

# THE HIDDEN HAND

# THE HIDDEN HAND

STELLA RIMINGTON

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G  
L O N D O N • O X F O R D • N E W Y O R K • N E W D E L H I • S Y D N E Y



BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc  
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK  
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING and the Diana logo are  
trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2025

Copyright © Stella Rimington, 2025

Stella Rimington is identified as the author of this work in accordance with  
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This advance reading copy is printed from uncorrected proof pages and  
is not for resale. This does not represent the final text and should not be  
quoted without reference to the final printed book.

This is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author's  
imagination and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted  
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying,  
recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior  
permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5266-5273-7; TPB: 978-1-5266-5272-0;  
EBOOK: 978-1-5266-5274-4; EPDF: 978-1-5266-5276-8

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY



To find out more about our authors and books visit [www.bloomsbury.com](http://www.bloomsbury.com)  
and sign up for our newsletters





I

AT THREE IN THE afternoon the Boston Public Garden was not crowded, and the bench nearest the Charles Street entrance was unoccupied. It was a good time to meet, Li Min thought as she sat down, holding a copy of the *Boston Globe*. It was after the lunch hour, when the benches would have been filled with office workers eating their sandwiches, yet too early for the parents and children coming to feed the ducks straight after school.

Lost in her thoughts, she only noticed the man when he was seated beside her on the bench. He liked to arrive stealthily, as if from nowhere, but she knew he would have made the journey north from the Embassy in Washington D.C. to see her – and possibly others like her? Li Min wondered.

As always, he was dressed very formally, in black suit, white shirt and shiny city shoes. His face was expressionless as he turned to acknowledge her with a curt nod. She knew nothing about this man save that he represented her government and that he must be obeyed. Even his full name was a mystery to her; she knew him by one syllable only: *Deng*.

‘I have brought my report,’ she said to pre-empt his habit of asking for it as an opener. She picked up the newspaper beside her on the bench, feeling the folder inside as she did so. But for once Deng did not reach eagerly for the paper. He took it with a curt nod, saying, ‘Thank you. I will examine it

I



later. But now I have something else to discuss with you. A change in your situation.'

Li Min tried to hide her shock. She was a doctoral student in computer science at Harvard, specialising in Artificial Intelligence, and she could not think of a better place than this to do her work. After university in Beijing, she had spent two years doing a Master's at Cal Tech, where she had improved her English and her technical know-how. Here at Harvard she had begun to specialise, discovering an aptitude for creating video and audio simulations of individuals which were entirely AI-created but seemed so real that they would fool all but the most expert. They were known as deepfakes.

It was at Harvard that these meetings had begun. With the funding for her studies supplied by her government, Li Min had always known there would be a price to be paid. Until now her contact with officialdom had consisted of regular meetings with Deng at which he asked for reports on her work. But today seemed different.

'You have been granted a great honour. Oxford University has recently established, with the approval and cooperation of our government, an Institute for the Study of International and Cultural Affairs.' He said this mouthful as though he had learned the title by heart. He probably had, thought Li Min cynically.

Deng went on: 'The Institute is part of one of the ancient colleges, St Felix's. It has its own Director and trustees, but ultimately it answers to the Governing Body of the college. These teachers, known as Fellows, hire the Director – and can fire him.'

He spoke with an authority derived from twenty minutes spent reading St Felix's website and its entry in Wikipedia.



But Li Min was not to know that. He continued: ‘You will find in the Institute a large group of postgraduate students and some senior visitors. The students work in many different fields and come from all over the world, though naturally since much of the funding is Chinese, so are many of the visiting students. The intention is for these groups to mingle and get to know each other.’

‘How interesting,’ Li Min said, without meaning it.

‘I am glad you think so because you have been selected to join the Institute. You will continue your work on Artificial Intelligence – I am told by my superiors in Beijing that it is most promising – but you will do it as a student at Oxford, not Harvard, and your new address will be St Felix’s College. My understanding is that the two universities are equally prestigious.’

Li Min resisted the desire to argue; on the one occasion she had tried, and that had been over something minor (her attendance at a particular lecture which Deng had requested), he had slapped her down brutally, even threatening to discontinue the Chinese government’s underwriting of her course. It seemed wiser now to find out more about what she was being asked to do. *Asked?* Told more like it. So she said mildly, ‘When am I meant to start at Oxford?’ Surely they would have to give her another semester at Harvard to complete her dissertation.

‘The new term begins in three weeks. After their Easter holiday.’

‘What?’ She could not help herself.

Deng ignored her protest. ‘Mrs Lu, my assistant, will help you pack up your belongings. Do not worry. If anything gets left behind, we will send it on to you.’



‘But three weeks is not enough time for me to do everything I need – to see my advisers and explain to the university that I am leaving’

‘Who said anything about three weeks? Your flight to London leaves Sunday evening, and you will be on it.’



‘MY GOODNESS,’ SAID LOUISE Donovan, ‘I don’t know what you have been doing since I last saw you, and I’m sure you are not going to tell me. But whatever it is, it suits you.’

‘I might say the same about you,’ replied Manon Tyler, smiling. ‘You look years younger.’

They had first met when Manon had visited England on a university exchange course and had been hosted by Louise. That had been seven years ago, but since then they had kept in touch, and seen each other occasionally. Manon had gone on to do graduate work in politics, but soon found the academic life was not for her – too devoid of action, too dry and abstract. She had applied to and been accepted by the CIA, and had worked at its Headquarters in Langley, Virginia for three years before being sent to London. They’d had plenty of time to further their friendship then since Louise was already living there, working for a political party. She had become involved with a man who had turned out to be a Russian spy. Following the trauma of that case, Louise had come to Harvard to study for a degree at the Kennedy Institute.

Having accidentally been caught up in the investigation, Manon had discovered she had a taste for fieldwork and action; her superiors had seen this, too, and also noted her ability to keep a cool head in difficult situations. Manon had



accordingly been sent on the CIA training course for field officers. She now had a period of leave before her first posting and had come to Boston to visit Louise before going on to spend a few days at her parents' holiday cottage in New Hampshire. They were sitting in the living room of Louise's flat, a pleasant two-bedroom apartment on a leafy street about a mile from Harvard Square.

They chatted on, catching up with each other's news. Louise was enjoying her course, though it was both intensive and hard work, and she said she had little time for social life. 'What about you?' she asked Manon. 'Is there a man in your life?'

'No. There was a super-cute guy in my training program but it didn't happen. He screwed up an exercise and got chucked out. I lost touch with him. And you?'

'No luck. Everyone around here's so young they see me more as a mother hen than as a girlfriend. There is someone I wanted to mention to you, though. It's a young girl called Li Min. She's a Chinese graduate student. I met her at a party last week – and this is where the mother hen bit comes in. I don't know exactly what she does, but I know it's to do with AI and these deepfakes everyone is talking about. I tried to read about them but had to give up; it all got way too technical for me. But anyway, Li Min talked cheerfully about her life here and how much she loved Harvard, and then suddenly she became very upset, almost in tears.'

'Why?'

'That's what I wondered. When she'd calmed down a bit, she told me that she's leaving Harvard even though she's only halfway through her degree. Transferring to Oxford, she said.'



‘Why is she doing that? I know Oxford is wonderful but so is Harvard.’

‘She knows that, but it’s not her choice. Her government is making her move. They pay her fees, so she has to do what she’s told. It’s a pity because somebody told me that she is doing very well here. They say she’s super-bright.’

Manon said, ‘Does she know why they want her to move?’

‘I tried asking, but she was quite cagey about it. I think they’re moving her on because of her research; from what she did say, Oxford is in the vanguard of her particular field. I also had the distinct impression that she’s being sent to find out about the research already being done there. She called it a “fact-finding expedition” – but I think she was being sarcastic.’

‘I bet she was.’ Manon thought it sounded more like a polite way of saying ‘to steal secrets for Beijing’.

Louise laughed. ‘That’s your line rather than mine, so I thought maybe you’d be interested in meeting her. She calmed down with me eventually, but a mutual friend says she’s still terribly troubled. Would you mind if I invited her round, perhaps for breakfast tomorrow?’

‘OK,’ said Manon slowly, wondering what Louise might have said to the girl about her house guest’s job. No, she decided, Louise had more sense than to make that kind of mistake.

‘Shall I ask her for ten-thirty?’

‘Yes,’ said Manon. ‘That’s fine.’ She found she was looking forward to finding out more about this whole business.

Louise had gone out and bought croissants and the Sunday papers, and Manon had read more than her fill of the



gargantuan Sunday *New York Times* when the buzzer rang in the apartment.

‘That’ll be Li Min,’ Louise said. ‘I’ll sit with you for a minute and then go to my bedroom so you can talk in private.’

But when she came back a moment later, she was still alone. She held an envelope in her hand and looked puzzled.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Manon.

‘That was a friend of Li Min’s. She said Li Min had asked her to drop off a note for me.’ She opened the envelope.

‘Maybe she’s ill.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Louise as she scanned the note, and then read aloud: “*Dear Louise, It was a great pleasure to talk to you. I am sorry not to be able to join you and your friend this morning, but circumstances make that impossible for me. My apologies. With very good wishes, Li Min*”.

‘I guess she got cold feet,’ said Manon. ‘You know, was worried the Chinese authorities would find out she was complaining.’

‘I see she’s included her address in Oxford. It’s St Felix’s College. It’s almost as if she’s asking us to get in touch, but I won’t be going to England anytime soon.’

‘I don’t suppose I will either,’ added Manon, but more wistfully.

## A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Dame Stella Rimington joined the Security Service (MI5) in 1968. During her career she worked in all the main fields of the Service: counter-subversion, counter-espionage and counter-terrorism. She was appointed Director General in 1992, the first woman to hold the post. Now the author of the bestselling Liz Carlyle series of espionage thrillers as well as two books in the Manon Tyler series, she lives in London and Norfolk.

## A NOTE ON THE TYPE

The text of this book is set in Adobe Caslon, named after the English punch-cutter and type-founder William Caslon I (1692–1766). Caslon’s rather old-fashioned types were modelled on seventeenth-century Dutch designs, but found wide acceptance throughout the English-speaking world for much of the eighteenth century until replaced by newer types towards the end of the century. Used in 1776 to print the Declaration of Independence, they were revived in the nineteenth century and have been popular ever since, particularly amongst fine printers. There are several digital versions, of which Carol Twombly’s Adobe Caslon is one.

