

*A Darker Shade  
of Blue*

*by Angela Campion*



BROWN SKIN  
BOOKS



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B O O K S

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**T**HE SHEIK OF ARABY, Scene Four

*Medium shot: The Sheik enters. He has finished his meal and retires to his tent when his mouth opens in wide-eyed shock, his arms raised. Horrors! His chest of jewels and plunder from his Bedouin raids is open, half his treasure gone. Enter: Nubian slave girl in diaphanous robe with a bulging sack over her shoulder. She tiptoes away in the corner of the frame and doesn't see the Sheik. ('All right, big gesture here, Eric, buddy! Point! You're accusing her! Yeah, that's good, keep pointing now!')*

*Cut to: dialogue card, white lettering on black:*

**'How dare you steal my treasure? I'll teach you a lesson, you black minx!'**

*Cut back to: The Sheik. He crosses the floor, and Nubian slave girl cowers. She drops the sack of loot as the Sheik tears open her robe. She is nude underneath. Cut to: closer shot of Sheik and Nubian girl. He fondles her breasts, and she struggles against him for a moment. ('Okay, Eric, kiss her nipple now, just put it in your mouth like you're hungry, pal—no, move your hand, we can't see her tits. That's good. Now you, uh, you—')*

*'Sara.'*

*'Sara, whatever. Keep fighting him for a second, annnnnnnnd, that's good, that's good! But now you're liking it. You love what he's doing to you. Swoon a little—excellent! Now you kiss him.'*

*Cut to: the bed. Both are naked now, coiled together in an embrace on the bed as we pan to...*



Sara waited for the next shot, trying not to burst out laughing at the ridiculous backdrop behind her. She lay on a daybed with brass fixtures, like nothing out of the Arab world before or since, in the middle of the large New York loft. Someone had at least gone to the trouble of fastening up tent panels and had thrown down imitation rugs in a sincere effort to bolster the fantasy. But she doubted anyone was going to buy that the actors were in the Middle East—especially when the 'Sheik' was a white fellow with a fake goatee beard and convincing enough Arab headgear, but wearing what looked like a school-

marm's white nightgown. Probably no one in the audience would care. In front of her, the camera crew was setting up for the real entertainment of the two-reel picture.

The advertisement for this job had been carried in one of the less than respectable newspapers, and any girl could figure out what would be asked of her if she read between the lines. Perfect, she thought. She rose early that morning, and despite the banging and protests outside the door over her hogging the communal bathroom, she took her sweet time, washing, creaming herself, inspecting her body for any flaws. Then she took half an hour on her carefully applied makeup in her bedsit. *Less is more*, she told herself.

By the time she was ready, Baxter was waiting for her outside the entrance to the brownstone, giving her a slight nod and that frozen smile of his that he reserved for what he called his 'business'.

Her gentle giant. Not a bad looking bloke, she thought, his skin a nut-brown shade, and his face would have been blandly handsome except for a scar on his left cheek that most people assumed was from a fight but was actually from a bad machinery accident. Well, she hadn't recruited him for his looks. Recruit? More like enticed. Baxter was to be her insurance. He stood six foot four, his powerful physique straining his blue shirt and even the arms of his second-hand tweed blazer. He did his best not to intimidate people, always clasping his hands in front of him in a dignified, quiet way, but his relaxed posture only made others sure he could start trouble and end it as well.

'What do you reckon, darling?' she asked playfully, smiling up at him. 'I'm a long way from home, and I don't have to do this, but we both need to eat, don't we?'

'Let's just do it,' he grumbled. He had been surly with her ever since she had told him she wouldn't be his steady girl. She didn't want to be anybody's steady girl, but Baxter took this announcement very personally, and it had reduced the relationship to the most *expedient* terms.

Fords and Buicks groaned by, and Sara was surprised to spot a Harley-Davidson motorcycle roaring past like an angry lawn motor, while up the street a few girls only a couple of years younger than her sat on a stoop doing their own choral rendition of Bessie Smith's *Down Hearted Blues*. Girls were singing the hit all over town. It was the summer of 1926.

'Jesus, I could use a drink,' muttered Sara. She tugged on Baxter's arm once again as if he could explain everything American. 'What's bloody wrong with

people here?' Because the country was years into Prohibition now with everyone miserable, and she couldn't imagine folks standing for it back home.

'Oh, white folks gotta problem with anybody havin' fun,' he sneered. 'You shouldn't drink anyways, Sara. You act like you some lady, and then you want gin?'

'So only men should drink, darling? And nice girls don't like to fuck, but they should give in to your charms at the right moment, yes?'

She giggled at his shock over her language. She had sensed from the beginning that they had no future together, and with every display of attitude from him over how a woman should be... It just pushed her away more. But he respected her mind. He knew she was smarter than him, that *she* should do the planning to come up with the quick cash, and if their partnership had lost any romantic illusions, it had at least been profitable. This was to be their last deal together.

They fell into silence as they walked along. It was too early for the speakeasies, and she didn't know any around here anyway.

They splurged on a subway ride that took them down from 130th Street into Hell's Kitchen, and it wasn't long before they found the 'studio'. It was in a block of loft spaces, the front door wide open, and the sound of hammering and sawing on one floor mixing with a gramophone blaring Dixieland jazz on another. She walked in with Baxter one step behind her to see a group of white men fussing over a movie camera on a tripod. Lights brighter than any she had ever seen bathed the far wall in a white glow, and the rough hardwood floor and grimy windows were gradually transformed into a makeshift desert with beach sand dumped on the floor. A huge screen offered the illusion of sky with fluffy white clouds on a field of pale blue.

Who should she talk to? A podgy overweight white man with a double chin covered by two days' stubble was yanking on his vest lapel, waving his cigar and barking suggestions at the crew. Must be the director, thought Sara. He was doing the least work.

'Try feeding it through that end,' he said impatiently to them.

'Are you Mr Krieghoff?'

'What do you want?' Barely glancing at her.

'I'm here for the job,' she said timidly.

Now he gave her a closer but still hostile inspection. *Ugh*, thought Sara, but didn't say it. It's good they've set their story in Arabia, because the guy's cigar smelled like camel dung. The blue smoke forced her to cough.

‘We’re supposed to be in the desert,’ snapped Krieghoff. ‘I got no parts for coloured girls in this picture.’

‘Uh, yes, you do,’ said a voice quickly behind them, and Sara watched the only black man in the film crew hurry over to them. ‘You took my suggestion about the whole “ravishing the slave girl” bit.’

Sara looked the newcomer up and down. He had a rather clever manner of mixing the usual understated deference to whites with just the right nudge that they were foolishly wrong. He had a studious look about him, but the soft curves of his cheeks rounded to a hard masculine jaw. His skin was a café au lait shade, and his eyes were tiny coals that smouldered with intelligence and maybe a hint of anarchy. Now he was acting again, looking at her with a boyish, nervous grin as if he realised he’d made it too obvious that he wanted her to stay.

He gave the director another prompt. ‘The Nubian slave girl for Scene Four...?’  
‘Right, right, right—’

Krieghoff nodded as it came back to him, both his chins jiggling. He looked past Sara to Baxter, who gave Krieghoff a polite, level gaze, no challenge in his look. But Baxter wasn’t going to drop his eyes as the white man expected.

‘What did you bring your boyfriend for?’ Krieghoff demanded, using his cigar like a pointer.

‘You come to a few of these jobs, and not everyone has a camera,’ Sara answered. ‘Girl’s got to protect herself. And he’s *not* my boyfriend. He won’t give you any trouble. He’ll just wait for me.’

‘I didn’t say you had the job yet, sugar.’

The helpful young black technician was still hovering near his director. ‘You’re British, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, actually, I am,’ she told him, smiling shyly.

The fat man glared at his employee. ‘Shouldn’t you be doing something?’

As Krieghoff turned back to her, the technician gave her a friendly wave and then tore his gaze away to return to his work.

‘Okay, girlie, strip. Let’s see what you got.’

Sara instinctively hesitated. The men in the background were still trying to fix the camera, a couple of the actors sitting around smoking and drinking bootleg gin while the door to the loft remained wide open.

Krieghoff lost his patience again. ‘Come on, come on! These guys have been shooting naked girls all morning. They’re not going to stop for your pretty little brown ass! Show me.’

Sara quickly stepped out of her flat shoes and lost the blue wool sweater draped over her shoulders. She began to undo the long column of buttons on her cotton dress. Underneath, she wore no bra. The dress fell in a whisper to the floor, and she stood there naked except for her panties, the chill in the sunless loft making her small nipples hard. At twenty-one, her figure was girlish, her breasts perfectly round ripe fruits, her hips narrow and her belly thankfully flat. Her pubic bush made a dark cloud through her white panties, where Krieghoff's beady little eyes seemed to linger. *Pig*, she thought, and quickly dismissed the thought before her face betrayed its disgust.

Someone had told her once she had good legs, and she hoped that would seal the deal. Despite the fat man instantly knowing she was a Negro, she was light-skinned enough to be often mistaken for a white girl. Her nose was flat and her lips were full, but her cheekbones were high, her eyes large bright almonds with generous lashes. Her hair, of course, was the regular giveaway, but she had made a vow with herself never to resort to 'conking', using lye and chemicals to straighten it out. She'd heard horror stories about the burning sensation and the damage to girls' scalps with that foolishness. No, there were other ways to manage it and keep it from frizzing up, and these days her brown hair flowed in gentle waves to her shoulders.

The young black guy was checking her out. She liked how he looked at her—with desire but no spiteful, hungry lust like the director. The guy works on blue movies all day, she thought, and he's got these teenage puppy eyes for me! It was endearing. Behind her, Baxter had a view of her small, pert ass, but he had seen her nude before. To get anywhere, she needed to impress the ugly fat man chewing on his thick sausage roll of tobacco.

'Your tits are too small,' he pronounced and waddled away.

Sara was too shocked to even trade looks with Baxter. She stepped over her flats and barefoot, walked briskly after Krieghoff. 'Hey! Hey, wait a minute. You see any other coloured girls here? I thought you needed one.'

Krieghoff shrugged. 'We change the part. The guy doesn't fuck a Nubian, he fucks a common village girl.'

'That'll get a little boring, won't it?' she shot back, putting her hand on her hip.

The whole crew was now paying attention. Sara measured their expressions, and each man seemed to silently agree with her. It wasn't simply that they were jaded and cynical from filming girl after naked girl throughout the morning.

They all knew they were on a break-even shoot at best. Any differential—race, attitude, and God help them, acting ability—was welcome to spice up the cinematography and their long-term fortunes.

With another exasperated sigh, Krieghoff muttered an okay. ‘Go get yourself something... something *Nubian* out of the wardrobe racks and hurry up. We’ll walk you through it.’

‘You got a script?’ she asked innocently, gathering up her dress and her sweater.

There were snickers from a couple of men in the crew, while Krieghoff cracked an indulgent grin that puffed out both cheeks. ‘This ain’t the *thee-uh-tah*, Your Ladyship-Off-the-Boat! I thought you’ve done this before?’

‘Yes, I have,’ Sara protested.

And she had, but with not nearly as much experience as she had let on. *Idiot*, she told herself. What was she thinking? Of course, there would be no script. Why bother, when the director didn’t even have to block his scenes beforehand, commanding the actors to do everything step by step as the camera rolled.

‘The last director I worked with used to write down all his ideas and have everyone read it,’ she explained.

It sounded painfully feeble even to her ears.

Krieghoff was too busy to weigh the probability of her lie. ‘We don’t have time to write down shit. Look, you’re an escaped slave girl, yeah? You don’t know the sheik but you do know somehow he’s got treasure. Never mind how, you just *do*. You sneak in and toss the props from that chest into this sack, see? Then just as you’re about to escape, the sheik enters and catches you. Your mark’s there. He rips off your dress, then we get down to it, okay? Let’s go.’

Sara kept nodding all the while, the lights brilliantly hot and bright, and she couldn’t make out Baxter’s face as her protector stood in the corner with his arms folded. A ginger-haired white man walked over, and she suddenly realised this was the movie’s ‘star’, the sheik, still wearing the white nightgown, pieces of the false goatee bunched in his hand with a tube of makeup gum. ‘Hi, I’m Eric. I’ll be working with you.’

‘Sara Newsome. Pleased to meet you, Eric.’

It was surreal, shaking this stranger’s hand, knowing that in a few minutes, they would be naked together, not doing anything but pantomiming sex. Sara was nervous enough that all her anxiety worked well for her short scene of

stashing the loot. 'Look around, look around,' Krieghoff told her from his fold-out chair. 'Very nice and stay on your mark, sweetheart. You did that so fucking well, we're going to actually do a close-up.'

She stood patiently under the lights while the men moved the tripod, and the black technician came over to her with a sable touch-up brush and a cloth to wipe the shine from her brow.

'Don't you guys have a what-do-you-call-it?'

'You mean a dolly?' he laughed. 'Yeah, it would make life easier, and things would be more dynamic, but what do you think you're working on? This is *The Sheik of Araby*, not *The Thief of Baghdad*. Strictly "shoot 'em doing it, get it printed, get it on the street". We're lucky there's even a story at all on this one.'

'Now why do I think you're a big reason for that?' asked Sara.

He smiled modestly, keeping his eyes on the black slate as he wrote down the shot number in chalk. 'Oh, maybe because it's true. I mean he's using some of my ideas... Plus the whole sheik thing he ripped off that Rudolph Valentino picture, plus a couple of other scenarios he's borrowed just to get Eric screwing another girl.'

'I bet your ideas were better,' she suggested. 'You look like you do a little of everything around here.'

'You have to for these crank 'em out jobs,' he answered. 'So I help with the filming, I set up lights, and every so often a beautiful naked girl pays me a compliment on what I *should* be doing. And by the way, my name's Horton.'

'What kind of first name is that?'

He laughed again pleasantly. 'It's not. Girls who work for us never want to know my first name.'

Krieghoff was barking that they were ready. All of a sudden, her new friend was lifting the marker slate and making it crack so loudly that she jumped, and she heard two different anonymous voices call out again:

'Rolling!'

'Speed!'

Ten whole seconds to show fear, and then Krieghoff shouted, 'Cut!' It was waiting time again.

And now at last, they were getting to the main event. Sara lay naked on the daybed, and she could just imagine the piano accompaniment in the theatres, sugary chords of 'romantic music' as she arched her back suggestively, her

'small' bosom lifting, and though Krieghoff's camera didn't have a dolly to track, it did have a zoom.

'Lift your knee a little that way, sugar,' the director ordered. 'We're seeing too much of your crack.'

*You'd think that would be the idea*, thought Sara. She had seen very few blue movies herself, but the couple that she had seen struck her as remarkably tame, no genitals in view and the choreography was not very... well, imaginative.

Now the 'Sheik' entered, his ginger hair covered by a black wig, the goatee beard pasted over his upper lip and chin. Eric stood fully nude, thrusting out his chest with his hands on his hips in a gesture that would have worked well in row forty-six. Except the camera was shooting him five feet away. His dangling willy was impressive enough, but Sara laughed, then did her best to use it as a seductive, challenging laugh to lure her man in, beckoning him with a finger. 'Great!' shouted Krieghoff from behind the lights, 'Fuckin' inspired!' But what had really made Sara laugh was that no one cared that Eric's coppery pubic hair would still look rather light compared with the dark wig and beard. Eric marched towards her, Krieghoff shouting for him to fondle her tits again, smoosh them together, then 'plant one' on her lips and *hold it*.

Sara closed her eyes and kissed her co-star, ignoring the tickle of the false beard, and Eric opened his mouth but thankfully did nothing more. And now Krieghoff was telling him to 'get on top of her'. As Eric climbed on the bed and slithered on top, she lifted her legs for the illusion of him penetrating her and felt his cock brush up against her vaginal lips. 'Sorry,' he muttered under his breath, his mouth frozen so that it wasn't caught on camera. She gave him an imperceptible nod that it was all right. She could feel his hard-on against her pubic bone and her lower belly, but he was lying so close on top of her that no one would be able to tell with this camera angle. Krieghoff was barking away *Fuck her, fuck her* even though it was dry clumsy momentum, and Sara knew she couldn't lay back and simply think of England. She shut her eyes tight and opened her mouth, rolling her head on the pillow. Then Krieghoff was shouting cut, and the spell was broken.

Eric sat up and said pleasantly, 'Wonderful. That was really good, Sara.' As if the two of them had been moving a settee across a living room instead of writhing nude in front of a camera. And to her amazement, he jumped off the bed and went to fetch his drink, his cock still pointing north. Around

them, Krieghoff, Gilbert Horton and all the others were oblivious to his erection. They took no more notice of him than if he were sweating profusely from the exercise.

The crew was ready for the tighter shot. Eric pretended to mount Sara again, propping up his weight on his arms, and *shit, he was still hard*. As they pantomimed the humping, she felt him grinding himself against her, and she dutifully pumped her hips over nothing, gasping away even though pictures were silent, but at least it would look good. She glanced down, and the thin white cock against her light brown belly was getting redder and redder, and he was actually getting into it, Krieghoff yelling he should kiss her again but pull back immediately so they could keep seeing her tits, and as Eric did, his shaft made an electric contact with her clitoris, and in spite of herself, she felt a rush of lubrication. Krieghoff was muttering how great it was because the little bitch's nipples were looking flushed and hard now, and though Eric was outside of her she wondered what she'd do and what would happen when he came. He looked ready to burst.

'Cut!'

The 'Sheik' blushed in front of her and gave her a chivalrous peck on the cheek. 'Hope we can work together again. You've got genuine talent.'

'Ummm, thank you, so do you.' She couldn't think of what else to say.

Eric waved goodbye and went over to Krieghoff, standing naked with his arms folded as the director outlined the next scene for him. Sara waited on the daybed, confused. By the way Krieghoff was talking, she wouldn't be needed any more, but she hesitated over getting dressed. Should she wait?

'So that's it, I guess,' she said, trying to sound casual.

'Yep, that's it, thank you very much,' said Krieghoff briskly. 'Leave us your name and an address, and we'll be in touch.' He turned his back to her as he went to speak to his cameraman.

Baxter came over holding her panties and her dress, and she quickly slipped them on. 'What do you mean you'll be in touch?' she asked loudly.

'If we use it,' said Krieghoff over his shoulder.

'What about my money?'

*If we use it...?*

The director relit his cigar. 'We'll see. You only get paid for what we use, sugar. That's how the business works.'

'Like hell it does!' she shot back. 'You filmed me, you pay me. Right now.'

Krieghoff's eyes flicked left and right, uncomfortably aware that the other members of the crew were watching him. Maybe this stunt had worked on the other girls, but this black one was going to make trouble.

'You're obviously not a professional,' he chuckled, still trying to bluff his way out. 'You see a cash register here for extras we hire on? There's accounts and proper bookkeeping that has to be done. I *said* leave your name and an address where we can send a cheque. *Later.*'

Sara looked up at Baxter. Time to use her insurance. She stood squarely in front of Krieghoff, and her giant of a friend took one menacing step forward.

'You goin' to pay one way or another,' he told the fat man.

The director sucked air through his gritted yellowing teeth, his pink fingers rubbing the mesh of dark stubble on his flabby chin. 'Shakedown, huh? You lousy—'

'Not a shakedown at all,' she snapped. 'I worked for that money. I'm owed. *Sugar.*'

'And if I don't pay, your boyfriend here beats me up?'

'I can't buy any food by breaking your legs,' replied Sara. 'No, we'll just take your camera and kit and call it even.'

Krieghoff's mouth fell open, and she swore his watery eyes were about to pop out of their sockets like pool balls shooting off a billiard rail. '*You can't take our equipment!*'

'Then cough up my money.'

'You can't fucking take our equip—'

'Then my friend here will break your legs *then* take your equipment!' she roared.

The director backed away a couple of steps, rubbing his mouth nervously with his wide palm. He broke into a cruel laugh.

'There's just him and you against a bunch of my guys here,' he said at last. 'No way he can take 'em all.'

Sara walked nonchalantly, gracefully, over to the cameraman nearest the tripod. Her fingers rested on the side of the lens as she offered him a flirtatious smile. The man smiled back nervously. She glanced at the others. She'd watched them work for a while, and she thought she had sized them up pretty accurately. No one liked Krieghoff. No one much enjoyed working with this blustering, bullying tub of lard. And no one really wanted to risk a sock in the chops or broken ribs over him. It was a gamble, of course, since

this was their livelihood, too, but she was willing to bet she could go ahead and pack up the goods.

But there was no need to be completely heartless about it. The hack director might be able to get his hands on another camera, and these fellows needed to work like everyone else. She gave them an out.

'You're quite right,' she said, seemingly for Krieghoff's benefit but addressed to the others, 'he may not be able to handle them all. But you can be sure the first fellow's going to get hurt badly.'

And Baxter adjusted his posture so that he looked just a little bit taller as he asked, 'Now which one of y'all wants to be that first one?'

Nobody answered. Good. Baxter stepped forward, and with his broad back to Krieghoff, blocking the director's view. The cameraman actually helped him remove the black box from the tripod, muttering that he didn't want to 'see no accident'. But the fat man overheard and was incensed. Bunching his podgy fists, he started hammering Baxter's shoulders.

*'What are you doing, helping the nigger, asshole? That's our fucking camera!'*

Chaos. A slapstick movie, only the clumsy scuffle was real and serious. Krieghoff grabbing hold as best he could of the tall black man, and Baxter couldn't hold the camera box and fight the director at the same time. He literally handed the equipment back to the cameraman, shrugged the fat director off and then turned to give him a hard shove.

'Get offa me, man!' he barked. And then he hit Krieghoff hard in the temple and staggered him.

It was one of the actors who marched forward, shirtless and with a good boxer's build, trying to rally the others. 'Are you going to let that happen to a white man?'

And then Sara noticed Gil Horton at her elbow, raising his gentle voice so the others could hear. 'He brought it on himself! The son-of-a-bitch wouldn't pay. And how many times have each of you been stiffed by Krieghoff? So don't interfere! Why don't you go down the block for a smoke or something.'

'I'll tell you what we'll do, Horton,' snapped the actor. 'We'll go down the block and call the cops!'

Sara watched Gil Horton intently. How he handled this would decide whether they got out of here at all, let alone with the film equipment. She had thought of his eyes as tiny coals, and they were smouldering now.

'Oh, you won't do that, Billy,' said Gil. 'The cops bust us for theft, they'll be busting all of you as well on obscenity and pornography charges. And maybe the crew guys can claim they weren't here, but they'll see *you* on the film.'

'It ain't worth it, Billy,' muttered one of the other technicians.

'He's right, my man,' said Baxter. 'It ain't worth it. And nothin' is worse than bein' in stir with two broken arms. They make you a fairy real quick.'

Billy stood down. He grabbed his shirt off the back of a chair, clenched his teeth one last time at Gil Horton and stormed out. After a moment, the other cameramen and technicians looked sheepishly at each other and filed out the door. Eric the Sheik actually smiled and mouthed the words *good luck* to Sara. She mouthed back a *thank you*.

She turned in astonished gratitude to Gil.

'There's film stock in the Frigidaire in the other room,' he informed her.

She kept staring at him, and he added, 'Not much good having a camera without film.'

'*You goddamn nigger turncoat son-of-a-bitch!*' spat Krieghoff, fuming helplessly from his spot on the floor. 'Why don't you fucking go with 'em then?'

'Figure I will,' said Gil cheerfully.

While Baxter went back to loading up the camera, Gil ushered Sara into the room where the fridge was. As she stacked the round metal tins into his arms, she said, 'I guess you're out of a job.'

'Naw,' he replied happily. 'Consider this my job interview for you. I didn't know if you were going to turn up or not, but I'm glad you did.'

She couldn't believe it.

He roared with laughter. 'You know, that's a good imitation of Krieghoff you got going there. You better close that pretty little mouth of yours or all your air's going to float out.'

'You knew...?'

'Who do you think helped Krieghoff write that ad in the paper?'

'You didn't ask for a black girl.'

He rolled his eyes. 'Well, I couldn't make it too obvious with that pig in charge. It was you in New Jersey, right? Didn't you pull a stunt like this on a crew out in Hoboken last month? There's a rumour making its way around about a hard broad—a coloured girl—trying to start up her own little movie company. Most people think it's just talk.'

'They didn't want to pay me in Hoboken either.'

He made a gesture to say that was all he could carry. 'What did you make off with out there?'

'A camera, a couple of lights...'

'With this stash, you'll almost be in business,' said Gil. 'But I'll bet Mr Fee-fi-fo-fum out there doesn't know cinematography.'

Sara shook her head. 'I guess we have a lot to talk about.'



All three of them had their arms full as they marched in single file through Hell's Kitchen for the nearest subway. Sara announced they would take the equipment to her place, and Gil Horton immediately objected. You got to be kidding, he told her. 'I'll bet you rent a single room with a bed and a john down the hall, don't you? And your friend here is a dollar a week at some other flophouse. How safe do you think this stuff will be with us marching in broad daylight into those kinds of neighbourhoods? You're lucky your first camera hasn't been ripped off! You want to do business, first protect your investment.' When she testily demanded what his alternative was, he said he knew of a friend's family house on Strivers Row.

It was a struggle down the steps of the subway, but they made it eventually, making a neat pile of the black cases. Sara instructed Baxter to keep an eye on the equipment while she kept an eye on their newest colleague. They were heading up in the four o' clock rush hour, and as people crammed into the tight space, Sara boldly sat down in Gil's lap, wrapping her arms around his neck like a girlfriend.

'Not much room in here,' she said, smiling at him.

'You could have kept your seat.'

She bit her bottom lip, made the slightest shake of her head. 'Uh-uh. This is nicer.'

He inclined his chin over to Baxter. 'What's his story? I thought you two...'

'Well, we're not,' she answered. 'We were for a bit, but now we're not. He's just helping me out one last time, and then he's moving on. He wants to get out to Detroit where he's got a cousin, take a plumber's course there or something. Stay out of trouble. He's such a big fellow that he's somewhat of a magnet for fights and people wanting to prove something. I think he's led a pretty rough life.'

'Haven't we all.'

'No,' she insisted. 'Not like you and me. You didn't belong in that place with Krieghoff. You were there to pick up whatever scraps of knowledge you could

get from a cheap apprenticeship, and then you would have skipped anyway.' She giggled. 'I suppose that was your plan before you heard about me, and I just made things a little easier.'

'Or harder,' he countered.

'Or harder,' she echoed, and she nestled closer to him. She could feel his erection in his trousers. They sat in one of the back seats, no one behind them, and in one deft move, she lifted her bum an inch and pulled the hem of her skirt free. It cascaded down again, and now she could feel the thickness of him through her panties and the barrier of his woollen trousers.

'I'll bet you went to whatever nice university they have over here that allows in well-heeled Negroes.'

'Oh, there's several of them, actually,' he informed her, keeping the banter up. 'More than most folks think. There's Howard, Morehouse, Fisk down south... I didn't need to go to a *black* college. I actually went to Columbia.'

She felt him wrap his arm around her waist, playing her game that they were a nice black couple out for a day in Manhattan. She glanced over at Baxter. He wasn't giving her and Gil any attention, and it was her guess that he was well over her. He would only want to get paid after the equipment was dropped off, and she had an idea of how to settle up with him so that there would be no hard feelings.

She caught Gil studying her for a moment, clearly wondering if it was platonic affection or if she felt something more for Baxter. Now was not the moment to explain how it was slightly more complicated, how she had made an alliance with Baxter with barely any negotiation, the big man listening carefully whenever she had come by his place to say, 'There's jobs for us loading fish...' Or: 'I think a department store needs packers for the day.' And then finally when she sat him down and announced, 'I saw this ad, and I think it's our break...'

Not quite friends but more than acquaintances and less than sincere lovers. Despite her British passport, the authorities on Ellis Island had certainly picked up on the fact that she was a Negro and had forced her to wait for two weeks. The facilities were abysmal. Filthy washrooms, families, mostly whites from Europe, huddled together, and she had noticed the big man. You couldn't help noticing Baxter. He had landed a job mopping floors. It was a good job until one of the white clerks decided his nephew needed it more. But while he was still there, he had warned Sara off the fake 'cops' that were a legendary con on the island—strolling around in uniform-like costumes, they passed themselves

off as the real thing and demanded fees on the spot. The Italians fleeing Mussolini and the white Russians fleeing the Bolsheviks were too used to intimidation by police. They paid up. Baxter quietly told her not to: 'It's a scam, baby.' He had helped her forcefully say no when the con artists insisted, and that hadn't gone over too well with the white clerks either.

Once in Manhattan, they had pooled their street smarts to find digs together, but it was never easy, not when Baxter expected an instant wife and not a partner in crime. He said he was amazed she'd got as far as she did with acting and 'liberating' film equipment as she so casually put it. Plumbing, that was a pipe dream, too, he joked, but it would be steady work. And so today was to be their last together.

Gil was asking her something. Wanting to dismiss the subject of Baxter for a while. 'What's your story then, huh? What's a black *British* girl doing over here? How do you even get to be black *and* British?'

'Oh, it's like your universities,' she replied. 'There's more than you think. There've been Africans who came over, freed American slaves, folks from the West Indies since... Oh, I don't know, at least the seventeen hundreds.'

'I never knew that,' he said innocently. 'We just hear about France. Is it like France? I mean, there are brothers who stayed after the war, and they're supposed to treat us better over there.'

'I don't know about France,' she said, hoping to change the topic. 'It's... complicated.'

She thought she was being honest. After all, it was complicated. Her father had grown up in Victoria's England as a black man where he could qualify in medicine at Edinburgh University and go on to be a surgeon at a hospital in Dartford. He could marry a white woman, the daughter of liberal thinking Radicals, but when Sara and her mother waited outside the one men's club where Father could belong, old men lumbered out muttering about 'niggers cocking things up in Rhodesia'. The newsagents sold boy's magazines with lurid cartoons of blackface clowns. And yet she could remember a revival of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the theatre, the English ready to come out and sit through a hearty condemnation of American slavery.

The subway train rattled on through its tunnel, the lights flickering, and she stole the moment to kiss him. His lips were stiff at first with apprehension then yielded softly, letting her tongue come inside his mouth to play. She felt a new swelling underneath her.

‘What was that for?’

‘I like you,’ she answered.

‘You’re pretty forward,’ he laughed.

‘No, I’m direct.’

‘I love your accent,’ he said. ‘It sounds... I don’t know, classy!’

‘You mean posh?’ she teased. ‘No one’s ever accused me of being that! But Daddy didn’t want us talking like some white English people. Dropping aitches and sounding rough.’

‘And that’s what they sound like where you come from?’

‘Not all of them, of course, but those were the ones willing to be seen in public with my father. They couldn’t afford to put on airs. The posh ones expected Daddy to be discreet.’

‘Why did you come to America?’

‘For the movies.’

‘They make movies in England. I’m sure they got them.’

‘Yes, they do,’ she said, ‘but not as many and not like American ones. Look, Chaplin came over here. Garbo’s here. I thought this is the place to go make movies.’

‘So you want to be a star. That’s why you’re going to all this trouble?’

‘No, I want to *make* the movies.’

There was a long pause as he considered the enormity of her ambition. To his credit, he didn’t laugh. He didn’t immediately say like other fools that women can’t make movies and whoever heard of such a thing? Act, yes. But produce...? He kept his arm around her as if it was the most comfortable place for it to be, leaning in to nuzzle her neck as he said softly, ‘You are something else.’

She almost wanted to ask why he didn’t contradict her, why he didn’t say, you’re a woman, you’re a Negro, and how can you possibly think—

‘Hey, if you can wiggle your ass in front of those guys and then storm off with their gear, I think you can do pretty much anything!’

