

FLETCHER & CLARK

FEELING EXCITED IS DEATH

The cordless phone rings; it's Clark.

Fletcher splashes his free hand in the water. —I'm in the bath, he says.

—You're in the bath? Clark says.

—Yep, Fletcher says. Then, in a hushed, urgent tone: —Does that shock you? Clark responds by barking out a short laugh, and Fletcher smiles: as long as he can make her laugh he knows that everything in their relationship is operating as normal.

—So I have gossip, he says.

—Yeah, I got your message.

He sticks his foot into the air, contemplates his flexing toes. He loosely cups his free hand around his genitals. —It's about Cassandra, he says.

—Oh yeah?

—Yeah.

—So spill, says Clark.

—We kissed, Fletcher says.

—No fooling, says Clark.

—It was a soul kiss, Fletcher says, dragging out the vowel in *soul* like he's Barry White. Souuuul kiss.

—Gross, says Clark.

—It wasn't gross. It was . . . tender.

—Gross, says Clark. —So what happened?

—Well, uh, says Fletcher. —It was yesterday. She'd called just as he'd been about to dump some linguine into a pot of boiling water. He reached absently for the phone and fumbled it—he managed to catch it before it hit the floor but he tilted the open pasta box in the process, sending half the noodles down to the floor in a brittle rain. *Shit*, was the word with which he greeted her.

Once they got past that she had a proposition for him. *Hey*, she said, *I've got a quick break for dinner; I was wondering if you wanted to join me, but I need to pick Leander up in like an hour so you'd need to leave right away*. He reached out and turned off the stove and said *where?*

He met her at the same cafe where they'd met for their last date, and afterwards he walked her to the subway station, the same place where he had wanted to kiss her, but didn't.

—We were at, uh, the subway station.

Fletcher listens to the sound of Clark chewing. —Fletcher Klingman, she says, after she swallows. —You gave a woman a *soul kiss* at a *subway station*?

—Uh, he says. —It was more like *she* kissed *me*.

—I don't want to know, says Clark.

The scene: they're standing there, she's rooting through her big South American-looking purse; he's looking at her hair and thinking *Jesus*. She finds the card, holds it up next to her face, and smiles, showing her teeth.

—I'm glad you could make it on such short notice, she says.

—Yeah, Fletcher says. —Me too. He smiles and looks down the front of his coat.

—Come here, she says, and he goes to her, and she squeezes him, hard, and he squeezes her in return, and just at the point where it seems about time for them to let go he squeezes her harder. Then he lets go and he takes a step backwards and says, politely—well, I guess I'll talk to you later.

—You're a good man, she says.

—I'm a what? he says, and she smiles and her eyes lock with his and she takes a step towards him and puts her fist at the base of his neck, and he has time to think *oh, this is the moment when we're going to*— and then they're kissing.

Something in the station dings, an indication of an arriving train, and she lets go and points down and says —Uh, I need to be on that. But I'll call you.

Fletcher feels like he might drift away. —OK, he says. She grips both his shoulders and quick kisses him on the mouth again. —OK, she says. She looks down, clenches her fingers into him once, and says it again—OK. And then she lets go of him, and she passes through the turnstile and hurries down the stairs, turning once to fire him a wuick wave *goodbye* and Fletcher walks out into the night and wishes that he could click his heels; he even makes a clumsy attempt at it, as if he might have spontaneously learned how in the past minute. Then he goes home, and pulverizes linguine under his boots as he walks across the kitchen to hit the light.

—Yeah, Fletcher says, —she was like *oh, stud*.

—*Stop*, Clark says. —I'm trying to eat here.

—What are you having?

—It's like a *ratatouille*, Clark says. —So, anyway, have you talked to her since then?

—No.

—Well, Clark says, —how do you feel about things?

—Awful.

—Awful?

—Awful.

—Awful how?

—I don't know. I mean, I think I like her. I'm starting to let myself feel excited. And feeling excited is death.

—Feeling excited is death?

—Yeah. I mean, you kiss someone, right?

—I don't.

—Yeah, yeah, I know *you* don't, I mean normal people, red-blooded Americans, stick with me here for a minute.

—OK. You kiss someone.

—You kiss someone.

—In a subway station.

—And they kiss you back. And so a couple of things are obvious. You like them. They like you. This is the part where you begin to feel excited. And then you start to worry.

—Worry, Clark says.

—Yeah. Like, you worry that she's mistaken. Like maybe you've tricked her. You've been putting your best foot forward all this time. And you start to think like maybe you can relax a little bit. But, my God, what if you let your guard down and she sees your *true self* and she's like *horrified*? She could realize that she's made some tremendous *mistake*.

—I find the notion of the true self problematic.

—Will you listen? I'm trying to get somewhere with this.

—Listening.

—Or maybe she's not the one who's mistaken. Maybe *I'm* mistaken. You get excited; you start to think, hey, this is working, could this be a long-term kind of thing? And then you start to worry about like little things about her, like, I don't know, she likes dogs or whatever, and you start to worry *could I really be in a long-term relationship with someone who likes dogs?*

—Or with someone who has a four-year-old kid.

—Or with someone who has a four-year-old kid!

—I think I'm beginning to see the problem, says Clark.

—Yeah, Fletcher says. —So the trick is to not let yourself feel excited.

—Uh-huh. So how's that working out for you? Clark asks.

—Badly, Fletcher says.