

## The Man

Anton knows Kara hates coffee. She can picture his mouth curling into a thin smile as he typed out her instructions. *Report to the Engine Room Coffee Shack, 6.30am, Monday.*

It's an hour into her shift and already the smell of steamed milk, bitter espresso is making her stomach roll.

"Two flat whites and make it quick."

Kara flashes a wide, fake smile at the woman on the other side of the counter. "Sit in or take away?"

She scowls. "Do I look like someone who's got time to sit drinking coffee outside the station in rush hour?"

Kara turns to the giant silver machine behind her, starts grinding and tamping. It's a perfect location, she thinks, especially with Christmas just two weeks away. As well as commuters, there are groups of shoppers making an early start. She can sense their excitement as friends meet up, their empty shopping bags ready to be filled.

After pouring milk into a metal jug, Kara presses a button and the frother whines into action. She places her hand on the base of the jug, as she'd been taught on the Barista training course the previous day.

Just a morning to learn how to make coffee, but it had taken her whole childhood to discover how to make perfect tea. What she wouldn't give to be back in her grandmother's little cabin, the kettle simmering on the fire while Kara watched wrinkled hands measure out black leaves.

Flat whites made, lids pressed on, card tapped on machine, payment taken. Kara leans against the counter and sighs. How long until - and then, as if the God she doesn't believe in has heard her, The Man appears. Tall with glasses, long coat, white shirt and battered briefcase. Anton said he was a creature of habit and he's following his routine to the letter, checking his watch. She can tell from the quizzical look on his face he's thinking about it. Should he go in? But Anton says it's a little game The Man plays every morning, this uncertainty over what has become his daily indulgence.

Kara bites her lip. Please let him push open the door. She knows he's got 20 minutes before boarding the third carriage of the south-bound train, but she needs The Man to come up to the counter so that she can make him his usual —

"Double shot Americano, drop of cold water," he says. And it's happening. The Man is ordering his regular drink, holding out his old-style loyalty card to be stamped, taking the exact money from his pocket and placing it on the counter. She puts the money in the till — first cash transaction all morning — and stamps the card while coffee drips into the cup.

"Lovely morning," he says.

"Yes, it is." Kara smiles. A real one this time. He seems like a nice guy.

"Where's Julie today?"

Kara shrugs her shoulders. "Sorry, can't help you there." She thinks of the regular barista that she's never met, probably still throwing up after the dodgy meal at her favourite Italian restaurant last night. All part of Anton's plan.

"I just got a call from the agency this morning asking me to come in," Kara says. "Supposed to be my day off." She turns to add hot water to the no-plastic compostable cup, left hand swiftly dipping into her pocket then up to release the tablet before her right hand clicks the lid into place. Smooth and natural, just as she was taught.

"Enjoy." She places the drink on the counter in front of him.

"Well," The Man squints at the badge on Kara's shirt. "Thank you, Becky, for giving up your day off to make my morning coffee. I appreciate it." He checks his watch, just as Kara knew he would. "Another 15 minutes before I get my train."

He picks up his briefcase, then frowns when he sees the Reserved sign on the table at the back where he usually sits. A safeguard, Anton said, just in case the place got packed out.

Kara runs to remove the sign. "Left over from a business meeting at 7.30. So early! All done, so no problem to sit here."

"Becky, you are an angel," The Man says, putting his drink on the table.

Kara walks back to serve another customer. Anton said one tablet would be enough, so as long as the man has two, maybe three sips....

She's just using the card machine when the man's head slumps to one side. No-one else has noticed. Kara waits until the woman she's serving turns to leave, then picks up a tray, starts clearing a table next to where The Man is sitting. She stops, studies him, tilts her head.

“Sir?” She bends close. “Are you ok?” She shakes his shoulder, and he falls over, sprawling along the bench seat. She checks his breathing. Slow and shallow.

Kara calls out to the room. “Can someone help me here?”

A man runs over. “I’m a vet, not a doctor, but maybe I can help?”

She’d thought it would be him, quietly puzzling over the crossword at the window table for the last half an hour. Nice touch, Anton, she thinks, making him a vet. Not too predictable.

“Thank you.” Kara moves back, watches as the vet checks The Man’s eyes, calls out: “Will someone phone for an ambulance?”

A woman pulls a mobile from her bag. “I’m on it,” she tells him.

Kara picks up The Man’s drink and his briefcase, takes them to the little kitchen where, as instructed, she’d left the back door unlocked. A woman she’s never seen before is stacking dishes in the washer. She stops as soon as Kara enters, wipes her gloved hands dry, then takes the briefcase, opens it.

“So old school,” the woman says, removing a bundle of files and starting to photograph them.

“Makes it nice and easy for us.”

Kara pours the coffee down the drain, then puts the cup with its lid into a plastic bag.

“I’m done,” the woman tells Kara, handing back the briefcase before adding her gloves to the bag and tying the handles tight. It swings by her side as she heads out into the alley.

Kara glances at the clock. The Man should be coming round soon. Just enough time for her to return the briefcase, which if anyone asks, she took with her for safekeeping. She thinks about the documents inside, wonders what it must be like to have a mind that can create solutions, allow crops to adapt to changing weather conditions, yield a good harvest even in a climate crisis. She still can’t believe governments keep this knowledge to themselves, won’t share it.

That, Anton said, was why The Man contacted them after last month’s COP26 when he’d hoped to present his findings, wanting to help save people and planet, but his government hadn’t even allowed him to be one of the registered participants.

“I love my country,” the man had told Anton when they met, “but I love humankind more.”

“I think he’s going to be fine,” the vet tells Kara as she crouches beside The Man who is sitting up now, blinking hard. “Probably low blood sugar. You should get him something sweet.”

“Of course,” Kara smiles at The Man as she slips the briefcase under the table beside him.

“I’ve no idea what’s happened to the ambulance,” the woman with the phone says, although both Kara and the man who is posing as a vet know she never made the call, was talking to empty air, had turned the sign on the café door to CLOSED as she held the one-way conversation.

Kara twists the sign to OPEN on her way back to the counter. Soon The Man will be on the train to the lab, ready to continue his work, never knowing what happened. Anton says it’s best like that.

Of course, they could have staged a mugging to get the information, but then the security forces would have known the formula was stolen and pointed the finger at other countries as they always do. Interrogation, torture, that was the usual route when secrets were revealed.

Kara thinks of the thousands of people who won’t go hungry once the photographed documents reach the hands of scientists back home. Eventually, once tested, the formula will be leaked to others, shared around the world

She picks up a clean cup. Tea. The remedy to everything, her grandmother used to tell her.

Yes, Kara will make The Man a tea, with plenty of sugar, to take with him. There is no hand-painted jar of loose black tea, no kettle simmering on a little stove, no grandmother to brew it to perfection. Just Kara and a tea bag, but she will do her best.