

Future Encounter

By

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Anna moved slowly towards the checkpoint, anger and resentment rising within her. Two bloody hours she'd been stuck here. And for what? She was just trying to get home from work, not blow up the middle of Birmingham.

'I can remember a time when the only hold-ups were caused by leaves on the line,' remarked the guy next to her, edging along the platform.

Anna grinned at the memory. 'It wasn't so long ago,' she said. 'How did we get to this anyway?'

The man raised his eyebrows. 'I think it was supposed to make us feel safe.'

'Well, it doesn't work for me,' murmured Anna, the emotion in her voice surprising the man.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

For a moment she didn't seem to hear the question. He tried again.

'Look, I'm sorry. We pass each other every night but I don't know your name. I'm David.'

'Anna,' she answered. It was true she recognised him but somehow folks didn't talk to each other much these days. How did you know if you could trust them? She glanced quickly at him. He was attractive. Forty, forty-five maybe.

'Sorry, David. I was thinking about something else. I've just had the day from hell and all I want to do is get home and attack a bottle of red wine.'

He nodded. 'We could always pop into the wine bar by the entrance. And try our luck later when this lot has gone through.'

She wasn't sure. The programmes on the television warned you to be careful of strangers. Stalkers, internet predators, terrorists – they made the whole world seem dangerous. But how much of it was true?

'It's just a drink, love. No strings attached.'

Anna looked back at the checkpoint. It would take the marshals at least an hour to clear this queue. And the wine bar was a busy place. What was she afraid of?

A few minutes later she was sipping a glass of Beaujolais and beginning to relax.

'Maybe we should do this every night and avoid the rush,' she said, smiling across at her companion.

David grinned. 'Fine with me. But what about this day from hell? Want to talk about it?'

Anna shrugged. 'Guess who lost her ID card at the Mall this morning?'

David groaned. 'Oh hell. That happened to my brother a couple of months ago. It was a nightmare.'

She nodded. 'I couldn't even get into the school where I work. I had to ring the Head from outside the front gates, for God's sake. And he wouldn't let me in!'

'I know it seems ludicrous. But it was probably more than his job was worth.'

'He knows me, David! I've been teaching history there for the past five years.'

David sighed. 'Yeah, I agree it's a crazy situation. But maybe we should keep our voices down a bit. Don't forget the CC TV cameras pick up sound now.'

Anna slammed her glass down noisily. 'Why shouldn't I say I don't like what's happening? Does that make me some kind of a threat to the country?'

'Okay, okay, love. Actually I happen to agree with you.'

His voice was low but he put his hand over hers and held it tightly.

She quietened. 'You do?'

He nodded. 'I hate the way we have to live now. If it can be called living. Being afraid all the time, looking at every stranger as if they're the enemy.'

He sighed and looked down at his glass. 'Still, it's a lot easier for us. At least we're British.'

'You are,' murmured Anna quietly.

David looked up, studying her face.

'My mother was Indian,' she explained, putting her hand to her aching temple. 'I know we're not the enemy but sometimes people in the street look at me – as if they're wondering. My hair, my complexion... David, I'm not exactly a typical English rose. When someone's scared, they don't care where you're from. You're just a foreigner.'

He squeezed her hand sympathetically. It felt good. Comforting.

'Well for what it's worth, I don't care where you're from. I love long dark hair and beautiful brown eyes.'

Anna laughed. 'Okay, that's enough. But thanks for the reassurance. It's good to know someone else feels the same way I do.'

David smiled. 'Don't you ever feel like leaving this country? Going back to India? Or maybe you think we can do more by staying here and trying to change the situation. Get things back the way they were before the 2012 attacks.'

Anna shrugged. 'Is that possible? I went to a couple of meetings led by one of those groups. You know the ones who fight for civil liberties? I don't think I'm brave enough to join them. They said lots of their members had been arrested recently. I can't afford to let that happen to me. I'd lose my job at the school and then I'd probably be sent back to India. My family need the money I send home each month. They'd starve without it.'

'But if you could do something to fight the system without any risks attached, would you be prepared to consider it?'

His voice was quiet. Deliberate.

Anna stared at him uncertainly. 'Is that a hypothetical question or an invitation?'

'Take it any way you like.'

Suddenly the wine tasted sour in her mouth and she felt the sweat running down her armpits to settle in the waistband of her skirt. This wasn't just an innocent drink then.

'No David, I wouldn't. I'm sorry but like I said before, I'm not brave enough to risk my family. And if you're recruiting, I wish you luck. I really do. But I'm not getting involved.'

Anna picked up her bag and stood up, checking her watch for the time of the next train. David smiled at her and turned to the two men sitting at the next table.

'You can stand down now, she's harmless. Misguided and an idiot but not a serious threat.'

Anna stepped backwards in shock, her chair clattering over the polished tiles.

'You're Inland Security,' she whispered, her voice shaking. 'Are you telling me this whole scenario was a set up to find out if I was some kind of subversive?'

'You are a foreigner, aren't you, Anna? And you freely admitted you attended civil liberty meetings. You really should be more careful who you mix with in the future. Particularly with your colouring. As you said yourself, it makes people jumpy.'

Anna's voice began to rise. 'How can you do this? Deliberately persuade someone to trust you? To open up to you? Just so you can trap them!'

Anna was close to tears. She'd liked this man – wanted to trust him. He was right about one thing. She was a bloody fool!

David sighed. 'We're only trying to keep you safe, Anna. Why can't people like you ever see that? But like I said before, I'd be more careful in future. Remember we'll be watching you.'

Anna picked up her coat and fled. She wouldn't let this man witness the ultimate humiliation. It was only as the train pulled out, she finally allowed the tears to fall.

An hour later she was sitting in front of her computer, the bottle of red wine half empty. In the secure code she always used, Anna carefully typed the email to her friend from the hospital. The same friend who recruited her to the Campaign for Freedom group she now helped to run.

The encounter with David had caught her off guard and it frightened and upset her. She wanted to trust him. And because of that she'd almost given herself and the group away. She swore it would never happen again. She poured herself another glass of wine and sat back. She wasn't a natural revolutionary and she could never bring herself to hurt anyone. She just wanted the world to be the way it used to be. Perhaps it was already too late.

The End