

PROLOGUE

‘Ohmygod, I’ve forgotten my passport!’

Tash French bombed back out of Hampstead Underground’s lift just as the doors were shutting, trapping her rucksack in its metal jaws with a dubious crunch and almost dislocating both of her shoulders as she was brought to an abrupt halt.

Freeing the tattered and shredded bag – which had halved in size – she was briefly accused of fare-dodging and searched for incendiary devices by an enthusiastic guard before bursting out on to Hampstead High Street to run home and collect the truant document. She’d put it out on the kitchen table so that she wouldn’t forget it. She’d then covered it and the table in rubbish from her bag when searching for her luggage tags.

Fighting her way through the crowds of shoppers, she glanced at her watch. She was supposed to be checking in for her flight in three-quarters of an hour. She’d never make it. If only she hadn’t got so engrossed in the daytime TV phone-in on restructuring and prioritising one’s life through astrology to overcome shyness and skin problems, she wouldn’t be this late.

She ran breathlessly down the High Street before darting to the left and along Old Brewery Mews, unaware that pairs of holey socks, shabby knickers and some decidedly antique bras were being scattered from a tear in the rucksack, leaving a paperchase trail of smalls behind her. As she dashed into Willoughby Road, she left the mews looking as if a hundred swinging singles about to set off on a day trip to Benidorm had conga-ed down its pavement.

With her nose in a fellow rope-hanger’s armpit half an hour later, Tash was too tightly crammed into the corridor of a Piccadilly Line tube to look at her watch, but she knew she was cutting things finer than a Barbie doll’s hair ribbon if she was going to make it to Heathrow in time. She was firmly wedged between the anonymous armpit – devoid of Right Guard for several days, Tash deduced – a thin-haired woman with a twitch who was sucking a Fisherman’s Friend pungently and thrusting a Daily Express into the back of Tash’s neck, and a little Indian who was reading on tip-toes over the thin woman’s shoulder and listening to what sounded like a battery of tap-dancing centipedes marching along a metal sink unit on his personal stereo.

In a very black section of tunnel between Hyde Park Corner and Knightsbridge, the train came to a shuddering, hissing halt and the lights dipped on and off like a department store five minutes before closing time. The engine went eerily quiet. Someone muttered in a did-you-know voice about signal failures at Gloucester Road. Everyone ignored him – only maniacs, after all, conversed with strangers on public transport – and pretended to be engrossed in the posters overhead telling them not to fare-dodge. A drunk began reedily singing ‘Underneath the Arches’. Still they didn’t move.

A German couple were starting to have a heavily vowelled argument with the only recognisable words being ‘Wictoria’, ‘Vestminster’ and ‘Lie-cest-er Sqverer’.

The did-you-know told them they were going the wrong way, but not to worry, just think – they were currently directly underneath Harrods.

‘Ve did Harrods on Ved-nes-day,’ snapped a German.

The Indian’s centipedes continued on the drainer. The Express woman inserted another Fisherman’s Friend. Still the train remained motionless.

Tash, reeling from the combined BO and lozenge fumes, started to snivel into the armpit. She’d definitely never make her flight now.

In the depths of her patched-up rucksack, her alarm clock went off.

There turned out to be a bomb scare at South Kensington. All stations were to be evacuated.

Having been firmly smacked on the bottom by the electric ticket barriers before filing out of Knightsbridge Underground, Tash walked groggily into a convoy of heavily guarded Arabs who almost swept her like driftwood into a stretch Merc. She hastily extracted herself and jumped on to a bus.

Two stops later she jumped off. It was going the wrong way.

Whimpering in panic, she looked at her watch. Her check-in time had passed; the plane was due to take off in three-quarters of an hour. Risking her life, and that of a cycling courier who was talking on his mobile phone and reading a map at the same time, she shot across the road.

Once there, she ran after another bus and tripped over a Japanese tourist, flying gracefully into a striped Telecom tent and flattening the entire thing and the engineers inside. ‘Sorry!’ Tash muttered, disentangling herself from a web of Nikon straps and crushed BT employees.

She dived after the bus and threw herself on to the tailgate.

The bus terminated at Chiswick because the driver wanted to have his regulation coffee break.

Tash wailed with frustration and looked around desperately for a glowing yellow rectangle above a black cab.

Traffic groaned past her in convoy, emitting great clouds of grimy exhaust fumes and strains of top forty hits. Occupied cabs threaded in and out of the choked lanes like fat beetles pushing their way through slow-moving ladybirds, their drivers’ jaws constantly moving, occupants staring at the meters in silent horror, watching the numbers tick up like a jogger’s stopwatch. Hundreds of unoccupied cabs seemed to be whizzing back towards central London. None passed Tash, stranded forlornly on the opposite side of the busy road.

In a few minutes’ time she’d be able to see her plane rising up from the distant smoky horizon like a great metal phoenix. She threw down her rucksack and stamped on top of it in frustration, her eyes bleary with tears.

‘Wanna lift, love?’

A Darth Vader in black leathers straddling a throbbing ebony 800cc BMW which was big enough to fit a jacuzzi

pillion on, had drawn up beside her and was looking at her through half a centimetre of tinted visor.

‘Going to Heathrow?’ he asked in a muffled voice.

Tash nodded doubtfully and peered through the smoked glass. All she could see was her own blotchy reflection – piggyeyed and miserable. He was probably a mad rapist, she decided, intent on whisking her off to deepest Kew and torturing her in a hot-house.

‘It’s all right,’ he lifted the visor and turned out to be about fifty, West Indian and in possession of a Mother Teresa smile. ‘I work there. Look.’ He pointed to a parking permit on his wind deflector. It said he was called Murray de Souza and was in Security Division 385.2b.

‘Thanks, but I’ve missed my flight,’ Tash shrugged miserably.

‘Where you going?’

‘Paris. De Gaulle,’ Tash told him glumly. ‘At least I was.’

Murray’s mouth split into a toothy laugh. He had gold fillings, Tash noticed. It was like looking into a prospector’s cellar.

‘You didn’t phone to check all the flights were running?’ Tash shook her head.

‘Child, get on the bike.’

When Tash got to Heathrow – and miraculously, thanks to Murray’s help, into the right terminal and up to the correct desk – she found that all the flights into Paris were running three hours late due to an air traffic control strike.

She then had to wait two hours by a rubber pot-plant and three depressed-looking angel fish in the departure lounge before boarding her plane. It was only when she was finally shuffling along a huge plastic tube with her grouchy fellow passengers, towards the mouth of the tin bird, that she realised she’d left the house with the television waffling downstairs, the radio blaring upstairs, all the lights blazing, the answerphone switched off and a garden window open because one of the cats had developed a phobia about the cat-flap. She also had an unpleasant feeling that she’d left her keys in the front door.

‘Er . . . do you mind awfully if I make a phone call?’ she asked a make-up-enamelled stewardess apologetically.