

The Winds Of Marble Arch

Connie Willis

Cath refused to take the tube.

"You loved it the last time we were here," I said, rummaging through my suitcase for a tie.

"Correction. *You* loved it," she said, brushing her short hair. "I thought it was dirty and smelly and dangerous."

"You're thinking of the New York subway. This is the London Underground." The tie wasn't there. I unzipped the side pocket and jammed my hand down it. "You rode the tube the last time we were here."

"I also carried my suitcase up five flights of stairs at that awful bed and breakfast we stayed at. I have no intention of doing that either."

She wouldn't have to. The Connaught had a lift *and* a bellman.

"I *hated* the tube," she said. "I only took it because we couldn't afford taxis. And now we can."

We certainly could. We could also afford a hotel with carpet on the floor and a bathroom in our room instead of down the hall. A far cry from the—what was it called? It had had brown linoleum floors you hadn't wanted to walk on in your bare feet, and you had to put coins in a meter above the bathtub to get hot water.

"What was the name of that place we stayed at?" I asked Cath.

"I've repressed it," she said. "All I remember is that the tube station had the name of a cemetery."

"Marble Arch," I said, "and it wasn't named after a cemetery. It was named after the copy of the Roman arch of Constantine in Hyde Park."

"Well, it sounded like a cemetery."

"The Royal Hernia!" I said, suddenly remembering.

Cath grinned. "The Royal *Heritage*."

"The Royal Hernia of Marble Arch," I said. "We should go visit it, just for old times' sake."

"I doubt if it's still there," she said, putting on her earrings. "It's been twenty years."

"Of course it's still there," I said. "Scummy showers and all. Do you remember those narrow beds? They were just like coffins, only at least coffins have sides so you don't roll off." The tie wasn't there. I started taking shirts out of the suitcase and piling them on the bed. "These aren't much better. It makes you wonder how the British have managed to reproduce all these years."

"We seemed to manage all right," Cath said, putting on her shoes. "What time does the conference start?"

"Ten," I said, dumping socks and underwear onto the bed. "What time are you meeting Sara?"

"Nine-thirty," she said, looking at her watch. "Will you have time to pick up the tickets for the play?"

"Sure," I said. "The Old Man won't show up before eleven."

"Good," she said. "Sara and Elliott can only go Saturday. They've got something tomorrow night, and we've got dinner with Milford Hughes's widow and her sons Friday night. Is Arthur going with us to the play? Did you get in touch with him?"

"No, but I know the Old Man'll want to go. What are we seeing?" I asked, giving up on the tie.

"*Ragtime*, if we can get tickets. It's at the Adelphi. If not, try to get *The Tempest* or *Sunset Boulevard*, and if they're sold out, *Endgames*. Hayley Mills is in it."

"*Kismet* isn't playing?"

She grinned again. "*Kismet* isn't playing."

"Which tube stop does it say for the Adelphi?"

"Charing Cross," she said, consulting the map. "*Sunset Boulevard*'s at the Old Vic, and *The Tempest*'s at the Duke of York. On Shaftesbury Avenue. You could get the tickets through a ticket agent. It would be a lot faster than going to the theaters."

"Not on the tube, it won't," I said. "It's a snap to go anywhere. And ticket agents are for tourists."

She looked skeptical. "Get third row if you can, but not on the sides. And no farther back than the dress circle."

"Not the balcony?" I asked. The farthest, steepest seats had been all we could afford the first time we were here, so high up all you could see was the tops of the actors' heads. When we'd gone to *Kismet*,

the Old Man had spent the entire time leaning forward to look down the well-endowed Lalume's Arabian costume through a pair of rental binoculars.

"Not the balcony," Cath said, sticking an umbrella and the guidebook in her bag. "Put it on the American Express, if they'll take it. If not, the Visa."

"Are you sure the third row's a good idea?" I said. "Remember, the Old Man nearly got us thrown out of the upper balcony the last time, and there wasn't even anybody else up there."

Cath stopped putting things in her bag. "Tom," she said, looking worried. "It's been twenty years, and you haven't seen Arthur in over five."

"And you think the Old Man will have grown up in the meantime?" I said. "Not a chance. This is the guy who got us thrown out of Graceland five years ago. He'll still be the same."

Cath looked like she was going to say something else, and then began putting stuff in her bag again. "What time is the cocktail party tonight?"

"Sherry party," I said. "They have sherry parties in this country. Six. I'll meet you back here, okay? Or is that enough time for you and Sara to buy out the town and catch up on—what is it?—three years' gossip?"

I'd seen Elliott and Sara last year in Atlanta and the year before that in Barcelona, but Cath hadn't come with me to either conference. "Where are you doing all this shopping?" I asked.

"Harrods," she said. "Remember the tea set I bought the first time we were here? I'm going to buy the matching china. And a scarf at Liberty's and a cashmere cardigan, all the things we couldn't afford last time." She looked at her watch again. "And I'd better get going. The traffic's going to be bad in this rain."

"The tube would be faster," I said. "And drier. You take the Piccadilly line to Knightsbridge, and you're right there. You don't even have to go outside. There's an entrance to Harrods right in the tube station."

"I am not maneuvering shopping bags up and down those awful escalators," she said. "They're broken half the time. Besides, there are rats."

"You saw *one* mouse in Piccadilly Circus *one* time, and it was down on the tracks," I said.

"It's been twenty years," she said, coming over to the bed and deftly pulling my tie out of the mess. "There are probably thousands of rats down there now." She kissed me on the cheek. "Good luck presenting your paper." She grabbed up an umbrella. "You take the tube," she said, going out the door. "You're the one who's crazy about it."

"I intend to," I called after her, but the lift had already closed.

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In spite of Cath's dire predictions, the tube was exactly the same as it had been twenty years ago. Well, maybe not exactly. There were ticket machines now, and automated stiles that sucked up my five-day pass and spit it out to me again. And the escalators were metal now instead of wooden. But they were as steep as ever, and the posters for musicals and plays that lined them had hardly changed at all. *Kismet* and *Cats* had been playing then. Now it was *Showboat* and *Cats*.

Cath was right—I did love the tube. It's the best underground system in the world. Boston's T is old and decrepit, Tokyo's subway system is a sardine can, and Washington's looks like it was designed as a bomb shelter. The Metro's not bad, but it has the handicap of being in Paris. BART's in San Francisco, but it doesn't go anywhere.

The tube goes everywhere, all the way to Heathrow and Hampton Court and beyond, to obscure suburban stops like Cockfosters and Mudchute. There's a stop at every tourist attraction, and it's impossible to get lost.

But it isn't just an efficient way of getting from the Tower to Westminster Abbey to Buckingham Palace. It's a place in itself, a wonderful underground warren of tunnels and stairs and corridors, as colorful as the billboard-sized theater posters on the walls of the platforms, as the maps posted on every pillar and wall and forking of the tunnels.

I stopped in front of one, studying the crisscrossing green and blue and red lines. Charing Cross. I needed the gray line. What was that? Jubilee.

I followed the signs down a curving platform and out onto the eastbound platform.

A train was pulling out. An LED sign above the tracks said NEXT TRAIN 6 MIN. The train started into the narrow tunnel, and I waited for the blast of wind that would follow it, pushing the air in front of it as the train disappeared.

It came, smelling faintly of diesel and dust, ruffling the hair of the woman standing next to me, rippling her skirt. NEXT TRAIN 5 MIN., the sign said.

I filled the time by watching a pair of newlyweds holding hands and reading the posters on the tunnel walls for *Sunset Boulevard* and *Sliding Doors* and Harrods. "A Blast from the Past," the one on the end said. "Experience the London Blitz at the Imperial War Museum. Elephant and Castle Tube Station."

"Train approaching," a voice said from nowhere, and I stepped forward to the yellow line.

The familiar MIND THE GAP sign was still painted on the edge of the platform. Cath had always refused to stand anywhere near the edge. She had stood nervously against the tiled wall as if she expected the train to suddenly leap off the tracks and plow into us.

The train pulled in. Right on time, shining chrome and plastic, no gum on the floor, no unknown substances on the orange plush seats.

"I beg your pardon," the woman next to me said, shifting her shopping bag so I could sit down.

Even the people who rode the tube were more polite than people on any other subway. And better read. The man opposite me was reading Dickens's *Bleak House*.

The train slowed. "Regent's Park," the flat voice announced.

Regent's Park. The last time we were here, the Old Man had shouted "To the head!" and vaulted off the train at this station.

He had been taking us on a riotous tour of Sir Thomas More's body. We had gone to the Tower of London to see the Crown Jewels, and Cath, reading her Frommer's England on \$40 a Day while we

stood in line, had said, "Sir Thomas More is buried in the church here. You know, *A Man for All Seasons*," and we had all trooped over to see his grave.

"Want to see the rest of him?" the Old Man had said.

"The rest of him?" Sara had asked.

"Only his body's buried there," the Old Man had said. "You need to see his head!" and had led us off to London Bridge, where More's head had been stuck on a pike and the Chelsea garden where his daughter Margaret had buried it after she took it down, and then off to Canterbury, with the Old Man turned around and talking to us as he drove, to the small church where the head was buried now.

"Thomas More's Remains: The World Tour," he had said, driving us back at breakneck speed.

"Except for Lake Havasu," Elliott had said. "Isn't that where the original London Bridge is?" And when the annual conference was in San Diego, the Old Man had roared up in a rental car and hijacked us all to Arizona to see it.

I couldn't wait to see him. There was no telling what wild sightseeing he had in mind this time. This was, after all, the man who had gotten us thrown out of Alcatraz.

He hadn't been at the last four conferences—he'd been off in Nepal for the first one and finishing a book the last three—and I was eager to hear what he'd been up to.

"Oxford Circus," the flat voice said. Two more stops to Charing Cross.

I leaned out to look at the station as we stopped. Each station has its own distinctive design, its own identifying color: St. Pancras green edged with navy, Euston Square black and orange, Bond Street red. Oxford Circus had a blue chutes and ladders design that was new since the first time we'd been here.

The train pulled out, picked up speed. I would be there in five minutes and to the Adelphi in ten, a lot faster than Cath in her taxi, and at least as comfortable.

I was there in eight, up the escalators and out in the rain, up the Strand to the Adelphi in twenty. It would have been fifteen, but I had to wait ten (huddled under an awning and wishing I'd taken Cath's advice about an umbrella) to cross the Strand. Black London taxis, bumper to bumper, and double-decker buses, and minis, all going nowhere fast.

Ragtime was sold out. I got a theater map from the rack in the lobby and looked to see where the Duke of York was. It was over on Shaftesbury, with the nearest tube stop Leicester Square. I went back to Charing Cross, and went down the escalator and into the passage that led to the Northern Line. I still had half an hour, which would be cutting it close, but not impossible.

I started down the left-hand tunnel toward the trains, keeping pace with the crowd, straining to hear the rumble of a train pulling in over the muffled din of voices, the crisp clatter of high heels.

People began to walk faster. The high heels beat a quicker tattoo. I got the tube map out of my back pocket. I could take the Piccadilly Line to South Kensington and change to the District and—

The wind hit me like the blast from an explosion. I reeled back, nearly losing my balance. My head snapped back sharply like I'd been punched in the jaw. I groped wildly for the tiled wall.

"The IRA's blown up a train!" I thought.

But there was no sound accompanying the sudden blast of searing air, only a dank, horrible smell.

Sarin gas, I thought, and reflexively put my hand over my nose and mouth, but I could still smell it. Sulfur and a wet earthy smell, and something else. Gunpowder? Dynamite? I sniffed at the air, trying to identify it.

But whatever it was, it was already over. The wind had stopped as abruptly as it had hit me, and so had the smell. Not even a trace of it lingered in the dry, stuffy air.

And it must not have been an explosion, or poison gas, because no one else had even slackened their steps. The sound of high heels retained their brisk, even clatter down the tiled passage. Two German teenagers with backpacks hurried past, giggling, and a businessman in a gray topcoat, the *Times* tucked under his arm, and a young woman in floppy sandals, all of them oblivious.

Hadn't any of them felt it? Or was it a usual occurrence in Charing Cross Station and they were used to it?

How could anybody possibly get used to a blast like that? They must not have felt it.

Had *I* felt it?

It was like an earthquake back home in California, a jolt, and then before you could even register it, it was over, and you weren't sure it had really happened. The only way you could tell for sure was by asking Cath or the kids, "Did you feel that?" or by the picture tilted on the wall.

The only pictures on the walls down here were pasted on, and the German students, the businessman had already told me the answer to "Did you feel that?"

But I felt it, I thought, and tried to reconstruct it.

Heat, and the sharp tang of sulfur and wet dirt. But that wasn't what had made me lose my balance, what had sent me staggering against the wall. It was the smell of panic and people screaming, of a bomb going off.

But it couldn't be a bomb. The IRA was in peace negotiations with the British, there hadn't been an incident for over a year, and bombs didn't stop in mid-blast. There had been bombs in the tube before—the mechanical voice would be saying, "Please exit up the escalator immediately," not "Mind the gap."

But if it wasn't a bomb, what was it? And where had it come from? I looked up at the roof of the passage, but there wasn't a grate or a vent, no water pipes running along the ceiling. I walked along the tunnel, sniffing the air, but there were only the usual smells—dust and damp wool and cigarette smoke, and, where the passage went up a short flight of stairs, a strong smell of oil.

A train rumbled in somewhere down the passage. The train. There had been one pulling in when the smell hit. The train must be causing the wind somehow. I went out onto the platform and stood there looking down the tunnel, half-hoping, half-dreading it would happen again.

The train pulled in and stopped, and a handful of people got off. "Mind the gap!" the computerized voice said. The doors whooshed shut, and the train pulled out. A wind picked up the scraps of paper on the track and whirled them into the side walls, and I braced myself, my feet apart, but it was just an ordinary breeze, smelling of nothing in particular.

I went back out into the passage and examined the walls for doors, felt along the tiles for drafts, stood in the same place as before, waiting for another train to come in.

But there was nothing, and I was in the way. People going around me murmured, "Sorry," over and over, which I have never been able to get used to, even though I know it's merely the British equivalent of "excuse me." It still sounded like they were apologizing, when I was the one blocking traffic. And I needed to get to the conference.

And whatever had caused the wind, it was probably just a fluke. The passages connecting the trains and the different lines and levels were like a rabbit warren. The wind could have come from anywhere. Maybe somebody on the Jubilee Line had been transporting a carton of rotten eggs. Or blood samples. Or both.

I went up to the Northern Line, caught a train that had just pulled in, and made it to the conference in time for the eleven o'clock session, but the episode must have unnerved me more than I'd admitted to myself. Standing in the lobby and pinning on my registration badge, the outside door opened, letting in a blast of air.

I flinched away from it, and then stood there, staring blindly at the door, until the woman at the registration table asked, "Are you all right?"

I nodded. "Have the Old Man or Elliott Templeton registered yet?"

"An old man?" the woman said, bewilderedly.

"Not *an* old man, *the* Old Man," I said impatiently. "Arthur Birdsall."

"The morning session's already started," she said, looking through the ranked badges. "Have you looked in the ballroom?"

The Old Man had never attended a session in his life.

"Mr. Templeton's here," she said, still looking. "No, Mr. Birdsall hasn't registered yet."

"Daniel Drecker's here," Marjorie O'Donnell said, descending on me. "You heard about his daughter, didn't you?"

"No," I said, scanning the room for Elliott.

"She's in an institution," she said. "Schizophrenia."

I wondered if she was telling me this because she thought I was acting unbalanced, too, but she added, "So, for heaven's sake, don't ask him about her. And don't ask Peter Jamieson if Leslie's here. They're separated."

"I won't," I said and escaped to the first session. Elliott wasn't in the audience, or at lunch. I sat down

next to Jim McCord, who lived in London, and said, without preamble, "I was in the tube this morning."

"Wretched, isn't it?" McCord said. "And *so* expensive. What's a day pass now? Two pounds fifty?"

"While I was in Charing Cross Station, there was this strange wind."

McCord nodded knowingly. "The trains cause them. When they pull out of a station, they push the air in front of them," he said, illustrating the pushing with his hands, "and because they fill the tunnel, it creates a slight vacuum in the train's wake, and air rushes in behind to fill the vacuum, and it creates a wind. The same thing happens in reverse as trains pull into the station."

"I know," I said impatiently. "But this one was like an explosion, and it smelled—"

"It's all the dirt down there. And the beggars. They sleep in the passages, you know. Some of them even urinate on the walls. I'm afraid the Underground's deteriorated considerably in the past few years."

"Everything in London has," the woman across the table said. "Did you know there's a Disney Store in Regent Street?"

"And a Gap," McCord said.

"Mind the Gap," I said, but they were off on the subject of the Decline and Fall of London. I said I needed to go look for Elliott.

He was nowhere to be found. The afternoon session was starting. I sat down next to John and Irene Watson.

"You haven't seen Arthur Birdsall or Elliott Templeton, have you?" I said, scanning the ballroom.

"Elliott was here before the morning session," John said. "Stewart's here."

Irene leaned across John. "You heard about his surgery, didn't you? Colon cancer."

"The doctors say they got it all," John said.

"I hate coming to these things anymore," Irene said, leaning confidently across John again. "Everybody's either gotten old or sick or divorced. You heard Hari Srinivasan died, didn't you? Heart attack."

"I see somebody over there I need to talk to," I said. "I'll be right back." I started up the aisle.

And ran straight into Stewart.

"Tom!" he said, "How have you been?"

"How have *you* been?" I said. "I heard you've been ill."

"I'm fine. The doctors tell me they caught it in time, that they got it all," he said. "It isn't so much the cancer coming back that worries me as knowing that this is the kind of thing in store for us as we get older. You heard about Paul Wurman?"

"No," I said. "Look, I have to go make a phone call before the session starts." And before he could fill

me in on the Decline and Fall of Everybody.

I took off for the lobby. "Where have you been?" Elliott said, clapping a hand on my shoulder. "I've been looking all over for you."

"Where have *I* been?" I said, like a shipwreck victim who'd been on a raft for days. "You have no idea how glad I am to see you," I said, looking happily at him. He looked just the same as ever, tall, in shape, his hairline not even receding. "Everyone else is falling apart."

"Including you," he said, grinning. "You look like you need a drink."

"Is the Old Man with you?" I asked, looking around for him.

"No," he said. "Do you have any notion where the bar is in this place?"

"In there," I pointed.

"Lead the way," he said. "I've got all sorts of things to tell you. I've just talked Evers and Associates into a new project. I'll tell you all about it over a couple of pints."

He did, and then told me about what he and Sara had been doing since the last conference.

"I thought the Old Man would be here today," I said. "He'll be here tonight, though?"

"I think so," Elliott said. "Or tomorrow."

"He's all right, isn't he?" I said, looking across the bar to where Stewart stood talking. "He's not sick or anything?"

"I don't think so," Elliott said, looking reassuringly surprised. "He lives in Cambridgenow, you know. Sara and I won't be there tonight. Evers and Associates are taking us out to dinner to celebrate. We'll stop by for a few minutes on our way, though. Sara insisted. She wants to see you. She's been so excited about your visit. She's talked of nothing else for weeks. She couldn't wait to go shopping with Cath." He went over to the bar and got us two more pints. "Speaking of which, Sara said I'm to tell you we're definitely on for the play and supper Saturday. What are we going to see? Please tell me it's not *Sunset Boulevard*."

"Oh, my God!" I said. "It's not anything. I forgot to get the tickets." I glanced hastily at my watch. It was 3:45. "Do you think the box offices will be open now?"

He nodded.

"Good." I snatched up my coat and started for the lobby.

"And not *Cats!*" Elliott called after me.

I would be lucky if I got anything, I thought, sprinting down to the tube station and pushing my way through the turnstile, including a train at this hour. The escalators were so jammed I had trouble getting the list of theaters out of my pocket. *The Tempest* was at the Duke of York. Leicester Square. I pulled my tube map out—Piccadilly Line. The passage to the Piccadilly Line was even more crowded than the escalator, and slower. The elderly woman ahead of me, in a gray headscarf and an ancient brown coat,

was shuffling at a snail's pace, clutching her coat collar to her throat with a blue-veined hand, her head down and her body hunched forward as if she were struggling against a hurricane.

I tried to get around her, but the way was blocked by more teenagers with backpacks, Spanish this time, walking four abreast and discussing "El Tour de Londres."

I missed the train and had to wait for the next one, checking the "Next train 4 Min." sign every fifteen seconds and listening to the American couple behind me bitterly arguing.

"I *told* you it started at four," the woman said. "Now we'll be late."

"Who was the one who had to take one more picture?" the man said. "You've already taken five hundred pictures, but, oh, no, you had to take one more."

"I wanted to have something to remember our vacation by," she said bitterly. "Our happy, happy vacation."

The train came in, and I mashed my way on and grabbed a pole, and then stood there, squashed, reading my list. The Wyndham was near Leicester Square, too. What was at the Wyndham? *Cats* .

No good. But *Death of a Salesman* was at the Prince Edward, which was only a few blocks over. And there was a whole row of theaters on Shaftesbury.

"Leicester Square," the automated voice said, and I forced my way off the train, down the passage, and up the escalators and into Leicester Square.

The traffic up top was even worse, and it took me nearly twenty minutes to get to the Duke of York, only to find that its box office was closed until six. The Prince Edward was open, but it only had two sets of single seats fifteen rows apart for *Death of a Salesman* . "The soonest I can get you five seats all together," the black-lipsticked girl said, tapping keys on a computer, "is March fifteenth."

The Ides of March, I thought. How fitting, since Cath would kill me if I came home without the tickets.

"Where's the nearest ticket agent?" I asked the girl.

"There's one on Cannon Street," she said vaguely.

Cannon Street. That was the name of a tube station. I consulted my tube map. District and Circle Line. I could take the Northern Line down to Embankment and catch the District and Circle from there.

I looked at my watch. It was already four-thirty. We were supposed to be at the sherry party at six. I would be cutting it close. I sprinted back to Leicester Square, down to the Northern Line, and onto a train. It was even more jammed, but everyone was still polite. They held their books above the fray and continued to read in spite of the crush. *Madame Bovary* and Geoffrey Ryman's *253* and Charles Williams's *Descent into Hell* .

"Cannon Street," the computer voice said, and I pushed my way off and headed for the exit.

I was halfway down the passage when it hit again, the same violent blast as before, the same smell.

No, not the same, I thought, regaining my footing, watching unconcerned commuters walk past. There

had been the same sharp smell of sulfur and explosives, but no musty wetness. And this time there was the smell of smoke.

But no fire alarms had gone off, no sprinkler system been activated. No one had even noticed it.

Maybe it's one of those things where it's so common the locals don't even notice it, I thought, they can't even smell it anymore. Like a lumber mill or chemical plant. We had gone to see Cath's uncle in Nebraska one time, and I'd asked him if he minded the smell from the feed lots.

"What smell?" he'd said.

But manure didn't smell like violence, like panic. And it was everywhere. If this was a persistent, pervasive smell, why hadn't I smelled it in Piccadilly Circus or Leicester Square?

I was all the way to South Kensington before I realized I had gone back down the passage without even being aware of it, boarded a train, ridden seven stops. And not gotten the tickets.

I got off the train, half-intending to go back, and then stood there on the platform uncertainly. This was no carton of rotten eggs, or blood samples, no localized phenomenon of Charing Cross. So what was it?

A woman got off the train, glancing irritably at her watch. I looked at mine. Five-thirty. It was too late to go back to the ticket agent's, too late to do anything but figure out which line to take to get home.

I felt a rush of relief that I wouldn't have to go back to Cannon Street, wouldn't have to face that wind again. What were they, I wondered, pulling out my tube map, that they produced such a feeling of fear?

I thought about it all the way back to the hotel, wondering if I should tell Cath. It would only confirm her in her opinion of the tube, and she would hardly be in the mood for wild stories about winds in the tube, not if she'd been waiting for me to show up. Cath hated being late to things, and it was already after six. By the time I made it back to the hotel it would be nearly six-thirty.

It was six forty-five. I pushed unavailingly on the lift button for five minutes and then took the stairs. Maybe she was running late, too. When she and Sara started shopping, they lost all track of time. I fished the room key out of my pants pocket.

Cath opened the door.

"I'm late, I know," I said, unpinning my nametag and peeling my jacket off. "Give me five minutes. Are you ready?"

"Yes," she said. She walked over and sat down on the bed, watching me.

"How was Harrods?" I said, unbuttoning my shirt. "Did you get your china?"

"No," she said, looking down at her folded hands.

I grabbed a clean shirt out of my suitcase and pulled it on. "But you and Sara had a good time?" I said, buttoning it. "What did you buy? Elliott said he was afraid you'd clean out Harrods between the two of you." I stopped, looking at her. "What's wrong?" I said. "Did the kids call? Has something happened?"

"The kids are fine," she said.

"But something happened," I said. "The taxi you and Sara took had an accident."

She shook her head. "Nothing happened," and then, still looking down at her hands, "Sara's having an affair."

"What?" I said stupidly.

"She's having an affair."

"Sara?" I said, disbelieving. Not Sara, affectionate, loyal Sara.

Cath nodded, still looking at her hands.

I sat down on my bed. "Did she tell you she was?"

"No, of course not," Cath said, standing up and walking over to the mirror.

"Then how do you know?" I asked, but I knew how. The same way she had known that the kids were getting chicken pox, that her sister was engaged, that her father was worried about his business. Cath had always noticed things before anybody else—she was equipped with some kind of super-sensitive radar that picked up on subliminal signs or vibrations in the air or something. And she was always right.

But Sara and Elliott had been married as long as we had. They were the couple at the top of our "Marriage is Still a Viable Institution" list.

"Are you sure?" I said.

"I'm sure."

I wanted to ask her how she knew, but there wasn't any point. When Ashley had gotten the chicken pox, she'd said, "Her eyes always look bright when she has a fever, and, besides, Lindsay had them two weeks ago," but most of the time she could only shake her short blonde hair, unable to say how she'd reached her conclusion, but always right. Always right.

"But—I saw Elliott today," I said. "He was fine. He didn't—" I thought back over everything he had said, wondering if there had been some indication in it that he was worried or unhappy. He had said Sara and Cath would spend a lot of money, but he always said that. "He sounded fine."

"Put your tie on," she said.

"But if she—we don't have to go if you don't want to," I said.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "No. No, we have to go."

"Maybe you misinterpreted—"

"I didn't," she said and went into the bathroom and shut the door.

* * *

We had trouble getting a taxi. The Connaught's doorman seemed to have disappeared, and all of the black boxy London cabs ignored my frantic waving. Even when one finally stopped, it took us forever to get to the party. "Theatergoers," the cabbie explained cheerfully of the traffic. "You two plan to see any plays while you're here?"

I wondered if Cath would still want to go to a play, convinced as she was that Sara was having an affair, but as we passed the Savoy, its neon sign for *Miss Saigon* blazing, she asked, "What play did you get tickets for?"

"I didn't," I said. "I ran out of time." I started to say that I intended to get them tomorrow, but she wasn't listening.

"Harrods didn't have my china," she said, and her tone sounded as hopeless as it had telling me about Sara. "They discontinued the pattern four years ago."

* * *

We were nearly an hour and a half late for the party. Elliott and Sara have probably long since left for dinner, I thought, and was secretly relieved.

"Cath!" Marjorie said as we walked in the door and hurried over with Cath's nametag. "You look wonderful! I have so much to tell you!"

"I'm going to go look for the Old Man," I said. "I'll see if he wants to go to dinner afterward." He would probably drag us off to Soho or Hampstead Heath. He always knew some out-of-the-way place that had eel pie or authentic English stout.

I set off through the crowd. You could usually locate the Old Man by the crowd of people gathered around, and the laughter. And the proximity to the bar, I thought, spotting a huddle of people in that direction.

I waded toward them through the crush, grabbing a glass of wine off a tray as I went, but it wasn't the Old Man. It was the people who'd been at lunch. They were discussing, of all things, the Beatles, but at least it wasn't the Decline and Fall.

"The three of them were talking about a reunion tour," McCord was saying. "I suppose that's all off now."

"The Old Man took us on a Beatles tour," I said. "Has anybody seen him? He insisted we recreate all the album covers. We nearly got killed crossing Abbey Road."

"I don't think he's coming down from Cambridge till tomorrow," McCord said. "It's a long drive."

The Old Man had driven us four hundred miles to see London Bridge on Lake Havasu. I peered over their heads, trying to spot the Old Man. I couldn't see him, but I did spot Evers, which meant Sara and Elliott were still here. Cath was over by the door with Marjorie.

"It was just so *sad* about Linda McCartney," the Gap woman said.

I took a swig of my wine and remembered too late this was a sherry party.

"How old was she?" McCord was asking.

"Fifty-three."

"I know three women who've been diagnosed with breast cancer," the Gap woman said. " *Three*. It's dreadful."

"One keeps wondering who's next," the other woman said.

"Or *what's* next," McCord said. "You heard about Stewart, didn't you?"

I handed my sherry glass to the Gap woman, who looked at me, annoyed, and started through the crowd toward Cath, but now I couldn't see her either. I stopped, craning my neck to see over the crowd.

" *There* you are, you handsome thing!" Sara said, coming up behind me and putting her arm around my waist. "We've been looking all over for you!"

She kissed me on the cheek. "Elliott's been fretting that you were going to make us all go see *Cats* . He *loathes Cats* , and everyone who comes to visit drags us to it. And you know how he frets over things. You didn't, did you? Get tickets for *Cats*? "

"No," I said, staring at her. She looked the same as always—her dark hair still tucked behind her ears, her eyebrows still arched mischievously. This was the same old Sara who'd gone with us to *Kismet* , to Lake Havasu, to Abbey Road.

Cath was wrong. She might pick up subliminal signals about other people, but this time she was wrong. Sara wasn't acting guilty or uneasy, wasn't avoiding my eyes, wasn't avoiding Cath.

"Where *is* Cath?" she asked, standing on tiptoe to peer over the crowd. "I have something I've got to tell her."

"What?"

"About her china. We couldn't find it today, did she tell you? Well, after I got home, I thought, I'll wager they have it at Selfridge's. They're always years behind the times. Oh, there she is." She waved frantically. "I want to tell her before we leave," she said and took off through the crowd. "Find Elliott and tell him I'll only be a sec. And tell him we aren't seeing *Cats* ," she called back to me. "I don't want him stewing all night. He's over there somewhere." She waved vaguely in the direction of the door, and I pushed my way between people till I found him, standing by the front door.

"You haven't seen Sara, have you?" he said. "Evers is bringing his car round."

"She's talking to Cath," I said. "She said she'll be here in a minute."

"Are you kidding? When those two get together—" He shook his head indulgently. "Sara said they had a wonderful time today."

"Is the Old Man here yet?" I said.

"He called and said he couldn't make it tonight. He said to tell you he'll see us tomorrow. I'm looking

forward to it. We've scarcely seen him since he moved to Cambridge. We're down in Wimbledon, you know."

"And he hasn't swooped down and kidnapped you to go see Dickens's elbow or something?"

"Not lately. Oh, God, do you remember that time Sara mentioned Arthur Conan Doyle, and he dragged us up and down Baker Street, looking for Sherlock Holmes's missing flat?"

I laughed, remembering him knocking on doors, demanding, "What have you done with 221B, madam?" deciding we needed to call in Scotland Yard.

"And then demanding to know what they'd done with the yard," Elliott said, laughing.

"Did you tell him we're all going to a play together Saturday?"

"Yes. You didn't get tickets for *Cats*, did you?"

"I didn't get tickets for anything," I said. "I ran out of time."

"Well, *don't* get tickets for *Cats*. Or *Phantom*."

Sara came running up, flushed and breathless. "I'm sorry. Cath and I got to talking," she said. She gave me a smacking kiss on the lips. "Goodbye, you adorable hunk. See you Saturday."

"Come on," Elliott said. "You can kiss him all you like on Saturday." He hustled her out the door. "And not *Les Miz!*" he shouted back to me.

I stood, smiling after them. You're wrong, Cath, I thought. Look at them. Not only would Sara never have kissed me like that if she were having an affair, but Elliott wouldn't have looked on complacently like that, and neither of them would have been talking about china, about *Cats*.

Cath had made a mistake. Her radar, usually so infallible, had messed up this time. Sara and Elliott's marriage was fine. Nobody was having an affair, and we'd all have a great time Saturday night.

The mood persisted through the rest of the evening, in spite of Marjorie's latching onto me and telling me all about the Decline and Fall of her father, who she was going to have to put in a nursing home, and our finding out that the pub that had had such great fish and chips the first time we'd been here had burned down.

"It doesn't matter," Cath said, standing on the corner where it had been. "Let's go to the Lamb and Crown. I know it's still there. I saw it on the way to Harrods this morning."

"That's on Wilton Place, isn't it?" I said, pulling out my tube map. "That's right across from Hyde Park Corner Station. We can take—"

"A taxi," Cath said.

* * *

Cath didn't say anything else about the affair she thought Sara was having, except to tell me they were going shopping again the next day. "Selfridge's first, and then Reject China—" and I wondered if she had

realized, seeing Sara at the party, that she'd made a mistake.

But in the morning, as I was leaving, she said, "Sara called and cancelled while you were in the shower."

"They can't go to the play with us Saturday?"

"No," Cath said. "She isn't going shopping with me today. She said she had a headache."

"She must have drunk some of that awful sherry," I said. "So what are you going to do? Do you want to come have lunch with me?"

"I think it's someone at the conference."

"Who?" I said, lost.

"The man Sara's having an affair with," she said, picking up her guidebook. "If it was someone who lived here, she wouldn't risk seeing him while we're here."

"She's *not* having an affair," I said. "I saw her. I saw Elliott. He—"

"Elliott doesn't know." She jammed the guidebook savagely into her bag. "Men never notice anything."

She began stuffing things into her bag—her sunglasses, her passport. "We're having dinner with the Hugheses tonight at seven. I'll meet you back here at five-thirty." She picked up her umbrella.

"You're wrong," I said. "They've been married longer than we have. She's crazy about Elliott. Why would somebody with that much to lose risk it all by having an affair?"

She turned and looked at me, still holding the umbrella. "I don't know," she said bleakly.

"Look," I said, suddenly sorry for her, "why don't you come and have lunch with the Old Man and me? He'll probably get us thrown out like he did at that Indian restaurant. It'll be fun."

She shook her head. "You and Arthur will want to catch up, and I don't want to wait on Selfridge's." She looked up at me. "When you see Arthur—" she paused, looking like she did when she was thinking about Sara.

"You think he's having an affair, too, oh, Madame Knows-All, Sees-All?"

"No," she said. "He was older than us."

"Which was why we called him the Old Man," I said, "and you think he'll have gotten a cane and grown a long white beard?"

"No," she said, and slung her bag over her shoulder. "I think if they have my china at Selfridge's, I'll buy twelve place settings."

* * *

She was wrong, and I would prove it to her. We would have a great time at the play, and she would realize Sara couldn't be having an affair. If I could get the tickets. *Ragtime* had been sold out, which

meant *The Tempest* was likely to be, too, and there weren't a lot of other choices, since Elliott had said no to *Sunset Boulevard*. And *Cats*, I thought, looking at the theater posters as I went down the escalator. And *Les Miz*.

The *Tempest* and the Hayley Mills thing, *Endgames*, were both at theaters close to Leicester Square. If I couldn't get tickets at either, there was a ticket agent in Lisle Street.

The *Tempest* was sold out, as I'd expected. I walked over to the Lyric.

Endgame had five seats in the third row center of the orchestra. "Great," I said, and slapped down my American Express, thinking how much things had changed.

In the old days I would have been asking if they didn't have anything in the sherpa section, seats so steep we had to clutch the arms of our seats to keep from plummeting to our deaths and we had to rent binoculars to even see the stage.

And in the old days, I thought grimly, Cath would have been at my side, making rapid calculations to see if our budget could afford even the cheap seats. And now I was getting tickets in third row center, and not even asking the price, and Cath was on her way to Selfridge's in a taxi.

The girl handed me the tickets. "What's the nearest tube station?" I asked.

"Tottenham Court Road," she said.

I looked at my tube map. I could take the Central Line over to Holborn and then a train straight to South Kensington. "How do I get there?"

She waved an arm full of bracelets vaguely north. "You go up St. Martin's Lane."

I went up St. Martin's Lane, and up Monmouth, and up Mercer and Shaftesbury and New Oxford. There clearly had to be closer stations than Tottenham Court Road, but it was too late to do anything about it now. And I wasn't about to take a taxi.

It took me half an hour to make the trek, and another ten to reach Holborn, during which I figured out that the Lyric had been less than four blocks from Piccadilly Circus. I'd forgotten how deep the station was, how long the escalators were. They seemed to go down for miles. I rattled down the slatted wooden rungs and down the passage, glancing at my watch as I walked.

Nine-thirty. I'd make it to the conference in plenty of time. I wondered when the Old Man would get there. He had to drive down from Cambridge, I thought, going down a short flight of steps behind a man in a tweed jacket, which was an hour and a—

I was on the bottom step when the wind hit. This time it was not so much a blast as a sensation of a door opening onto a cold room.

A cellar, I thought, groping for the metal railing. No. Colder. Deathly cold. A meat locker. A frozen food storage vault. With a sharp, unpleasant chemical edge, like disinfectant. A sickening smell.

No, not a refrigerated vault, I thought, a biology lab, and recognized the smell as formaldehyde. And something under it. I shut my mouth, held my breath, but the sweet, sickening stench was already in my nostrils, in my throat. Not a biology lab, I thought in horror. A charnelhouse.

It was over, the door shutting as suddenly as it had opened, but the bite of the icy air was still in my nostrils, the nasty taste of formaldehyde still in my mouth. Of corruption and death and decay.

I stood there on the bottom step taking shallow, swallowing breaths, while people walked around me. I could see the man in the tweed jacket, rounding the corner in the passage ahead. He *must* have felt it, I thought. He was right in front of me. I started after him, dodging around a pair of children, an Indian woman in a sari, a housewife with a string bag, finally catching up to him as he turned out onto the crowded platform.

"Did you feel that wind?" I asked, taking hold of his sleeve. "Just now, in the tunnel?"

He looked alarmed, and then, as I spoke, tolerant. "You're from the States, aren't you? There's always a slight rush of air as a train enters one of the tunnels. It's perfectly ordinary. Nothing to be alarmed about." He looked pointedly at my hand on his sleeve.

"But this one was ice-cold," I persisted. "It—"

"Ah, yes, well, we're very near the river here," he said, looking less tolerant. "If you'll excuse me." He freed his arm. "Have a pleasant holiday," he said and walked away through the crowd to the farthest end of the platform.

I let him go. He clearly hadn't felt it. But he had *had* to, I thought. He was right in front of me.

Unless it wasn't real, and I was experiencing some bizarre form of hallucination.

"Finally," a woman said, looking down the track, and I saw a train was approaching. Wind fluttered a flyer stuck on the wall and then the blonde hair of the woman standing closest to the edge. She turned unconcernedly toward the man next to her, saying something to him, shifting the leather strap of the bag on her shoulder.

It hit again, an onslaught of cold and chemicals and corruption, a stench of decay.

He has to have felt that, I thought, looking down the platform, but he was unconcernedly boarding the train, the tourists next to him were looking up at the train and back down at their tube maps, unaware.

They have to have felt it, I thought, and saw an elderly black man. He was halfway down the platform, wearing a plaid jacket. He shuddered as the wind hit, and then hunched his gray grizzled head into his shoulders like a turtle withdrawing into its shell.

He felt it, I thought, and started toward him, but he was already getting on the train, the doors were already starting to close. Even running, I wouldn't reach him.

I bounded onto the nearest car as the doors whooshed shut and stood there just inside the door, waiting for the next station. As soon as the doors opened I jumped out, holding onto the edge of the door, to see if he got off. He didn't, or at the next station, and Bond Street was easy. Nobody got off.

"Marble Arch," the disembodied voice said, and the train pulled into the tiled station.

What the hell was at Marble Arch? There had never been this many people when Cath and I stayed at the Royal Hernia. Everybody on the train was getting off.

But was the old man? I leaned out from the door, trying to see if he'd gotten off.

I couldn't see him for the crowd. I stepped forward and was immediately elbowed aside by an equally large herd of people getting on.

I headed down the platform toward his car, craning my neck to spot his plaid jacket, his grizzled head in the exodus.

"The doors are closing," the voice of the tube said, and I turned just in time to see the train pull out, and the old man sitting inside, looking out at me.

And now what? I thought, standing on the abruptly deserted platform. Go back to Holborn and see if it happened again and somebody else felt it? Somebody who wasn't getting on a train.

Certainly nothing was going to happen here. This was our station, the one we had set out from every morning, come home to every night, the first time we were here, and there hadn't been any strange winds. The Royal Hermitage was only three blocks away, and we had run up the drafty stairs, holding hands, laughing about what the Old Man had said to the verger in Canterbury when he had shown us Thomas More's grave—

The Old Man. He would know what was causing the winds, or how to find out. He loved mysteries. He had dragged us to Greenwich, the British Museum, and down into the crypt of St. Paul's, trying to find out what had happened to the arm Nelson lost in one of his naval battles. If anybody could, he'd find out what was causing these winds.

And he should be here by now, I thought, looking at my watch. Good God. It was nearly one. I went over to the tube map on the wall to find the best way over to the conference. Go to Notting Hill Gate and take the District and Circle Line. I looked up at the sign above the platform to see how long it would be till the next train, so that when the wind hit, I didn't have time to hunch down the way the old man had, to flinch away from the blow. My neck was fully extended, like Sir Thomas More's on the block.

And it was like a blade, slicing through the platform with killing force. No charnelhouse smell this time, no heat. Nothing but blast and the smell of salt and iron. The scent of terror and blood and sudden death.

What *is* it? I thought, clutching blindly for the tiled wall. What *are* they?

The Old Man, I thought again. I have to find the Old Man.

I took the tube to South Kensington and ran all the way to the conference, half-afraid he wouldn't be there, but he was. I could hear his voice when I came in. The usual admiring group was clustered around him. I started across the lobby toward them.

Elliott detached himself from the group and came over to me.

"I need to see the Old Man," I said.

He put a restraining hand on my arm. "Tom—" he said.

He looked like Cath had, sitting on the bed, telling me Sara was having an affair.

"What's wrong?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"Nothing," he said, glancing back toward the lounge. "Arthur—nothing." He let go of my arm. "He'll be overjoyed to see you. He's been asking for you."

The Old Man was sitting in an easy chair, holding court. He looked exactly the same as he had twenty years ago, his frame still lanky, his light hair still falling boyishly over his forehead.

See, Cath, I thought. No long white beard. No cane.

He broke off as soon as he saw us and stood up. "Tom, you young reprobate!" he said, and his voice sounded as strong as ever. "I've been waiting for you to get here all morning. Where were you?"

"In the tube," I said. "Something happened. I—"

"In the *tube*? What were you doing down in the tube?"

"I was—"

"Never use the tube anymore," he said. "It's gone completely to hell ever since Tony Blair got into office. Like everything else."

"I want you to come with me," I said. "I want to show you something."

"Come where?" he said. "Down in the tube? Not on your life." He sat back down. "I *loathe* the tube. Smelly, dirty—"

He sounded like Cath.

"Look," I said, wishing there weren't all these people around. "Something peculiar happened to me in Charing Cross Station yesterday. You know the winds that blow through the tunnels when the trains come in?"

"I certainly do. Dreadful drafty places—"

"Exactly," I said. "It's the drafts I want you to see. Feel. They—"

"And catch my death of cold? No, thank you."

"You don't understand," I said. "These weren't ordinary drafts. I was heading for the Northern Line platform, and—"

"You can tell me about it at lunch." He turned back to the others. "Where shall we go?"

He had never, ever, in all the years I'd known him, asked anybody where to go for lunch. I blinked stupidly at him.

"How about the Bangkok House?" Elliott said.

The Old Man shook his head. "Their food's too spicy. It always makes me bloat."

"There's a sushi place round the corner," one of the admiring circle volunteered.

"*Sushi!*" he said, in a tone that put an end to the discussion.

I tried again. "Yesterday I was in Charing Cross Station, and this wind, this *blast* hit me that smelled like sulfur. It—"

"It's the damned smog," the Old Man said. "Too many cars. Too many people. It's got nearly as bad as it was in the old days, when there were coal fires."

Coal, I thought. Could that have been the smell I couldn't identify? Coal smelled of sulfur.

"The inversion layer makes it worse," the admirer who'd suggested sushi said.

"Inversion layer?" I said.

"Yes," he said, pleased to have been noticed. "London's in a shallow depression that causes inversion layers. That's when a layer of warm air above the ground traps the surface air under it, so the smoke and particulates collect—"

"I thought we were going to lunch," the Old Man said petulantly.

"Remember the time we tried to find out what had happened to Sherlock Holmes's address?" I said. "This is an even stranger mystery."

"That's *right*," he said. "221B Baker Street. I'd forgotten that. Do you remember the time I took you on a tour of Sir Thomas More's head? Elliott, tell them what Sara said in Canterbury."

Elliott told them, and they roared with laughter, the Old Man included. I half expected somebody to say, "Those were the days."

"Tom, tell everybody about that time we went to see *Kismet*," the Old Man said.

"We've got tickets for *Endgames* for the five of us for tomorrow night," I said, even though I knew what was coming.

He was already shaking his head. "I never go to plays anymore. The theater's gone to hell like everything else. Lot of modernist nonsense." he smacked his hands on the arms of the easy chair. "Lunch! Did we decide where we're going?"

"What about the New Delhi Palace?" Elliott said.

"Can't handle Indian food," the Old Man, who had once gotten us thrown out of the New Delhi Palace by dancing with the Tandoori chicken, said. "Isn't there anywhere that serves plain, ordinary food?"

"Wherever we're going, we need to make up our minds," the admirer said. "The afternoon session starts at two."

"We can't miss that," the Old Man said. He looked around the circle. "So where are we going? Tom, are you coming to lunch with us?"

"I can't," I said. "I wish you'd come with me. It would be like old times."

"Speaking of old times," the Old Man said, turning back to the group, "I still haven't told you about the time I got thrown out of *Kismet*. What was that harem girl's name, Elliott?"

"Lalume," Elliott said, turning to look at the Old Man, and I made my escape.

* * *

An inversion layer. Holding the air down so it couldn't escape, trapping it below ground so that smoke and particulates, and smells, became concentrated, intensified.

I took the tube back to Holborn and went down to the Central Line to look at the ventilation system. I found a couple of wall grates no larger than the size of a theater handbill and a louvered vent two-thirds of the way down the west-bound passage, but no fans, nothing that moved the air or connected it with the outside.

There had to be one. The deep stations went down hundreds of feet. They couldn't rely on nature recirculating the air, especially with diesel fumes and carbon monoxide from the traffic up above. There must be ventilation. But some of these tube stations had been built as long ago as the 1880s, and Holborn looked like it hadn't been repaired since then.

I went out into the large room containing the escalators and stood, looking up. It was open all the way to the ticket machines at the top, and the station had wide doors on three sides, all open to the outside.

Even without ventilation, the air would eventually make its way up and out onto the streets of London. Wind would blow in from outside, and rain, and the movement of the people hurrying through the station, up the escalators, down the passages, would circulate it. But if there was an inversion layer, trapping the air close to the ground, keeping it from escaping—

Pockets of carbon monoxide and deadly methane accumulated in coal mines. The tube was a lot like a mine, with its complicated bendings and turnings of its tunnels. Could pockets of air have accumulated in the train tunnels, becoming more concentrated, more lethal as time went by?

The inversion layer would explain why there were winds but not what had caused them in the first place. An IRA bombing, like I had thought when I felt the first one? That would explain the blast and the smell of explosives, but not the formaldehyde. Or the stifling smell of dirt in Charing Cross.

A collapse of one of the tunnels? Or a train accident?

I made the long trek back up to the station and asked the guard next to the ticket machines, "Do these tunnels ever collapse?"

"Oh, no, sir, they're quite safe." He smiled reassuringly. "There's no need to worry."

"But there must be accidents occasionally," I said.

"I assure you, sir, the London Underground is the safest in the world."

"What about bombings?" I asked. "The IRA—"

"The IRA has signed the peace agreement," he said, looking at me suspiciously.

A few more questions, and I was likely to find myself arrested as an IRA bomber. I would have to ask the Old-Elliott. And in the meantime, I could try to find out if there were winds in all the stations or just a few.

"Can you show me how to get to the Tower of London?" I asked him, extending my tube map like a tourist.

"Yes, sir, you take the Central Line, that's this red line, to Bank," he said, tracing his finger along the map, "and then change to the District and Circle. And don't worry. The London Underground is perfectly safe."

Except for the winds, I thought, getting on the escalator. I got out a pen and marked an X on the stations I'd been to as I rode down. Marble Arch, Charing Cross, Sloane Square.

I hadn't been to Russell Square. I rode there and waited in the passages and then on both platforms through two trains. There wasn't anything at Russell Square, but on the Metropolitan Line at St. Pancras there was the same shattering blast as at Charing Cross—heat and the acrid smells of sulfur and violent destruction.

There wasn't anything at Barbican, or Aldgate, and I thought I knew why. At both of them the tracks were above-ground, with the platform open to the air. The winds would disperse naturally instead of being trapped, which meant I could eliminate most of the suburban stations.

But St. Paul's and Chancery Lane were both underground, with deep, drafty tunnels, and there was nothing in either of them except a faint scent of diesel and mildew. There must be some other factor at work.

It isn't the line they're on, I thought, riding toward Warren Street. Marble Arch and Holborn were on the Central Line, but Charing Cross wasn't, and neither was St. Pancras. Maybe it was the conversion of them. Chancery Lane, St. Paul's, and Russell Square all had only one line. Holborn had two lines, and Charing Cross had three. St. Pancras had five.

Those are the stations I should be checking, I thought, the ones where multiple lines meet, the ones honeycombed with tunnels and passages and turns. Monument, I thought, looking at the circles where green and purple and red lines converged. Baker Street and Moorgate.

Baker Street was closest, but hard to get to. Even though I was only two stops away, I'd have to switch over at Euston, take the Northern going the other way back to St. Pancras, and catch the Bakerloo. I was glad Cath wasn't here to say, "I thought you said it was easy to get anywhere on the tube."

Cath! I'd forgotten all about meeting her at the hotel so we could go to dinner with the Hugheses.

What time was it? Only five, thank God. I looked hastily at the map. Good. Northern down to Leicester Square and then the Piccadilly Line, and who says it isn't easy to get anywhere on the tube? I'd be to the Connaught in less than half an hour.

And when I got there I'd tell Cath about the winds, even if she did hate the tube. I'd tell her about all of it, the Old Man and the charnelhouse smell and the old man in the plaid jacket.

But she wasn't there. She'd left a note on the pillow of my bed. "Meet you at Grimaldi's. Seven p.m."

No explanation. Not even a signature, and the note looked hasty, scribbled. What if Sara called? I wondered, a thought as chilly as the wind in Marble Arch. What if Cath had been right about her, the way she'd been right about the Old Man?

But when I got to Grimaldi's, it turned out she'd only been shopping. "The woman in the china department at Fortnum and Mason's told me about a place in Bond Street that specialized in discontinued patterns."

Bond Street. It was a wonder we hadn't run into each other. But she wasn't in the tube station, I thought with a flash of resentment. She was safely above-ground in a taxi.

"They didn't have it either," she said, "but the clerk suggested I try a shop next door to the Portmerion store which was clear out in Kensington. It took the rest of the day. How was the conference? Was Arthur there?"

You know he was, I thought. She had foreseen his having gotten old, she'd tried to warn me that first morning in the hotel, and I hadn't believed her.

"How was he?" Cath asked.

You already know, I thought bitterly. Your antennae pick up vibrations from everybody. Except your husband.

And even if I tried to tell her, she'd be too wrapped up in her precious pattern to hear me.

"He's fine," I said. "We had lunch and then spent the whole afternoon together. He hadn't changed a bit."

"Is he going to the play with us?"

"No," I said and was saved by the Hugheses coming in right then, Mrs. Hughes, looking frail and elderly, and her strapping sons Milford Junior and Paul and their wives.

Introductions all around, and it developed that the blonde with Milford Junior wasn't his wife, it was his fiancée. "Barbara and I just couldn't talk to each other anymore," he confided to me over cocktails. "All she was interested in was buying things, clothes, jewelry, furniture."

China, I thought, looking across the room at Cath.

* * *

At dinner I was seated between Paul and Milford Jr., who spent the meal discussing the Decline and Fall of the British Empire.

"And now Scotland wants to separate," Milford said. "Who's next? Sussex? The City of London?"

"At least perhaps then we'd see decent governmental services. The current state of the streets and the transportation system—"

"I was in the tube today," I said, seizing the opening. "Do either of you know if Charing Cross has ever been the site of a train accident?"

"I shouldn't wonder," Milford said. "The entire system's a disgrace. Dirty, dangerous—the last time I rode the tube, a thief tried to pick my pocket on the escalator."

"I never go down in the tube anymore," Mrs. Hughes put in from the end of the table where she and Cath were deep in a discussion of china shops in Chelsea. "I haven't since Milford died."

"There are beggars everywhere," Paul said. "Sleeping on the platforms, sprawled in the passages. It's nearly as bad as it was during the Blitz."

The Blitz. Air raids and incendiaries and fires. Smoke and sulfur and death.

"The Blitz?" I said.

"During Hitler's bombing of London in World War II, masses of people sheltered in the tubes," Milford said. "Along the tracks, on the platforms, even on the escalators."

"Not that it was any safer than staying above-ground," Paul said.

"The shelters were hit?" I said eagerly.

Paul nodded. "Paddington. And Marble Arch. Forty people were killed in Marble Arch."

Marble Arch. Blast and blood and terror.

"What about Charing Cross?" I asked.

"I've no idea," Milford said, losing interest. "They should pass legislation keeping beggars out of the Underground. And requiring cabbies to speak acceptable English."

The Blitz. Of course. That would explain the smell of gunpowder or whatever it was. And the blast. A high-explosive bomb.

But the Blitz had been over fifty years ago. Could the air from a bomb blast have stayed down in the tube all those years without dissipating?

There was one way to find out. The next morning I took the tube to Tottenham Court Road, where there was a whole street of bookstores, and asked for a book about the history of the Underground in the Blitz.

"The Underground?" the girl at Foyle's, the third place I'd tried, said vaguely. "The Tube Museum might have something."

"Where's that?" I asked.

She didn't know, and neither did the ticket vendor back at the tube station, but I remembered seeing a poster for it on the platform at Oxford Circus during my travels yesterday. I consulted my tube map, took the train to Victoria, and changed for Oxford Circus, where I checked five platforms before I found it.

Covent Garden. The London Transport Museum. I checked the map again, took the Central Line across to Holborn, transferred to the Piccadilly Line, and went to Covent Garden.

And apparently it had been hit, too, because a gust of face-singeing heat struck me before I was a third of the way down the tunnel. There was no smell of explosives, though, or of sulfur or dust. Just ash and fire and hopeless desperation that it was all, all burning down.

The scent of it was still with me as I hurried upstairs and out into the market, through the rows of carts selling T-shirts and postcards and toy double-decker buses, to the Transport Museum.

It was full of T-shirts and postcards, too, all sporting the Underground symbol or replicas of the tube map. "I need a book on the tube during the Blitz," I asked a boy across a counter stacked with "Mind the Gap" placemats and playing cards.

"The Blitz?" he said vaguely.

"World War II," I said, which didn't evoke any recognition either.

He waved a hand loosely to the left. "The books are over there."

They weren't. They were on the far wall, past a rack of posters of tube ads from the Twenties and Thirties, and most of what books they had were about trains, but I finally found two histories of the tube and a paperback called *London in Wartime*. I bought them all and a notebook with a tube map on the cover.

The Transport Museum had a snack bar. I sat down at one of the plastic tables and began taking notes. Nearly all the tube stations had been used as shelters, and a lot of them had been hit—Euston Station, Aldwych, Monument. "In the aftermath of the bombing, the acrid smell of brick dust and cordite was everywhere," the paperback said. Cordite. That was what I had smelled.

Marble Arch had taken a direct hit, the bomb bursting like a grenade in one of the passages, ripping tiles off the walls as it exploded, sending them slicing through the people sheltered there. Which explained the smell of blood. And the lack of heat. It had been pure blast.

I looked up Holborn. There were several references to its having been used as a shelter, but nothing in any of the books that said it had taken a hit.

Charing Cross had, twice. It had been hit by a high-explosive bomb, and then by a V-2 rocket. The bomb had broken water mains and loosed an avalanche of dirt down onto the room containing the escalators. That was the damp earthiness I'd smelled—mud from the roof collapsing.

Nearly a dozen stations had been hit the night of May tenth, 1941: Cannon Street, Paddington, Blackfriars, Liverpool Street—

Covent Garden wasn't on the list. I looked it up in the paperback. The station hadn't been hit, but incendiaries had fallen all around Covent Garden, and the whole area had been on fire. Which meant that Holborn wouldn't have to have taken a direct hit either. There could have been a bombing nearby, with lots of deaths, that was responsible for Holborn's charnelhouse smell. And the fact that there had been fires all around Covent Garden fit with the fact that there hadn't been sulfur, or concussion.

It all fit—the smell of mud and cordite in Charing Cross, of smoke in Cannon Street, of blast and blood in

Marble Arch. The winds I was feeling were the winds of the Blitz, trapped there by London's inversion layer, caught below ground with no way out, nowhere to go, held and recirculated and intensified through the years in the mazelike tunnels and passages and pockets of the tube. It all fit.

And there was a way to test it. I copied a list of all the stations I hadn't been to that had been hit—Blackfriars, Monument, Paddington, Liverpool Street. Praed Street, Bounds Green, Trafalgar Square and Balham had taken direct hits. If my theory was correct, the winds should definitely be there.

I started looking for them, using the tube map on the cover of my notebook. Bounds Green was far north on the Piccadilly Line, nearly to the legendary Cockfosters, and Balham was nearly as far south on the Northern Line. I couldn't find either Praed Street or Trafalgar Square. I wondered if those stations had been closed or given other names. The Blitz had, after all, been fifty years ago.

Monument was the closest. I could get there by way of the Central Line and then follow the Circle Line around to Liverpool Street and from there go on up to Bounds Green. Monument had been down near the docks—it should smell like smoke, too, and the river water they'd sprayed on the fire, and burning cotton and rubber and spices. A warehouse full of pepper had burned. That odor would be unmistakable.

* * *

But I didn't smell it. I wandered up and down the passages of the Central and Northern and District Lines, stood on each of the platforms, waited in the corners near the stairways for over an hour, and nothing.

It doesn't happen all the time, I thought, taking the Circle Line to Liverpool Street. There's some other factor—the time of day or the temperature or the weather. Maybe the winds only blew when London was experiencing an inversion layer. I should have checked the weather this morning, I thought.

Whatever the factor was, there was nothing at Liverpool Street, either, but at Euston the wind hit me full force a minute after I had stepped off the train—a violent blast of soot and dread and charred wood. Even though I knew what it was now, I had to lean against the cold tiled wall a minute, till my heart stopped pounding, and the dry taste of fear in my mouth subsided.

I waited for the next train and the next, but the wind didn't repeat itself, and I went down to the Victoria Line, thought a minute, and went back up to the surface to ask the ticket seller if the tracks at Bounds Green were above-ground.

"I believe they are, sir," he said in a thick Scottish brogue.

"What about Balham?"

He looked alarmed. "Balham's the other way. It's not on the same line either."

"I know," I said. "Are they? Above-ground?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't know, sir. Sorry. If you're going to Balham, you go down to the Northern Line and take the train to Tooting Bec and Morden. Not the one to Elephant and Castle."

I nodded. Balham was even farther out in the suburbs than Bounds Green. The tracks were almost certain to be above-ground, but it was still worth a try.

Balham had taken the worst hit of any of the stations. The bomb had fallen just short of the station, but in the worst possible place. It had plunged the station into darkness, smashed the water and sewer pipes and the gas mains. Filthy water had rushed into the station in torrents, flooding the pitch-black passages, pouring down the stairs and into the tunnels. Three hundred people had drowned. And how could that not still be there, even if Balham was above-ground? And if it was there, the smell of sewage and gas and darkness would be unmistakable.

I didn't follow the ticket vendor's directions. I detoured to Blackfriars, since it was practically on the way, and stood around its yellow-tiled platforms for half an hour with no result before going on to Balham.

The train was nearly deserted for most of the long trip. From London Bridge out there were only two people in my car, a middle-aged woman reading a book and, at the far end, a young girl, crying.

She had spiked hair and a pierced eyebrow, and she cried helplessly, obliviously, making no attempt to wipe her mascaraed cheeks, or even turn her head toward the window.

I wondered if I should go ask her what was wrong or if the woman with the book would think I was preying on her. I wasn't even sure she would be aware of me if I did go over—there was a complete absorption to her sorrow that reminded me of Cath, intent on finding her china. I wondered if that was what had broken this girl's heart, that they had discontinued her pattern? Or had her friends betrayed her, had affairs, gotten old?

"Borough," the automated voice said, and she seemed to come to herself with a jerk, swiped at her cheeks, grabbed up her knapsack, and got off.

The middle-aged woman stayed on all the way to Balham, never once looking up from her book. When the train pulled in, I went over and stood next to her at the door so I could see what classic of literature she found so fascinating. It was *Gone With the Wind*.

But the winds aren't gone, I thought, leaning against the wall of Balham's platform, listening for the occasional sound of an incoming train, futilely waiting for a blast of sewage and methane and darkness. The winds of the Blitz are still here, endlessly blowing through the tunnels and passages of the tube like ghosts, wandering reminders of fire and flood and destruction.

If that was what they were. Because there was no smell of filthy water at Balham, or any indication that any had ever been there. The air in the passages was dry and dusty. There wasn't even a hint of mildew.

And even if there had been, it still wouldn't explain Holborn. I waited through three more trains on each side and then caught a train for Elephant and Castle and the Imperial War Museum.

"Experience the London Blitz," the poster had said, but the exhibit didn't have anything about which tube stations had been hit. Its gift shop yielded three more books, though. I scoured them from cover to cover, but there was no mention at all of Holborn or of any bombings near there.

And if the winds were leftover breezes from the Blitz, why hadn't I felt them the first time we were here? We had been in the tube all the time, going to the conference, going to plays, going off on the Old Man's wild hares, and there hadn't been even a breath of smoke, of sulfur!

What was different that time? The weather? It had rained nearly nonstop that first time. Could that have

affected the inversion layer? Or was it something that had happened since then? Some change in the routing of the trains or the connections between stations?

I walked back to Elephant and Castle in a light rain. A man in a clerical collar and two boys with white surplices over their arms were coming out of the station. There must be a church nearby, I thought, and realized that could be the solution for Holborn.

The crypts of churches had been used as shelters during the Blitz. Maybe they had also been used as temporary morgues.

I looked up "morgue" and then, when that didn't work, "body disposal."

I was right. They had used churches, warehouses, even swimming pools after some of the worst air raids to store bodies. I doubted if there were any swimming pools near Holborn, but there might be a church.

There was only one way to find out—go back to Holborn and look. I looked at my tube map. Good. I could catch a train straight to Holborn from here. I went down to the Bakerloo Line and got on a northbound train. It was nearly as empty as the one I'd come out on, but when the doors opened at Waterloo, a huge crowd of people surged onto the train.

It can't be rush hour yet, I thought, and glanced at my watch. Six-fifteen. Good God. I was supposed to meet Cath at the theater at seven. And I was how many stops from the theater? I pulled out my tube map and clung to the overhead pole, trying to count. Embankment and then Charing Cross and Piccadilly Circus. Five minutes each, and another five to get out of the station in this crush. I'd make it. Barely.

"Service on the Bakerloo Line has been disrupted from Embankment north," the automated voice said as we pulled in. "Please seek alternate routes."

Not now! I thought, grabbing for my map. Alternate routes. I could take the Northern Line to Leicester Square and then change for Piccadilly Circus. No, it would be faster to get off at Leicester Square and run the extra blocks.

I raced off the train the minute the doors opened and down the corridor to the Northern Line. Five to seven, and I was still two stops away from Leicester Square, and four blocks from the theater. A train was coming in. I could hear its rumble down the corridor. I darted around people, shouting, "Sorry, sorry, sorry," and burst onto the packed northbound platform.

The train must have been on the southbound tracks. "Next train 4 min.," the overhead sign said.

Great, I thought, hearing it start up, pushing the air in front of it, creating a vacuum in its wake. Embankment had been hit. And that was all I needed right now, a blast from the Blitz.

I'd no sooner imagined it than it hit, whipping my hair and my coat lapels back, rattling the unglued edges of a poster for *Showboat*. There was no blast, no heat, even though Embankment was right on the river, where the fires had been the worst. It was cold, cold, but there was no smell of formaldehyde with it, no stench of decay. Only the icy chill and a smothering smell of dryness and of dust.

It should have been better than the other ones, but it wasn't. It was worse. I had to lean against the back wall of the platform for support, my eyes closed, before I could get on the train.

What *are* they? I thought, even though this proved they were the residue of the Blitz. Because

Embankment had been hit. And people must have died, I thought. Because it was death I'd smelled. Death and terror and despair.

I stumbled onto the train. It was jammed tight, and the closeness, the knowledge that any wind, any air, couldn't reach me through this mass of people, revived me, calmed me, and by the time I pulled in to Leicester Square, I had recovered and was thinking only of how late I was.

Seven-ten. I could still make it, but just barely. At least Cath had the tickets, and with luck Elliott and Sara would get there in the meantime and they'd all be busy saying hello.

Maybe the Old Man changed his mind, I thought, and decided to come. Maybe yesterday he'd been under the weather, and tonight he'd be his old self.

The train pulled in. I raced down the passage, up the escalator, and out onto Shaftesbury. It was raining, but I didn't have time to worry about it.

"Tom! Tom!" a breathless voice shouted behind me.

I turned. Sara was frantically waving at me from half a block away.

"Didn't you hear me?" she said breathlessly, catching up to me. "I've been calling you ever since the tube."

She'd obviously been running. Her hair was mussed, and one end of her scarf dangled nearly to the ground.

"I know we're late," she said, pulling at my arm, "but I *must* catch my breath. You're not one of those dreadful men who've taken up marathon-running in old age, are you?"

"No," I said, moving over in front of a shop and out of the path of traffic.

"Elliott's always talking about getting a Stairmaster." She pulled her dangling scarf off and wrapped it carelessly around her neck. "I have *no* desire to get in shape."

Cath was wrong. That was all there was to it. Her radar had failed her and she was misinterpreting the whole situation.

I must have been staring. Sara put a defensive hand up to her hair. "I know I look a mess," she said, putting up her umbrella. "Oh, well. How late are we?"

"We'll make it," I said, taking her arm, and setting off toward the Lyric. "Where's Elliott?"

"He's meeting us at the theater. Did Cath get her china?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her since this morning," I said.

"Oh, look, there she is," Sara said, and began waving.

Cath was standing in front of the Lyric, next to the water-spotted sign that said, "Tonight's Performance Sold Out," looking numb and cold.

"Why didn't you wait inside out of the rain?" I said, leading them both into the lobby.

"We ran into each other coming out of the tube," Sara said, pulling off her scarf. "Or, rather, I saw Tom. I had to *scream* to get his attention. Isn't Elliott here yet?"

"No," Cath said.

"He and Mr. Evers came back after lunch. The day was *not* a success, so don't bring up the subject. Mrs. Evers insisted on buying everything in the entire gift shop, and then we couldn't find a taxi. Apparently there are no taxis down in Kew. I had to take the tube, and it was *blocks* to the station." She put her hand up to her hair. "I got blown to pieces."

"Did you change trains at Embankment?" I asked, trying to remember which line went out to Kew Gardens. Maybe she'd felt the wind, too. "Were you on the Bakerloo Line platform?"

"I don't remember," Sara said impatiently. "Is that the line for Kew? You're the tube expert."

"Do you want me to check your coats?" I said hastily.

Sara handed me hers, jamming her long scarf into one sleeve, but Cath shook her head. "I'm cold."

"You should have waited in the lobby," I said.

"Should I?" she said, and I looked at her, surprised. Was she mad I was late? Why? We still had fifteen minutes, and Elliott wasn't even here yet.

"What's the matter?" I started to say, but Sara was asking, "Did you get your china?"

"No," she said, still with that edge of anger in her voice. "Nobody has it."

"Did you try Selfridge's?" Sara asked, and I went off to check Sara's coat. When I came back, Elliott was there.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. He turned to me. "What happened to you this—"

"We were all late," I said, "except Cath, who, luckily, was the one with the tickets. You *do* have the tickets?"

Cath nodded and pulled them out of her evening bag. She handed them to me, and we went in. "Right-hand aisle and down to your right," the usher said. "Row three."

"No stairs to climb?" Elliott said. "No ladders?"

"No rock-axes and pitons," I said. "No binoculars."

"You're kidding," Elliott said. "I won't know how to act."

I stopped to buy programs from the usher. By the time we got to Row 3, Cath and Sara were already in their seats. "Good God," Elliott said as we sidled past the people on the aisle. "I'll bet you can actually *see* from here."

"Do you want to sit next to Sara?" I said.

"Good God, no," Elliott joked. "I want to be able to ogle the chorus girls without her smacking me with her program."

"I don't think it's that kind of play," I said.

"Cath, what's this play about?" Elliott said.

She leaned across Sara. "Hayley Mills is in it," she told him.

"Hayley Mills," he said reminiscently, leaning back, his hands behind his head. "I thought she was truly sexy when I was ten years old. Especially that dance number in *Bye-Bye, Birdie*."

"You're thinking of Ann-Margret, you fool," Sara said, reaching across me to smack him with her program. "Hayley Mills was in that one where she's the little girl who always saw the positive side of things—what was it called?"

I looked across at Cath, surprised she hadn't chimed in with the answer—she was the Hayley Mills fan. She was sitting with her coat pulled around her shoulders. Her face looked pinched with cold.

"You know Hayley Mills," Sara said to Elliott. "We watched her in *The Flame Trees of Thika*."

Elliott nodded. "I always admired her chest. Or am I thinking of Annette?"

"I don't think this is that kind of play," Sara said.

It wasn't that kind of play. Everyone wore high-necked costumes, including Hayley Mills, who swept in swathed in a bulky coat. "I'm *so* sorry I'm late, dear," she said, taking off her coat to reveal a turtleneck sweater and going over to stand in front of a stage fire. "It's so cold out. And the air's so strange."

Whoever was playing her husband said, " 'Into my heart an air that kills from yon far country blows,' " and Elliott leaned over and whispered, "Oh, God, a *literary* play."

I'd missed the rest of the husband's line, but he must have asked Hayley why she was late because she said, "My assistant cut her hand, and I had to take her to hospital. It took forever for her to get stitched up."

A hospital. I hadn't considered that. Their morgues would have been full during the Blitz. Was there a hospital close to Holborn? I would have to ask Elliott at intermission.

A sudden rattle of applause brought me out of my reverie.

The stage was dark. I'd missed Scene I. When the lights went back up, I tried to focus on the play, so I could discuss it at least halfway intelligibly at the intermission.

"The wind is rising," Hayley Mills said, looking out an imaginary window.

"Storm brewing," a man, not her husband, said.

"That's what I fear," she said, rubbing her hands along her arms to warm them. "Oh, Derek, what if he

finds out about us?"

I glanced sideways across Sara at Cath, but couldn't see her face in the darkened theater. She obviously hadn't known what this play was about, or she'd never have chosen it.

But Hayley wasn't acting anything like Sara. She chain-smoked, she paced, she hung up the phone hastily when her husband came into the room and was so obviously guilty no one, least of all her husband, could have failed to miss it.

Elliott certainly didn't. "The husband's got to be a complete moron," he said as soon as the curtain went down for the intermission. "Even the *dog* could deduce that she's having an affair. Why is it characters in plays never act any way remotely resembling real life?"

"Maybe because people in real life don't look like Hayley Mills," Cath said. "She *does* look wonderful, doesn't she, Sara? She hasn't aged a day."

"You're joking, right?" Elliott said. "All right, I know people kid themselves about their spouses having affairs, but—"

"I *have* to go to the bathroom," Cath said. "I suppose there'll be a horrible line. Come with me, Sara, and I'll tell you the saga of my china." They edged past us.

"Get us a glass of white wine," Sara called back from the aisle, and Elliott and I shouldered our way to the bar, which took ten minutes, and another five to get served. Sara and Cath still weren't back.

"So where were you all day?" Elliott asked me, sipping Sara's wine. "I looked for you at lunch."

"I was researching something," I said. "Holborn Tube station is in Bloomsbury, isn't it?"

"I think so," he said. "I rarely take the tube."

"Are there any hospitals near the tube station?"

"Hospitals?" he said bewilderedly. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"Or churches?"

"I don't know. What's this all about?"

"Have you ever heard of a thing called an inversion layer?" I said. "It's when air is trapped—"

"They simply must do something about the women's bathroom situation," Sara said, grabbing her wine and taking a sip. "I thought we were going to be in there the entire third act."

"Sounds like an excellent idea," Elliott said. "I don't mean to sound like the Old Man, but if this is any indication, plays truly have gone to hell! I mean, we're expected to believe that Hayley Mills's husband is so blind that he can't see his wife's in love with—the other one—what's his name—?"

"*Pollyanna*," Cath said. "I've been trying to remember it all through the first two acts. The name of the little girl who always saw the positive side of things."

"Sara," I said, "are there any hospitals near Holborn?"

"The Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children. That's the one James Barrie left all the money to," she said. "Why?"

The Great Ormond Street Hospital. That had to be it. They had used it as a temporary morgue, and the air—

"It's so *obvious*," Elliott said, still on the subject of infidelity. "The excuses Hayley Mills's character makes for where she's been—"

"She looks wonderful, doesn't she?" Cath said. "How old do you suppose she is? She looks so young!"

The end-of-intermission bell chimed.

"Let's go," Cath said, setting her wine down. "I don't want to have to crawl over all those people again."

Sara swallowed her wine at one gulp, and we went back down the aisle. We were too late. The people on the end had to stand up and let us past.

"But don't you agree," Elliott said, sitting down, "that any normal person—?"

"Shhh," Cath said, leaning all the way across Sara and me to shut him up. "The lights are going down."

They did, and I felt an odd sense of relief, as if we'd just avoided something terrible. The curtain began to go up.

"I still say," Elliott said in a stage whisper, "that nobody could have that many clues thrown at him and not realize his wife's having an affair."

"Why not?" Sara said, "You didn't," and Hayley Mills came onstage.

Beside me, in the dark, Elliott was applauding like everyone else, and I thought, it's as if nothing happened. Elliott will think he didn't really hear it, like the wind in the tube, over so fast you wonder if it was really real, and he'll decide it wasn't, he'll lean across me and say, "What do you mean? You're not having an affair, are you?" and Sara will whisper, "Of course not, you idiot. I just meant you never notice anything," and it won't all have blown up, it won't all—

"Who is it?" Elliott said.

His voice echoed in the space between two of Hayley Mills and her husband's lines, and a man in front of us turned around and glared.

"Who is it?" Elliott said again, louder. "Who are you having an affair with?"

Cath said, in a strangled voice, "Don't—"

"No, you're right," Elliott said, standing up. "What the hell difference does it make?" and pushed his way out over the people on the aisle.

Sara sat an endless minute, and then she plunged past us too, tripping over my foot and nearly falling as

she did.

I looked over at Cath, wondering if I should go after Sara. I had the ticket for her coat and scarf in my pocket. Cath was staring stiffly up at the stage, her coat clutched tightly around her.

"This can't go on," Hayley Mills said, looking now fully as old as she was, but still going gamely on with her lines, "I want a divorce," and Cath stood up and pushed past me, me following clumsily after her, muttering, "Sorry, sorry," over and over to the people on the aisle.

"It's *over*," Hayley said from the stage. "Can't you *see* that?"

I didn't catch up to Cath till she was halfway through the lobby.

"Wait," I said, reaching for her arm. "Cath."

Her face was white and set. She pushed unseeingly through the glass doors and out onto the pavement, and then stood there, looking bewildered.

"I'll get a taxi," I said, thinking, At least we don't have to compete with the end-of-the-play crowd.

Wrong. People were streaming out of the Apollo, and farther down the street, *Miss Saigon*, and God knew what else. There were swarms of people on the curb and at the corner, shouting and whistling for taxis.

"Wait here," I said, pushing Cath back under the Lyric's marquee, and plunged out into the meleé, my arm thrust out. A taxi pulled toward the curb, but it was only avoiding a clot of people, newspapers over their heads, ducking across the street. The driver put his arm out and gestured toward the "in use" light on top of the taxi.

I stepped off the curb, scanning the mess for a taxi that didn't have its light on, jerking back again as a motorbike splashed by.

Cath tugged on the back of my jacket. "It's no use," she said. "*Phantom* just let out. We'll never get a taxi."

"I'll go to one of the hotels," I said, gesturing up the street, "and have the doorman get one. You stay here."

"No, it's all right," she said. "We can take the tube. Piccadilly Circus is close, isn't it?"

"Right down there," I said, pointing.

She nodded and put her purse uselessly over her head against the rain, and we darted out onto the sidewalk, through the crowd, and down the steps into Piccadilly Circus.

"At least it's dry in here," I said, fishing for change for a ticket for her.

She nodded again, shaking the skirt of her coat out.

There was a huge crush at the machines and an even bigger one at the turnstiles. I handed her her ticket, and she put it gingerly in the slot and yanked her hand back before the machine could suck it away.

None of the down escalators were working. People clomped awkwardly down the steps. Two punkers with shaved heads and bad skin shoved their way past, muttering obscenities.

At the bottom there was a nasty-looking puddle under the tube map. "We need the Piccadilly Line," I said, taking her arm and leading her down the tunnel and out onto the jammed platform. The LED sign overhead said, "Next train 2 min."

A train rumbled through on the other side and people poured onto the platform behind us, pushing us forward. Cath stiffened, staring down at the "Mind the Gap" sign, and I thought, all we need now is a rat. Or a knifing.

A train pulled in, and we pushed onto it, crammed together like sardines. "It'll thin out in a couple of stops," I said, and she nodded. She looked dazed, shell-shocked.

Like Elliott, staring blindly at the stage, saying in a flat voice, "Who are you having the affair with?," stumbling blindly over people's feet, people's knees, trying to get out of the row, looking like he'd been hit by a blast of sulfurous, deadly wind. Everything fine one minute, sipping wine and discussing Hayley Mills, and the next, a bomb ripping the world apart and everything in ruins.

"Green Park," the loudspeaker said, and the door opened and more people pushed on. "You better watch out!" a woman with matted hair said, shaking a finger in Cath's face. Her fingertip was stained blue-black. "You better! I mean it!"

"That's it," I said, pushing Cath behind me. "We're getting off at the next stop." I put my hand on her back and began propelling her through the mass of people toward the door.

"Hyde Park Corner," the loudspeaker said.

We got off, the door whooshed shut, and the train began to pull out.

"We'll go up top and get a taxi," I said tightly. "You were right. The tube's gone to hell."

It's all gone to hell, I thought bitterly, starting down the empty tunnel, Cath behind me. Sara and Elliott and London and Hayley Mills. All of it. The Old Man and Regent Street and us.

The wind caught me full in the face. Not from the train we had just gotten off of, from ahead of us somewhere, farther down the tunnel. And worse, worse, worse than before. I staggered back against the wall, doubling up like I'd been punched in the stomach. Disaster and death and devastation.

I straightened up, clutching my stomach, unable to catch my breath, and looked across the tunnel. Cath was standing with her back against the opposite wall, her hands flattened against the tiles, her face pinched and pale.

"You felt it," I said, and felt a vast relief.

"Yes."

Of course she felt it. This was Cath, who sensed things nobody else noticed, who had known Sara was having an affair, that the Old Man had turned into an old man. I should have gone and gotten her the first time it happened, dragged her down here, made her stand in the tunnels with me.

"Nobody else felt them," I said. "I thought I was crazy."

"No," she said, and there was something in her voice, in the way she stood huddled against the green-tiled wall, that told me what should have been obvious all along.

"You felt them that first time we were here," I said, amazed. "That's why you hate the tube. Because of the winds."

She nodded.

"That's why you wanted to take a taxi to Harrods," I said. "Why didn't you say something that first time?"

"We didn't have enough money for taxis," she said, "and you didn't seem to be aware of them."

I wasn't aware of anything, I thought, not Cath's obvious reluctance to go down into the tube stations, nor her flinching back from the incoming trains. She was watching for the next wind, I thought, remembering her peering nervously into the tunnel. She was waiting for it to hit.

"You should have told me," I said. "If you'd told me, I could have helped you figure out what they were so they wouldn't frighten you anymore."

She looked up. "What they were?" she repeated blankly.

"Yes. I've figured out what's causing them. It's because of the inversion layer. The air gets trapped down here, and there's no way out. Like gas pockets in a mine. So it just stays here, year after year," I said, unbelievably glad I could talk to her, tell her.

"People used these tube stations as shelters during the Blitz," I said eagerly. "Balham was hit, and so was Charing Cross. That's why you can smell smoke and cordite. Because of the high-explosive bombs. And people were killed by flying tiles at Marble Arch. That's what we're feeling—the winds from those events. They're winds from the past. I don't know what this one was caused by. A tunnel collapse, maybe, or a V-2—" I stopped.

She was looking the way she had sitting on the narrow bed in our hotel room, right before she told me Sara was having an affair.

I stared at her.

"You know what's causing the winds," I said finally. Of course she knew. This was Cath, who knew everything. Cath, who had had twenty years to think about this.

I said, "What's causing them, Cath?"

"Don't—" she said, and looked down the passageway, as if hoping somebody would come, a sudden rush of people, hurrying for the trains, pushing between us, cutting her off before she could answer, but the tunnel remained empty, still, no air moving at all.

"Cath," I said.

She took a deep breath, and then said, "They're what's coming."

"What's *coming*?" I repeated stupidly.

"What's waiting for us," she said, and then, bitterly, "Divorce and death and decay. The ends of things."

"They can't be," I said. "Marble Arch took a direct hit. And Charing Cross—"

But this was Cath, who was always right. And what if the scent wasn't of smoke but of fear, not of ashes but of despair? What if the formaldehyde wasn't the charnelhouse odor of a temporary morgue but of a permanent one, Death itself, the marble arch that waited for us all? No wonder it had reminded Cath of a cemetery.

What if the direct hits, shrapnel flying everywhere, slashing through youth and marriage and happiness, weren't V-2s, but death and devastation and decline?

The winds all, all smelled of death, and the Blitz hardly had a monopoly on that. Look at Hari Srinivasau. And the pub with the great fish and chips.

"But all of the stations where there are winds were hit," I said. "And in Charing Cross there was a smell of water and dirt. It has to be the Blitz."

Cath shook her head. "I've felt them on BART, too."

"But that's in San Francisco. It might be the earthquake. Or the fire."

"And on the Metro in D.C. And once, at home, in the middle of Main Street," she said, staring at the floor. "I think you're right about the inversion layer. It must concentrate them down here, make them stronger and more—"

She paused, and I thought she was going to say "lethal."

"More noticeable," she said.

But I hadn't noticed. Nobody had noticed except Cath, who noticed everything.

And the old, I thought, remembering the white-haired woman in South Kensington Station, her coat collar clutched closed with a blue-veined hand, the stooped old black man on the platform in Holborn. The old feel them all the time, I thought. They walked bent nearly double against a wind that blew all the time.

Or stayed out of the tube. I thought of the Old Man saying, "I *loathe* the Underground." The Old Man, who had run us merrily all over London on the tube after adventure, on at Baker Street and off at Tower Hill, up escalators, down stairs, shouting stories over his shoulder the whole time. "Horrible place," he had said, shuddering, yesterday. "Filthy, smelly, drafty." Drafty.

He felt the winds, and so did Mrs. Hughes. "I never go down in the tube anymore," she had said at dinner. Not, "I never take the tube." I never *go down* in the tube. And it wasn't just the stairs or the long distances she had to walk. It was the winds, reeking of separation and loss and sorrow.

And Cath had to be right. They had to be the winds of mortality. What else would blow so steadily, so

inexorably, on the old and no one else?

But then why had I noticed them? Maybe the convention was an inversion layer of another kind, bringing me face-to-face with old friends and old places. With cancer and the Gap and the Old Man, railing about newfangled plays and spicy food. Bringing me face-to-face early with death and old age and change.

And a feeling of time running out, that made you go shoving down escalators and racing through corridors, frantic to catch the train before it pulled out. A feeling of panic, that it might be the last one. "The doors are closing."

I thought of Sara, running up out of Piccadilly Station, her hair windblown, her cheeks unnaturally red, of her pushing past my knees in the theater, desperate, pursued.

"Sara felt them," I said, suddenly understanding.

"Did she?" Cath said, her voice flat.

I looked at her, standing there against the far wall, braced for the next wind, waiting for it to hit.

It was funny. This very passage, this very station had been used as a shelter during the Blitz. But there weren't any shelters that could protect you from this kind of raid.

And no matter what train you caught, no matter which line you took, they all went to the same station. Marble Arch. End of the line.

"So what do we do?" I said.

She didn't answer. She stood there looking at the floor as if it had "Mind the Gap" written on it. Mind the Gap.

"I don't know," she said finally.

And what had I thought she would say? That it wouldn't be so bad as long as we had each other? That love conquers all? That was the whole point, wasn't it, that it didn't? That it was no match for divorce and destruction and death? Look at Milford Hughes Senior. Look at Daniel Drecker's daughter.

"They didn't have my china at any of the shops in Chelsea," she said bleakly. "It never occurred to me it might be discontinued. All those years, I—it never occurred to me it wouldn't still be there." Her voice broke. "It was such a pretty pattern."

And the Old Man was so funny and so full of life, the pub was always jam-packed, Sara and Elliott had a great marriage. But even that couldn't save them. Divorce and destruction and decay.

And what could anybody do about any of it? Button up your overcoat? Stay above-ground?

But that was the problem, staying above-ground. And somehow getting through the days, knowing the doors were closing and it was all going to go smash. Knowing that everything you ever loved or liked or even thought was pretty, was all going to be torn down, burned up, blown away. "Gone with the wind," I said, thinking of the woman on the train.

"What?" Cath said, still in that numb, hopeless voice.

"The novel," I said ruefully. "*Gone With the Wind*. There was a woman on the train to Balham today reading it. When I was tracking down the winds, trying to find out which stations had them, if they were stations that had been hit during the Blitz."

"You went to Balham?" she demanded. "Today?"

"And Blackfriars. And Embankment. And Elephant and Castle. I went to the Transport Museum to find which stations had been hit, and then to Monument and Balham, trying to see if they had winds." I shook my head. "I spent the whole day, trying to figure out the pattern of the—what is it?"

Cath had put her hand up to her mouth as if she were in pain.

"What is it?"

She said, "Sara cancelled again today. After you left. I thought maybe we could have lunch." She looked across at me. "Nobody knew where you were."

"I didn't want anybody to know I was running around London chasing winds nobody else could feel," I said.

"Elliott told me you'd disappeared the day before, too," she said, and there was still something I wasn't getting here. "He said he and Arthur wanted you to have lunch with them, but you left."

"I went back to Holborn, to try to see what was causing the winds. And then to Marble Arch."

"Sara told me she and Elliott had to go take Evers and his wife sightseeing, that they wanted to see Kew Gardens."

"Elliott? I thought you said he was at the conference?"

"He was. He said Sara had a doctor's appointment she'd forgotten about," she said. "Nobody knew where you were. And then at the theater, you and Sara—"

Had shown up together, late, out of breath, Sara's cheeks flaming. And the day before I had lied about lunch, about the afternoon session. To Cath, who could sense when people were lying, who could sense when something was wrong.

"You thought *I* was the one who was having an affair with Sara," I said.

She nodded numbly.

"You thought I was having an affair with *Sara*?" I said. "How could you think that? I *love* you."

"And Sara loved Elliott. People cheat on their spouses, they leave each other. Things . . ."

". . . fall apart," I murmured.

And the air down here registered it all, trapped it below-ground, distilled it into an essence of death and destruction and decay.

Cath was wrong. It was the Blitz, after all. And the girl crying on the train to Balham, and the arguing American couple. Estrangement and disaster and despair. I wondered if it would record this, too, Cath's fear and our unhappiness, and send it blowing through the tunnels and tracks and passages of the tube to hit some poor unsuspecting tourist in the face next week. Or fifty years from now.

I looked at Cath, still standing against the opposite wall, impossibly far away.

"I'm not having an affair with Sara," I said, and Cath leaned weakly against the tiles and started to cry.

"I love you," I said and crossed the passage in one stride and put my arms around her, and for a moment everything was all right. We were together, and safe. Love conquers all.

But only till the next wind—the results of the X-ray, the call in the middle of the night, the surgeon looking down at his hands, not wanting to tell you the bad news. And we were still down in the tube tunnels, still in its direct path.

"Come on," I said, and took her arm. I couldn't protect her from the winds, but I could get her out of the tube tunnels. I could keep her out of the inversion layer. For a few years. Or months. Or minutes.

"Where are we going?" she asked as I propelled her along the passage.

"Up," I said. "Out."

"We're miles from our hotel," she said.

"We'll get a taxi," I said. I led her up the stairs, around a curve, listening as we went for the sound of a train rumbling in, for a tinny voice announcing, "Mind the Gap."

"We'll take taxis exclusively from now on," I said.

Down another passage, down another set of stairs, trying not to hurry, as if hurrying might bring another one on. Through the arch to the escalators. Almost there. Another minute, and I'd have her on the escalator and headed up out of the inversion layer. Out of the wind. Safe for the moment.

A clot of people emerged abruptly from the Circle Line tunnel opposite and jammed up in front of the escalator, chattering in French. Teenagers on holiday, lugging enormous backpacks and a duffel too wide for the escalator steps, stopping, maddeningly, to consult their tube maps at the foot of the escalator.

"Excuse me," I said, "*Pardonnez moi*," and they looked up, and, instead of moving aside, tried to get on the escalator, jamming the too-wide duffel between the rubber handholds, mashing it down onto the full width of the escalator steps so no one could get past.

Behind us, in the Piccadilly Line tunnel, I could hear the faint sound of a train approaching.

The French kids finally, finally, got the bag onto the escalator, and I pushed Cath onto the bottom step, and stepped on the one below her.

Come on. Up, up. Past a poster for *Remains of the Day* and *Forever*, *Patsy Cline* and *Death of a Salesman*. Below us, the rumble of the train grew louder, closer.

"What do you say we forget going back to our hotel? We're not far from Marble Arch," I said to cover

the sound. "What say we call the Royal Hernia and see if they've got an extra bed?"

Come on, come on. Up. *King Lear* . *The Mousetrap* .

"What if it's not still there?" Cath said, looking down at the depths below us. We'd come almost three floors. The sound of the train was only a murmur, drowned out by the giggling students and the dull roar of the station hall above us.

"It's still there," I said positively.

Come on, up, up.

"It'll be just like it was," I said. "Steep stairs and the smells of mildew and rotting cabbage. Nice wholesome smells."

"Oh, no," Cath said. She pointed across at the down escalators, suddenly jammed with people in evening dress, shaking the rain from their fur coats and theater programs. "*Cats* just got out. We'll never find a taxi."

"We'll walk," I said.

"It's raining," Cath said.

Better the rain than the wind, I thought. Come on. Up.

We were nearly to the top. The students were already heaving their backpacks onto their shoulders. We would walk to a phone booth and call a taxi. And what then? Keep our heads down. Stay out of drafts. Turn into the Old Man.

It won't work, I thought bleakly. The winds are everywhere. But I had to try to protect Cath from them. Having failed to protect her for the last twenty years, I had to try now to keep her out of their deadly path.

Three steps from the top. The French students were yanking on the wedged duffel, shouting, "*Allons! Allons! Vite!*"

I turned to look back, straining to hear the sound of the train over their voices. And saw the wind catch the gray hair of the old woman just stepping onto the top step of the down escalator. She hunched down, ducking her head as it blew down on her from above. From above! It flipped the hair back from the oblivious young faces of the French students above us, lifted their collars, their shirttails.

"Cath!" I shouted and reached for her with one hand, digging the fingers of my other one into the rubber railing as if I could stop the escalator, keep it from carrying us inexorably forward, forward into its path.

My grabbing for her had knocked her off-balance. She half-fell off her step and into me. I turned her toward me, pulled her against my chest, wrapped my arms around her, but it was too late.

"I love you," Cath said, as if it was her last chance.

"Don't—" I said, but it was already upon us, and there was no protecting her, no stopping it. It hit us full-blast, forcing Cath's hair across her cheeks, blowing us nearly back off the step, hitting me full in the

face with its smell. I caught my breath in surprise.

The old lady was still standing poised at the top of the escalator, her head back, her eyes closed. People jammed up behind her, saying irritatedly, "Sorry!" and "May I get past, please!" She didn't hear them. Head tilted back, she sniffed deeply at the air.

"Oh," Cath said, and tilted her head back, too.

I breathed it in deeply. A scent of lilacs and rain and expectation. Of years of tourists reading *London on \$40 a Day* and newlyweds holding hands on the platform. Of Elliott and Sara and Cath and I, tumbling laughingly after the Old Man, off the train and through the beckoning passages to the District Line and the Tower of London. The scent of spring and the All-Clear and things to come.

Caught in the winding tunnels along with the despair and the terror and the grief. Caught in the maze of passages and stairs and platforms, trapped and magnified and held in the inversion layer.

We were at the top. "May I get past, please?" the man behind us said.

"We'll find your china, Cath," I said. "There's a second-hand market at Portobello Road that has everything under the sun."

"Does the tube go there?" she said.

"I beg your pardon," the man said. "Sorry."

"Ladbroke Grove Station. The Hammersmith and City Line," I said and bent to kiss her.

"You're blocking the way," the man said. "People are trying to get through."

"We're improving the atmosphere," I said and kissed her again.

We stood there a moment, breathing it in—leaves and lilacs and love.

Then we got on the down escalator, holding hands, and went down to the eastbound platform and took the tube to Marble Arch.