

*Where you have gone,
I do not know,
Just that my soul is empty and hollow,
And so I go, and on I go.*

"So Badly My Eyes Hurt, So Badly"
(traditional folk song,
translated from the Romanian by Elisa Hategan)

CHAPTER 1

It was a very casual nod of the head and hand gesture, but it was enough to throw Elena into disarray. Her first thought was of Ana, so she turned to her fourteen-year-old daughter, and asked softly, "Can you just wait here? I won't be long."

Ana began to protest but Elena flashed her one of those looks that brooked no contradiction, so the girl shuffled off in the direction of the chromium benches by the bathrooms. The airport was buzzing with more travellers than Elena had ever seen in one place, even in the terminal back in Cluj-Napoca. Somehow, she had been singled out by the short, squat, male Indian customs officer. That didn't bode well. Elena strolled over, trying to affect an air of bored indifference. Channelling Ana's primary mode, in fact.

"Spot check, Miss," the customs officer said. "We just need to take you aside, if that's okay?"

"I must agree?" Ana said, trying to make the question sound like one of casual curiosity, rather than burning necessity.

"No, but we do have the right to refuse you entry, if you won't comply."

So that's a yes then, Elena thought. Did they look too closely at our passports?

"Okay," Elena assented. *Is he going to search me?*

"If you would just follow me to our interview room, you'll just have a brief interview with two police officers. That's all. Won't take a minute."

The officer smiled thinly. He gives this spiel all the time, she thought. It could all be a bluff. But what choice do I have? Could Interpol have acted this quickly already?

It seemed unlikely. Elena turned to wave towards Ana, who was engrossed in her phone, as ever.

"Ana!" Elena called. "I'll be back in a minute. Routine check." She used Romanian to avoid anyone overhearing but at least two of her compatriots turned in response to her Latinate inflection.

Following the customs officer to the small, prefabricated office beside the customs booths, Elena felt her heart pounding furiously behind her ribs and tried to still it. They do spot checks, she thought, and they're not allowed to single people out by race or point of origin. At least that's what Frances had told her.

The office door blocked most, but not all, of the terminal's hubbub as two female officers rose to greet Elena. One was in her forties, black and well-built. The other was slender, white, pinched and barely five feet tall. Don't they have a height requirement for coppers? Elena wondered.

"I'm Sargent Mel Taylor, this is PC Joanne Renfrew. This is simply a routine stop and search procedure we do with randomly assigned arrivals. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Elena wasn't much reassured. It was exactly what she'd expect them to say if they were planning to search and arrest her. They have my passports, she thought. What else do they need?

"Your name is?" said PC Renfrew, consulting the passports the customs officer had handed her before he left, and a form on a wooden clipboard.

"Elena. Balanescu," she said, heart pounding again as she reinforced the lie.

"Take a seat, Mrs Balanescu."

How did they know she was married?

"Sorry, Mizz Balanescu. I misread," corrected PC Renfrew. Her Sargent wasn't saying much, perhaps overseeing the junior officer, perhaps observing Elena. Maybe both.

Elena sat on a hard plastic chair, which wobbled irritatingly. She put her hands together on the table, as if cradling a baby bird, so as not to fidget.

"You've come from Romania, is that right?" Renfrew continued.

Elena nodded, "from Cluj."

"And what's the purpose of your visit?"

"Visiting friend."

"Name?"

"Frances. Frances da Costa."

“And where are you staying? You and... Ana?”

Is she asking about Ana because she doesn't know she's my daughter? Elena wondered. That could be a good sign. No infodump from Interpol.

“Yes. My daughter. We stay at Frances, Soho.”

Elena hoped they wouldn't insist on the full address. It was on a piece of paper in the front pocket of her suitcase, currently with Ana.

“Ok. Would you mind standing up and taking off your outer garments.”

Even though Elena knew she had nothing to fear, she felt a rush of panic envelop her. Were they going to strip search her?

“Just the jacket and jumper will do,” Renfrew said. These cops seemed to have a sixth sense for sources of anxiety. Then again, they'd probably done this a thousand times before.

She did as she was told, silently consenting to yet another woman's hands brushing against her breasts and the inside of her thighs. To be fair to PC Renfrew, the police officer patted her down with as little evident enthusiasm as possible. Meanwhile, Sargent Taylor took notes and examined the passports again. Shit, thought Elena. Are they convincing enough?

What would happen if this went badly? Would Ana be escorted to some holding place for family? Would she be sent on the first plane home? Would Elena be arrested here, or deported under guard? She should have gone through all this with Frances.

“That's fine. You can get dressed,” said PC Renfrew and Elena realised that the pat down really was just a formality. Sargent Taylor shut her passports and passed them back across the table. In reaching for them, Elena spotted something unfortunate.

There was a dark arch of red under the unpainted forefinger nail of her right hand. Dried blood. Why hadn't she painted her nails on the plane? She'd meant to. She would at least have spotted the blood she'd missed during the clean-up.

The memory sent a spurt of bile into the back of Elena's throat. She gulped it down, though it burned. Tears began to prickle the corner of her eyes as she snatched back the passport. Was she about to break? Elena felt it was even possible she might blurt out her guilt to these two perfectly decent officers.

“Don't worry Ms Balan, we do this all day. Wish we didn't have to but... you know?”

Renfrew was trying to put her at ease. Neither officer had spotted a thing. She was in the clear.

“I can go?” she said, with an involuntary gulp. “My daughter...”

“Of course,” Taylor nodded. “As we said, routine.”

As she clicked shut the office door behind her and re-entered the buzzing arrivals lounge, Elena mulled over that word. Routine. Ana jumped to her feet and started pushing the suitcases over towards her. Eager to explore the big city.

Routine.

There would be nothing at all routine about this trip.

CHAPTER 2

So many people. The airport buzzed like a hive on a summer's afternoon. Music, voices in many languages, announcements she could only half understand. A rank of suited men stood, attentive, bored, or indifferent, holding paper signs. Mr Wellington. Colin McPherson. Siobahn. A young woman pulling an enormous purple suitcase rushed up to the taxi driver holding the last sign, pointed to it, shook her head, and laughed.

Half a pace behind her mother, yellow Minions-themed backpack hanging off her shoulder, Ana yawned dramatically.

"She's not here, is she? Of course."

"She'll be here. Be patient."

Elena felt a sinking dread in the pit of her stomach. They had been waiting for twenty-five minutes, their plane having been delayed by ten, plus the ten-minute customs check. Frances was already forty minutes late. It wasn't like her. Amongst the many things she liked about Frances was her punctuality. When they met at a bar or restaurant, Frances would be there fifteen minutes early to find a seat. Elena had never had a friend like that. A friend with occasional, inconclusive benefits.

"Mum, she's not coming", whined Ana.

Elena scowled at her daughter but had to admit that she felt the same way. Something was very wrong. She dialled Frances's number again, walking away from the throng of people at arrivals while the ringtones sounded, each offering less hope than the last. Midway through the eighth ring, a click, a buzz and then a continuous tone.

Number unobtainable.

Elena checked her daughter's whereabouts (Ana had found a branch of Accessorise and was entranced) and returned to the arrivals area. Another plane had spilled its variously happy, exhausted, or hopeful contents out through the terminal. A group of brightly clad African women embraced relatives with unselfconscious affection. Elena watched a young lesbian couple, one girl blue-haired and nose-pierced, the other boyish and gangly, kiss with shy enthusiasm. The feeling in her stomach roiled like she was being stirred with an invisible spoon.

Frances wasn't coming. This had all been a trick. She'd been duped. Elena tried not to think of all the money she'd wasted.

A full hour crawled by. Elena washed the last remnants of her crime from under her fingernails in the recently scrubbed restroom. Then, to mollify Ana, she squandered five pounds in the costume jewellery shop. A spiral, rainbow-patterned bangle that reminded Elena of a toy she'd had as a child. On Ana's slim wrist, the bangle looked garish and impractical. Nevertheless, her daughter loved it and her mood brightened as they shared an iced coffee at the café overlooking arrivals.

When Frances was an hour late, Elena would give up.

"Never trusted her," offered Ana, slurping on ice cubes through a straw. "She was lowkey shifty".

Elena chose not to remind Ana of the many times she'd played raucous board games with Frances or when the older woman had taught her daughter to paddleboard at Vama Veche. Ana had laughed like Elena had seldom seen before. Teenagers had selective memories.

"Five more minutes and then we go," Elena said.

Ana nodded, picking up an ice-cube by sucking hard on the straw then letting it tinkle back into the glass.

Fifteen minutes later, Elena and Ana squeezed onto a full Piccadilly line train at Terminal 4 and cast their eyes round a carriage full of bleary-eyed travellers. Elena noted all the different the various luggage tags. KRK, CDG, YYZ, ABB, CCU. She tried to guess the airports but, aside from JFK and ZAG, found herself stumped.

Ana sat on their suitcase and listened to music on the iPhone Frances had given her, second-hand, only a model 11, but generous, nonetheless. How could a woman capable of such kindness treat them both with such contempt?

Elena began to imagine the worst. Frances's car concertinaed against a motorway bridge. Frances curled foetal in an alleyway, beaten by thugs. A fallen stepladder and scattered tools.

Elena almost hoped it was true. Not that Frances would be injured or traumatised but that their off-on relationship would have a chance to weather this storm. They'd laugh at her catastrophising later, as Elena tended to Frances's surprisingly minor injuries – a fractured wrist, a purple bruise on her temple. Perhaps that was it. She'd been "unavoidably detained" (as she'd put it).

Elena wouldn't mention this weird hope to her daughter just yet. Ana didn't need an excuse to laugh at her mother's naiveté. They'd get to D'Arblay Street, find the hidden key (there had to be one), get into the flat and wait for news. Elena checked her phone. One text message – an alert from a package holiday company. She'd forgotten to opt out.

The tube train rattled out of a tunnel into fragile sunlight and ricocheted through the suburbs of Hounslow and Ealing.

"Mum, listen to this".

Anna, holding out her earbuds. Elena forced them into her own ears, listening to the sweet, fey innocent pop-song that swirled out. A catchy chorus, abominable lyrics, a swarm of electronica. The sound of youthful energy and hope. She smiled at her daughter, pulling a stray strand of hair from where it was stuck to Ana's forehead. Why was this train so swelteringly hot? Ana showed her the singer's album cover on her phone. An impossibly young man with a quiff struck a pose he'd probably have no idea was retro.

"He lives here. Maybe I'll meet him?"

Elena raised a sceptical eyebrow then laughed. Ana was at an age - fourteen, going on fifteen - where she shuttled between peer-learned cynicism and childish optimism. Elena sometimes felt that she herself had never outgrown that knife-edge between hope and disappointment. Would Ana be the same?

The next station is... Earl's Court.

What was it with these Brits and their obsession with aristocracy? Knights, Barons, Earls... This one Underground line seemed obsessed with wealth and status. With a little over two hundred Euros left in her bank account, Elena felt the background hum of fear that she'd be penniless if this trip didn't work out. She should have insisted on a return ticket.

At Knightsbridge, a throng of shoppers poured into the carriage, filling every available space with Harrods bags and a heady cocktail of perfume that caught the back of her throat. Elena would never be seen dead wearing gold high heels with white trousers. The overdressed shopper caught her eye and smiled, seeing the protective arm Elena had instinctively thrown around Ana's shoulders. Elena immediately felt guilty for judging the woman.

Elena craned her head further into the carriage to study the schematic drawing of the Piccadilly Line. She knew D'Arblay Street was in Soho, but Soho didn't appear on the Underground map. A tall, afro-haired black man with enormous headphones caught her eye.

"Where are you going?"

His directness startled her. Then he smiled and she softened.

"I try to find Soho. I am on right line?"

He nodded.

"Depends where you're off to. Get out Piccadilly maybe?"

"Don't know. I'm going here."

Elena showed the young man her folded piece of paper containing the address from Frances's text message.

"D'Arblay Street? Think that's in Soho. Piccadilly or Leicester Square. Six or half a dozen."

"Sorry?"

"You can get off at either one."

She thanked him and he smiled again and went back to his music. London was not as unfriendly as some of her friends had told her it would be. Elena had suspected, at her send-off drinks, that they were jealous. She told them all to come and visit her. Perhaps she would regret that.

Elena decided to get off at Piccadilly. She'd heard of that place, and it would be nice to show Ana one of the sights.

Much confusion concerning station exits later, Elena and Anna bumped the suitcase up the steps and emerged in the chaotic vortex that was Piccadilly Circus. Ana marvelled at the huge, curved advertising displays and insisted on taking a selfie.

"Can we check out the fountain?" Ana asked.

"Later. We're close, I think. Let's find Frances's place. Dump this monster."

Elena gestured to the suitcase, an unnecessarily literal metaphor of rootlessness. As ever, Elena wanted to blend in, not stand out.

"Let's use English here," said Elena.

"Do we have to?" her daughter replied, predictably in Romanian. *Nu ne trebuie?*

An elderly lady at a kiosk selling t-shirts and trinkets grinned, wishing them well in Romanian. Elena nodded her gratitude.

"Don't you want to learn?"

"Not all the time," countered Ana.

"It's how you get better", pointed out Elena, negotiating a pedestrian crossing.

They zig-zagged slowly though pedestrians and sight-seeing tourists, found Windmill Street and headed towards Soho. Ana walked wide-eyed at the weird mix of stylish boutiques and restaurants and out-and-out pornography. Elena gave up trying to direct her away from the more lurid displays (a book of Robert Mapplethorpe photos in a shop window, neon 'Sex Shop' signs, transvestites in six-inch, size ten heels). Several consultations with shopkeepers and passers-by later, they turned off Poland Street into D'Arblay Street.

Number 19 seemed to be a drycleaner. Elena checked next door. A café at 21, a shuttered office for something called "Flagstone Films" at 17. Perhaps the flat was upstairs, and you had to enter through the shop?

Inside, a steamy chemical tang and a balding moon-faced elderly man with bifocals hanging bagged suits on a rack.

"Excuse me please. There are flats here?"

The man looked baffled.

"I'm trying to find Flat A, number nineteen."

The man scratched his earlobe, taking the piece of paper from Elena. In a room beyond, she could hear a radio and a woman singing along to a song from the 1960s. A perky melody with world-weary lyrics. The unseen woman had a pretty voice about an octave lower than the singer's. *Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone.*

"No flats here, except ours. We been here thirty-six year."

"Thirty-seven!" came a voice from the back.

An angular woman in her mid-sixties appeared, carrying a pile of empty suit bags. Her husband handed her Elena's note.

"Some flats at number 16," offered the woman. "Try there."

Elena and Ana traipsed up and down the street for longer than was reasonable looking for Frances da Costa's flat. There were several doorways with name plates but all but one were numbered, not lettered. No-one answered at number 16 when Elena pushed buzzer A for the third time, holding down the button until the blood left the tip of her finger.

"Mum, give it up. She's gone and robbed us. This is embarrassing. Let's go."

Elena shook her head, though she felt the same fears. She pressed flat B's buzzer.

"Hello?" came a crackly, indistinct voice. Female but clearly not Frances.

"We just moved in, and my key won't turn – is broken. Could you open?"

Nothing for twenty seconds, then a buzz. Elena shouldered open the door. Ana waited outside while Elena walked up the musty, cold corridor to the first door. 16A, clearly labelled. She rapped the brass knocker.

No response. One more time... nothing.

Elena was about to try the opposite flat when she caught Ana's eye and saw pity on her face, part-silhouetted against the light from the street. Elena decided not to disturb the elderly person who had let her in. She found a pen and the back of a leaflet she'd picked up in the airport and scribbled a note which she pushed under the door of Flat A. *Frances – where are you? We are in town. Please call me. No kiss, just an initial "E".*

Ana pulled the door shut behind her mother, who had run out of ideas.

"Could ask a cop," Ana offered.

Across the road, a young, uniformed policeman was backing out of an off license, shaking hands with a middle-aged Indian man, evidently having trouble withdrawing from the encounter. The shopkeeper was smiling amiably, the policeman nodding.

The cop turned and caught Elena's eye, half-smiling awkwardly. He was handsome in an understated sort of way, his round helmet ill-suited to his angular face. He was wiry but not thin and his body language spoke of someone ready to flee (or give chase) at a moment's notice.

Elena remembered seeing an old black and white documentary film in which an elderly woman in trouble asked a jolly English policeman for directions. For some reason this gave her pause as the off-license's door shut with a tinkle. Perhaps he could be trusted? The policeman wrote something in a small notebook, then pocketed it. No, it was way too risky, given that she was—

"Excuse me!" called out Ana, as he was turning to walk away.

CHAPTER 3

PC Rob Yarmouth found himself staring at a livid purple bruise that had spread around a lump of hairy flesh like a half-submerged egg.

"You see? This where they strike me. I get headaches. I jump each time bell rings."

Mr Singh pulled his turban down over the injury and sat back on the stool behind the counter. The thin morning sunlight lit the jewel-like liqueurs behind his head. The shop had a sickly-sweet aroma. Incense, thought Rob, plus spilt alcohol.

"Can you tell me, from the start, what happened?"

Mr Singh cleared his throat and told the story in a breathless but studied manner. Rob suspected he'd told it to quite a few friends and relatives since nine o'clock.

"I open up. I put money cash tray under the counter while I unlock. These kids - they burst in, cloth round faces. One is holding knife. I remember—small blade like for peel potatoes. These are boys, not men, I think. Sharmila, my wife, upstairs doing laundry. One of them shout 'give us your cash'. I tell them I been to bank last night, I have only what's in till, but they don't listen."

"How much was in the float?" interrupted Rob.

"Usual for weekday. Hundred pounds maybe. So, listen, I reach for the cash. You know - they have knife, so of course I pay. Then they hit me in the head with bottle. Cointreau, I think. My clothes stink. Whole shop stinks."

"And you fell unconscious?"

"Yes. I wake up when Sharmila, she shouts for me and then I don't answer, she comes down".

"How much money did they take?"

"Took notes and a bag of pound coins. About seventy pound. Plus couple of bottles. Baileys and plum brandy".

"Baileys?"

"Maybe they panic. Grab anything."

"Why do you think they hit you?"

"Perhaps they think I have weapon."

"Did they take anything else at all?"

"The most important thing. Money – is nothing. They took Kirpan."

"What's that?"

The shopkeeper gestured to a space above the door where something rectangular had evidently been wrenched free.

"Ceremonial dagger. Don't worry, is blunt. Only for show."

"Is it valuable?"

"Not really. Very important for our religion. But you can't sell."

"Would you recognise it?"

"Certainly. In frame on black velvet."

"Like this?"

Rob scrolled through his smartphone, held up a photo. Mr Singh's eyes widened in recognition.

"That's it!" cried Mr Singh, eyes widening.

"Are you sure?"

"I swear", confirmed Mr Singh, nodding vigorously. "Can't believe. Did you catch?"

"Kid called Sidney tried to nick a scooter just round the corner from the station a half hour ago", answered Yarmouth. "Opposite the café where we get our lunches, would you believe? We didn't see an accomplice. Would you recognise them if you saw them again?"

A worried look from Mr Singh. "I don't know. Happened fast."

Rob held up another photo. A shadow flickered across Mr Singh's concentrating face. Could it be recognition?

"They cover faces. I'm not sure."

Rob sighed, gestured at a CCTV camera in the corner of the ceiling.

"That working?"

Mr Singh shook his head.

"Only for show. Not connected. Sorry."

So, this was how it was going to go. Mr Singh had recognised the boy, who had just turned fifteen. Rob was sure of it. But Soho, although a commercial district in the city centre, remained a close-knit community. And things work differently in communities.

"Will I get Kirpan back?"

"It's in evidence at the moment. We still need to catch the other boy."

"They're so young. Is necessary?"

Rob swallowed exasperation.

"You were assaulted with a glass bottle and robbed. It's a serious crime."

"They were terrified. Must be first time."

Rob counted to ten internally.

"You reported a crime, so we have to proceed. We'll need to keep the... kirpan... as evidence. You said plum brandy, didn't you, as well as the Baileys?"

"Yes? Was close to hand, like I say."

Rob had seen it all before. Although he had just turned 30 and had only been a qualified police officer for a little over four years, he already knew the drill here. Mr Singh probably knew the boy, albeit loosely. Perhaps the thief was his grandson's school friend or a known face in the vicinity, perhaps a gang member. Whatever was the case, Mr Singh either felt threatened or, worse still, he felt some sympathy for his attacker. If Rob called him in for a line-up, his memory of the two boys would no doubt grow even hazier. Forensics was probably his best bet.

"I take it you cleaned up the shop after the attack?"

Mr Singh frowned, worried.

"Of course. Can't do business with broken glass and alcohol on floor."

"Where are the pieces of the bottle?"

"Bin in back yard. My wife..."

"Please don't touch them and do not throw them out."

Rob said this with a vehemence that surprised even him.

"Of course. Sorry. I thought..."

"We'll have a look at any CCTV footage from the street outside and a detective will be round to look at that bottle. We'll get the kirpan back to you as soon as we can. We may also have to call you to ID some suspects. Will that be okay?"

Mr Singh, looking chastened, nodded.

"I'm sorry I can't help more. Will I get something... for insurance?"

Mr Singh let the thought hang, looking worried, perhaps guilty for not seeming more helpful or grateful.

"Go online and list what was taken. You'll get a report number for the insurer."

Rob scribbled down the email address for reporting minor crimes and tore a page out of his pad. Mr Singh took it like it was a golden ticket.

"Appreciate. Thank you for coming so soon."

"Well, we're only ten minutes away. DC O'Leary will be round to talk to you a little later."

"Don't think I remember anything more."

"I know but it's protocol. I'm just a bobby on the beat. I'm not a detective."

"I see. I open shop? My regulars..."

"That should be fine. Goodbye now."

"So very grateful for return of kirpan... when you're able."

Rob began to back out of the shop as Mr Singh grasped his wrists.

"Very kind young man. So sorry..."

Mr Singh turned the 'Open' sign over and followed Rob out into the street, shaking his hand. He seemed to have dialled up the gratitude, perhaps again aware that he wasn't being as helpful as his civic duty required him to be.

Rob tried to disengage. Physical contact from strangers always made him feel on edge. The mistrust had persisted, ever since COVID-19 had upturned the world a couple of years ago.

He turned and caught the eye of a young girl and then a pretty woman of about his age leaning in a doorway to some flats opposite. He had the strangest sensation that they were both looking at him with unusual intensity. He had no idea why but flashed his most congenial yet business-like smile.

"Remember to call if you remember anything."

"I will, officer Yarmut, I will."

With relief, Mr Singh let him go. Rob turned on his heels towards Wardour Street.

"Excuse me!" came a perky voice from behind him.

CHAPTER 4

Damn her daughter for being such a mind-reader! Before Elena knew what was happening, Ana had trotted over the road to talk to the young policeman. Elena had to follow.

The officer, who seemed approximately Elena's age (32), listened attentively at first. Then, with a slightly pained expression explained that he wouldn't be able to report Frances as a missing person if she couldn't give him any more details of where Frances should be.

"She should be here," Elena insisted, handing over her crumpled piece of paper.

"And your friend gave you this address?", asked PC Yarmouth.

"I copy from text message."

"And it's the wrong address?"

"It seems wrong, yes."

"Then she gave you an incorrect address?"

Elena felt her face colour. It sounded absurd when spoken to a stranger. To her surprise she felt tears prickling the corners of her eyes. She shrugged, giving as non-committal an admission of defeat as possible. The officer just nodded and took a deep breath.

"I was going to get a coffee", he said. "Would you both like to join me? It'll be easier to talk there."

After some hesitation (was this normal procedure with British police?) Elena nodded gratefully.

PC Yarmouth, as the policeman had introduced himself, led them round a couple of corners of the maze-like centre of Soho to a café with the odd name of Chai Me. Elena ordered a green tea, Yarmouth a coffee. Ana wanted something sweet, as ever. For once, Elena relented. They took seats at the back of the cosy café, its furniture rustic and wooden. There were three other patrons, all concentrating intently on laptops or smartphones.

"I would normally interview you in your home or down at the station but if you don't mind talking here, it's a lot nicer," explained Yarmouth. "Plus, I'm knocking off in a bit. Early shift. I started at 4am."

"Really," said Elena, "how you stay awake?"

In response, Yarmouth tapped his coffee cup. Ana eyed them both over her hot chocolate with extra miniature marshmallows.

"I know. Coffee in a place with a thousand kinds of tea. I'm weird like that."

Yarmouth brushed a strand of his overlong hair away from his eyes. Elena had seen this expression on a man's face before. He was shyly sizing her up. Did he think they were on a date?

"Look, we're in UK for first time, supposed to meet our friend. She doesn't show up to collect, doesn't call. We can't get through..."

"And she gives you a false address."

Why must he keep harping on about that?

"But if you knew her..." Elena began.

She didn't finish the thought. After all, how well did she even know Frances? They'd met perhaps two dozen times, slept together just once. It had been her first gay experience since school, and the excitement of it hadn't yet dissipated. Something awaited clarification.

They had met in a bar. A 'gay friendly' place (although Elena hadn't known that at the time). Her friend Madeline was late, and Elena had cast her eye around the room looking for her, only to snag Frances's gaze.

She worked in IT, was a little older than her, perhaps forty. Elena was charmed by Frances's forthrightness. She had been tactile, placing a delicate hand in the small of Elena's back as Frances leaned in to make herself heard over the music.

When Elena said she had an ex-husband and a daughter, Frances didn't flinch or betray disappointment. Instead, she had showed Elena a photo of her own child – a son called Robbie, back home in London and currently staying with his father, whom Frances had amicably divorced two years ago. Frances had uttered the phrase "of course, I'm bisexual" as easily as you might admit to being left-handed. Elena had thrilled to the older woman's confidence.

Unlike some of her disastrous dates with men, Elena's sixth sense for untrustworthiness hadn't fired. Grudgingly, she felt herself opening up to the idea of having a girlfriend, rather than a boyfriend. That was just four months ago and here she was, in a foreign country, on forged papers. She had trusted Frances with her life. With two lives.

"I don't have much money. I don't know what we will do."

Elena caught Ana hiding her face behind her hand. She knew how pathetic this sounded but there was more than pride at stake. Elena could perhaps afford a coach and ferry fare home if it came to that, but she knew what awaited her back home, and she wasn't quite willing to admit defeat yet. Over their long, wine-fuelled conversations, Frances and Elena had planned a future in London. It had morphed from a pipe dream to a concrete plan to an absolute necessity, following the horror of ten days ago. When Elena ran to Frances, she didn't condemn her; she laid plans. And so here she was. But where was Frances?

PC Yarmouth exhaled pent-up breath.

"Did Frances ever show you any ID? Maybe a driver's license or passport?"

Elena frowned, suddenly feeling defensive.

"No—not exactly how one proceed in friendship."

"No, I just mean, maybe when you were planning your trip, you might have seen something. Don't take this the wrong way but how do you know she is who she says she is?"

"You think I've been duped? What could she possibly get from that?"

Elena knew what Frances could get. Approximately 35,000 Leu (around 8,000 Euros) from Elena for the forged passports for her and Ana. Perhaps she had pocketed a cut of that?

No, she trusted Frances. Besides, months and months of romancing her and getting through Ana's force-field of disdain, for a few thousand Euros? That would make her a very determined but low-ranking con artist. Of course, she couldn't reveal any of this backstory to PC Yarmouth.

"I don't know," he shrugged. "There are a lot of scammers out there. You didn't meet online or anything?"

"No! We met at bar. She was over on business. She works as IT consultant and her firm have office in Bucharest."

Yarmouth nodded and asked the next question with his eyes cast firmly down at a small, scruffy notepad he'd pulled from a pocket.

"Hope you don't mind me asking, but was this a romantic relationship?"

Romantic, Elena thought, blushing. The truth surprised her, as she blurted it out.

"I don't know. Maybe. Could be, yes."

She could almost hear Ana rolling her eyes. Sexuality was simultaneously so much easier, and yet more complicated for Ana's generation. Yarmouth looked up from his pad, unperturbed.

"And do you know for certain that she came home to Britain?"

"I saw her off from airport six weeks ago. We both did."

Ana nodded, looking intently at PC Yarmouth, who suddenly looked self-conscious. He folded his notepad away into a pocket.

"Do you have a photo of Frances?"

Elena realised with a jolt that Frances had never let her take a photo of them together. She had been camera shy, oddly, despite her outward confidence. Elena had assumed it was a precautionary measure. There were plenty of places in Bucharest where you could still be beaten for being openly gay.

The one time Elena tried to take a double selfie, Frances took the phone off her and fired off some photos of Elena instead, making her pose ridiculously by the Zodiac fountain. It had been a laugh... and perhaps a clever deflection?

She shook her head, decisively. "We didn't take many photos."

"I got one!" Ana piped up.

Elena stared at her daughter, surprised. Ana scrolled through her photos, found something, slid the phone over. Elena picked it up. The photo showed her and Frances on her old sofa, both apparently

asleep, Frances's head on Elena's shoulder, the older woman's long red hair curled across Elena's breast. Elena felt a tightening in her throat.

"When did you take this?" Elena asked, in Romanian.

"After that massive walk. You both fell asleep in front of some old film. I thought it was funny."

"I didn't know she took," Elena said to Yarmouth. "That's Frances."

Instinctively, the police officer smiled when he saw the photo.

"It's not ideal 'cause it's not square on. I suppose I could ask someone to run it through the system though, with her name. I'm not a detective but I can ask a favour. I wouldn't get your hopes up though. If we find her, she's likely a bad egg."

"Please do. I need to know I'm doing something. I will keep phone charged and hope she calls."

"I'm sure they'll let you plug it in here. They're decent sorts. I'm sorry I can't be more helpful, Miss Balan."

"Is okay. Can you direct me to cheap hotel? We're on tight budget."

"Em... There's a backpackers' hostel near Piccadilly. It's not fancy but...!"

"Fancy we don't need."

Elena looked at Yarmouth as he drained his coffee. He was more handsome than her ex-husband but unexpectedly shy for a police officer. Back home, Elena's family had had some dealings with the police. Her brother had run away several times and become involved with some rougher boys who hung out on an abandoned building site. The police officers who picked him up for truancy or smoking weed always looked like men you wouldn't cross, grim functionaries just doing their job. Yarmouth looked soft, caring, perhaps even a little out of his depth.

Ana messaged Yarmouth the photo and he paid for their drinks, despite Elena's protestations. Back out on the street, the wind had picked up and a light drizzle was falling. Ana shivered. Elena wanted to get them somewhere warm and freshen up. Then she would distract them both with a movie or something.

"The hostel is here," said Yarmouth, handing Elena a page from his notebook on which he'd drawn a crude map. "There's a fancy gym next door. The tube station is only two minutes away. It's always bustling – loads of kids. They'll know other places if it's full."

Elena thanked him profusely. She was certain he'd acted out of pity for her and that embarrassed her, but she was still glad she'd asked for help. As they parted company and Yarmouth promised to call her by the following afternoon, Ana surprised her mother by shaking his hand. Elena did likewise. His fingers were surprisingly soft and warm, his grim firmer than she would have expected.

As they walked away, following Yarmouth's map, Ana leaned in conspiratorially.

"He was hot! And he fancies you."

"Don't be stupid," replied Elena. "He was just doing his job."

CHAPTER 5

The Piccadilly Backpackers Hostel was run by a pair of professionally courteous men who had seen it all. Michael, the younger of the two, touched his colleague lightly on the shoulder, as he squeezed past to get to the room keys. That moment told Elena that they were a couple. It seems she had a better gaydar for men than for women.

It was evident that the place had a high turnover of both staff and clientele. It was run with military precision, as evidenced by the registration forms she was required to fill in.

Geoffrey, the greyer of the two concierges, talked them through the rules and regulations.

"You've got lucky today ladies. The female only dorms are full, but a couple just checked out of room 3, so I can give you that and it'll just be you and two German women."

"No private rooms?"

Geoffrey laughed, but not unkindly.

"We have six doubles, all booked for the foreseeable. We're not exactly the Ritz. But we are clean, efficient and..."

"Reasonably priced," completed Michael in a singsong voice, typing their details into the computer. It was evidently something of a catchphrase.

"We have over seven thousand guests a year and many of them come back year after year, so we must be doing something right," added Geoffrey. "How long will you be staying?"

"I don't really know. That okay?"

"The limit is ten days, usually. We've had families basically trying to live here and we're not set up for that."

"It shouldn't be too long," reassured Elena.

Once they were booked in (for £30 per night, a little more than Elena expected) Michael took them up to the dorm, showed them how the key cards worked and left them in the empty room. Two metal-framed bunkbeds stood out against brightly patterned modern wallpaper. A small radiator, painted gold, was draped with drying t-shirts. One of the bunks had backpacks and clothes bundled upon it—the mystery Germans' things. The other was smartly made-up; Elena sniffed the pillow and sheets. Clean and fresh. It would do.

Ana bounded up onto the top bunk.

"I'm having this one!"

Elena had no desire to climb the spindly ladder each night, so shrugged her agreement. Ana lay back on the bed, thin arms folded behind her head, and closed her eyes. Her chest rose and fell under her light-blue top. They develop so young these days, thought Elena, and the thought sent a shiver of fear through her.

Ana already had the usual pubescent crushes on pop stars and actors but just before school had ended for the summer an older boy had been seen hanging around with Ana and her friends. Elena felt glad she'd taken her daughter away, regardless of the outcome of this trip. She knew she couldn't protect her from lustful boys forever but fourteen seemed a bit too young to be entering that particular battlefield.

"Can we go sightseeing? I want to see the palace!"

Ana rested on her elbow, looking down at Elena, who was digging through their suitcase for her phone charger. She was down to 11% on the iPhone.

"Sure. Don't you want to shower and rest first?"

"Rest? Mum, I'm not like eighty or something."

Elena had showered and changed, regardless of her daughter's irrepressible energy, when they walked out twenty minutes later. The water pressure had been a little weak, but the water was hot and the showers as clean as promised. Renewed, Elena decided to adopt a more positive outlook. Frances would get in touch and if she didn't, they would just have a little micro-holiday (on a budget) and then...

Nope, there was no use in trying to complete that thought. Elena needed to stay upbeat for Ana's sake. The future would take care of itself.

Reluctantly, she had left her phone on charge, hiding it under the mattress. She'd listened to the usual warnings about not leaving valuables in the rooms but there was no avoiding it. They'd come back in an hour or so and check messages.

Elena had grabbed a handful of leaflets from reception, including a basic map of central London. Michael had ringed a few sights – Trafalgar square and the National Gallery, St James Park, Buckingham Palace – and they'd settled on a basic itinerary. They were going to enjoy themselves despite Frances. Fuck Frances, she thought, refusing to feel guilty about her disloyalty.

Ana took her arm as they wormed their way through the crowds, past the fountain and statue of Eros, towards Trafalgar Square. Elena was struck once again by the variety of races and nationalities congregating in the large formal space with its imposing lions and the ridiculously tall column topped by the bird-bedecked statue of Admiral Nelson. The whole world is drawn here and welcomed here, she thought. Of course, the UK's recent and controversial exit from the EU gave Elena pause—would people look at her like an unwelcome interloper? Ana, ever-vigilant on social media, had informed her that London (and Scotland, apparently) had not so voted, so Elena decided to continue to feel welcomed by this place and its inhabitants.

Ana loved the fountains and the lions particularly and, before Elena could stop her, raced over to climb on top of one.

"You're not supposed to!" shouted Elena, futilely.

"Come on mum, take my picture."

Ana tossed down her phone, which Elena just caught in the jacket she'd brought in case of further rain.

"Ana! Make it quick then."

With her usual agility, Ana scrambled up onto the back of the massive, black metal lion. Elena scanned the square for police or officials. None were in evidence. Ana took a few furtive photos as her daughter struck dramatic poses.

"It's like that film with the talking lion who sacrifices himself."

"The Lion King?"

"No, not that one. Whatsisname... Aslan!"

"The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. Come down now, will you?"

Another mother restrained her son from following suit as Ana leapt down and grabbed her phone back to check the photos. Elena avoided eye contact with the disapproving woman.

"You're such a maniac", she said, experiencing a strange kind of pride. Ana was fearless.

They whiled away an hour wandering the National Gallery, until Ana could no longer feign interest in the old masters (and neither could Elena). They both loved Stubbs' horses and the Arnolfini portrait with its sneaky 'selfie' (as Ana put it) of the artist captured in a convex mirror in the background. But the society portraits and historical paintings left them cold, and they both soon felt the urge to get back outdoors again.

Having bought some provisions in a corner shop (chorizo, rolls, rather plastic cheese, juice, and apples), they made for St James Park, passing through the impressive Admiralty Arch and crossing the wide but strangely empty Mall. They walked around the duck-pond, Elena telling Ana her plans for staying in London should Frances ever surface.

They could stay at Frances's for a little while but, as a one-bedroom flat with a fold-out bed in the lounge, it wasn't ideal for anything long-term. Frances had said that once her salary hike kicked in, they could look for a two-bedroom place, somewhere reasonably central, perhaps even with a communal garden. To Elena, who had been brought up on a social housing project and had only ever managed to rent fairly substandard flats in unfashionable bits of Bucharest on her dressmaker's salary, the apartments he sent photos of looked palatial. London was a city of wealth and opportunity.

After finding their home, Elena would get herself a job, perhaps piecemeal, ideally something a little more creative but armed with a sewing machine, she could knock out anything up to thirty or

forty garments a day at home. Frances's pay was good, but Elena wanted her own independent income; she'd let him know that that was non-negotiable.

"And what if Frances doesn't appear?" asked Ana, interrupting her train of thought.

Elena's first instinct was to scold Ana for her negativity, but it wasn't her fault. Her own father had absconded when she was a toddler. The pregnancy had been unplanned, and Karl had never bought into fatherhood. He'd been inconsistent, oscillating between acting like it hadn't happened and 'mucking in' but his participation in Ana's first three years had been perfunctory at best. It was natural she had a cynical attitude about her mother's partners, male or female.

"Then it's Plan B, I suppose. We rent, maybe on the outskirts of town, I get work, we find you a school. We'll survive."

"Can't we just go back?"

"You know that's not an option."

"So you keep saying, mum, but why? You won't say."

They'd had this argument several times over the last ten days. Elena knew it was unfair to uproot her daughter from her network of friends without an explanation (although Ana had become expert in the perplexing array of social media connections kids had at their disposal these days). Still, there was no way she could tell her what they were running from. Not for a few years, at least.

"You just have to trust me, sweetheart. We can't go back."

Elena had a sudden flash of memory - a line of blood running between tiles, like a pointing finger. She'd never realised the kitchen floor had a slope in it, allowing gravity to create this macabre effect. How weird to have had that thought in the moment of aftermath.

A swan flapped its wings and hissed aggressively at a tourist who had stooped too close for a photo. Ana forgot her interrogation and laughed. Elena was for once grateful for her daughter's easily distracted brain.

They climbed a tiny railing and walked up a steep grassy bank to the shade of some tall trees. The sun had melted away the drizzle finally. Elena threw down her coat for them both to sit down, not caring if it got wet. They watched the unending parade of tourists, joggers and bird life skimming or bobbing on the placid lake. Apparently, there were pelicans but so far, they hadn't seen any.

Ana for once put her phone away (how on earth did she still have power on that thing?) and joined her mother in simply enjoying the day. They made up stories about the passers-by and pored over the map for the next port of call. Elena felt edgy though, thinking of her phone back in the hostel and the messages that might be pinging in from Frances or Yarmouth. She'd let Ana enjoy another hour of this 'holiday mode' and then they'd go back and check. Until Elena knew whether she was on this adventure on her own (daughter notwithstanding) she'd not be able to fully commit to London. A blank dread was filling her head, a background hum of anxiety.

Ana threw a piece of chorizo to a bravely curious squirrel, while Elena tried to dispel the growing feeling that she'd exchanged one trap for another.

CHAPTER 6

Yarmouth didn't know how much more hair metal he could take. Forget giving love a bad name, this place gave music a bad name. Guns and Roses had been replaced by Bon Jovi. Now Aerosmith took over the sonic assault. That said, the Temperance was the closest pub to Detective Fleischer's office and Yarmouth didn't want to set foot in there again. He could take jokes at his expense from one colleague. Running the gauntlet of the whole department was another matter.

He was eyeing the dregs of his pint of Director's and beginning to wonder if he should get another one when in bounced Tom Fleischer, in his rather affected manner. Yarmouth raised a hand to attract his attention, but Fleischer was already making a beeline for his corner table.

"Robin Redbreast! You look fighting fit. Punched out any superiors lately?"

Subtle, Yarmouth sighed. "No, I have managed to restrain myself."

Fleischer squeezed his rugby player's frame into the bench opposite. He pointed quizzically at Yarmouth's near-empty glass. He was not offering. Yarmouth downed the last mouthful.

"Okay Tommy, what can I get you?" Yarmouth said. "Pint?"

Fleischer mock-tutted.

"Now you know I can't drink on duty, mate. A coke will be fine."

Yarmouth squeezed out of the booth. Fleischer caught him with a hand as he edged around the fruit machine.

"Though if something crystal clear and Russian were to fall into the glass, well that would just be too bad."

"Message received."

"Oh, and try not to hit anyone on the way to the bar."

Yarmouth sighed. The oaf thought he was a comedian. Still, he was the closest thing Yarmouth had to a friend in the department. He headed for the bar.

Eight months ago, Yarmouth had been a junior detective, ten weeks into the job. His boss, Chief Inspector Robert McPherson was an unlikable bigot, small-minded and uncompromising. He got the convictions but treaded on a lot of fairly innocent toes in the process, especially if those toes were black or brown. The Met had long had a problem with institutional racism but had recently cleaned shop, edging out a few of the more obvious offenders.

McPherson was too good at covering his traces to put anything damning in writing or say anything dubious around his superiors though. Any witnesses to his excessively harsh interrogations and street intimidations were too afraid to rock the boat. He was painfully old school and if Yarmouth had had any sense, he would have waited out the eighteen months to McPherson's retirement and suffered in silence.

Yarmouth had not been sensible. He'd been dating a girl called Rupa, whose family ran an Indian sari stall in Southall. For the last few weeks, they had been intimidated by some local thugs who wanted to edge them off the marketplace and take over their spot, claiming it had been promised to them. Yarmouth had got involved as a favour, although Southall was not strictly speaking his patch. He'd been questioning Rupa's brother Amit away from the stall about the gang when one of them had turned up and started harassing Rupa.

Yarmouth, in plain clothes, had stepped in, flashing his badge. The would-be gangster, who looked scarcely out of his teens, seemingly wasn't alone. Within minutes a gaggle of youths were shouting at him and Rupa. Uniformed back-up appeared to calm things down. It didn't work. Tensions were high and weapons were brandished, scuffles finally breaking out. There were several arrests, including Rupa and Amit.

Back at the station, McPherson had got wind of the situation and inserted himself into the melee of shouting, angry Indians. Amit was the most wound-up, shouting loudly about the injustice of it all and the ignorance of the police. McPherson had not taken kindly to this and had whipped out his baton. At this point Rupa made the disastrous judgement call of stepping in between her brother and

the exasperated Chief Inspector. Yarmouth tried to prevent her intercession, but Rupa held her ground, insisting that her family be set free. They were after all, the victims, not the perpetrators.

McPherson had simply barged her out of the way. Rupa had slipped on the recently mopped floor and gone down, hitting a moulded plastic chair with her shoulder as she fell. As Yarmouth went to her aid, McPherson had muttered the fateful line that had sealed his and Yarmouth's fate.

"That's right, go and help the Paki, fucking arsehole."

To this day, Yarmouth wasn't sure whether the insult to Rupa or himself had pushed his buttons most. He reacted instinctively, pushing his boss square in the chest. McPherson, glaring in disbelief, pushed back, bellowing. Yarmouth simply sidestepped and drove his fist into McPherson's jaw, a glancing blow that caused no damage to anything but McPherson's pride, but one caught on two separate CCTV cameras, plus his chest-mount.

What wasn't caught on camera was what McPherson had said to prompt Yarmouth's rage (which was of a sudden ferocity that baffled even Yarmouth himself). It had been intended for Yarmouth's ears alone and none of the eight witnesses were able to repeat it when questioned. McPherson blamed the slick floor for his 'stumble' and Rupa's fall. He'd been let off with a verbal reprimand from his superior for acting 'without due care and attention'.

Yarmouth was demoted, booted back down to street detail, handed back the uniform he thought he'd relinquished mere months ago. A singular moment of madness he'd never experienced before or since had rocketed him back to square one.

Several of his colleagues, who hated McPherson as much as Yarmouth did, had applauded his actions, quite literally, in the pub that Friday night. Embarrassed and ashamed (but also with a hint of pride) Yarmouth had endured what would become a regular volley of piss-taking. A lengthy written warning was added to his HR file, and he was dropped from CID and reassigned to the city centre a month later. The government had bowed to public pressure to put more 'bobbies on the beat' and Yarmouth was to be part of the new vanguard of cops on foot patrol, an entirely ineffectual and pointless strategy, if you looked at the statistics but the new Commissioner always kowtowed to the Old Etonians, it seemed.

His relationship with Rupa lasted another few weeks, and then she announced she was going home to Kolkata to marry a neighbour's son, an old childhood friend she's never quite forgotten. She thanked him for his gallantry and his understanding.

"McPherson's retiring next year, you'll be glad to hear. We've all had a whip-round to buy him a gold knuckleduster and a lifetime subscription to Leather Boyz dot com."

"I'll bet," said Yarmouth putting down the drinks.

"Might be good for you. Play your cards right, they might let you back."

"That'll be the day."

"Anyhow, I'm guessing you didn't call me here for a jolly," said Fleisher, sipping his Smirnoff. "Do I sense a favour coming on?"

Yarmouth rubbed his face, finalising his sales pitch.

"It's just a little thing, for a friend."

"Oh, a 'friend' is it? And is this friend of the female persuasion?"

"Yes, but that's irrelevant. Missing person. Her... friend."

"Is she hot? Maybe he should stay missing?"

Yarmouth glared at his ex-colleague.

"I'm kidding. So, tell me, why can't this just be reported the usual way?"

"It's complicated."

"It always is, bruiser, it always is."

Yarmouth slid the phone over, the photo of Elena and Frances onscreen. Fleisher drew in breath.

"Wow. Bit of lesbo action. Eastern European?"

"Romanian. The older one's English, or so Elena says. They've been dating a while. The older one, Frances da Costa, invited the Romanian and her daughter over to stay."

"Let me guess... Redhead never showed up?"

"Bingo. She's not called or texted and her phone rings 'number unobtainable'."

"You said 'them'."

"There's a daughter. She's fourteen, or thereabouts."

"Shit. You think she's a con artist?"

"Probably. Might be in our books."

"What was that name?"

"Frances da Costa. I know—sounds dubious. But maybe a mugshot?"

"Image is a bit shitty. This all you have?"

"Sadly, yes. So—can you run it for me?"

"No problem. So, what's your connection to all this?"

"I don't know. I just feel sorry for them."

"Always a sucker for a damsel in distress, Tommy Boy. Give me a couple of hours, I'll sneak it through."

Pocketing the piece of paper, Fleisher turned his attention to the TV screen where a European football fixture was playing, sound down, to a backdrop of Def Leppard. For the rest of their brief lunchtime 'catch up', Yarmouth would have to compete for attention with AC Milan and Barcelona.

CHAPTER 7

Elena found herself dashing up the stairs at the hostel two at a time, Ana rolling her eyes behind her. Elena had just had the strangest feeling that Frances had called. When she retrieved the phone from her hiding place under the mattress, there was indeed a message informing her of a missed call. It was not from Frances.

Elena played the voicemail on speaker. It was Elena's mother Constantia, Ana's grandmother. Her country-accented Romanian spilled out in a garbled stream. She sounded drunk; it was not an uncommon occurrence.

"Elena? Where are you? I went round your house – everything gone. The door was open. Are you on holiday? When are you coming back? My back hurts and I need my medicine. You need to come and visit me and bring me a new prescription from Dr Lazarescu. Oh, and Karl has disappeared too. Are you together? No – I don't think it's likely. I know you don't care, and I shouldn't too. That son of a bi..."

With comic timing, the phone's voicemail limit cut Constantia off. It was just as well, thought Elena. She didn't want Ana to start asking questions about Karl, her ex-husband.

Ana was rifling through her suitcase, tossing items of clothing onto her bed, looking for something. She turned from this task when the phone message cut off. Elena stood staring at the phone, feeling a clouding of indecision sweep over her.

"Aren't you going to call her back?"

Even though Elena was ambivalent at best about her mother's wants and needs, Ana had always liked the old woman, almost inexplicably as far as Elena was concerned. Constantia had been a more attentive grandparent than mother, it was true. She had developed a habit of handing Ana a handful of small coins and suggesting she buy herself an ice cream, even though Ana was in her teens and the cash amounted to less than the price of a postage stamp, let alone a toffee Big Milk. Ana found this endearing and funny and dutifully added the money to the piggy bank she'd had since she was five.

"Later, for sure. We have somewhere else to go, first."

"Where's that? I'm a bit tired. Wouldn't mind crashing out."

Elena was continually surprised how kids of her daughter's age got so drained of energy. Were their metabolisms in overdrive during puberty?

"I can't leave you here, so you're coming. It's only six o'clock. I'll get you an ice cream."

Ana's face lit up at the blatant bribery.

"Big Milk?"

"I don't think they have that here. Hurry up and find whatever you're looking for."

Twenty minutes later, Ana in a summery, patterned top and knee-length skirt, they weaved their way through Soho, following their crude tourist map. A few false turns and backtrackings later, Ana stopped and pointed dramatically, her mother almost stumbling into her.

"There!"

A neon sign containing a clock declared "Bar Italia". Frances had mentioned it as one of his favourite haunts. She'd once WhatsApped a photo of Frances with her arm around the proprietor, an elderly man with a boxer's face and a shock of white curly hair. Where had that photo gone?

Frances had said you could get a coffee and pastry at 4am here. Bar Italia had an eclectic clientele of Soho creatives, street-sweepers, tourists, and men taking a breather between the gay bars and nightclubs of Old Compton Street. If Frances had been seen anywhere in London recently it would be here.

At 6pm the place was half-empty. A well-dressed couple in their sixties sat at a table outside ignoring one another, engrossed in newspapers. Elena considered getting the photo of Frances out and accosting them but thought better of it and headed inside.

A much younger man than the one in Frances's photo stood polishing an impressive Gaggia machine while a woman with a narrow birdlike face took payment from a suited gentleman buying an espresso. There were a couple of lone customers at the long counter set along one wall.

"Can I help you?" The woman said, with a professionally thin smile. Her accent sounded Eastern European, perhaps Bulgarian.

"I'm not sure. Have you seen this lady here?"

The woman leaned in, shading the phone from the sunlight glancing in across the polished counters. She took a good look, then shook her head.

"I wouldn't really know. I only work Mondays to Thursdays. Maybe Luca?"

She gestured with her head towards her colleague, who had turned his attention to refilling a large glass jar with biscotti. Luca took a pair of reading glasses from a chain around his neck and studied the photo carefully. He shook his head gently, deflating Elena.

"Not recent."

His answer surprised Elena.

"So, you do recognise her?"

Luca rubbed a meaty hand across his face.

"I think. She came a few months ago. Used to meet people here. Name maybe... Fiona?"

"Frances. Her name Frances."

Luca looked sceptical.

"No. Wasn't that. Haven't seen her 'round lately."

Ignoring the conversation, Ana stood on tiptoes studying the old black and white photos of Soho in its seedier 50s incarnation. Careworn faces and trilbies, everyone smoking.

Elena thanked Luca, her emotions held firmly in check. Not firmly enough for Luca though, who took pity and poured them an espresso 'on the house'. It tasted wonderful and Elena told him so.

"Of course. Best damn coffee in whole city."

Outside, Ana reminded Elena of her promise of an ice cream. They headed for Leicester Square when Baskin Robbin's 35 flavours astonished them both.

Strolling around the square looking at the cinema marquee's promising epic thrills or heart-warming comedy, Ana took her mother's arm, a small gesture which moved Elena. Elena had chosen a small vanilla and pistachio cone, her daughter a triple chocolate creation that she ate too fast, and which gave her a headache.

"So, what's the plan?"

As ever, Ana's directness was hard to deflect.

"We could maybe see a film. There's supposed to be a discount cinema around here, somewhere. Prince Charles."

"No, I mean... generally. Are we going to wait for this loser like, forever?"

Occasional card games aside, Ana had never really warmed to Frances in the way that Elena had hoped she would. Perhaps because of their experiences with Ana's stepfather combined with her own inexperience, Ana mistrusted strangers and her mum's choice of friends. Elena couldn't really blame her for this. Had Ana known a single trustworthy adult in her life?

Suddenly, a face popped into Elena's mind, wearing a smile that couldn't be doubted. It wasn't Frances's face, it was that of PC Yarmouth, the young officer who had said he'd help them. Could he be trusted to be as good as his word?

"Look, Ana. We know Frances is in London or has been recently. Who's to say what's happened to her? We didn't come all this way to turn round and run back home again."

Elena couldn't tell Ana that running home was no longer an option. They were stuck here, with or without Frances. Travelling on a forged passport had been utterly terrifying. She didn't want to go through that shivering fear again. The face of the woman who had scrutinised their documents was imprinted on her memory. She'd shown a mild flickering of interest in the fake surname – Ceausescu – which had made Elena's heart pound so loudly she was sure it was audible. Then professional interest segued back to boredom before the immigration official handed the passports over and waved them through. The whole subterfuge had taken less than a minute but another few seconds would have finished Elena. She wasn't cut out for a life as a criminal.

She had to build a new way of living, here in Britain. If Frances could be found, so much the better, if only to explain herself so Elena would have some sort of closure. If she never turned up, at least Elena had Ana, and a new start, assuming she could find work.

Ana wiped her mouth with a tissue and pulled her mother into a throng of people surrounding a street performer. Skin spray-painted gold, with an orange robe protecting his modesty, the bald-headed man sat in a lotus position, Buddha-like, seemingly levitating several feet off the ground. He was playing a sinuous melody, eyes closed, upon a wooden flute. A swathe of cloth fell from his lap onto the chewing-gum spotted paving stones. Ana leaned in as they walked around the circle, saying a little too loudly,

“There’s some sort of metal frame under his robe.”

The performer’s eyes flicked open. With a curl of his lip into a rather sinister smile, he said: “You cannot find what you seek by looking for it.”

Elena laughed instinctively. The floating Buddhist’s gaze seemed to range off into the middle-distance, over their shoulders as he began playing his flute once more. Something made Elena turn to see what he was looking at and in that precise moment, through a gap in the huddled bodies of tourists, she spotted a familiar flash of red hair, a recognisable gait.

“Frances!”

She couldn’t help shouting out. The receding figure didn’t stop or turn and the gap in the crowd closed. Elena pushed through impatiently, dragging Ana after her, drawing disapproving looks.

“Frances! Stop!”

The woman, dressed in a fitted black jacket and jeans, turned a corner down a side street. She was wearing oversized headphones. Frances wouldn’t be able to hear Elena shouting at her.

“Come on, Ana!”

“Mum, I don’t think that’s her. Too tall.”

“You can wait here if you can’t move any faster.”

The annoyance in Elena’s voice masked a doubt. Were they chasing a phantom? They ducked and weaved through chattering groups of tourists, a rainbow of races. Ana vaulted a suitcase, Elena accidentally elbowed an elderly lady, shouting an apology over her shoulder.

They tore down the alleyway, reaching a T-junction behind the National Gallery. Frustrated, Elena turned randomly right, then left again. There Frances was, turning onto Trafalgar square.

Ana ran ahead, leaping steps, Elena not far behind. They emerged onto the square and into a wall of sunshine and traffic noise. There, straight ahead, stood the woman, standing still, facing away from them, lighting a cigarette. Elena marched up to her.

“Frances! Hey!”

A little too loud.

The woman whirled on her heels. The same chin, straight nose, long wavy red hair falling to her collar. A cousin, a sister, almost a doppelgänger. Remarkably close. But not Frances.

“Can I help you?”

CHAPTER 8

"You'd better not be late, mum. This town is a maze."

Elena wrenched out a painful snag in her hair, standing in front of the small mirror that someone had leaned against the dormitory's sole window.

"I'm only popping out for an hour or so. That policeman might have news on Frances."

In truth, Elena no longer held out much hope of her lover ever showing up. It had been a mirage, a fantasy. But pursuing the mystery gave her something to do. A purpose.

"Can't he just tell you over the phone?" Ana whined.

"I guess not, otherwise he wouldn't have suggested dinner."

"I told you he fancies you."

"Don't be stupid. What time does the film end?"

Ana did a quick check on her phone.

"It's 93 minutes, so maybe add twenty for trailers and stuff. Can you come and get me at ten?"

"Don't worry. I'll be there. It's supposed to be funny, though. You'll enjoy it."

"Yeah, whatever. And you'll enjoy your date."

"Ana, it's not a date."

"Hmm... So why are you wearing that dress?"

Ana stepped closer to the mirror, squinting down to see how the floral-patterned strapless dress fitted. She had to admit, it was a little sexier than she'd imagined it might be.

"I didn't have time to try it on before we left home. Thought I'd give it an airing. How do I look?"

Ana sized her up.

"If I said way too sexy, would you change?"

"I haven't got time."

"Thought not. You look amazing. His eyes are going to fall out of his head."

Ana looked down at her cleavage, the low neckline making a bigger deal of her smallish breasts. Was this a terrible mistake? She'd wanted to dress up, to feel she was on holiday, not adrift and escape in a foreign land. And yes, Ana was perspicacious as ever – she wanted to impress Yarmouth. What harm could it do to get a police officer on her side?

Half an hour later, having dropped Ana off at the small repertory cinema for the Princess Bride screening, Elena took a deep breath and pushed open the door of Les Oiseaux on Wardour Street. The place was decorated with silvery-green wallpaper reminiscent of a Rousseau jungle painting, silver-wrapped tree branches decorated with stuffed parrots and red hanging lanterns. Somehow the effect was quite magical, rather than tacky.

Yarmouth had chosen a table near the back of the restaurant. Feeling a little chilly without a jacket, Elena was grateful. She also couldn't help having the thought that it would have been awkward if they'd sat by the window and Frances had walked by and seen them together. There were so many things wrong with that thought.

Charmingly, Yarmouth stood up as she approached and even pushed the chair back a little so she could sidle into it. The dress was a little too tight around her behind; she'd take it out a little before wearing it again. Yarmouth kissed her lightly on one cheek. He looked different out of uniform, a lot more relaxed and somehow loose-limbed, almost louche.

"You look amazing," he said.

"Um, thank you. I made dress herself."

Why had she said that? It seemed so boastful. Yarmouth raised his eyebrows as they took their seats.

"Really. Impressive. Is that what you do? I mean, are you in fashion?"

Fashion. She laughed a little.

"I work as seamstress, but I've had lot of jobs. Could never find right thing. Maybe here in London I will."

She was oversharing. And why did she feel so nervous? This wasn't a date, after all.

"I'm sure."

Yarmouth cleared his throat and slid a manila envelope out from under his menu.

"It's all I could find. Nothing definitive, I think."

Weirdly disappointed he had suddenly turned so business-like, Elena peeled open the envelope and pulled out a few sheets of paper. They contained a series of photos with accompanying names and dates of birth. The photos were all mugshots. A series of women, variously affecting boredom or nonchalance, a few looking genuinely upset. Quickly flicking through the pages, she could see that none of them was Frances. The names were wrong too – nothing closer than Frances de Silva (aged 52 and greying at the temples).

She shook her head, disappointed one more degree. Yarmouth leaned over, touching her left wrist lightly.

"It could be good news. It means she's not a known felon on our books."

"Or just too smart to have been caught."

Yarmouth pushed a strand of sandy hair away from his brow, sitting back in his chair again.

"Or she's not a criminal or con-artist at all. I'm sorry it's not more... helpful to you."

Elena forced a thin smile.

"Is fine. I don't know what I expect."

She pushed the papers back across to him and forced her attention to the menu. Her French wasn't good enough to translate more than half of the entrees and main courses. This caused another flicker of irritation and then she realised how ungrateful she must seem. Yarmouth had done her a favour outside of working hours and had now given up an evening for her. She made an effort to brighten up.

"Have you been here before? You recommend something?"

Fifteen minutes later, they were tucking into their starters – French onion soup for Elena, just garlic bread for Yarmouth. Elena was surprised to find herself enjoying the meal and Yarmouth's company. She also felt flattered he'd not cut the evening short and had committed to two courses. Pathetic. Of course he would stay.

She caught her reflection in a mirrored panel. The woman looking back at her did not look like a fugitive, she looked like smartly dressed thirtysomething enjoying a dinner date (it had to be admitted) with a handsome man who was paying her every attention. She realised her ego had suffered a bit of a bruising over the last few months and Frances had merely glued together a few of the pieces; a poor display of craftsmanship.

Yarmouth was good company. He talked a little about his work, how he'd joined the force after seeing a TV show called *The Bill* as a kid and deciding he wanted to do some good.

"Hopelessly naïve, I know. I still do believe in what the uniform represents. Even though I'd rather be out of it."

"What do you mean?"

"I used to be a detective. Until a few months ago."

"What happened?"

"I made a poor judgement call."

He hesitated, sizing up the wisdom of saying more. Elena held the moment in silence.

"I punched out a superior officer."

Elena's eyes widened.

"You did not!"

He nodded ruefully.

"The man was a complete arsehole. A racist arsehole, even."

"You didn't get fired?"

"A couple of colleagues backed me up in terms of what he said to provoke me. Plus, and this is a bit more embarrassing, I have uncle who works in the CPS. He pulled strings, apparently, though it happened behind closed doors and without my knowledge. I got demoted."

"You went back to street?"

"No choice really. I'm not sure I'm much use for a career change now."

"Well," Elena said, lowering her head, then flicking her eyes up at him. "You look very... dashing."

"Dashing, is it? Did you learn your English from PG Wodehouse novels?"

Elena frowned lightly. Yarmouth winced.

"Sorry, stupid joke. How's your soup?"

And like that, the evening segued easily into a good time shared between friends. Elena almost forgot the circumstances that had brought her there. Yarmouth appeared genuinely interested to hear about Romania, having never travelled further East than a week's package trip to Split with an ex-girlfriend. He asked about Ana, and said that Elena seemed very resilient and his first impression of Ana was that she took no prisoners. This made Elena laugh.

Yarmouth was thirty—two years younger than Elena—and had only had two long-term relationships, the longest of which had lasted six years and ended with an infidelity (hers, not his) and a broken engagement. He had no kids, an elderly father living in sheltered accommodation in a seaside village whom he visited once a month. Elena decided that he was a little too self-deprecatory for her liking, but she warmed to his sense of humour, nonetheless. She also decided that he was handsome, having at first thought he was a little too weak jawed. He was constantly looking around him, not in a paranoid or self-conscious way, just as if he was monitoring the environment. Training or personality? she wondered.

As their main courses arrived—both had opted for beef bourguignon—and the restaurant filled up, Elena had to lean in towards Yarmouth, whom she was trying to remember to think of as Robin, although the name felt too feminine. This made their knees touch under the table. Elena considered withdrawing but opted not to. Yarmouth—Robin—made no show of noticing and he too did nothing about it.

Elena laughed, thinking about how the evening was developing.

"What? What are you thinking?" he asked.

"Oh nothing. Just... This is funny."

"What's funny? I'm funny, am I? Funny how? Like I'm here to amuse you?"

Robin had gone into some sort of shtick and looked endearingly awkward until Elena recognised it.

"No, not funny like Joe Pesci funny. Just... I didn't expect... This."

She gestured about her, indicating the diners, the restaurant, her dress, finally pointing at Robin.

"Is nice." Elena felt herself grow serious. "Is really nice."

Now it was her turn to blush. She felt her face redden and pushed back her chair.

"Sorry, just have to go to... You know."

"Sure. It's behind you, between those feral-looking parrots."

Elena splashed water on her face in the small and dimly-lit bathroom. Its ceiling was decorated with tiny glowing constellations. They blurred against the dark blue painted tiles. Elena realised her eyes were moist with more than tap water. What was happening to her? She was such a sponge for emotion these days. She looked in the mirror, removing up a speck of mascara that had stuck to her cheekbone. The neckline of her dress was probably an inch too low for her liking but—fuck it—this was London, not Bucharest, and she could cope with the admiring glances.

Returning from the bathroom, a ruddy-faced man in a business suit brushed boozily past her in the hall and squeezed one of her breasts with a fleshy paw. For a split second, Elena could not process what had happened. Then the rage flooded in.

"What the fuck?"

She pushed the man violently away from her and, pleasingly, he slipped on a piece of tissue paper on the tiled floor and fell on his arse, knocking over a small pot plant in the process. He grunted animal-like and bewildered staff appeared, not knowing who they should help and how.

"She fucking assaulted me!" the idiot complained, picking himself up and batting away the hands of an over-eager waiter.

“Elena!”

The familiar voice and presence of Robin, back in charge as PC Yarmouth, burst upon the scene just as the man who had assaulted Elena began to gesticulate towards her. Elena backed away, into Yarmouth—into Robin’s chest.

“He touch my breast! He attack me.”

Minutes later, the idiot was being marched, handcuffed, from the restaurant, Yarmouth having called a few of his buddies in a passing patrol car. The restaurant had offered them a free dessert on the house, but their evening had been destroyed.

“What a total cunt,” he said forcefully. “Sorry but I hate guys like that.”

“Not exactly my favourite as well,” she replied, wondering what would happen next.

In the street outside, Robin took out a pack of cigarettes and offered Elena one. She shook her head, taking a mental point off Robin’s tally then adding several back on for his chivalry and resourcefulness, then shaking off the whole ridiculous score card. She was awful on dates. Dates? Was that really what they had had? Ana would rib her mercilessly.

“Shit!”

Elena looked at her phone for the time. Quarter past ten. The film would have ended almost half an hour ago.

“What’s up?”

“I need to get to Prince Charles cinema. I’m super late. Can you direct me?”

“I can do better than that. Come on. It’s about five minutes away and I know all the short-cuts.”

He reached out a hand and she took it as they dashed across the street between cars. His hand was warm, and he grasped hers firmly. For perhaps the first time since arriving in London, Elena felt safe.

CHAPTER 9

Ana enjoyed *The Princess Bride* a lot more than she expected to. All mum had told her about it was that it was supposed to be some sort of classic funny fantasy film. It looked a bit juvenile at first. But as she relaxed with her pick and mix and let it wash over her, she found herself giving into to the silly jokes, questionable effects, and cameos from comedians that I guess you'd recognise if you were, like, eighty or something.

The cinema was only a third full, which oddly made her less self-conscious, and there were a lot of 'loners' there. Plus, the guy who had torn her ticket and shone his torch down the aisle for her had been cute. He looked mixed-race and had an impressive set of sideburns that made his ratty little moustache all the more absurd in comparison. Yet he'd had a friendly face, a gangly charm and Ana guessed he wasn't that much older than her—perhaps seventeen or eighteen.

When the end credits rolled and the lights went up, the gangly usher appeared, cleaning up spilt popcorn and drinks cups with a brush and a sort of shovel on a stick. He looked at Ana and grinned briefly and awkwardly.

"Enjoy the film?"

"It was all right," Ana shrugged. "I liked the tiny bald one who kept saying 'indubitably' a lot."

She'd decided to use the word 'indubitably' as soon as humanly possible, once she'd Googled its meaning.

"Wallace Shawn. Did you know he's also a playwright?"

"That funny guy with the lisp? Really?"

"Yep. You should check out *My Dinner with Andre*. He co-wrote that and stars. Two guys having lunch in New York. That's the whole film."

"Sounds great," she said, rolling her eyes.

Deadly boring more like, but Chris (as his name badge revealed) was reddening a little, so Ana decided to humour him.

"You know a lot about films."

"Well, I do work in a cinema. I mean, I love movies. I'm going to film school next year."

"Cool."

"What about you? You at college?"

College. She loved him a little bit already. He surely couldn't believe she was seventeen.

"Not yet. Summer holidays. I was thinking maybe I'd be a writer. Or a dancer. Maybe both."

A writer? Where had that come from?

"I'd better go," she said. "My mu.... My friend will be waiting."

Chris stepped aside with his brush and pan, clanging it loudly against the seats behind him. She almost made it to the door before he piped up again.

"Look, if you want to come again, I can get you a cheaper ticket."

There was no way she could tell him she was there on a child discount already.

"Why?"

The question came out a lot more aggressively than she'd intended.

"We're building customer loyalty."

Chris seemed proud of his reply, so she let it hang.

"Thanks. Maybe. See you."

Then she stepped back out into the half-light of the foyer with the little snack kiosk and a view of the back of another, much grander, cinema. Why were they all clustered together? she wondered.

Elena was nowhere to be seen. Ana hung around the foyer for a few minutes, feeling awkward. She'd said goodbye to Chris as coolly as she'd been able to. Having to say hello again while waiting for her mum to collect her would just be too embarrassing. She kept one eye on the street outside, another on the corridor leading down to the screens.

After fifteen minutes it was too much to bear. Ana stepped outside, looked up and down the street, saw no sign of her mum. She looked at her phone, which she'd kept on silent in the cinema. No missed calls. Elena was twenty minutes late.

"You okay?"

Ana spun round—Chris was leaning against the wall behind her, taking out a packet of cigarettes. He seemed to fight a small inner battle within himself then held out the packet towards her. Marlboro Lights. She was sorely tempted, but shook her head.

"My friend's late. She texted me, said she was at Bar Italia. Can you direct me?"

She could easily have looked it up herself on Google Maps, were she really going there, but she wanted him to show her. Chris was a good six inches taller than her as he hunched over her phone and began describing how what she saw on the tiny screen related to reality. He smelled of cigarettes, hair gel and, very faintly of sweat. She liked it.

"So, just past the Eastern side of Chinatown, Gerrard Street, can't miss it, lots of lanterns, stinks a bit. Then up past the fire station..."

She didn't want to tell him she was staying in a backpackers' hostel or that she was new to the UK, though he probably guessed by her accent.

"So where are you from?"

And there was the question.

"Bucharest. Well, just outside. Romania."

"I see. Economic migrant."

"Oh sure, reduce me to label, why not?"

Her vehemence surprised them both.

"Sorry, I'm a bit touchy about the whole anti-immigrant bullshit," she said.

"Brexit? Yeah, well, we're not to blame in London. We wanted you guys. London's a melting pot, innit? Look at me. Mum's from Mozambique, dad's half French and they met in Morocco, went travelling together, landed here and stayed."

"Sweet. Well, I'd better go. Coffee calling."

She grinned, spun on her heels, and gave him a little wave as she headed up towards the restaurants and paper lanterns. He waved back, affecting a casual drag on his cigarette. She could see right through his artless posing.

On the other hand—coffee calling? Jeez.

Elena and Robin reached the cinema at a jog. He'd let go of her hand after crossing Shaftesbury Avenue, but the memory of that touch lingered. She shook the confusing associations off and yanked open the cinema doors. There were a few couples loitering in the foyer between screenings, plus one gangly youth with an unconvincing moustache but no sign of Ana.

Elena approached the youth, who was eyeing them both with curiosity.

"Have you seen young girl waiting by herself? She was in eight o'clock screening. My daughter Ana."

The kid looked a little dazed as he processed the question.

"Em, yes. I sent her to Bar Italia."

"You did what?"

"We must have just missed her," said Yarmouth.

"Sorry miss, she said she was meeting.... friends."

Elena groaned.

"When did she leave?"

"About fifteen minutes ago. I'm sure she'll still be there?"

Elena dashed back outside, heading back the way they had come, Robin in tow.

Back at the hostel, Ana clumped back upstairs, preparing the devastating expression of hurt and world-weariness with which she would flatten her mother. How the fuck could she have forgotten her own

daughter? Out drinking with a police officer, supposedly because of some random woman who'd stood them up. What a loser Elena was.

So distracted was Ana by these thoughts that she didn't question the additional resistance behind the dormitory door after the light clicked green and the spare card the night manager had given her let her in. She forced back what turned out to be a chair piled with bags and clothes, causing one of the German women kneeling between her friend's thighs to turn fearfully, hair ruffled, face sweaty.

The woman underneath her shrieked and grabbed for some clothing. Ana backed out of the room, embarrassment flushing her face. On the way down the stairs, her embarrassment turned into anger.

She stormed into the foyer and accosted Michael.

"There's a pair of weird women up there, doing sex!"

"Sorry?"

"I said, there's Germans doing stuff in our room. Is allowed?"

"It's not... recommended. I'm really sorry."

"Well, make them stop. I need to have a shower and my stuff's in there."

"Of course. I mean, you absolutely shouldn't feel you can't access your room."

"No shit. Are you going to do anything? Go up and make them stop."

Michael looked decidedly awkward.

"As I'm sure you're aware, this is a LGBT-friendly environment."

"What?" Ana exploded. "I don't care what they do with each other, I just want to get my stuff!"

"I don't really think I'd feel comfortable..."

In that moment, a flustered Elena and stony-faced Robin burst into the foyer. A three-way argument ensued, with Michael in mollifying mode and Robin as out-of-his-depth mediator. Eventually, free soft drinks and two free night's accommodation in a private room notwithstanding, three things were clear (at least to Ana, who held all the cards).

Elena was a neglectful mother, Ana an abused child and they couldn't possibly stay in the hostel another night.

CHAPTER 10

Elena had been grateful for nearly fifteen hours now and was finding it exhausting. The suspicious part of her felt the need to question just where all this kindness was coming from. Her inner pragmatist told the cynic inside to just shut up. Robin really wanted to help her and Ana and that was that. A third voice then interjected, a needling voice that resented yet another lover 'rescuing' her from a difficult situation. Plus, the men in Elena and Ana's lives had always been the problem; it felt weird for one now to provide a solution.

Still, it was only one night at Robin's place and then she would pay her own way. It had been a busy and hopefully lucrative morning. Robin lived in Ealing, which meant shuttling back West on the same line she'd taken from the airport, albeit in the opposite direction. They had arrived at almost midnight, an exhausted Ana falling asleep on Elena's shoulder in a way she hadn't done since she was about eight. The familiar warmth and pressure against her breastbone made Elena nostalgic for the carefree, charming child her daughter had once been.

Parenthood was a constant state of grieving as a bigger, more angular and awkward child replaced each simpler, younger version. She was just getting used to Ana version 14 and OS 15.0 was waiting just around the corner.

"Nearly there," Robin said, watching Elena's eyes begin to close involuntarily.

The next station is South Ealing, announced the tannoy, perkily.

As they'd stumbled out into the quiet Ealing suburbs, there had been little to see. A few restaurants and pubs letting their last customers out, Saturday night kids wandering home in small but noisy groups. The streets were noticeably greener and leafier, Elena noticed as Ana stumbled along, arm in arm with her. Robin got out his keys between a Polish delicatessen and a solicitors' office, rattled a door open and they clumped up to his small bachelor flat on the second floor.

Somehow Elena had expected more. Robin had one front room, one small bedroom, a kitchenette, and a separate bathroom with shower cubicle but no actual bath. The shower curtain was mouldy at its base. The bedroom was littered with papers and clothes, the lounge noticeably tidier. Elena got the impression Robin spent as little time here as possible.

"Mi casa es su casa," Robin announced, immediately seeming to regret the faux-Spanish. "Make yourself at home."

After much argument, Elena and Ana agreed to take the bedroom while Robin took a sleeping bag to the sofa. Before they went to bed, Robin made them all a cup of tea, a pre-sleep ritual he maintained helped him sleep. Then he found them fresh bedding, another kind gesture Elena tried to protest against (but not too strongly, there was a bit of a "single man" odour about Robin's bedclothes). Ana was wandering idly, picking things up and putting them back down. Elena was too tired to tell her off for this small impertinence and Robin didn't seem to mind. Ana examined a photo of Robin, out of uniform, with his arm around a diminutive Indian girl, taken in a sunlit park.

"Me and the ex. Don't ask."

Elena had no idea what he meant, and didn't.

When Robin had said his goodnights and Elena and Ana had thanked him once more, Ana slumped down on the side of the bed near the window. Since childhood she had liked sleeping with a slight breeze blowing in from an open window.

"This side's mine."

Elena didn't argue. She slid open a drawer, looking for somewhere to put her glasses.

A paperback, some cufflinks, business cards for 'DC Yarmouth', strips of chewing gum, two miniature in-flight bottles of gin and an open packet of condoms, ribbed, half-full. She shut the drawer rapidly. She had forgotten that there were lives as lonely as her own.

The following morning, a Sunday, brought thin sunlight and an autumnal chill. Elena woke unusually early, at just after 7am, and decided to make breakfast as a more tangible thank you to PC Yarmouth.

Half an hour later, having found the Polish deli already open downstairs, Elena had found the pots and pans in Robin's kitchen and was frying thinly sliced Kielbasa sausage, eggs, and buttering rolls. She'd retrieved a dusty cafetiere from the back of Robin's Spartan cupboards and brewed a potful of Italian coffee. Plates and glasses of fresh orange juice plus Ana's favourite cereal stood in place on the small side-table she'd wiped clean in the lounge. Making breakfast was a little presumptuous and Elena felt her heart flutter a little as Robin, patting down a tuft of hair, entered the kitchen.

"Smell's amazing. What is it?"

She tried to pronounce the name of the sausage, got it on the second attempt.

"This is really nice of you. Thanks."

Slightly stiffly, Robin leaned in and brushed his lips against Elena's cheek. He stepped back into the doorway, awkward in the narrow frame.

"Is the least I could do. Plus, I might have found job while I was downstairs."

Oh really?

"There was a card in window of the deli. Wanting Eastern European translation services for a charity. All I need is mobile phone and I can work from anywhere. I'm going to call them tomorrow."

"That's brilliant. You're English is nearly perfect, so I'm sure they'll want you."

"Nearly perfect?" She teased.

"Totally perfect. What I meant to say."

"Why don't you take coffee to table?" she said with a smile.

Robin grabbed the cafetiere and three mugs and almost bumped into Ana in the doorway.

"Well, this is... domestic," Ana said, in Romanian.

Elena rolled her eyes at her daughter as Robin edged past her.

"Cheeky. And English, remember. I'm amazed you're up."

"Me too. It's so quiet here. Birds woke me."

"Go sit down. Your cereal's on the table."

"Cool."

It did feel surreally natural to be sitting down with Robin and Ana to their basic Sunday breakfast. Robin introduced her to the joys of HP sauce and his mother's gooseberry preserve and, midway through his second cup of coffee, dropped his bombshell.

"I think I might have found you a flat."

"A what?" Said Elena, almost choking on her mouthful.

"A place to stay. Rent-free, well, for the first six months at least. It's no big deal; the guy owes me a favour. It's a bit of a dump but maybe better than nothing?"

She could have hugged him. The inner voices began to niggle away at her again, but she decided to go with the flow.

Ana did the washing up. She even offered, which heightened the odd feeling Elena had that this was some sort of dream. Then they took their showers, made themselves presentable and headed back to the underground, looking for all the world like a family unit out for a Sunday stroll.

She hadn't thought of Frances all morning.

CHAPTER 11

Yarmouth had thought of Malcolm Carver's place when Elena had first asked about a cheap hostel, but had of course immediately discounted it. Carver was his confidential informant (or had been) and he wasn't yet ready to sour that arrangement. Perhaps it was because Yarmouth still harboured hopes of one day being invited back to join DI Fleischer and his buddies at the West End.

Nevertheless, he felt himself compelled to help and not just because he found Elena strangely alluring (or "hot stuff" as McPherson would have put it). In the tenacious Romanian and her daughter, he saw echoes of his own family's story. His mother had been a single parent since Yarmouth had been eight years old, his father having been killed in an accident on one of the North Sea rigs. Juggling the responsibilities of raising Robin and his big sister Maisie in that unforgivingly small seaside town in Fife while holding down a succession of thankless jobs had been Karen Yarmouth's struggle. An Englishwoman abroad, raising two wild fatherless kids, mum had fought many of the same fights Elena would now face. Since Robin could so easily alleviate some of this difficulty for her, why wouldn't he?

And so, he had gone, cap in hand, to a man he despised. A verminous but very well-connected ex-pimp turned slum landlord who had amassed, through crime, intimidation and, Yarmouth had to grudgingly admit, some business nous, a large slice of Soho real estate. Much of the area had been gentrified and sold upmarket for flats and restaurants in the last twenty years and Carver had been one of the chief beneficiaries. However, it had proved hard for the old lag to entirely leave behind his shady ways, despite an armful of prison tattoos that should have reminded him of his earlier poor choices.

One of Carver's warrens of tiny bedsits that had once housed 'models' plying their ancient and horizontal trade had been the site of a drugs killing some months back and forensics had just finished with it. It was between tenants and Carver had been agitating for the boys in blue to clear out and let "an honest man do an honest day's business", a phrase that had made Yarmouth snort Starbucks latte through his nose. Carver still owed him one, though and now it was time to collect.

Two floors up behind an anonymous-looking Dean Street doorway, Yarmouth located the bijou office of Carver Holdings and, out of uniform for obvious reasons, flung open the front door. A bored-looking receptionist put away her Harry Potter book and cast a baleful eye over him.

"Have you got an appointment?"

"Just tell him Yarmouth's here. He'll find a slot in his schedule for me."

"Mr Carver's out in meetings until four."

"No, he's not. I can hear him ranting behind that door."

This was true. A shadow crossed the frosted pane in the door on the far wall, between a thriving pot plant that was beginning to flirt with the light fittings and a less thriving tank of languorous terrapins. A raised voice declaimed in an East End accent; there were strong suggestions of fist-waving.

"Take a seat. When he's off the phone, I'll tell him you're there."

The receptionist, Janine, offered up a plush white sofa beneath some ugly art and behind a coffee table stacked with style magazines.

Yarmouth considered it, but not for long. Carver was not a fellow who respected those who waited, and Yarmouth needed to show a strong hand. In five strides he was invading Carver's inner sanctum and making the big man pause and re-adjust mid-flow.

"...Well tell the fucker that if he doesn't have the deposit, he can sling his hook. I'm not waiting another day for that pair of cunts to hum and haw! I've got a family of chink... of Chinese who are gagging for it. I don't have to provide any furniture either as they don't use any where they're from. Or is that the Japs? I can never remember."

Carver threw an exasperated look Yarmouth's way, seeming not to object to the intrusion as much as the phone call he was having.

"Debbie, dearest, either they sign the contract and hand over the cash by five, or they can fuck off back to Poland. And no, they cannot have a fridge-bloody-freezer. Goodbye."

The last word was delivered in a sort of singsong as Carver slammed the phone receiver back down (or would have if it hadn't been a sliver-shaped designer artefact that required careful slotting into a base module).

"Fucksake Robbo, can't I just go back to running hookers and dope, instead of dealing with these knobheads? At least you know where you stand with sex-deviants and junkies."

Yarmouth couldn't help but laugh. Horrible person though Carver was, he could be entertaining.

"What can I do you for, son? Hear you're back in the zoot suit. Not today though, which I'm guessing makes this not exactly an official visit."

Damn. Carver had just played the first hand and it was a good one.

"Had a bit of an altercation with a superior, as I'm sure you heard. They put me back on the beat. Good news though: I got the Soho detail, so you'll probably see a lot more of me from now on."

"Always nice to see a familiar face, my son. Now what can I do for the boys in blue?"

"It's more of a personal favour."

"Oh really? Now I'm intrigued. Look, take a seat, will you? You're wearing out the Axminster."

Yarmouth flumped down on an armchair while Carver sat down behind his desk, hands positioned into a little tent on the varnished wood. Don Corleone couldn't have looked more poised.

"You've been a reliable CHIS, Carver. I'll say that for you."

Carver winced.

"Hey, less of the confidential informant stuff round here, if you don't mind. I'm legit now but there's folk might hold grudges if they knew about my little tip offs."

"That's kind of what I'm counting on."

A darker cloud passed across Carver's face now.

"Look Robbo..."

"PC Yarmouth if you don't mind."

"Okay, PC, whatever. We had a relationship of trust and honour."

"The operative word being 'had'. My responsibility to you ended when they bumped me off the detective desk. And Fleischer tells me you've been pretty uncooperative with my replacement."

"That nonce Kendall? I can't trust him. A man with my kind of... associations... has to be cautious."

"Point taken. Anyway, I have no intention of accidentally mentioning your collusion in, for example, our busting that burly gentleman from Ukraine with his six pituitary case brothers."

"Smirnov? Why the fuck would you...?"

"Well, I wouldn't. That's what I'm saying. I just need a little favour from you to, I don't know, reinforce my sense of trust and honour."

Carver sighed and sat back in his chair, no longer so amiable—or so confident.

"Spill. What do you want?"

Fifteen minutes later, Carver's receptionist was handing Yarmouth a packet of keys while Carver tapped disconsolately at his terrapin tank.

"Janine, did you feed these lazy fuckers? I think this one's dead."

Janine threw Carver a surprisingly confrontational look.

"Course I did. Just as you told me. One half spoonful each morning and at four o'clock."

"Should've got fish like everyone else round here."

Yarmouth smiled at Janice and stuffed the envelope into a side pocket.

"Well, it's been a pleasure as ever, Carver."

Carver didn't look up from the murky water of the tank, as he dipped a fountain pen below the surface to prod a terrapin. Gratifyingly it shrank into its shell.

"Three months, that's all. Then I'll want rent," he muttered.

"That seems perfectly fair to me."

"Fair? It's fucking thievery. You should arrest yourself."

Carver laughed bronchially and loudly, as if this were a bon mot worthy of Wilde.

"And Carver," said Yarmouth. "Needless to say, don't go mentioning this arrangement to Kendall, Fleischer or anyone at the Met."

Carver harrumphed a grudging agreement and started wiping his pen with a handkerchief.

“She’d better be worth it.”

Yarmouth hesitated at the door. He hadn’t said anything about who the keys were for. And now by stopping, he’d just validated Carver’s guess. He was about to turn and reiterate his warnings but thought better of it. Cool was the way to play it.

“See you later.”

“No doubt, Robbo, no doubt.”

Back in the street, Yarmouth took a deep lungful of Soho morning air. A sickly-sweet odour wafted across the road from a Chinese restaurant gearing up for lunch. A whiff of hot tar accompanied by an undercurrent of leaky drains added to the heady stench.

It was time to make Elena smile.

CHAPTER 12

Robin had to elbow open the door, behind which lay a pile of unopened mail, alongside a fragment of something he snatched up and stuffed into his pocket. Elena felt a flicker of suspicion that something was wrong, but quashed it.

A tiny vestibule containing only a forlorn side table and a round mirror with a crack across it opened into two rooms—a compact lounge with a tiny kitchenette off it and a sparsely-furnished bedroom whose wall was still adorned with a single left-behind poster. It displayed the imposing image of a frowning rapper with massive, tattooed arms cradling an Uzi in an inner-city backstreet. The juxtaposition was at once bizarre and strangely-fitting.

“Nice,” Ana couldn’t help but drawl.

Elena shot her a warning glance.

“Yeah, it’s a bit shitty but it is rent free, for the first three months at least,” Robin said.

“Why free?” Said Elena, trying to make the question sound as casual as possible.

“All I can say is the landlord owes me one.”

“Has it got Wi-Fi?” Ana asked.

Yarmouth scouted around the front room, locating a router behind a faded curtain. Its lights still blinked optimistically.

“Oddly enough, I think it does. Password is on the base.”

Elena walked around, feeling ungrateful even as she opened chipboard-fronted cupboards in the kitchenette and located the bathroom—a door in the hall she’d assumed was a closet led to a miniscule space into which a shower cubicle, toilet and Lilliputian hand basin had somehow all been crammed. Yarmouth had gone out of his way to help, and she appreciated more than she could adequately convey but this place stank—literally—of desperation. The lives lived here had not been easy. Bolthole was the English word that sprang to mind. Elena had read it in a novel recently. A place of refuge or escape.

“It’s just what we need. It’s perfect.”

“It’s a place to start, that’s what it is,” said Yarmouth, ruefully. “Look, I can show you Freecycle and how to get some cheap furniture if you like but I’ve got to get to my shift. Let’s meet soon, eh?”

Yarmouth stood hovering in the doorway from the lounge to the vestibule. Elena could just let him go if she wanted.

“Look, why don’t you come back after shift. I’ll cook. Something traditional. You like meatballs? I got a great dish my mother taught me.”

“I don’t know. I don’t finish until nine. I’d get here maybe nine thirty. That’s pretty late.”

“It’s not like we’re going anywhere,” Ana muttered.

Elena was grateful for the unexpected support and grabbed her daughter round the shoulder in an embrace that made both of them a little awkward.

“We eat late anyway. Come over.”

“Okay then. You’re on. I’ll bring wine. Assuming you drink, I mean.”

“I’m Romanian. I drink,” laughed Elena, knowing in that moment that she’d made a friend.

“See you later then. I’ll be in uniform, hope that’s okay.”

“Are you kidding? That’s essential,” said Ana.

Was her daughter flirting with Robin for her own sake or her mother’s? thought Elena fleetingly.

After Yarmouth left, Elena and Ana made a wish-list together. It was a thing they liked to do, both being pragmatic and idealistic at the same time. It began:

New curtains

Sofa

TV

Coffee table

Coffee pot

Teaspoons

Proper plates
Saucepans (3)
Kettle
Iron and Ironing board
and ended, somewhat optimistically:
PS5 (Ana)
Record player (Elena)
Fridge-Freezer

The list made them both feel better, like they had already transformed the blank canvas of their drab flat into a designer pad for a modern single parent and daughter.

A little later, Elena stood in the bedroom, having unpacked her suitcase and the small backpack she'd used as a carry-on. Her clothes lay folded in piles on the bed, depressingly small piles. Was this all she amounted to at thirty-two years of age? She quickly put them away, gratified that there were old hangers left in the walk-in cupboard. She felt a little more optimistic once her things were safely hidden away and she had showered and changed into what she was trying not to think of as her 'date night' outfit.

Torn away from Snapchat for a moment, Ana laughed when she saw what her mother had chosen, commenting on its low neckline and the jewellery she had added as a grace note. Elena asked her to help by chopping some vegetables and, for once, Ana complied without complaint.

Robin arrived a little early, around 9:15 and caught Elena having a steadying glass of wine as she compacted and rolled the meatballs and dropped them into the hot oil. He kissed her on the cheek rather more wetly than she was expecting while Ana watched from the doorway. The cooking smells and candles Ana had lit already made the place feel more home-like and inviting. As promised, Robin was in uniform, and Ana goggled at the paraphernalia of policing. Around the base of his jacket, which had four deep pockets, Robin wore handcuffs, a baton, a can of pepper spray, a torch and, most fascinatingly, a Taser.

"Can I have a shot of that?" Ana asked, eagerly.

Robin raised an eyebrow.

"That's not going to happen. You don't want to be on the receiving end of one of these, believe me. The CS spray's pretty horrible too, unless you enjoy rubbing hot chillies in your eyes."

"What about the cuffs? Will you be using them on mum later?"

"Ana!" objected Elena, coming at her daughter with a meaty spoon.

Pursued by Elena, Ana leapt over the sofa and hid behind the curtain. Elena returned to her cooking.

"Sorry about my daughter," she said, "Embarrassing mum is one of her all-time favourites."

"There's always the cuffs," Robin said, dangling them at Ana from one finger.

"Don't worry. I'm on my best behaviour with a cop in the house."

"We have house," Elena thought aloud.

The moment of silence that followed required something. Elena walked up to Robin and, heart beating unreasonably loudly, squeezed his upper arm, feeling a taut and lean muscle beneath the cloth. She whispered in his ear simply:

"Thank you."

Robin relaxed into the evening more than he had at the restaurant and Ana, true to her word, was on her best behaviour, lively and funny but letting the adults have their time too. On cue, as Robin leaned back in his chair with a satisfied expression, having finished the last mouthful of cheesecake, Ana excused herself and went into her room to continue catching up with her friends online.

"Do you ever worry what she's looking at? Who she's talking to?" Robin asked.

"No, not really, she knows not to be stupid."

"It's just... I guess in my profession you suspect the worst. The things we see."

"Should I worry? I put parental locks on her internet?"

“Kids can get around those, if they’re clever.”

“Why you say this? Now you got me worried.”

“Forget it. She seems a sensible kid.”

But Elena couldn’t forget what Robin was suggesting and felt irritated that he’d injected a note of darkness into the evening.

“Maybe it’s habit for you,” she suggested, partly to herself. “You know how ugly the world is so you’re always looking for it”.

“Perhaps. I can also recognise when it’s beautiful too. Like this meal, the way you’ve transformed this place with a few candles and your things. And you.”

Elena was surprised to see Robin swallow and pause before he finished his thought.

“You’re beautiful Elena. Sorry, that’s a daft thing to say.”

“Shut up.”

Elena put a finger over his lips and Robin let it linger there before grasping it and pulling her towards him over the table. They kissed, tentative at first, then deeply and hungrily. Elena could taste the food on his breath, an aftertaste of the beer he’d preferred to wine.

They broke apart, both suddenly a little shy. Robin looked about to say something, then evidently thought better of it. Elena broke the silence.

“Will you do me huge favour?”

Robin looked up expectantly at Elena as she cleared the plates from the table.

“As long as you don’t ask me to kill a man.”

It was evidently a daft joke, but it resonated in ways Robin couldn’t have guessed.

“I was thinking more like you do the washing up,” Elena said.

“Of course!”

Robin hurriedly pushed his chair back and took the plates from their hands. Elena went in for another kiss and this one felt easier, more natural. Looking a little dazed, Robin followed Elena into the kitchen, where he turned on a tap that made a weird repetitive clunk as it poured surprisingly hot water.

While Robin did the washing up, Elena tidied up the lounge and lit a couple of candles. Her heart was pounding. Was this a good idea? She decided not to think too hard about it, moving Robin’s jacket from the sofa to a hook behind the door. Robin was whistling a song she half recognised—something about surprises—as she found herself slipping a hand inside his jacket pocket.

The thing he’d tried to conceal was still there—a fragment of police tape. Of course. That’s how he’d known this place was vacant. She was living in a crime scene. A chill ran through her, one she tried to dispel with another glug of wine. It almost worked. She put her smile back in place and went into the kitchen to help Robin with the drying.

They could have slept together. Elena knew he wanted to; she had too, before finding what was concealed in Robin’s pocket. Now it felt too risky, too soon. There were still secrets between them. Instead, they spent an hour on the sofa talking, cuddling, and kissing like teenagers, facing an empty, painted-over fireplace into which Elena had placed a single white church candle. Then, with a theatrical yawn and stretch, Robin announced that he had an early shift the next morning and the spell was broken. Elena felt a weird mix of disappointment and relief.

A final kiss in the doorway and he was gone, handcuffs rattling as he descended the creaky stairwell. Elena blew out the candles and looked in on Ana, who had fallen asleep in her pyjamas cradling her iPhone, her head resting against Edmundo, a stuffed elephant toy she’d kept as the only remnant of childhood. Elena wondered when she’d know that her little girl was an actual woman. She already had the athletic frame and subtle curves of her mother and a little of her father’s jawline, an unhappier resemblance. Fifteen next year. In Latin America that would make her a woman.

This though was England and Ana was still young enough to be tucked in by her mother. Ana stirred a little as Elena pulled the cut-price duvet out from under her and laid it over her. Then she plugged in the phone for Ana, for whom having a powerless phone was akin to being rendered mute.

Elena could still feel the warmth of Robin's embrace, the strangely comical sensation of his baton pushing into her hip (he'd made the obvious joke) as she made sure the front door was properly shut. What was she doing? A flame of guilt flickered through her; what if Frances returned?

The very thought was absurd. Clearly Frances had absconded, taking her money and her fantasies of a new life. She'd have to build new fantasies now.

What was that? A crash of glass, then female laughter. Ana opened the door, looked out into the hall. Light was gleaming in the frosted glass panel above the door opposite. Flat D.

A latch turned and Elena almost retreated but curiosity got the better of her. Two men in their forties or fifties emerged from the flat opposite, evidently drunk, wearing rumpled business suits. One turned and leered at Elena, winking a lazy eyelid.

"Fuck sake, its hottie central, this place," he muttered in a drunk's approximation of a whisper.

"Quietly, gentlemen please!" came a stern but teasing voice from within. "The neighbours."

"No worries. Next week eh, love?"

"Text me. We'll see."

As the men stumbled down the stairwell, a svelte black woman, Somali possibly, appeared in the doorway as Elena pretended to examine the letterbox of her front door.

"Is the music too loud? I'm really sorry," said the woman, who was heavily made up, her silk dressing down gaping at the neckline to reveal an impressive bosom.

The make-up and dramatically spiralling hair falling across her face made it hard to tell but Elena guessed she was perhaps twenty-five. She seemed a little tipsy.

"No, not at all. I just moved here. Elena."

Elena offered a hand. The Somalian ignored it and planted a kiss on her cheek.

"Don't be so formal. We're sisters. I'm Qamar. Carver just set you up, did he?"

"I'm sorry."

"Mr Carver. That's his flat you're in."

"Er, not exactly."

"I'm sorry, I thought you were working."

"Working?"

"Fuck, this is embarrassing. Forget I said anything. Just let me know if the music's too loud. We'll chat soon."

With an awkward smile, Qamar shut the door, a swirl of dance music replaced by a low bass thud, darkness filling the hallway once again.

It took Elena a couple of minutes to register what her neighbour had probably meant by 'working'.

CHAPTER 13

Elena had a dilemma—she had a job interview with the translation agency she'd seen advertising in the deli window. There was nobody to leave Ana with and, although her daughter was a pretty savvy fourteen-year-old, Elena was wary of leaving her up to her own devices. It was pouring with rain, a cold, slashing downpour that rendered umbrellas futile. There was little chance that Ana would venture out in that, but Elena worried about the implications of what she'd found in Robin's pocket as well as her neighbour's likely profession. Was she really a sex worker, or had Elena got the wrong end of the stick? How would you even ask?

Until Elena was sure that whatever had happened in her flat was not a threat and that her neighbour was as benign as she'd seemed, she couldn't leave Ana there. Which presented two problems. She couldn't really tell her daughter why she was insisting she come out into the filthy weather with her. Nor could she really leave her with anyone. Robin was at work and, in any case, had done her enough favours. She knew nobody else to turn to.

"I'm not a baby mum. Just leave me here and I'll read or something. Or watch the imaginary TV."

"I can't do that Elena. Not until I know the neighbourhood is safe."

"You do remember where we come from? Compared to Glina, this place is heaven. It's all posh restaurants and cafes."

"And Robin told me it had a bit of a seedy past. Strip clubs, stuff like that. Just let me be sure before I leave my only child alone, eh?"

"Okay. Tell you what. I liked that cinema you took me to. Despite you totally forgetting me and everything. It was cool. Can I go there?"

"Well... I don't know. Is there anything on?"

"Romeo and Juliet. It's got Leo di Caprio in it when he was young and hot. Two o'clock."

"Shakespeare? You want to see a Shakespeare play? Are you ill?"

Elena put the back of her hand against Ana's head, affecting concern.

"Very funny. It's a modern version. Hawaiian shirts and stuff. Can you take me?"

It did solve her problem and the film was long enough that she could maybe meet Robin for coffee too – he'd texted her that he'd be on patrol and due a break around three.

"Fine, let's go. Sensible coat though. It's foul out there."

A little later, Elena felt a tugging of doubt when Ana stopped at the top of the street upon which the little cinema hid. Ana dismissed her with a gesture.

"You can go. Give me the cash and I'll get my own ticket."

"Okay Miss Independent, if it's important to you. Will ten do? I'm still getting the hang of this money."

"Twenty, more like."

Elena paid up without protest, watching her daughter trot off down the road, weaving between tourists and Chinese delivery men servicing the local restaurants. Again, she was struck by the speed with which Ana was growing up. Was it sensible to let her loose in London? Elena made sure Ana went into the Prince Charles then stood outside for ten minutes, until she was almost late for her interview. She wouldn't put it past Ana to have sneaked out and gone roaming once her mother was safely away. It's exactly what Elena would have done in the same circumstances.

Ana felt her heart beating vividly under her coat as she approached the kiosk. Chris was there, serving a couple of twentysomething arty types, bearded and plaid-shirted. He flicked his eyes up to see Ana and smiled. That smile melted her thin pretence at reserve, and she beamed back.

"Hey you! Back already? You're becoming a right cineaste."

"A what-ass?"

"It means you love film."

"Whatever. I just need to get out of the rain."

"It's pretty grim out there, isn't it? You can put that away."

He spoke this last sentence sotto voce and Ana took a moment to realise he meant the £20 note she was brandishing.

"Your money's no good here miss."

"What?"

Was that him blushing?

"I mean, jeez, I'll get you in for nothing."

"Really?"

"Just be cool, though. I'm tearing the tickets in a moment anyway, when Ludo takes over. Spend it on popcorn or something. I'd recommend the salt and sweet mixed."

"Wow. Thanks! What did I do to deserve this?"

"I dunno. You brightened up my day a little."

Again, the shy turn. God, he really fancied her, didn't he? Ana realised she had absolutely no idea what to do with that information. She bought the recommended popcorn and a Coke and took a seat in the foyer while Chris served the people behind her. She opened Snapchat and began updating her friend Sophia on her new home and 'the hot guy in the cinema'. After a bit of banter, Sophia dropped that some news that sent a strange cold thrill through her.

Sophia had had sex.

She'd broken the pact. Ana and Sophia had been best friends since they were six and nine months ago, they'd agreed they'd talk to one another before making the decision to sleep with a boy. What was worse was that Sophia was six months younger than her, having only just turned 14. What was even worse is that Ana had never even heard of this boy Petru.

"It all happened really fast. His family only moved here last month. He's so amazing. Plays the guitar. And he's fifteen", Sophia said, breathlessly, her face half in shade as she walked through a Bucharest market.

Ana went text only. She didn't want to see her friend's face right now.

—sorry, can't do video. bad signal. what happened?

—we drank loads of cider and were snogging. in his parents' place when they were out. we knew we had hours alone. it just kind of happened.

—you make it sound like an accident. his dick just fell into you by mistake?

—are you pissed off?

Ana took a moment before replying. Counting internally to ten the way her grandmother had once advised.

—no. i'm not exactly thrilled though. we said we would wait until we were 16.

—i know but it just felt right. i love him and i think he feels the same.

—how did it feel?

This time it was Sophia who took a while to respond.

—i was scared at first. he was all over me, then his hand went in my pants. it felt amazing, much better than when i do it myself. i meant to say no but i kind of didn't. then when he went in me it was sore at first but then it felt awesome.

"You can come in now."

Chris's voice startled Ana, who was feeling hot and agitated, with a familiar moistness and tingling starting down below that she had no way to satisfy. He stood before her, one hand rubbing the tight, shiny curls over his small skull nervously. Instinctively she thrust the phone into an inside pocket.

"Top secret?"

"Em. Totally. Girl stuff."

Ana tried to laugh but her hotly flushing face made it feel forced.

"You can go into the cinema now. It's a bit cooler than here. Air-con's broken in the foyer."

He was being kind, reading her flustered skin as overheated. For a moment she wondered what it would be like if he took her into the cinema and pushed down onto her and...

"Sure. Same place?"

"It's the only screen we got. Turn left at the bottom."

His hand brushed the small of her back as she started on the steps. A moment's boldness made her turn.

"What do you think of it? The film?"

He affected a scholarly pause for thought.

"Bit like all Luhrmann's films, totally mental and OTT. Not much subtlety. But it's got some power too. Di Caprio's as good as ever, Danes is hot. It's passionate, a bit crazy, like teenage love."

Teenage love. How old was he, exactly?

"Cool. See you later, then."

With that, she trotted happily down the carpeted steps into the musty auditorium, just knowing his eyes were on her all the way down.

CHAPTER 14

At the end of the briefing, Sergeant Brompton injected a note of unusual urgency into his Monday morning drawl. Urgency was hard to do in a thick Dudley accent.

"You want to be keeping a particular eye out for two chancers who have been lifting mobile phones and iPads on a scooter. Well, on several scooters actually. In fact, it might be more than two lads, they're always helmeted and masked up, so the CCTV is not telling us much."

"Helpful," muttered Constable Gibran, a wryly skinny veteran officer of twenty-two years serving.

"They've taken about forty devices at last count and keep moving about, making it hard to keep up with them. We've sent bikes out but they're wary little buggers," added Brompton.

"Age? Race?" piped up Dave 'Pikey' Threave (so called because his dad owned a field of static caravans in Margate).

"Unknown. They keep themselves well-wrapped up. Brown skin though, from the few glimpses people have had."

"Oi oi! No racial profiling sir," quipped Thomson from a corner of the room, exaggerating his natural Jamaican burr. "Black lives matter, innit?"

"I'm just telling it like it is, smartarse. Anyway, you see these guys, call it in. We'll have bikes with you ASAP. Do not try to apprehend them alone."

Various nods, grumbles and noises approximating agreement. The men and women of West Central headed out to their bikes, squad cars and vans for drop-offs.

When Yarmouth had been 'moved sideways' from DC to plain old C, he'd angled for a car patrol, but it hadn't been forthcoming. Instead, he found himself grinding down the shoe-leather on foot patrol, something communities wanted but management begrudged as a painfully old-fashioned and impractical way of policing a city as huge as London.

Technically, he was window-dressing, a PR exercise in 'community policing', forever condemned to taking reports of stolen bicycles and broken shop windows. On an especially exciting day there might be a fight in Berwick Street market, or a pharmacy might be broken into. Soho, however, was a fairly cushy detail, it had to be said, much quieter in reality than its sleazy past might suggest.

It came as something of a shock therefore when the afternoon suddenly turned into something like an episode of *The Sweeney*. Yarmouth had been paired that morning with a new recruit, a wide-eyed young man called Jamie Conover. PC Conover wore the self-conscious look of someone new to the uniform, ultra-aware of the effect it had on people.

Although many folks were blasé about uniformed police officers on the street (and a tiny minority were actually appreciative) there did seem to be a sizable group who, without being felons in any way (probably) seemed to avoid eye-contact, stiffen slightly, or affect a forced nonchalance when passing officers on the street. It was unsettling at first but something Conover would quickly grow used to. As Yarmouth had told the 25-year-old that morning "it's called respect and it's actually a good thing."

Yarmouth was quite enjoying being the 'old timer' for once, pointing out the alleyway haunts of drug-dealers, nightclubs where trouble had taken place and market stalls raided for stolen merchandise.

"This young Syrian guy came up to me a couple of weeks ago, bold as brass, with a kit-bag full of dodgy Blu-Rays. Tried to sell me a copy of *Cop Land*, would you believe. Didn't even seem to think it was a crime."

"Did you nick him?"

"Didn't seem worth the paperwork. Gave him a caution and told him we'd not be so generous next time round. He seemed genuinely shocked that you can't sell iffy bootlegs of the new *Marvel* movie while it's still in the cinema."

"But he was openly committing a crime. Shouldn't you have acted anyway?"

"Well, technically, yes, of course. But look at this guy's life. He's probably spent months stuck in a shanty town in Calais, paid all he owns to be sneaked over on a container ship or gone the legit route and spend months applying for asylum, his whole life destroyed."

"Isn't it the court's job to make those calls?"

"Again, technically, yes. But clogging up the courts with countless petty cases where people are just trying to make ends meet. Refugees, seriously poor people. I don't see the point."

Yarmouth suddenly remembered he was talking to an impressionable stranger.

"You do realise this is entirely between you and me, all this?"

"Sure. I'm just not clear on..."

"Oof!"

Yarmouth was jerked round by the impact of a small scooter, whose pillion passenger had clonked his shoulder with a rucksack. Neither driver nor passenger reacted as they sped up the street and cut down a pedestrian alleyway.

"Hey! He took my phone! Officer!"

A middle-aged woman, executively dressed, had rushed breathlessly up to them, waving like a drowning person signalling to shore. Reacting physically before he knew entirely why, Yarmouth belted up the road and down the alleyway, bellowing behind him.

"Stay there!"

The bike had been negotiating a group of tourists snapping photos of each other and was only now crossing leaving the lane and cutting across another road, causing a taxi to screech to a stop, horn blaring.

Yarmouth, who had gone through a marathon-running phase in his late twenties, pounded past the startled Koreans and vaulted a pile of litter sacks, before dodging through the cars and entering the next lane.

He knew he should already have called for back-up and hoped Conover had done just that, though he knew the rookie had probably forgotten protocol already. Yarmouth also knew the small lane had been fenced off at its other end by the massive perimeter of the Crossrail development. The riders had made a big mistake.

Yarmouth heard the roar of an idling bike at the end of the alley, its riders skittish as squirrels, trying to decide whether to try to scale the eight-foot-high metal fence into the building site beyond or try something even more desperate.

"Stop where you are!"

Taser in one hand, baton in the other, Yarmouth faced off against his nemeses, who levelled off the bike and revved menacingly.

"Don't even think about it! Switch off the bike and step aside," Yarmouth said, trying to maintain the level, authoritative tone he'd been taught.

Nothing from the men at the end of the street.

"I'll use this if I have to," warned Yarmouth, feeling a quaver entering his voice.

Nothing from the thieves. The rider revved and Yarmouth raised his Taser.

Then, with a brief wheelie, the bike roared towards him. From only twenty feet away, it was on him in seconds, the leather-clad and masked riders holding on tightly. Yarmouth fired his weapon, the wires leaping out with a buzzing twang. Simultaneously, he saw the flash of a blade and side-stepped as the driver slashed at his stomach with something that resembled a Stanley knife.

Too shocked to react quickly, Yarmouth watched the electrified wires rip off the pillion rider's shoulder, jerking him to one side, enough to cause the rider to wobble but regain his balance and continue tearing down the alleyway towards Conover, who had ignored Yarmouth's warning—of course.

"Stop right there!" Conover shouted shrilly, baton raised.

Yarmouth would not easily forget the way Conover's skull cracked against the pavement as the bike seemed to drive straight up his falling body and launch itself into the street, where it bounced off a passing white van, scattering rider, passenger, and contraband over the wet Soho streets.

Conover lay as prone as roadkill as passers-by gathered. Yarmouth looked down, feeling a wetness spreading between his fingers. The knife had cut through canvas and cotton layers and just pierced the skin, creating a gash about three inches long.

Yarmouth limped his way to the end of the alley in time to see a panda car pull up and a member of the public attempting CPR on his colleague. Then he too found himself surrounded by concerned citizens.

“Has anyone called an ambulance?” he heard himself shout as sound and vision seemed to recede.

It was if a succession of veils were being pulled across his consciousness. Before he blacked out, he saw one of the riders trying to stagger to his feet, getting as far as his knees before collapsing again. One last thought flitted across his shutting-down mind: why attack two police officers—attempt to kill one of them even—for a bag of phones?

CHAPTER 15

Elena sat as primly as the schoolmistress in a period drama, awaiting the sound of her name. It came just as she was starting to count the blooms in a dried floral display on the receptionist's desk.

"Elena Balan!"

The receptionist said it a little like "Milan", rather than the version that rhymed with "Alan" the way Elena herself pronounced it. Elena smiled at the woman seated next to her, a fellow Romanian who might be one of the charity's clients or a fellow interviewee. They'd exchanged a few friendly words, but Elena hadn't felt like asking.

"You can go through now. Straight through there, third door on the right."

Beyond the double fire doors, Elena passed down a hallway with several rooms on the right and tall windows to her left offering an eclectic street view. The doors were all open, leading to, respectively, a library with two computer terminals, a small canteen, and a lounge. Reclining in the latter, clipboards in hand were a turbaned Sikh man in his fifties and a much younger, blonde woman with sharp Eastern European features. The woman stood up first, offering her hand.

"I'm Aldona Petrovska, this is Tony Singh. Tony heads the translation team and I'm in HR. Actually, I pretty much am HR. We're a small organisation."

"Elena Balan," she said unnecessarily.

They sat down and Aldona and Tony explained the aims and work of the charity. Voices Unlimited was set up by Tony and two colleagues to provide free spoken and written translation services for refugees and immigrants in their first six months of UK residence. Tony, a journalist and former Labour party speechwriter, had been angered by the rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment he'd seen during his time in both journalism and politics and had managed to put together, on a volunteer basis at first, a group of likeminded individuals to help give newcomers to Britain "back their own voices" as he put it. As Elena listened to their pitch, she felt immediate warmth for both her interviewers. She'd anticipated a lot more antagonism; interviews she'd had back home had always felt adversarial.

Partly she knew, the low wage and zero hours contract under which she'd be working meant that VU (as they self-abbreviated) would be lucky to have her. She shouldn't be surprised they were being so accommodating. She wondered if she would have been as welcome if they'd known what she'd been fleeing. The temptation was strong to tell her own story.

"Just arrived in Britain myself and I am still finding my feet," she began tentatively, being methodical in her tenses. "I'd love to do something to help Romanian community here though. I feel they are not much respected?"

"We hear a lot of sad stories," began Tony. "Just the other day we had a woman in here—mother of two small kids—who was pushed over on the tube for putting down one of those little packets of hankies with a message tied to it. Most people, if they don't donate, just ignore it. These idiots decided to take exception. That said, we don't condone begging, in any form."

"People do what they have to," said Elena. "Especially when there's kids."

"This poor woman spoke hardly any English," Aldona added. "Her brother had brought her over but was alcoholic and not working. Without the language skills it's difficult to get work. That's where you'd come in. Help with applications, CVs, a bit of interview coaching, translation of letters, forms, and other documents."

"I'd love to help," said Elena.

She really meant it, which surprised her a little. The job was only supposed to be a stop-gap, but this could actually be fulfilling. Half an hour later, after a cup of tea (Tony had mistakenly added sugar but Elena let it pass) and what seemed more like a friendly chat than a job interview, she left, feeling optimistic. They said they were keen to fill the position quickly and would let her know by the end of the week.

Elena delayed heading to the cinema, opting for a wander through Soho and into Covent Garden. She watched the matinee crowds heading from restaurants and bars into the big theatres where shows like *Wicked* and *Avenue Q* seemed to alternate with grittier fare starring well-known Hollywood

actors. She'd heard that Matthew McConaughey was in town, acting in something by Tennessee Williams (or was it Eugene O'Neill)? She daydreamed that she might spot him, emerging from a limo, entourage in tow.

Without really planning it, Elena found herself back outside Bar Italia and decided to pop in for a quick coffee. Ana's film still had twenty minutes or so to run, she reckoned. A different waitress stood behind the counter, making coffees but Luca was also there, immaculately dressed, clearing tables. Elena was gratified that when he saw her, he broke off what he was doing to greet her.

"Bella bella! How are you? I hope you are not getting your coffee elsewhere?"

Elena laughed.

"I wouldn't dare. Anyway, yours is unimpeachable."

"Unimpeachable, is it? What a word. Sit down, please. I bring you something on the house?"

He said these last three words behind a hand, in a stage whisper. Elena suspected Luca was flirting with her but probably without intent, as some elderly Lotharios are wont to do. She was in a mood to humour him. When he brought her a giant cappuccino and two biscotti, she insisted on paying, and he made a show of protesting until they settled on her paying for the coffee only. She suspected the biscotti were always complimentary and Luca was just a good salesman, but it was entertaining, nonetheless.

"And how is your beautiful daughter?"

"Still beautiful," Elena said. "Is enjoying a bit of Shakespeare. Well, Shakespeare with guns."

"Cultured too. Just like her mama."

A little later, when Elena was halfway down her coffee, Luca surprised her again by pulling up a chair and sitting on it backwards, his hairy arms crossed over its back.

"And now my dear (again the stage whisper) we must get serious. I saw your woman."

"My woman?"

Luca frowned.

"Your red-haired friend. The one who you were looking for."

"Frances?"

Elena was so stunned she almost choked on her drink.

"You saw Frances. When?"

"Just yesterday. But I couldn't call you. The number seemed wrong or something."

Luca ferreted about in his apron pocket, producing the piece of paper with Elena's number on it. She was touched that he'd kept it. Looking more closely, she saw that she'd flipped two of the digits. How stupid!

"She was in here, had usual espresso, talking to two men. I was in the back doing stock-take. I didn't see her until she was leaving and couldn't stop her, but I swear it was this Frances woman."

Elena hardly knew how to react. Her feelings seemed to include joy, trepidation, resentment and even a weird kind of disappointment. She was already folding away her memories of Frances and storing them in the attic of her subconscious. Robin had appeared from nowhere and supplanted Frances, fulfilling the hope she still seemed to need to attach to another person. What was she to do with this news now?

"Okay," she said. "I give you my address and right number. Please, please, if you see her again, get her to call me."

Elena carefully wrote out the information this time, on a flier for a local open mic music night. Luca took it with all the ceremony of a deed or contract.

"I promise you, I will. Now... have you tried our wonderful lemon cakes? I bake them myself, fresh this morning."

Somehow, head and heart thumping, Elena left a few minutes later, with a bag of lemon cakes. Six for the price of four, of course. She made her way to the cinema by memory this time, which would have pleased her, if she hadn't been focused on the miracle that had just occurred.

Ana sat in the foyer, sitting next to a tall, thin, mixed-race boy with unruly hair. Elena could see her through the glass as she approached. Something made her pause and not go straight in.

Ana was engrossed, holding an iPhone earbud to her ear while the boy, who looked very young but still much older than her daughter, wore the other. Ana was nodding her head in time with the music, her shoulder touching the boy's. He too was nodding along. They shared a joke and Ana, passed back the earbud and touched his arm lightly. Elena felt odd watching this. She felt another cocktail of emotions, largely worry and irritation, but with a hint of pride.

Ana's eyes flicked up and her smile fell as she saw her mother waiting, bag of cakes dangling. She said a hasty goodbye to the boy and dashed out into the lane.

"Mum! Were you spying on me?"

"Who's that boy? Does he know how old you are?"

"How long have you been here?"

"Did you even see the film?"

It often began that way, their arguments. They'd both interrogate one another's motives with questions both treated as rhetorical. None of the questions would be answered until both felt equally betrayed and unhappy. Elena, who should probably let it slide, given how well her day had been going so far, found she couldn't. First the unpredictable insertion of Frances back into their lives, and now this?

"You are fourteen years old, Ana. He's practically got a moustache."

"He's only eighteen and a film student and he's really, really nice to me."

"Listen, sweetheart, you have no idea what he's after."

"Oh, I have a good idea, mum. I'm not an idiot. We haven't even held hands or anything. He's just a friend. Why do you have to interfere in everything?"

Elena let the question hang for a while.

"Because I'm your mother. I'm responsible for you."

"And I'm responsible for myself. I'm not some sort of slut, like Sophia."

Who was Sophia? It didn't matter; Elena was glad her daughter had someone to compare herself favourably to. That meant she had a moral compass, painfully skewed by hormones though it might be. She decided not to press the matter, although Ana sulked on the short walk home and slammed her bedroom door shut in the time-honoured manner of frustrated teenagers everywhere.

It'd blow over. It always did. Maybe knowing Frances was coming back would ground her a little more. Was Frances coming back? Why did she assume that? Her one-time lover was nearby but hadn't been in touch. That had to be a bad sign, didn't it? She should forget her and move on. Elena almost already had. How typical it was of this woman to wait until Elena no longer needed her or especially cared for her whereabouts and then pop back up.

On second thoughts, Elena had better not tell Ana anything about Frances. Let her come crawling back, ideally with a craven apology and a watertight explanation for her behaviour. Or let her really vanish this time, leave the city, never appear again.

Elena decided not to be too harsh on Ana and popped out to buy some groceries for her daughter's favourite meal—sausages, mashed sweet potato and peas. Her shouted goodbye at the door was met with deafening silence. Elena headed down to the Polish delicatessen nearby and came back moments later to see her neighbour letting herself into the flat.

"Qamar! How are you?"

The Somali flashed her beacon of a smile.

"I am wonderful, my dear. Just about to get my drink on. Client cancelled tonight but I'm bushed anyway."

Then Qamar's eyed narrowed in momentary appraisal of what she'd said.

"I'm a masseuse. Got my own cards made and everything."

Qamar passed an ornately lettered card with a swirly purple and red pattern on the back.

LADY QAMAR – masseuse

Did she know about the misspelling? Elena thought it best not to mention it.

"Listen. You should come around later. I have an epic Bordeaux in there. Present from a client."

Qamar pointed into her open flat, which was redolent with warmth, colour, and an aromatic joss-stick of some sort. It looked tempting.

"I've got to cook dinner for my daughter. We're having fight. Boys."

Qamar rolled her eyes.

"The old story. Well, bring her along. Later I mean, after your meal."

"We'll see. We're both tired."

Qamar tutted.

"Ridiculous. You're both young and gorgeous. Like me. We don't get tired. Come. When you're ready."

Turning down Qamar was evidently something few found easy. Elena thought her neighbour would probably forget the invitation the moment her door was closed. She'd make it up to her another time. Elena and Ana had talking to do.

As it happened, the talking was less problematic than Elena had expected. Ana told her about her friend Sophia's revelation about sleeping with a boy. Ana's dismayed reaction to this turn of events gave Elena a bit of confidence that she wouldn't go out and do anything stupid in a spirit of competition. Chris, it turned out, sounded more like a protective older brother than a threat. Elena decided to extend her newfound spirit of trust to her daughter's friend, despite her misgivings.

"He gets me free tickets too," Ana said, as she stuffed sausage and mash into her cheeks with the urgency of a hibernating squirrel.

"I want you paying next time. He might lose his job."

"Aw, you're concerned for my friend. That's sweet."

"Don't patronise me, sweetie. Be safe, be sensible."

Ana nodded, chasing rogue peas around her plate.

After Ana had surprised her mother again, this time pleasantly, by doing the dishes, they sat drinking tea and eating the delicious little lemon cakes Luca had given her. Elena noted the slight contradiction of her accepting freebies from Luca while chiding her daughter for Chris's cinema tickets. Parents were allowed to be hypocrites though.

She turned her attention from her daughter's excited babbling about some developments on a Netflix show she was watching on her phone to the remaining three cakes.

Ana, would you like to meet the neighbour?

Qamar answered her door a few moments after the second round of knocking. Her music, a lilting ringing guitar-driven raga, rang out into the stairwell, explaining the delay.

"My friend Kelifé's new album. I just can't get enough of it!"

"I hope I'm not disturbing," began Elena, somewhat ironically.

"Not at all. I invited you, remember. Come in, come in. And who is this lovely young woman?"

Ana smiled, despite her misgivings about tagging along.

"I'm Ana."

Ana found herself enfolded in an impetuous hug, her hand, proffered in a handshake, limp at her side. Elena wondered if she was on something. She would take a good look at Qamar's pupils when they got inside.

Qamar led them into her lounge, a sumptuously furnished and decorated place midway between an exotic bazaar and a boudoir. Elena was beginning to think her first instincts about Qamar's profession had been correct. She couldn't gracefully back out now, so slumped down beside Ana in a low sofa while Qamar sat cross-legged back down onto a beanbag that already bore her generous imprint. A joss-stick was burning in the corner and the room was lit exclusively with candles and a couple of strings of fairy lights, one surrounding an impressively ornate antique mirror.

Elena had to admit the place had a seductively soothing aesthetic, particularly once Qamar had turned the music down to a reasonable volume and opened a bottle of wine. It appeared she had already finished one, along with a visitor who had left lipstick around the rim of a half-empty glass. The wine glugged out into two giant, thin glasses. A third stood ready.

"Can I have some?" asked Ana, in as reasonable a tone as she could muster.

"I don't think..." began Elena, before she was waved into silence by her host.

"Of course she can, Elena. Look at this young woman."

"She's still a child. I don't want her getting drunk."

"Mum!"

"Not so much a child anymore, I think," Qamar suggested. "Already turning many men's heads, no?"

Was that Ana blushing?

"Just look at her," said Qamar.

Elena looked. She tried to see her daughter with the eyes of a stranger and was startled to see that there had been a change from the shy child Elena still held in her mind's eye, as if she'd been denying the evidence of her senses. Ana's body was widening, developing curves. Her face had lost its chubby childishness, developing cheekbones and a tiny chin dimple. She was no longer the flat-chested, wiry tomboy who had practically leapt up trees and raced through cornfields while her mother struggled to capture her on camera. Soon enough, Ana's independence would be unchallengeable. She must make her own mistakes, as Elena had. Within reasonable boundaries, of course.

"Go on then. But just one small glass."

Ana rubbed her hands together and accepted the glass, its contents the colour of dried blood. She took a sip and Elena could see she was pretending to enjoy it more than she probably did. Good.

"So, what do you do?" Ana asked.

Shit. Elena looked at Qamar, who hardly missed a beat, her eyes only as dilated (Elena decided) as the low light of the candles required.

"I'm a model and a masseuse. I'm starting my own business soon with two... colleagues. It's called MMM. We got a logo designed—a fancy font and three dots like mmm..."

Qamar tossed over a piece of card upon which the logo had been printed. Like everything else in Qamar's world, it looked seductive.

"The first M is for massage... of course. The second is for meditation. My pal Rajesh will cover that. The third one is music, which is where Kelife comes in. He's a music therapist as well as a musician and DJ. I sing with him sometimes. It's very relaxing."

"Sounds great. When are you launching?" asked Elena, a little confused now.

Was this a cover story for what Qamar really did, or the truth?

"We did a pop-up in Shoreditch a few weeks ago, in this weird box-park place. It was amazing—really popular. Some of the girls... some girls I know... are volunteering to be trained up in one of the skills so we can offer after-hours and do it seven days a week. One of my clients is getting us a start-up loan. He works in finance. It's all so..."

Here, Qamar remembered to pause for breath.

"...very exciting."

Elena couldn't help but be impressed. If this was a cover story, it was convincingly delivered. After staying long enough to convey her mixed feelings about London (there was so much to see but no friends to see it with) Ana began yawning and Elena took the half-finished glass of wine off her and let her back into the flat. She then returned to Qamar's. This woman intrigued her and besides, Ana wasn't the only one who lacked friends. And although Qamar was beautiful, Elena was oddly relieved to realise she didn't fancy her.

"So, what is it you do?" Qamar asked, adding slyly, "or rather, tell me what you'd really like to be doing. Nobody in London is doing what they really want to be doing."

"I'm going to be working as a translator. Is quite a cool job, actually."

Elena told her about Tony and Aldona and the charity's mission and activities. Qamar seemed genuinely interested, as she nibbled politely at a lemon cake and refilled their glasses with the fruity Bordeaux. Elena began to warm to her, suspicious no longer, even if she did sell her body for sex. Who was Elena to judge? Elena had endured an abusive relationship with her ex, before meeting Frances. That was a kind of prostitution of the soul (or so Elena thought in her most self-recriminatory moments).

The conversation flowed and Qamar disappeared briefly to change out of her dramatically short skirt and cleavage-enhancing silk shirt into a demure, though brightly patterned, silk kimono. She began to tell her own story, in a strange mixture of self-deprecation and self-aggrandizement. Both were defence mechanisms, Elena guessed. Qamar had had a hard life.

"You've heard of FGM? Where they cut you down below, to stop you enjoying sex. And all in the name of Allah. It's bullshit. It's male control. Me and a couple of friends ran away at fifteen, before my father and uncle could have it done to us. We fell in with a charming, but very dangerous man who uses girls to rob rich men. We'd hang out at the bars of fancy hotels in Edinburgh, Newcastle, Manchester, go upstairs with the men we'd meet.

Once we got in their rooms, we'd insist they shower before we sleep with them. While the Johns were in the en suite—bang! We run away with their wallets, watches and gold-plated crap. Things got a bit hot when one of them turned out to be a local celebrity. Police got a little too lively. Our spotter made himself scarce and we went our separate ways. I landed in London, dancing in some clubs. One night, Mr Carver, who part-owned the club, asked me if I wanted to meet with one of his photographer friends, take some photos, maybe think about joining Girl Oasis."

"What's that? Sound like tribute band."

"I wish. It was, still is, a camgirl site. You know, bored looking girls in skimpy outfits chatting to guys and trying to take them into private rooms for sex shows. Easy money, if you can cope with the boredom and the morons.

"Anyway, this photographer took some pictures and I really enjoyed the session. He was good-looking in a scruffy sort of way and towards the end of the session he just came right out and said he'd love to sleep with me. I was kind of flattered, kind of creeped out and tried to laugh it off. Then he got out his wallet and pulled out two hundred quid. I was broke back then, desperate. I was taking a bit of coke to get by, to pull all-nighters at the club and the cams. I said I wouldn't sleep with him, but I would suck him off. He gave me the £200 anyway. That's how it started."

Qamar was no longer making eye contact now and her story had taken on the mood of a confessional. Elena wasn't sure she wanted to hear much more but didn't want to seem prudish or stand-offish either. Despite her misgivings, she liked this young woman.

"It was easier than I thought. I kind of pulled away from my body and focused on what I'd spend the money on. Mostly crystal or coke, as it happened but that's another story. I'm off all that shit now. So, I started on the cams and I took in a few clients. Mr Carver popped round every so often and he would bring clients or sometimes he'd bring me dresses to wear, special outfits that guys had requested. I guess he was a pimp, but he was pretty low-key. He rented me this place and I paid him a quarter of my take on top of the rent. But it's changed recently."

"What do you mean?"

"Clients are getting, how can I say this? Low class. They don't pay as much, and they demand more. Sometimes they get rough. I reported this one guy for trying to beat me with his belt buckle. The next week he was back with a chain, as if nothing had happened. I had to threaten him with a knife to make him leave. He spat on me and threw a tenner on the floor 'for my trouble'. What a bastard. I'm sick of it all now and I'm getting out."

"The triple-M business?"

"Exactly. We're getting ready to launch, it's going to be great."

With that, Qamar lifted her eyes to Elena's and smiled her thousand-watt smile and Elena couldn't but believe her. This woman, who had experienced so much adversity, was a kindred spirit. They were both fighters, disappointed by life but determined to persevere on their own terms.

Elena left, more than a little unsteady with a warm and fuzzy wine haze dulling her sense, three hours later. She let herself back into the flat with exaggerated and not entirely successful care. Dropping her keys on the floor in the hallway, Elena looked up into the sleep-dulled features of her daughter.

"Have you been over there all this time? It's nearly one thirty," queried Ana.

“I’ve been... I’ve just been with my friend,” Elena muttered, before heading into her room to fall asleep, fully clothed, on the bed.

CHAPTER 16

Qamar had been dead for two days when the police broke down her door, the coroner estimated. At some point in the small hours of the 9th of September she had evidently decided to end her life, taken one of her four kitchen chairs into the lounge, wrapped an internet router cable around her neck and tied it to the faux-antique electric chandelier that was the room's centrepiece. Then she must have kicked the chair away and hanged herself. One of her shoes was found several feet away, the other dangling from her foot, evidence of the spasms that must have wracked her body as animal instinct took over from the terrible act of will that had finished her.

A suicide note, of sorts, was found pinned to a cork board in the kitchen. Written in biro in a spidery hand it read, simply 'I am ashamed. I do not want to live.' A scrawled signature beneath.

Elena found out about her friend (she did not hesitate now to designate her as such) when, returning from her first day at the translation agency, she saw a police officer taping off Qamar's door. The POLICE tape was of the same variety Robin had once concealed from her. Perhaps it was time to broach that act of subterfuge.

"What's happened?" Elena had asked, her voice quavering.

The policeman, fortysomething, balding, shrugged. "Woman who lives here offed herself."

Offed herself. The casualness of the term hit like a hammer-blow.

"She was my friend. And she would never do that."

A gratifying flicker of shame crossed the man's features, concealed swiftly behind bland professionalism.

"We'll send someone over to talk to you, offer support. We may have a few questions, if that's okay. Just routine."

Elena nodded, stunned. She entered her flat, slumped down on the cheap sofa she had recently decorated with throws and cushions from a local discount store. She could hear the loud voices of police officers outside as well as heavy footsteps traipsing in and out of Qamar's flat. She found herself worrying about Qamar's immaculate cream-coloured carpet.

Could Qamar have killed herself? It seemed hardly credible. She had seemed so full of possibilities, so vibrant with excitement about the future. Elena had taken heart herself from her friend's example. Over the last two days, during which she had simply assumed Qamar was away visiting someone (or with a client?) she had taken her neighbour's advice on several points.

Firstly, she had decided to be more trusting and sympathetic towards her daughter, who was going through a difficult and confusing life change. Secondly, she had decided to treat her poky apartment as if it was palatial and, in addition to the throws and cushions, had stretched her credit card balance a little further by purchasing candles, a few small rugs, some things for the kitchen and even a wine rack, though it currently stood empty. She had been looking forward to having Qamar round.

A warm wetness on her cheeks informed Elena that she was crying. Fortunately, Ana was out—Elena had said she could go clothes shopping and had given her thirty pounds. Elena knew it wouldn't stretch far but it was a nod towards giving her daughter a little more freedom. Elena had also got around to making her phone work here and had insisted Ana text her regularly. She needn't have feared. A series of changing room selfies had already arrived during the day, taken from a place called Top Shop. Elena had given a thumbs up emoji to a salmon-coloured top and white jeans.

The day at Voices Unlimited had gone really well too. After all the usual induction stuff, Elena had been set to work translating some CVs and a lawyer's letter for some clients. Hearing the old tongue again and rolling those syllables round her mouth while she turned them into functional English had made her a little homesick, but not in an unpleasant way.

She'd gone for lunch at Bar Italia (where Luca shook his head to her perfunctory question about Frances) and the busyness and noise of the place had cheered her too. She ended the day reassuring a worried mother that the letter from her daughter's university about her bursary was merely bureaucratic and not disastrous. She'd felt useful and helpful and thought she was probably going to

enjoy the job, although it was only for three days per week at the moment. Everything had been going so well. And now this.

Then she felt bad focusing on how Qamar's death affected her, rather than how Qamar must have felt when Elena left, and she had perhaps sunk into depression. Had she been bipolar? Certainly, the energy and wildness of her neighbour had seemed a little forced, possibly even manic. Perhaps Elena wasn't such a good judge of other people's mental states, after all.

She had to find out more. Robin would be able to help. He was supposed to come round after his shift to play Scrabble (Elena's idea—she wanted to test her English). She would ask him then. Her instinct told her that something was just not right about what the officer outside had told her.

Could Qamar have been murdered?

She let the possibility sink in. Could it be true? Her friend must have had some insalubrious clients and colleagues in her oldest of professions. Could one of them have killed her, either in a pre-planned way, or accidentally, and made it look like suicide?

She said nothing of this to the pretty blonde Detective Constable Milner, who knocked on her door about an hour later. She merely listened, asked a few tentative questions, and answered those directed at her as practically as possible. Milner had clearly been tasked with tying up loose ends in a case that the police considered self-evidently suicide.

"How well did you know Ms Liibaan?"

"I just met her. She invited me and my daughter for tea."

"Your daughter Ana you mentioned. How old is she?"

Why was that relevant?

"Fourteen. She's out shopping."

"I hope you didn't give her your credit card!"

It was a gauche attempt at humour. Elena smiled thinly.

"She has pocket money. She's a good girl. I don't want her to know about this... yet. I mean, I want to tell her."

"Of course. That's your prerogative. How did Miss Liibaan seem when you last spoke? And what time was that?"

"She seemed in good mood, she had plans. Full of hope. It's so hard to believe."

"It's commoner than you think," said the officer, with a rueful head shake.

Elena both wanted and didn't want to know the answer to her next question. She shuffled uncomfortably amongst the new cushions.

"Can I ask, how did she do?"

"Are you sure you want to know? If you were friends..."

"I only met her a couple of times."

Elena blurted out this truth and then felt guilty and wanted to retract it.

"I mean, I like her, but we also just met."

"Okay. Well... I shouldn't really say but you might as well know. She hanged herself. With some sort of electrical cord."

"No!"

"It was probably fairly quick. I mean compared with, well, with other methods. Look, I want to give you my card. Just in case you want to talk to anyone about this."

"It's just so sad. Why couldn't she just knock on my door?"

The young officer shrugged, but not callously.

"I can only tell you that people can be really unreadable. And you mustn't blame yourself."

"Oh, I don't."

The thought hadn't really occurred to her. It was true that she hadn't seen Qamar in a couple of days and hadn't rung her buzzer, but there had been no reason to. There was a rattle of keys in the lock and Ana blustered in.

"Mum, what's going on out there? There's police and... oh, hi."

Ana's face had hardened into the front with which teenagers face down authority.

“Ana,” Elena began. “I’ve got some sad news to tell you.”