Out of the Tunnel

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Extract

CHAPTER ONE

July morning, July night

THURSDAY 7TH JULY 2005 BEGAN with me waking curled into my boyfriend J's back, both of us bone-tired, me from sleeplessness, and he from having worked until the early hours at his law firm. We ignored the alarm, wordlessly signalling our disobedience to it by sliding deeper under the duvet. Another fifteen minutes of sweet drowsy warmth, scent of his hair; let me lie here longer, safe in my beloved's arms. But no, I was running late, and today was an important day, one I had been waiting for. I climbed out of bed, showered, fed the goldfish and Miff the fat tabby cat, and ran about the flat with wet hair, dithering over what to wear, because I had a big presentation to give that afternoon. Settled on my new black trouser suit, black and white linen top, favourite red leather cork-heeled platform sandals. No time for breakfast, though I gulped the tepid tea I had made for J. I did a twirl

for him. He said I looked lovely, though he wasn't wearing his glasses. He looked shattered, still lying on the sofa of our North London flat, still in his dressing gown, face creased with exhaustion. We kissed, hard, then softly, and he wished me good luck. I didn't know then how much luck I would need that day.

Then I was striding through the grey morning streets, smelling the tang of rain in the air, heading for the kiosk at Finsbury Park station to buy *Marie Claire* magazine before boarding the train to work at my new advertising job in the West End. The magazine, published that day, contained a story about me, and I was nervous, anxious, excited to read it. I had given the interview months ago. I bought a newspaper, and the magazine, which had a free pair of sunglasses attached to it. I scanned the cover; it featured Elizabeth Hurley in bikini pants and a see-through kaftan with her nipples airbrushed out. My piece was not mentioned in the cover lines. It was not, after all, a very unusual or unique story.

The newspaper's triumphant headline was 'One Sweet Word: London' – the news of the Olympic celebrations yesterday as we had been told it would host the Games in 2012. I paid at the kiosk, and hurried down the stairs, turned right to the Piccadilly line platform, juggling my handbag, newspaper, magazine, the reams of unravelling plastic that the magazine was wrapped in, the blister-packed free sunglasses, moving with the practised ease of the long-term commuter through the crush of people.

I'd waited a long time to read this article. Dammit, there was nowhere to sit down and see what it said. I moved further up the platform, right to the end of the train. Stood where the

first carriage stops, it was sometimes easier to get on there. I knew that there was no hope of getting a seat to work, not today.

I flicked my gaze up to the electronic train announcement board. Delays. The Piccadilly line, which normally runs a train every minute or so at rush hour, was running a terrible service, with trains every seven or eight minutes. 'Fire at Caledonian Road,' said the tannoy. 'There's so many flipping people trying to get onto the platform, they're still all crowded up the stairs,' said the woman in front of me to her friend. 'If it gets any more crowded they're going to have to close the station.' Her friend sighed, and swore. I briefly contemplated shoving my way back down the platform and taking the other train, but there were hundreds of people going the other way, and for all I knew, it was just as bad on the Victoria line.

It had gone half past eight. I was going to be late; we all were. People were huffing and sighing, irritated, the euphoria or shock of London winning the Olympic hosting bid on their newspaper pages diminished by the chaos of yet another fight to get to work on time on London's creakingly overstretched public transport system. A man next to me remarked to nobody in particular, 'How the bloody hell are we going to manage the Olympics when we can't even run the trains on time?' He was breaking the 'Don't Talk To Strangers' rule of the London Underground user so I ignored him. So did everyone else. I spied a space on the platform bench behind me. I sat down quickly, opened the magazine, scanned the contents page.

There it was, the article, told in the first person, though I wasn't allowed to write it up myself. There was my picture, partially obscured to protect my identity, as is usual with this

sort of story. A few hundred words on glossy paper, swimming in front of me as my eyes teared up, and my heart started to beat faster. The platform, the crush of people, and the noise of the late train finally arriving faded away, as I started to read the story of my almost-death.

It was hard to read, because as I read it, I was reliving it all again. My heart was beating faster, and my breathing was shallow. I started a clammy sweat. I needed to compose myself, needed to get on the train, to make it into work and sit at my desk normally, without this embarrassing trembling reaction. I glanced up, concentrating on getting my breathing back to normal. Another train had just pulled in, and people were pushing themselves onto it. I could have squeezed on too, but I was worried that I was now in the early stages of a panic attack, and so I stayed on the bench. The tube doors hissed closed. The train pulled away. I got up, and moved towards the edge of the platform, ready for the next train. I knew I had to get on it, however crowded it might have been. I was going to be very late, and I had been in my job only six weeks. I was still on probation. I didn't want to get into trouble.

When the next tube came along, I was ready. I started to get on at the middle set of doors of the first carriage. I put my foot on the train, but at the last second I stepped back and decided to go a few metres further up, to board at the first set of doors, the very front of the train, where I thought I might have a little more space. I wanted to read that article again, more calmly this time. I wanted to get the fear and adrenaline out of my system, and to try instead to feel the pride, the pleasure that I'd survived. Because I was proud of it; proud

that I was still here to tell my story, proud that the man who attacked me was now locked up, and couldn't hurt anyone else. I got onto the train and stood by the yellow pole in the centre of the standing area by the first set of doors. I held the pole with my right hand, my new blue handbag over my left shoulder, newspaper now shoved into the bag, holding the folded magazine in my left hand, worrying whether anyone else would read it over my shoulder and recognise me in the accompanying photo. But of course they wouldn't, nobody makes eye contact with their fellow passengers or speaks to them on the London Underground. It is the only way to maintain your composure in such crowded conditions, to pretend that all the other people don't exist.

We were off. This time it was easier for me to read my story. The train stopped at Arsenal, Holloway Road, Caledonian Road, with more and more people getting on at each stop. *This is the most crowded train I have ever been on,* I thought, *in over a dozen years of making this journey in from North London on the Piccadilly line. I bet I could lift my feet up off the floor and not fall over; I am wedged in so tight.*

Now we were at King's Cross, the doors slid open, people were pushing to get out, people were pushing to get in, I was being pushed away from the pole, back towards the centre of the carriage, I looked out through the open doors at the crowds. *My God, the platform is heaving here, six- or seven-deep, with fed-up commuters, all trying to stuff themselves into this delayed train. There is no way any more people can fit into this carriage, but still they come. I can't wait to escape from this sweating, irritable crush of humanity.*

Somewhere behind me, pushing onto my carriage, boarding

through the middle set of doors, unremarkable among all the commuters, was a young Jamaican-born British man with a rucksack. His rucksack contained ten pounds of explosives. He had travelled to London, rising early, leaving his pregnant wife and baby to join three friends at Luton station. The group of men had said goodbye to each other, hugged each other, happy, almost euphoric as they split up to continue their journeys. July 7th was a special day for this man and his friends. They had chosen to leave this world and to enter Paradise. And Germaine Lindsay, nineteen years old, the man climbing through the doors, pushing onto the train with the rest of the crowd, had chosen this rush-hour morning at King's Cross station, this train, and this carriage to die.

I didn't know this, of course; none of us knew what was about to happen, then. Maybe, somewhere there was a whisper of intelligence on the plot; maybe someone official came across this young man and assessed him as a low risk, made the judgement that he was no one worthy of special attention. Perhaps there were warnings somewhere, clues about what he and his friends wanted to do. A file on him, intelligence chatter, rumours, emails, a history of looking at the wrong websites, watching the wrong DVDs, talking to the wrong people... Something that could have warned us of the bomb in his bag and the hatred in his heart and the chaos and carnage he was moments away from unleashing. Whatever was known, it wasn't enough to stop him, and so he, like hundreds of others, was on board this overcrowded train.

The driver waited at King's Cross for several minutes, longer than usual, to allow as many people to scramble off and push on as possible. People who didn't make it and who were left on the platform looked angrily through the windows

at us as the doors closed. The platform tannoy warned: 'This train is about to depart.'

Twenty-six people, and the bomber, had a few minutes left to live.

I found that I was crushed against another young woman. For a moment we were locked chest to chest in an intimate hug. We apologised to each other. My heart was beating fast and my body was still in a state of adrenalised fight-or-flight readiness, but there was nowhere to flee to. The irritation in the air was palpable, people uncomfortably pressed into each other, backs, elbows, bags, rucksacks.

The last person to board was a smiling black woman who was giggling in disbelief at the crush as she squeezed her curvaceous figure through the closing doors. Her warm humour defused the tension. The train started to move. I took a deep breath. Three more stops to go. I tried to compose myself for a busy day at work. I unclenched my fists. It was impossible to read anymore, all I could do was lift up my head and concentrate on breathing in and out to fight the claustrophobia, and read the adverts on the walls of the train.

And then I felt rather than heard an explosion; it was as if I had been punched violently in both ears. The world went as black as if I had been plunged deep underwater. Everything had changed in a heartbeat. And the thought flashed through me. 'Not again. Not bloody again.'

IT WAS ALMOST EXACTLY THREE years since the early hours of Friday 17 July 2002, when I had forced my way out of my North London flat, naked and covered in blood, with

my hands bound behind my back and a wire noose around my neck, screaming as I threw my body across the bonnet of a police car.

The previous twenty-four hours had been normal enough. I had taken the tube to work in an advertising department office in South London near the Thames South Bank. It was a sweltering blue day. By lunchtime I had already been to three meetings in the West End, and the clothes I had picked out that morning to wear to work were limp and creased from hurrying about London using public transport. I had another important meeting in Victoria at 2pm, so I set off early and bought a cheap black cotton skirt and blouse in my lunch break at Victoria station shopping centre on the way to meet the client. Arriving at the client's offices, I changed into my new clothes in the loo, powdered my shining face and tied back my hair into a ponytail, changing myself into a fresher, cooler business proposition. But the meeting was not a success because the presentation I had prepared would not load and play properly on my laptop. And I had forgotten the hard copy. I talked around the ideas instead, promised to send over a copy of the presentation as soon as I got back to the office, but the opportunity had gone and we both knew it. I headed back to my desk, irritated with myself.

I spent the afternoon writing up another proposal for a meeting tomorrow, occasionally looking out of the window at the boats moving up and down the sparkling river, the big wheel of the London Eye turning slowly, the tourists sauntering in the glorious sun. In the office, phones rang constantly, many of them for absent colleagues which meant taking endless messages. I cursed the fact that I had no lunch meeting today.

Then I could have been out of the office, lingering over coffee at an outside table, instead of squinting at a proposed media schedule for a pitch we were unlikely to win. Half the bloody office seemed to be on holiday, I wished I was too. Emails arrived every five minutes, my boss wandered over to my desk to badger me about a meeting he wanted me to organise for next week, and I could feel my jaw tightening as I pushed my damp hair out of my eyes. I worked on the 24th floor of a 1970s tower block, and the air conditioning didn't work.

By 6pm I was gritting my teeth with stress. I couldn't face another sweaty tube journey home, not immediately, so I picked up my swimsuit which I kept under the desk in a plastic bag. As I stepped out of the office a warm breeze lifted my hair and the evening sun shone on my face. I walked to my gym, looking forward to plunging my body into cool water. There was an aqua-aerobics class about to start, so I joined about a dozen pink-cheeked women as we wallowed and splashed, kicked and pushed resistance floats while an instructor barked at us from the poolside over the blare of pop music. It was surprisingly hard work and afterwards, towelling myself dry, I realised I was starving. There hadn't been time for lunch. I left the gym and headed for a sushi bar opposite, treating myself to a few delicate slices of ballet-slipper-pink salmon, some warm rice, eye-watering wasabi stirred into salty soy sauce, vinegared seaweed and cucumber slices sprinkled with sesame seeds, and some green tea. I called a few girlfriends on my mobile, to see who was up for a glass of wine by the riverside. Everybody I called was just leaving for home, or not picking up. I thought about going back to the pub by my office, where some of my colleagues would be standing by

the bar with pints of super-chilled lager, but I couldn't face any more work talk. I called my sister. She was delighted to hear from me.

'Oh brilliant, are you about? Ben's got tickets for that cool Polish bar in Southwark; they're having a third birthday party. There's a band, free drinks, come down, he knows all the bar staff,' she told me.

I got the tube from Waterloo and headed over. Anna and Ben, her boyfriend of the moment, were waiting for me in a pub called The Ring, by Southwark tube station. Ben had a large vodka and cranberry juice on the table for me, Anna looked glamorous in a backless gold halter-neck top. My long black skirt, flat sandals and high-necked black blouse looked dowdy in comparison, my makeup minimal after my swim. I borrowed some lip gloss from Anna, undid a few buttons, and we walked round the corner to the party. The bar was noisy and crowded, a band was playing Motown hits and I was introduced to a few of Ben's friends while a glass of vodka and spiced pear juice was thrust into my hand. Anna and I went to the cloakroom to drop off my wet swimming kit and her jacket. Then we stood near the band, jigging from foot to foot, watching the crowd, and catching up on the week's events. It was too loud to hear each other, so we came back to the bar, where Ben handed me another drink and introduced me to some more people. I put the drink on the bar; I didn't like it. It was warm, too sweet, and left my tongue feeling furred. The barman noticed.

'Don't like it? Want a shot instead?'

I hesitated, but Ben and his friend by my side accepted eagerly. This was a Polish bar after all, vodka shots its

speciality. I used to work in Poland; I had spent a year before university teaching blind children in a convent school in a forest outside Warsaw. 'Have you got *Zubrowka*, bison grass vodka?' I asked, in Polish, experimentally, and the barman smiled and poured us all a cold glass. '*Na zdrowie*', I said, 'cheers' and we toasted the bar's success the Polish way. Eyes meet, and down in one.

I looked over at my sister, who was explaining about my year in Poland to the group around her. More people came to the bar and stood next to me; the barman began pouring more shots, telling me that Laski, the school where I had worked, was 'a special place', that it was very good that I had worked there. We talked about the Polish prime minister, whom I had surprised once, wandering without his minders in the garden outside the rooms I shared with another volunteer when I worked at Laski. The barman raised the bottle to us, as we all knocked back a second shot. 'To the children of Laski!' Then he immediately poured us a third.

I was feeling woozy with tiredness now, I had not eaten very much, and I had drunk too much alcohol far too quickly after exercising and running about all day. The three vodka shots, plus the drink in the pub before were giving me a headache, a tight band gripping my skull. J and I had rowed the night before; I was angry that I had seen so little of him, as night after night his law firm had kept him working late on a deal. I had barely seen him all week, and he had been working weekends. I walked away from the group at the bar to a quieter corner and called him, asking if he could join me and my sister. 'Just for an hour or so, just give yourself a break, honey, I need to see you,' I pleaded, but he said tightly, that he could not get away.

I felt a flash of disappointed anger. I looked down at my chipped toenail polish in my frumpy sandals. The evening had soured. As the veins throbbed in my temples, I decided to leave the party, the live band, the dancing, and the laughing crowds. I kissed my sister good night and told her that I was heading for home. She asked me to stay longer, stay over, but I thought of the next day's meetings, the unfinished pitch, the too-long list of things I had to do, and I sighed, and said no. I collected my bag with my wet swimming things from the cloakroom attendant, and stepped outside into the cool of the evening air. Dammit, now I realised I was drunk.

I thought briefly about going back into the bar, staying with Anna after all, but I couldn't face it. My headache was feeling better for the fresh air, and if I went now, I could avoid the crowds on the tube at pub-closing time. I wove my way to Southwark tube station, asked a London Underground staff member which platform I needed, and got onto the train which was pulling in. My head was pounding, so I closed my eyes against the bright lights of the carriage – and fell asleep almost at once. I woke, feeling disoriented after what felt like a few minutes. This wasn't right. I was at Stratford station, not Wood Green, not Green Park. The man at Southwark had told me the wrong train. Now I was miles from home, dazed with tiredness and vodka and facing another long journey before I could get into my bed. Swearing under my breath, I walked along the station platform, asking if there were any cabs. Someone told me where they might be found. There was one in the car park, dropping somebody off. The driver looked at me. 'I'm finished for the night, love. Where do you want to go?'

I told him Wood Green. He rolled his eyes. 'Okay. Hop in.'

I lolled in the back, closing my eyes again, wishing I was home, nauseous with pain and alcohol. My eyelids felt gritty and my mouth tasted bitter. The journey home seemed to take forever. I wondered if J would be at home when I got back. The cab stopped yet again at a red traffic light, near to home. There was no other traffic on the roads. I looked at the ticking meter. I had a £20 note in my purse, and the meter read £19.60. I decided to walk the last five minutes back to my flat, thinking the night air would help to clear my head and my nausea. I handed the note over to the driver, and got out.

The street was quiet, though in the distance I could hear a siren, and birdsong from a tree next to a bright streetlight. Nobody else was walking. It was about half-past midnight, the pubs had closed and the tubes had stopped running. I walked slowly, breathing deeply, thinking only of my headache, how stupid I had been to accept the free shots and down them in one, when I had work the next day. I did not notice whether anyone was following me. I did not think of any danger. I felt safe, walking the familiar way home that I had walked every day for four years. I left the main road, walked past the bus depot, through the well-lit council car park, full of CCTV cameras, past the hut which was the local minicab drivers' office, hearing the sound of Turkish music playing from their radio. Turned right into a well-lit residential street; nearly home now. I could see my flat as I reached the end of the road. It was dark. Perhaps J had already come home, turned out the lights, gone to bed? No, the curtains were still open. The flat

was empty. It was a big, damp, rented ground floor flat with a rambling 100-foot garden in a converted three-storey house with other tenants upstairs. I could see our sitting room's bay windows, looking out into our road. There were a dozen concrete steps to climb before reaching the communal front door. Outside the window, to my left was a patch of gravelled front garden, with neatly stacked branches and logs cut from the vigorous buddleia tree growing in the North London clay soil. J had pruned the tree back to let in some more light, last weekend, when we had the big row about working too hard and never seeing each other. Taking out his anger with an axe and a hacksaw in the few hours when he was not at the office.

I crossed the road, fumbling for my keys in my handbag, let myself into the communal hall, ignored the pile of post, and opened the front door of our flat, which had a Chinese Pa Kua symbol nailed to it to ward off evil. I kicked off my sandals. My feet hurt, my legs and shoulders ached, my head felt as if it was being gripped by a vice. Without turning on the lights, I walked into the flat and got some painkillers and a glass of water from the kitchen, switched the kettle on. I sat down heavily while I waited for it to boil, my head in my hands.

Then I took some paracetamol, brushed my teeth and washed my face in the kitchen sink, still feeling ill. I made a cup of tea and got into bed. I no longer felt drunk, just shattered. Tomorrow I would probably have a hangover. I needed to stay hydrated. Reaching for the mug in the darkness, I managed to knock the mug onto the bed, spilling hot milky tea all over myself and soaking the duvet. Swearing, I dragged the duvet

into the bathroom, and rinsed off the spill, before it stained, and left the wet duvet draped over the bath in the bathroom. I put my huge dressing gown on instead, and wrapped myself up in that, closed my eyes, desperate to get to sleep. I wished J was there. Any moment now, I expected to hear him turn the lock of the front door, undress in the dark and slide into bed beside me, which would probably wake me up again, and tomorrow we would both be irritable with exhaustion. My last conscious thought as I slid into sleep was of resentful anger at J's law firm for doing this to him, and to me, asking him to work so late night after night after night.

I was woken by the chime of the doorbell. I pulled the dressing gown around me and got out of bed, without bothering to switch the light on. I went to the door in the hall, thinking J must have forgotten his key. As I stepped through my door into the communal hall, I could see a figure through the fluted glass panel of the front door, back-lit by the street light outside the house. Although the figure was only a silhouette, I knew it was not J.

I hesitated. The figure was standing close to the glass, trying to see in. Then a voice said, 'It's your neighbour – there's been an accident.'

I could tell by the voice that it was a young man, and the accent sounded West Indian. I knew many of my neighbours. Upstairs was a shy Japanese man who worked in IT, who would bow on the stairs but spoke little English. I knew the older Turkish man with sad eyes who lived next door to the right, whose wife had died, and who now lived alone in a big house, tending the flowers that she had planted in their big garden. We used to talk over the fence when I was outside

in our garden, and sometimes swap tomatoes that we had grown. On the left-hand side were a young couple who were landscape gardeners and I used to talk to them too; I regularly admired their climbers, they would compliment J and me on our hanging baskets. Above the gardeners lived a family who I think was Indian, who would nod and smile when we saw each other but whom I didn't know very well. Across the road, directly opposite our flat lived some young West Indian men who had just bought a new car and who would play loud music and laugh and chat with neighbours and passers-by when they were outside cleaning and polishing the vehicle and installing a new souped-up stereo system.

I thought it must be one of them at the door. I thought maybe a pizza delivery kid had been knocked off his bike or something, and I thought I had once mentioned to the men who lived opposite during a conversation that I knew a bit of first aid. So I opened the door, cautiously. Just a crack, just an inch. I wanted to peer past the silhouetted figure of the neighbour calling for help, so I could look out at the street and see the accident, see if there was anything I could do.

The door was wrenched from my hands, and then a stranger threw himself at me, pushing me back into the communal hall, back through the door of our flat into our hall. It was a blitz attack, overwhelming. I staggered backwards, stumbling over my dressing gown, opened my mouth with shock, but no sound came out, only a gasp. *No. No.* 'But you can't' – I said, stupid with surprise – and then he punched me in the face. As hard as he could, and my head snapped back as the pain exploded, my nose poured blood, and the world whirled, the dark hall and the yellow light from the streetlight shining on the ceiling splintered crazily, and then it began.