

S. C. LOADER

THE REALM

*Some vows should
never be broken.*

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Also by S.C. Loader

Helping Hands

The Last Chapter

Three Wishes

The Realm

Some vows should never be broken.

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Love
endures

Chapter 1

'Shut that damn thing off!' demanded a muffled voice from under the quilt.

The whine of the alarm clock continued peevishly loud and unabated.

Moments later an irritated hand made its way across the bed to wake the culprit responsible for this dream shattering event but found only a cold emptiness. A stifled expletive followed the realisation that peace could only be restored at the considerable personal cost of leaving the cosy confines of the enveloping eiderdown.

Some minutes later Richard stumbled half asleep and naked into the bathroom. His wife Miriam, already fully dressed and applying the final touches to her make-up turned to greet him in her usual scornful manner, 'Finally found your way out of bed. Bravo!' Her eyes ran down the full-length of his lean, lightly sun-tanned muscular body, 'Tell me, why on earth did I marry such a repulsive slob?'

He knew better than to suggest an answer, 'You forgot to turn it off again.'

She smiled and stretched up to whisper in his ear, 'My dear, I forget *nothing*!' then with an inconsiderate and disproportionate amount of noise, she tidied away her make-up. After slamming a drawer closed for good measure she left, leaving him in the sole company of the bleary-eyed, thirty-six-year-old slob in the mirror.

'Wow! Only one insult this morning,' he said to himself, 'she must be in a good mood.'

The face in the mirror did not venture an opinion.

The razor fell still briefly, 'Saving them for later?' The disheartened expression staring back at him confirmed those thoughts.

Richard arrived at the breakfast table ready for a day's business, fully groomed, smartly suited and his tie was neatly, if not perfectly, in place.

He sat opposite his wife, the empty chair next to her had tempted him, but only momentarily.

Miriam poured him a coffee and proceeded to offer her brand of unsolicited proverbial advice, 'Perhaps if you came to bed at a reasonable hour, then you might find getting out of it easier in the morning.'

'My business meeting last night ran on far longer than I had anticipated.'

'Oh! So that is what it was and there was I thinking you were just out to impress some skinny blond tart with an expensive meal so that you could lay her. What's wrong with those cheap cesspits you normally go to every night, not good enough for her?'

Seemingly undisturbed by his wife's intimation Richard calmly continued to turn a disagreeable piece of dry, half scorched toast into something more edible, 'God only knows where you...', a sentence curtailed by a well-aimed flying teaspoon, one of Miriam's favoured ways of showing her distaste at his choice of words. He continued, wary of the vast array of munitions still at her disposal, 'I do not know where you get your information, but as usual, it's completely wrong!'

'So you were not in Rutherford's last night and there was no blond tramp with droopy tits, wearing a disgustingly short mini-skirt?'

'I was there and the woman was neither a tramp nor was she wearing a mini-skirt. How did you know I was there anyway?'

Miriam fetched herself another teaspoon before answering, 'Linda. She saw you with the blond bimbo in the restaurant and called me.'

'Linda?'

'Linda Shaw!'

'Oh! Her again! Five times Linda or is it six now? I've lost track.'

'Three! She has only been divorced three times and don't you dare use that sarcastic tone of voice when referring to a friend of mine.'

'Friend? An interesting choice of friends you have.'

'At least I have some!'

'Well, she came to the wrong conclusion and typically so have you. It was a business meeting and the blond woman was a client.'

'A client indeed,' Miriam paused only to add a spoonful of sugar to her coffee, 'far more likely you were hers! What's wrong, run out of impressionable young girls around the office to jump into bed with?'

'She was a client and it was a business meeting,' Richard stretched out a hand, 'pass over the sugar please.'

'Really!' she stood, 'sorry the bowl's empty, I'll get some more. Tell me, since when has the bank allowed its debt collectors to entertain clients in expensive restaurants? And if it was a business meeting as you say, then where was your pathetic puppy dog of a secretary?'

'She's not a puppy dog and I would appreciate it if you did not persist in using that term, she has a name.'

'As you wish. So where was panting Petra? Under the table? I'll bet she wasn't taking shorthand if she was! Or had you given her the slip so you could screw someone else for a change?'

'I've never been to bed with Petra.'

Miriam handed over the refilled sugar bowl, 'I don't suppose you have, the way she dribbles in your presence I wouldn't be surprised if she threw herself on her back and spread her legs for you in the office. Tell me,' adding a note of feigned pity in her voice, 'is she still so dreadfully ugly?'

'She's not ugly, granted she is not one of the prettiest, but she's far from being ugly.'

'She *is* ugly! Not that you'd notice, you'd screw anything so long as it wasn't wearing knickers and still had a pulse. How often has she spread for you? Fifty times? More?'

'Why are you so convinced I'm having an affair with Petra?'

'Don't waste your breath denying it; you forget I have my sources!'

'Five times Linda again no doubt!'

'Three! And I have more than her say so, I have my own evidence and plenty of it! That revolting slut spreads her legs for you!'

'She does not spread her legs for me, neither does she dribble, pant nor anything else. She was not there last night because it was an off-the-record meeting.' After taking a sip of coffee he added, 'so what's your evidence?'

Miriam refrained from an enlightening answer, 'So what did the dumb blond charge you anyway or did you get a freebie for picking up the restaurant bill?'

Richard finished his coffee, 'I've already told you, it was bank business.'

Miriam refilled his cup, 'You screwed her,' she said rather matter-of-factly, 'you came home well after two and the restaurant closes at one, where did you go? Her place or some cheap grotty hotel room?'

'Nowhere,' he remained unmoved by her continuing accusations, 'I did not have sex with her, it was business and she was only interested in raising capital, nothing else.'

Miriam raised a pair of disbelieving eyebrows, 'The slut spread herself, I can bet money on it and what for? A little more credit? A few more days before you send in your thugs?'

'They're called bailiffs.'

'They're still thugs! So what did she get for enduring your derisory two-minute performance?'

'We didn't have sex,' taking the last piece of toast out of the stand he asked, 'would you like it?'

'If you mean the toast, no thanks, you may have it. If you mean sex... with you... not in a million years, not even if you were the last man on earth,' adding an overdramatic shudder and an equally overdramatic grimace to emphasise her words. 'If you want sex why don't you hump dozy Doreen again, I'm sure she would only be too willing!'

'She's not my wife, you are.'

'Shame you didn't think of that before you screwed her!'

'I didn't screw her.'

'Oh! So ramming someone from behind while they're bent over a stool in the cleaning cupboard now counts as making love does it?'

'I've told you before, it wasn't me.'

'Pardon me! But who was caught in flagrante? I may not have been there, but I still have my contacts and I know exactly what you and that dirty little bitch did.'

'Ah yes. Your contact, five times Linda.'

'Three!'

'Not for long.'

'At least she knows what to do with backstabbing, adulterous husbands! Sometimes I wish I could follow her lead.'

Richard fell silent and after a few moments turned away.

He sat thoughtfully crunching his way through the piece of unbuttered toast, staring at nothing in particular through the kitchen window, while Miriam contemplatively watched him over the rim of her coffee cup.

She knew she could accuse him of anything, deride him, insult him, use coarse or even foul language if she wanted to. The former she found to be a particularly rewarding way to vent her anger and irritatingly he would neither react nor defend himself with any great enthusiasm, but whenever she hinted towards a divorce he would do exactly this, fall silent. She watched him for a while longer before quietly cursing herself when forming tears threatened to rearrange her make-up.

Richard habitually checked through his attaché-case before leaving the apartment, wallet, keys, mobile phone, two pens, two pencils, a Swiss army pocket knife, cigarettes and lighter. The only true business contents were five, loose A4 sheets of paper containing some handwritten notes, the core of a presentation he was due to give to the new chairman the following Monday.

'Why do you bother taking that?' asked Miriam sarcastically. 'There's nothing in it, there hasn't been since you gave up your highly paid, and if I may add *highly* respectable career in the Accounts Division.'

'Because...'

'Because you think a despicable, lowly paid debt collector looks more impressive to women if he carries an attaché-case around?'

'For God's sake woman, let it rest!'

Miriam sidled up to him smiling, suddenly and unexpectedly he felt the resounding sting of her hand against his cheek. Her slim seventy kilogram, one-metre seventy-centimetre frame maybe half a head shorter than his own, but it could still deliver a teeth-jarring slap.

'Don't blaspheme... debt collector!'

'Loan Recovery Manager.'

'Debt collector!'

Apart from Miriam's unheard and physically impossible advice given to an errant motorist who chose to ignore their right of precedence while traversing a pedestrian crossing, their five-minute walk to the underground station was undertaken with their customary commuting companion, silence.

The escalator smoothly conveyed them from the claustrophobic, gloomy dullness of the passage up into the bright airy sunlit world their platform inhabited. Passing through the ticket validating gates Richard noticed two young children waiting on the platform, an expectant looking girl stood next to a sullen-looking boy who appeared to be more interested in a handheld electronic game than in the world around him. Richard nudged Miriam and directed her attention towards them as they made their way past.

'No!' she said with the unmistakable intonation of determination.

'No what?'

'I can read you like a book, you're hinting again. Well, you can forget it, I've already told you I don't want children,' then disapprovingly looking him up and down she sneeringly added, 'not yours anyway!'

Today a grey-haired gentleman thwarted their normal daily ritual. However, it was neither his dark glasses nor his pale yellow tie that concerned Miriam, but the white cane he was carrying. Although very sympathetic towards anyone with a handicap she preferred to keep a physical distance, Richard had no such reservation. In fact, he felt his own handicap, although pitifully minor next to this gentleman's, included him within their numbers.

Because their customary waiting place was occupied by the white caned gentleman Richard's affliction came to a stop a little short of exactly halfway down the platform. This position ensured them the choice of the two least populated middle carriages. A preference based on somewhat different grounds, Richard simply did as he was told. Miriam considered him a weak pathetic excuse of a man and she took immense pleasure in dominating as much of his life as possible to prove her point. Her opinion of him was not altogether incorrect, for he quickly discovered it led to a far quieter one if he

did not try to resist. Miriam's preference was based on personal taste; she did not want to be associated with the passengers using the other carriages. She considered the front two bore the ill-mannered, elbow wielding I'm-in-a-hurry-get-out-of-my-way passengers, while the last two transported both the idle too-lazy-to-walk-any-further and the sweaty forgot-to-set-the-alarm-clock passengers. Her ardently held views on all three types of passengers had been so frequently voiced that Richard no longer cared to challenge their validity.

They waited patiently in the company of their customary commuting companion.

An electronic tone announced a new message on the overhead displays for those with nothing better to do than read it. '*The next train will arrive in 3 mins 30 secs*' advised the lower half of the scrolling display, unrelentingly the upper half displayed '*Friday...22 July...7:25 am...Friday...22 July...7:25 am...*', Richard watched until it changed to, '*Friday...22 July...7:26 am*' then sought something else to occupy himself with.

Miriam checked for eavesdroppers then in a very low voice suggested, 'If you want children why don't you ask putrid Petra, I'm sure she would throw herself on her back at the chance.'

The man with the cane chuckled.

Characteristically Richard refused to be goaded; he had grown accustomed to Miriam's verbal aggression over the year since it had first started. Thankfully she generally restricted her hateful outpourings to the privacy of their apartment. She rarely swore and would blush profusely if she did, her struggle to continually find new and deliberately offensive epithets caused him some amusement, and he had learned to ignore the constant string of insults and frequent accusations. In public, she liked to maintain her polished professional businesswoman image and she was especially careful never to demean herself, something he was very grateful for.

'You're holding the book upside down.'

Richard's comment startled Miriam, it was exceptionally rare for him to break what she deemed to be a sulking silence by anything more than an odd grunt. She was even embarrassed that he managed to buy his daily newspaper from the same man every day without a single word passing his lips.

'Why?' she asked.

'The children back there, I was not hinting that we should have some, but just pointing them out. Don't you think there was something a little strange about them?'

'Not really, apart from the fact that they were smartly presented, which is something of a rarity with today's youth.'

'I have a very uneasy feeling about them, something is not quite right.'

'Why? They're no different from anybody else here, just younger!'

'Perhaps, but they're not facing the track.'

'So!'

'Everybody, whether waiting for a train or meeting someone faces the track, they're not. Wait here... I'll just go and check.'

Richard picked up a touchscreen pen and handed it to the boy, 'Is this yours?' he asked.

Despite lacking the courtesy of looking at the person talking to him, Richard found the boy to be surprisingly polite and well-spoken, 'Yes it is, thank you! I keep losing those.'

Miriam appeared at Richard's side as he turned to the slightly taller girl, he was immediately taken by her youthful beauty and her bright emerald green eyes, 'Excuse me for asking, but is everything okay, you're not lost or anything are you?'

'We're fine thank you. We're just waiting for our new parents.'

Miriam looked at Richard a little puzzled and discretely mouthed, 'New parents?'

She asked the girl, 'Where are they, do they know you're here?'

The girl looked to Richard and an extraordinary radiant smile spread across the whole of her pretty face, 'They will be on the next train.'

'If they're not, do you know where to go for help?' he asked.

'Yes we do, thank you very much.'

'Good.'

The aforementioned next train arrived and Richard offered a parting warning, 'Please be careful and don't get too close to the platform edge.'

'We'll be careful. Goodbye!'

As they turned to leave they noticed quite a few passengers were staring at them strangely.

'What's wrong with them?' ask Richard.

'They probably think we're perverts of some kind,' replied Miriam, 'you know what people are like nowadays.'

Their displaced position on the platform necessitated a short dash to their accustomed carriages, disconcertingly almost as soon as they boarded the warning buzzer sounded, the automatic doors closed behind them and the train jerked awkwardly as it pulled away, leaving them unable to verify whether the new parents were, as the little girl had said, 'On the next train.'

Silently sitting opposite one another they watched their respective scenery unfold, Miriam the past and Richard the future and when their train finally entered into the encompassing darkness from whence its name was derived their thoughts replaced the scenery.

In the darkness of the tunnel wall, Miriam sought the handsome, intelligent and affectionate man she had married. If she was forced into a confession, the former was still perfectly true and the sight of his naked body still aroused strong sexual feelings, but she had no intention of indulging his ego by admitting to it. Her admiration of his intelligence evaporated when he threw away a wonderful career, just at a point where he was only one small step away from achieving his own ambition of becoming a senior manager, only to move into a dead-end job that no one else would touch. Luckily, as he threw himself off the career ladder she compensated by

climbing up it, so they remained relatively unaffected by his huge drop in salary. That alone would have been forgivable, everyone was entitled to make a mistake once in their lives, but two months later he made another, one that she would not and could not forgive him for. The discovery that she was not the only one he lavished his affections upon destroyed not only their dream of a house and children but also three years of marriage. Sacrificed not on the altar of religion, but across a stool, in a cleaning cupboard and for that mistake she was determined to make him pay an extortionately heavy price.

The darkness of the tunnel wall had also seemingly captured Richard's attention, but he was actually admiring the reflection of an especially attractive young woman in the carriage window. This woman was not so dissimilar to his wife, both were the embodiment of femininity, slim, shapely and breathtakingly beautiful. Both had dark coloured eyes which added a subtle hint of the mysterious, but sadly there the similarity ended. The long, dark, loosely curled hair of the woman in the window was suggestive of a deeply sensuous, loving, warm natured woman, tender, caring and supportive. Qualities he felt currently unable to attribute to his wife.

His deliberations over the possibility of a future together with this woman came to an abrupt end with a sharp bend in the track, his knee swung touching hers, unintentionally breaking an unspoken taboo.

Quickly he removed the offending knee, but he was too late, it had been noticed. Miriam's unilateral prohibition on all physical contact with her extended even to the confined space of an underground carriage. Even accidental transgressions such as this were reprimanded by what he had secretly labelled her Death Eyes. She would glower at him for a few seconds, then narrow her eyes threateningly before momentarily glaring at the offending piece of anatomy, invariably her eyes then returned to his bearing an ominous coldness. Her message was clear, concise and invoked sufficient fear to ensure there would be no second transgression of her rules, there never was!

Strangely, her behaviour always left him questioning why she still allowed him to sleep in the same bed as her? A question that still awaited a

satisfactory answer.

The first three stations of their journey came and went, the ever-increasing number of passengers brought the carriage to near bursting point and the air thick with the usual pungent, early morning mixture of aftershave and perfume. Relief arrived in the shape of the fourth station, the first inner-city stop. The open doors allowed a welcoming change of air and the carriage sighed as a third of its burden disgorged out onto the platform. Richard waited a little impatiently and for want of anything better to do, although he knew it by heart, traced their route on the underground plan fixed to the glass panel behind Miriam's head. Saint Stephen's was next, a very popular stop that would see at least another third of the passengers leave. The following station was renowned for its drug addicts and drunkards, the inappropriately named Culture Square, unsurprisingly few would alight here. Then came theirs, City Centre and freedom, but a short five-minute walk beyond.

The last of the waiting embarked and to the despair of the latecomers rushing down the steps the warning buzzer sounded, the doors slid closed and following a small jolt the train headed off into the darkness.

Richard was eyeing his fellow passengers, searching for a pretty face with which he could fantasise over a different life when the platform of Saint Stephen's rolled in to view. It held a surprise, an enormous horde of insomnia afflicted tourists. The unusually long respite was rewarded, their carriage was brimming with the varied, excited and expectant faces of the visitors to their beautiful city and the atmosphere was bright and cheerful, filled with the exuberant unintelligible chatter of alien languages. Richard watched a smile slowly grow across a previously expressionless face, Miriam's interest in the world had been re-awoken, all languages were to her an absolute joy. Richard spoke only two, but Miriam had four fluent and three passable languages, plus she knew odd words or phrases from many more, not only a source of envy for Richard but also one of enormous admiration.

Before long the passenger sitting next to Miriam vacated her seat in readiness to disembark and unusually, despite the presence of a few standing passengers, it remained empty. Richard was tempted, but only momentarily.

At Culture Square only the predicted handful alighted, the tourists had obviously been forewarned. One passenger boarded and after all the customary precautions the train moved off again with its habitual jolt.

The new passenger made his way unsteadily through the swaying carriage and sat himself down heavily next to Miriam. Nonchalantly she turned her head to acknowledge her new, albeit temporary, travelling companion. Richard doubted her new neighbour noticed her eyes bulge, the smile vanish or that she recoiled up against the carriage wall faster than an inexperienced electrician touching the wrong wires. This man was every passenger's nightmare, especially women passengers and he had chosen to sit next to one who had no qualms and little finesse in displaying her utter revulsion at his presence. Richard's own opinion of this man was not so dissimilar to Miriam's and although he could never quite understand why any man would choose to disgrace himself in this degrading manner, a modicum of pity prevented him from voicing it.

The carriage lurched slightly and the beer can escaped his inebriated grip, some of its contents emptying as it rolled foaming into the aisle. He remained unaware of his loss and in all probability, given that his eyes were barely open, of the world around him. The clothes he wore were filthy, ill-fitting and threadbare. He stank of stale sweat and alcohol, his hair had neither seen scissors, shampoo nor a comb for some considerable time, but in his favour, he had at least shaved recently, probably about a month ago and hopefully, the wetness around his crotch was spilt beer, otherwise, there would soon be another note to add to his particular brand of cologne.

The carriage lurched again and his arm fell limply towards Miriam, she snatched the edge of her skirt away in horror, then slowly his torso started to keel over sideways towards her, Miriam looked towards Richard with panic in her eyes. As their station came next and although far sooner than they normally would, he silently signalled they should make their way towards the carriage doors. Holding out his hand she readily took it, thankfully the

gentleman next to Richard swung his legs out of the way making their escape a little easier. Guiding Miriam around the public inconvenience and over the spilt beer, they made their way towards the doors, reaching them just as the train rolled to stop at their station.

'Quick, I don't want to be in here any longer than I have to,' urged Miriam.

Richard pressed the button, but the doors failed to open.

'Hurry! Before he follows us!'

The second attempt also failed. Miriam's anxiety found new heights as the carriage lights began to flicker.

'Quickly!' the panic that had filled her eyes shortly before had now found its way into her voice.

Suddenly the carriage fell into complete darkness as the lights failed.

At the third attempt only one of the pair opened, Miriam forced Richard out and quickly followed, checking over her shoulder as she did so, to her relief *he* was not behind them.

Almost as soon as Miriam had stepped onto the platform the warning buzzer sounded, the door closed and the train sped off out of the station.

'Did you see that!' she cried. 'That filthy drunk touched me!'

'No he did not, now calm down.'

She promptly started to brush herself down with hands that looked frightened to touch whatever they were supposed to be removing.

'That disgusting excuse for a man has probably given me fleas or lice, or even both!'

Richard walked over and lifted a hand to help brush her down.

'What do you think you're doing?' she asked sharply.

'Trying to help.'

'Flees or no fleas I don't want your help, whatever I caught from him can be cured by a hot bath, whatever I catch from you will probably require months of painful injections to cure!'

Richard turned away a little dejected.

A few moments later he asked, 'Where are we?'

The question did not capture Miriam's attention, but the strange note in his voice did.

She looked up, then around, 'This isn't City Centre!' she proclaimed.

'I know that, but where is it?'

Before either had had the opportunity to locate a station nameplate the power failed and everything abruptly fell into utter blackness. As they waited for the emergency lighting to shed some light upon the mystery, the darkness gained a new bride, an ominous eerie silence. Nothing could be heard, not a single solitary sound, nothing... anywhere.

Unmeasured time ticked slowly away.

Richard's voice finally broke the unnerving silence.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Careful, the platform edge is right behind you.'

'I know! I'm not a child!'

Miriam's retort reverberated off unseen walls then faded away, swallowed up by the darkness.

Richard broke it again, 'Did you notice anyone else on the platform before the lights failed?'

'No.'

'Neither did I.'

Miriam sought to verify it, 'Hello, is anyone there?'

Only her echo answered.

More time passed unmeasured, but obstinately the emergency lighting still refused to flicker into life.

Richard spoke his thoughts out loud, 'I wonder if the parents arrived?'

'What parents?'

'The children's.'

'Oh! Them... I hadn't given them much thought.'

'Really!'

There was a pause before she answered, 'Okay, perhaps I did,' she sounded embarrassed to admit to her lie, 'actually I was thinking the very same thing just before that revolting drunk sat down next to me.'

Their eyes slowly began to distinguish differences in the darkness.

'Look! Down there,' exclaimed Miriam, forgetful that no one, including herself, could see her pointing finger.

'Where?'

'At the end of the platform,' adding the informative afterthought, 'to your right.'

'I see it, What's that underneath? Steps?'

'I think so. Let's go and find out, I've had enough of this.'

The steps, sandwiched between two tauntingly still escalators, eventually led them up into a broad gloomy passageway, lit only at the far end by the sunlight penetrating the glass-faced entrance. Richard inspected his leg, while crossing the platform a demented litter bin had attacked him with what he considered to be murderous intent. There was no damage to skin or cloth, only to pride.

Their transit through the passageway was brought to an abrupt halt by one of the shops that lined the passageway's sides, a fruit merchant's display had caught Miriam's eye.

'Wow! Look at those gorgeous looking apples.'

'They're only apples,' replied Richard in a disinterested tone.

'Wait... hold this,' and she thrust her attaché-case into his arms.

Richard was surprised, her case was heavy, much heavier than his own.

'I need something for my lunch and we've run out of fruit at home. Do you want any?'

'No thanks, you know I cannot abide fruit.'

'It's healthy!'

Richard remained unimpressed, 'I wonder why all the other shops are closed?'

Miriam shrugged her shoulders and continued her inspection

While he waited Richard cast a casual eye around himself, it eventually fell upon a lonely shopping bag propped up against the wall. Curiosity guided an investigative hand, soap powder, shampoo, razors and a collection of various other toiletry products.

'Someone's forgotten their shopping!'

Miriam said nothing in response. After a few seconds he glanced at his watch, two minutes past eight exactly, 'Hurry up or we'll be late for work. I'll wait for you outside.'

One of Miriam's hands picked over the fruit; the other nonchalantly waved him away.

Richard walked out onto the dazzlingly bright, sun-soaked station concourse and promptly offloaded his burden of cases onto a bench directly opposite the entrance. On opening his attaché-case it produced a strange, dull clunk. Inspecting the case and its immediate surroundings failed to determine the cause. Dismissing the event he returned to his original intent and glanced at the newspaper that lay inside while withdrawing a cigarette from its packet. He knew Miriam would take her time over her choice thus giving him the opportunity for a quick smoke.

"Oil prices rise, recession looms."

Stated the headline, he hoped against the latter half as it would bring considerably more work into his department, he closed the lid on potentially bad news.

The cigarette in his mouth remained unlit, although a fully functioning lighter hovered within ignition distance. A casual observation of the general surroundings had triggered a question in his head, one that had captured his full and undivided attention.

Miriam approached from behind and added her handbag to the accumulation on the bench.

'That was very strange,' she said while simultaneously inspecting her purchase, 'there were no prices marked anywhere and there was nobody to ask or pay. I just left some money next to the till, I hope it was enough.'

She looked up, 'What do you think you are doing?' she demanded to know and through gritted teeth added. 'Get that out of your mouth. Now!'

A slow, unguided hand removed the offending article.

'We travel together in the mornings simply because our offices are only minutes apart, but I will not have you belittle me in public by smoking those

disgusting things on the street like a common labourer.'

Richard, without even looking in her direction, asked, 'What public?'

It was eight o'clock on a bright sunny summer morning and it was a normal working day, yet there was not a soul to be seen, anywhere.

Miriam's hand gripped his arm tightly, he ignored it and continued his visual search for any signs of life, discounting the pigeons of which there were a large number and the handful of other unknown feather wearers, there was none.

Miriam's grip intensified to a pain-inducing level, 'What!' he asked irritably.

Her hand tugged at him for attention and he glanced sideways at her, she was facing the station and he could not see her face, 'What do you want?'

Her spare hand slowly rose and an unsteady finger pointed towards something behind him, he turned around and his jaw fell.

The entire station, the cycle racks and the benches that lay at its entrance, the lonesome tall blue and white underground sign barely two meters away from them and everything else associated with the station, including all the paving slabs up to the ones they stood on... had all vanished.

Chapter 2

The empty space that was once a station held them in a state of spellbound disbelief.

Richard summed up his thoughts as best he could under the circumstances, 'Fuck!'

Miriam voiced her assembled thoughts with a little more dignity, 'Ditto!'

'It was there, wasn't it?' asked Miriam after a few seconds of awe induced silence.

'If it wasn't, then I would like to know where you bought that fruit!'

Both looked at the plastic carrier bag Miriam was still holding, the only remaining physical proof of the station's previous existence.

Miriam's spare hand blindly found the sleeve of Richard's jacket and gripped it tightly, then she sidled up until the gap between them no longer allowed light to pass through.

'Where's it gone?' her voice now carried the note of fear rather than that of disbelief.

'Whole stations do not disappear in the blink of an eye,' an authoritative, matter-of-fact statement Richard hoped would allay some of her fear by restoring reason to the situation.

'Then what's happened to it?' she asked. 'Where did it go?'

Richard raised a hand and vaguely moved an extended index finger to the left, his eyes following in the same direction, then the finger moved to the right and again his eyes followed. He looked deeply contemplative and although Miriam urgently wanted her question answered she could see he was working towards an explanation if there was one to be found for this phenomenon.

'What's in that bag?'

She had not expected another question, 'Apples!'

'Are you sure?'

'I do know what apples look like!' she allowed one of the plastic handles to slip from her grip exposing the contents, twelve large green apples. 'Satisfied! Now, are you going to tell me where the station went?'

'Nowhere. It never existed.'

'What! Of course, it existed! Where did I buy these then?' the note of fear had now been replaced by one of annoyance.

'Look, I can't explain the apples, but the station I can assure you never existed, not here anyway.'

'Has your brain taken a holiday? Of course, it existed, you attacked a litter bin, I bought apples, we walked through it, we saw it with our own eyes. It was there!'

'The litter bin attacked me!'

'I don't care who attacked who! Just tell me where it went!' annoyance had become anger.

'Okay, I agree we saw it, felt it in various ways, heard it and even smelt it, but our senses can be fooled quite easily by someone with sufficient resources and a strong enough reason.'

'What are you on about?'

'Forget what your senses told you, apply your intelligence. Look at this site for instance.'

'What about it?'

'It isn't physically big enough to have held the station in the first place, not the one that we saw anyway. It's wide enough, but its depth is nowhere deep enough. Remember the passageway?'

'Of course!' she lifted and shook her bag of apples. 'Somewhat difficult to forget!'

'How long was it?'

'Quite long.'

'Exactly! A damn site longer than would fit into that space, this site would barely take a quarter of that passageway's length, agreed?'

A slow thoughtful nod accepted his argument.

'Here's another question for you, how many steps did we climb up to reach the passageway?'

'Not many, why?'

'The underground line we travelled on to reach this place is unique, under the city it is the deepest. So why should there be so few steps to reach the surface? At a guess, I would say there were no more than thirty, if you give or take a couple of steps either way that is equivalent to two flights of stairs in our apartment block. A rise of two floors from the deepest underground line in the entire network? I don't think so! Then, there was the direction of the train...'

'All trains move forward!'

'Not that direction! We stepped off the train, turned right and walked in an almost straight line to this point.'

'So?'

'That would mean the train travelled from the back of this site towards us, agreed?'

Miriam mentally worked on his suggestion and finally nodded in agreement.

'The sun is in front of us!'

'What has that to do with this?'

'It rises in the east in the morning, which means the train travelled from east to west, but the underground line that we use runs from the south of the city to the north, and even allowing for small deviations in that route I doubt there is a point anywhere along its entire length where it runs truly east to west!'

'Perhaps you're right, but we still saw it, we walked through it!'

'I think someone has played an amazingly clever and very elaborate trick on us, how I don't know, perhaps we were drugged, maybe even hypnotised, but I do know that the station we saw could not exist on that site.'

'Who would do such a thing and to us?'

'Pass! Ask me another.'

'Perhaps the Government, they can do all sorts of underhanded things!'

'Not this one,' stated Richard assuredly, 'they can't even agree on which day of the week it is and even if there was a secret department for this type of thing, why us? A senior sales representative from a company

manufacturing office furniture and a...,' he hesitated over his own job title, knowing Miriam's dislike of it, 'and a debt collector in a bank's employment are not very likely candidates for a clandestine operation by either their own government or anybody else's.'

'Perhaps you inadvertently stumbled upon a secret that someone wants kept that way?'

'In my job, I deal with companies that are either bankrupt or are on the verge of bankruptcy and the plight of these companies is common knowledge. To fund such an elaborate trick as this would require financial backing on a major scale, they simply do not have that kind of money. Besides, an orchestrated accident would be far easier, cheaper and quicker.'

'Then who?'

Richard shrugged his shoulders, 'Beats me!'

'Could it be one of those stupid television programmes that like to set people up in ridiculous situations?'

'Even they have to work to a budget, think of the costs involved. Everyone we have seen or met today from the moment we walked onto the platform at Pilgrims Bridge station would have to have been an actor or an extra, including the children and that drunkard. Hiring an entire train, changing the signage at every station en route, and, and, and... the costs would have been phenomenal'.

'Why the signage?'

'Because we know which station follows which, after Culture Square comes City Centre, we saw a station we believed to be Culture Square and automatically knew ours was next. As all the stations look almost identical to one another and it's only the signage that helps you tell them apart, all they would have to do is change the signage and we're fooled!'

'That wouldn't work,' stated Miriam.

'Why not?'

'Because we know the time and the distances involved. For us to end up in an unknown place, we would have to travel much further along our normal line and we would have noticed that, but what if we had been

diverted onto another line, once underground one dark tunnel looks much like another.'

'Except that each line has its own colour designation and every station on that line is decorated in that colour, the paintwork, the wall and floor tiling, the litter bins, all the seating and more. Imagine the cost of changing all that and then back again once they had finished.'

'If it were a disused line, it might be easier to dress up unused stations.'

'Actually, you might have something there. If we changed lines, then that would account for why the sun is in the wrong place and why there were so few steps to reach the surface.'

Miriam's grip on his sleeve relaxed and for a few minutes, they stood silently staring at an empty, dusty piece of brick strewn waste ground basking in the morning sunshine. Their thoughts mulled over the things said and unsaid, it was one of the latter that eventually caused Richard to break their vigil.

A little apologetically he confessed, 'There is something else bothering me besides the station.'

Miriam's grip on his sleeve tightened, 'What?'

'Where are all the people?'

'If the station was a ...'

'No, not there...' corrected Richard, then pointing over his shoulder added, 'here.'

Miriam released his sleeve and they turned around simultaneously.

Three bright green shiny apples rolled away from the dropped carrier bag and Miriam's trembling, two-handed grip on the other sleeve exposed the heightened level of terror induced by their new discovery.

Richard recovered his composure first, but not his sense of eloquence, 'Double fuck!'

Miriam recovered her eloquence, but not her composure, 'Double ditto!'

Sidling up against him as tightly as possible she asked an obvious question to which there was no obvious answer, 'Where is it?'

'God only knows!'

Miriam twitched and Richard flinched, but the hand of retribution remained tightly gripping his sleeve and her, 'Don't blaspheme,' lacked all of its usual venomous undertones.

'It was definitely there after the station disappeared, I was leaning against it when you tried to gain my attention.'

'Then where's it gone?'

'Sod the bench, where's our stuff gone? All my presentation notes were in that case!'

Miriam suddenly understood the implications of Richard's comment, 'My handbag! My attaché-case!'

'How did they make a bench disappear and everything on it without us noticing, we were only centimetres away?'

'They?'

'Whoever... and what on earth is this and how did it get here?' asked Richard craning his neck skywards.

Towering above them was a huge bare rectangular board supported on two large wooden upright struts, one of which stood roughly in the middle of the now non-existent bench.

'I don't know, I just want to get away from this place... look! Isn't that your pocket knife?'

'Where?'

'There, by that wooden thing.'

'Ah yes! I see it,' but trying to step forward proved difficult with a woman attached, 'you'll have to let go at some point.'

'Then you'll disappear and I'll be left here alone.'

'If that were their intention they would have done that while you were in the station and I was out here on my own.'

'They? Who are *they*?'

'Whoever!'

Miriam thought his statement over and reluctantly released her grip on his sleeve.

'It is mine, but how did it get here?' pocketing the knife he remembered the strange clunk he had heard earlier. 'It must have fallen out of my case

unnoticed when I opened it.'

Miriam asked another obvious question without a correspondingly obvious answer, 'Why did they leave it behind? They took everything else.'

'They?' inquired Richard, grinning at Miriam.

'Whoever!' she tried but failed to return the grin.

Recovering the spilt apples, Richard delivered the replenished carrier bag back into Miriam's care, 'Actually, that is a very good question considering they even took the paving slabs.'

'Can we go, I don't like this place, it's scary.'

'I'm inclined to agree, come on,' taking Miriam's free hand, to which she raised no objection, he led her towards the road. Passing under the huge board Miriam twisted her head around to see what was on its street-facing side, a few steps later she asked Richard to stop when they reached the road.

'Why?' he asked, surprised that she would want to do anything that would delay her escape.

'There is something you have to see.'

Richard raised his eyebrows and grinned, but she wasn't looking at him and her hand gripped his so tightly her nails began to cut the skin.

The road was barely five metres away and reached quickly and as requested Richard stopped.

'So what did you want to show me?'

Miriam said nothing but pointed a trembling finger in the direction from which they had just come.

'Triple fu...', the expletive died a quiet death.

The huge rectangular board was a hoarding, in this case advertising a forthcoming event.

'Opening soon...' Read the uppermost line of enormous lettering, underneath, in even larger, italicised print, '*Saint Catherine's Gates Station*.' Then came an artist's impression of the proposed station frontage and in every detail bar one, it was identical to the one that had disappeared. The only difference between the imagined station and the experienced one was the sketched images of a small group of people, two adults and two children.