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To Kill a Phantom

by Zoe Carroll

Josie settled into the train seat and shut off the noise of the busy carriage with her headphones and some gentle Einaudi. She inhaled deeply and sighed out heavily. She closed her eyes and imagined getting home to Matt. He would pour her a glass of chilled white wine and ask about her day while they cooked their dinner together in their kitchen.

They matched, she knew, her and Matt, like a pair of comfortable socks, useless without the other. They had been friends since junior school and lovers since the endless summer after their final exams; theirs was a young and all-consuming love that burned brightly with passion and discovery.

Josie walked the short distance from the train station across the car-park and the children's play area to reach the tall Victorian town house that had been converted into flats. She climbed the stairs to the flat at the very top of the house and slipped her key into the door. The small flat was dark and cold so she flicked on the heating and all of the lights. She hated the dark.

It was seven months since they had broken up.

"I've met someone else," he'd told her as he packed his clothes into a holdall they'd bought for their holiday to Kefalonia three years before "It's nothing you've done. I just don't want to always be wondering 'What if?'"

He had moved close to her and tried to touch her face but she had turned away, the scent of him too much to bear, "We were so young Josie, we change and grow up, nothing stays the same."

He had gone then and she had never seen him since. She wanted to see him, to bump into him somewhere and see the person he had met. To see who was worth leaving her for. To see who had replaced her. In her mind's eye she conjured images of beauty, grace, sensuality and confidence. She could never match up to this woman who had caught Matt's eye, captured his heart. Sometimes she wondered if it was a woman at all, he hadn't been specific. She would prefer that in so many ways. She couldn't compete with a man if that was what Matt had preferred but Josie's mind always wandered back to her fears and insecurities. In her thoughts, the woman she envied was better than her in every way.

"It's knocked your confidence, that's all," her best friend Lydia had assured her over their sandwiches at lunchtime "nobody can be that perfect. You need to start dating again Josie, or at least going out."

"I'm not ready Lyd, I'm just not ready to move on."

"Then you need to meet her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. All the time you are thinking that she is some enigmatic mystery woman she has power over you. As soon as you see that she's just a normal bint like the rest of us and that Matt will probably leave her too one day, it'll be easier to move on, trust me" Lydia had shot Josie her biggest smile, the one that always reminded Josie why Lydia was still her best friend after all these years.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe I just need to find out who she really is," Josie felt better already.