

Wet Encounter

The clouds had been gathering all day, and now the long restless drought had ended with a psychotic flourish. The rain hammered down in fist-sized drops, bouncing high off the roofs of the late rush-hour traffic and turning the dust-strangled streets into rivers. Pools coalesced on the broken pavements, and outside Central Station the drains were overflowing, belching their stale fumes over the scurrying pedestrians.

Hopping and dodging amongst the puddles, Andy felt the water beginning to soak though the newspaper he was holding over his head. Damp was wicking up his socks; his trousers stuck to his thighs. He dodged for a doorway – a jeweller's, closed for the evening – and nearly slithered into a waterproof-clad woman who was already sheltering there. She stepped back in surprise.

'Sorry,' he said. His breath condensed in the sodden atmosphere.

She didn't reply, but stuck her nose in the air and carried on staring across at the station.

Andy studied her briefly. Medium height, not slim. Wearing a thin packable cagoule, put on in a hurry. Suit, rather too tight; red high-heels; a wheely case, dark-stained and dripping from the rain. She looked a bit stuck-up, he thought.

He checked his phone: nothing from Tracey. He'd another fifteen minutes before they were supposed to meet. Maybe the rain would clear by then. He fingered the small parcel in his pocket. How would Tracey be today, he wondered?

Sighing, he decided to follow the woman's example, and peered out across the road.

Desperate people galloped amongst the traffic; a grimacing cyclist wiped his eyes; cars sent bow-waves over the pavements.

'Well I don't know what the Iron Curtain was, but I think it's landed here,' he remarked.

'You can hardly see the station through this lot.'

She nibbled her lip, stood on tiptoe as if to see better, but still said nothing. Then she tutted, checked her watch, looked at her phone.

Andy ventured to the front of the doorway and braved the dripping gutters to look up at the clouds. 'Reckon we're stuck here for a while,' he said. 'You got a train to catch?'

She spared him a glance. Her eyes were bluer than he'd expected. 'I'm supposed to be meeting my boyfriend,' she said, pointedly.

'Yeah, me too,' said Andy. 'Well not *your* boyfriend, o' course, I mean mine. No, I mean my *girlfriend* . . .'

She stifled a chuckle. Still peering through the rain, she said: 'I don't want to keep him waiting. He's picking me up at Costa's, then we're off to Whitby.'

'Oh?' said Andy. 'I'm meeting Tracey at Costa's too.'

Ignoring him, she pulled a phone out of her pocket. 'This thing's not working, so I can't call him.'

'It'll have got wet,' observed Andy.

'Well, *that* doesn't take much working out,' she snapped.

They resumed their vigil in what would have been a silence if it hadn't been for the rain, still slapping onto the pavements, drumming on the car roofs and toppling from the gutters in great dollops.

She looked at her watch again. 'Might have to make a break for it,' she said. 'Oh, wait – that's his car.'

Across the road, a red Volvo had moored at the station. A square-jawed man in a white shirt and striped tie was simultaneously climbing out and putting up a green umbrella.

Andy looked up with interest. His companion was waving, and calling: 'Darren! Darren! Over here!' Her cagoule squeaked as she waved her arms. She might well have succeeded in attracting his attention if, just at that moment, a number fourteen hadn't grumbled past them, splashing the pavement and sending little waves into the doorway. Then maybe Darren would have spotted her, and maybe things would have been different. But as it was, by the time the bus had passed and its train of spray had subsided, they could just make out the green umbrella, beyond the Volvo. Underneath it, the man with the jaw was kissing a tall blonde woman in a blue raincoat. And they looked like they meant it.

'Darren?' said Andy's companion.

'Tracey?' said Andy.

Across the road, the couple parted. He appeared to be forcing the umbrella on her; she took it; they kissed again. Then, looking furtively around, she disappeared into the station while he hurried to get back in the car. Forcing his way into the traffic, he drove a few yards down the road and turned into the station car park.

'Who the bloody hell was that?' said the woman between her teeth. 'What's he think he's doing? I bet that's one his floozies from work – that's who it is.' She sniffed, then gasped, clenching and unclenching her free fist. 'Right. That's the last time he messes me about. I'm going to have it out with him – now!' She squared her shoulders, and pulled her hood so far over her head that it came right down to her eyes.

'It was Tracey,' said Andy.

She turned, and blinked up at him. 'That was Tracey? The bitch, she's always been after him. Christ, they went to Paris together last month. He told me he didn't even like her. Bloody liar!' She peered up at Andy. 'Wait a minute – how do *you* know that's Tracey?'

Andy was gazing out into the rain, his jaw working. 'I was going to take her to Macready's tonight. A special meal. Booked a table. I was going to give her – I'm sorry, it doesn't matter now. . .' He nodded, then swallowed. 'Hm. Yeah.'

'You're telling me you're going out with Tracey?'

'Yeah.' He sniffed. 'Well, I was. We've been a bit up and down lately – wanted to make it up to her. Looks like I'm too late.' He studied his feet. 'D'you know, she told me she went to Paris with Louise. Never mentioned anyone else.'

She pulled her hood down. 'Maybe Darren went with a different Tracey?'

'Don't think so. We're definitely talking about Goldman's aren't we? In Jury Street?'

'Oh,' she said, and nodded. 'Yes, that's it.'

'There's only one Tracey at Goldman's. And that was her, snogging the bloody boss.'

'And the bloody boss is my Darren,' she spat. 'The two-timing – ooh, I hate him! How could he even *think* of taking me to Whitby when he's – he's – Oh my God! I wonder what he's told her about me!'

Andy was staring at something he'd pulled from his pocket. 'I won't be needing this, then,' he muttered.

'Oh. That's a lovely necklace,' said the woman.

'Tracey,' he moaned. 'Tracey . . .'

She touched his elbow. 'You're better off without her. Look, the rain's easing off now.'

Andy looked up. She was right – now the traffic was louder than the rain, and he could at least see the station properly.

'So, er, what are you going to do?' she said.

'Not sure. How about you?'

'I should go and tell him, now. Tell him it's all over.'

'No second chance, eh?'

She shook her head. 'No. You don't know all the things he swore to me.'

'No. Oh, *bloody* Tracey!' he said, kicking the wall. Then he turned. 'Look,' he said.

'What's your name?'

'Sally. Why?'

'Sally, I'm Andy. And Andy's got an idea. . .'

Five minutes later, a bedraggled couple squelched to the back of the Costa's queue in the station concourse. The woman wore a dripping cagoule, and dragged a sodden wheel-case. The man was tall, and stooped slightly. At the tables, Darren was sitting in one corner behind a potted palm, Tracey in the opposite one: as far apart as possible. The woman in the cagoule caught Darren's eye, and waved. The tall man had to call to Tracey; she looked up and started to rise from her chair. Then she stopped. From the other corner came a clatter as someone dropped a coffee cup. Soon it seemed like the whole cafe was watching as the couple at the back of the queue deliberately turned and started kissing each other. And they looked like they meant it.

Andy was surprised. She was softer than he'd expected, and the way that her plump lips fitted his own was quite alarming. Her cheeks were cool from the rain, and she had a wet lock of hair stuck to her forehead; but there was a warmth rising from her, and her perfume smelt of oranges . . .

After about a minute, they managed to part, and both glanced sheepishly round. Darren and Tracey were standing at their separate tables, still staring.

Andy drew a breath and looked down at Sally. 'You kiss nicely,' he said.

Sally had gone very red. 'So do you,' she whispered.

He cleared his throat. 'Well,' he murmured. 'That's told 'em.'

'Yes. I suppose it has.' She looked up at him. 'Please let's not stand here any more. Can we go?'

'Okay. Shall we wave first?'

They turned, gave a mock-cheerful wave at their now-ex-partners, and walked off.

'What will you do now?' Andy said.

She stopped. 'I don't know. Go home, I suppose. Get out of these wet things.'

Andy found himself trying not to imagine the scene. 'Well,' he said. 'Bye then.'

'Bye,' she said. 'Good luck.'

He watched her trailing her case towards the exit, the wheels skidding over the sodden floor. Over in Costa's, Darren and Tracey stood arguing.

Sally had joined the queue for the taxis when Andy caught up with her. The rain was still falling, and there was a lake by the blocked drain.

'Hey, look,' he said. 'Sally. You, er, fancy coming to Macready's later? I mean – you know – the table's booked – it'd be shame to waste it.'

She looked up at him, twisting the corner of her mouth. Her cheek dimpled.

'I mean, we could have a good bitch about Darren,' he said.

'And Tracey,' she said.

'Yeah. Darren and Tracey.'

Just then, another bus swept by, soaking them both.

'And,' said Andy, blinking, 'let's go in a taxi.'