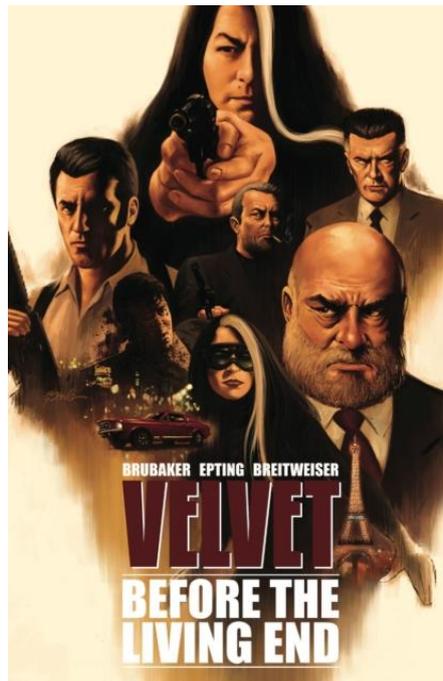


Velvet by Ed Brubaker & Steve Epting with Elizabeth Breitwesier

[Crime]

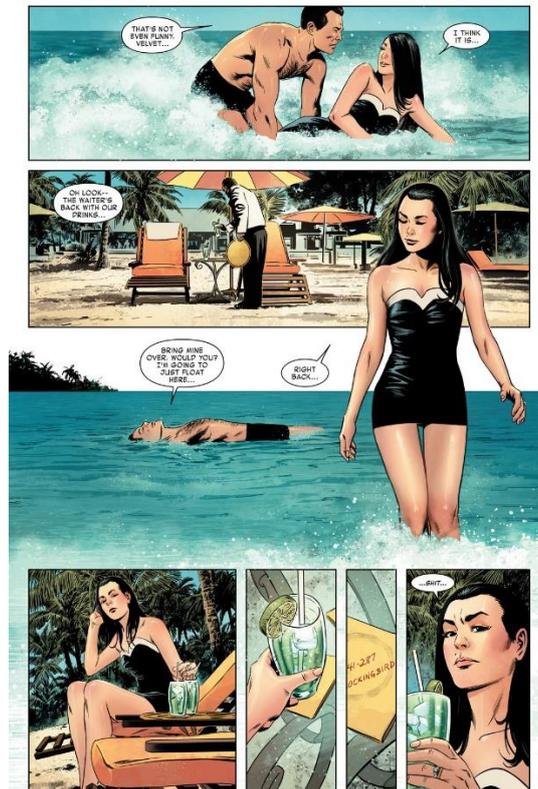


"I didn't believe that Frank Lancaster had killed X-14.
"So I looked into it... and my entire life fell apart."

Exceptionally slick international espionage thriller set in the '50s-'70s this is lush with 20th Century fashion from the sleekest sports cars and stealth suits to a masque full of masks in Monaco. By "masks" I mean spies, few better disguised than Velveteen Templeton of ARC-7, an Intelligence Agency so covert that others don't believe it exists. Its agents are so effective that the chances of them being taken down in the field are minimal. On the very third page one is taken down in the field.



Immediately all fingers point to an inside job, but the Director's secretary Templeton suspects it's a set-up. And it *is* a set-up, but what Templeton doesn't realise is that she's being set up to believe it's a set-up and so get set up herself. What most of ARC-7's *agents* don't know is that Velvet isn't in ARC's admin for her shorthand skills. For decades she was one of their most capable deep-cover operatives, and that may prove the undoing of whoever has framed her for murder, treachery and treason.



On the run from her own agency, Templeton has to retrace assassinated Agent X-14's steps and his contacts across Eastern Europe, criss-crossing the globe while cross-referencing what she discovers with her own painful history in order to work out why he was murdered from within. What had he stumbled upon that made him a threat? Was it the same thing her husband uncovered? Because he too was set up and Templeton took the fall for it so very far that she almost didn't recover.

Brubaker's internal monologues in CRIMINAL, FATALE, KILL OR BE KILLED etc have always been compelling, individualistic and often fucked up affairs, but here you're as much in the dark as Velvet so you're even more emotionally invested. During the middle chapters you'll have your head whipped round not once but thrice in swift succession, because who is playing whom at any given moment is far from obvious. Finally, with only one lead left alive, Templeton has no choice but to take the fight back to America, even though she knows that the second she sets foot on its shores alarm bells will start ringing. She's counting on it. "Every move I make from now on has to be two moves." Sometimes you won't see the second move coming; often you won't have seen the first move being made.

I love the wit of Velvet's black bathing costume back in 1950s' Bermuda, its white stripe across her chest anticipating the streak of maturity than will later appear in her sable hair; and that she's a middle-aged agent whose decades of experience inform both her psychological makeup *and* her entire investigation. An American TV company was desperate to sign the series if only Brubaker would agree to Templeton being in her mid-20s, thereby missing the point and *literally* losing the plot.

Nor is it just her knowledge, but Velvet's subversive skills, altering her body language so subtly when undercover in Paris as a temp, her hair dyed grey to fade into the background. She holds a file modestly and meekly to her chest. When she brings a tray of tea to the investment manager's desk – as always, thanks to artist Steve Epting – she's slightly hunched in high heels.



Epting has steeped this series in its period time and place: the hotel furnishings, bar tops, aircraft interiors, office spaces, shop windows, fly-posters, polished, chrome-plated cars and a particularly posh, trans-European train dining car. As to the fashion and fabrics, I almost wept when Templeton had to ditch that black and white pashmina cardigan.

Breitweiser's colour art electrifies the splintering glass shards in the first chapter's climax. Even more impressive is what she brings to bear on the Regency, white-stone classical facades and balustrades of Britain when the heavens have opened on a comparatively calm London street outside a private gentleman's club. The street lights are reflected on the rain-rippled pavement, thin streams of water pour with just the right weight from an umbrella... as a cigarette is lit and then *puff*...

