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The Detective's Secret

Written by Lesley Thomson

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LESLEY THOMSON

The Detective's Secret



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Stare. It is the way to educate your eye, and more.

Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You are not here long.

Walker Evans

413 The Thames is a tunnel.

414 The river is a tunnel, it's civil infrastructure.

415 The river is a tunnel with an uncountable number of entrances

416 When you go into the river you discover a new entrance – and in yourself you uncover an exit, an unseen exit, your exit. (You brought it with you.)

Roni Horn

For the Nelson sisters who have had a profound influence on my life: May Walker, June Goodwin and Agnes Wheeler.

And for Mel with my love.


Hogarth Lane
Chiswick House Grounds
Burlington Lane
Corney Road Cemetery
Unit HQ
Jackie & Graham's house
Nigel's house
Palmyra Tower
The Garden of the Dead
Chiswick Eyot
Lonsdale Road
Ravenscourt Park
Stamford Brook
King Street
A315
Chiswick High Road
St Peter's Church
The Ram
River Thames
A4
Chiswick Mall

Prologue

October 1987

Clouds streamed across the sky. Street lights obliterated the stars; the moon wouldn't rise until midnight, four hours away. A fierce wind rattled reed beds on Chiswick Eyot and tore through the undergrowth. Cross-currents on the river made rib-cage patterns; patches of stillness in the black water resembled corpses.

The Thames was rising, a deadly confluence of tide and turbulence. Miniature waves broke across Chiswick Mall; water welled in gutters, covering kerbstones and lapping at the steps of St Nicholas' church. A storm was gathering force.

At night Chiswick Mall was outside time. Misty yellow light surrounding iron lamp standards might be gas lit, cars were carriages on cobblestones. On the foreshore of the Thames, the clank-clank of a barge's mooring chain against the embankment wall beat the passing of no time at all.

A shape reflected in the river was dashed by a squall; it resolved into a tower. Utilitarian, a cylindrical tank supported by stanchions, the water tower was built in the Second World War to protect riverside wharfs and factories from fires. Long in disuse, the wharfs demolished, the tank was empty, the pipes stripped out. Fifty metres high, it stood taller than the brewery and the church spire and dominated the west London skyline. Against streaming clouds and tossed boughs, the tower, designed to withstand bombs and tensile stresses, seemed as if forever falling.

A cage attached to one supporting column housed five stairways connected by a platform; the last arrived at a narrow metal

walkway that gave access to the tower. Violent gusts harassed the grille, testing steel rivets.

A man hurried through the church gates, skirting the water; he ducked into an alley between the brewery buildings and struggled up the staircases into the tower, head bowed against the wind. Minutes later, a woman emerged from the subway by the Hogarth roundabout and went into the alley. Checking about her, she pulled on the cage door and, both hands on the guard rail, began an awkward ascent.

'I hate this place.' Her voice rang in the concrete tank.

He watched as she zipped up her slacks, smacking at dirt although there was none; he kept it clean. Grimacing, she eased on brown leather faux-Victorian boots, doing up the laces with slick-snapping efficiency.

'You wanted secrecy.' The man pulled on underpants, his nakedness absurd as their intimacy of the afternoon ebbed. Her boots had heels. He had advised flat shoes for safety, but was glad she had ignored him. She was his fantasy woman.

He had put himself out to get the key from the engineer. The man had kept it after the developers went bust – as ineffectual revenge for non-payment – but there was no point in telling her of this effort: it would not convince her to leave her husband.

'Come and be with me.'

She had insisted that they leave no spending trail. No hotels, no meals out. No risk of meeting anyone they knew or being remembered by strangers. She had admitted that nylon sleeping bags on the tank floor, drinking wine from the bottle and feeding each other wedges of Brie on bite-size water biscuits spiced up the sex. Strangely there was no handle on the inside: he propped open the thick metal door with a brick and, once she was inside, he locked what he called the 'front door' after her. She'd surprised him by saying that the danger of being locked in made her feel alive.

'*You'd feel alive all the time with me.*'

She knew that, she had told him.

'The apartment has a view of the sea.' He had told her he would take a year's lease. Things had changed, she'd said as soon as she arrived. It had spoiled his performance.

'Another bloody excuse!' He shouldn't have said that.

He buttoned his shirt, saw he'd missed a button and started again. She was pouting and air-kissing into her compact mirror. Already she had 'gone', planning the kids' meal, back to her life that was death. The knickers he had bought her lay discarded beside the used condom – just the one this time. Last time she had agreed to leave; today she said her family needed her.

'I need you.'

'The flat does sound beautiful.' She appeased him, shrugging into her coat.

'Then leave!' He always tried to be everything her husband was not. Mr Perfect. He'd once let her know the other girls didn't need persuading. She knew there were no other girls.

She smoothed her skirt over her stomach and he was aroused all over again.

'You look lovely.'

'That wind nearly blew me off my feet,' she said again as if she hadn't heard him. 'There's a storm getting up.'

'It's not all that's "getting up"!'

She came over, put a hand on his crotch and whispered, 'Next week.' She didn't usually do this when she was about to go; he dared to hope it meant something good.

'I can't hear any wind,' he said. 'It's nothing.'

'You told me this place is soundproofed!' She looked about her as if she'd just arrived. 'It's like a prison cell.'

'Sea view versus a mauso-bloody-leum!' he snarled. Usually he toned down his accent.

'In my heart I'm yours, you know that.' An off-the-shelf response.

It frightened him that he could hate her. He saw why people killed their lovers. If she were dead, she would stay.

He tensed his jaw. 'Do you have sex with him?'

She was rootling in her handbag. She squirted perfume on her wrists – not for him, but to expunge him.

'You promised to leave.'

'You'd be horrified if I turned up with two kids in tow!'

He tortured himself with a vision of her with a leg over the blubbery husband, letting him pump away inside her. In his dreams there were no kids in tow.

'Bring the girl. Let him have the boy.' Unlike the husband, he played fair.

She laughed and looped her bag over her chest as he advised, for safety.

'I'm leaving on Saturday.' His palms tingled at the decision made there and then.

'You said we had a month.' As he had hoped, she was upset.

'I'll be at the station at three on Saturday. If you're not there, I'm going.'

'It's too soon.' She kicked the brick aside and stepped on to the spiral staircase.

'It's always "too soon"'. In her heels he wanted her again.

'I can't just leave.'

Not a 'no'. His venom evaporated. 'Be careful in those boots, that wind is strong.' Too late he recalled he'd underplayed the wind.

'I climb mountains in these.'

Not with me.

He followed her down the staircase and stopped her in the lobby by the front door.

'Promise me you'll give it some thought,' he said, but really he wanted her to give it *no* thought, just to leave. 'I'll be there next Saturday at Stamford Brook. At three. You won't regret it!'

'Darling, don't—'

He cut across her: 'You owe it to yourself. We only have one life – let's make the most of it! When we're settled, we can get the kid. One step at a time. Your life now is like living in a coffin, you said so yourself!'

He went towards her, but she blew a kiss and turned away. The

bottom door shrieked when she opened it. He watched until she reached the caged staircase, and then he returned to their room.

Without her the magic had gone; it was a just cold concrete tank. He stuffed everything into the holdall, anxious to follow her, to see her when she wasn't with him. She had left him the Brie, not out of generosity, but because she wouldn't want to explain how come she had it.

Footsteps. She was coming back. He grew excited and regretted packing up the sleeping bags. 'Hon, you came back. I knew you would!'

There was a deafening report.

The tank door had shut, he stared disbelieving at the grey metal. Beware the jokes of those with no sense of humour. The lack of handle wasn't sexy now. She was on the other side of the double cladding, daring him to lose his nerve.

'Good game!' His temples thudded from the alcohol and he needed a pee. This was her revenge for his ultimatum. 'Joke over!'

Wind fluted through vents near the ceiling – she was right about the storm. Daylight no longer drifted in; the street lights didn't reach so high. Bloody stupid to have said leave the boy, he liked him. The walls emanated chill.

'He's a good kid, I'll treat him like my own son.' His voice bounced off the concrete.

There was a distant vibration – the bottom door slamming. There was no keyhole this side; his key was useless.

'Maddie!'

In the dark, the man wondered if, after all, it was not a joke.