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The Burning Girl

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ONE

The train was stationary, somewhere between Golders Green and Hampstead, when the woman stepped into the carriage.

Just gone seven on a Monday night. The passengers a pretty fair cross-section of Londoners heading home late, or into the West End to make a night of it. Suits and *Evening Standard*s. The office two-piece and a dog-eared thriller. All human life, in replica football kits and Oxfam chic and Ciro Citterio casuals. Heads bouncing against windows and lolling in sleep, or nodding in time to Coldplay or Craig David or DJ Shadow.

For no good reason other than it was on the Northern Line, the train lurched forward suddenly, then stopped again a few seconds later. People looked at the feet of those opposite, or read the adverts above their heads. The silence, save for the tinny basslines bleeding from headphones, exaggerated the lack of connection.

At one end of the carriage, two black boys sat together. One looked fifteen or sixteen but was probably younger. He wore a red bandanna, an oversized American football

jersey and baggy jeans. He was laden with rings and necklaces. Next to him was a much smaller boy, his younger brother perhaps, dressed almost identically.

To the man sitting opposite them, the clothes, the jewellery, the *attitude* seemed ridiculous on a child whose expensive trainers didn't even reach the floor. The man was stocky, in his early forties, and wore a battered brown leather jacket. He looked away when the bigger boy caught him staring, and ran a hand through hair that was greyer on one side than the other. It looked, to Tom Thorne, as if the two boys had blown their pocket money in a shop called 'Mr Tiny Gangsta'.

Within a second or two of the woman coming through the door, the atmosphere in the carriage had changed. From buttoned-up to fully locked-down. English, *in extremis* . . .

Thorne looked at her just long enough to take in the headscarf and the thick, dark eyebrows and the baby cradled beneath one arm. Then he looked away. He didn't quite duck behind a newspaper, like many of those around him, but he was ashamed to admit to himself that this was only because he didn't have one.

Thorne stared at his shoes, but was aware of the hand that was thrust out as the woman stood over him. He could see the polystyrene cup, the top of it picked at, or perhaps chewed away. He could hear the woman speak softly in a language he didn't understand and didn't need to.

She shook the cup in front of his face and Thorne heard nothing rattle.

Then it became a routine: the cup held out, the question asked, the plea ignored and on to the next. Thorne looked

up as she moved away down the carriage, feeling an ache building in his gut as he stared at the curve of her back beneath a dark cardigan, the stillness of the arm that supported her baby. He turned away as the ache sharpened into a stab of sorrow for her, and for himself.

He turned in time to watch the older boy lean across to his brother. Sucking his teeth before he spoke. A hiss, like cats in a bag.

'I really hate them people . . .'

Thorne was still depressed twenty minutes later when he walked out of the tube station on to Kentish Town Road. He wasn't feeling much better by the time he kicked the door of his flat shut behind him. But his mood would not stay black for long.

From the living room, a voice was suddenly raised, sullen and wounded, above the noise of the television: 'What bloody time d'you call this?'

Thorne dropped his bag, took four steps down the hall and turned to see Phil Hendricks stretched out on the sofa. The pathologist was taller, skinnier and, at thirty-three, ten years younger than Thorne. He was wearing black, as always – jeans and a V-neck sweater – with the usual assortment of rings, spikes and studs through most of the available space on and around his face. There were other piercings elsewhere, but Thorne wanted to know as little about those as possible.

Hendricks pointed the remote and flicked off the television. 'Dinner will be utterly ruined.' He was normally about as camp as an armoured car, so the joky attempt at being queeny in his flat Mancunian accent made Thorne smile all the more.

'Right,' Thorne said. 'Like you can even boil an egg.'

'Well, it *would* have been ruined.'

'What are we having, anyway?'

Hendricks swung his feet down to the floor and rubbed a hand back and forth across his closely shaved skull. 'Menu's next to the phone.' He waved a hand towards the small table in the corner. 'I'm having the usual, plus an extra mushroom bhaji.'

Thorne shrugged off his jacket and carried it back out into the hall. He came back in, bent to turn down the radiator, carried a dirty mug through to the kitchen. He picked up Hendricks' biker boots from in front of the sofa and carried them out into the hall.

Then he picked up the phone and called the Bengal Lancer . . .

Hendricks had been sleeping on Thorne's sofa-bed since just after Christmas, when the collection of mushrooms growing in his own place had reached monstrous proportions. The builders and damp-proofers were supposed to be there for less than a week, but as with all such estimates the reality hadn't quite matched up. Thorne was still unsure why Hendricks hadn't just moved in with his current boyfriend, Brendan – he still spent a couple of nights a week there as it was. Thorne's best guess was that, with a relationship as on and off as theirs, even a temporary move would have been somewhat risky.

He and Hendricks were a little cramped in Thorne's small flat, but Thorne had to admit that he enjoyed the company. They discussed, fully and frankly, the relative merits of Spurs and Arsenal. They argued about Thorne's consuming love of country music. They bickered about

Thorne's sudden and uncharacteristic passion for tidiness.

While they were waiting for the curry to arrive, Thorne put on a Lucinda Williams album. He and Hendricks argued about it for a while, and then they began to talk about other things . . .

'Mickey Clayton died as a result of gunshot wounds to the head,' Hendricks said.

Thorne peered across at him over the top of his beer can. 'I'm guessing that wasn't one of your trickier ones. What with most of his head plastered all over the walls when we found him.'

Hendricks pulled a face. 'The full report should be on your desk tomorrow afternoon.'

'Thanks, Phil.' He enjoyed taking the piss, but, aside from being just about his closest friend, Hendricks was the best pathologist Thorne had ever worked with. Contrary to appearances, and despite the sarcasm and the off-colour jokes, there was no one better at understanding the dead. Hendricks listened as they whispered their secrets, translating them from the mysterious language of the slab.

'Did you get the bullet?' Thorne asked. The killer had used a nine-millimetre weapon; what was left of the bullets had been found near the previous victims, or still inside what was left of their skulls . . .

'You won't need a match to tell you it's the same killer.'

'The X?' It had been obvious when the body had been discovered the previous morning. The nylon shirt hoiked up to the back of the neck, the blood-trails running from two deep, diagonal cuts – left shoulder to right hip and vice versa.

'Still not sure about the blade, though. I thought it might

be a Stanley knife, but I reckon it could be a machete, something like that.'

Thorne nodded. A machete was the weapon of choice with a number of gangland enforcers. 'Yardies or Yakuza, maybe . . .'

'Well, whoever's paying him, he's enjoying the work. He shoots them pretty quickly afterwards, so I can't be a hundred per cent sure, but I think he does his bit of creative carving while they're still alive.'

The man responsible for the death of Mickey Clayton, and three men before him in the previous six weeks, was like no contract killer Thorne had ever come across or heard about. To these shadowy figures – men who were willing to kill for anything upwards of a few thousand pounds – anonymity was everything. This one was different. He liked to leave his mark. 'X marks the spot,' Thorne said.

'Or X as in "crossed out".' Hendricks drained his can. 'So, what about you? Good day at the office, dear?'

Thorne grunted as he stood up. He took Hendricks' empty can and went through to the kitchen to get them both fresh ones. Staring aimlessly into the fridge, Thorne tried in vain to remember his last good day at the office . . .

His team – of which Hendricks was the civilian member – at the Serious Crime Group (West) had been seconded to help out the Projects Team at SO7 – the Serious and Organised Crime Unit. It had quickly become apparent that *organised* was one thing this particular operation was not. The resources of SO7 were stretched paper thin – or at least that was their story. There *was* a major turf war between two old family firms south of the river, and an

escalation in a series of ongoing disputes among Triad gangs that had seen three shootings in one week and a pitched battle on Gerrard Street. All the same, Thorne suspected that he and his team were basically there to cover other people's arses.

There was nothing in it for him. If arrests were ever made, the credit would go elsewhere, and anyway, there was precious little satisfaction in chasing down those responsible for getting rid of pondlife like Mickey Clayton.

The series of fatal 'X' shootings – of which Clayton's was the fourth – was a major assault on the operations of one of north London's biggest gangland families, but the simple fact was that the Projects Team hadn't the first idea who was doing the assaulting. All the obvious rivals had been approached and discounted. All the usual underground sources had been paid and pumped for information, none of which had proved useful. It became clear that a major new operation had established itself and was keen to make a splash. Thorne and his team were on board to find out who they were. Who was paying a contract killer, quickly dubbed the X-Man, to hurt the Ryan family?

'He's making life hard for himself, though, isn't he?' Thorne started talking from the kitchen and continued as he brought the beers into the living room. 'This X thing, this signature or whatever it is, it limits what he can do, where he can do it. He can't just ride up on a motorbike or wait for them outside a pub. He needs a bit of time and space.'

Hendricks took a can. 'He obviously puts a lot of effort into his work. Plans it. I bet he's bloody expensive.'

Thorne thought Hendricks was probably right. 'It's still cheap though, isn't it? When you think about it. To kill someone, I mean. Twenty, twenty-five grand's about top whack. That's a damn sight less than the people putting out the contracts pay for their Jeeps and top-of-the-range Mercs.'

'What d'you reckon I can get for a couple of hundred quid?' Hendricks asked. 'There's this mortuary assistant at Westminster who's getting on my tits.'

Thorne thought about it for a second. 'Chinese burn?'

The laugh was the first decent one that Thorne could remember sharing with anyone for a few days . . .

'How can it be the Yardies?' Hendricks said when he'd stopped giggling. 'Or Yakuza? We know our hitman's not black or Japanese . . .'

A witness claimed to have seen the killer leaving the scene of the third murder and had given a vague description of a white male in his thirties. The witness, Marcus Moloney, was an 'associate' of the Ryan family, and not what you'd call an upright citizen, but he seemed pretty sure about what he'd seen.

'It's not that simple,' Thorne said. 'It might have been, ten years ago, when people stuck to their own, but now they don't care so much and the freelancers just go where the work is. The Triads use Yardies. Yardies work with the Russians. They nicked a gang of Yakuza last year for recruiting outside schools. They were as good as giving out application forms; signing up Greek lads, Asians, Turks, whoever.'

Hendricks smiled. 'It's nice to see that they're all equal-opportunities employers . . .'

Thorne grunted, and the two of them settled back into saying nothing for a few minutes. Thorne closed his eyes and picked at the goatee he'd grown towards the end of the previous year. The beard created the illusion of a jawline and covered up the scar from a knife wound.

The puckered line that ran diagonally across Thorne's chin was the only visible reminder of a night six months before when he'd both begged for his life and prayed for death to come quickly. There were other scars, easier to disguise, but far more troublesome. Thorne would reach into his gut in the darkness and finger them until they reopened into wounds. He could imagine the scab forming then, blood black across the tender flesh. The crust that would itch and crumble beneath his fingernails, exquisite and agonising, for him to poke and pick at . . .

Lucinda Williams sang softly about an all-consuming lust, her voice sweet and saw-toothed at the same time, rising like smoke above a single acoustic guitar.

Thorne and Hendricks both started slightly when the phone rang.

'Tom?' A woman's voice.

Thorne sank back into his armchair with the phone. He shouted across to Hendricks deliberately loud enough for the caller to hear, 'Oh Christ, it's that mad old woman who keeps phoning me up . . .'

Hendricks grinned and shouted back, 'Tell her I can smell the cat food from here!'

'Come on then, Carol,' Thorne said. 'Tell me what's been happening in glamorous Worthing. Any "cat stuck up tree" incidents or Zimmer-frame pile-ups I should know about?'

The woman on the other end of the line was in no mood for the usual banter. 'I need to talk to you, Tom. I need you to listen . . .'

So, Thorne listened. The curry arrived and went cold, but he didn't even think about it. He could tell as soon as she started to talk that something was seriously wrong.

In all the time he'd known Carol Chamberlain, Thorne had never heard her cry before.