



Playing the Royal Game

By Carol Marinelli

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Carol Marinelli recently filled in a form asking for her job title. Thrilled to be able to put down her answer, she put writer. Then it asked what Carol did for relaxation and she put down the truth - writing. The third question asked for her hobbies. Well, not wanting to look obsessed she crossed the fingers on her hand and answered swimming but, given that the chlorine in the pool does terrible things to her highlights – I’m sure you can guess the real answer.

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She was better off without the job, Allegra told herself.

No one should have to put up with that.

Except that walking in the rain along grey London streets, taking the underground to various employment agencies, the anger that her boss could make such a blatant a pass at her and then fire her for not succumbing started to be replaced with something that felt close to fear.

She needed that job.

Needed it. Her savings had been obliterated by the bottomless pit that was her family's excess spending. At times it felt as if her lowly publishing wage supported half the Jackson family. Yes, she was the boring reliable one, but they didn't mind her dependability when their erratic ways found them in trouble. Just last week she had lent her stepmother, Chantelle, close to five thousand pounds in cash for credit card debts that her father didn't know about. It was laughable to think that she might now have to have her family support her.

It was a miserable day, with no sign that it was spring; instead it was cold and wet, and Allegra dug her hands deeper into her trench coat pockets, her fingers curling around a fifty-pound note she had pulled out of the ATM.

If her boss refused to put her pay in tomorrow it was all she had before being completely broke. No!

She'd been through worse than this, Allegra decided. As Bobby Jackson's daughter she was all too used to the bailiffs but her father always managed to pick himself up; he never let it get him down. She was not going to sink, but hell, if she did, then she'd sink in style!

Pushing open a bar door, she walked in with her head held high, the heat hitting her as she entered, and Allegra slipped off her coat and hung it, her hair dripping wet and cold down her back. Normally she wouldn't entertain entering some random bar, but still, at least it was warm and she could sit down and finally gather her thoughts.

There had been a confidence to her as she'd stalked out of her office with dignity. With her track record and her job history, a lot of the agencies had called over the years offering her freelance work.

It had been sobering indeed to find out that they were hiring no one, that the financial crisis and changes to the industry meant that there were no causal jobs waiting for her to step into.

None.

Well, a chance for a couple, but they added up to about three hours' work per month. Per month!

Allegra was about to head to the bar but, glancing around, saw that it was table service so she walked over to a small alcove and took a seat, the plush couch lined with velvet. Despite its rather dingy appearance from the street, inside it was actually very nice and the prices on the menu verified that as fact.

She looked up at the sound of laughter—a group of well-dressed women were sipping on cocktails and Allegra couldn't help but envy their buoyant mood. As her eyes moved away from the jovial women they stilled for a fraction, because there, sitting at a table near them, lost in his own world, was possibly the most beautiful man ever to come into her line of vision. Dark suited, his thick brown hair was raked back to show an immaculate profile, high cheekbones and a very straight nose; his long legs were stretched out and crossed at the ankle. But despite his rather languorous position, as he stared into his glass there was a pensiveness to him, a furrow between his eyebrows that showed he was deep in thought. The furrow deepened as there was another outbreak of laughter from the women's table, and just as he looked up, just as he might have caught her watching, Allegra was terribly grateful for the distraction of the waitress who approached.

'What can I get you?' Allegra was about to order a glass of house wine, or maybe just ask if they could do her a pot of tea and a sandwich, because she really ought to try a couple more job agencies, but hell, a girl could only take so much rejection in one day and she may well be living off tea and sandwiches for a long while yet!

'A bottle of Bollinger please.' It was an extravagant gesture for Allegra, an unusual one as well. She was extremely careful with her pay cheque, saving twenty percent to put towards her first mortgage before it even hit her account, determined never to be like her family—but where had that gotten her?

The waitress didn't bat an eye; instead she asked how many glasses.

'Just the one.'

She was given a little bowl of nuts too! 'Celebrating?' the waitress asked as she poured her drink.

'Sort of,' Allegra admitted, and then, left alone, she decided that she was. For months she had put up with her boss's thinly veiled leers and skin-crawling comments. It was worth celebrating just to finally be past all that, so she raised her glass to the window, in the general direction of her old work place.

'Cheers!'

As she turned she caught Mr. Gorgeous watching her—not staring, just idly curious—and she couldn't blame him for that. After all, she was raising a glass to the window. She gave him a brief smile and then turned back to her thoughts, took out a pen and the notebook and list of contacts that she always carried and set about making copious lists, determined, *determined*, that by the end of the week she would be back in work.

Halfway down the bottle and she didn't feel quite so brave. If anything, half a bottle of champagne on an empty stomach had her emotions bubbling and she was dangerously close to tears, especially when the waitress came over.

'You didn't sign the register when you came in,' the waitress said, and even before she continued Allegra knew what was coming and inwardly flinched as realization dawned. 'You are a member, aren't you?' She

felt a blush spread on her cheeks. Of course it was a private club that she'd entered, not some bar she'd just wandered into, and just as she was about to apologise and fling down her fifty-pound note and flee, a voice that was as pleasing as its owner saved her the embarrassment.

'Why are you hiding there?' A deep warm voice had both Allegra and the waitress turn around and she found herself looking now into the eyes of the pensive stranger—very brown eyes that stayed steady as hers blinked in confusion. He turned and addressed the waitress. 'Sorry, she's my guest. I'll sign her in in a moment.' The waitress opened her mouth to say something—after all, Allegra had been sitting there alone for a good half an hour or so and he had made no effort to join his *guest*—but perhaps he was a favourite customer, or maybe it was just his impressive stance, because, without comment, the waitress left them to it.

'Thanks,' Allegra said as he took a seat in front of her. 'But no thanks. I'll just settle my bill...' She went to go, but as he moved to stop her, his hand reaching across the table, she shot him a look that told him unwelcome contact would be a *very* foolish mistake on his part. Given the day she'd had, Allegra had enough pent-up energy to give this stranger a little piece of her mind.

'As I said, thank you, but no thank you.'

'At least finish your drink,' said the stranger. 'It would be a shame to waste it.'

It would be a crying shame actually.

Maybe she could take it with her, Allegra thought wildly, having visions of herself walking down the street, half-drunk bottle in hand, bemoaning her situation. She found herself smiling at the very thought—not smiling at him, of course, except he interpreted it as such, because he clicked slender fingers in the direction of the bar and summoned another glass. Allegra sat bristling as the waitress poured him a glass of *her* champagne.

'I'm just trying to enjoy a quiet drink alone,' she said pointedly.

'Then sign in,' he suggested.

'Ha, ha!'

'Or,' he offered, 'you can be my guest, which means you sit with me. I wouldn't hear of it otherwise.' She couldn't place his accent. He spoke English terribly well; in fact, his voice was clipped and well schooled, unlike Allegra's rather more London accent, but there was a slight ring to it, Spanish or Italian perhaps. She was determined not to stay long enough to find out.

'Anyway,' he carried on despite her lack of response, 'you don't look as if you are enjoying it. In fact, apart from the small salute to the window you seem as miserable as I am.' She looked at him and saw that the impressive suit he was wearing wasn't just dark, it was black, and so, too, the tie. Not just from the attire, but from the strain on his face, he had clearly come from a funeral. Now he was close, she could smell him—and he smelt nothing like the usual man in a bar. It wasn't just the delicious hint of cologne that was unusual; he actually smelt of clean—there was no other way to describe it. His eyes were clear and bizarrely she felt herself relax just a little, for this was surely not a man who usually pressed attention, and it wasn't as if she had anywhere else that she needed to be.

'Are you usually so invasive?'

He thought about it for a moment. 'No.' He took a sip of drink and seemed to think about it some more.

'Never. I just saw you looking so fed up and then when the waitress came over I thought.'

'That you'd cheer me up?'

'No.' He gave a small shrug. 'I thought we could be miserable together. Don't look, but there are a group of women...' He gestured his head and as instructed she didn't look, but she knew who he meant. She'd heard their flirting laughter, and had easily guessed it was aimed towards him. 'One of them in particular seems determined to join me.'

'I'd have thought you'd have no trouble at all fighting off unwelcome attention.' Unlike me, she didn't add, but then she wasn't particularly used to men vying for her attention—well, not gorgeous ones anyway. But knowing how...

Users Review

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David Johnston:

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