

PERFECT ILLUSION

I must have fallen asleep on the bus because when I reached Kings Cross station, there were no other passengers. I jumped off and headed towards my apartment. Still drowsy, I didn't pay attention to anything around me until it then struck me – there was nothing around me. No people, no cars. The bus disappeared round the corner and then vanished. Everything was as it should be except I was the only one on there.

I headed down Pentoville rd but couldn't help but notice how unusually quiet it was for 3pm in the afternoon. Curtains flew in the breeze from open windows but no sound of humanity could be heard. No car or bus was on the road and no one stood behind the counters of any of the shops.

I walked towards my apartment, startled by the sound of my own steps. No other human being was around except for me and now, the man in the red raincoat 100 metres behind me. Where had he come from? His rhythm matched mine, slowing down as I did or speeding up when I did but never coming closer.

I rounded the corner to my street and leaned against the wall, hoping the man would continue on straight ahead.

1,2,3..I counted to twenty and then peered around the corner, no one. He had disappeared.

I exhaled, relieved and continued on my way but as I dug for my keys amongst my handbag clutter, I spotted his raincoat from the corner of my eye – his pale, almost white eyes staring at me and I fumbled my keys. I didn't know who or what he was but I knew I wanted to get into my apartment quickly.

I reached down for my keys again and thrust them into the lock, my heart beating faster as he moved towards me. The key just wouldn't fit in the hole. I fought with the keys, almost in tears as the raincoat man increased his speed.

The key went in and I turned it to throw myself into the building and slam the door behind me just in time. I could hear his breathing on the other side of the door.

'Go away, leave me alone!' I cried, stepping back from the door. Nothing.

'Did you hear me? Go away. I'm calling the police.' I drew out my phone from my purse, my hands shaking but found there was no signal. I ran up the two floors to my apartment to see the door ajar.

I opened it tentatively. 'Michael. Michael, are you home?' Please be home. I started looking throughout the house, but couldn't hear anything. The back windows were open and the crisp wind blew into the house. This was strange. He never left the windows open. I started to get frantic now and searched each room in the house. The bedroom, the bathroom, the living room, kitchen- nothing. I leaned over the sink to close the kitchen window facing the courtyard and I saw the raincoat man

below looking up at me. I slammed the window shut and started to panic again. I was here alone, the raincoat man was not leaving, there was no phone signal and no sign of my husband. The streets were deserted and I had no idea what was happening but I was scared.

I re-locked the doors and hid in my bedroom. I had no idea what to do.

'Don't be afraid,' a voice boomed overhead. Yeah right.

'What do you want from me?' I yelled back.

'Nothing. This is your dream.'

I scrunched my face at the random speaker. What?

'Then wake me up! And why can't I see you?'

'I'm in your head.'

Great, now I was going crazy too, hearing voices. I crawled into the corner of the room, closed my eyes and placed my fingers into my ears to block any sound. Well, the voice anyway. 'There is a logical explanation for this,' I told myself, over and over again.

As I lulled myself into tranquillity, I felt a shadow above me. Michael! No, it was the raincoat man.

I pushed myself against the corner, ready to pounce but he didn't move.

'I am your guide.' Clutching the wall I took a second to look at him. His face was mouthless. How was he speaking? I could see two small holes for his nose and empty, pale blue eyes staring impassively at me. The raincoat covered his head and his hands remained in his pockets. Beneath the raincoat I could see the outline of legs covered in black jeans and trainers.

'Guide for what?'

'You are living in you the dream you requested. Often, participants forget where they are so we are sent to guide you back into your fantasy.'

'How can I even hear you?'

'You can't, I'm communicating telepathically.'

'Oh.' Freak. I should play along.

'So are you telling me my fantasy was to live in a deserted Kings Cross without my husband?'
Right.

He said nothing. 'Surely I could have come up with something better than that.'

'You can only use what's in your memory.'

'This Kings Cross is not in my memory.'

'Other people aren't included unless they enter the fantasy with you.'

'So let me get this straight. Of all the memories in the my head, I chose to be in Kings Cross, alone and I left my husband behind to do it?' P-lease.

'You chose to live above ground.'

I was about to tell the 'guide' to get the hell out of my apartment when something flipped in the pit of my stomach. Some nauseating pain I didn't want.

I started getting flashbacks of explosions, people screaming, burning alive. I knew this could not be real.

'What are you putting in my head?' I shouted at the motionless intruder.

'They are your real memories. We can shut them down if you like.'

I clutched my head in agony as more horror visions overwhelmed. Flashbacks of me and Michael - armed and running.

'Stop this now!'

'Are you sure? Once we wipe them, you'll never get them back.'

'Get what back? I don't understand!'

I had a vision of hiding in a cave with children injured and dying.

'Your real memories are crowding your fantasy.'

'No, no! These are nightmares crowding my reality.'

'Think about it Lisa, when was Kings Cross ever quiet? Why are you breathing so easily?'

'What a stupid question? Unlike you, I have a proper mouth and nose. Of course I'm breathing normally.'

'Should we wipe it?' I heard him say to someone above.

'Not yet.' Who was that?

'I want to get out of here.' Silence.

The feeling of heat started creeping along my skin as if I was on fire.

'Stop it! Stop it!' I looked down but nothing was happening.

I was really losing my mind. 'Why are you doing this to me?'

'We're not. These are your memories.'

'What are you talking about? I can't have been burnt alive, I'm here.'

Then it came. I felt myself gasping and saw everyone around me melting. Michael became charcoal before my eyes. 'Michael! Michael!' I screamed, holding out my hand but seeing it burn.

Michael was dead. I should be too.

The next thing I remember, I was in a dark room, bandaged from head to toe, breathing through a machine.

I opened my eyes to see the man in the red coat looking down on me.

'What happened, I ask?'

'Nuclear warfare. The end of the world.'

I snorted. 'If it was the end of the world, why are we here?'

Again, that nauseating feeling that there was more to this than I thought. The raincoat man was obviously not going to harm me so I stood up. We were the same height. He followed me as I went to the kitchen to make myself some camomile tea – something to relax me.

'Tea?' I asked him.

Again, nothing. Suit yourself.

'What came after the bandages?' he asked me. It seemed like he did anyway. How did he know what I saw?

As I placed the water to boil, I noticed the kettle didn't make any sound either. Could I have had an injury and not remembered? Maybe this raincoat person is a hallucination? And yet as I held my mug I was again thrust back into another world- dark and cavernous where many raincoat men hovered over screens showing deserts and desperate people dying.

Were these guys aliens? Was that it? We'd be taken by aliens and I was injured fighting them?

This was crazy. I lived in London all my life. Michael and I had just bought this flat on the quieter side of Kings Cross and I was writing my first book. I looked around me. This was my kitchen with the crooked cupboard door on the top right and the red plastic tablecloth. This was real. I saw Michael's glasses lying on the corner of the bench. He'd forgotten them as usual. I touched them, but somehow, I knew he was dead.

Raincoat man had disappeared. I was totally alone. I ran out of my apartment and onto the streets. 'Is anybody here?' I shouted at the top of lungs. Nothing but the sound of my own echo.

'I can't stay here!' I said to the voice above, or whoever was presumably listening. 'I can't be here on my own.'

I ran back into my apartment and headed for my bedroom mirror. I gasped. All I saw was the raincoat man. I ran to the bathroom and looked at my face, clutching at the taut skin and empty eyes. I leaned back against the wall. Who was I?

'Agent Kelly. Agent Sarah Kelley,' I heard the voice say.

That was me. I was an agent for the underworld. The new world that was created after the holocaust. I headed back to my bedroom and slowly opened my coat. My skin had a whit gloss to it, as if made of plastic. What the hell was I?

'You're in your fantasy world Agent Kelley. It was an experiment to see if we could still living in the real world again, at least in our dreams. We thought it may help morale. You volunteered.'

It all came back to me. The agony of losing Michael. The physical pain of healing. The recruitment to the leadership forces of an underground world that had been developing for over 100 years. The agony of the people stuck underground.

'But what am I going to do here?'

'Live happily ever after.'

'What?' I threw my hands up in exasperation before a dark cloud came over me and then nothingness.

I could hear birds chirping as sun streamed through my bedroom window. It was going to be a good day. I went to the bathroom and looked at my face, giving it a good wash, brushing my teeth. Today would be a good day to plant some more vegetables in the garden below as the shops still haven't seemed to open. Must be a national holiday. Everyone seems to be on vacation at the moment. It's been terribly lonesome. Wouldn't it be great if I was married and living in a bustling city with lots of people and traffic? Maybe this place will be like that again though it's nice to have the peace too. I wonder where everyone went? I'm sure I knew once but I'm not sure because I don't remember. I remember going to school, my parents, my friends and then nothing except this apartment and this emptiness. I have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing, why the phones don't work, or why I still look eighteen.