

Susan
Lewis

Stolen



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The sun was shining, the birds were singing and everything was so right with Rose's world that her smile was turning heads as she walked. Attracting almost as much attention was not-quite-three-year-old Alexandra, skipping along beside her mother, one hand clinging to the pushchair, the other carrying Snugs, her favourite bear. Inside the pushchair the twins, Simon and Becky – one fair like his father, the other dark, like her mother – were fast asleep. Tomorrow they'd be eighteen months old, so Alexandra had been helping her grandmother bake a cake this afternoon, which was now safely stored at the bottom of the pushchair ready for Alex to ice when they got home.

'Becky can't help, can she?' Alex asked for the tenth time.

'No, darling, she's too small.'

'She'll spoil it, won't she?'

'Maybe, but not intentionally. She's just little and can't do things as well as you can yet.'

'Simon doesn't want to make cakes.'

'No he'd rather eat them.'

Alex giggled and carried on skipping, careful never to let go of the pushchair, until they arrived at the station when she hopped up on to the footboard for the ride down the escalator.

'Good girl,' Rose praised, as they successfully disembarked at the bottom. 'Now, stay close while we wait for the train.'

'It's called a Tube really, isn't it?' Alex asked.

'That's right.'

'Why is it called a Tube?'

'Well, I suppose because the underground tunnels look like tubes.'

Alex peered wide-eyed into the darkness. 'Do monsters live in there?' she whispered, taking care not to wake them.

'No, only trains.'

Alex's earnest eyes turned to her mother. 'Daddy fights monsters and chops them up into little bits.'

Imagining his smile Rose felt her heart flood with love, and scooping Alex up she blew a raspberry kiss on her cheek.

Had anyone told her on her twenty-first birthday that by the time she was twenty-five she'd be married to the most wonderful man in the world with three beautiful children, she'd never have believed it. This was because she hadn't yet met the man destined to sweep her off her feet, but when she did, a month after the big celebration, she'd known, virtually at hello, that this was who she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. Amazingly, exhilaratingly, he'd felt the same way, so breezing past all the cautions and disapproval of family and friends, not to mention suspicions that she must be pregnant (which she wasn't), they'd headed up the aisle a mere ten months after their first date.

And not a day had gone by since when she hadn't felt their love deepening, nor had she ever experienced a moment's doubt about becoming a mother. True, they hadn't expected it to happen quite so

soon, nor so prolifically, and it certainly wasn't always easy – having twins, after the trouble-free ride Alex had given them, had come as a brutal awakening to just how challenging parenthood could be. However, they were all happy and healthy – and coping, even if there were times when she felt like screaming or taking herself off somewhere quiet for a very long lie-down.

'OK, darling, the train's coming, so stand back.'

Obediently Alex stepped in behind her mother and hid her face as the loud, nasty monster rattled into the station.

'Right, up we go,' Rose said as the doors opened.

Alex hopped up and followed her in giant steps to a bench seat.

The only other passenger was a man, half-hidden behind a paper, but then Rose had deliberately chosen to travel home from her mother's in the middle of the afternoon to avoid the rush-hour crush. Trying to manage three children amongst a bruising, impatient horde of commuters wouldn't have been wise, in fact it could be downright reckless.

Moments after the doors closed one of the twins started to wake up. Watching her eyes blink open and her tiny mouth widen in a yawn, Rose waited expectantly, and sure enough, the instant Becky spotted her, her precious little face broke into the sunniest of smiles.

'Hello you,' Rose murmured.

Becky burped and Alex gave a shriek of laughter.

'Say pardon me,' Alex told her.

Becky looked at her sister and frowned.

'Can I run down to the door at the end?' Alex demanded, already starting to go.

'No, sweetheart,' Rose told her.

'I want to.'

'I said no.'

'But I want to.'

'Mummy, up, up.' Becky was already half out of the pushchair, while Simon, in his usual fashion, simply carried on sleeping.

'You'll have to go back in when it's time to get off the train,' Rose warned as she lifted Becky on to her lap. Becky burped again and started wriggling in an effort to get down.

'Look at me, Mummy,' Alex called.

Gasping to see her at the other end of the carriage, Rose scowled at her meaningfully. 'I told you it wasn't allowed.'

'I want to run,' Alex pouted.

Rose glanced at the man seated opposite. 'You're being a nuisance,' she told Alex.

'Oh, please don't mind me,' the man said, and Rose noticed that his eyes seemed gentle, yet somehow sad, as he watched Alex darting past.

'Run, run,' Becky cried.

'You're too small,' Rose laughed, pulling her back as she tried to launch herself off.

'Let Becky run too,' Alex implored. 'I'll hold her hand.'

Rose looked at the other passenger again, and when he smiled she set Becky down on her wobbly legs and felt her heart fill with pride as Becky toddled off with Alex, so thrilled that she was gurgling with glee.

Though Rose knew she loved them all equally, she'd have to admit, if pushed, that she'd always felt there was something special about Alex, probably because she was their firstborn, or perhaps because she was so engaging. People always wanted to stop

and talk to her, and being the sociable little chatterbox she was she usually had plenty to say. Her daddy was completely smitten, to the point that he'd sit and watch her sleeping at night, listening to her breathing and marvelling at what a wonderful little miracle she was. He did the same with the twins, but Rose was aware of a special bond developing between him and Alex that she loved every bit as much as she loved them.

'Look at us, Mummy!' Alex shouted as she and Becky charged back through the carriage.

'Ssh,' Rose cautioned, looking at the man again.

Though he was smiling as he watched them, Rose was struck again by how melancholy he seemed, and being as soft-hearted as she was, she wanted to ask if he was all right. Of course she couldn't, and nor would she, but when he glanced her way she treated him to one of her warmest smiles. He seemed embarrassed, but pleased, and chuckled aloud as Alex and Becky stormed past again.

Since no one else got on the train as they passed through the next few stations she allowed the girls to carry on wearing themselves out, until eventually they were approaching Southfields and she called out for them to come back. Alex looked mutinous, but then Becky began squealing as she raced towards her mother, and not wanting to be last Alex sprinted after her. It was as Becky reached the pushchair that Alex caught up and pushed her. Becky fell, hitting her mouth on the wheel, and let out a terrible scream.

'Alex, you naughty girl,' Rose snapped angrily as she scooped Becky up. Blood was pouring from Becky's lip, and having found her voice she was belting it out. Then Simon was awake and crying too, while Alex gazed on in fear.

'You're in big trouble,' Rose told her over the din, 'now hold on to my coat while we get off.'

The train came to a stop as they reached the doors, and still trying to shush Becky, Rose bumped the pushchair on to the platform.

'I hurt, I hurt,' Becky sobbed.

'It's all right,' Rose soothed, afraid she might have lost a tooth. 'We'll make it better.'

'No, no,' Becky squealed, tightening her legs round Rose's waist as Rose tried to put her in the pushchair.

Becoming frazzled, Rose turned round to make sure Alex was behind her, and her heart skipped a beat when she realised she wasn't.

'Alex!' she shouted in panic. Then she saw her, still on the train, rooted to the spot.

'Alex, get off! *Get off!*' Rose yelled as the doors started to close.

Alex's eyes were huge as she stared at her mother.

'No, no, no,' Rose cried, thrusting Becky on top of Simon and dashing back to the train. 'STOP!' she screamed, as the doors slammed shut. 'Please, stop the train!'

There was a look of terror in Alex's eyes now.

'HELP!' Rose yelled as the train started to move. 'Help!' She was banging the doors, trying to wrench them apart. 'My baby, my baby.'

The man was out of his seat and standing beside Alex with a hand on her shoulder. 'Next station,' he mouthed through the window.

Rose's terror was blinding. She was shaking so hard she barely knew what she was doing. *Next station*, was what he'd said. Next station. He'd keep Alex safe and wait with her until Rose and the twins arrived on the next train.