

At Risk

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extract from an uncorrected book proof

1

With quiet finality, the tube train drew to a stop. A long hydraulic gasp, and then silence.

For several moments no one in the crowded carriage moved. And then, as the stillness and the silence deepened, eyes began to flicker. Standing passengers peered worriedly through the windows into the blackness, as if hoping for some explanatory vision or revelation.

They were halfway between Mornington Crescent and Euston, Liz Carlyle calculated. It was five past eight, it was Monday, and she was almost certainly going to be late for work. Around her pressed the smell of other people's damp clothes. A wet briefcase, not her own, rested in her lap.

Nestling her chin into her velvet scarf, Liz leant back into her seat and cautiously extended her feet in front of her. She shouldn't have worn the pointed plum-coloured shoes. She'd bought them a couple of weeks earlier on a light-hearted and extravagant shopping trip, but now the toes were beginning to curl up from the soaking they'd received on the way to the station. From experience she knew that the rain would leave nasty indelible marks on the leather. Equally infuriatingly, the kitten heels had turned out to be just the right size to get wedged in the cracks between paving stones.

After ten years of employment at Thames House, Liz had never satisfactorily resolved the clothes issue. The accepted look, which most people seemed gradually to fall into, lay somewhere between sombre and invisible. Dark trouser suits, neat skirts and jackets, sensible shoes – the sort of stuff you found in John Lewis or Marks and Spencer.

While some of her colleagues took this to extremes, cultivating an almost Soviet drabness, Liz instinctively subverted it. She often spent Saturday afternoons combing the antique clothing stalls in Camden Market for quixotically stylish bargains which, while they infringed no Service rules, certainly raised a few eyebrows. It was a bit like school, and Liz smiled as she remembered the grey pleated skirts which could be dragged down to regulation length in the classroom and then hiked to a bum-freezing six inches above the knee for the busride home. A little fey to be fighting the same wars at thirtyfour, perhaps, but something inside her still resisted being submerged by the gravity and secrecy of work at Thames House.

Intercepting her smile, a strap-hanging commuter looked her up and down. Avoiding his appreciative gaze, Liz ran a visual check on him in return, a process which was now second nature to her. He was dressed smartly, but with a subtly conservative fussiness which was not quite of the City. The upper slopes of academia, perhaps? No, the suit was hand-made. Medicine? The well-kept hands supported that idea, as did the benign but unmistakable arrogance of his appraisal. A consultant with a few years' private practice and a dozen pliant nurses behind him, Liz decided, headed for one of the larger teaching hospitals. And next to him a goth-girl. Purple hair extensions, Sisters of Mercy T-shirt under the bondage jacket, pierced everything. A bit early in the day, though, for one of her tribe to be up and about. Probably works in a clothes shop or music store or . . . no, got you. The faint shiny ridge on the thumb where the scissors pressed. She was a hairdresser, spending her days transforming nice girls from the suburbs into Hammer Horror vampires.

Inclining her head, Liz once again touched her cheek to the silky scarlet nap of her scarf, enveloping herself in a faint scented miasma which brought Mark's physical presence – his eyes and his mouth and his hair – rushing home to her. He had bought her the scent from Guerlain on the Champs Elysées (wildly unsuitable, needless to say) and the scarf from Dior on the Avenue Montaigne. He had paid cash, he later told her, so that there would be no paper trail. He had always had an unerring instinct for the tradecraft of adultery.

She remembered every detail of the evening. On the way back from Paris, where he had been interviewing an actress, he had arrived without warning at Liz's basement flat in Kentish Town. She'd been in the bath, listening to La Bohème and trying half-heartedly to make sense of an article in The Economist, and suddenly there he was, and the floor was strewn with expensive white tissue paper and the place was reeking – gorgeously and poignantly – of Vol de Nuit.

Afterwards they had opened a bottle of duty-free Moët and climbed back into the bath together. 'Isn't Shauna expecting you?' Liz had asked guiltily.

'She's probably asleep' Mark answered cheerfully. 'She's had her sister's kids all weekend.'

'And you, meanwhile . . .'

'I know. It's a cruel world, isn't it?'

The thing that had baffled Liz at first was why he had married Shauna in the first place. From his descriptions of her, they seemed to have nothing in common whatever. Mark Callendar was feckless and pleasure-loving and possessed of an almost feline perceptiveness – a quality which made him one of the most sought-after profilists in print journalism – while his wife was an unbendingly earnest feminist academic. She was forever hounding him for his unreliability, he was forever evading her humourless wrath. There seemed no purpose to any of it.

But Shauna was not Liz's problem. Mark was Liz's problem. The relationship was complete madness and, if she didn't do something about it soon, could well cost her her job. She didn't love Mark and she dreaded to think of what would happen if the whole thing was forced out into the open. For a long time it had looked as if he was going to leave Shauna, but he hadn't, and Liz now doubted that he ever would. Shauna, she had gradually come to understand, was the negative to his positive charge, the AC to his DC, the Wise to his Morecambe; between them they made up a fully functioning unit.

And sitting there in the halted train it occurred to her that what really excited Mark was the business of transformation. Descending on Liz, ruffling her feathers, laughing at her seriousness, magicking her into a bird of paradise. If she had lived in an airy modern flat overlooking one of the London parks, with wardrobes full of exquisite designer clothes, then she would have held no interest for him at all.

She really had to end it. She hadn't told her mother about him, needless to say, and in consequence, whenever she stayed the weekend with her in Wiltshire, she had to endure a wellintentioned homily about Meeting Someone Nice.

'I know it's difficult when you can't talk about your job,' her mother had begun the night before, lifting her head from the photo album that she was sorting out, 'but I read in the paper the other day that over nineteen hundred people work in that building with you, and that there are all sorts of social activities you can do. Why don't you take up amateur dramatics or Latin American dancing or something?'

'Mum, please!' She imagined a group of Northern Ireland desk officers and A4 surveillance men descending on her with eyes blazing, maracas shaking, and coloured ruffles pinned to their shirts.

'Just a suggestion,' said her mother mildly, and turned back to the album. A minute or two later she lifted out one of Liz's old class photos.

'Do you remember Robert Dewey?'

'Yes,' said Liz cautiously. 'Lived in Tisbury. Peed in his pants at the Stonehenge picnic.'

'He's just opened a new restaurant in Salisbury. Round the corner from the Playhouse.'

'Really?' murmured Liz. 'Fancy that.' This was a flanking attack, and what it was really about was her coming home. She had grown up in the small octagonal gatehouse of which her mother was now the sole tenant, and the unspoken hope was that she should return to the country and 'settle down', before spinsterhood and the City of Dreadful Night claimed her for ever. Not necessarily with Rob Dewey – he of the sodden shorts – but with someone similar. Someone with whom, at intervals, she could enjoy 'French cuisine' and 'the theatre' and all the other metropolitan amenities to which she had no doubt grown accustomed.

Extricating herself from the maternal web last night had meant that Liz hadn't got on to the motorway until 10 p.m., and hadn't reached the Kentish Town flat until midnight. When she let herself in she found that the washing that she'd put on on Saturday morning was lying in six inches of cloudy water in the machine, which had stopped mid-cycle. It was now far too late to start it again without annoying the neighbours, so she rooted through the dry-cleaning pile for her least crumpled work outfit, hung it over the bath, and took a shower in the hope that the steam would restore a little of its élan. When she finally made it to bed it was almost 1 a.m. She had managed about five and a half hours' sleep and felt puffy-eyed, adrift on a tide of fatigue.

With a gasp and a long, flatulent shudder, the tube train restarted. She was definitely going to be late.