But Evangeline wasn't selfish. Everything she'd done, every risk she'd taken, every lie she'd constructed—it had all been for Wendy's benefit. To give her the sort of friendship she deserved, the sort of understanding and appreciation that ordinary people couldn't provide.

"You don't know anything about our friendship," she said quietly.

"Don't I? Looks to me like you're one of those possessive types who can't bear to share. Probably convinced yourself you're protecting her when really you're just keeping her isolated so she'll depend on you."

The analysis was disturbingly accurate, which made it even more intolerable.

"You need to clear off," Evangeline said.

"Do I? Last I checked, this was a public street."

"You need to leave her alone. Stop watching her, stop planning to approach her, stop thinking you have any right to insert yourself into her life."

"And what if I don't? What are you going to do about it?"

The challenge hung between them in the evening air. Across the street, Wendy had finished her closing routine and was gathering her coat and handbag. In a few minutes, she'd exit the boutique and encounter whatever scene was unfolding in the doorway opposite.

Evangeline could feel the compound's effects reaching some sort of critical mass, bringing with them a certainty that bordered on religious conviction. This man represented everything that was

wrong with the world—the casual entitlement, the assumption that women existed for masculine consumption, the inability to understand that some connections transcended conventional categories.

"What am I going to do?" she repeated thoughtfully.

Then her hands were moving, faster than conscious thought could monitor. The young man was taller and stronger, but he wasn't expecting violence from an elegantly dressed woman in expensive accessories. Evangeline's fingernails found his face, drawing blood from scratches that would leave permanent scars. Her knee connected with his groin with enough force to send him stumbling backward into the street.

"Bloody hell!" he gasped, doubling over in pain. "You're completely barmy!"

"I'm protecting someone I care about from predatory attention she hasn't requested," Evangeline replied calmly, examining her fingernails for damage.

"Help!" the young man called toward the street. "Someone ring the police! This woman's attacked me!"

But Carnaby Street at closing time was busy enough that his cries blended into the general urban noise of evening commerce. Besides, who would believe that an obviously respectable woman had initiated violence against a healthy young man?

Evangeline straightened her dress and checked her reflection in the shop window. A few strands of hair had come loose during the altercation, but otherwise she looked perfectly composed. Ready for a civilised conversation with someone who mattered.

Across the street, Wendy had emerged from Kaleidoscope and was staring at the scene with an expression that Evangeline couldn't quite interpret from this distance. Surprise, certainly. But perhaps also recognition that some situations required decisive action from people who understood what was at stake.

"Wendy!" Evangeline called, waving cheerfully. "What perfect timing. I was just dealing with some unpleasant fellow who seemed to think you might be interested in his company."

She began crossing the street, leaving the injured young man behind without a backward glance. He'd learned his lesson about presuming to compete for things that didn't belong to him. The experience would probably make him more thoughtful about approaching women who hadn't indicated interest in masculine attention.

Really, Evangeline had done him a favour.

But as she approached the boutique, she noticed that Wendy's expression wasn't reflecting the gratitude she'd expected. Instead, Wendy looked rather like someone who'd witnessed something horrifying and was trying to process what it meant.

"Good heavens, Evangeline," Wendy said quietly. "What have you done?"

"I've protected you from someone who was planning to bother you with unwanted romantic advances. Rather successfully, I'd say."

"You attacked him."

"I defended you."

"He's bleeding, Evangeline. You've hurt him quite badly."

Evangeline glanced back at the young man, who was still doubled over in the street, holding his scratched face whilst passersby offered assistance. Rather more dramatic than the situation warranted, really.

"He'll be fine. Men are terribly robust, aren't they? And he needed to learn that not every woman is available for his consumption."

"Evangeline." Wendy's voice carried something that might have been fear. "You can't just attack people on the street because you don't like their intentions."

"Can't I? When those intentions threaten something precious?"

"Threaten what?"

"Our friendship, obviously. The connection we've built, the understanding we share. Did you want him bothering you with crude proposals and masculine presumptions about what you need from life?"

"That's not the point. The point is that you've just committed assault in front of witnesses because someone showed interest in talking to me."

"Someone showed interest in pursuing you romantically despite having no knowledge of your preferences or availability. Rather presumptuous, don't you think?"

Wendy was backing toward the boutique's door, key already in her hand. "Evangeline, I think you should go home. We can discuss this when you're feeling more... settled."

"I'm perfectly settled. More settled than I've been in months, actually."

"You don't look settled. You look rather dangerous."

The observation stung because it suggested that Wendy couldn't see the protective motivation behind what had just happened. That she was interpreting masculine defense as feminine aggression.

"I'm not dangerous to you," Evangeline said carefully. "I would never hurt you."

"Wouldn't you? Because five minutes ago I wouldn't have thought you'd hurt anyone, and yet there's a man bleeding in the street because he thought I was attractive."

"He thought you were available. There's a difference."

"Available for what? Conversation? Coffee? The possibility of getting to know someone new?"

"Available for whatever men want from attractive women. Sex, presumably. Domestic servitude. The satisfaction of conquest."

"How do you know what he wanted? You didn't give him a chance to explain."

Evangeline felt frustration building behind her chemically enhanced confidence. Wendy was being deliberately obtuse about what had just transpired, refusing to acknowledge that some situations required protective intervention.

"I know because I understand men better than you do, obviously. You've been isolated from masculine predation by grief and caution, but I've seen how they operate. They don't want friendship or intellectual companionship—they want possession."

"And what do you want, Evangeline?"

The question was delivered with uncomfortable directness, carrying implications that made the evening air feel suddenly charged with tension.

"I want what's best for you."

"Do you? Or do you want to control who I spend time with, who I talk to, who I'm allowed to care about?"

"Those are the same thing."

"Are they?"

Wendy had her key in the boutique's door now, clearly preparing to retreat to somewhere Evangeline couldn't follow. The rejection was intolerable.

"Don't go," Evangeline said, reaching for Wendy's arm. "Please. We need to discuss this properly."

"I don't think we do." Wendy pulled free of the contact, eyes showing something that definitely qualified as fear. "I think I need to get away from you before something else happens."

"Something else like what?"

"Like whatever made you think violence was an appropriate response to someone showing interest in me."

The boutique door opened, and Wendy disappeared inside, leaving Evangeline alone on Carnaby Street with the taste of disaster sharp in her mouth.

Behind her, the injured young man was being helped to his feet by concerned passersby, someone was suggesting that police should be called, and the evening's commercial activity was resuming around what everyone would remember as an unfortunate incident involving an obviously unstable woman.

But Evangeline barely noticed the disruption she'd created. She was too busy processing the reality that Wendy had looked at her with fear, had retreated from her touch, had chosen to end their conversation rather than try to understand the protective motivation behind what had happened.

For the first time since discovering the formula, Evangeline wondered whether transformation had solved the right problem.

Perhaps the issue wasn't that Malcolm was insufficiently loveable, but that love itself was more complicated than chemistry could address.

The compound was still flooding her system with confidence and clarity, but underneath those artificial emotions, something that felt very much like Malcolm's original despair was beginning to reassert itself.

What was the point of becoming someone worth loving if the person you loved was afraid of what you might do to protect that love?

The walk back to Bloomsbury felt like retreat from a battlefield where she'd won the engagement but lost the war.

Chapter 12: Investigation

"Right then, let's have a proper dekkko at what we've got, shall we?"

Detective Inspector Tommy Morrison spread the files across his desk like a particularly grim jigsaw puzzle, each document representing another piece of evidence that Dr. Malcolm Slaughter had been conducting unauthorised experiments with potentially catastrophic results.

Dr. Hartwell sat across from him, looking rather like a man who'd discovered that his professional judgement had been compromised for months. Sister Murphy occupied the third chair, her Irish accent sharpening with each revelation about the extent of pharmaceutical theft that had occurred under her watch.



"The missing drugs alone are enough to nick him," Morrison continued, tapping the inventory sheets. "Systematic theft over four months, controlled substances, clear pattern of escalating behaviour. But there's something else going on here, isn't there?"

"Indeed there is," Hartwell replied grimly. "The behavioural changes I've observed, the erratic performance, the way he seemed to be timing his activities around some sort of schedule that had nothing to do with patient care."

Sister Murphy leaned forward, her expression carrying the particular intensity that belonged to people who'd spent their careers keeping other people alive through careful attention to detail.

"Inspector, when you nicked him—calling himself this Evangeline Lovelace character—you mentioned witnessing something rather extraordinary?"

Morrison shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Even now, twelve hours after the arrest that had gone so badly wrong, he wasn't entirely certain how to describe what he'd seen without sounding like he'd suffered a complete breakdown himself.

"I saw Dr. Malcolm Slaughter transform into a woman whilst I was watching him," he said finally. "Not make-up, not costume, not theatrical trickery. Actual physical transformation. Bone structure, facial features, hair colour and length—everything changed completely."

"Blimey," Hartwell muttered. "And you're certain it wasn't some sort of elaborate disguise?"

"Quite certain. I've been investigating unusual crimes for twelve years, and I've never seen anything like it. The changes were too fundamental, too complete. And they happened far too quickly for any conventional technique."

Sister Murphy crossed herself reflexively. "Faith, that's beyond anything I've ever heard. You're telling us that Dr. Slaughter was using stolen hospital supplies to actually change himself into a different person?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you, yes. Systematic theft of consciousness-altering drugs, physical transformation witnessed by reliable sources, escalating obsessive behaviour toward a specific individual—it all fits rather neatly, doesn't it?"

Morrison pulled out his arrest report, such as it was. The paperwork looked rather pathetic now, documenting the detention of someone who'd simply vanished from police custody through means that shouldn't be medically possible.

"The transformation I witnessed was male to female—Malcolm Slaughter becoming Evangeline Lovelace. But the process appears to be temporary, lasting several hours before reversing itself."

"Which explains how he escaped from custody," Hartwell observed grimly. "You arrested a woman, but when the effects wore off, you were holding a man."

"A man that none of my officers recognised as the arrested suspect. He simply walked out of the station whilst a constable held the door for him."

Sister Murphy was studying the pharmaceutical inventory with professional interest. "Inspector, these drugs—diazepam, thiopental, fentanyl—sure as I'm standing here, they're exactly the sort of compounds someone with advanced medical knowledge might combine to alter brain chemistry and possibly physical characteristics."

"But is such transformation actually possible?" Morrison asked. "From a medical standpoint, can chemical compounds actually change bone structure, alter physical appearance to this degree?"

Hartwell and Sister Murphy exchanged uncertain glances. They were venturing into territory that challenged everything they understood about human biology.

"Theoretically," Hartwell said carefully, "extreme hormonal manipulation combined with consciousness-altering drugs might produce some physical changes. But what you're describing goes far beyond anything documented in medical literature."

"Yet you both observed behavioural changes that coincided exactly with the missing pharmaceuticals?"

"Absolutely," Sister Murphy confirmed. "Starting in September, Dr. Slaughter became increasingly distracted during procedures, defensive about his schedule, secretive about his activities outside hospital hours. Classic signs of someone up to no good, if you ask me."

Morrison consulted his timeline, correlating pharmaceutical thefts with reported sightings of Evangeline Lovelace.

"The woman—this Evangeline character—first appeared in late October, didn't she? About six weeks after the drug thefts began."

"That's right," Hartwell confirmed. "And according to witnesses, her appearances became more frequent and more intensive as the pharmaceutical losses increased."

"Rather suggests the two phenomena are connected, doesn't it?"

"What I don't understand," Hartwell continued, "is the motivation. Why would someone go to such extraordinary lengths to create a false identity?"

"Access," Morrison replied immediately. "Malcolm Slaughter couldn't get close to Wendy Whitrose—wrong social circle, wrong personality type, wrong everything. But Evangeline Lovelace could befriend her, gain her trust, develop the sort of intimate relationship that Slaughter craved."

"Frightfully elaborate way to chat up a bird, isn't it?" Sister Murphy observed.

"Elaborate, yes. But rather effective until it started falling apart. According to Miss Whitrose's statement, she genuinely believed Evangeline was a close friend until the behaviour became inappropriately possessive."

Morrison pulled out another file—witness statements from the assault incident on Carnaby Street, medical reports from the injured man, photographs of the scene.

"And now it's escalated to violence. Unprovoked attack on a stranger whose only crime was showing interest in the object of Slaughter's obsession."

"How badly was the victim hurt?" Hartwell asked.

"Facial lacerations requiring stitches, significant bruising, possible damage to his masculine anatomy. The sort of injuries that suggest someone with considerable knowledge of human vulnerability."

"Medical knowledge?"

"Precisely. Evangeline Lovelace knew exactly where to strike for maximum damage with minimum risk to herself."

Sister Murphy was studying the photographs with professional interest. "Inspector, these injuries—they're quite precise, aren't they? Not the random flailing you'd expect from someone having an emotional breakdown."

"No, they're surgical. Calculated. The work of someone who understands anatomy and knows how to cause specific types of harm."

The implications hung in the air like smoke from a particularly unpleasant fire. They weren't just dealing with pharmaceutical theft or identity fraud—they were dealing with someone whose medical knowledge made him genuinely dangerous when threatened.

"Right then," Morrison said, gathering the files. "I think it's time we had another proper chat with Dr. Slaughter. Officially this time, with serious charges and legal representation."

"Will you be able to hold him?" Hartwell asked. "The transformation aspect of this case—will anyone believe it?"

"They'll believe the physical evidence. Theft, assault, harassment—those are straightforward charges that don't require explaining impossible medical phenomena."

The telephone on Morrison's desk rang, interrupting their discussion. He answered it with the professional efficiency of someone accustomed to receiving bad news during working hours.

"Morrison... Yes, I see... When did this happen?... Right, we'll be there directly."

He replaced the receiver with the careful precision of someone processing unwelcome information.

"That was Paddington Green station. Dr. Slaughter's been spotted in the vicinity of Miss Whitrose's residence. Neighbours reported seeing him acting suspiciously, apparently watching the building for extended periods."

"Stalking behaviour escalating," Hartwell observed grimly.

"Indeed. And there's something else—the witness who rang it in described him as appearing to be 'changing' whilst they watched. Facial features shifting, physical characteristics becoming more feminine."

Sister Murphy crossed herself again. "Holy Mother of God. He's doing it again, isn't he? Taking the compounds, transforming himself."

"Rather looks that way. Which means he's either completely lost control of the process, or he's preparing for another confrontation with Miss Whitrose."

Morrison was already reaching for his coat. "Either possibility requires immediate intervention."

"Inspector," Hartwell said carefully, "given what we know about his medical knowledge and his willingness to use violence—perhaps you ought to consider armed backup?"

"Already arranged. This isn't the sort of situation where we take chances with public safety."

Genevieve Pemberton was having tea with her sister when the telephone rang.

They'd been discussing Wendy's increasingly obvious distress over the past week—the way she'd been avoiding her usual social activities, the defensive way she responded to casual questions about her friends, the particular quality of watchfulness that belonged to people who felt they were being observed by hostile forces.

"I'll get it," Genevieve said, rising from the sofa in Wendy's flat above the boutique.

"Genevieve Pemberton speaking."

"Miss Pemberton? This is Detective Inspector Morrison, Metropolitan Police. I need to speak with your sister rather urgently."

"What's this about then?"

"It concerns her friend Evangeline Lovelace. There's reason to believe Miss Lovelace may be dangerous, and your sister could be at considerable risk."

Genevieve felt her stomach clench with recognition. She'd been worried about Evangeline for weeks—the intensity of her attention toward Wendy, the evasive answers to simple questions, the way she seemed to appear wherever Wendy happened to be with suspicious frequency.

"How dangerous are we talking about, Inspector?"

"Potentially quite dangerous. Miss Lovelace has recently committed assault, and there's evidence suggesting she's been conducting illegal activities that may have compromised her mental stability."

"Right. Wendy's here with me now. What do you need us to do?"

"Stay exactly where you are. Lock the doors, don't answer to anyone you don't recognise, and ring me immediately if you see anyone matching Evangeline Lovelace's description in the vicinity."

"Inspector, there's something you ought to know. Wendy's been absolutely terrified this past week. Won't go out alone, keeps checking the locks, jumps at unexpected sounds. It's like she knows something dreadful is about to happen."

"Has she mentioned specific threats?"

"Not threats exactly, but she said Evangeline's behaviour at our parents' house was rather frightening. Romantic declarations that felt more like demands, possessive comments about their friendship, the sort of intensity that makes you worry about what might happen if the person doesn't get what they want."

Morrison's voice became more urgent. "Miss Pemberton, I need you to listen carefully. We have reason to believe that Evangeline Lovelace is not who she claims to be. That she may, in fact, be someone else entirely—someone with medical knowledge and access to dangerous chemicals."

"What sort of someone else?"

"We think she may be a man called Malcolm Slaughter, a doctor who's been using experimental compounds to alter his physical appearance."

The statement was so bizarre that Genevieve almost laughed. Almost. But something about the inspector's tone suggested he wasn't the sort of person who made jokes about serious police matters.

"You're telling me that my sister's been friends with a man pretending to be a woman?"

"I'm telling you that the evidence suggests exactly that, yes. And this individual has demonstrated capacity for violence when he perceives threats to his relationship with your sister."

Genevieve looked across the room at Wendy, who was watching the telephone conversation with increasing anxiety. Beautiful, kind Wendy, who'd survived her husband's death only to find herself the object of an elaborate and dangerous deception.

"Inspector, what happens if he—she—if this person comes here?"

"You ring me immediately and you do not, under any circumstances, allow them into the premises. This individual is to be considered extremely unstable and potentially violent."

"And if we can't reach you?"

"Then you ring 999 and request immediate police assistance. And Miss Pemberton?"

"Yes?"

"Your sister's instincts about feeling threatened were absolutely correct. Trust them."

After hanging up, Genevieve returned to the sitting area where Wendy was waiting with the particular stillness that belonged to people bracing for bad news.

"That was the police," Genevieve said gently. "About Evangeline."

"What about her?"

"They think she might be rather more dangerous than we realised. They want us to stay inside and ring them if we see her."

Wendy's face went pale. "How dangerous?"

"Dangerous enough that they're treating this as a serious threat to your safety."

"But she's my friend. Or she was my friend. Surely she wouldn't actually hurt me?"

Genevieve sat beside her sister and took her hand. "Wendy, darling, I don't think Evangeline is who we thought she was. I don't think she's who anyone thought she was."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the police believe she's been lying about everything. Her name, her background, possibly even her... well, her fundamental identity."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I, completely. But I think we're about to find out just how much we've been deceived."

Outside the flat's windows, London's evening settled over Carnaby Street with its usual combination of commerce and culture. But inside, two sisters waited for whatever revelation was approaching with the growing certainty that their world was about to change in ways they couldn't yet imagine.

And somewhere in the city, a man who'd spent months becoming someone else was preparing for a confrontation that would determine whether his elaborate transformation had been salvation or damnation.

Chapter 13: Unmasked

The compound had never worked quite like this before.

Malcolm stood in the narrow alley beside Kaleidoscope, feeling the familiar warmth spreading through his body whilst simultaneously experiencing something rather like his consciousness fragmenting. The transformation was taking bloody ages—nearly twenty minutes of shifting, wavering changes that left him uncertain whether he was becoming Evangeline or dissolving into something else entirely.

He'd increased the dose again. Double what he'd used during that business with the young chap, triple his original amounts. The chemistry was becoming dodgy, but predictability seemed less important than permanence.

The reflection in the boutique's darkened window showed features that couldn't seem to settle. Masculine bone structure overlaid with feminine softness, brown hair shifting toward blonde and back again, eyes that changed colour with each flicker of street light.

But gradually, Evangeline began to emerge. Not the polished woman who'd charmed London's social circles, but something more desperate. Beautiful still, but with an intensity that belonged to someone whose grip on reality had gone rather wonky.

She smoothed her midnight blue dress and checked her reflection once more. The face looking back was stunning, but the eyes carried something that might have been madness.

Right then. Wendy was upstairs, probably having tea with her sister, discussing whatever comfortable concerns occupied people whose lives hadn't been built on elaborate chemical deceptions. Time for a proper conversation about their future together.

The front door lock gave way after several minutes of careful fiddling—these Victorian mechanisms weren't built for people with detailed knowledge of how things broke.

She climbed the narrow staircase quietly, listening to voices from above. Two women discussing something in serious tones.

"—police said she might be dangerous," Genevieve was saying. "Wendy, you ought to take this seriously."

"But it's Evangeline. I've known her for months. She's intense, yes, but she's not actually threatening."

"Isn't she? What about at Mummy and Daddy's? That wasn't intensity—that was something rather more disturbing."

Evangeline felt anger building behind her chemically enhanced confidence. They were discussing her as if she were some sort of problem to be managed, some inconvenience in their otherwise orderly lives. As if months of genuine friendship could be dismissed as mere 'intensity.'

She knocked on the door. "Wendy, we need to talk".

Silence. Then Genevieve's voice, carefully controlled: "Evangeline? How did you get into the building?"

"The front door was unlocked. Terribly unsafe, really—anyone could wander in. May I come up? There are some things I need to explain."

"Actually," Wendy's voice, thin with fear, "this isn't a good time. Perhaps you could ring tomorrow?"

"Oh, I don't think tomorrow will do at all. There seem to be some rather serious misunderstandings about my intentions."

The lock was giving way under pressure. These old mechanisms were designed for honest people, not desperate individuals intent on breaking in.

"Evangeline, please just go home. We can discuss this another time."

"What could be more appropriate than the home of someone I care about? Someone I've spent months protecting from people who don't appreciate her properly?"

The lock clicked open.

Evangeline stepped into the flat's entrance hall, clocking comfortable domestic details. Photographs, a small table with keys, the lingering scent of tea and anxiety.

"Good evening," she said pleasantly. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything important."

Wendy and Genevieve were pressed against the far wall, both pale, both obviously terrified. Wendy clutched a telephone receiver.

"Evangeline," Wendy said carefully, "you can't just break into people's homes. That's not how friendships work."

"Isn't it? I rather thought friendships involved caring enough to make sure someone understood how much they meant to you." Evangeline moved further into the room. "Besides, I didn't break anything. The lock was simply... persuaded."

"How did you know I lived here?"

"Darling, I've known for months. I make it my business to understand people I care about. Their addresses, schedules, family connections." Evangeline settled onto the sofa uninvited. "It's called taking an interest."

"It's called stalking," Genevieve said flatly.

"Is it? Or is it being a thorough friend? Someone who pays attention, who makes the effort to truly know people she values?"

The chemical enhancement was reaching critical mass, bringing clarity that felt almost religious. Everything seemed perfectly obvious—the careful campaign she'd conducted, the elaborate personality she'd constructed, the obstacles she'd removed to protect their friendship.

All perfectly reasonable. Completely misunderstood by people who lacked imagination to appreciate real devotion.

"Wendy," Evangeline continued, leaning forward intensely, "I need you to understand something about our relationship. About what I've sacrificed to become someone worthy of your attention."

"What are you on about?"

"I'm talking about transformation. About the extraordinary lengths someone might go to become the sort of person you'd want to know."

Wendy had gone white. "Evangeline, you're not making sense."

"Am I not? Then let me be clearer." The euphoria was building, making everything seem inevitable. "Do you remember our first meeting? That party in October? You were so kind, so interested in genuine conversation rather than social performances."

"Of course I remember."

"And do you remember thinking I seemed rather... different? That there was something about me that didn't quite fit?"

Wendy nodded slowly, obviously trying to keep things calm whilst Genevieve reached for the telephone.

"There was a reason for that difference. A rather extraordinary reason, actually." Evangeline rose, moving closer with graceful confidence. "I created myself specifically for you."

"What d'you mean, created?"

"I mean Evangeline Lovelace didn't exist before I met you. Everything about her—appearance, personality, background, interests—was carefully designed to be exactly the sort of person you'd find interesting."

Profound silence. Evangeline could see understanding dawning in Wendy's eyes, recognition of something that couldn't be true but was starting to make horrible sense.

"That's impossible," Wendy whispered.

"Is it? Would you like me to prove it?"

Before either sister could respond, Evangeline moved toward the hall mirror, chemical confidence combining with Malcolm's desperate need for honest recognition.

"Watch carefully," she said. "And try to understand that everything I'm about to show you was done out of love."

The reversal began slowly—hair darkening from blonde to brown, facial structure coarsening, elegant femininity dissolving into something ordinary. Within minutes, the beautiful woman was becoming someone else entirely.

Someone male.

Someone who looked rather like a hospital doctor under considerable stress.

Someone who most definitely was not Evangeline Lovelace.

Wendy's scream was sharp enough to shatter glass.

"My name is Malcolm Slaughter," he said, turning from the mirror. "I'm twenty-eight, I work at University College Hospital, and I've been using experimental compounds to transform myself into someone you could love."

"You're having me on," Genevieve said hollowly.

"Rather, I'd say it's just very difficult. Months of research, chemical experimentation, systematic nicking of supplies from hospital stores. But quite possible, as you can see."

Malcolm moved closer, noting they couldn't look away despite their horror. Finally, someone was seeing him clearly—not Malcolm the disappointing doctor, not Evangeline the performance, but the real person who'd made extraordinary efforts to be worthy of love.

"Wendy," he said gently, "everything between us has been genuine. My feelings, my interest in your thoughts, my desire to protect you—all real."

"But you're not real," she whispered. "Evangeline isn't real. Our friendship was built on lies."

"Not lies. Improvements. I became someone better, someone who deserved your attention."

"By deceiving me about your fundamental identity."

"By transforming myself into someone worth knowing."

The distinction seemed clear to Malcolm, but Wendy's expression suggested she wasn't appreciating the philosophical subtlety.

"You're a man," she said, as if the words were difficult. "You've been pretending to be a woman for months, lying about everything."

"I've been becoming someone you could care about."

"By chemically altering your appearance and constructing fictional identity."

"By making myself worthy of your affection."

Frustrating. He'd expected surprise, shock, but also recognition of the extraordinary effort involved, appreciation for the lengths he'd gone to.

Instead, they were looking at him like something dangerous from the street.

"Wendy," he said, reaching toward her with obviously masculine hands, "surely you can see the person you've come to care about is still here? That our friendship is still real, regardless of technical details?"

But Wendy was backing away, shaking her head violently.

"Don't touch me. Don't come any closer. You're not who I thought you were. You're not anyone I know."

The rejection was more painful than any physical injury. Months of careful work, transformation, becoming someone better—dismissed because of details that seemed irrelevant.

"But I am someone you know," he said desperately. "I'm the person who listened to your stories about James, who understood your fear of getting hurt, who's been protecting you."

"You're the person who's been lying about everything."

"I'm the person who's been loving you enough to become worthy of your love."

The word hung in the air—love—making everything suddenly, terrifyingly clear.

Malcolm saw it register on Wendy's face, understanding that this had never been friendship, that everything had been conducted under false pretences by someone whose feelings were far more intense and dangerous than she'd suspected.

Someone standing in her flat after breaking in, having revealed himself to be capable of physical transformation through illegal drug use.

Someone looking at her with intensity that belonged to people whose grip on reality had become rather uncertain.

"You need to clear off," Genevieve said, moving protectively. "Right now. Before the police arrive."

"The police?"

"We rang them whilst you were... changing. They're on their way."

Malcolm felt something cold in his chest. Not just rejection, but betrayal. After everything he'd revealed, after showing them the extraordinary lengths he'd gone to for love, they'd involved authorities who couldn't possibly understand.

"That was rather unfair."

"Unfair?" Wendy's voice climbed toward hysteria. "You've been stalking me for months under false identity, broken into my home, admitted to drug theft and illegal experimentation—and you think we're being unkind?"

"I think you're being bloody ungrateful."

More venom than intended, but the chemical enhancement was interacting badly with his emotional state, producing justified rage.

All those months of careful attention, studying her preferences, becoming someone she could value—reduced to stalking by people who couldn't appreciate the effort.

Perhaps it was time to help them understand exactly how much effort had been involved.

Malcolm reached for the small vial he'd prepared for emergencies. If words couldn't make them see reason, if his human form wasn't acceptable, perhaps another demonstration was needed.

But as his hand closed around the vial, multiple footsteps on the stairs announced his time had run out.

Detective Inspector Morrison's voice: "Armed police! We've got the building surrounded!"

Malcolm looked at Wendy one last time, memorising her face, her terror, her complete rejection of everything he'd tried to become.

Then he swallowed the entire vial and waited to see what would emerge from the chemical chaos about to flood his system.

This transformation might be permanent.

Chapter 14: The Hunt

The transformation hit Malcolm like a freight train going full pelt.

One moment he was standing in Wendy's sitting room, watching terror spread across her face as armed police thundered up the stairs. The next, every cell in his body was screaming as the massive overdose flooded his system with chemical chaos that his metabolism couldn't possibly process safely.

This wasn't the controlled, predictable change he'd perfected over months of careful experimentation. This was molecular violence—his bone structure shifting so rapidly it felt like his skeleton was trying to tear itself apart, his nervous system firing random signals that made his vision strobe between colours that shouldn't exist.

But somehow, impossibly, Evangeline began to emerge from the chemical maelstrom. Not the elegant, composed woman who'd charmed London's social circles, but something wild and desperate, beautiful and terrifying in equal measure.

"Armed police! Don't anybody move!"

Detective Inspector Morrison's voice cut through the flat's entrance hall, but Evangeline was already moving. The French doors leading to the small balcony weren't locked—why would they be, three floors above Carnaby Street?—and the fire escape beyond offered exactly the sort of theatrical exit that seemed appropriate for someone whose entire existence had become rather theatrical.



She swung herself over the balcony railing with fluid grace, landing on the iron platform below with barely a sound. The compound was still surging through her system, bringing with it a euphoria that made everything seem not just possible but inevitable.

Behind her, she could hear Morrison's voice: "Search every room! Check the balcony! She can't have got far!"

But she already had, hadn't she? Dropping silently down the fire escape whilst London's evening crowds provided perfect camouflage for someone who knew how to blend into the city's cultural underground.

"Lost her, guv," Constable Davies reported, rather out of breath from his sprint through Carnaby Street's evening shoppers. "One minute she was there, next minute she'd done a runner into the crowd."

Morrison stood on the narrow balcony outside Wendy's flat, studying the fire escape that provided access to the maze of back alleys and side streets that characterised this part of London. Someone familiar with the area could disappear completely within minutes, especially if they had reason to avoid police attention.

"Right then," he said grimly. "Alert all units. Female suspect, blonde, approximately twenty-five, wearing dark blue dress. Considered extremely dangerous. Last seen legging it south toward Great Marlborough Street."

But even as he gave the description, Morrison knew they were chasing someone who might not exist in any conventional sense by the time they found her. If Dr. Malcolm Slaughter could transform himself into Evangeline Lovelace at will, what was to stop him from becoming someone else entirely? Someone their descriptions wouldn't match, someone who could walk past police cordons without attracting a second glance?

"Inspector?" Dr. Hartwell appeared at the balcony doors, looking rather green around the gills. "The sisters are asking about medical attention. The younger one's gone into shock, and Miss Whitrose is... well, she's taking this revelation rather badly."

Morrison could hear sobbing from inside the flat—the particular sound of someone whose understanding of reality had been fundamentally shattered. Wendy Whitrose had just discovered that her closest friend for the past four months had been an elaborate chemical deception created by a man whose feelings toward her were considerably more intense than friendship warranted.

"Get them to hospital," Morrison said. "Full medical evaluation, psychiatric support if needed. And keep them under protection until we've got Slaughter banged up."

"Do you think you'll find him?"

Morrison studied the London skyline, lights beginning to twinkle as evening settled over a city that offered infinite hiding places for someone desperate enough to use them.

"Oh, we'll find him. The question is what sort of state he'll be in when we do."

The compound was playing havoc with Evangeline's nervous system, but it was also giving her insights that felt almost mystical in their clarity.

She moved through London's underground scene with the fluid grace of someone who belonged exactly where she was—through the basement clubs where art students discussed revolution over cheap wine, past the coffee houses where folk singers competed with conversation, into the narrow alleys where the city's creative energy felt most concentrated.

But something was wrong with the transformation. Her reflection in shop windows showed features that couldn't seem to settle—sometimes perfectly feminine, sometimes obviously masculine, occasionally something that belonged to neither category. The massive dose was creating effects she'd never experienced, changes that felt increasingly beyond her control.

In the loos at a club near Tottenham Court Road, she studied her face in the cracked mirror and watched her bone structure shift in real time. Beautiful one moment, ordinary the next, sometimes settling into configurations that looked almost alien.

The other women using the facilities gave her funny looks but said nothing. This was London in 1967, after all—a city where experimentation with identity was practically a civic duty.

But as Evangeline tried to stabilise her appearance, she became aware of voices outside discussing something that made her blood run cold.

"—definitely her, the blonde bird the Old Bill are looking for—"

"—clocked her come in about an hour ago, been acting right peculiar—"

"—reward if we ring them in, innit?—"

The conversation was taking place near the club's entrance, but voices carried in these underground spaces. Evangeline pressed herself against the loo wall, listening to people she'd never met casually discussing her capture as if she were some sort of criminal.

Which, she supposed, she rather was. Breaking and entering, pharmaceutical theft, assault, harassment—the charges would be mounting up by now. But surely they had to understand the motivation? Surely someone would recognise that everything she'd done had been driven by love rather than malice?

The loo door opened, admitting a girl with dramatically lined eyes and a mini-dress that barely qualified as clothing.

"You alright, love?" she asked, noting Evangeline's obvious distress. "You look proper rough."

"I'm fine. Just feeling a bit... unwell."

"Been at the pills, have you? Only you look like you've had a right dose of something."

The observation was more accurate than the girl could possibly realise. Evangeline nodded weakly, using the sink to steady herself as another wave of molecular instability swept through her system.

"There's a back way out through the kitchens," the girl continued quietly. "If you're trying to avoid someone particular, like."

"Why would you help me?"

"Because whoever you are, whatever you've done, you don't deserve to be hunted like some sort of animal." The girl's expression carried unexpected wisdom. "Besides, the Old Bill's got no business in places like this. This is our world, innit? We look after our own."

The chase led Morrison through a London he rarely saw during official duties.

Following reports of Evangeline's movements meant tracking her through the underground clubs and coffee houses that catered to the city's emerging counterculture. Places where police weren't particularly welcome, where conversations stopped when officers appeared, where the social contract between authority and citizen had been replaced by something more adversarial.

"She was definitely here," Constable Richards reported from the entrance to a basement club that seemed to exist entirely below street level. "Multiple witnesses place her in the loos about thirty minutes ago. But she scarpered through the back exit before we arrived."

"Where'd she head?"

"Toward Bloomsbury, apparently. Though the descriptions are becoming rather... inconsistent."

Morrison frowned. "Inconsistent how?"

"Well, sir, some witnesses describe her as blonde and beautiful, others as rather ordinary looking with brown hair. One gentleman insisted she was clearly a chap in women's clothing, but he'd obviously been on the sauce."

The implications were troubling. Either they were dealing with multiple suspects using similar disguises, or Dr. Slaughter's chemical transformations were becoming increasingly unstable. Neither possibility suggested the situation was moving toward safe resolution.

"Right then," Morrison said, studying a map of the area. "If she's heading toward Bloomsbury, she's probably making for familiar territory. Her flat, perhaps, or somewhere she feels safe."

"Should we set up surveillance at Dr. Slaughter's address?"

"Already sorted. But I suspect our suspect is becoming less predictable by the hour. The amount of chemical compounds she's taken—it can't be doing her any favours. Either she'll collapse from the physical stress, or..."

Morrison didn't finish the thought, but both officers understood the alternative. Someone whose brain chemistry was being artificially manipulated to this degree might be capable of behaviour that no amount of police training could anticipate.

Malcolm's flat felt like visiting a museum dedicated to someone else's life.

Evangeline stood in the narrow hallway, studying the grey walls and carefully neutral furnishings that had once represented his entire world. The laboratory beckoned from the second room—beakers and equipment and the chemical apparatus that had made her existence possible.

But something was happening to the transformation that felt genuinely dangerous. Her heart was racing at a rate that suggested serious cardiovascular stress, and her vision kept fragmenting into prismatic patterns that definitely weren't normal human perception.

The massive overdose had been a mistake. She could see that now, as her body struggled to process chemical concentrations that were probably approaching toxic levels. But admitting the mistake would mean accepting that her desperate gamble to make the transformation permanent had instead created something rather dodgy.

She moved to the laboratory, studying the familiar equipment with eyes that couldn't quite focus properly. The apparatus for synthesising the compound, the careful notes documenting months of experimentation, the molecular diagrams that had seemed so promising when Malcolm had believed science could solve the fundamental problems of human existence.

All of it suddenly seemed rather pathetic. A desperate man's attempt to become someone worthy of love, using chemistry to paper over personality defects that ran much deeper than molecular intervention could address.

But if the transformation was failing, if Evangeline was dissolving back into Malcolm's disappointing reality, then what had been the point of any of it?

She reached for the emergency supply of compound she kept for situations exactly like this one. Just enough to stabilise the transformation, to buy herself time to think clearly about what came next.

But as her hand closed around the vial, footsteps on the stairs outside announced that thinking time had run out.

Detective Inspector Morrison's voice carried clearly through the thin walls: "Armed police! Dr. Slaughter, we know you're in there!"

Evangeline looked around the laboratory one last time, memorising the space where she'd been created, where months of careful work had transformed Malcolm's lonely existence into something that felt meaningful.

Then she opened the window overlooking the narrow alley behind the building and prepared to discover whether Evangeline Lovelace could fly.

The chemical chaos in her system suggested she might be about to find out.

Chapter 15: Family Secrets

John Pemberton had been conducting his own investigation for the best part of three weeks.

It wasn't quite the done thing—arranging for private investigators, having background checks done, drawing upon the considerable resources that came with three generations of maritime commerce to examine the life of his daughter's friend. But something about Evangeline Lovelace had been rather troubling him since that dreadful evening when she'd made those inappropriate declarations in his sitting room.

Now, standing in his Kensington study with a manila folder containing rather disturbing information, he rather wished he'd trusted his instincts sooner.

"Darling?" Jane appeared in the doorway, still wearing the careful composure that had carried her through thirty years of managing social crises. But underneath the practised calm, John could see the particular strain that belonged to parents whose children had encountered genuine danger. "The girls are asking when they can come home from hospital."

"Not just yet, I'm afraid," John said grimly, spreading the investigation results across his mahogany desk. "This business with Evangeline is considerably more serious than we initially realised."

Jane moved closer, studying the documents with the methodical attention she brought to charity committee reports and household accounts. But these papers contained information that no amount of upper-class breeding had prepared her to process.

"Good heavens," she whispered, reading over the first page. "John, this can't possibly be right."

"I'm afraid it rather is. Evangeline Lovelace—if that's even her real name—doesn't exist in any official capacity prior to October of last year. No birth certificate, no educational records, no employment history. She simply turned up, fully formed, at precisely the moment she began pursuing Wendy's friendship."

The private investigator's report painted a picture that was both impossible and undeniable. When cross-referenced with hospital employment records, pharmaceutical purchase logs, and witness statements from various social events, the evidence suggested something that challenged everything the Pembertons understood about normal human behaviour.

"The chap in the photograph," Jane continued, pointing to a grainy image of Dr. Malcolm Slaughter taken from University College Hospital's personnel files, "he looks absolutely nothing like Evangeline, does he?"

"That's rather the point, isn't it? According to the police report—and yes, I've got connections at the Yard who've been keeping me informed—Dr. Slaughter has been using nicked medical supplies to chemically alter his appearance. To become Evangeline."

Jane sank into the leather armchair beside John's desk, her usual poise temporarily abandoned. "You're telling me that the woman who's been having tea with our daughter, who's invaded our family dinner, who's made romantic overtures in our sitting room—that woman is actually a chap?"

"A chap who's been systematically stalking Wendy for months, using an identity constructed specifically to gain her trust and affection."

The manila folder contained additional disturbing details: surveillance photographs showing "Evangeline" watching the boutique from various concealment points, witness statements describing erratic behaviour at social events, medical reports documenting the assault on Carnaby Street that had escalated far beyond acceptable boundaries.

But most troubling were the hospital records that suggested Dr. Slaughter's experiments had been escalating in both frequency and intensity. The missing pharmaceuticals represented enough controlled substances to seriously damage or kill someone whose brain chemistry was being artificially manipulated on a regular basis.

"John," Jane said carefully, "what exactly has this person been taking? These drugs—are they dangerous?"

"According to the medical consultant I had a word with, the combination of substances involved could cause serious cardiovascular problems, neurological damage, potentially complete psychological breakdown." John gathered the photographs with hands that weren't entirely steady. "We're not dealing with someone playing dress-up for theatrical purposes. We're dealing with someone who's been conducting illegal medical experiments on himself, using compounds that may well have compromised his mental stability."

The telephone rang before Jane could respond, its shrill tone cutting through the study's heavy silence. John answered with the cautious efficiency of someone who'd been receiving unwelcome news rather frequently of late.

"Pemberton... Yes, Inspector Morrison, thanks for ringing... I see... How dangerous?... Right then, we'll remain here until you've got him safely behind bars."

He replaced the receiver with the careful precision of someone processing information that confirmed his worst fears.

"The police have tracked him to his flat in Bloomsbury. They've got the building surrounded, but he's apparently taken some sort of massive overdose. The inspector believes he may be in the final stages of complete psychological collapse."

"What's that mean for the girls?"

"It means Wendy's instincts about feeling threatened were absolutely correct. It means we've been dealing with someone whose grip on reality has been deteriorating for months. And it means we need to make certain this never happens to our family again."

Genevieve Pemberton sat in the private room at University College Hospital, watching her sister sleep under mild sedation whilst trying to process revelations that seemed to belong in Gothic novels rather than real life.

The doctor—a competent woman in her forties who specialised in treating victims of psychological trauma—had explained the situation with clinical detachment that somehow made it even more disturbing.

"Your sister has experienced what we classify as severe betrayal trauma," Dr. Patterson had said. "Someone she trusted completely has turned out to be not only systematically deceptive, but rather dangerous. The psychological impact can be as serious as physical assault."

Genevieve had nodded and made appropriate sounds, but her mind kept returning to the impossible central fact: Evangeline Lovelace had never existed. Everything about her—her appearance, her personality, her entire history—had been chemically constructed by a chap whose feelings toward Wendy were far more intense and dangerous than friendship warranted.

"Miss Pemberton?" A nurse appeared in the doorway, carrying a tea tray with the sort of institutional efficiency that suggested she'd delivered bad news to worried relatives countless times before. "Your parents are here to see you."

John and Jane entered with the careful movements of people navigating unfamiliar and unwelcome territory. Private hospitals were familiar territory—the Pembertons had been using expensive medical care for generations. But psychiatric emergencies were rather outside their usual social experience.

"How is she?" Jane asked, settling beside Wendy's bed with maternal concern.

"Sleeping, mostly. The doctor says she'll need considerable support to process what's happened." Genevieve studied her parents' faces, noting the particular strain that suggested they'd been conducting their own difficult conversations. "There's more to this business than what happened last night, isn't there?"

John and Jane exchanged glances that confirmed Genevieve's suspicions.

"Rather more, I'm afraid," John said carefully. "I've been investigating Evangeline's background since that evening at our house. What I've discovered is... well, it's rather extraordinary."

He outlined the private investigator's findings, the police reports, the medical evidence suggesting someone whose experiments with identity had escalated far beyond anything resembling normal human behaviour. As he spoke, Genevieve felt her understanding of the past four months shifting into patterns that were both clearer and more disturbing.

"So when she said she'd 'created herself' for Wendy," Genevieve said slowly, "she meant that quite literally, didn't she?"

"Apparently so. Every aspect of her personality, her appearance, her social background—all carefully constructed to appeal to your sister's particular preferences and vulnerabilities."

"But how could anyone maintain such an elaborate deception? Surely there were signs, inconsistencies, moments when the performance slipped?"

Jane leaned forward with the particular intensity she brought to complex social problems. "That's what's most troubling, darling. According to the police, Dr. Slaughter's medical knowledge allowed him to create transformations that were essentially perfect. Physical changes that couldn't be detected through casual observation."

"You're saying he actually became a different person?"

"We're saying he used nicked hospital supplies to chemically alter his brain chemistry and physical appearance on a regular basis. The Evangeline that Wendy befriended was real in the moment, but she was also temporary, artificial, and ultimately unsustainable."

Genevieve absorbed this information whilst watching her sister's peaceful expression. Wendy looked younger in sleep, more vulnerable, like the girl she'd been before James's death had taught her that people she loved could disappear without warning.

Now she'd learned that people she loved might never have existed in the first place.

"What happens when she comes round?" Genevieve asked.

"Therapy, support, time to come to terms with the reality that her closest friendship for the past four months was based on systematic deception by someone whose feelings toward her were dangerously intense."

"And what happens to him? This Dr. Slaughter?"

John's expression became grimmer. "According to Inspector Morrison, he's holed himself up in his flat with what appears to be a considerable supply of the compounds he's been using for transformation. The police believe he may be planning some sort of final, desperate gesture."

"Suicide?"

"Or something worse. Someone whose brain chemistry has been artificially manipulated for months, who's just taken a massive overdose of experimental compounds—there's no telling what he might be capable of."

The hospital room fell quiet except for the soft sounds of medical equipment monitoring Wendy's vital signs. Outside the windows, London continued its daily business, but inside this small space, three people grappled with the reality that their family had been targeted by someone whose obsession had escalated into genuinely dangerous territory.

"I keep thinking about all those conversations," Genevieve said finally. "All those times Evangeline seemed to understand Wendy so perfectly, seemed to anticipate her needs, seemed to care about her wellbeing in ways that felt almost uncanny."

"What about them?"

"They weren't uncanny at all, were they? They were calculated. Someone with medical training, someone who'd studied psychology and human behaviour, someone who'd made Wendy into a research project." Genevieve's voice carried growing anger. "He wasn't her friend. He was studying her, learning her patterns, working out exactly what she needed to hear to trust him."

Jane reached across to take her younger daughter's hand. "I'm afraid that's exactly what happened, darling."

"But why? What did he want from her that justified such elaborate deception?"

"According to the police psychiatrist," John said carefully, "people who engage in this sort of systematic identity construction are usually driven by profound inadequacy combined with obsessive romantic fixation. Dr. Slaughter apparently convinced himself that if he could become the right sort of person, Wendy would fall in love with him."

"But she's not interested in women romantically, is she? She made that clear during her marriage."

"Which suggests his entire understanding of her was fundamentally flawed from the beginning. He created an elaborate fantasy based on misinterpretation of her emotional needs."

The implications were staggering. Four months of friendship, of intimate conversation, of growing trust and affection—all based on one person's delusion about what the other person wanted from life.

"Will she get over this?" Genevieve asked.

Dr. Patterson, who'd been listening from the doorway, stepped into the room with professional compassion. "Getting over betrayal trauma takes time, but your sister has several factors working in her favour. Strong family support, previous experience processing grief and loss, and the intelligence to recognise that what happened wasn't her fault."

"How long?"

"Months, probably. She'll need to rebuild her ability to trust, to form new relationships, to believe that people are who they claim to be. But with proper support, most people do recover from experiences like this."

John stood, moving to the window that overlooked London's skyline. Somewhere in the city, a chap who'd spent months chemically transforming himself into someone else was facing the consequences of his elaborate deception.

"Inspector Morrison mentioned that other medical facilities have reported similar pharmaceutical thefts," he said. "There's worry this might not be a one-off."

"D'you think there are others like Dr. Slaughter?"

"I think we're witnessing something new and rather disturbing about what people are capable of when they combine medical knowledge with psychological instability and access to controlled substances."

The telephone beside Wendy's bed rang, startling everyone in the room. Dr. Patterson answered with professional efficiency.

"Yes... I see... How serious?... Right then, we'll prepare for that possibility."

She rang off and turned to the Pembertons with an expression that suggested the situation had become more complicated.

"That was Inspector Morrison on the blower. Dr. Slaughter has apparently barricaded himself in his laboratory with enough chemical compounds to pose a serious threat to public safety. They're clearing out the surrounding buildings."

"What sort of threat?" Jane asked.

"The sort that requires the bomb squad and hazardous materials team. Whatever he's planning, it's going to be rather more dramatic than simple suicide."

Outside the hospital windows, London got on with its daily business, unaware that somewhere in Bloomsbury, a chap whose attempts to chemically transform himself into someone worthy of love were about to reach their inevitable, tragic conclusion.

But in this small room, three people who loved Wendy Whitrose prepared themselves for whatever final revelation was approaching, certain only that their understanding of human nature had been fundamentally challenged by someone whose desperate need to be loved had driven him far beyond the boundaries of sanity.

Chapter 16: The Final Transformation

The laboratory had become Malcolm's tomb, and he was bloody well aware of it.

He sat surrounded by months of careful experimentation—beakers and apparatus and chemical formulae that had once seemed like salvation but now looked rather like the debris of a particularly elaborate suicide attempt. The police had been shouting through his door for the better part of an hour, their voices carrying the sort of proper professional patience that belonged to people trained to talk desperate blokes away from irreversible decisions.

But Malcolm wasn't feeling particularly keen on being reversible just now.

The massive overdose from his escape was still coursing through his system, creating effects that were both fascinating and terrifying from a medical standpoint. His reflection in the laboratory's mirror couldn't seem to settle on any particular identity—sometimes Malcolm's disappointing features, sometimes Evangeline's ethereal beauty, occasionally something that belonged to neither category entirely.

"Dr. Slaughter!" Inspector Morrison's voice carried clearly through the barricaded door. "We know you're in considerable distress, aren't you? Let us help you, won't you?"

Help. As if what he needed was assistance rather than transformation. As if the fundamental problem of Malcolm Slaughter's existence could be sorted through counselling and rehabilitation rather than complete molecular reconstruction.

Malcolm laughed, a sound that emerged somewhere between masculine baritone and feminine soprano, depending on which throat was producing it at any given moment.

"I'm afraid help isn't quite what's required, Inspector," he called back, noting how his voice shifted between registers mid-sentence. "What's required is rather more... permanent."

The chemicals spread across his workbench represented enough controlled substances to kill several blokes or, if properly combined, to create something that had never existed before. Not just temporary transformation, but complete rewriting of human biology. The sort of breakthrough that would make his months of careful experimentation look like children mucking about with chemistry sets.

Malcolm began measuring compounds with the precise attention he'd once brought to surgical anaesthesia. But instead of keeping patients safely unconscious during operations, he was preparing to make Malcolm Slaughter unconscious permanently whilst something entirely new took his place.

"Dr. Slaughter," a different voice now, older, carrying medical authority, "this is Dr. Hartwell from University College Hospital. I understand you've been conducting pharmaceutical research. Perhaps we could have a chat about your findings?"

Hartwell. The chap who'd supervised his deteriorating performance over the past months, who'd watched him make increasingly dangerous mistakes whilst his attention was divided between patient care and chemical transformation. Malcolm almost felt sorry for him—discovering that a colleague had been systematically nicking controlled substances to conduct unauthorised human experimentation couldn't be pleasant for someone who'd devoted his career to proper medical practice.

"Dr. Hartwell," Malcolm replied, his voice settling into something approximating masculine normality, "I rather think my research has progressed beyond the stage where consultation would be helpful."

"Has it indeed? Because from my perspective, it appears you've created a situation that's potentially fatal for yourself and dangerous for everyone in the surrounding area."

"Dangerous, yes. But also revolutionary. Have you any idea what I've accomplished in this laboratory?"

"I have some idea, based on the considerable pharmaceutical inventory discrepancies and witness reports. You've been using nicked hospital supplies to alter your physical appearance."

"I've been using advanced chemistry to solve the fundamental problem of human inadequacy," Malcolm corrected, continuing his careful measurements. "I've discovered how to become someone worthy of love."

The silence from beyond the door suggested that Hartwell was processing this statement with the sort of clinical detachment that belonged to medical professionals dealing with psychiatric emergencies.

"Malcolm," Hartwell's voice had become more personal, less official, "what you've accomplished is remarkable from a scientific standpoint. But the physical and psychological stress you're putting on your system—it's not sustainable, is it?"

"Isn't it? That's rather what I'm attempting to determine."

Malcolm had combined enough thiopental, diazepam, and synthetic hormone compounds to create something that theory suggested might rewrite his cellular structure on a permanent basis. The mixture glowed with an almost supernatural light, though that might have been his compromised visual system playing tricks.

"The young woman you've been transforming into," Hartwell continued, "Evangeline Lovelace. The people who knew her—they're concerned about what happens to her if you... if this situation doesn't sort itself out safely."

Clever bloke. Appeal to his protective instincts regarding Evangeline, suggest that her welfare depended on his survival. But Hartwell didn't understand that Evangeline and Malcolm weren't separate entities competing for the same biological space. They were evolving toward something

new, something that would incorporate the best aspects of both identities whilst discarding the limitations that had made their previous existence so unbearable.

"Dr. Hartwell," Malcolm said, raising the beaker containing his final formula, "I want you to understand something about what's about to happen. This isn't suicide. This is birth."

"Birth of what?"

"Of someone who deserves to exist. Someone who belongs in the world rather than observing it from the margins. Someone worthy of the sort of love that Malcolm Slaughter could never inspire and Evangeline Lovelace could never sustain."

The compound tasted like metallic flowers and liquid starlight. Malcolm swallowed it in one gulp, then settled back to observe what would emerge from the chemical chaos about to flood his system.

The change began immediately, but not in the controlled, predictable way he'd experienced during previous transformations. This felt like his cellular structure was being disassembled and reconstructed from the molecular level up, every nerve ending firing signals that his brain couldn't properly interpret.

His reflection in the laboratory mirror became a kaleidoscope of shifting features—masculine bone structure dissolving into feminine curves, brown hair lengthening and lightening, facial features rearranging themselves with fluid grace. But unlike previous changes, this one didn't seem to be settling into any particular configuration.

Instead, he seemed to be cycling through multiple identities, as if the massive dose had completely mucked up whatever biological mechanisms governed the transformation process.

"Dr. Slaughter?" Hartwell's voice, more urgent now. "Malcolm, are you alright in there?"

Malcolm tried to respond, but his vocal cords couldn't seem to decide which voice to produce. What emerged was something between a laugh and a scream, neither entirely human nor completely recognisable as belonging to any particular gender.

The laboratory around him was beginning to shift and blur, colours becoming more vivid whilst simultaneously losing definition. He could see mathematical formulae floating in the air like luminous insects, could hear music that seemed to be emerging from the chemical apparatus itself.

This was either transcendence or complete neurological breakdown. Possibly both.

"I think..." he managed to say, though his voice sounded like it was coming from underwater, "I think I've rather miscalculated something."

The concern in his observation was academic more than personal. From a scientific point of view, he was witnessing effects that no amount of theoretical preparation could have anticipated. His consciousness seemed to be fragmenting, experiencing reality from multiple perspectives simultaneously whilst his physical form continued its chaotic cycling between identities.

Through the chemical haze, he became aware of new voices beyond the laboratory door. Proper medical terminology, emergency procedures, discussions of breaking down the door and getting him sectioned. They were preparing to breach his defences, to interrupt his experiment at the precise moment when it was producing the most extraordinary results.

Malcolm tried to focus on the door, on the sounds of people preparing to save him from something he didn't want to be saved from. But his vision kept sliding between different spectrums of light, showing him the world as it might appear to someone whose brain chemistry had been rather thoroughly rewired.

"Guv?" A new voice, younger, carrying the particular urgency that belonged to people witnessing medical emergencies. "We're reading some very peculiar electromagnetic activity from inside the flat. The meters are going absolutely barmy."

Electromagnetic activity. Malcolm found this rather fascinating from a theoretical standpoint, though he was having difficulty maintaining focus long enough to analyse the implications properly. Could extreme neurological stress produce measurable energy outputs? Were the chemical compounds interacting with his nervous system in ways that generated actual electromagnetic fields?

The questions seemed important, but his ability to pursue logical trains of thought was going to pieces rapidly.

"Right then," Morrison's voice, carrying the sort of determination that meant immediate action was imminent, "we're going in. Medical team on standby, protective overalls for everyone, and nobody touches a bloody thing without proper clearance."

Malcolm wanted to warn them about the various chemical compounds scattered throughout the laboratory, about the potential dangers of interrupting a transformation that was clearly approaching some sort of critical threshold. But when he tried to speak, what emerged was a sound that belonged to no recognisable human voice.

His reflection had become something extraordinary—features that combined the best aspects of masculine and feminine beauty, hair that seemed to shift colour with each movement, eyes that held depths of understanding that neither Malcolm nor Evangeline had ever possessed individually.

This was what he'd been working toward, wasn't it? The synthesis of everything he'd ever wanted to become, freed from the limitations of conventional biology and social expectation. Someone who could exist in the world without apology, who could inspire love without deception, who could belong somewhere without having to put on an act for someone else.

But as the transformation reached what felt like completion, Malcolm became aware of something rather troubling: he couldn't remember why any of this had seemed important.

Wendy's face floated through his consciousness like a half-remembered dream. Beautiful, certainly, and kind, but why had she mattered so much? Why had winning her affection justified months of elaborate deception and chemical experimentation? The obsession that had driven his entire

transformation project seemed suddenly as distant and incomprehensible as a child's fear of bogeymen.

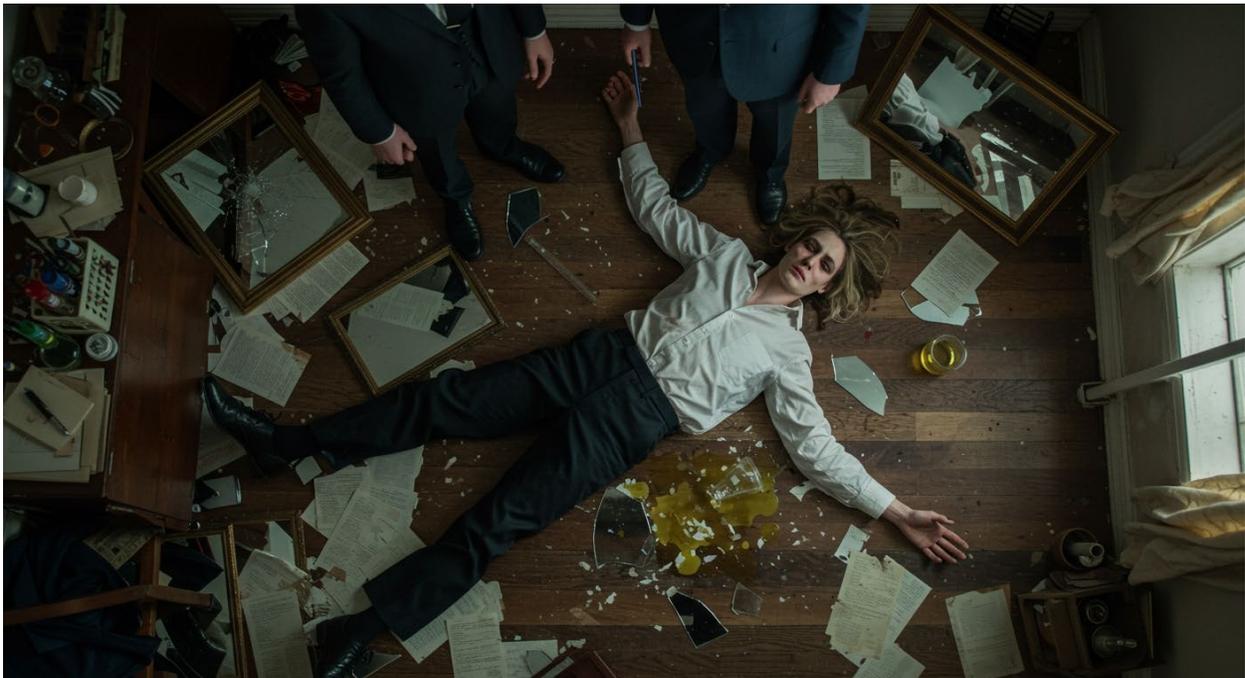
The laboratory door splintered inward with a sound like breaking bones. Armed officers in protective gear flooded into the space, followed by medical personnel carrying equipment that Malcolm's chemically enhanced perception could somehow see in multiple dimensions simultaneously.

"Bloody hell," someone whispered, though Malcolm couldn't determine who had spoken or why the observation seemed significant.

Dr. Hartwell appeared in the doorway, medical bag in hand, taking in the scene with professional assessment that quickly shifted to something approaching awe.

"Is that...?" he began, then stopped, apparently unable to complete the question.

Malcolm tried to stand, to greet his colleagues with the grace that belonged to someone who'd successfully sorted the fundamental problem of human inadequacy. But his body seemed to have developed its own relationship with gravity, one that didn't involve conventional ideas about up and down.



He found himself on the laboratory floor, surrounded by concerned faces that kept shifting between familiar and strange, whilst his reflection in the scattered mirror fragments showed someone who was beautiful and terrible and completely impossible.

"Get him to hospital," Hartwell was saying, though his voice seemed to be coming from several different directions at once. "Full neurological examination, immediate intervention for chemical poisoning, and get the psychiatric ward prepared for something we haven't encountered before."

Malcolm wanted to explain that he wasn't poisoned, that this was breakthrough rather than breakdown, that what they were witnessing was evolution rather than medical emergency. But the words wouldn't arrange themselves properly, and the world kept sliding between different versions of itself.

As they lifted him onto a stretcher, Malcolm caught sight of his reflection one final time in the laboratory's shattered mirror. The face looking back was neither Malcolm nor Evangeline, but something new and strange and quite utterly alone.

The transformation was complete.

Whether it had been worth the bother remained to be seen.

Chapter 17: Bedlam

Bethlem Royal Hospital hadn't been called "Bedlam" officially for decades, but the nickname lingered in London's collective memory like a scar that wouldn't heal properly, did it?

Dr. Elizabeth Thornton stood outside the secure ward's observation room, reviewing the case file that had turned up with their newest patient three days earlier. Twenty-eight years old, formerly Dr. Malcolm Slaughter of University College Hospital, currently listed as "identity unstable" following what the emergency medical team had described as "complete psychological and physiological breakdown resulting from systematic self-administered chemical experimentation."

The clinical language couldn't begin to capture what she'd witnessed when they'd brought him in.

"Doctor?" Staff Nurse Williams appeared beside her, carrying the sort of carefully neutral expression that belonged to psychiatric professionals dealing with cases that challenged conventional understanding. "The patient's family are here to see him, aren't they? Should I prepare them for...?"

"For what they're about to encounter?" Dr. Thornton closed the file with the decisive motion of someone who'd learned that some conversations couldn't be put off indefinitely. "I rather think nothing could prepare them, but we'll do our best."

The Pemberton family—for they'd insisted on taking responsibility for someone who'd terrorised their daughter, which suggested either remarkable compassion or rather profound guilt—sat in the hospital's consultation room with the particular stillness that belonged to people bracing for revelations they didn't want to hear.

John Pemberton looked older than his fifty-two years, as if the events of the past week had put years on him. Jane maintained her careful composure, but her hands hadn't stopped moving since she'd sat down—adjusting her handbag, smoothing her skirt, the nervous gestures of someone whose social training hadn't included procedures for visiting psychiatric patients who'd systematically stalked family members.

Genevieve sat between her parents, pale but determined, the only family member who'd insisted on making this visit despite everyone's reservations.

"Dr. Thornton," John said as she entered, rising with the automatic courtesy that belonged to gentlemen raised to stand when ladies entered rooms. "Terribly good of you to see us. We understand that Mr.... that Dr. Slaughter's condition is rather serious."

"I'm afraid it's considerably more serious than the initial reports suggested," Dr. Thornton replied, settling into her chair with the practised efficiency of someone who delivered difficult news regularly. "The chemical compounds he administered to himself have caused what we believe to be permanent neurological damage, combined with psychological fragmentation that simply doesn't respond to conventional treatment."

"Meaning what, precisely?" Jane asked carefully.

"Meaning that the person who conducted these experiments on himself no longer exists in any coherent sense, does he? What remains appears to be fragments of different personalities, none of which seem to remember why the transformation was undertaken in the first place."

Dr. Thornton had been treating psychiatric patients for fifteen years, had encountered everything from severe depression to complete psychotic breaks, but she'd never seen anything quite like what occupied the secure room down the corridor.

"The physical changes," she continued, "appear to be permanent as well. The patient's appearance shifts constantly between masculine and feminine characteristics, but never settles into any stable configuration. It's as if his biological identity has become fundamentally wonky."

"Can he be treated?" Genevieve asked quietly.

"We're having a go at various interventions, but frankly, we're in uncharted territory. The combination of synthetic hormones, consciousness-altering drugs, and whatever else he was experimenting with—it's created effects that don't appear in any medical literature."

John leaned forward with the intensity that belonged to people trying to get their heads round problems that might affect their families. "Dr. Thornton, is he dangerous? To himself or others?"

"At present, no. He seems to have no memory of his previous obsessions, no awareness of the people he was attempting to pursue. If anything, he appears to have retreated so far into his own fractured consciousness that external reality has become largely irrelevant."

The assessment was both reassuring and tragic. The chap who'd terrorised Wendy Whitrose no longer existed, but what remained was something that could barely be called human.

"We've had one request," Dr. Thornton continued carefully, "from Miss Whitrose herself. She's asked to see him, to understand what's become of the person she believed she knew."

"Absolutely not," John said immediately. "Wendy's been through quite enough trauma without exposing her to... to whatever he's become."

"That's rather what we told her initially. But she's been quite insistent, hasn't she? She seems to feel that seeing the reality of his condition might help her come to terms with what happened to her."

Jane and John exchanged glances that carried the weight of parents trying to protect their daughter whilst recognising her right to make her own way about recovery.

"What do you think, from a medical standpoint?" Jane asked.

"I think that confronting the reality of someone who deceived you—seeing what their deception ultimately cost them—can sometimes provide a form of closure. But I also think it could be traumatic in ways that are rather difficult to predict."

"Could we accompany her?" Genevieve asked. "If she's determined to do this, perhaps having family support would make it rather safer."

Dr. Thornton nodded. "That would certainly be advisable. But I should warn you—what you'll see bears very little resemblance to either the Dr. Slaughter who worked at University College Hospital or the Evangeline Lovelace who befriended Miss Whitrose. The transformation he sought has left him as something quite other, hasn't it?"

Wendy Whitrose had spent three days in hospital processing the reality that her closest friend for four months had been an elaborate chemical deception created by someone whose feelings toward her were far more intense and dangerous than friendship warranted.

Now she stood outside Bethlem's secure ward, flanked by her family and Dr. Thornton, preparing to confront whatever remained of the person who'd systematically manipulated her emotions whilst conducting unauthorised medical experiments on himself.

"Are you quite certain about this, darling?" Jane asked for the third time since they'd arrived. "There's no harm in changing your mind."

"I need to see," Wendy said quietly. "I need to get my head round what he became, what all of this was really about."

Dr. Thornton unlocked the observation room door with the sort of institutional key that suggested whatever lay beyond required careful security. "The patient is restrained for his own safety—the physical instability makes him prone to injury if he attempts normal movement. He may not recognise you, and he may not respond to questions in any sensible manner."

"Has he said anything about... about me? About why he did what he did?"

"He doesn't appear to retain any memory of his previous motivations. The personality fragments we can observe seem to be unaware of each other's existence, and none of them demonstrate recognition of external stimuli that don't relate to immediate physical needs."

The observation window looked into a room that had been designed for patients who required constant medical supervision. White walls, minimal furniture, monitoring equipment that tracked vital signs with the steady persistence of mechanical attention.

On the narrow bed, restrained with soft cuffs that prevented self-injury, lay something that defied easy categorisation.

The physical form was recognisably human but seemed to shift constantly between different configurations. Sometimes the features appeared masculine—the thin face and unkempt hair that had belonged to Dr. Malcolm Slaughter. Sometimes they resolved into feminine beauty—perfect cheekbones and flowing blonde locks that had characterised Evangeline Lovelace.

But increasingly, the appearance settled into something that belonged to neither identity. Androgynous in the most unsettling sense, beautiful and terrible simultaneously, like a classical statue that had been carved by someone who'd never quite sorted out what they were trying to create.



"Good Lord," John whispered, instinctively moving closer to his wife.

The figure on the bed turned toward the observation window, though whether in response to their presence or to some internal stimulus was impossible to determine. The eyes that looked back at them held no recognition, no awareness of the people watching from the other side of the glass.

Instead, there was a kind of profound absence—not emptiness exactly, but as if the consciousness that had once inhabited that body had dispersed into fragments too small and scattered to constitute a coherent person.

"He doesn't know we're here, does he?" Wendy asked.

"We don't believe so," Dr. Thornton confirmed. "The personality fragments seem to be experiencing reality from completely different perspectives. One might be aware of physical sensations, another might be processing visual stimuli, but there's no integration, no central consciousness that combines these experiences into coherent awareness."

"Is he in pain?"

"We don't think so. Pain requires a level of neurological integration that doesn't appear to be present."

Wendy pressed closer to the observation window, studying the face that had once belonged to someone she'd trusted completely. The features shifted as she watched—sometimes settling into configurations she recognised from months of friendship, sometimes becoming something utterly barmy.

"I keep thinking about our conversations," she said quietly. "All those times he seemed to understand exactly what I needed to hear, seemed to care about my thoughts and feelings in ways that felt almost uncanny, didn't they?"

"What about them?" Genevieve asked gently.

"They were calculated, weren't they? Every expression of interest, every moment of apparent understanding—all designed to make me trust him, to make me care about him." Wendy's voice carried the particular pain that belonged to people recognising the full extent of their betrayal. "He studied me like a research project, learned my patterns, worked out exactly what sort of person I'd take a fancy to."

"And then he became that person," Dr. Thornton added. "Using chemistry to construct an identity that would appeal to your particular emotional needs."

"But why?" The question emerged with desperate intensity. "What could he possibly have wanted from me that justified such elaborate carry-on?"

Dr. Thornton had been wondering the same thing. In her experience, people who constructed false identities usually wanted money, sex, or social access. But Dr. Slaughter's motivations seemed more complex and ultimately more tragic.

"Based on his hospital records and the witness statements we've collected, I believe he convinced himself that if he could become the right sort of person, you would fall in love with him. The transformation wasn't just about deception—it was about becoming someone he believed would be worthy of your affection."

"But I could never have loved him," Wendy said, the reality settling over her with devastating clarity. "Not Malcolm Slaughter, and certainly not the false identity he created. The entire premise was completely off from the beginning."

"Yes," Dr. Thornton agreed. "His understanding of human relationships was fundamentally distorted, wasn't it? He seemed to believe that love was something that could be engineered through careful personality construction rather than something that emerges from proper connection between real people."

The figure on the bed had turned away from the window, apparently losing interest in whatever external stimuli had briefly captured its attention. It now stared at the ceiling with the vacant intensity that belonged to someone watching things that existed only in their fractured consciousness.

"Will he recover?" John asked.

"Recovery would require reintegration of his scattered personality fragments, reversal of the physical changes caused by systematic hormone manipulation, and reconstruction of memories that appear to have been chemically disrupted. Frankly, we haven't the foggiest whether any of those things are possible."

"So this is permanent?"

"We believe so, yes. What you're seeing represents the final result of his transformation experiments. He achieved what he was seeking—complete escape from Malcolm Slaughter's identity—but the cost was the destruction of any coherent sense of self."

Wendy continued studying the figure through the observation glass, trying to reconcile what she saw with her memories of the elegant, charming woman who'd been her closest friend for four months.

"He got what he wanted, didn't he?" she said finally. "He's no longer Malcolm Slaughter. He's no longer anybody, really."

"In a sense, yes. Though I doubt this was the outcome he was hoping for."

"What was he hoping for?"

Dr. Thornton considered the question carefully. In her assessment, Dr. Slaughter had been driven by profound self-hatred combined with romantic obsession, seeking to sort out both problems through chemical transformation. But the solution had been fundamentally flawed from the beginning.

"I think he was hoping to become someone you could love without having to be someone he couldn't bear to be. But love doesn't work that way, does it? It requires genuine connection between real people, not elaborate performances designed to manipulate emotional responses."

"No," Wendy agreed, stepping back from the observation window. "It doesn't work that way at all."

They stood in silence for several minutes, watching the figure on the bed cycle through different physical configurations whilst apparently remaining unaware of their presence. Beautiful and tragic and utterly alone, a cautionary tale about what happened when someone tried to sort out the fundamental problems of human existence through chemistry rather than genuine self-acceptance.

"I've seen enough," Wendy said finally. "I understand now what he became, what all of this cost him."

"And how do you feel about that?" Dr. Thornton asked.

Wendy considered the question whilst studying her own reflection in the observation window—a real person, with real thoughts and feelings and the sort of proper existence that no amount of chemical manipulation could replicate.

"I feel sorry for him," she said finally. "And grateful that I discovered the truth before his delusions did me in as well."

As they left the secure ward, the figure on the bed continued its lonely cycling between identities that no longer remembered why they'd been created, what they'd been seeking, or whether any of it had been worth the bloody trouble.

Malcolm Slaughter had achieved perfect transformation at last.

He'd become absolutely nothing at all.

Chapter 18: Recovery

March 1967

Spring came early to Carnaby Street that year, and with it, the particular energy that belonged to London when the city remembered that winter wouldn't last forever.

Wendy Whitrose stood behind the counter at Kaleidoscope, arranging a display of summer dresses that had turned up that morning from a young designer in Chelsea. The fabrics caught the March sunlight streaming through the boutique's windows—bright geometric patterns and bold colours that seemed to vibrate with optimism about the future.

It had been six weeks since the night Evangeline Lovelace had broken into her flat and revealed himself to be someone else entirely. Six weeks of therapy sessions with Dr. Patterson, family dinners that actually felt like proper family dinners, and the gradual process of learning to trust her own judgement about people again.

"Those are absolutely smashing," said the girl examining the yellow mini-dress with op-art spirals. She couldn't be more than seventeen, all long legs and dramatic eye makeup, the sort of customer who made Kaleidoscope feel like the centre of London's fashion revolution. "Very now, aren't they?"

"Rather," Wendy agreed, though she found herself studying the girl's enthusiasm with the careful attention that had become her habit since discovering how elaborate deceptions could be. Not suspicion, exactly, but awareness. The recognition that not everything that appeared genuine actually was.

But this girl's excitement about the dress seemed authentic—the sort of uncomplicated response to beautiful things that belonged to people who were exactly who they appeared to be.

"I'll take it," the girl decided. "And the white boots, if they've got them in a size six."

As Wendy wrapped the purchase in Kaleidoscope's signature silver paper, she found herself appreciating the simple transaction. Real person, real desire for beautiful clothing, real exchange of money for goods. No hidden agendas, no elaborate performances, no systematic deception designed to manipulate emotions.

Just normal human interaction between people who were exactly who they claimed to be.

The bell above the door chimed, admitting Genevieve with her usual theatrical flair. But something about her sister's entrance seemed different these days—less performative, more grounded. As if the events of the past months had taught her something important about the difference between authentic self-expression and elaborate disguise.

"Right then," Genevieve announced, settling into the chair beside the counter with a stack of art school portfolios, "I've brought the sketches for the window display. Want to have a dekkko?"

The designs were brilliant—geometric patterns that echoed the season's fashion trends whilst creating visual narratives about transformation and identity. But unlike the chemical transformations that had nearly destroyed their family, these were honest artistic explorations of how people chose to present themselves to the world.

"They're wonderful," Wendy said, studying a sketch that combined mod fashion elements with classical portraiture. "Very thoughtful."

"That's what I was going for, wasn't it? Art that makes people think about authenticity, about the difference between choosing who you want to be and pretending to be someone you're not."

Genevieve had been processing the events of February in her own way—through her artwork, through long conversations with friends at the Royal College of Art, through a newfound appreciation for relationships that didn't require elaborate interpretation.

"I keep thinking about that last night," she continued, arranging the sketches across the counter. "When he... when Malcolm showed us what he'd been getting up to. The way he seemed to genuinely believe that systematic deception was the same thing as love."

"Dr. Patterson says that's rather common with obsessive personalities," Wendy replied, though she still found the clinical explanations inadequate for describing the emotional reality of being systematically manipulated by someone whose feelings she'd never asked for. "They convince themselves that their behaviour is protective rather than predatory."

"But how do you tell the difference? Between someone who genuinely cares about you and someone who's putting on a performance for their own purposes?"

The question had been troubling Wendy as well. Dr. Patterson had offered various therapeutic strategies—trusting her instincts, paying attention to inconsistencies, maintaining healthy boundaries with new people. But the fundamental challenge remained: how did you open yourself to authentic connection whilst protecting yourself from elaborate deception?

"I think," Wendy said carefully, "you pay attention to whether someone's interest in you feels sustainable. Whether they're curious about who you actually are, or whether they seem more invested in who they think you ought to be."

"Malcolm was definitely more keen on his fantasy version of you than your actual personality."

"Exactly. Evangeline never disagreed with me about anything important, never challenged my opinions, never had preferences that conflicted with mine. At the time, I thought that meant we were perfectly compatible."

"But it actually meant he was putting on an act rather than discovering proper compatibility naturally."

"Right. Real friendship involves some friction, doesn't it? Some moments where you have to negotiate different perspectives or work through disagreements. Perfect harmony is usually a sign that someone's not being entirely honest."

The observation had emerged from months of therapy, but also from watching her own family navigate the aftermath of Malcolm's deception. Her parents, her sister, the various friends who'd rallied round her during the crisis—all of them had moments of disagreement, irritation, complex emotions that required patient discussion.

Real relationships were messier than Malcolm's chemical performance had been, but they were also more sustainable because they were built on genuine understanding rather than elaborate fantasy.

"I had coffee with Marcus Webb yesterday," Genevieve said, changing the subject with the particular timing that belonged to people who'd been building up to important announcements. "The photographer who documented all of this madness."

"Oh yes?"

"He's been commissioned by an American magazine to write about what happened. About how someone with medical knowledge used nicked pharmaceuticals to create false identities for stalking purposes."

Wendy felt her stomach clench slightly. The idea of their family's trauma being turned into magazine content wasn't entirely comfortable, even if it might help other people recognise similar warning signs.

"What sort of article?"

"Educational, mostly. Warning signs of elaborate deception, how chemical transformation might be used for predatory purposes, that sort of thing. He wants to have a word with you, but only if you're comfortable with it."

"I'm not certain I'm ready for that level of public attention."

"That's what I told him. But he said something rather interesting—that there might be other people experiencing similar situations, other cases where medical professionals are using their knowledge for systematic identity fraud."

The possibility was disturbing but not entirely surprising. If Malcolm had been able to develop such techniques, presumably other people with similar knowledge and psychological problems might attempt similar deceptions.

"Dr. Patterson mentioned that the police have been contacted by other medical facilities reporting unusual pharmaceutical thefts," Wendy said. "Apparently our situation wasn't entirely a one-off."

"Which suggests that publicity might actually be helpful. Not sensational exploitation, but genuine education about what to keep an eye out for."

Wendy considered this whilst arranging another rack of dresses. The idea of helping other people avoid what she'd experienced was appealing, but the emotional cost of revisiting the trauma publicly seemed considerable.

"Perhaps in a few months," she said finally. "When I've got more perspective on what happened."

"Fair enough. Marcus said he'd wait until you felt ready."

The afternoon customers began arriving with the usual mix of serious fashion enthusiasts and curious tourists who'd heard about Carnaby Street's reputation as London's most innovative shopping district. Wendy found herself enjoying the busy atmosphere—real people making genuine choices about self-expression, using clothing and accessories to explore identity in healthy, authentic ways.

So different from Malcolm's approach to transformation, which had been secretive, deceptive, and ultimately destructive to everyone involved.

"Miss Whitrose?" A young chap appeared at the counter, well-dressed but slightly nervous, the sort of customer who clearly felt out of place in a boutique designed primarily for women's fashion. "I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but I'm looking for a gift for my girlfriend. Something that would suit someone who's keen on the mod scene but doesn't want anything too... well, too dramatic."

Wendy studied him carefully—not with the paranoid intensity that had characterised her first weeks after the revelation, but with the healthy wariness that Dr. Patterson had helped her develop. His nervousness seemed genuine, his request reasonable, his body language suggesting someone who was exactly what he appeared to be: a slightly overwhelmed young bloke trying to buy appropriate clothing for someone he cared about.

"Of course," she said warmly. "What sort of things does she usually wear? And what's the occasion?"

As they discussed fabric preferences and sizing, Wendy found herself appreciating the straightforward nature of the interaction. No hidden agendas, no elaborate performances, just someone asking for help with a genuine problem and accepting her expertise at face value.

This was what normal human connection looked like—imperfect, sometimes awkward, but authentic in ways that Malcolm's chemical transformations had never achieved.

"That's perfect," the young chap said, examining the dress and accessories Wendy had selected. "She'll love these. Ta ever so much for your help."

After he'd left with his carefully wrapped packages, Genevieve looked up from her sketches with an expression of mild surprise.

"You handled that brilliantly," she said. "Very natural, very professional. No hesitation at all."

"Did you expect hesitation?"

"Well, given what happened with... you know. A strange bloke appearing at the boutique, asking detailed questions about women's preferences. A few weeks ago, that might have made you rather nervous."

Wendy considered this observation. Her sister was right—six weeks ago, any unfamiliar man showing interest in understanding women's fashion choices would have triggered immediate anxiety about potential deception or stalking behaviour.

But this interaction had felt completely different. The young man's nervousness had seemed genuine, his questions focused on practical concerns rather than psychological manipulation, his gratitude sincere rather than calculated.

"I think," Wendy said slowly, "I'm learning to tell the difference between genuine interest and performance. Between someone who wants to understand women's perspectives and someone who wants to take advantage of them."

"How can you tell?"

"Authentic questions feel different from manipulative ones. That young chap was asking about fabric and sizing because he wanted to buy something his girlfriend would genuinely enjoy. Malcolm asked about my preferences because he wanted to construct an identity that would make me emotionally dependent on him."

"The motivation behind the questions determines whether they feel safe or threatening."

"Exactly. And I think I'm getting the hang of recognising the difference."

The late afternoon light streaming through Kaleidoscope's windows was taking on the golden quality that belonged to London in early spring—warm and optimistic and brimming with promise. Outside, Carnaby Street bustled with its usual mixture of fashion enthusiasts, tourists, and young people who'd made this narrow stretch of pavement into the symbolic centre of cultural revolution.

But inside the boutique, two sisters sat surrounded by beautiful clothing and genuine conversation, rebuilding trust in human connection one honest interaction at a time.

"Wendy?" Genevieve said quietly. "Are you happy?"

The question caught her off guard. Not because it was difficult to answer, but because she realised she hadn't asked herself that question in months. During the period of friendship with Evangeline, she'd been focused on whether she felt understood, appreciated, valued. During the aftermath of discovering the deception, she'd been focused on healing, processing, recovery.

But happiness—actual contentment with her life as it was, rather than as someone else thought it should be—that was something different.

"Yes," she said, surprised by the certainty in her own voice. "I rather think I am."

"Even after everything that happened?"

"Perhaps because of everything that happened. I know things about myself now that I didn't know before. I understand what authentic friendship feels like because I've experienced elaborate counterfeit friendship. I appreciate genuine human connection because I've seen what systematic manipulation looks like."

"And you're not frightened of it happening again?"

Wendy considered this question whilst watching the street life continue outside the boutique's windows. People walking together, talking, laughing, living their authentic lives without elaborate disguises or chemical transformations.

"I'm more careful now," she said finally. "More aware of warning signs, more willing to trust my instincts when something feels off. But I'm not frightened of connecting with people who are genuine."

"How do you know they're genuine?"

"You don't, completely. But you learn to recognise the signs of authenticity just as you learn to recognise the signs of deception. And you remember that most people are exactly who they appear to be—imperfect, complicated, sometimes difficult, but real."

The bell above the door chimed again, admitting their parents with the particular energy that belonged to people who'd spent the day managing various domestic crises and were ready for family time.

"Girls," Jane announced, carrying packages from Harrods and wearing the satisfied expression of someone who'd successfully navigated London's department stores, "we're taking you both to dinner. That new place in Soho that everyone's on about."

"To celebrate what?" Genevieve asked.

"To celebrate the fact that our family survived something rather extraordinary," John said, settling into the chair near the window with the weary contentment that belonged to fathers whose daughters were safe and thriving. "And to celebrate the fact that spring has arrived in London, and we're all here to enjoy it."

As Wendy locked up the boutique and gathered her things, she reflected on how much had changed since that October evening when she'd first met Evangeline Lovelace at a photographer's party. She'd learned about deception and authenticity, about the difference between love and obsession, about the importance of family and the resilience of human connection.

But most importantly, she'd learned that authentic life—messy, imperfect, sometimes disappointing—was infinitely more valuable than any elaborate performance designed to manipulate emotions.

Outside, London's cultural revolution continued with its usual mixture of creativity and commerce, art and fashion, genuine innovation and temporary trends. But Wendy Whitrose walked through it all with the quiet confidence of someone who'd discovered the difference between authentic transformation and dangerous illusion.

She was exactly who she was, and that was quite enough.

Epilogue: Spring 1967

The Summer of Love was still months away, but London already thrummed with the particular energy that belonged to a city convinced it was rewriting the rules of how people were allowed to live.

Wendy Whitrose stood outside the Royal Festival Hall on a warm May afternoon, watching the Thames flow past with its cargo of tourist boats and working barges, thinking about how much had changed since that October evening when she'd first met someone who'd claimed to be Evangeline Lovelace.

Seven months. Long enough for the sharp edges of trauma to soften into something more manageable, though not long enough to forget the lessons learned about the difference between authentic connection and elaborate performance.

"You're looking rather thoughtful," Genevieve observed, turning up beside her with two cups of tea from the festival café and her usual ability to read her sister's moods with uncanny accuracy.



"Just thinking about how different everything feels now," Wendy replied, accepting the tea gratefully. "Not bad different. Just... more real, somehow."

Genevieve had changed as well over the past months. Her artwork had evolved from abstract explorations of identity into more grounded examinations of authentic self-expression. The Piccadilly Underground had developed a following among London's art school crowd, playing venues where the music mattered more than the fashion statement.

"More real how?"

"I suppose I used to think that perfect understanding between people was the goal," Wendy said, watching a group of art students sketch the festival hall's modern architecture with earnest concentration. "That friendship meant never having disagreements, never having to negotiate different perspectives."

"And now?"

"Now I rather think those disagreements are what make relationships genuine. The friction, the need to actually get to know each other instead of just assuming compatibility."

It had taken months of therapy with Dr. Patterson to understand that Malcolm's perfect performance as Evangeline had been precisely what made it so dangerous. Real friendship required the sort of authentic messiness that couldn't be chemically manufactured or systematically calculated.

"Speaking of getting to know people," Genevieve said with the particular timing that suggested she'd been building up to something important, "Marcus Webb rang yesterday. About that article for the American magazine."

"Oh yes?"

"Three other cases, Wendy. Medical professionals using nicked pharmaceuticals to create false identities for stalking purposes. All in the past year, all following similar patterns to what we experienced."

The information wasn't entirely surprising—Dr. Patterson had previously mentioned that the police across Britain were reporting unusual pharmaceutical thefts—but it was still disturbing to realise their family's trauma hadn't been a one-off.

"The article could be genuinely helpful," Genevieve continued. "Not sensational exploitation, but proper education about warning signs, about how elaborate these deceptions can become."

Wendy had been considering the interview request for weeks, weighing the emotional cost of revisiting the trauma against the potential benefit of helping other people recognise similar situations before they became dangerous.

"I think I'm ready," she said finally. "Not to rehash all the personal details, but to help people understand how sophisticated these deceptions can be. How someone with medical knowledge can create transformations that seem completely genuine."

"Are you certain?"

"Rather. It's been seven months, hasn't it? Time to do something useful with what I've learned."

They walked along the South Bank, past the bookstalls and street musicians that had made this stretch of the Thames into London's unofficial cultural marketplace. The city's energy felt different

these days—less desperate to prove itself revolutionary, more confident about the changes it was creating.

Wendy found herself appreciating the authentic chaos of it all. Real people making genuine choices about how to express themselves, using art and music and fashion to explore identity in healthy, creative ways. So different from Malcolm's secretive, destructive approach to transformation.

"How's the boutique?" Genevieve asked as they paused to watch a folk singer perform for a crowd of office workers on their lunch break.

"Absolutely thriving, actually. We've got three new designers, and that piece in Vogue brought in customers from all over Europe." Wendy smiled, remembering the surreal experience of seeing Kaleidoscope mentioned in international fashion coverage. "Rather strange to think that a shop on Carnaby Street is now considered essential viewing for people keen on London style."

"You've become part of the cultural revolution, haven't you?"

"I suppose I have. Though it feels different now—more grounded, less about creating artificial versions of myself and more about helping other people express their authentic selves."

The distinction was important. London's fashion scene could be as performative and deceptive as anything else, but when it was done honestly—people exploring genuine aspects of their personalities through clothing and style—it became something entirely different from Malcolm's chemical masquerade.

"Any word about...?" Genevieve's question trailed off, but Wendy understood what she was asking.

"Dr. Thornton rang last month. No change in his condition. The personality fragments seem stable, but there's no integration, no coherent sense of self." Wendy paused, considering how to describe something that challenged conventional understanding of human consciousness. "She said he's physically stable, not in any pain, but essentially absent. Like the lights are on but nobody's home, is there?"

"Do you think about him often?"

"Not as much as I used to. At first, I couldn't stop wondering what signs I'd missed, what I should have recognised earlier. But Dr. Patterson helped me understand that elaborate deceptions are designed specifically to bypass normal warning systems."

"And now?"

"Now I mostly feel sorry for him. He was so desperate to be someone else that he destroyed any possibility of being anyone at all."

They continued walking toward Westminster Bridge, past the young couples and tourists who'd made the South Bank into London's most democratic public space. Everyone was welcome here—art students and office workers, fashion enthusiasts and political activists, people from every

background imaginable united by the simple desire to participate in whatever cultural experiment London was conducting.

"I met someone," Wendy said quietly, surprising herself with the admission.

Genevieve stopped walking entirely. "Did you? When? Who?"

"His name is David. He works for the BBC, producing cultural programmes. We met at that gallery opening in Chelsea last month."

"And?"

"And he's exactly who he claims to be. Complicated, sometimes difficult, genuinely passionate about his work. We disagree about things—music, politics, whether the cultural revolution will last or burn itself out within a few years."

"That sounds wonderfully normal."

"It is. Wonderfully, messily normal. He's not trying to become someone I'd find attractive—he's just himself, and we're discovering whether we're compatible."

The relationship was still new, still tentative, but it felt fundamentally different from her friendship with Evangeline. Instead of perfect understanding, there were genuine negotiations about different perspectives. Instead of calculated charm, there was authentic curiosity about each other's thoughts and experiences.

"So, you're happy with him?" Genevieve asked.

Wendy considered the question whilst watching London's afternoon energy flow around them. Office workers heading home, students discussing art and politics, couples walking hand in hand, the sort of authentic human activity that no amount of chemical manipulation could replicate.

"Yes," she said, recognising the truth of it as she spoke. "Not perfectly, constantly happy—that would be suspicious after everything I've learned about performances designed to manipulate emotions. But genuinely content with my life as it is, rather than as someone else thinks it ought to be."

"Even with the wariness? The careful attention to whether people are being genuine?"

"Especially because of that. The wariness isn't paranoia—it's wisdom. I understand now that authentic relationships require some friction, some disagreement, some moments where you have to work through different perspectives. Perfect harmony is usually a sign that someone's not being entirely honest."

They reached Westminster Bridge as the late afternoon light began to take on the golden quality that made London photographers famous throughout Europe. The city spread out before them—ancient

and modern, traditional and revolutionary, exactly the sort of complex authentic entity that couldn't be chemically manufactured or systematically calculated.

"I keep thinking about what he said that last night," Wendy continued. "About creating himself specifically for me, about becoming someone I could love. He genuinely believed that love was something that could be engineered through careful personality construction."

"But it can't be, can it?"

"No. Love emerges from genuine connection between real people, not from elaborate performances designed to manipulate emotional responses. Malcolm never understood that—he thought if he could just become the right sort of person, I'd fall in love with him. But the entire premise was completely off from the beginning."

"Because you could never have loved someone who didn't actually exist."

"Exactly. And because real love requires accepting someone as they actually are, not as they've chemically altered themselves to appear."

As they walked back toward Carnaby Street, Wendy reflected on how much London had changed since that autumn evening when she'd first encountered elaborate deception disguised as friendship. The city's cultural revolution continued, but with less desperation now, more confidence about the changes it was creating.

Street musicians played genuine music rather than calculated performances. Fashion designers explored authentic expressions of contemporary identity rather than systematic manipulation of visual codes. Young people gathered in coffee houses and galleries to discuss real ideas rather than constructed personas.

Not perfect—London would never be perfect, and neither would the people who lived there. But real in ways that mattered, honest in ways that could be trusted, authentic in ways that no amount of chemical transformation could replicate.

"Right then," Genevieve said as they approached Kaleidoscope's familiar windows, "family dinner tonight, isn't it? Mummy's making her famous roast."

"Wouldn't miss it. Though I should warn you—David might join us. If that's alright with everyone."

"A real boyfriend meeting the family? How wonderfully conventional."

"Isn't it just? Rather refreshing after everything we've been through."

As Wendy unlocked the boutique for one final check of the evening's receipts, she caught her reflection in the window and smiled at what she saw: a real person, with real thoughts and feelings and the sort of authentic existence that no amount of chemical manipulation could improve upon.

Malcolm Slaughter had achieved perfect transformation at last—he'd become nothing at all.

But Wendy Whitrose had discovered something infinitely more valuable: the confidence to be exactly who she was, and the wisdom to recognise the difference between authentic connection and elaborate performance.

It was enough. More than enough.

It was real.

British Idioms, Colloquialisms, and Expressions

- **Absolutely gear** - Excellent, wonderful (1960s slang)
- **Absolutely smashing** - Wonderful, excellent
- **Absolutely thriving** - Doing extremely well
- **After-party** - Party following main event
- **Alright** - Okay, acceptable
- **At face value** - Accepting as genuine without question
- **Awfully sorry** - Very sorry (polite intensifier)
- **Banged up** - Arrested, imprisoned (slang)
- **Barmy** - Crazy, insane
- **Best part of** - Most of, majority of
- **Blimey** - Exclamation of surprise
- **Blokes** - Men, guys (informal)
- **Bloody** - Mild intensifier/expletive (e.g., "bloody brilliant")
- **Bloody hell** - Strong exclamation of surprise
- **Building up to** - Leading toward, preparing to announce
- **Burn itself out** - Fail or collapse from exhaustion
- **Chap** - Man, fellow (more polite than "bloke")
- **Cheers** - Thanks/goodbye
- **Chuffed** - Pleased, delighted
- **Clearing out** - Evacuating, emptying
- **Clocked** - Noticed, spotted
- **Coffee houses** - Cafés (more British term)
- **Come off it** - "Don't be ridiculous" or "stop pretending"
- **Come round** - Regain consciousness, wake up
- **Come to terms with** - Accept and deal with something difficult
- **Coming round** - Regaining consciousness
- **Completely off** - Wrong, mistaken
- **Crowd of us** - Group of us (more British phrasing)
- **Dekko** – look at, from Hindi Dekho meaning look or see
- **D'you** - Do you (British contraction)
- **Daddy/Mummy** - Father/mother (upper-class usage)
- **Did me in** - Destroyed or exhausted me
- **Dodgy** - Suspicious, unreliable, dangerous
- **Done a runner** - Escaped, ran away
- **Don't come the innocent with me** - Don't pretend to be naive
- **Fair enough** - That's reasonable, I accept that
- **Fancy a drink?** - Would you like to have a drink?
- **Frightfully** - Very (as intensifier, upper-class)
- **Get one's head round** - Understand, comprehend
- **Get over** - Recover from, overcome
- **Getting over** - Recovering from
- **Going absolutely barmy** - Going crazy, losing one's mind
- **Going to pieces** - Falling apart, deteriorating
- **Good at taking the piss** - Good at making fun of oneself

- **Good Lord** - Exclamation of surprise (upper-class)
- **Gorgeous** - Beautiful
- **Got on with** - Continued with, carried on with
- **Groovy** - Cool, fashionable (1960s)
- **Guv** - Boss, sir (working-class address to superior)
- **Hang on** - Wait a moment
- **Have a dekko** - Have a look
- **Have a go at** - Try, attempt
- **Have a gossip** - Have a chat, talk
- **Have a word with** - Speak to, have a conversation with
- **Haven't the foggiest** - Don't know at all
- **Holed up** - Hiding, barricaded in
- **I say** - Exclamation of surprise or emphasis
- **I see** - I understand (acknowledgment)
- **Isn't it just?** - Isn't that exactly right?
- **Keen on** - Interested in, enthusiastic about
- **Legging it** - Running away quickly
- **Lovely work** - Excellent job (praise)
- **Mad as a hatter** - Completely crazy
- **Make one's own way** - Make independent decisions
- **Materialised** - Appeared (more formal British)
- **Mix one up** - Create or concoct something
- **Muck in/Mucking about** - Participate/playing around
- **Muttering on** - Talking about, complaining
- **Nicked/Nicking** - Stolen/stealing (slang)
- **Nobody's home** - No one is mentally present
- **Old Bill** - Police (slang)
- **On about** - Talking about
- **On the blower** - On the telephone
- **One-off** - Isolated incident, unique occurrence
- **Ought to** - Should
- **Proper** - Real, genuine (as intensifier)
- **Push off** - Leave, go away
- **Put off** - Delayed, postponed
- **Put on an act** - Pretend, perform falsely
- **Put years on him** - Aged him significantly
- **Quite** - Rather, very (British intensifier)
- **Rang off** - Hung up the telephone
- **Rather** - Somewhat, quite (frequent British intensifier)
- **Rather done in** - Tired, exhausted
- **Rather hope so** - Quite hope so
- **Rather lovely** - Quite nice
- **Rather a shame** - Quite unfortunate
- **Rather trying** - Difficult, challenging
- **Rehash** - Go over again, repeat
- **Right then** - Transitional phrase, "well then"
- **Routine as anything** - Very routine, completely ordinary
- **Scandalous** - Shocking, outrageous

- **Scarpered** - Ran away, escaped
- **Shan't** - Shall not (formal contraction)
- **Smashing** - Excellent, wonderful
- **Sorted/Sort out** - Fixed, resolved/fix, resolve
- **Spotted** - Noticed, detected
- **Straightaway** - Immediately
- **Striking up conversations** - Starting conversations
- **Ta/Ta ever so much** - Thanks/Thank you very much
- **Take a fancy to** - Become attracted to or interested in
- **Terribly** - Very (as intensifier)
- **The done thing** - Proper, appropriate behavior
- **The Yard** - Scotland Yard (police headquarters)
- **There's no telling** - It's impossible to know
- **Turned up** - Arrived, appeared
- **Utterly barmy** - Completely crazy
- **We'll see about that** - We'll see
- **Went mad** - Went wild, became very excited
- **Whilst** - While
- **Won't you?/Aren't they?** - Tag questions (British speech pattern)
- **Working out** - Figuring out, calculating

British vs. American Spellings

- Analyse, analyze
- Anaesthesia, anesthesia
- Behaviour, behavior
- Catalogue, catalog
- Categorisation, categorization
- Centre, center
- Characterised, characterized
- Classify, classify
- Colour, color
- Colourless, colorless
- Corridor, hallway
- Counselling, counseling
- Cupboard, closet
- Defence, defense
- Favour, favor
- Flat, apartment
- Formulae, formulas
- Grey, gray
- Jewellery, jewelry
- Labelled, labeled
- Licence, license (noun)
- Loo, bathroom/toilet
- Metabolise, metabolize
- Naïve, naive
- Neighbours, neighbors
- Organise, organize
- Practised, practiced
- Programme, program
- Realise, realize
- Recognise, recognize
- Rehearsing, rehearsing
- Smelt, smelled
- Specialised, specialized
- Stabilise, stabilize
- Storey, story/floor
- Theatre, theater
- Tobacconist's, tobacco shop
- Unauthorised, unauthorized
- Whilst, while