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A Pound of Flesh

Susannah Squire
SQRSUS001

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ABSTRACT

A Pound of Flesh follows the story of a young Welsh girl called Bethan who decides to leave her claustrophobic home in order to seek a new life in London. She soon finds out that making her economic and sexual ends meet will be harder than she thinks.

Bethan's life is turned upside down when she is travelling on the tube during the terrorist attacks of July 7th. She is faced with the stark reality of her mortality and this consideration, along with the introduction of some charismatic influences, takes her along a path she could never have foreseen.

This novel explores themes such as post feminism, the clash of Islam and Christianity in a globalised world and sexual morality through the eyes of a girl who is not only coming of age but also coming to terms with the socio-politics of modern Britain.

- **PART ONE**



CHAPTER ONE

London

When she was seventeen, someone tried to buy Bethan. It was an Arab man in London, and this incident, more than any other, formed her opinion of the opposite sex. Bethan had ventured to London from her native Wales out of a misguided sense of adventure and a desire for independence.

This desire was brought about by the unceremonious and painful loss of her virginity six months earlier in a lay-bye off a country lane at two in the morning. She was shocked by the experience and by the knowledge that someone could bleed that amount and not die. She threw her knickers away on the way home.

She didn't tell her mother what had happened – but then she never told her mother anything. The lay-bye incident, and Bethan's reaction to it, brought about a fundamental change in her world-view. The indelicacy of her partner (a common and grubby local boy who said “fuck” a lot), combined with her new sense of the power of her body, made her aware of how dull and unappreciated she was in her current situation and led her to crave change.

To be brutally honest (and she was) anywhere was glamorous in comparison to Newport, Bethan's home town. Being a girl of extremes, she decided to invoke her grandfather's saying, "in for a penny, in for a pound," and go to that seething metropolis she had been warned led directly to the path of moral turpitude: London.

Bethan was walking in Kensington when she saw the man approaching her, looking at her the way a heroine addict who has gone cold-turkey for a week looks at a gram of smack. He stopped her and asked all the normal banal questions men ask women when trying to appear simultaneously polite and virile. He spoke with a predatory manner, however, and Bethan could not help feeling ill at ease.

The Arab offered Bethan a life of sexual servitude in which she could receive whatever material goods her heart desired if only he could "keep her for a while." This was not the first time Bethan had been propositioned (Newport had its rogues), but it was the first time she had been offered anything tangible for sex, and the idea that something other than the vague promise of satisfaction (what a joke that had turned out to be!) could be given in return for the trials and tribulations of having to perform fellatio (or worse) appealed to her.

She nevertheless declined his offer and sauntered away, chest out, wondering if she would have taken the man up on his offer if he had been younger and more attractive. She had taken his card, after all. His name was "Sam" and he owned a series of "boutique" hotels in the area. The significance of this was not completely lost on her.

She told no one of what happened as she felt it a slight on her appearance and demeanour. Did she look like a girl who would have sex for money? Probably. A

preference for spandex and an abundance of somewhat obvious charms had led many a male to tell her she was absolutely the most beautiful creature they had ever seen, or, as they put it in Newport, “a fit bitch.” Bethan was never quite sure where she stood in the looks department as the only people who ever told her she was beautiful were the ones who wanted to do depraved things to her.

She found London to be an inhospitable place, but was liberated by the anonymity it afforded her. Economic matters raised their ugly heads, and Bethan was forced to find a job. Having only very mediocre GCSEs, and those being mostly in the arts and languages, she struggled to get decently paid and intellectually-stimulating employment. Out of desperation and the threat of destitution – or, worse, having to return home – she settled for a receptionist job at a publishing house three days a week and, due to the diminutive wages she was paid, worked at a bar on Friday and Saturday nights.

Considering her irregular hours of employment, Bethan was left with a good deal of time on her hands. This was initially taken up by sight-seeing and the search for a bed-sit. Despite her habitually solitary nature, after seeing what she deemed to be London’s highlights and securing a dingy place in a disreputable part of North London, she found herself craving company of any kind.

One night she found herself reminiscing about the lay-bye, and that was when she decided things had become truly desperate and that she must interact with people – or, at any rate, men – of her own age. Although Bethan had rarely sought out company, she now felt desperately lonely. She had grown up in a loud and emotional house and had

often dreamed of her own flat and how she would enjoy the privacy it would afford her. But as she sat in her gloomy one-room bed-sit, she was overwhelmed with longing.

But how she hated Newport! Its bigotry; its rough “towny” dickheads who would shout disgusting things at her while she did her shopping on a Wednesday afternoon and try to put their hands down her skirt on a Friday night; the old women who would tut-tut and suck their false teeth when she walked into the pub in her spandex; her abusive and aggressively overprotective brothers.

Yet what she felt now, as she sat in the bed-sit, was not exactly longing for that place, or anything recognisable as longing, rather a sense that Newport was all she had ever known. She wanted so badly to move on, to have the experiences everyone kept going on about, to be excited and exciting, but it didn’t come. And as the tears dribbled down her cheek, she experienced two things that she had never experienced before: desolation and shame. *This* is what she was. Newport was what she was. Her clothes were too tight, her voice too enthusiastic, her manner too obviously naïve and unsophisticated. Sam had seen it, everyone saw it, it may as well be written across her tits (as opposed to her forehead, as this is where most people talked to Bethan).

Well, if that was what she was then that’s what she would use to her gain. You can’t change something until you recognise it, she reasoned, and until she changed it she would use it to her advantage.

Before leaving home, Bethan had armed herself with a list of people who had left Newport for London in recent years and whom she could call up and visit. This list was not lengthy. Most people who were born in Newport stayed there, giving rise to the

adage: “Newport born and Newport bred, and when I die I’ll be Newport dead.” The reality of this was not brought about by any strong patriotic feeling but rather by the reality of being either pregnant or on the dole by the time the citizens of Newport were of an age to leave home. Bethan had narrowly avoided both of these situations. The former by an almost unhealthy obsession with contraception (probably due to the hygiene levels of most of the boys with whom she slept) and the latter by her detached but devoted mother who gave her lump sums in order to encourage Bethan’s ambitions, vague though they were.

Despite this, there were some people who had successfully made the transition. There was only one girl on the list, Lucy, and rumour had it that she had fallen into prostitution, so Bethan decided against her. The rest were boys, and this suited her fine. One was married, and in Bethan’s mind this denoted an endemic boredom, so she skipped him. Her eye fell next, with some mixed emotion, on Justin’s name.

Bethan now brought to the front of her mind all she could recall of Justin. She had known him vaguely a few years ago – his sister, Hayley, had a brief and tempestuous fling with her more respectable brother, Rhys. She remembered Justin as being god-like in the looks department and cocky in the personality department. What really stood out, though, was how he came to be that way.

Hayley and Justin’s mother was a formidable woman, who seemed to enjoy nagging and generally antagonising not only her own children but anyone who had the misfortune to encounter her in the course of everyday life. To escape his mother’s

tyranny, Justin had run away to London at sixteen and promptly found (as had so many before him) that the streets were lined with something that was closer to shit than to gold.

Luckily for him, Justin, had been blessed with the gift of gorgeousness, and, unlike Bethan, he was well aware of it and knew how to use it (a lesson she was only just beginning to learn). Thus, when he was approached by a “talent scout” and asked to audition as a dancer, it both flattered his vanity and provided him with a potential exit from what was becoming an increasingly desperate financial situation.

Only they didn’t want dancers, they wanted strippers, and the audition involved little more than Justin stripping down to his embarrassing grey y-fronts. If he’d known, he would have worn his Calvins. Despite his unappetising underwear, the “scouts” saw that they’d struck gold with this sinewy, hard cherub. After a few brief whispers about the legality of a nearly-nude sixteen-year-old, he was hired on the condition that he lied about his age if asked. But, as the head lech told him, “we’re not hiring you to talk, young man.”

Justin went on to be one of five “dancers” who formed the male strip group Hot Boys. Hot Boys toured small towns around the UK, stripping down to their leather g-strings for middle-aged women who couldn’t get enough of these wiggling Adonises. Due to the characteristic underestimation of the vim of female sexuality, no one foresaw quite how popular these boys would be and none of the boys, least of all Justin, foresaw how rich taking their kit off would make them.

It has to be said that Justin was good at what he did. Indeed, several boys came and went, but Justin was one of only two boys who stayed the distance. He stripped until

he was twenty-four, ending his eight-year reign with a “no-holds-barred” performance in which he revealed his sizeable penis to a shocked and delighted audience. This wasn’t in his contract, he just enjoyed it.

It isn’t too much of a stretch to imagine how this went down back home. It was the subject of much tut-tutting by the women – hypocrisy never had a more fertile breeding ground than in Newport, where many of the same women who tutted had travelled to nearby Bristol to see exactly what Justin had to wiggle – and many accusations of homosexuality by the men (words such as “pouf” and “nonce” normally accompanied Justin’s mention).

Being ten years younger than him and therefore too young to recognise the significance of this scandal, Bethan had heard a lot about Justin before their brief meeting in Newport with their respective siblings, but despite this she was completely unprepared for how attractive she would find him. She was fourteen at the time and felt the most powerful surge of fluid to her groin. He was twenty-four and treated her with an indifference that bordered on disdain. He had reached the height of his career and was feeling insecure as to where he would work afterwards, as he remained largely talentless in the eyes of most employers. This insecurity had made him testy and defensive, and the last thing he cared about was an early-developer who couldn’t look him in the eye.

This event was fresh in Bethan’s mind but she was determined to call him. What was the worst that could happen? He’d say no, he didn’t want to see her and in fact didn’t even remember their meeting two years ago and could she please get off the phone as he

was expecting a call from someone infinitely sexier and more self-assured than she. Bethan's throat constricted at the idea and bile rose in her mouth.

She sat for half an hour in silence on the end of her bed and decided if he didn't answer by the fourth ring it wasn't meant to be and she would leave him, and probably London, alone forever.

He did answer.

"Hello?"

"[cough] Hi ... Justin?"

"Yeah, that's me ... who's this?"

"Bethan ... I know it's a bit weird but Hayley used to go out with my brother Rhys and we met two years ago ..."

"...."

"And, er, I've just recently moved to London and I don't really know anyone so I was just wondering if, you know, you might have a free minute to do something ... or something ..."

"Sounds good, Beth. I'm a bit busy at the moment ..."

"Right-o. I just thought ..."

"Let me finish. I'm a bit busy at the moment but if you wanna meet me at about six in the Slug and Lettuce in Covent Garden, that suits me."

“Yeah, great. Thanks. A lot. Will see you there.” She hung up.

Oh God Oh Fuck Oh Fuck Oh Fuck, thought Bethan. Her face was red and hot, she felt sick and her heart was beating like the baseline of a hard-house track.

Why did she have to create so many problems for herself? Now, not only did she have to meet Adonis in Covent Garden in a crowded pub without managing to wet herself, she had to find something smart to wear. She (wisely, as it turned out) decided not to veer too far from her habitual path of dress and walked out in clothes that were just a little too tight and a face with just a little too much make-up. Her hair was damp from the shower and she was wearing her best red-lace matching underwear, because, although she wasn't optimistic, you never knew. She looked like a wet dream.

CHAPTER TWO

Bethan felt despair as she sat waiting in the Slug and Lettuce, leered at by fat, red-nosed American tourists and slagged off by chav-like Essex girls in white PVC stilettos. Justin was already half an hour late. She had got there twenty minutes early – there is nothing like the promise of sex to improve one’s punctuality – and had been waiting for just a little bit too long and drunk just a little bit too much vodka for there to remain much excitement in her stomach.

The only sensation she felt was a painful rumbling (due to lack of food) and a sinister nausea (due to a plethora of vodka). Well, if she threw up it would at least give her an excuse to leave, and hadn’t her life always been a disappointment, always on the brink of something bright and shiny and exciting (like Justin) yet always in the event slightly tarnished, slightly ugly, slightly depressing (like the American tourists)? Apart from anything else, she was running out of money, and had spent a large portion of her diminutive wage in this commercialised hole. No, it was time to leave.

She changed her mind about the state of her life, finances, and stomach, the minute she saw Justin walk through the door. Her instinct was to wave at him from across the bar, but she sat still and waited for him to find her. A faint look of recognition crossed his face as he saw her and he stood in front of her bar stool in order to better assess just

how soon and how much he would fuck her. For Justin was never one to waste time or money, and if he was to spend either on this creature he needed assurances.

And assurances he got. Whether it was due to his astonishing looks or her severe loneliness it is impossible to say, but she wanted him in a way she could not understand, and if alarm bells rang in her head as she evaluated this cocksure metrosexual then they were drowned out by the swooshing of alcohol in her brain and the rushing of blood to her groin.

“Hi Bethan,” he said, grinning, fancying himself far more than it was humanly possible for Bethan to fancy him.

“You took your time,” she said, swaying slightly. “Thought you weren’t coming, actually ... ’bout to leave.”

“Not a bad idea, that,” he said. “I don’t know why I suggested this place, forgotten how shite it was ... Let’s go somewhere better. You look like you could do with some food.”

If anything, Bethan looked like she could do with a little bit less food, but she took the comment to refer to her body and not to her glaringly obvious intoxication and agreed to leave the pub and go with this man she neither knew nor trusted but desperately needed.

Justin was of that class of man that can make himself appear much wealthier and more important than he really is. Women were simple and materialistic creatures in his

eyes. He had no idea that wining and dining was unnecessary to get into Bethan's knickers – he sad truth was that a kebab would have done.

He took her to Pattison's, an upmarket meat market, the kind of place CEOs took their secretaries, with high-class hookers waiting in the cigar lounge for the type of man who would pay above the odds for the privilege of pissing on them. Bethan was out of place here: too young, too plump, too pretty. Luckily, she was too drunk to notice, and so they got on with what they came to do.

The food was complicated and unfamiliar to Bethan, so Justin ordered for her in a patronising but patient way. She was grateful for the food and ate as if she hadn't eaten in weeks.

Then, as night follows day, came the moment when the safe haven of the restaurant had to be abandoned. Bethan was bored and fast sobering up; Justin was twitchy and, observing Bethan's state, asked for the bill. When it came it was, of course, exorbitant. Bethan, although not used to the high life, knew she couldn't afford to pay her half and so didn't even offer. Anyway, if he wanted to shag her – and it was becoming increasingly obvious he did – he could bloody well pay for her food. The place was his choice, after all. If the price was above the odds, then she was worth it.

In this way, Bethan placated her conscience and, not being too given to sentiment, decided to look at the evening more as a business transaction than as the beginning of some grand love affair. Do me a favour, she thought. All she really wanted was company, and if this meant having a vain and self-centred yet astonishingly good-looking man

patronise and then shag her, well, then, this was still better than your average Friday night in the bedsit.

“So do you want to go on to a club or something?” Justin asked (as a formality, of course).

“Nah,” Bethan said, “bit tired to be honest ... rather go to bed.” For she too was not completely without knowledge of how attractive she was to him at this point and that the word “bed” was the only one she had spoken all evening that would resonate in his mind.

“I don’t live far from here so why don’t you stay at mine tonight? Wouldn’t like to think of you navigating the tube all the way back to that little dive you live in, and you in the state you are ...”

“Okay,” said Bethan, “I don’t see why not.” Because, truly, she didn’t.

“Come on then you little pisscat, I’ll get us a cab.”

And it was as easy as that.

CHAPTER THREE

Yeah, it's not much but it does me."

The false modesty so evident in his tone slightly grated Bethan as they entered Justin's tenth-floor Chelsea flat. It had those panoramic windows she had seen in slick ITV dramas on the telly and everything was clean and leather and steel and she would swear to God nothing had been used.

"Fancy a drink?" he asked.

"No, I think I've done quite enough of that tonight."

"Yeah, good point, and you're no good to me puking, are you? How about something a bit more exciting, then?" he said, reaching for a small plastic bag containing the white powder that has become as ubiquitous as it is infamous in London social circles.

Bethan showed her youth when, failing to notice the drugs Justin reached for, she began to strip down to her bra and knickers, thinking the "exciting" thing to which he referred was his overexposed genitals.

"God, you really don't mess around, do you, little one? No, don't be embarrassed, I like that in a girl ... I just wondered if you wanted to try some of this stuff first?"

“No, thanks. I don’t think I want any of that horrible shit.”

“Fine. Go on in. I’ll be there almost immediately my darlin’.”

As she turned towards the bedroom she heard the unmistakable sound of someone ecstatically sniffing their way through a few grams of pleasure.

Justin’s bedroom was a variation on the theme that ran throughout his flat, with an enormous dark-wood bed filling more or less the whole space and two small narrow tables on either side of it, on which stood two long, elegant, stainless steel lamps. Bethan went to the side she thought wasn’t Justin’s (as there was a lack of *FHMs* in comparison to the other side) and began to remove her jewellery and place it on the table.

Still in her slightly tacky red underwear, she walked over to the window and looked out at the night. She could see her own reflection in the window and she was pleased at what favours the underwear did for her beautiful body and congratulated herself on a good choice. Then she looked beyond herself at the lights of the city and thought that perhaps she was in over her head: with London, with Justin, with her menial but bewildering job at the publisher’s.

She had never seen so many lights at night. Newport simply did not have the population to furnish one with such a view and her bedsit really just looked out onto someone else’s concrete back yard, where the most exotic sight was a washing line with faded men’s underpants and a bunch of socks pegged out. It seemed a long way from all this.

Then in the reflection she saw Justin approaching her from behind, and, as he put his arms around her waist, she felt a faint sinking feeling but also a rush of desire as his hard naked chest and huge erection pushed up against her. She turned around and let herself be kissed by him, and if there had been any fleeting observers to the event they would have likened these two semi-naked lovers to Venus and Adonis. Both young, both beautiful, both experienced in the ways of lust, if not of love.

Justin unclipped her bra with one hand, in a way that made Bethan briefly realise just how many women's bras he must have undone over the years. She tugged at his tight boxers and as he slid them off he went down on his knees and removed her g-string partly with his mouth, breathing a hot breath, as he did so, onto the place that by now was throbbing to have his attention. He pushed her onto the bed and let his mouth and hands do the talking and he was soft and hard at the same time and God but she was so *wet* and she didn't care if the Pope himself accompanied by her entire family was watching. She melted and put up no resistance.

He made love to her. And the sad thing is that it really felt like that to Bethan.

CHAPTER FOUR

A feeling of inadequacy overcame Bethan as she bashed around Justin's designer kitchen at 9.30 the next morning. The truth was she hadn't made anyone breakfast in bed since she was five and that was for her mum on mother's day and she'd ended up setting the kitchen on fire . Being sweet and homely wasn't really her thing, and she cared even less about food than she did about laundry, but she wanted to please Justin.

He had almost no food in his flat – she supposed he must eat out a lot, glamorous bloke like him. She warmed some beans in the microwave, which was one of those stainless steel things with about a hundred different knobs that took her five minutes to figure out, by which time she had burned the bottom of the egg and the toast was cold. Not being one to worry much about presentation, however, she put it on a plate.

When she walked through to the bedroom she was greeted with the sight of her Adonis spread out on his stomach, muscular arse pointing up. Although this sight made her practically piss herself with happiness, it was accompanied by a sinking feeling, almost too slight to notice. Was it lust? Nerves? Regret? She thought it best not to look too closely for the source of the feeling or she may be overcome with a violent need to cry, a feeling not uncommon to her when faced the next morning with the man she'd had sex with the night before.

“Uh ...” What did she call him? Justin? Baby?

“I made you something to eat ... just thought you might be hungry, like ... You should be after last night, anyway ...”

“Yeah, great,” he said groggily. “What time is it? Why the fuck am I so hungover?”

“It’s just after 9.30 and you indulged yourself a bit last night.” She couldn’t help feeling that at this moment she interested him about as much as the curdling breakfast he was pushing away. If he was hungover, was last night a mistake?

“Are you all right? You look a bit pale yourself,” he said, interrupting her thoughts.

“Yeah, you know. Sorry if I was a bit, uh, pissed, and forward, actually.”

“You were great, little one ... better than great. But listen I actually have to get going myself. Man about a dog and all that.”

He got up and looked at her.

“Right. Yeah. Me too,” she said. “Thanks anyway.”

Her bright pink top smelled like sex as she pulled it over her head and she’d never felt so sick in her entire life.

She followed him to the door and as he leaned in to kiss her she turned her cheek. She would have that victory, at least.

“Bye, I’ll call you, Beth.”

“Great, bye then.”

Oh God, this was not exactly how grand passions got underway. As she walked to the tube station her knickers rode up her arse and she wondered why he had to be so abrupt. If he didn't want her to stay, then why the fuck did he invite her back last night? For sex, obviously. Wasn't that all they were interested in anyway? Pigs at the fucking trough, all of them, and she didn't need that shit in her life. If this was love, she didn't want to know.

But as she bought her ticket at the machine she felt a shiver go through her groin as she had a flashback of his body on top of her, of the moment he entered her. It had been so good, he had been so careful and anxious about her pleasure, so different to the boys she'd shagged in Newport. Surely this attentiveness must transpose itself onto his emotions somehow?

Did she want to go out with him anyway? Yeah, she definitely did. Humiliating though it was, she fancied the pants off him and in retrospect really wouldn't have let last night happen if she'd only known how attached she would feel this morning. The sick feeling wasn't regret, it was disappointment.

The particular tube she happened to board was filthy and as she sat down she was aware of being leered at by at least four blokes seated in the carriage. Granted, she was somewhat oddly attired for mid-morning, with her spangly clothes and last night's mascara smudged halfway down her cheek. But had they no fucking manners? Hadn't she had a shit enough day already?

Dirty and greasy and sick, that was how she felt as she entered her bed-sit. She sat down on the edge of her bed and stared into the middle distance wondering why she felt like this, it had never happened before. She was probably just overtired. She was tired and overwrought and needed to clean up: both her flat and herself.

She walked through to the bathroom and turned on the ancient shower and as she undressed felt a bizarre sort of comfort as she heard the pipes creak and moan as they tried to summon up enough hot water to wash off the scum she could feel sticking to her skin.

As she climbed in and felt the water pour over her she thought it resembled the way Justin had kissed each part of her body. Her neck, her shoulders, her tummy, her thighs. She soaped all these areas tenderly now to try and comfort herself and felt she was washing off his love.

Her face became hot and she felt her eyes prickle with tears. Let them come, she thought, he can't see me, no one can. The water subsumed her tears and as they splashed into the bottom of the cast-iron bath and she watched them roll down to the drain she knew it was stupid and immature to get this upset over a tosser like Justin. But he wasn't a tosser last night in the bedroom, and that was what her thoughts stuck on.

As she was off work she decided to clean her flat and generally have a bit of a sort-out as she hadn't really done that since she'd moved in; seeing as the place looked a bit of a mess and she didn't have any clean clothes for work tomorrow she thought it was probably overdue.

Even though it wasn't lunchtime yet, she cooked herself some pasta as she thought it would firstly fortify her for the housework ahead and secondly aid in getting rid of the pounding headache that had plagued her since she'd woken up. She scrubbed, dusted, wiped, and washed until she was knackered and the next time she looked at her watch it was four o'clock in the afternoon and time for a sit down.

She decided to call her mum as she needed a bit of comfort, and although for most of Bethan's life comforting hadn't been her mum's speciality, since she'd left home her mum was always so lovely on the phone that Bethan was tempted to call her every time she needed reassurance. She didn't normally call as she was eager to prove she could cope on her own. She always told her mum how *well* things were going – even when they weren't. Today, however, she didn't even attempt to resist temptation and picked up the phone. They'd all be at home now (her mum and her three brothers) as it was after work and before dinner.

“Hello?” Her mum answered. She was grateful for this small mercy at least, as it meant she wouldn't have to endure the Spanish inquisition from one of her overprotective older brothers (she simply didn't have the strength for that today).

“Hiya mum, it's Beth.”

“Oh, hiya pickle! How you getting on?” It grated Bethan the way her mum always spoke as if she was on some sort of holiday instead of grinding her guts out trying to make her seventeen-year-old ends meet.

“Great, ta, mum. Just thought I’d call for a chat. I’ve been missing you a lot, you know. Actually, I was wondering if I might come home next weekend to see you all, if I can get the weekend off from the bar ...”

“Oh, that would be lovely, my little pickle, we’re all desperate to see you. They should give you the weekend off, shouldn’t they, pickle? Hard-working girl like you, publishing office most weekdays, bar at night and on weekends. No, you tell them you have to come and see us. It would be a real treat to have you.”

“Mum, I’ve only been away a month. You’re talking like you haven’t laid eyes on me in years.”

“That’s what it feels like, love. You all right to buy your coach ticket or do you want me to send you some money for it?”

“It’s sixteen quid, mum, I think I can manage. I’ll try and leave London after work on the Friday so I should get to Newport bus station just before dinner.”

“Right-o! Either me or one of the boys will be waiting for you, love.”

“See you then, mum. I’ll call you if there’s any change. Otherwise I’ll see you Friday.”

“Can’t wait, pickle. I love you.”

“Love you too, mum. Bye.”

As she put down the phone Bethan sat in wonder at herself. True, she had contemplated returning home soon as she promised her mum she would visit once a

month, but she certainly hadn't planned to call with the express purpose of arranging the trip. Oh, well – it would keep everyone happy and kill several birds with one stone. And she could take some laundry home. And wear her posh, newly-acquired London clothes to Zanzibar on the Saturday night. It wasn't all bad. And it didn't look like she'd be seeing Justin next weekend after the way things went this morning.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was such a cliché, the way Bethan felt on Monday mornings. But particularly this Monday. Justin hadn't called her after all, and she felt pretty useless and unattractive as she got dressed and walked down the road to the nearest tube station. It was all bollocks anyway, she thought.

As much as she hated working in the bar at night, she *hated* working in the publishing office all day; and, as today was Monday, she had to do both. She worked from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon, then had just enough time to get the tube home, have a quick nap, shower, eat, change, and get to Clapham in time to start her bar shift at nine. The prospect of all that this morning, however – this morning, when all she really needed was some comfort – made her want to vomit and cry.

Nevertheless she avoided vomiting and crying and got to the office more or less on time. Bethan's job was, most of the time, mind-numbingly boring. She essentially had to answer phones, fax documents, and smile and serve tea to the pretentious dickheads who came and sat in the foyer waiting to have meetings with the other middle-aged pretentious dickheads who worked in her office. Not difficult, the casual observer might think; soul-destroying, but not difficult. But sometimes, it became *really* difficult, *really* quickly. Like today.

The middle-aged dickhead known as Carl came in the office as usual at about ten looking as if he had spent the weekend in the sweaty, perfumed embrace of a cheap prostitute (which, incidentally, he had). Carl had a tendency not only to address himself directly to Bethan's chest (something she was used to by now), but also to treat her like his personal dogsbody and to make her do all the things he thought he was too busy (although he was actually just too much of a twat) to do. In her three weeks of employment she had collected his dry-cleaning, fixed his laptop, and even broke up with his last girlfriend by sms (Bethan considered this last one an act of mercy and so didn't mind it as much as the others). And today, it turned out, was to be no exception.

"Fax this to David, Bethan."

"Who's David? And *please* would be nice."

"God, do I have to do *everything* myself, and don't get snooty with me you little taff or you'll be out on your tarty arse before you know what's going on."

He threw a pocket book at her.

"There, under 'D,' for dunce."

"Or perhaps for *dickhead* who's unable to give women pleasure," She muttered, flicking through to the "D" page.

"What was that?"

"I said *my pleasure*."

And with that she saw his portly frame flounce out of the reception door. She found the first David in the “D” section and promptly faxed the letter to him. She thought no more about it and carried on with the rest of the day’s little challenges. The main one being not checking her mobile every five minutes to see if Justin was trying to get hold of her. She spilt a cup of tea on the new carpet in reception, which caused her co-workers to snigger under their breath all the unoriginal jokes about Bethan ruining the shag etc ad nauseum.

Then at four o’clock, just as she was cheering up proportionately to the drawing near of the end of the day, it happened.

“What the fucking fuck have you done, you stupid cow?” It was Carl the cunt (as she now called him in her mind) and he was hopping mad.

“What? Don’t talk to me like that. What are you on about?”

“You faxed a letter of rejection to the wrong person and now he’s taken his manuscript elsewhere and I’ll lose the account and get into *huge* shit and all because you’re so fucking incompetent you can hardly read.”

Of all the ways Bethan could have reacted, she reacted in the worst possible way. Not because she wanted to and not because showing one’s emotion is ever wrong, but because she let Carl see he’d hurt her, and she would kick herself over this moment for months to come. In short, she cried. What’s more, her fit of tears was observed by the whole office and everyone just stared at her as if she’d lost her mind. Maybe she had, she thought, she did seem to be crying rather a lot these days.

Eventually, after what seemed like three years, a bloke who had smiled at her once or twice came up to her and took her off into the tea room to sort herself out. Their departure was sounded off by whistles and shouts of “go on, Kesh!” from the office floor, which, obviously, didn’t help her state of mind.

“Don’t mind him, love, he’s an idiot. Everyone knows it. He’s the incompetent one around here. He’s been on a dodgy wicket with the boss for months and he knows it. He’s just taking out his shit on you.”

Bethan looked up at the source of this kind voice. It came from full lips, below a large, slightly hooked nose flanked by bright brown eyes. He was Muslim, she knew that, he was also very cute. And probably a cunt like the rest of them, she thought.

“Yeah, thanks. Look, I’m fine, just a bit tired and stuff,” she said. “You better get back before your mates think we’re shagging.”

He blushed at this and for the first time in her life Bethan wished she wasn’t quite so brazen. He was a soft, gentle man, his kindness was too much for her. It was simultaneously glorious and agonising.

“Right. Well I hope you’re okay. It’s about your knocking off time now anyway, isn’t it?” he said, and then, realising his pun (or perhaps Freudian slip), he blushed again. “I’m Rakesh, by the way.”

“Bethan. Thanks, Rakesh. And yeah, it is about my knocking off time.” God, did she have *no* shame? To think of that at a time like this. Tart that she was.

She went back behind the desk and got her bag and left the office without a backward look. Fuck them all if she did leave early. She may need the money, but she didn't need it *that* badly, and she certainly didn't need it at the price of her self-esteem. But even in her angry mind she knew this was no time to be resigning. She didn't have the strength, or, frankly, the time. She had to get home and get ready for her equally unappetising stint in the club.

After a sleep, Bethan woke up with a pounding headache and a determination to get drunk at work to at least take her mind off things. She got dressed in her tight black trousers and her low-cut black vest (complimented by a Wonderbra) and made her way to her second job. Monday night was not normally a desirable or profitable shift behind the bar (hence the reason Bethan got the shift instead of the other bartenders who had proven both their loyalty and capability to the club), but tonight there was some sort of champagne promotion party happening and apparently huge numbers were expected, the attractive but drug-addicted bar manager told her. Oh, well, at least she might make some much-needed cash.

She stacked the fridges and stocked the till with her fellow barman for the evening, Phil, and then they opened at ten-thirty. There were dozens of people in and they were not only tipping well but were also buying Bethan tons of shooters, helping her to achieve with relative ease her primary goal of getting wasted and making money. If only every night could be like this, she thought. The crowd was wealthy, trendy, a bit up-themselves, but on the whole Bethan approved. No one counted their change, which was probably a good thing as by one o'clock Bethan very much doubted she was giving the

right amounts (although she clearly wasn't that drunk, as the cunning little minx always made sure the discrepancy worked out in her favour, not the punter's).

The bar was crazy-busy and she was struggling to keep up with the amount of people she had to serve, when she looked up to find the next unsuspecting victim in need of a drink. Her eyes reeled back in her head as she saw Justin waiting at the other end of the bar. Worse than that, he was not alone. Worse than that, his companion was female. Worse than that, she was the tartiest-looking old slapper Bethan had ever seen (she wasn't, of course, it just seemed that way to Bethan's overwrought, pissed brain).

"Go and serve those punters down the other end will you, Phil, my love?"

"Thought you'd want to do a bloke like that yourself, Beth ..."

"Yeah, well, what can I say? Been there, done that, used the condom." She winked at him, faking a cockiness she didn't feel. In reality, her stomach was in knots and she could taste bile in her throat.

Phil dutifully went and served them, Bethan determinedly keeping her eyes down and pretending to be absolutely fascinated by some pissed thirty-year-old detailing the more unsavory parts of his divorce proceedings to her over the bar. So, in a short space of time, Justin and the tart left the bar and after finishing their vodka Red Bulls, moved toward the dance floor.

Bethan had never been what you might call the textbook definition of self-restraint, partly because of her age, but more because of her personality. There is not a

saint in heaven who wouldn't have peered over the bar to see exactly what Justin was getting up to with his Jordan lookalike, so what chance did she have?

It was a scene of devastation. There was some cheesy r and b song playing, the lyrics of which appeared to be about anal sex, and Justin and Miss-five-quid-tits were practically having sex on the dance floor. With their clothes on, of course. Bethan may as well have been watching a porno with them as co-stars for all the difference it made.

Cunt! How could he do this? She had made an absolute tit of herself after all then. He didn't know how she'd been obsessing, of course, but that really made no difference. In fact, it was worse to be embarrassed inside your own head and to go down in your own estimation than to have your shame paraded for all to see. Phil saw.

"I shouldn't worry, looked like a right tosser to me, Beth. You can do better than that. If that's the kind of bird he goes for, you're wasted on him, anyway. We call her Gyrating Jessica. She'll do anything for a free drink. I've had at least four blowjobs out of her. Not bad for a couple of shots of Jack. She's a slag, love."

"It's all right, Phil, he's nothing to me anyway. You're right. Complete fucking tosser. Dunno what I was thinking." She was thinking he was beautiful and cool. And she still thought it, felt it. Involuntarily.

"Yeah, well, Beth, you ever get lonely of an evening and I'd be more than happy to help you out."

“Don’t, Phil. Don’t degrade yourself to the level of every other man I’ve ever met. Except my brothers, of course. And I mean they couldn’t, you know ... I think I’m drunk, Phil.”

“I know you are. Don’t worry, I won’t grass you. I’ll just use it as leverage for the next time I’m off my nut and I need someone to cover for me.”

He winked at her and gave her arse a squeeze. Pigs at the trough, indeed.

From her vantage point, Bethan saw Justin and the woman disappear into the loos. Great. Fuck. Vomit. Pigs.

CHAPTER SIX

The rest of the working week went by, dull and uneventful, surprisingly free of trouble at either the bar or the office. No one seemed to be cross with her. Nice change for once. In fact, this week would not be worth mentioning at all if it weren't for Sarah. The happenstance of Sarah's appearance in Bethan's life is as random and perfect as the appearance of anyone in anyone else's life, but Sarah was Sarah and she wouldn't be ignored. She came into the publishing house on Thursday morning, cross, pretty, forceful. The blokes in the office raised their eyebrows and puffed their cheeks in a way that immediately told Bethan they were shit scared of this twenty-something. So was she.

"I'm Sarah."

"Right-o. Are you here to see anyone, Sarah?"

"Carl. Fuckwit that he is. He's had my manuscript for over a month and not a dicky-bird as to whether you capitalist dogs are going to publish it."

Bethan, having no strong feelings upon anything other than her approaching lunch hour at this time, said, with more than a hint of satisfaction, "wouldn't hold your breath on him love, he's in a disciplinary meeting as we speak. Bad manners and all that."

Sarah was by no means used to being called "love," especially not by a woman. Especially not by such a lovely young woman. All her friends were petrified of terms like

that. They had had them squeezed out of them at undergraduate level and had been replaced by sterile PC terms that meant nothing to anyone. Normally had she been addressed in this way Sarah would have protested, said she wasn't their "love," but this girl made her feel that she wanted to be. She was warm, somehow pure. Sarah continued, much less sure of herself. She rarely believed the things that came out of her own mouth anyway.

"Well, never mind ... I'll e-mail him or something. You new here?"

"Ish. Been here 'bout a month. For my sins." Sarah let out a polite, flattering laugh.

"I'm Sarah. Nice to meet you. You're much friendlier than the other girl they had here."

"I'm Bethan. Not really surprised, Sarah, she was a drug addict. Don't suppose she had much to be happy about." Sarah was loving this girl's candour, people like this just didn't exist in her world.

"Well, if you're stuck for something to do Bethan give me a call," she said, frantically scribbling her number on a scrap of paper from her leather satchel. "I mean you're obviously new in town ..."

Bethan buckled at this American-sounding phrase but took the paper and smiled a slightly perplexed smile. She felt like she was being chatted up. It was the first time a woman had been genuinely nice to her since she moved to London. In fact, it may have

been the first time a woman (except her mum and her nan) had ever been nice to her ever. She felt happy.

“Thanks, Sarah. That’s really kind. I’m definitely gonna take you up on that.”

Sarah smiled winningly and left in a whirl of curls and wool. The men in the office, having observed this interaction, felt a surge of insecurity. The two women had just shown far more interest in each other than they ever had in them. Must be lesbos. A few sniggers went round the office behind her which Bethan studiously ignored. Why were men’s minds full of such drivel? Bethan at this stage knew little of the fear that motivated much of their ridiculous bigotry.

Before she knew it, Friday arrived and Bethan found herself sorting out her washing to take on the coach back home to mum. She couldn’t bloody wait to be fed and hugged. She wasn’t needed at the office that Friday and so she took the morning to sort things out at home.

Then, at about eleven, her mobile rung. She thought it would be her mother reminding her not to forget to come but when she picked up the phone and saw Justin’s number on the screen she was so alarmed that a little wee involuntarily slipped out. Just a little, not a whole one. After recalling herself away from the state of her knickers, she thought for a moment whether or not to answer. Or rather, she didn’t think and was completely overwhelmed by a need to speak to him and just picked up.

“Hello.” She tried for icy but sounded strangled.

“Hi Beth, it’s Justin.” He sounded way too excited. His voice was too high-pitched for nonchalance, which, incidentally, was what he was trying for.

“Yeah?”

“Are you all right?”

“Fine. You? Catch any interesting venereal diseases this week? Crabs? Herpes? Something like that?” There went apparent indifference. Where did that come from?

“What? Oh, you mean after Monday?”

“Do I? Funny you should think of that, Just. Was she that filthy. I mean filthier than normal.”

“Jesus, Beth. Calm down. She’s nothing. Right tart. Just a friend. Someone to have a drink with. Don’t tell me you don’t have blokes like that ...”

“Oh, I do, yeah. It’s just that I try not to shove my crotch into theirs if I can possibly avoid it. Gives people the wrong idea in my experience. Or perhaps the right one.”

“Beth, nothing happened. I promise. Not that I have to. We’ve only been together once.”

She hung up. Tears formed in her eyes. The phone rang again immediately. It was him. If she was strong she wouldn’t answer. She was not strong.

“I didn’t mean that how it sounded,” he said.

“Right.”

“I like you a lot, Beth. In fact that’s why I’m ringing. I wanted to see you this weekend. Thought you might be up for dinner or something, then a club.”

She said nothing.

“Or if you're a bit knackered we can see a film or something.”

“I’m going to Newport. My coach leaves in a couple of hours.” God why, why, why?

“Why are you going back to that shithole?”

“Because that’s where I’m from, Just. So are you. And anyway, don’t call it a shithole.” Since when did she become a champion of Newport? She’d called it much worse things than a shithole.

“Sorry. Well can I come round for a bit before you go?”

“What? To me?”

“Yeah, if that's okay.”

It was. She gave him directions and he said he’d be there in twenty minutes. That wasn’t really enough time for her to get her stuff sorted, but he could have said he was outside now and she’d still have let him in.

She brushed her hair and put a clean pair of knickers on. Twenty minutes seemed like twenty decades but eventually there came a knock at the door that could only be his.

She opened it and saw him, in all his tight-jeaned, collared-shirted glory and almost didn't want him to come in. Almost.

“Wow, Beth. This ain't the Ritz.”

“Yeah, and I'm not a page-three girl like Gyrate Jessica, so this is about all I can afford earning a legitimate minimum wage.”

“You should be, Beth. A page-three girl, I mean. Not on minimum wage.” With that he leaned in and kissed her. A proper kiss. A kiss that melted all her resolution and self-defence mechanisms. A kiss that would have made a member of the Nazi Youth League become homosexual.

Next thing he was pushing her onto her bed and unbuttoning her jeans. She forgot all about how utterly unsuitable he was and just thanked Jesus, Mary, and all the saints in Heaven for putting a clean pair of knickers on her.

They had sex. It was better than the first time. There was more in it. They were more familiar with each other, greedier for each other's flesh than they had been in his sterile apartment. He was rough with her. She loved it. Couldn't get enough of it. Wanted him never to stop. Understood how people became sex addicts.

But it did end, naturally. And as they were lying there a feeling of uneasiness came over her.

“What are we doing, Just?”

“Well, if you don’t know by now, darling, I feel I can’t help you. I shall just have to carry on taking advantage of this gorgeous body of yours ...” He started to kiss her breasts.

“No, I just meant, like, do you like me and stuff?”

“Not as much as him,” said Justin pointing to his (frankly enormous, although Bethan was too young to appreciate it) penis, “in fact, I think he’s ready for another round.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not. Have to go. Have to get to Paddington by tube so ...”

“If I give you a lift can I have my way with you again?”

Well, it was cheaper than a tube ticket she supposed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The National Express coach was cheap for a reason. As she looked around at the fag-ends in the ashtray (which had probably been there for a good week), felt the dirt from the seat (which had probably been there for a year) seeping into her jeans, and heard the rough lads in front of her talk about their massive weekend in the “big smoke” (the likes of whom would probably be there for the rest of her life), she realised that the inside of Justin’s Range Rover was probably the last and most prominent luxury she would be exposed to for a while.

Not that she was *that* sad to leave him. He was a bit like an animal. Tried to finger her in the car on the way to the station. She’d stopped him, pleading tenderness, of both brain and genitals. At the same time, she’d wanted to stay in London; wondered if he’d ever offer her the opportunity of a weekend alone with him again. In truth, she didn’t know what the fuck was going on and probably wouldn’t for the foreseeable future.

In the extremely foreseeable future, however, she had a weekend of boozing and bonking ahead of her at the centre of the world: Newport.

The squalid and decaying appearance of Newport bus station is often lost on the first time visitor to the town (or city as it was recently made by the Queen, although God knows why). These virginal eyes will rather tend to focus on the “pretty” river on the opposite side of the road (not seeing that it is full of excrement and used needles) or

perhaps they will be too occupied by rubber-necking to see their cowed and humbled relatives who wait for them. Neither of these nor any other relief came to Bethan.

She saw the bus station as a place she had been to too often; lost and confused by all the fumes and activity as a child, equally lost and confused by all the sexual activity she had committed there after eleven o'clock throw-out from the pubs on a Friday night with someone who wasn't good enough to clean her boots.

This sense of recognition depressed Bethan. Not because she disliked it, but because she liked it. This was the familiar. This was her and always would be, no matter how much she pissed about with publishing or the underground or strippers. The pervasive squalidness was like an unwanted scar. People would pretend not to look at it and on your good days you would convince yourself it wasn't there, but as soon as you were down or insecure it would be all you could think about, it became emblematic of all you hated and feared and could never escape about yourself. It was as permanent as AIDS and as incurable.

Her middle brother, Ryan, was waiting for her on the platform, excitement and mischief in his eyes. She shuffled off the bus and went to get her bag out of the hold, but he couldn't wait and intercepted her with a crushing embrace just as she turned to go to him.

“Allo Darlin. 'Ow was ya trip?”

“Fine. Took a while to get out of London bu—”

“Yeah, well, never mind all that. Mam’s at home. Can’t fuckin’ wait to see you. Fed up with us lot I ’spect,” he said, referring to the fact that amongst all the other cruelties in Bethan’s mum’s life, she had been given three of the most unruly, debaucherous, and rowdy sons that ever there were. They varied in their irresponsibility, with Rob (the oldest) being the most responsible and Ryan the least, with Rhys (the youngest) floundering (as was his way) somewhere in between.

“Yeah, well, can’t really blame her for that,” Bethan said. “Having you lot at home’s enough to do anyone’s head in.”

“You love it, Beth, bollocks to what you say.”

It was true, she did. They were everything to her and she would have cut off her head as soon as she would wish to be without them. She was unflinchingly loyal to her family, especially to her brothers. They could cheat, steal, fight, drink, and shag to their wanton heart’s desire and she would defend them to other people as if they were the three Magi on their way to Bethlehem.

Ryan carried her bags as if they were two downy pillows as they walked to the car. He was the biggest man most people would ever see: six foot eight with a beer gut to rival a champion darts player. As they approached Ryan’s car, Bethan felt a surge of irritation (undoubtedly not to be the last of the weekend) as she saw he had spent even more money he didn’t have on giving the 1970s monstrosity new wheels and tires.

“You’re working then, Ry, to afford those flashy bits for your car?”

Ryan's employment status was always a moot point, both with him and everyone else. He had joined the army at fifteen, after systematically failing every GCSE he sat, but had hated it even more than school, if that was possible. He then decided that seeing as he'd always liked the world of the automotive, he would apply to the only offering from it that it gave him and become a truck driver. This didn't work out to be the dream occupation it had promised to be either and so now he was bouncing part-time at some of the less salubrious nightclubs in Newport (not that there were any that were at all salubrious in any way, to be fair), and taking HGV work as and when it came. And instead of donating the money he made to his long-suffering mother or the three deeply unfortunate mothers of his illegitimate children, he spent it on his car.

A car that, incidentally, should have been in Newport's sizeable scrapyards years ago. As they made their way back to the home of their childhood, the siblings wondered, Bethan with amusement and Ryan with panic, how much longer the old banger would last.

As they pulled into Portland Crescent, Bethan felt the first true surge of happiness since she'd arrived. The three-story houses that were considered the poshest of their kind in the area loomed on either side of the narrow street, and, as Bethan looked into the art-nouveau style glass front doors, she was struck by the incessant signs of life in each house.

This was a long way from London, where she could never tell if she was completely alone on her floor, never mind in the buildings next to her. The street she grew up in suddenly seemed a lively, active place, and Bethan's warm feelings were no

doubt quickened by the anticipation of seeing her mum's beautiful but harassed face in a matter of moments.

The curtains of the front room of number eight twitched as Ryan slammed his car door, and it retaliated by slumping lopsidedly in its frame. Bethan's mum opened the door and half-walked, half-ran out to her daughter and hugged her and whispered such comforts as "my lovely girl" and "my little pickle."

"Cup o' tea, love?"

"Yes, please, mum."

"Better get some food in you an' all, Beth," Ryan said. "Big one tonight. It's two-for-one specials at Zanzibar. Don't want you chuckin' before eleven like last time."

Bethan, as we saw on her date with Justin, couldn't hold down booze. Many a time had she seen the inside of the night bus, with one of her friends holding her hair back. In this, and not only this, she was an anomaly in her family. Her three brothers could drink a bar dry and still see to swing a punch afterwards, whereas Bethan was more or less ready to lean over the toilet after two vodka cranberries (or vodka anything, or anything anything). It's true that all her brothers were over six-two and that probably had something to do with their vastly greater capabilities, but, really, she knew twelve-year-olds who could handle their drink better.

"Leave her alone, Ryan, ya big lump of a thing. I don't want anyone chuckin' tonight," her mother said. "God almighty, ya little sister's only home for one weekend and all you can think about is getting off your head. You've always been the same."

Ryan, although a big boy, was embarrassed at his mother's scolding, and mumbled something about his car before slinking (if that word can be applied to such a large man) out of the kitchen.

"Rob and Rhys will be home soon, love. Don't mind him out there, he's got a lot on his mind."

"Like what, mum? Where his next pint's coming from? Who he's going to impregnate next?"

"He's no angel, Beth, but he's a good lad underneath it all. And anyway, you and the others are doing fine. Ryan'll sort himself out, he's just immature."

Bethan doubted this but she didn't want to distress her mother further. Besides, she wasn't as angelic as her mum thought, was she? Getting drunk at work, having sex with someone considerably older and more promiscuous than herself. She should shut her mouth and she knew it.

"You enjoying London, then? You look a bit pale and thin, love."

"Pale maybe, mum, I'm a bit tired. I'm not really sure if I'm enjoying it. It's different, you know? From here, I mean. I needed a change."

"Well, I think you're very brave. It's probably just a phase, my pickle, but I let you go because I always want you to pursue your dreams."

"It's not a phase, mum," replied Beth, becoming irritated, "I'll stick at it. What's there for me here, anyway?"

“You’re right, love, sorry. Try and be patient with me, it’s hard for me to understand. I’ve only been there twice on the bus for Christmas shopping trips. You’re doing a lot more than I could.”

Bethan felt a surge of guilt. Her mum, Ruby, was the nicest person she knew. She’d never met her dad and didn’t want to. What could he possibly give her that her mum didn’t give her already? And hadn’t her mum done well for herself and her kids?

She worked as a physio in a private practice and was successful enough to afford this place where they could all live, and she had made sure her kids had what they needed, both growing up and now. She’d had a string of wealthy boyfriends, who bought her nice clothes and jewellery, but she would never marry, she said, it wasn’t for her. What did she want with a bloke always wanting her attention, jealous the minute she talks to someone else? No, she had her kids and her house and her job and her friends and that was enough.

The front door made its squeaky opening sound and Bethan was brought back into the present.

“‘Allo ’allo ’allo. What have we got here?” Rob and Rhys walked into the kitchen and Rhys went over to Bethan and squeezed her so tight she thought he’d break her ribs, while Rob waited behind him.

“Hi boys.”

“All right, Beth? You up for a big one tonight? What’s for dinner, mum?” asked Rob, adding, “you’re home nice and early.”

“Casserole, and if I can’t get off early on a Friday when my little pickle’s home for the weekend, when can I?”

“Quite right, mum.”

Rob worked in banking and always seemed to have money. He contributed to the house and was gentle and kind, some would even say a bit sappy. Rhys worked for a local property developer and seemed either to have tons of money or none at all for months on end. He’d done a degree in geography that had got him nowhere and so he took his current job on the nefarious condition that if he didn’t make any sales then he didn’t get any money. He wasn’t paid a wage as far as Bethan could tell, but he seemed happy in his drifty, non-committal way, and he adored both his mother and his sister.

They sat down for dinner and chatted about things in general and their respective jobs (or lack of one, in Ryan’s case) in particular. Three more overprotective brothers never there were, and so, understandably, when the conversation turned to Bethan’s having a boyfriend she felt a sinking, nervous feeling that suddenly made the casserole about as appetising as a plate of dog poo. While she was more likely to get up and do an Irish jig on the dinner table than to tell them the extent of her relationship, she was also a reluctant yet frequent liar and they would guess in an instant if she brushed off their questions that she was hiding something. And then they would ferret it out of her with the tenacity of pigs snuffling for truffles. Her best policy was to stick as close to the truth as possible without incriminating herself or incurring their wrath.

“You’re blushing, Beth. Someone in particular we need to know about?”

“No, no one special. But I have been seeing a bit of Hayley’s brother Justin.”
Actually she’d been seeing all of him but her brothers and mum certainly didn’t need to know that.

“Are you fucking joking?” This came from Rhys, the one who had dated Hayley.
“The nonce who takes his clothes off?”

This outburst of rage was uncharacteristic and made Bethan concerned as to where this was going. She tried to betray nothing in her face or tone.

“The very same. Look, nothing’s happened, Rhys. I was just a bit lonely and so I called him and we met for a drink.”

“Trusting him when you’re lonely is a bit like trusting McDonalds with your cow, Beth. He’s not the kind of bloke you ever want to date. Shags himself unconscious most weekends.”

“Rhys! I will not let you talk like that at the dinner table!” It was funny the things their mum found outrageous.

“Sounds a bit of a degenerate to me, Beth.” This was hard to take from Ryan, who had had the clap eight times along with a host of other sexually-transmitted curses.

“God! You lot! Calm down. Wish I hadn’t mentioned his name now. He’s just a friend an— ”

“Yeah, well he better stay that way or I’ll introduce him to the back of my ’and.”

“Thanks, Ryan. Look I better go and get ready if we’re to hit the bright lights and glamour of Newport any time tonight, lads. Thanks, mum, great dinner as always.”

She kissed her mother on the top of her head on the way out of the dining room and wondered to herself how she was ever to get and keep a boyfriend with this lot to contend with. Didn’t they do whatever the fuck they wanted? She was *so* glad in that moment that she had the freedom of her own space in London, and that she no longer had to resort to cars and bus shelters if she felt like having sex.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Everything was just as she'd remembered it, unfortunately. As the boys got rowdier and rowdier with every drink they downed, Bethan looked around and wondered what tonight had in store for her. Even in the brown half-light of the dirty bar she was attracting a lot of attention, that much was clear, as much from the frown on Ryan's face as from the blush on hers. She wasn't sure if it was due to her new clothes or the new push-up bra she'd bought, but she didn't mind, as long as they didn't touch her. She hated greasy townies trying to cop a feel as they "squeezed" past her on their way to the bar, ignoring the six feet of space there actually was.

Well, if she was here and it was the weekend she was going to get drunk. She was going to have a good time. After this week she deserved it. She wondered if she could handle another shag tonight after her escapades with Justin before she left? Probably. It was amazing what you could achieve when you tried.

The night carried on at an alarming pace and before she knew it Bethan was having a raucous time. She was wasted and excited and glad to be letting rip. They moved on from the bar to Zanzibar, and then she really started to feel the effects. Amazingly, though, she didn't feel sick or tired, just drunk and happy and a little bit randy.

The boys were off trying to ensnare their various victims for the night, all except Rob that is, who had gone home to his girlfriend about half an hour earlier. Ryan looked to be having more success than Rhys, but perhaps this was because he was more aggressive in his tactics; often walking up to the unsuspecting female, grabbing her by the shoulders, shouting “ALL RIGHT? I’M RYAN!” before sticking his tongue down her throat. It lacked subtlety but definitely had time on its side.

As for Beth, she was feeling a bit tired by now and decided on one last dance before calling a taxi and telling Rhys to throw in the towel. On her way to the dance floor (mainly filled with slappers in white lurex with pigtails dancing around their cheap handbags), Bethan felt someone touch her arm. She looked up. It was a boy that went to the same comprehensive as her, Jamie, she remembered. He was a little bit shorter and a little bit thinner than her usual type – like an economy version of the ideal. He was funny, though, and needs must when the devil is poking his fork into your groin.

“Hi Beth. God haven’t seen you out in ages.” He had lovely green eyes.

“Nah. Moved to London, haven’t I? Just home for the weekend to see my mum and this bunch of troublemakers.”

“Yeah? That’s nice. Doing my A levels myself ...” He seemed nervous. Bethan couldn’t tell if it was because he fancied her or because Ryan was looking over at them with an aggressively suspicious eye.

“That’s what I should be doing, really, just never much of a one for the books. Look, you wanna get a kebab or something? You’d be doing me a favour, I’m a bit pissed and need to eat.”

She felt more confident now that he was interested. She was up for it, but there was no way she was going to initiate anything here in full view of the boys. It was like asking for a royal rumble.

Relief flooded over Jamie's face. "Good idea. Fed up of this place, anyway. Hadn't you better tell them?"

Beth walked over to Ryan and skillfully feigned severe sickness, telling him a kebab would fix her up so her friend was walking her to the Turkish place. She'd underestimated how drunk Ryan was.

"You sure he's your friend?"

"Yes, Ry. We've been at school together since I was twelve."

"Yeah, well you make sure he stays that way or I'll cut his dick off ... little twerp."

"Right-o! Enjoy the rest of your night. I'll see you at home in the morning," she said, casting a cursory glance over the woman hanging on Ryan's arm, thinking he wouldn't be back until at least midday tomorrow, giving her enough time to get there herself before he could raise the alarm to the others that she hadn't come home.

She walked back to Jamie, who had been watching the interaction with some trepidation, and she took his arm and told him to come the fuck on, she needed to eat.

They got food and sat at the plastic booth and chatted for ages. Bethan never remembered him being so nice and so interesting and wondered if she'd really been as stuck up as everyone at school said. It was amazing how things equalised over time. Next

time Bethan looked at the clock it was three o'clock and she thought if she didn't do it now she never would.

"Right, well that's me, love. I think we should make a move ..."

"I can give you a lift in my car, if you like ... Your mum still in the same place?"

"Yeah, course she is. But actually I was wondering if I could stay with you tonight. Haven't got house keys and the boys won't be home for ages and Rob's at his girlfriend's and I don't want to wake my mum up ..."

This was all partly true, but the main reason she didn't want to go home was because she felt lonely and confused about Justin and she would put her life on him being in bed with some tart right now, so why shouldn't she have some fun?

"Right!" he was blushing. "Actually that's no problem as I've got my own flat now, with a spare bedroom and all." God, did she have to spell it out for him. Well, if she did she'd do it when they got there.

"Great!"

Jamie's parents were rich, she remembered that as they got to his car. They drove home chatting away as if it was Sunday lunchtime and they had met at the golf club. Jamie had hardly had a drop all night, he told her, what with the drink-drive laws being so strict.

They got to his flat. It wasn't far from where they'd come and it was pretty tiny but was clean and smelled nice.

“I’ll just make up the spare bed.”

“Christ, Jamie! Am I that bad?”

“What do you mean?” He knew what she meant. “No, Beth, of course not. You’re bloody gorgeous. It’s just that you never looked twice at me the entire time we were in school, and you’re pretty drunk and I don’t want you to hate me for the rest of your life just because you had your beer goggles on tonight.”

“This isn’t school. I don’t have my beer goggles on and I want to do more than look.” She leaned in and kissed him. She wished she could be this confident when she was with Justin.

Surprisingly, that was the last thought she had of Justin that night. Where had Jamie been hiding himself all these years? They had sex and it was good. He probably enjoyed it more than her but that was par for the course. He was really intense. He seemed nervous but excited and she liked to feel that someone felt like that about her.

CHAPTER NINE

It was hard for Bethan to open her eyes on Saturday morning on account of all the eye make-up glueing her lids together. When she finally accomplished it she saw Jamie's gorgeous green ones looking back at her fairly mediocre brown ones, his being, naturally, free of make-up and no doubt the better for it.

She was overcome by guilt and nausea in equal measure, with both of these being outweighed by a compulsion to say something.

"All right?" It wasn't Shakespeare but at least it made the situation seem less surreal.

"Great, Beth. Better than you, probably. Want a cup of tea?"

"Yes, please," she replied in a small voice, feeling that a cup of tea was what she wanted most in the world at this point. That it held the prospect of salvation.

Jamie got up and padded into the kitchen, clearly feeling self-conscious. He didn't put on a dressing-gown or underwear as he felt it would make him look a bit sad but he also wondered if it was ideal to have his dick flapping around when there was scolding water to be dealt with. He also couldn't help wondering if Bethan would be disappointed with his size when she wasn't liquored, whether she might be embarrassed at having to see him walking around like this. One look at her spread-eagled nude on top of his

bedspread told him she wouldn't be, that nudity was fine with her. He set about making her some tea and toast. He remembered she took milk and no sugar. He remembered it from when she came to his house once two years ago. He was a sensitive lad.

While this was going on, Bethan thought she should really be going. She'd be in trouble if everyone was up and about before she got home and showered and changed to erase all the evidence from the Spanish inquisition she would inevitably face from her brothers. At the same time, however, she found she didn't really want to. She felt happy lying there, listening to Jamie rustling around in the kitchen, realising with relish that she was going to get toast as well.

She looked around his room and saw his books lying in piles on the floor by his bedside table and his desk. Some of them were recreational books too. Not an *FHM* in sight. Thank God. Having to look at some air-brushed model with her knickers falling down would not have been ideal with Bethan feeling as she did that her entire body had been infested by maggots.

Jamie re-entered with a tray and they ate their toast and drank their tea whilst talking about their respective routines. Before they ate, Jamie had put on a pair of boxers and he had given Beth a t-shirt. He really couldn't have held a conversation with her boobs wobbling around in front of him. He had a huge erection as it was. She was really very attractive.

Once they had finished eating Bethan felt much better. Her nausea and anxiety had gone away and she found herself wishing for more time.

“Well, I suppose I should take you home ...”

“I suppose you should.”

“I don’t want to, though ...”

“I don’t want you to, either.”

She leaned over and kissed him. A hot, wet kiss that made him feel hard and weak. And as the breakfast clothes fell to the floor, Bethan knew that she would have a lot of explaining to do when she got home.

Then she thought of a poem they’d read in school: “Let the rain wash the dishes.”

She did.

CHAPTER TEN.

The drive back to Bethan's mum's house was neither awkward nor embarrassing. If there were butterflies in her stomach then they were flapping their wings in honour of the grilling she would receive upon re-entering her childhood home rather than because she had any regrets or animosity with regards to the man sat next to her. They were friends. It was fun. Why shouldn't she have a good time?

"You better drop me at the end of the road, Jay, that way I can say I got the bus back. I'll tell them I slept at Jade's ... I haven't seen her since school, but they don't know that." And anyway, it wasn't so much the feasibility of the excuse that mattered, it was its existence. As long as she didn't come home and say she'd spent the night having rampant sex everything would be fine. But how do you explain that to someone without sounding weird? She wasn't going to try.

"Okay. But I'm not scared Beth. Of your brothers I mean." He didn't sound convincing.

"I'm sure that's very honourable of you, she said, "but it would just make life easier for me."

"Then your wish is my command."

He pulled the car up. He looked at her. For the first time since the early hours of the morning they had nothing to say to each other. Or, rather, they had too much.

“Look Jay, I just want to say that even if this was a one-night stand and I never see you again I won’t regret it. It was great.”

“Are you dumping me, Beth?” Jamie said with amusement in his voice.

“No, nothing like that.” In truth, it had just been insurance. If he hadn’t wanted to see her again that would have been his get-out-of-jail-free card. “I just. Well.”

“I’d like to see you again. I mean, I’m obviously gonna see you again. Newport isn’t exactly a metropolis. I feel like we’re in *Titanic* or something.”

Bethan agreed this was getting ridiculous. Neither of them wanted this long farewell. Neither of them wanted farewell at all. But how do you say that? Language is so desperately inadequate in these situations.

They swapped numbers and had a bit of a final kiss and Bethan got out the car and thought that was fun I wonder if anything will come of it what about Justin it will all sort itself out.

Romantic considerations had to be put on the back burner; she had some lies to tell. Bethan was a proficient and skillful liar. She listed it among her main attributes. Seeing her tell a lie was nothing short of spectacular. The trick was to make yourself believe it, and not to “protest too much,” if worst came to worst she just swore and walked away shaking her head. People always believed her. Even people who had known her all her life.

She walked up to the front door and put her key in. Yes, the lack of access she had described to Jamie last night had been a lie too. But one of the more worthwhile ones, she thought.

Ryan was crossing the hall as she entered it.

“What the fuck time do you call this?” His anger, though mighty, was never original.

“Thirty minutes after noon, Ry, same as everyone else.” She was smooth as ice and as cold. If she lacked composure and nonchalance in other situations, she was the female equivalent of James Bond within these four walls.

“Well where have you been? We’re all worried sick.”

“No we’re not, Ryan,” their mother shouted from the living room, “it’s just you boys. I happen to be reading a very interesting piece on Lucian Freud in the Saturday supplement. Hello pickle!”

“Hi mum. I slept at Jade’s. Couldn’t be bothered with the night bus, she lives right by the kebab shop.”

Ryan couldn’t refute this, no matter how hung-over and irritable he was. Somewhere in the recesses of his stewed brain he knew vaguely of the existence of someone of this name in his sister’s life, he didn’t know where she lived. He was slipping, starting to be swayed, finally his frown left as he settled back into the comfortable lie as if it was an armchair. Wrap your lies in truth and you will never be found out. Bethan lived by this principle.

She went upstairs and showered and changed into some clean clothes. She washed her knickers by hand herself in the sink. Her mum wouldn't have commented on the state of them but of all the things that mortified Bethan, white marks seemed to come near the top in her bizarre moral hierarchy.

The four siblings were too hung-over and tired to do anything strenuous that night, much to the delight of their mother. She had no date that night as the GP she'd been seeing on and off for a few months was away at a conference and so she was free to enjoy her children's subdued company. She made a curry, not by coincidence, she knew it was their favourite hangover food, and then they all watched a film on the telly, by the end of which Ruby was the only one awake.

Bethan had booked herself on the five o'clock bus out of Newport station, thinking that would allow for a big Sunday lunch and many big, embracing goodbyes. The car was packed on the way there, all the boys having insisted on coming. Luckily they were in Ruby's car, Ryan's would never have made it. Bethan said goodbye and made all sorts of promises about regular trips she knew she couldn't keep. As she loaded her bag full of freshly washed and ironed laundry into the coach's baggage department she felt sad yet determined. This weekend had been just what she needed after all. It wouldn't break her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN.

Frustrating, interfering and too familiar though her family were, being with them still beat coming back to an empty bed-sit on a Sunday night. Especially when there seemed nothing to look forward to the following week. Nothing except the usual round of bollockings and late nights. Bethan had moved to London to *do* something. She knew something was happening somewhere, but it felt perhaps even further away when she lived amongst it than when she was living in her stifling home.

She had to see the glossy women going shopping to Harvey Nicks, the ball-breakers in their power suits, the bohemian women in their Nepalese knits. She saw them all the time. She would have settled for any of these roles. She wanted prescription, identity, knowledge, direction. And unlike so many other girls of her age, she consciously *knew* she wanted these things. But they seemed completely unattainable. Did she want to be a receptionist for the rest of her life? No, obviously not. But she also didn't want to go to university, and it seemed a straight choice.

If Bethan had been wealthier or better educated or simply more designing, then she could have overcome these things. She would have realised that she could get information on different courses, go to night school, or simply marry someone rich. But if she had been any of these things she wouldn't be sat in the bed-sit on a Sunday night, depressed and bored out of her mind.

She needed a life, she thought. She'd never had loads of friends, but at least in school she'd had girls she could talk with, laugh with, moan with, even if they did talk about her behind her back. She didn't trust friendship but she needed it. She had two options then: Justin or Sarah. The only two people in London she could even ask for the time of day.

It would be too much to say that Bethan had realised Justin was a prat and that is why she didn't call him. She had realised that he was a prat from the moment they met, the fact was immaterial to their relationship. She didn't call him because she felt too weak. She wasn't in the mood for his attitude, she wasn't in the mood to tart herself up so that she would feel acceptable in his presence, she wasn't (for once) even in the mood for sex. It would also be too much to say that her weekend encounter with Jamie prevented her from calling Justin. Jamie didn't enter that equation. Who says young women are incapable of having sex without being emotionally involved? Bethan was exhibit A and star witness for the prosecution in that case.

She called Sarah. The phone rang. Just when she thought it was going to go onto voice-mail and she would have to hang up instead of leaving some weird message Sarah answered.

"Hello, Sarah speaking."

"Hi Sarah, it's Bethan. From Backdoor Publishers. I know it's a bit strange of me to call. I just wondered if you wanted to meet up and chat or something. Out somewhere." Bethan could hear background noise and for a terrible moment thought she had interrupted a church gathering or something of equal sobriety and magnitude.

“Oh, yeah, hi Bethan. Actually I’m having a drinks thing at my house tonight. Just some people I was at uni with. Why don’t you come for a bit?”

Bethan felt sick. One new person was enough to navigate, let alone a whole “drinks thing” full of them. But she wanted company, and here it was, offering itself up on a plate to her. “Perfect, Sarah, that’s really kind. Are you sure?”

“Yes, of course!” She sounded genuine so Bethan got directions and put herself straight and got on the tube and about an hour later found herself in front of a smart new block of flats right by Earl’s Court tube station. This was a long way from home, whether she considered it Newport or the bed-sit. She rang the appropriate bell and was let in without so much as having to affirm she was indeed the strange little Welsh person that the hostess had felt obliged to invite.

The front door of number twenty-eight was open. She knocked lightly and entered. There were about twenty people squashed into the flat. They looked, what was the word? Refined. The men had more hair and certainly of a floppier nature than the crew cuts she was used to seeing at home or the executive grooming she was used to at work. Lots of them (men and women) were wearing glasses. They were all drinking wine. They all talked with their hands. To Bethan this was Jane Austen, Richard Branson and the Royal Family rolled into one. The other half, if you please.

She should have worn something that looked less like a costume from *Showgirls*. Her ample bust was encased in a wholly inappropriate blue sequined bra that showed through her flimsy white lycra shirt. And everyone seemed to be looking. Well, what did

she expect? The men at this party seemed to be the ones with the boobs so she supposed she did stick out (ahem).

Sarah spotted her and rushed forward. She told Bethan what her flushed cheeks and wild hair had already indicated, that she was “inebriated,” or pissed, thought Bethan. The mandatory introductions were made, with Bethan feeling the odds were against her; all these people only had to remember one name, she had to remember loads.

One horsey-looking bloke sputtered that perhaps they should wear “those awful name tags” to make it easier for her. She didn’t laugh. Didn’t even smile. Before she knew it she was being asked by a group of these strange but no doubt well-meaning people what she thought of “women’s position in the workplace.” She said as long as there was one for her she was happy. They laughed. Like they’d never heard a joke before. She sent Rob a text: “sitting in a room full of nutters.” She partly wished she’d stayed in the bed-sit. Before she knew it Sarah was talking very loudly and crossly about what appeared to have been started by her joke.

“But women are just so marginalised, you know? I mean, apparently we’re all post-feminist free-thinkers, but I don’t see any evidence of it. Anywhere. It’s okay for me, I mean I’m not exactly a knock-out in the looks department,” murmurs of disagreement from the female faction, “but, you know, if you *are* pretty *at all* then it just seems like men can’t accept that you might have a brain in your body or an independent thought in your head.” Sarah’s cheeks were so flushed now that Bethan thought she might explode.

“I agree,” said the horsey bloke who she now knew was called Hugh. Hugh the Horse. That was how she remembered his name. “I feel strongly that women are still being held up as symbols of fetishisation, as sexual beings.”

There'd been a club in the Port (as the locals called Newport) called Fetish once, mused Bethan, closed down after a month. Skinheads got to it. She didn't think this information was either relevant or worth volunteering but it brought an involuntary smile to her lips.

“You're happy to have found such a free-thinking man, Bethan,” said Hugh the Horse's crony. “He's always open to offers ...” The crony nudged the Horse and they let out a snorting laugh.

“Excuse him, Bethan, he's so juvenile,” said the Horse. “I actually don't agree with meaningless sex, I think you have to be in love for it to be any good at all.”

A few of the surrounding females swooned and smiled at the Horse. Bethan began to think this was more like charades than a debate. The whole liberal thing was obviously part of the Horse's pulling tactics. It was working. But not on her. God, clever women were so fucking stupid sometimes. She felt irritated. All the frustration and confusion of her sex life seemed to be boiling under the surface and she just couldn't keep her mouth shut any longer. Men were pigs. And this one was the worst kind – a pig masquerading as a sheep.

“So you've never had meaningless sex, Hugh?”

Oh God, what had she said. They all looked horror-stricken. She thought they were supposed to be educated and liberal. Perhaps there were rules she didn't know about.

A tight smile spread over his horsey face. "No, actually, I can't say that I have, Bethan. I have too much respect for women to do something like that."

"But what if they want it? Meaningless sex, I mean. Sex is sex is sex, after all, Hugh." She looked him straight in the eye. What had come over her? This was hardly what her mother would call "polite."

"Well ... um ... obviously that's different. I mean ... you know." He excused himself and mumbled something about needing a refill. His glass was half full. Prat.

Bethan sipped her wine and talked to Sarah and some of her extremely interested and polite friends about where she came from (leaving out a bit), what she did (leaving out a lot), and her personal life (leaving out everything).

Before she knew it, Bethan found herself in the familiar but nonetheless unpleasant position of drunkenness. Quite severe drunkenness, actually. Everyone had been so polite and obliging, filling her glass before she even needed it. She had no idea how much she'd drunk. She'd been there about three hours so she was guessing about nine glasses. This was the equivalent of a bottle of whisky and thirteen pints for most people. She felt decidedly woozy and excused herself in search of the bathroom. She could taste the bile now; feel her Sunday lunch somewhere far further above her belly than it should be. God, where did they hide the bathroom in this fucking place!

She found it, at last. She leaned over the toilet bowl, thinking of all the high-fibre, academic poo that had been passed into it. She retched and puked – a bit at first, then an absolute load. What a relief. She felt weak and shaky but at least not as nauseous. She ran the taps so no one could hear the noise she was making, although, in fact, Bethan was not a noisy puker, another skill she had had to learn growing up. If her mother could not abide one thing, it was puking.

She stood up and washed her face with water, taking care not to smudge her eye make-up. That was enough then. Although the last thing she felt like doing was eating she would grab a few of the expensive nibbles on the way out and then head back north on the tube. She didn't relish the thought but at least it should be quiet on a Sunday evening (or night, as it was now).

She emerged back into the party space and grabbed some little quiches and a slice of pizza which she ate in quick succession. She went over to the drinks table and poured herself a glass of apple juice, provided "for the bores (snort snort)" she'd been told. There. She would let that sink in for ten minutes and then split. She went to find Sarah. She found her astride some toff on the sofa, snogging his face off. Good for her. Good to see the upper classes weren't above that sort of thing. Not that Bethan was after any of that tonight. You could overdo it, even at her tender age.

She went over to the group she'd been talking with to say bye it was nice to meet you see you again soon I'm sure. The Horse followed her to the door.

"Well," he leered, "it was certainly interesting to meet you, *Bethan* ..."

She just stared at him. She seemed to have puked up the last of her social courtesy towards this man and was left with raw contempt.

“If you ever feel like any of that meaningless sex ...”

“Why don’t you fuck off?”

She left without further ado.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Monday morning came too quickly and too brightly and was accompanied by an all-too-familiar hangover. At least she had plenty of clean clothes. Bethan made her way to work and as soon as she got there she wished she hadn't. Blah blah blah.

Her and Rakesh were on nodding terms, he was really dreadfully nice and seemed popular with both men and women in the office, a rare occurrence. Handsome too. Bethan wondered if he had a girlfriend or perhaps wanted one? He had told her before that although he was a Muslim he was not devout, not nearly as devout as his parents would like anyway. Bethan could relate to this, she'd told him. Not that her family were religious, oh no! It was more that they still wished she was five. Restrictions were frustrating in whatever form they came.

Sarah called her just after lunch. She wasn't normally allowed to take personal calls on "the company's time" but there was sod all happening and her regard for her job seemed to have reached an all-time low so she really didn't care.

Sarah apologised for being "incapacitated" (her word) when Bethan left last night. Bethan told her not to worry. They moaned about their respective hangovers and laughed at the various men at the party. It was great talking to Sarah, she made you feel so liked and in demand. She suggested they meet up later. Bethan agreed. Couldn't wait.

When five o'clock came Bethan made her way over to Mayfair and a bar there called "Cube" or some such geometrical shape. Sarah was already there. They ordered some fruit juice, both showing the other that they were by no means hardcore, by no means subscribers to the hair of the dog. The dog had bitten them both too hard last night for them to go anywhere near it today.

"So who was that bloke last night, Sare? You seemed into him."

"I believe it's a case of what you call beer goggles, Beth. His name's Peter and the truth is he'd shag my gran if she was willing and able."

"Don't say that!"

"No, it's fine. It's true. He's been with most of my friends. I was drunk, he was a sure thing. Nothing to regret and yet I feel like such shit today. Not sure if it's the after effects of him or the wine."

"Both probably."

"I'm sure you don't get that – regret, I mean. You're so pretty and relaxed you must just cast them off."

Bethan thought this description of her was hilarious. "Hardly. I get used all the time. Actually more or less without exception. The things I said to your sexist friend were just to annoy him. Form of self-defense too, I suppose. My latest debacle has been nothing short of a nightmare."

She proceeded to tell Sarah about Justin, from start to finish. This was the first time she had told anyone everything that had happened and even as the words left her

mouth she could hear what they spelled, could see her self-destruction button being pressed. Most people in Bethan's position would have tried to defend Justin, would have explained that the girl she'd seen him with was just a friend, explain that it wasn't like they were a proper couple or anything, would have feigned indifference. But to do that would have been excuses, lies, pretense. If Sarah was her friend she could hear it and hear it all.

"Well, I mean, he sounds amazing and everything, I mean to be a stripper I suppose you have to be," Sarah's cheeks coloured as she said this, "but it does sound like he thinks he can just do what he wants with you."

"The truth is he can. I mean I don't really blame him. He's great in bed so I let him be bad in other areas. There are times when I would bet my life that he was with someone else. I mean let's be objective. I work two jobs, one at night so that's not exactly sociable. I'm nine years younger than him. I live in what basically amounts to a squat," this was an exaggeration but Sarah couldn't have known and Bethan was going for dramatic effect, "and I'm from the very place he's been trying to escape his whole life. I'm hardly mysterious and sexy and sophisticated compared to what he's used to." Here she grinned. "And it's not like I don't have my fun."

Bethan went on to spill about Jamie. Sarah squealed with delight, interjecting the words "good God!" and "on the same day!" as Bethan talked.

"That's all very well, Beth, and I admire your stamina. But I still think you need to be careful. You're still you and that should be enough." These sounded like sentences

out of a self-help book to Bethan, or perhaps an advice column in Cosmo, they simply weren't real to her, they didn't apply.

They made small talk and then went their separate ways, both leaving the other wanting more. They were glad they met, glad Bethan had called, glad this wasn't just one more broken telephone on the switchboard of their lives. Bethan thought about all the people she hadn't bothered with, all the people she could know and it made her sad to think of them. Then she realised they were probably happier than her, they, after all, were the kind of people who made the effort. She wanted to be more like Sarah, to know what's important, be going somewhere, have dreams, know where Burma is.

She would go onto the internet at work on Wednesday (a prohibited act but it wouldn't matter if she was going to leave would it?) and find out what and where and how and how much she could study. This was going to be it. It had to be because, no matter what they tell you, hope does not necessarily spring eternal.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Only Wednesday turned out to be a bad day. She didn't go onto the internet, she didn't find anything out. It would all have to wait a bit.

Then Thursday rolled around. The Thursday that it all came home to roost. The Thursday everyone would remember forever and we'd all say why didn't we what could have o my god. If we could just stop time at nine o'clock on Thursday morning we could have felt the danger, if we'd realised what we'd done, we collectively, historically, politically. But you can't stop time, it passes and passes with the infinite certainty that it is the only sure thing; mercilessly, incomprehensibly eternal. So we don't take stock, we don't evaluate, we never stop. But Thursday stopped us, if only for a while.

Bethan was completely unimpressed by the gravity of this particular Thursday. She treated it with such disdain that she overslept. She had been asked to fill in and had forgotten all about it and so was horrendously late and didn't get anywhere near her office in Russell Square until well after nine-thirty.

My God, was she going to be for the high jump. It was funny but in her office punctuality seemed more important than anything else, as if timeliness was next to godliness. She had never excelled in either. She changed from the Northern Line at King's Cross and knew she would only be about another ten minutes. Her palms were sweating, she couldn't face another bollocking, not today. Think about something else.

Men. What the fuck had happened to Justin anyway? Probably shacked up with some tart. Men were such ...

The air ripped and scorched with noise. Dust everywhere. Her eyes stung like hell. The woman next to her started screaming her lungs out, screaming as if she'd just seen her child's eyes gauged out. It was so hot. And dark. Pitch black like it was when they went on a day trip down a coal mine when she was in primary school. No source of light. No hope. She felt panic crawling up her legs and into her stomach like a swarm of cockroaches. Her heart was beating so hard it was hurting her ribcage. She couldn't breathe. No one was talking but there was so much noise, they weren't even like humans anymore. They were rats, trapped, awaiting death.

She heard a loud bang and some clearing of glass. What must have been a man's voice shouted, "I've opened the door, the glass was smashed. Let's get out."

Now, walking along a tube track in the darkness with no idea of where you're going may not sound like the smartest of ideas, but it was either that or stay in the pitch black and blistering heat and wait to pass out. Everyone who was able started moving towards the door where the man had put the light on his mobile and was waving it up in the air so people could see where to come to. Others started doing the same and there was eventually a mini-sea of LCD displays lighting the path. Bethan clambered towards the door, stumbled out of the carriage and followed the procession along the side of the tube.

Three things occurred to her now. One: that their carriage was almost the last one on that tube, they were walking for ages. Two: that the carriages they were passing also contained people, people who seemed to be in a worse condition than them. They could

hear moans and urgent, panicked movement. Three: that she could feel sharp, intense stabbing pains up her left arm. She tried to touch it but the pain became more intense by the second until it took her breath away. But she couldn't stop walking. She tripped and stumbled over something that felt like flesh but she did not fall, she could not fall behind. She needed to be with these other people; to follow them to some sort of safety. Her arm could fall off and she would keep going. She was frightened but extreme fear is also determination, the determination of an injured dog.

After what seemed like an hour but could only have been fifteen minutes at the most, they saw torches, unhelpfully being shone in their eyes. Men were shouting now, grabbing arms, asking questions, being kind. It was all a bit much. All she wanted was the air, the polluted London air, the grey London sky, the pavement, the road, the crisp packets blowing in the wind. No more of this. The men in the fluorescent vests pointed them further in the direction they were heading, once they got to the platform there would be doctors, treatment, light.

They got there and it was all true. Bethan's arm started to hurt more and more as she reached the platform. The doctor started asking her what was wrong, she tried to hold up her arm, having suddenly lost the power of speech. She felt bile rising in her throat, realised she was going to be sick and thought god how selfish of me. That was her last thought for a few hours.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bethan woke up and it was like film: everything seemed mercilessly white and bright. She was obviously in hospital. She couldn't quite remember what had happened but also felt no sense of panic or alarm, she was either subconsciously aware, or more likely realised that she was alive and concussed with a sore arm but essentially okay. Her arm was bandaged and plastered from her elbows to her knuckles and she had a headache whose pervasiveness and persistency rivalled that of a jackhammer.

A nurse entered. Bethan saw she was on a ward, the other people around her looked much worse, although they were possibly thinking that about her too.

"All right, pet?" Bethan loved Northerners, so honest, and the middle aged ones always seemed so kind. All nurses should be from the North.

"Yes, thank you, I think so."

"Doc says you've bro'en ya arm, picked a fair bit o' glass out o' it too I don't mind tellin' ya."

"Thank you." What else could she say? Sorry?

"You've a concussion, too. D'ya mind what happened pet?"

"No, I suppose I can't really ..." Strange woman.

“No, love, I mean d’ya remember?”

“No. Only bits. Think I was on the tube.”

“Ya were, yeah. Tell you what, pet, I’ll put the telly on to jog ya memory and I’ll get you a sandwich. Chicken okay?”

“Great, thank you.”

The television was tuned to the BBC, there were scenes outside tube stations, people crying, an image of a decimated bus. Bethan caught bits of what was being said, “terrorist attacks comparable to nine eleven ... strategic places and times ... looks like suicide bombing ... responsibility not yet claimed ... authorities doing all they can ... hotline for family members ...”

She remembered now – or parts. She remembered heat, darkness, crying.

Bethan heard an agonising moan to her left. She looked over and saw a heavily bandaged man lying in the bed next to her. All the victims of the attack had obviously been put on the same ward, with no immediate discrimination of the severity of their wounds – this guy looked as though he was in a lot of pain. A nurse came and fussed over him for a few seconds, she spoke soothingly to him and told him she was going to increase the dosage of morphine and that he’d feel drowsy but much better in a minute.

He did and must have sensed Bethan staring at him. He looked over at her and attempted a smile that reached only as far as his nose. The rest of his face was creased in a frown, scabs, dried blood and dirt remained visible, even though the nurses had clearly attempted to clean him up. As Bethan looked at the marks she thought how they mirrored

barbed-wire fence, little crosses and almost butterfly-like patterns of red, black and brown. It made her want to look away. It wasn't ugly exactly, just not right. It was like a blackboard with squiggly chalk-marks all over it that you felt an urge to wipe clean, to see plain again and unmarked. She wondered if this man's face would ever be the same again, if stubble would ever grow back in the places on his chin that were gashed open now. It didn't look like any of this mattered at all to him. It seemed as though what concerned him most was that he'd never have that problem – he wouldn't have the chance.

“You all right, darling?” When he spoke to her his voice was so gravelly and rough, so strained and whispered and yet still masculine that she was surprised at his strength.

“Yeah, thanks. I'm so sorry, you look like you're in lots of pain. This is all so ... well, you know ...” Bethan felt her throat constrict, and hot tears behind her eyes. How the fuck could *she* be crying? She only had a bad arm. Her chest heaved and she wasn't sure if she was going to be sick or not but instead she just gasped and gasped as if she'd been under water for weeks. She tried but couldn't fill her lungs sufficiently to calm down. In a normal ward in a normal hospital on a normal day a nurse would have come and helped her, would maybe even have given her some oxygen. But there was no nurse, no oxygen, no comfort. Not today. It wasn't right that anyone should be comforted today. Just like the police don't care about traffic offences when there's a serial killer on the loose, the nurses on ward 2C simply didn't have time to attend to some hysterical girl today. Besides, if that sort of thing was allowed and encouraged who knew where it might lead? Everyone in that hospital, that city, that country, was on the verge of hysteria

on Thursday the seventh of July. A crack could become a crevice, which could become a crater, which could become a gorge. And there simply wasn't time for gorges today.

"Don't worry, darling. I'll be fine, you'll be fine, it'll all be fine." He coughed up what looked like blood into a tissue that he held in his tattered hands. "Augh ... Excuse me! Can't think what my wife would say if she saw me displaying manners like that ... I'm Steven, by the way," he said with a small and weak wave of the hand that held the tissue. He was mid-fifties, nicely-spoken if you discounted the effects of the injuries. He had kind eyes in that war-zone of a face.

Bethan had calmed by now, partly because she had to strain so hard to hear what he was saying. She introduced herself. They held a stilted conversation for a few minutes. Funnily enough neither of them said any more about what had brought them there. Steven's assertions that it would all be fine were either correct and that was why there was no more to be said or the words were so far away from the reality that the starkness of the contrast had shocked them into silence on the subject.

Suddenly Steven tensed up and his eyes bulged and the machine next to him made a loud beeping sound, like an alarm. An alarm that sounded like funeral music. The nurses drew the curtain around his bed, and there were frantic scurrying and ripping noises that made Bethan's stomach turn. The nurse emerged from behind the curtain. She looked at Bethan and said, "He's not going to make it, pet. You should say goodbye. He's alone apart from you."

Bethan climbed out of bed on wobbly legs and walked over to the curtain. Why was she doing this? She didn't know this man, if he was all alone apart from her then he

was all alone. Except that he wasn't because she was walking towards him now and he was looking at her with tiny little slits of eyes and she was taking his hand and stroking it gently, something she'd never done to anyone ever before. She stroked it and stroked it and kept looking in his eyes which were getting smaller and further away by the minute. She turned her eyes and looked down at his hand, she kept stroking it, softly, softly. She thought how beautiful it was in its disfigurement, how if she could just carry on stroking it like this then he'd be all right, he'd see his wife again, work again, shave again, eat again. She turned her eyes back to his face and saw his eyes had gone. They weren't looking at her or anyone else now and never would again because he was dead. Dead and gone.

And yet she couldn't stop gently stroking the hand she felt slowly growing cold in her own. The hand of a dead person that she hardly knew and never would now. Everything seemed still and so quiet and Bethan wasn't even breathing in case it disturbed Steven. The nurse came up behind her and put her hand on her shoulder and said don't worry, he's out of pain, you're a good girl, get some rest. Tears were streaming down Bethan's face by now and she knelt down beside the bed, partly because she wanted to and partly because her legs would no longer hold up the weight of the utter despair and shock and injustice that she felt. She kissed his hand and put it against her cheek and said she was sorry but she was sure he was in heaven because he seemed like a really nice person.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

With no recollection whatsoever of how she had got back into bed Bethan woke up on the same ward. For a moment she thought it had all been the worst and most vivid nightmare she'd ever had but she looked over to her left and saw only a bare mattress with a few folded blankets at the bottom. Her arm hurt but that was nothing. Her insides were empty, her throat burned and her soul would never be the same. The nurse came around to the side of her bed and said she was sorry but she thought Bethan was okay to leave now. She'd been in overnight (turned out it was Friday the eighth of July by now) and they really needed the beds. She gave Bethan a form to sign and handed her an industrial-sized box of strong painkillers.

The worst part about the discharging process was having to get dressed into her dirty, blood-stained, smoky clothes again. She wanted to burn them and never see them again, not wear them home. But obviously she had to so she made the surreal tube trip back to her flat on the Northern line, noting the policemen with machine guns that very much brought to mind a bolting horse and a stable door. Oh well. She should have been afraid to get on the tube, deeply traumatised by her last tube trip. But what could she do? In reality it was the only way she knew to get home and she felt completely numb. No fear, no trepidation, no more tears. She felt vacuous and nauseous and really just wanted to shower.

It was only after Bethan had showered (tying a plastic bag around her plastered arm), after she had washed the dirt smoke and tears off every part of her, after she had put on loose and comforting clothes, after she had sat on her bed and stared into space for about fifteen minutes, that she thought how worried everyone would be. That she needed to call them and tell them that she was all right in a way although not really but what would she say anyway?

It was four o'clock by now so she called home hoping to get her mum.

"Allo?" It was Ryan.

"Hi Ry, it's Beth. I just wanted to call to tell everyone I'm okay."

"Jesus, Bethan! We've all been sick with worry ... Where the fuck have you ..."
He was starting to cry. She felt pangs of guilt but really, when would she have rung them?

"I've been in hospital, Ryan. That's why I haven't called. They discharged me this afternoon. I'm sorry."

"I'll get mum ..."
She could hear him sniffing off down the hall, probably to the kitchen.

A moment later her mum came on the phone sounding concerned and gentle. "Are you all right, pickle?" She could hear her mother's voice wavering; could hear her trying to swallow the lump of relief that was at the back of her throat.

"I'm fine mum ... I mean, you know, the whole thing was awful but I'm fine ... really, you mustn't worry."

“I’ve been so concerned, Bethan. We didn’t know what had happened to you ... I must have called your mobile three hundred times over the last two days.” Her voice was breaking now, relief was flooding away, being replaced by irritation, Bethan was an inconsiderate daughter.

“I’m sorry mum ... I’ve been in hospital.” Bethan cringed as she said these words, realising in advance the effect they would have.

“OH MY GOD!” Her mum was properly crying now, unable to stem the flow of her tears any longer. Bethan sat on the end of the phone, listening to her mother cry, thinking what have I done, I should have found a way to call before now, I’m a terrible person.

Her mother managed to collect herself slightly, all irritation now gone from her voice. “Why were you in hospital?”

“I hurt my arm, mum. It’s, um, broken.”

“Oh Bethan, why don’t you come home for a bit love? We can look after you here. I don’t like to think of you up there all on your own ...”

“I’ve just been home, mum ...”

“That was before you broke your bloody arm, my girl!” Ruby was attempting strictness now (never her forte), in an attempt to force Bethan home. “Really, London’s such a dangerous place my pickle, come home for a bit. If you want to go back after you’re better, you can.” This was a fib. Bethan knew if she went home now she may never return.

“Mum, I know you’re worried, but honestly, it wasn’t even a bad break ...”

Silence. Ruby wasn’t convinced. She had, after all, raised four fine liars. “I’m not even in much pain ... I can’t leave now, mum ...” Bethan was rapidly racking her brain for a legitimate reason, “Work won’t give me the time off.”

“Well that’s shameful then Bethan. What kind of people do you work for, for God’s sake? A young girl, just broken her arm ... Heartless bloody pigs!”

Bethan could feel the tirade of indignation about to pour from her mother’s mouth so she decided to stop it. “It’s not that mum. It’s just that I’m not ill. That’s why they won’t give me time off. Because I don’t need it. Honestly.” The last time Bethan had to enter such tough negotiations with her mother had been when she had wanted to go clubbing at the tender age of fourteen. She had used single syllabic sentences then. Then, as now, they seemed to be working.

“Oh Bethan, are you sure? I’m really very worried ...” She was weakening now, Bethan saw what she needed to do.

“Mum, *please* don’t worry. I feel so guilty. I’ve created such a fuss and I’m fine.” She put on her little, pleading voice; it rarely failed.

“Don’t feel guilty, my little pickle. I’m all right. I won’t worry. But you must call me tomorrow, okay?”

“Of course I will mum. I love you.”

“I love you too, my little girl. Take care.”

“Bye mum.” Bethan put down the phone. She still had fifty pence left in the credit but a speedy exit from that conversation was worth fifty pence of anyone’s money. Pay phones were expensive anyway, mobiles were much better.

She didn’t have a clue where *her* mobile was though, lost forever probably. She thought of the people she knew who might have been affected. She thought of Justin, and then thought there was no way he would have been out and about at that time on a Thursday morning, being partial as he was to boozy Wednesday nights. This thought made her smile.

The first smile she felt had crossed her lips in days. She would call him, but not now – she wasn’t nearly strong enough. She actually wanted Sarah. Sarah to come to her and comfort her, she found the thought of Sarah at that moment very appealing, just what she needed. She didn’t even worry about the state of her flat. She just rang her up, invited her round and Sarah said she would come, immediately, in her unquestioning Sarah-like way. While Bethan waited for her to arrive she telephoned work to tell them what had happened and they were actually very good about it all and said poor you, it’s all so awful, take a week off. That, at least, cheered her up. The thought of going into that office ever again, let alone right now, made her feel terrible, so she decided not to think about it for at least a week. It would all sort itself out. It would have to because she was in no state to do so at the moment.

The intercom sounded and Bethan opened the door to her flat building and left her front door open. She suddenly felt seized by a kind of panic, what would she say? What can you say? Something would come to her.

Sarah walked in. This was the first time she had visited Bethan's flat and if she was surprised at its level of smallness and dinginess then she gave nothing away. Indeed, she didn't even look around, she just walked up to where Bethan was sitting on the end of her bed and hugged her. Sarah smelled a bit like Bethan's mum: lavender soap mixed with some incongruously exotic perfume. They sat like that for about two minutes, in each other's arms, neither really knowing how to begin, not even knowing if the beginning might also be the end.

"What happened to your arm?" It was Sarah who took the initiative, she was the stronger of the two, especially at that moment.

"It's broken ... or fractured ... or something. Glass in it too ... right mess the nurse said." Bethan let out a little laugh. Faint and small it sounded more like the strangled cry of someone who has been abandoned down a mine, cast out alone in the middle of the Atlantic.

"Poor you, Beth. That's awful. You look so tired and pale. I saw the pictures of some of the scenes on the news. I can't believe it. I can't believe you were there. I'm so glad you're all right." Sarah hugged Bethan again. Her love was so uncomplicated, she seemed so glad to be there, glad to help, glad to think of comforting things to say.

Bethan thought this would be what she needed, what she wanted to hear. But actually, it made her feel sick to the stomach. It *was* awful. She *did* look tired and pale. Yet these words all made it so much worse. She was, after all, fine. So many people weren't, so many people's families were getting phone calls from hospital wards, there would be so much despair and grief. She tried to imagine the scene in her own home if

things had been different, tried to imagine the crying and the whys and the we should never have let her go. What was a pain in the arm compared to all this?

This thought more than any other must have showed on her face because Sarah stopped in the middle of a sentence Bethan hadn't been listening to and said, "I'm sorry Beth. You look distraught. Should we not talk about this now?"

Bethan slowly nodded her head. "You know I think that would be best. I know it sounds weird because I suppose in a way I invited you round so that I could be with someone, talk to someone, moan away about how desperate I feel. But my Nana used to say "everything in moderation" and I think I've had all the desperation I can take for a while, Sare. I know it sounds terrible but I don't want to analyse it, I don't care at the moment. Someone bombed my fucking tube. What an absolute bastard. He should be dead if he isn't already but that's all I can really tell you at the moment. I really want normality, I want you to tell me what's happening with you ... Sorry, I probably sound mad, I ..."

"It's fine. It's fine, it's fine, it's fine, Beth. There will come a time when you'll need help or to talk or a psychologist perhaps, but I'm just here because I want to be with you, to support you and all that. Let's just relax. Maybe we can go out for something to eat and a bit of a walk later if you want. Or not. You shouldn't be worrying about anything but doing what makes you feel better at the moment. Everything else can wait." Sarah was making a valiant effort at saying the right things and it all seemed to be working because Bethan suddenly did feel a bit better and felt her shoulders drop a few inches and her leg muscles stopped twitching.

She thanked Sarah and invited her to lay back on the bed whilst apologising for its somewhat noisy springs. And so they lay there, next to each other on Bethan's old bed, in her little bed-sit in the worst part of town, for the rest of the afternoon. They talked a bit, were silent a bit, even laughed a bit. They ended up talking about everything except the last couple of days; their childhoods, their boyfriends, their mistakes, and Bethan told her in one afternoon perhaps more than she had ever told anyone. It was the kind of afternoon friendships are built on and it made them both feel great. It was a small but brightly coloured daisy sticking out of a manure heap of tragedy.

At about seven they went to the nearest curry house and got some food. Bethan felt like a chicken tikka bryani and she ordered one for Sarah too. They had naan bread and pints of coke and it all made for full stomachs and heavy eyes. Bethan didn't want to be alone and although she didn't say so Sarah must have guessed (being sensitive herself) and offered to stay over which was true friendship because really the contrast between her flat in Kensington and Bethan's bed-sit was as vast as the grey sky above their heads.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The morning came and the sun rose and the girls woke up after both having slept well. Sarah had to leave but it was okay now, she had made things better. She promised to visit soon and Bethan threatened to come and see her.

The next few days went by in a bit of a haze for Beth. She was dealing with things in her way. She was dealing with them in the way any late teen would have done – by not really thinking about them too much. She was a veritable blank canvas in a sea of intricate oil paintings of analysis, discussion and informed opinions on the attacks. Every time she turned on the television it seemed as though someone or other was giving their “informed opinion” on the attacks, on what caused them, on what would happen now, on what legislation the evil Labour party would try and push through in the wake of them. All this should have interested Bethan, being as she was so closely linked to the attacks. And to say that it didn’t would have been a lie.

She wanted to understand, to hear what these people had to say. But something in her brain seemed to lock up her eyes and ears every time she tried to watch and listen. It gave her a headache to try and understand it all. She had only the most rudimentary conception of what foreign policy even was, let alone how the hell it affected her and the mundanities of her life. And yet somewhere in her brain there must have been the early hatchings of the notion that that was exactly the point.

Whether you were a political analyst or a part-time receptionist at a publishing firm you could still be on a tube in the wrong place at a dangerous time. Ignorance was no safe-guard, even if knowledge wasn't either. Christ, she was barely old enough to vote, so how could politics affect her life?

- **PART TWO**



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

And so it became Monday and just as Bethan was wondering exactly when she would have to go back to work her new mobile that she had got on Saturday rang. The ring was unfamiliar at first as the phone was a different brand to her old one and the jumped-up idiot in the cell phone shop had been so busy alternately filling out her insurance form, making a fuss about her wanting the same number as before, and directing questions at her chest that he clearly hadn't had time to put a sensible ring tone on.

When it rang the sodding birdie song echoed through her flat and all she could think of were those dodgy karaoke evenings so popular in Newport: "and a little bit of this and a little bit of that and shake your bum DON'T BE SO RUDE!" Of all the songs in all the world ... The noise also served as a reminder that things were different now, that they must be got into order. She would change the tone to "ring ring" as soon as she was finished speaking to whoever it was who was calling her. Work probably. Not wanting to be unsympathetic or anything but we were just wondering when you could come back and start sorting out the mundanities in our lives that are too mundane even for our mundane brains. Yay. She'd left it on the kitchen counter and so she jogged over to it (although quite why is not clear as one leap would probably have covered that tiny area of space just as efficiently).

It was a number she didn't know. Not work. That was something at least.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is that Bethan?" A man's voice. Over thirty. Quite smooth and attractive.

"Yes it is. Can I ask who's calling?"

"My name is Jeremy Brazier and I work for *The Guardian* newspaper as a features writer. I know this must be a terrible imposition at a time like this."

Well actually it bloody well is, she thought, even if you have got a lovely voice.

"Can I ask how you got this number Jeremy?" She felt hostile now.

"It's a bit mercenary I know but the hospital gave us all the numbers of victims who had been affected by the July seventh attacks but who weren't, you know, incapable." Ah, the ethics of journalism!

"Right. That is very mercenary Jeremy. In fact it's dodgy as hell. But I still don't know what you want." How easy it is to be brave over the phone.

"Well, an interview ..." silence from Bethan's end, "basically ..." more silence, "of sorts."

"You want to interview me?"

"Yes."

"Listen, Jeremy I'm not really sure I can help you. If you want some in-depth opinion on how this attack is symptomatic of the "clash of civilisations" or whatever you

call it then that's not my field. I know nothing about it all. Didn't even do political studies for GCSE." She may as well be honest.

"I know that, Bethan. Your date of birth was on your hospital file. I'd hardly expect a seventeen year-old to be a pundit, we've got plenty of those anyway. All I really want is to chat to you about what happened to you personally, and how it has affected you so far. That's all. We may not even use it. We can meet wherever you want. Very relaxed."

He sounded awkward, like he wasn't used to having to persuade people. He wasn't doing such a bad job, mused Bethan. What the hell, she'd do it.

"Okay."

He let out a deep breath. "Great! Where do you live?" She told him. "Ah, I see. Well perhaps it's better if we meet more towards the middle of the city ... There's a coffee shop in Notting Hill called The Deli which would probably suit. Do you want to meet in your lunch hour or after work?"

"I'm not at work at the minute actually Jeremy so tomorrow at about twelve is fine for me."

"See you there then ... By the way, are you always this obliging?" His voice was laden with sarcasm.

"Always. See you there." And she hung up. That was weird! What the hell was she going to say? She'd worry about that when it happened. Well, she tried. In actual fact she thought about it on and off the whole day. She even phoned her mum to tell her.

“Don’t worry, pickle, just be yourself and tell the truth and it will all be fine.” This was indeed good advice and it would perhaps have had the desired affect had it not been the same advice Ruby had been giving her since she was five.

Later that day, for want of a more worthy past time, Bethan wondered down to the Ganja Café and paid a pound so that she could use their internet. She Googled “Jeremy Brazier” at the “Guardian.” A picture of her soon-to-be interviewer filled the screen with a long accolade of his most “controversial” and “groundbreaking” reports. Wasn’t half bad, she thought to herself. Bit pompous looking but she still wouldn’t kick him out of bed for eating biscuits. Oh, well, then it could be worse.

The Ganja Café was in fact run by a Pakistani family who had clearly seen there was a niche market in the area for a multi-purpose establishment, providing in one greasy swoop coffee, internet and kebabs. Bethan didn’t drink coffee but made liberal use of the other two facilities offered and after her time on the internet was up she bought herself a newspaper and a donner kebab with extra onions and munched it as she walked back to her flat.

When she got back to her bed-sit she called Sarah and had a brief conversation with the two of them agreeing to meet tomorrow night at Sarah’s flat for dinner. Bethan then decided that seeing as tomorrow was her interview, and even though no one was under the illusion that she was Miss Current Affairs, she should try and watch *Newsnight* and read the paper so that she could get a more removed, objective grip on the events that had befallen her in the last five days. She didn’t know it but the interview was to be the

catalyst that opened her eyes and ears, brought her out of recent shock and lifelong ignorance.

She switched the news on and for the first time in ages was genuinely interested and receptive to what was being said. There were discussions about the armed police in the tube stations around London and living in a “city under siege.” Next there was an item on the British intelligence services and their methods of collecting data on terrorism and domestic threats to British security. Bethan was less interested in this and it has to be said that her knowledge in this area was more or less confined to old James Bond films her brothers had made her watch and the occasional episode of *Spooks* that she watched on a Thursday night when she wasn’t working in the bar.

She opened the newspaper (she had thought *The Guardian* a prudent choice in consideration of tomorrow) and here too terrorists, policemen and politicians filled the pages. She read it all, pretty much cover to cover, becoming more and more horrified both at the situation Britain found itself in and also her own ignorance of all the turbulence up to this point. It wasn’t that she never read the paper or watched the news, she did, often. It was more that it took this level of intense scrutiny and more and more sensational statements to draw her attention to an issue which, had it been a few paragraphs on page eight instead of the entirety of the newspaper, she would probably have just skimmed over or missed out altogether.

It was terrible to admit but she’d always been more interested in other sections, like learning the latest NHS disaster or perhaps about snowstorms in Scotland than she had about foreign matters. That seemed to have changed now and if an outsider could

have observed her that evening, devouring newspaper reports and channel-surfing in order to find more and more opinion on the “Siege on London” as many media institutions were calling it; mouth slightly open; eyes wide as she saw people talking, screaming, analysing; brain in a sponge-like state of absorption; they would never have said here sits a girl with no interest in politics, without even a GCSE in the subject to call her own.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A stomach full of kebab, a lot of reading and some residual post-traumatic stress all made for a sound night's sleep. Bethan woke up at ten o'clock and realised she needed to get moving... *now*. She showered and put on a bit of make-up and a plain white shirt and tight jeans and realised she better leave because it was quarter past eleven and it simply wouldn't do to be late for this. It was only when she boarded the tube that she began to feel nervous. Her stomach tightened, her mouth dried out and she began to sweat profusely. She couldn't work out if she was scared of the tube or scared of the interview or just scared, in a general sort of way.

She arrived in Notting Hill at ten to twelve. She had fairly good directions but still got lost and had to be helped by a young mother in brightly coloured knitwear.

She breezed into the softly furnished, overpriced café at ten past twelve and scanned the sofas. There was a man sat on the sofa in the window on the left hand side of the door, he too was scanning the room. Bethan naturally had an advantage over him having seen his picture on the web. She walked over to him and shook his hand, hers shaking enough for him to notice. And, although neither could have known it, this was the undoing, in some sense at least, of both of them.

He was better-looking in real life, thought Bethan. Remarkable, actually. The wedding ring on his left hand caught the sunlight as they sat down next to each other on the sofa, each half-turned to face the other.

If Bethan thought Jeremy was attractive, the feeling was returned a thousand-fold. Beauty is undoubtedly in the eye of the beholder, and while most men who saw Bethan would say she was attractive, beautiful perhaps, they may stop in the street to get a better look at her; to the forty year old man sitting opposite her she was perfect, unblemished, young.

Nothing, however, showed. While Jeremy was schooled in hiding his thoughts and responses (from politicians, let alone seventeen year old girls), Bethan wasn't, her feelings were just not strong. She felt mild attraction for hundreds of men, she was so used to rushes of blood to her groin that they no longer showed in her face. Bethan made Jeremy feel like his groin had been dead for twenty years.

“So, um, Bethan ... I just wanted a general sort of chat about last Thursday and you're personal account of what happened,” his eyes flicked towards her arm, “if that's okay.”

“Great! I mean, not great, I mean, I'll do it.” Her eyes flicked towards the Dictaphone on the table, which Jeremy now switched on.

“Well, basically I have to change tubes at King's Cross. So I did. And. Then.” It was hard to breathe, suddenly. What then? What then? Then everything changed.

Stagger on. “We pulled out of the station. We weren’t going for long and then what was obviously the bomb exploded and all the lights went out ... you know the ... the neon lights ...” She was stammering a bit. Trying to be clear, to be right, to remember.

“Take a deep breath, Bethan, you’re obviously still upset.” He had kind eyes but they were slightly patronising all the same. It probably wasn’t his fault but he seemed to be saying, oh, so you can’t cope well, I could, you know, if it had been me. Drink some water, that will make you feel better.

“I’m not upset, Jeremy, I’m fine. What I am is trying to be accurate, okay?”

“Good, sorry. I shan’t interrupt you again.”

“Good.” Flailing arms, it was a body, you know, a body that tripped her up on the tube track. There was someone dead underneath the carriage, that’s what made her stumble. But she didn’t stop. “Well I didn’t see the bomber you know because my carriage was pretty far back ... It was dark and screaming, people were screaming but after that it was worse because it went quiet and that seemed so wrong and then I heard these ... these ... *moans*. We got out of the carriage by using our phones for light. We walked up the track but I fell at some stage ... I fell over something ... It.”

It was a dead body, that’s what it was. Someone from a carriage further up had been blown out of the carriage and had landed on the track. If you’d have only shone your little phone down there you would have seen something you didn’t want to Beth. It was a woman and her guts had been spilled, there was a huge gash down her front, like someone had tried to cleave her in half.

“Is that how you broke your arm?” He realised he was losing her.

“What? I mean, pardon?”

“When you fell on the track, is that how you broke your arm?”

“No. I’m actually not sure. I think that happened when the tube was jolted by the explosion. I went flying and my arm hit one of those upright steel poles they have for people to grip onto.” That is what happened.

“Right.”

They looked at each other for a long minute.

“And then we were saved. A voice came over the speaker ...” Did it? “And then these men – the rescue workers – came and found us and led us back to safety.”

“What then?”

“Excuse me?”

“What happened then, Bethan?”

“To be honest, I was sick and passed out and woke up in hospital. Someone must have helped me I suppose. There were lots of people helping.”

“Yes, there were. Builders rushed to give blood. People in the supermarkets came out and gave out tissues and water. People were stemming the bleeding of victims and saying the Lord’s prayer. Everyone wanted to help.”

This made her cry. She felt so grateful to these builders, these shop workers, these helpers. The beauty of their humanity was too much for her.

It wasn't a loud noise that came out of her soul, only a soft small whimpering sob, that's all. She went a bit pink, that's all. A few tears prickled her eyes, that's all.

"I know, I know," he shushed, "it's terrible. But you're okay." Jeremy put his arm around her and this annoyed her because he didn't understand why she was crying. He thought she was upset and traumatised because of what happened to her, her broken arm, the heat, the crying. But it was the people, you see. All the rescue workers and the people like Steven, who had tried to be nice to her even when he was fucking dying because they don't even think of themselves. They were the ones she was crying for. Why should they be gone?

Deep breaths. She was all right. That was the whole problem but it didn't do to think too much about this now.

"So. I sustained this injury but that's it. I know I haven't been the most poetic of your interviewees Jeremy." No apology.

"It's not about poetry, Bethan. This is the biggest attack on our country since World War Two. All I'm concerned about is making my piece count. About showing the humanist side of what's happened, how it's affected people's lives. People like you. You've been perfect." He said this softly and reassuringly, as if he was singing her a lullaby.

"Coffee?" Rough Essex accent. Not Jeremy. Not Bethan.

“Ah, a waitress!” Jeremy seemed startled, as if he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t have been. “Thought you’d never ask, hahaha! I’ll have a black coffee and, er, a muffin?”

“Chocolate or apple?” It wasn’t right to be having these conversations now.

“I think chocolate, don’t you? Coffee, Bethan?”

“I don’t drink coffee.” The waitress gave her a hateful look.

“Something else, then?” He sounded desperate. Just stay his eyes said. Stay a bit.

“Some tea please, and an apple muffin.” She felt violently ill. She doubted she’d keep it down but if Mr *Guardian* was willing to deal with a public puking then she admired his courage.

“Is that all you want?” If only he could have answered that question truthfully!

“Basically. My photographer should be here in about ten minutes ...”

“Photographer?” Christ!

“Yes. Sorry. I’ve alarmed you. He’ll just take one or two head and shoulder shots and then you’re ... free to go ... so to speak.”

“Right.” Oh well.

The waitress returned with two large, doughy muffins and their hot drinks. They chomped away and asked each other awkward questions whilst retreating into their

muffins to wait for the answers. The muffins, in turn, gave the subject of the interrogation time to think of an appropriate answer.

“So ...” *What can I ask her that’s not going to make her cry? (chomp chomp)*

“what do you do, Bethan?”

(Chomp chomp) *God, the thought of it makes me want to cry. What can I tell him?*

“I work at a publishing house.”

“That must be interesting.” (chomp chomp) *That sounds boring.*

“It is mostly.” *Is that a raisin?*

Luckily at that point the photographer walked into the café. He walked up to their couch and shook hands with them both. He and Jeremy seemed to know each other well. Jeremy introduced her to the man, his name was Aubrey. He, too, was about forty, but much more relaxed looking than Jeremy. This impression proved true when Aubrey sat down, ordered a cappuccino and began chatting. He was very interested in Bethan, asking her all about herself, what she thought of London and all that. It was unusual for someone to pay this much attention to her, it was completely non-sexual; he was just an interesting, interested man who she instantly liked. Jeremy seemed to visibly relax in his company too and the three of them talked about the weather, about London, about upcoming events such as concerts and plays. This is what I want, thought Bethan.

“So, you lads seem to know each other well, is that mainly through work?” She felt confident enough by now to ask a few questions of her own.

“Our wives are friends.” Aubrey said. Jeremy visibly paled. “They went to school together, but I must say that when you meet them you won’t believe that. My wife, Bianca, she’s an artist and totally chaotic...” a little smile crossed his lips, “whereas Kay, well she’s much more,” he struggled to find the word, “organised ... Well anyway we met through them many years ago and I did some work for *The Guardian* and Jeremy is good enough to sustain me throughout my quiet times ...” He trailed off here, feeling Jeremy should contribute.

He did. “We both know that isn’t true. Aubrey is a big fashion photographer Bethan. He works for me when he has time.”

“Really? That’s lush! I’ve always been so interested in photography. I don’t know anything about it of course; I’ve just always thought it must be, well, a great job.” She knew she sounded a bit overenthusiastic but she liked Aubrey and wanted him to tell her more about photography.

He obliged and looked happy. “Really? Well it’s nice to hear that Bethan. And as for knowing about it, I don’t think anyone really does, you know?” She nodded, entranced. “It’s one of those things you just have to get thrown into. I fell into it completely by chance and it’s just something that’s worked out well for me...Speaking of photographs, my dear, I had better take yours or I fear I’ll get the sack from Kate Adie over here.” Jeremy smiled. It was a worn but genuine smile.

Aubrey screwed something onto his camera. “Now if you don’t mind sitting back and looking out of that window there,” he pointed to his right, “this won’t take a second.” She did as he said and she heard a series of clicks come from the contraption.

“Beautiful!” He gave Jeremy a meaningful look, “I have a feeling that one will make *The Guardian* my dear.”

“Well, I’ve paid the bill so I think we should be going ...” Jeremy was brusque now, abrupt, anxious.

Bethan felt disappointed but knew it was inevitable. “Right. Well, thanks. It was nice to meet you both.” She went to shake both their hands. Jeremy took her hand and gave it a firm shake but Aubrey grabbed her and gave her a hug and said she was a great girl, she’d do great.

She left the café on slightly wobbly legs.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Her wobbly legs didn't want to walk in the direction of her flat, either. They wanted to go somewhere else, to be used. They were sick of being tucked up under her improbably lovely bottom in her cramped bed-sit. Notting Hill, Notting Hill. Where could you go from Notting Hill? Anywhere, really. She was going to Sarah's flat later so she may as well walk in that direction.

She wondered down the narrow streets and watched as they became wide, wider, widest until she eventually reached Kensington Palace Gardens. Everywhere seemed so quiet, there were hardly any people on the streets or in the gardens. London was like a plastic bag stuffed full of maggots in the fishing box of Britain; densely populated, notoriously so. Back in Newport they called it "the big smoke" or referred to it as "dirty," "crowded" and "brutal." But that was what Bethan loved about it; sometimes it was one of the only things.

Even now, even when its dense population and its smoky capitalism had made it a target for something truly unholy and dirty, even now she wanted to be there, there more than anywhere else. Even though everything that had happened there had been so different, so alien, so disturbing she knew she could never go back. As she walked in the gardens, only occasionally halted by stabbing pains in her arm, did she realise that her life had irrevocably changed; that London was no longer a "phase" or "something Beth

thinks will be a good idea"; it was, and would from now forever be, the place she was most at ease. If it was a rat race then she was a rat, if a circus then she a clown.

She missed the people today, missed all the faces she had never seen before and would never see again. She missed the seething humanity and liberating anonymity of the city. She walked and walked and walked with no idea of where she was, how far she'd come or what direction Sarah's flat was in. None of this mattered because it was only three o'clock and Sarah wouldn't be home until five so she was in no hurry. She would normally have needed some food by now (having as she did a ferocious appetite), but the pain killers she was taking seemed to make her feel dreadfully nauseous. Or perhaps it was her memory that made her that way. Or perhaps the muffin she had eaten; indeed, she thought, you could probably have used it to fill holes in walls, let alone one in your stomach.

She found herself at the edge of a fountain-like structure now, staring down as the water trickled and spilled and pooled in the place of least resistance. She recognised what she was looking at as the Diana memorial, recognised it from the television. She remembered the day of that funeral, all those people, all that crying. Her mum had spent the day watching the funeral and sobbing on the couch; they'd had to have baked beans on toast for dinner that night because it was the only thing they could cook unaided by their mother. Elton John had changed that Marilyn Monroe song, he had wept while singing, she remembered that, thought it must be really amazing for someone to love you enough to sing a song like that.

What would happen now then? Would there be memorials, songs, public inquiries? Who would write a song for Steven? If so much grief had poured out over the death of one person, what now? It was right that there should be extreme reactions. But nobody seemed to have anything much to say. There were no words, no songs, no people in the garden or birds in the trees. The sun came out and shone on her pale face. It seemed too bright, too strong; Bethan began to think it should hide its very rays for a while- just until people were ready to see it again, until they wanted light again, until they had forgotten the heat, the smoke, the smell.

But it was all very well having these thoughts now wasn't it? Why couldn't she have said this in her interview, to Jeremy, to Aubrey? She wasn't stupid, she had known the sort of thing they'd wanted, she'd read pieces like that a hundred times. She understood the need to personify tragedy, to make it personal, to say look here's a girl who's arm was broken in the bombings, here's a woman who's face needs plastic surgery and a man with skin grafts on his leg.

Perhaps there were certain things she hadn't wanted to have put in the *Guardian*. She knew there were certain things she felt and knew that she couldn't voice, she felt her tide of confusion turning to anger and prejudice. Now was a dangerous time for them all, they had to be careful, not only of attack from without but attack from within. She'd heard of "Paki-bashing" in Newport, knew it was a bunch of skinheads going around beating up anyone who didn't look like them. They'd even raped a black girl from her school. She'd felt sick that day, too. The school had an assembly and talked about atrocities committed in the name of ignorance and how the Bible says we should love thy neighbour. The sick thing was that some of the skinheads who sat behind her had

laughed. They thought it was all very funny. Until the black girl's brother had waited outside their local with a flick knife. They didn't laugh then. Neither did the nurses that had to stitch them up, or the police who arrested the brother, or the magistrate who sentenced him to six years.

This was something that had happened when Bethan was about thirteen, the girl had been in Rob's year at school. It was something that happened on the periphery of her life. But she thought of it now. Brought it to mind. If they weren't careful, she thought, if we aren't all really really careful, if we don't tread softly, aware of the red hot coals of hatred beneath our feet, then we are going to destroy each other, eat each other alive in the wake of these bombs. She hadn't told Jeremy she felt that for a few reasons. Because she didn't know him. Because he hadn't asked. Because it was so fucking obvious he must know it already.

It was quarter to five, she should go, get to Sarah's, eat. Her head ached from the walking and the thinking and the silence that seemed pervasive. She wanted company, sanctuary, wine.

*

"You timed it just right! Just got back with the ingredients for a creamy pasta and a bottle of wine ... How's your arm?"

"Fine, not bad at all actually. The painkillers are the problem, making me feel well woozy. Should probably sit the wine out, even though I'm desperate for a glass ..."

They laughed. They agreed it was time for food and Sarah whipped up a tasty, starchy, comforting pasta that Bethan devoured three-quarters of (by this time the affect of the painkillers had taken a back seat to the affect of walking around all afternoon) and then watched the BBC's *Pride and Prejudice*, bemoaning the lack of a Colin Firth-esque figure in their own lives. They went to bed early, each thankful of the other in this uncertain city at this uncertain time.

CHAPTER TWENTY

On Wednesday it was time for Bethan to face the fact that it was public transport that got bombed, not her office: she would have to go back to work. The thought, understandably, did not fill her with enthusiasm, but they had called several times after she had foolishly called them to give them a progress report and she couldn't avoid it any longer. As the managing director, Dave, had told her: if you wanted more than a week off there had to be a death in your family. He was all heart.

Ironically, the debauched, cocaine addled manager of the bar had been much more understanding, telling her to call him and he'd shift her as soon as she felt able. They both knew she wouldn't make that call, she'd never go back to work there, but they were pleasant and friendly on the phone. Another comfortable lie. Life was full of them.

She thought about calling the office and telling them she would show up at nine tomorrow but thought better of it, she may as well go past on her way home from Sarah's.

As she walked through the double doors of the front entrance to her building, she noticed two things. Firstly they had replaced her with someone even younger looking; fifteen at her estimate, rough looking with three piercings at strategic places on her face and a voice you could grate cheese on. Eastern European probably, the company must

have got a temp in, they would never want this to be the first face you saw upon entering their building.

The second, even stranger thing she noticed was the atmosphere in there. Previously there had been talking, tea-drinking, dirty-laughing sounds constantly echoing around the office. Indeed, they had at (certain pre-menstrual or hung-over) times been the bane of her life. But now it all seemed quiet, nervous, tense. Either the new girl had some sort of witch-like power or something had happened, there had been a scene.

Bethan walked up to Dave's door and knocked. He looked pleased, relieved even, to see her and offered her a chair.

"How are you, um, doing?" He had an unnaturally broad smile on his face, it looked forced.

"Fine. You know. Bit tired and the arm's giving me gip but the plaster will be off by this time next week so that will be great. It wasn't a messy break." She wanted to embarrass him a bit; he might offer her an extra day off.

Fat chance. He squirmed a bit but her words did not have the desired effect. "So I take it by your presence here that you're coming back to work as of tomorrow? I must say it will be a relief to get rid of Olga. Nice girl but a bit abrupt. Doesn't help that she can't type or speak English, either..." He raised a bushy eyebrow. It made him look like Dr. Evil. She resisted the urge to laugh.

"Yes, that's right." Silence. He was looking at her too hard. He wanted to say something. "Well, thanks for seeing me, I'll see you at nine tomorrow ..."

“Look, Bethan. This is a bit delicate. I’m not really sure how or even if I should say this but we’ve had a bit of ... um ... a bit of an incident here in the office this morning.” She knew it.

“I’m sorry Dave. I’m not sure I understand. What sort of incident?”

“Well, these are ... um ... problematic times Bethan. No one knows that better than you,” this wasn’t strictly true. “Emotions are running high, and, well, some things were said to an Asian staff member this morning over the coffee break that were, well, upsetting.”

Asian staff member, she thought, our office is whiter than a Persil advert. Then it dawned. “To Rakesh? Someone was rude to Rakesh?”

“Regrettably, yes. I must say rude would be an understatement. Abusive would be a more appropriate word.” Dave looked sad, but he wasn’t about to rock the boat, to stem the tide. He wouldn’t tell her exactly what had been said or by who, he wasn’t that kind of man. “I just thought you should know, having been away and all that ...”

“Right. Thanks, Dave. I’ll bare it in mind. Tomorrow then.”

“Yes. Goodbye Bethan.” He looked wistfully after her as she left, desperately wondering what he was going to do about the unrest in the office. His emotional equipment was not adequate for this sort of thing. Best to leave it, he thought. It would all sort itself out.

Or would it?

*

One of the most remarkable outcomes of the last week, Bethan mused as she walked away from her office building, was that she had hardly thought of Justin or sex (the two were inextricably linked in her consciousness). But she did now. She loved Sarah, loved spending time with her, but she wasn't, ultimately, male and therefore there were certain needs in Bethan's life she did not fulfill.

The really sad thing, she thought, is that even though I haven't spoken to him in a while, I still know his number by heart. She had the rest of the afternoon free and so decided it might be fun to spend it with him. If not fun then interesting, at least. Her stomach made a funny growling noise as she dialled his number, was she just inviting drama into her life by doing this? Did she somehow like the inadequate feeling he gave her when they were doing anything except having sex? In truth none of these were the case. She wanted to be cuddled by a man, to be touched and cared for; and if she had to endure twenty minutes of fairly deviant sex in order to obtain her five minutes of affection then it was a price she was willing to pay.

He answered on the fifth ring.

"Hello?" Lots of background noise, he must be outside somewhere.

"Mr. Stevens?" She tried for brisk professionalism.

"Yes?"

"My name is Chantelle and I work for the Inland Revenue Service ..."

"Right ..." He sounded nervous. Bethan was enjoying this immensely.

“It would appear, sir, that you have some outstanding accounts ... indeed, that you owe the government a good deal of money.”

“Really?” She could almost smell the sweat prickling the palms of his hands as he held the phone. “I’m not really ... My accountant assured me that everything was ...”

Bethan could hold back no longer and began to giggle. Then, returning to her Welsh lilt, she interrupted him, “it’s me, Just, you prat! Bethan!”

“Christ, Beth! You had me there. Cruel bitch!”

“You should get your tax in order, Just, then no one could make you as nervous as I just did.” She was teasing him now, reveling in his embarrassment.

“My sodding tax *is* in order ... tax people just make me nervous. Anyway. Haven’t heard from you in ages. I tried calling but couldn’t get you. Even came round your place last night. I was worried. Where have you been?” He sounded peeved on two accounts now.

She was momentarily touched by his concern. It was certainly outside of what she imagined his emotional limits were. He must have been concerned to go past her flat, it wasn’t on his way home from work. Actually, it wasn’t on the way from anywhere to anywhere.

“It’s a long story, Just. Are you working this afternoon?” She was confused by his irregular hours, he never seemed to have a consistent schedule. “Maybe we could meet up and I could tell you about it ...”

“Great!” From his voice it was clear this was the very same thought he was having. “I’m actually not working this afternoon. Why don’t you come to my flat? I’m out at the moment but I’m heading home in about ten minutes so I could meet you there. I could even pick you up, if you like?”

God, she thought, he was keen. Perhaps it had been a fallow ten days. “That would be great. I’m actually not at home so you won’t have to arse all the way up to my flat ...” She told him where she was and he arranged to pick her up outside the Starbucks opposite her office building in ten minutes.

She crossed the road at the pedestrian crossing, loving the fact that people were treating her with much greater reverence since she’d had a plastered arm. She wandered into Starbucks and got herself a hot chocolate with whipped cream (although the day was warm there was a cold wind that merited a hot chocolate) and sat at a table outside to await the arrival of her bed partner’s flashy Range Rover.

The chocolate was creamy and ready to drink. That’s what she loved about Starbucks, you never had to wait, you didn’t have the anticipation and watering mouth while it cooled down, you could just dive on into it, like a delicious kiss. She was all about instant gratification was Bethan. Perhaps that was why she still bothered with Justin, even though she had no illusions about him. It occurred to her that for the first time since they’d met she didn’t feel at all nervous at the prospect of seeing him, kissing him, sleeping with him. Perhaps she didn’t fancy him anymore; although she could barely stand thinking they may not have sex this afternoon so that wasn’t it. And he’d been very

nice on the phone. She was probably just underwhelmed, that was all. After the events of this week who could blame her? She simply had a lot on her mind.

His Range Rover was advancing towards her, swallowing up the tarmac with its huge tires just as she drained the dregs (although they shouldn't be called that because they are the sweetest bit) at the bottom of her paper cup which she threw in the bin as she walked to the edge of the curb.

He stopped and opened the passenger door for her, flashing her the perfect smile and symmetrical dimples that had made him a rich man. She kissed him on the cheek in an affectionate but not overtly sexual way. We must look like a young happy couple to passersby, she thought. It must look like he really loves me; he's picking me up because he doesn't want me getting the tube with my broken arm. It was a pleasant illusion to her.

*

What happened to your arm?" His smile had vanished now; his brows were furrowed with concern.

"I was on the tube, Just, last Thursday..." He wasn't really concentrating on what she was saying.

"Rush hour got a bit heavy, did it? That's what I'm talking about. I mean, everyone says you shouldn't have a car in London ... more trouble than it's worth and all that ..." He blabbered on about how wonderful his car was, while Bethan sat there, feeling this had been a mistake.

She became angry. “No, Just, you prick. I was in the tube that got bombed, on my way to work. Coming out of King’s Cross ...”

Tears prickled her eyes. Why was he so selfish?

His face dropped as he looked over at her and realised what he’d done, what he’d misunderstood. “Jesus Beth I’m so sorry ... I’m not really thinking ... I’ve, er, had a lot on at work. Are you okay? I mean, what happened?”

“You never think though, do you?” She collected herself, realising this was not her future husband she was negotiating with, that throwing a strop would get her nowhere. “I was in one of the back carriages so that’s why I got away with this,” she motioned towards her arm. “I’m fine.” His face brightened a fraction. “You’re forgiven.” He relaxed, never one to dwell on his own guilt.

“Whole thing’s so bloody awful,, whatever we’ve done, we don’t deserve this ...”

“Yeah ...” Bethan felt a deep antipathy to discussing this topic with Justin. “So what have you been up to?” She knew she’d only get the edited highlights so she saw no harm in asking.

“You know, same old. Trying to make hay while the sun shines. Literally. Summer season is party season so I’ve been trying to get as many bookings as possible but since all this ...” he waved his hand as if to encompass the very pavement, “no one feels like drinking and schmoozing with celebs so I’ve had to actively look for business, not something I’m used to.” The same applied with sex, she thought. “Anyway, here we are. Home sweet home.”

They pulled into the underground parking lot of Justin's flat building, passed row after row of BMWs, Mercedes' and Lexus'. They pulled into Justin's space and he switched off the engine; everything seemed so quiet. There was no sunshine down there, and when Bethan looked across at him she saw the contours of his face highlighted by neon, not natural light. He turned and looked at her, and very slowly leaned across and kissed her, being careful not to touch her arm. She kissed back, feeling perhaps this wasn't a mistake after all.

"I've missed you, Beth. I don't think you realise how much." She wasn't used to him being this nice; it was flattering, but also disconcerting.

"Shall we go up?" Sex in the car could be awkward and painful with a broken arm.

"Yeah." He seemed upset she didn't reciprocate, didn't tell him she'd missed him too.

They got the lift up to his floor and walked through the dark wood door. Memories of the last time she was here flooded Bethan's mind. The sex (great), her botched attempt at making him breakfast (embarrassing), his hasty goodbye (upsetting). Things seemed to have changed since then; progressed even. Indeed, as she was having these very thoughts she heard him asking her what she wanted for lunch.

"Anything. You know me ..." He smiled at her. An affectionate smile. He made them chicken sandwiches which they ate on his leather couch watching *Casablanca* on his plasma television. It felt strange but she enjoyed it all immensely. He hadn't even tried to have sex with her yet; they had just sat, ate, talked. Like normal people.

But she felt the building storm. “Beth?” Humphrey Bogart standing in the rain.

“Yes?”

“Would you like to go into my bedroom? I’ve got a lovely cardigan collection we could look at.” He was deadpan.

“Really? I love cardigans ...” She started running through to his room and he chased after her, both of them laughing.

They fell on the bed and had quick, satisfying sex, the chicken sandwiches occasionally making swooshing and gurgling noises in their stomachs. Her on top so that she could mind her arm – she was nothing if not practical and self-preserving. Him underneath, watching her breasts flap up and down and feeling the urge to tell her what he wanted to say, what he had been trying to say all afternoon, get stronger and stronger until he ejaculated it not through his mouth (this organ had never served him all that well), but rather through the part of him he had always used to great effect, the part of him that had never let him down.

They lay there, silent in their post-coital state, each with their own thoughts. Bethan was deciding that was just what she needed; congratulating herself on calling the right man for the job. As for Justin’s thoughts, they were of the most unpredictable nature this afternoon. He could wait no longer.

“Beth?”

“Yeeeeeeesssss ...” she looked at him through sleepy, satisfied eyes.

“Can I, um, see you again?” He looked awkward now. This was a stupid question that Bethan didn’t grasp the meaning of at first.

“Of course! You can see as much of me as you like ...” She was in an uncharacteristically generous, loving mood. She would have said anything at that moment to make him happy. To take that uncertain look off his face and make him as happy spiritually as she was physically.

“I’m not pissing about Beth. Oh God ... I haven’t tried to do this for years ... Perhaps we could come to an ... arrangement?”

If any other man had said those words to her Bethan would have assumed he was offering her money; some sort of prostitution of herself. But this was Justin, the man as articulate as a didgeridoo. She knew that, on the contrary, this meant something more permanent, a girlfriend-boyfriend set up. With a man ten years her senior. Who did nefarious things to make money. Who her brothers would, in all likelihood, come to London and kneecap when they found out.

“Can I just use the loo, Just?”

He shrugged, lay back and closed his eyes.

As she sat on toilet Bethan realised that, ironically, she could have lived with all that, had she wanted to be his girlfriend, had she wanted what he wanted. But there was something in her stomach that told her that although a relationship with Justin is what she had wanted, had needed a couple of months ago; this was wrong for her now. Down to her left she saw the same pile of *FHMs* that had been there last time. She wasn’t what he

really wanted, she would just do until the next thing came along. And she didn't want to spend her time looking over her shoulder checking to see if the next thing had arrived yet.

As Kelly Brook's vacant, bored, pseudo-sexual gaze stared up at her from the cover Bethan heard Justin snorting a line and thought Jesus he's immature. And a drug addict. And actually quite boring. As she flushed the toilet and noisily washed her sex soiled hands she tried to think of something that would sound cool and nonchalant and make him drop the dating idea forever and not spoil all the fun they were having today. But, as is so often the case, it didn't come. Later on, back in her flat she would kick herself for not being stronger, more tactful, more intelligent. Anything would have been better than just standing there in front of the mirror, wishing the God of language would have mercy on her.

Bethan emerged from the bathroom and climbed back into bed. Her place had gone cold while she'd been away, and there was a clear discharge emanating from Justin's nose. A long silence passed. Justin realised he was about to be rejected; Bethan realised she was essentially wasting her time.

"Just ..." She would play for time; she couldn't face the full "I'm not ready for this" speech, even coming from her own mouth.

"Yeah?" He looked at her with sad, drug-dulled eyes. He looked like someone who was slowly realising he should have known better.

"We have fun, don't we?" Although, not now.

“Lots.” He said it in a dry, toneless voice. It would have been funny if it hadn’t been so hopeless.

“Let’s just keep things how they are, then, eh?” The truth was things couldn’t possibly stay as they were before now, before this conversation. Justin wanted a beginning, Bethan wanted an end. Irreconcilable differences was the term for it. “I mean, we’re both young ...”

“I’m not as young as you, Beth.” He seemed petulant now. He looked tired; like he both wanted to hear what she was saying yet at the same time simply didn’t have the energy.

“That’s true, of course. We like each other ...” she struggled for words. God, she hated having to be the grown up. “But I feel like, things ... I feel like things are going to change for me ... I don’t know what’s going to happen ...”

“Have you met someone else? Is that it? Someone who’ll give you commitment?” Jealousy was always the first emotion to follow rejection. And who could blame Justin? She was sounding so vague, looking for a way out, fumbling along a dark passage.

Bethan lost patience. “No! I haven’t fucking met someone else. How could you, *you* of all people ask me that? And what if I had? You don’t own me Just; you only call me when you’re bored and feel like a shag...” She felt as if she was going to cry. How much more was she going to have to put up with this week? It had to be the worst week of her life. She stopped herself having those thoughts though, realising that down that path lay self-pity and depression.

Justin, in turn, couldn't deny or refute what she'd just said. The fact he was feeling post-coital attachment to this strange, moody little creature in his bed didn't erase the fact that it was true he always and only called her for a shag. In his eyes she was good at it, so why wouldn't she be good at it long term? She never made demands on him, never seemed to have headaches or her period like the other girls he'd been with (in fact this was just coincidence and the amount of adrenaline that rushed through her). She was straightforward; perhaps this was what was most important in a woman for him. And now he'd made her cross. And upset, by the look of that wobbly bottom lip. He needed to say something.

"I'm sorry, Beth. You're right. I'm just being an utter shithead, I know." She gave him a suspicious look. He gave her a little smile, realising he'd lost her, but there was still no point upsetting her further just to satisfy himself. "Hey, I'm so selfish I scare even myself sometimes!"

He laughed, knowing she'd like that last comment as "selfish" was perhaps the number one out of a plethora of insults the many women in his life had thrown at him over the years. Indeed, it seemed the one thing they all agreed on. He agreed with them, but couldn't change. Perhaps Bethan could have changed him; what he felt for her was not purely selfish but also something protective and different to what he normally felt for women. But it was too late for all that. All he could do was enjoy the rest of the tiny amount of time he had left with her before she walked out of his flat building never to return. He was not stupid; he saw the way things were going.

Bethan, in her way, forgave him. At least for the rest of the day. They lay in bed chatting in a general way for what remained of the afternoon, even went out for an Italian around seven o'clock. But no amount of chianti and lasagna could wash the sour taste of lost opportunity out of their mouths. After dinner, as Justin put away his credit card, he asked Bethan to come home with him, to stay the night, it was really too late to go back to hers. She said she'd like to (only a half lie, even now) but she started back at work tomorrow, and needed a good night's sleep and some clean clothes.

"Let me drive you back then, Beth ..."

"No," she squeezed his arm, "I think I should take the tube."

He didn't argue. He just looked at her with sad affection, kissed her forehead, turned around and walked towards his flat.

The tube was one of those really old ones. There was graffiti on almost every available surface and, to be frank, it smelled of something unsavory. Bethan looked at herself in the window opposite her seat. Her face, highlighted by the flickering light above her head, looked gaunt, as if there was a hole where something should be.

She meant those things she'd said to Justin. She was right that he did not own her, had no right to ask what he asked for. But she still felt like utter shit. She wanted to call him, to say I'm sorry, I really do want you with all my being, I wouldn't have upset you for the world because I know you're not as bad as everyone says, perhaps a bit confused, a bit misunderstood. But she knew a phone call always led to something else; and it was that very same something else she was speeding away from in that aluminium relic as she wiggled, like a flexible rat, through the nastiest places in London.

There were worse things than a break up, than letting someone down, than hurting someone, she thought.

She just couldn't think of any at that moment.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Bethan had heard Rob tell her that you had to do something every day for a month for it to become part of your routine. At the time he had been trying to convert her to the gym (a place she had always not only disliked but had a deep suspicion of), but it seemed Bethan's ability to get into routines (and fall out of them) worked on a much shorter time span. This morning seemed a prime example. She had only been off work for a week, yet seemed completely unable (or perhaps more accurately unwilling) to resume her morning routine of breakfast, shower, clothes, tube.

There seemed obstacles at every step: the milk had gone off, there was no hot water, she couldn't decide between the black trousers or the navy skirt, there were leaves on the line. As she muddled her grumpy way through that morning she couldn't help feeling it was all a sign: she was on the wrong path. Indeed, the rising sense of dread that entered her stomach as she thought of another month, two months, three months in her present position should have told her that a long time ago. Although Bethan was not risk-averse, as her gargantuan step of moving to London had in itself proved, she was extremely broke-averse. The thought of leaving her lowly paid but steady and reliable office job, of having no fixed income, of no longer being able to stay in London because it had become simply unmanageable in financial terms, scared her to death. So she would skip breakfast, have a cold shower, plump for the trousers and wait for the tube. For now, it was the only way.

Owing to the forces of the universe conspiring against her, however, she was half an hour late for work. On her first day back. Not a good idea. Especially when combined with everyone's already edgy mood. Dave went berserk, blowing the whole thing way out of proportion. She didn't have any respect; she was bloody lucky to have that job; she better watch herself from now on; she was on thin ice, my girl. Bethan simply didn't have the energy to tell him she thought the punishment unbecoming of the crime; she just stood there taking the onslaught thinking: I get paid to be bollocked, that is my central purpose in this office. I am the whipping girl here, one day I am going to raise my middle finger right up to his face and walk out. After her boss had satiated his inner Hitler then, Bethan sat behind the front desk, put on her headset (a Michael Jackson-like contraption, arguably the most interesting part of the job), and began answering phone calls, photocopying documents, couriering manuscripts and feeling like she was going to gnaw off her own wrist.

Part of her plethora of wonderful duties was to get the sandwiches for everyone at lunchtime: she took their orders, walked around the corner to the imaginatively named Le Petit Sandwich Bar and retrieved the food and subsequently marvelled at how almost all of her colleagues ate like monkeys (probably an insult to all but the messiest of monkeys). It was a tedious duty and one that wasn't strictly in her job description but she performed it nevertheless because, one: however tedious it was it still beat sitting behind four feet of faux mahogany, being nice to cretinous wankers and two: it gave her an opportunity to stretch her legs and talk to the dark, hungry-looking slavs that worked in the sandwich bar.

As she left the office, stepping out into the warm, dirty, sweet air of the street Bethan couldn't help smiling to herself. The orders today had been particularly bizarre, with tikka chicken, mayonnaise and sundried tomatoes abounding. One of the only women who worked in the office had asked for a sandwich with no bread; she was on the Atkins she said, giving Bethan a knowing look. The look, however, was altogether misplaced. Bethan knew nothing of this Atkins thing, to her it sounded like a degenerative disease, but she would make the order anyway. As she spoke to the particularly good looking Eastern European that helped her that day, she realised how ridiculous she must sound, asking for these pretentious, pointless foodstuffs from someone whose diet probably consisted of mainly potatoes and cabbage, someone who probably went back to an even dingier flat than her own and laughingly told his seven flatmates about the flabby pommes who bothered him all day long.

She leaned against the counter where you were supposed to pick up your orders and looked miserably at the coffee machine, hoping there would be some sort of hold up, some terrible mistake, which would delay her return. None seemed forthcoming.

Bethan was only brought back into the real world by a gentle tap on the shoulder. She turned around with a smile on her face, preparing to apologise for being inattentive, but it was not a Slavic face that she saw. It was a healthy, tanned, slightly stubbled face with kind eyes. Eyes that she'd sat next to only a few days before, eyes that had seen her cry, eyes that made her both excited and nervous. It was Jeremy.

"Hi Bethan." He looked pleased, but perhaps in a less manic way than her.

“Oh God! Hi!” Her voice was both too loud and too high-pitched. Two suits at a nearby table looked in their direction. She blushed. Charmingly.

“How are you getting on?” Jeremy was cool but interested, this time the unfair advantage had been his; he had had time to prepare. He spoke slowly, deliberately, his voice smooth and even, like marble.

“Oh, fine, fine ... First day back at work, actually.” It was all she could think of to say.

“You must be pleased to get back into the routine,” he said, looking at her thighs, “makes things seem more ...” he looked at her arm, “normal.”

“Oh, God, no! Not pleased at all. I hate my job, Jeremy” she said, thinking why did I just say that? I sound like a twat. “I mean ... it’s a bit tedious, to be honest.”

Jeremy looked surprised and amused. “Ah, I see.” His eyes roamed the room, looking for something to say. After a moment his eyes lit up, he seemed to have found it on the wall above the blackboard menu. “The piece comes out in tomorrow’s paper.”

“I’ll be the first one at the news stand!”

“I dare say you will,” he said dryly.

“Beeeetthhhaaaaaaan ...Yourrr sandweeeches ...” If there was one time you didn’t want to be interrupted by a Slavic voice ... The man handed her a brown paper bag big enough for a hyperventilating rhinoceros and gave her a winning smile. Jeremy’s eyes went to the bag, making a whole lot of calculations that went something like: there are lots of sandwiches in that bag; she must be the sandwich girl in her office; her job must

be tedious beyond my wildest dreams; it's a shame, she's bloody bright and damn good looking.

“Well, I have to go. It was nice seeing you Jeremy.”

“Bye, Beth. Er, you too.” He was less sure of himself now, he looked as though he wanted to suggest something but nothing came out so Bethan decided to leave immediately and avoid further awkwardness. As she walked past he kissed her cheek. It was a bit of a shock to both of them, but she kept walking and he looked away; neither wanting to seem as if that sort of thing didn't happen every day.

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The worst part about the sandwich run was the pathetically routine thanks Bethan received for her trouble. The more honest members of staff just grunted monosyllabically when she placed the cube of colourless grease-paper on the edge of their desks. The false and sickly sweet among them (which included the ones who were just grateful to have someone who could speak English back on the job) gave her an unlikely looking smile of condescending gratitude, showing their yellowing, uneven teeth as they mouthed a silently exaggerated “thanks” to her left or right ear.

The only exception to this was Rakesh who was always, but particularly today, genuinely happy to receive his lunch and appreciative of Bethan's efforts. Whether it was because he felt sympathy towards her due to her broken arm, or whether it was because he needed some sympathy himself after “the incident,” Rakesh asked Bethan to have her lunch with him.

“So, how are you feeling, Beth?”

“Fine, you know. A bit depressed, actually.”

“Well, that’s natural, I suppose. I mean,” his eyes darted towards her arm, “after what you’ve been through.”

“To be honest, Kesh, I think it’s more this place than that place.” She faltered now, not knowing if she sounded shallow and stupid. “Don’t tell anyone ... I don’t mean it badly. I just mean that I haven’t been thinking about the bombs. Well, not the bombs specifically ... It’s just this place, my life, I ...” She knew she’d said too much, been too inarticulate. She hardly knew Rakesh, what the fuck did he care if she was going through some sort of crisis? She’d probably made him feel really uncomfortable, saying all that about the bombs.

But he didn’t look uncomfortable, he just looked a bit sad, he looked empathetic. “It’s probably, you know, what d’ya you call it? Displacement. That’s it. Feeling stressed about little things because you haven’t dealt with a big thing. I read about it in *Men’s Health*. Lots of people get it after a traumatic event.” He looked pleased with himself.

“Thanks Dr Phil,” Bethan said, laughing, “ever thought you’ve missed your calling?”

“Oh, I’ve definitely missed my calling, Beth,” his face changed, the smile was gone. “I know what you mean about this place though; I haven’t had such an easy time of it myself.”

“Yeah, I heard. Well, sort of. I mean I heard there was *an incident*” she affected a gruff voice, “in the words of our great leader and master.”

A smile flashed across Rakesh’s mouth. “What, Dave, you mean?” Bethan nodded. “Yeah, well. Fat lot of fucking good he was an’ all. Practically pretended it didn’t happen.”

“That’s because he’s a spineless whelp who prowls Hampstead Heath on the weekends, Kesh.” They both laughed guiltily, checking no one else heard. “What did happen, anyway?” Bethan was dying to know, and she didn’t know anyone else well enough to ask them.

“Ah, I don’t really wanna talk about it to be honest, Beth.” Bethan just waited in silence, looking straight ahead. She’d found this the most effective way of eliciting information from people; they couldn’t stand the silence so they told her what she wanted to know. Funny that, she thought, how people just can’t bear silence.

Rakesh was no exception. “But basically, after last Thursday ... well, I mean, obviously people were upset and it was terrible and everything ... You know Chas from accounts?” Bethan nodded, she didn’t really know him, they all looked the same to her, all acted the same to her, totally unaware of their own insignificance. “Well, it was eleven o’clock on Friday and everyone was on smoke break outside ... I don’t smoke, I just go out for a break – God knows why. And Chas pipes up, ‘I saw on the news that your lot is responsible for yesterday,’ and he gave me this really aggressive look. I know I should have ignored him, but it really aggravated me, so I said, ‘what d’ya mean, *my lot*?’” Then he puffs his scrawny chest out,” Bethan rolled her eyes, “honest to God, walks up to me,

leans in well close and he's like, 'fucking Mozzies, that's what I mean. Why? You got a problem? I think you've got a fucking cheek showing ya face here today.' So I clocked him, Beth. Right on his fat red nose. If I'd had any self-restraint at all I wouldn't have, but there you go, I'm not the man I'd like to be ..." he said this with a wry grin. "He went for me too, but the other blokes in the office held him back. I'm not sure if they did it for me or for him and I don't particularly care."

"Jesus, Rakesh! That's pretty mental." Bethan felt sorry for him, although, as it turned out, he could take perfectly good care of himself. "Well, I think you did the right thing."

"Turns out you're alone in that, Beth. We both got a bollocking from Dave afterwards. Although you know what he's like, spineless shite. He was so scared of being politically incorrect he could hardly speak for stuttering. I almost prefer Chas's approach."

"You don't mean that, Kesh. Dave's may be spineless but Chas is a total cock ..."

"Yeah, well, since then everyone's pretty much ignoring me. Nothing overt, just a murmur of a hello and no chats in the tea room, but I can probably live without all that anyway." He looked passive now, emotionless.

"I wanted to come to London because I was so sick of narrow-mindedness at home. I thought things would be so different, so liberal, like something out of a Madonna video. Turns out it's not so different, in fact it all just seems to be variations on a theme, as my mum would say." She smiled at him. He was finishing his sandwich now, they

would both have to be getting back to work. “I should go back to my faux-mahogany prison ...”

“And I to mine. Thanks for lunch, Beth.”

“Don’t be daft,” she said, as she stood up and wiggled off to reception, feeling guilty for not saying something more comforting and profound.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

That night Bethan dreamed of nothing but Jeremy. The stupid girl. There she was, amidst terrorist attacks, racism and a broken arm and all she could do was perform sexual acrobatics with an increasingly George Clooney-esque journalist. She had morphed in the dream too. Her breasts were even larger, the rest of her body unfeasibly toned and flexible, it would all have been laughable if it wasn't so ridiculous. Indeed, the last thing Bethan felt like doing when she awoke to the beep-beeping of her grey plastic alarm clock was laughing. As she opened her sticky eyes the first thing she saw, in fact almost everything she saw, was brown. And not a deep, chocolatey brown. It was a faded, putrid, seventies colour that pervaded her bed-sit. This, combined with not having either Jeremy, George, or anyone else next to her made her feel deeply depressed, for about the third day in a row. She decided she would do something about this place on the weekend. Buy some lighter paint, at the very least.

Work was quiet on Friday mornings, and that week was no exception. It was unclear why everyone was late getting to work, and why they seemed to take long, liquid lunches and return minus half their number at two-thirty on a Friday, but Bethan didn't mind. Less people in the office meant less work, less stress, less shouting.

The sandwich run was still required, but there were fewer sandwiches to retrieve. After returning to the office and dropping off the appropriate packages, Bethan decided to

take a walk this lunchtime. It was a bright, quite blustery day and she needed the air. Her mum had always told her it was bad to eat and walk, although she'd never specified why. Bethan thought it was probably better from a digestive point of view, blood-flow and all that. That was the great thing about freedom – making your own decisions based on your own deductive processes.

So she walked and ate, looking around the fairly non-descript area of West London in which she worked. She loved it though, all of it, all of London. Even if the people there weren't that different, the place was. The smells were. The smell of freedom. The walk greatly lifted Bethan's mood. She felt on the verge of something. Things would improve, and as soon as her arm stopped giving her gyp she would go out and find another job, maybe find out about some evening classes. She'd always wanted to learn Spanish, or maybe Italian ...

This pleasant reverie was interrupted by the ringing of her mobile, almost inaudible over the traffic and people noise. She stepped into a shop to take the call.

“Hello?”

“Hi Bethan, it's Aubrey ... er ... Jeremy's friend, from *The Guardian*.”

Bethan's mind worked quickly. Aubrey. Nice photographer. What was this about?

“Oh, hi Aubrey! How're you doing?” Her voice was high and happy. She was genuinely pleased to hear from him.

“Ah, great, Beth, thanks. And you? How's the arm holding up?”

She was flattered he'd remembered. "Fine, I have an appointment on Monday, and if they don't take the plaster off then they'll do it sometime soon. It only gives me the occasional stab." Was all that too much detail? Hard to know, he was a friendly chap.

"Glad to hear that Beth ... Look, I know this is probably a bit odd, and not at all the way things are done ..." Oh God, she thought, what's coming next? "But, well the long and short of it is that my assistant is pregnant. Very pregnant actually, and, in my characteristically disorganised way I haven't done anything about replacing her and she's leaving next Thursday ..." He was trying to find a way of explaining his thought processes, his effort was palpable, even over the phone.

"Right ..." she thought some encouragement might help, she was also very intrigued and impatient.

"So it happened like this: I thought you were a likely girl when I met you, and you seemed interested in my work ... Then all this stuff with Jane ... Then I saw Jeremy last night and he mentioned ... I mean, I hope you don't mind. I know you have a job but he seemed to think you might be ... somewhat ... open to new career opportunities?" All this came out in a fast and garbled manner, but Bethan, through sheer determination, worked out exactly what he was trying to say.

"So you're looking for a replacement assistant?"

"Yes." He sounded mightily relieved. Exhausted even.

"And you're considering me?"

"It's yours if you want it."

“But I don’t know anything about photography,” she immediately regretted saying this. She should bluff it in job interviews, Rob had told her that since she was twelve. But this was hardly a normal interview ...

“Neither does anyone when they start, Beth. I must say, it’s not exactly a great job. You’ll mainly be carrying my equipment, making the tea, that sort of thing ... But you’ll also learn how it’s all, um, done.”

“God! That sounds great Aubrey ... I’m in a state of shock.”

“You don’t have to say now if you don’t want to. But if you could let me know later ... in view of my situation ...”

“No need for that, I’d love to do it!”

This was an impulsive decision, and Bethan recognised it as such. But what did she have to lose? It wasn’t like she had any sentimental attachment to her current job. Quite the opposite. She really needed a change, and she’d be getting some skills. Perhaps if he’d called when she hadn’t been in such a hopeful mood, she would have said no, or at least taken longer to consider. But he’d called then, and it was meant to be. After saying he’d be in touch on Monday, and telling her the wage she’d get (low, but about the same as she got at the office), Aubrey hung up, sounding pleased and relieved.

Bethan walked back to the office on air, feeling only a slight reluctance due to her resignation. Not one to sit on things, she went straight into Dave’s office and told him she’d found something else that had more “growth potential” (a phrase she’d picked up from the career section of *Cosmo*).

Dave nodded calmly, and told her that under her contract she had to give them a week's notice. Luckily for her she was classed as a "casual" employee, otherwise it would have been a month. A cloud passed across Bethan's face and she told Dave the new place wanted her to start next Thursday.

"Bloody hell, Beth! You don't mess around! Well, if it's only one day's difference, I'm sure it won't matter." He gave her a little smile, and Bethan regretted thinking so badly of him.

"Thanks so much, Dave, you're a star!" She got up to leave.

"It's been a pleasure having you working here Bethan. Good luck with whatever it is you're doing next."

Bethan walked out of his office thinking it's about bloody time something went right. It was almost too much to take in at once, but that didn't stop her from feeling excited beyond what she had previously thought possible.

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It wasn't until Bethan's phone rang at three o'clock that she stopped thinking about Aubrey, Jeremy, exotic islands in the sun and all the other things her brain associated with her new career path.

It was Sarah. "Hi Sare!" Bethan was brimming with excitement, desperate to tell her friend the news.

She wasn't the only one. "Oh my god, Beth, guess what I'm looking at?"

This could go on all day thought Bethan, and she really wanted to tell Sarah about the photography thing. "What?" she said, somewhat impatiently.

"Your little Welsh mug in *The Guardian*! Turns out someone must have taken a fancy to you, you've got a huge picture on the first page of the spread, looking all pensive. This is fab!"

What did "pensive" mean? Who gave a fuck? She was in the paper! "Oh my God! I haven't seen it yet ..." Jeremy had told her it was coming out today, but she hadn't heard a word he'd said, too busy staring ...

"You haven't seen it?!" Sarah scoffed. "You bloody nink! Go and get a copy now! Get ten!"

"I'm going to! Cheers love. I'll call you later."

"Come round on the way home if you like." Sarah's flat was not, of course, on Bethan's way home. But she wanted some company, it wasn't every day you were in the paper and got a job offer.

"You bet your arse I will. Bye!" Bethan broke into a run as she made her way to Gary the Paper Man's stall.

Gary the Paper Man had the most sonorous pair of lungs and stubby, blackened teeth in the whole of London but that didn't stop him from putting both to good use. He could always be found on the same corner near to Bethan's office bellowing the latest headline and giving the passing trade a large (if unsightly) smile.

Gary knew Bethan, called her Bethan the Taff just like she called him Gary the Paper Man. Another of Bethan's soon-to-be-terminated duties was to get the newspapers for the office and place them in the tea room every morning. She went to Gary because she liked him, he chatted to her and always had some little tidbit of information for her. Today was no exception.

"Hello Bethan the Taff! You never want another set of papers? Seen you once today I 'ave ... Must be my lucky day ..." A sea of black and misshapen pegs peered out from his cracked lips as he gave her his most winning smile.

"Actually it's a *Guardian* for me that I'm after, Gary."

"Here we go, my love," he handed it over, "did you know a man would have to sweat profusely for ten hours in a sauna just to release the amount of toxins he loses every time he takes a piss?"

"Thanks. Really? That's fascinating, Gary."

"Knew you'd like that one my darlin'." He was pleased with his factual prowess.

"Well I have to get back," she rolled her eyes and he gave a knowing nod. In that moment they were comrades, fighting the never-ending tyranny of work, of London.

"Have a blindin' weekend, darlin'."

"I will, you too, Gary."

As she walked back to the office Bethan briefly pondered what someone like Gary might do on the weekend, did he even live in a house? A hostel? She'd talked to

him so many times yet all each knew about the other was their respective occupations. At another time this subject may have held Bethan's fickle attention for longer, but not today.

The minute she got back behind her desk she opened the paper, rapidly thumbing through the precious, crackling pages until on pages six and seven she saw the spread. Sarah was right, her picture was the biggest, quite a lot bigger than the three others that had been included. Aubrey had photographed her from an angle that gave her high cheekbones and a sad, thoughtful look. It was a photo full of pathos and beauty, the stuff of editor's dreams.

But all Bethan thought when she looked at it was: that could be anyone. It was a strange thought, and the same one she'd had every time she'd looked at a photo of herself since she was six. She was fascinated by the way she never looked like her, how she always looked so neutral, so blank, even in the lens of a pro like Aubrey. She didn't, of course. Indeed, people all over London that day lingered on that photograph, squinted to minimise the effect of the grainy print, to see the contours and detail of that face better.

Her excitement ebbed a bit. She didn't know what she had been expecting, but it was hard to be excited about appearing in such a sad, serious article. It was well reported, obviously. Jeremy was a master and every eye that read the story had a tear in it by the end. Bethan texted her mum and brothers to tell them today was the day, there was no point calling, they'd all be in work. Except Ryan, who'd either be under his car or in bed with some girl and thus would be equally indisposed.

It was four-thirty by now and the office was empty, quiet, and slightly eerie. Bethan packed her handbag and, because there was no one there to stop her, left work half an hour early.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I think it's fab, Beth! You look like a model or something. Or an advert for tissues ..."

They both laughed. Sarah had such a way of putting things, thought Bethan. She was always witty and funny, even when dealing with terrorism and matters of national security, mocks and jokes never seemed disrespectful coming out of her clever mouth.

"Yeah, it's quite cool ... I always think I look strange in photos ..." Sarah threw her a scornful look whilst mimicking her photographic pout. She looked like a guppy. "I'm just glad it all came out all right. Tasty Jeremy must be a bloody good journalist after all, I was totally incoherent in that interview and he's made me sound like someone off *Newsnight*."

"Well, it's great, Beth. Never mind tasty Jeremy and incoherent chats! This is cause for celebration. You're not still on those dastardly pain killers are you?"

"Fuck no! Nothing holding me back now Sare." She gave her a mischievous look.

"Well, actually, this is a cause for double celebration Beth because I have some news too." Bethan knew there was something, Sarah was in such a buoyant, playful mood.

"Oh, yeah? Is someone gonna publish your book? Please tell me it's not Carl the tosser or I'll *die* ..."

“No, no one’s publishing my book yet but it’s almost as good as that...” Sarah looked at Bethan and looked as though she was going to burst. There was a hearty flush spreading up her neck to her face and she could barely suppress her smile. “I’m going to Thailand to teach English!”

“Bloody hell!” Bethan was not well travelled to say the least, but she had some idea about Thailand, lots of people from school had been there after their GCSEs because it was cheap. It looked very beautiful from the photos. Lucky Sarah. “That’s amazing! What’s brought all this on?”

“I know it seems sudden, I haven’t even told my parents yet. I’ve only really decided today. Basically I’ve submitted my manuscript to several publishers but the crap thing is that they take about three months to get back to you, so I’m in limbo there.” She looked at Bethan now, slightly worried, not sure if she was explaining herself properly.

Bethan nodded, “go on ...” Sarah was talking at an increasingly rapid rate, Bethan knew all she needed was a bit of encouragement.

“So there’s that. And then there’s the fact that I never took a year off after my A levels, you know? I went straight to uni ...” Bethan nodded and gave her an empathetic look, even though she had know idea what it was like to complete either A levels or a university degree. “And I thought, if I need to get a job, which I do ...” which you *don’t* thought Bethan, you’re minted! “Then I may as well travel a bit while I decide exactly what it is I want to do!”

“Well that all sounds perfectly reasonable to me ...”

“Hope my father agrees with you, Beth. He wants me to be happy he’s just a bit,” she looked at the mirror above the mantle piece, trying to find exactly what her father was a bit of, “*old-fashioned*, I suppose.”

“But surely you can’t just move to Thailand and teach English? I mean there must be more to it than that?” If there’s not then I’ll bloody well join you she thought.

“Well, yes, obviously, that’s what I’ve been finding out about,” Sarah said, mildly irritated at the obstruction placed in her path to freedom. “I have an English undergrad so all I need to do is this two week teaching course and then apply to language schools over there.”

“You’re so brave, Sare,” it was like going to the moon when I came to London, thought Bethan. Can you imagine if I told my family I was going to *Thailand*?

“Well, I know it seems a bit *wild*,” she said, relishing the word and the concept, “but I ... Well, to be perfectly honest I actually know someone who’s doing it already...” this statement was accompanied by a shy, slightly embarrassed look that was both uncharacteristic to Sarah and intriguing to Bethan.

“Well, that’s great then! At least if you know someone then it will make it a bit easier like ... Is it a girl you went to school with?”

“Well, yes. I mean no. I mean I went to school with them but it’s actually a boy.”

“Oh.” Bethan didn’t understand why Sarah seemed so embarrassed. Boys, girls, who cared?

“Yeah, well. Actually, and I mean *obviously* I’m not going to tell daddy about this,” daddy? thought Bethan, “we bonked a couple of times in the sixth form,” Bethan burst out laughing, she knew she shouldn’t but it was all so *Upstairs, Downstairs!* “I know, I know!” Sarah squealed, relieved that Bethan didn’t think it all too much, that she thought it was a lark (even though she’d misinterpreted Bethan’s laughter it was a comfort all the same). “But I mean it’s not like I’m moving there for him, he’s just someone I know that’s been there for two years and can give me... somewhere to stay for a bit ...”

“He may give you a lot more than that, Sare!” Bethan chortled.

“Shut up, you tart!”

“Says she of the globe-trotting shags! One in every port, eh?” They were both laughing hard now, gulping down neat the milk of companionship and connection.

They calmed down, swallowing their laughter and wiping their eyes.

“Do you think I’m stupid, Beth?” Sarah looked at her friend, needing the affirmation and sure that it would follow.

It did. “No, Sarah. I think it’s great. I’d never have the balls to do something like that. Who gives a toss if you’re staying with some old flame? People do it all the time, don’t be so narrow minded!”

“I know. You’re right. Can’t wait actually. I’m a bit scared, you know? Like when you want something to work out so badly that you’re almost scared to get excited about it

just in case it doesn't happen?" Sarah's voice was rapid, high-pitched with excitement and prospects of new experiences.

Bethan nodded. "I felt like that about coming here. Before I left I thought 'don't make it into too much of a big deal' but I couldn't help it. I got so excited. I felt like I was doing something no one else I knew would have done." Sarah nodded enthusiastically, she understood, was going through it now.

"Exactly, Beth, so don't say you haven't got the balls! You moved here, which by the sounds of it was hard enough ..."

"Yeah, I know. But it hasn't really turned out how I wanted so far, you know? Not that I came to seek my fortune or anything but, well, working as a receptionist and living in squalor wasn't exactly what I had in mind either ..." Bethan felt her mood ebbing.

"Come on, misery guts! You've just got a really exciting new job! No more receptionist." Bethan's face brightened. "We're on the verge of big things Beth! I can feel it."

Sarah padded over to the fridge and brought out a bottle of champagne. Bethan didn't know the name when Sarah showed her the label but acted suitably impressed and excited anyway. It must have been good because firstly Sarah had it and secondly they used to serve it in the VIP area of the bar she'd resigned from. It could have been rat piss and she would have drunk it that night, she needed to calm down, to relax, to stop feeling daunted and anxious.

“To us.” Sarah’s eyes sparkled as she made the toast and Bethan thought how beautiful she was, how honest and straight forward. She wanted things to work out for them both, but for Sarah especially. She had been sheltered from the world by posh schools, mummy and daddy, but that was about to change and Bethan hoped it wasn’t a change that would crush her.

“To us!” Bethan replied, and held Sarah’s outstretched hand as they downed their champagne and giggled.

They went out that night. Neither showered or changed or got dolled up because it was their celebration. They finished the champagne and got a taxi to Mayfair, they went to a bar called “Bubbles” and got bought a couple of vodka Red Bulls by some wealthy suits who had a table in the corner. They laughed, smiled and waved at the men (Bethan pulling it off with practiced panache, Sarah imitating her), eliciting another two rounds. The men invited them onto a club, promising more drinks, champagne and sex. The girls laughed and flirted but went home, they were both drunk and neither felt like sleeping with a banker who was probably married anyway.

They got back to Sarah’s at about two and fell into a deep slumber and, because dreams never allow for doubt, they dreamed about all the pleasures that lay in store.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

As Bethan opened one hungover eye and groaned with the nausea that seemed to be squeezing and churning her guts, a series of remembrances came to her pickled mind. The first was that it was Saturday, and the fact that she didn't have to get up and rush out of the house with her make up still smeared down her face afforded her comfort. The second was that she only had four days left of her old job before she moved on to bigger, better and more glamorous things with Aubrey, this made her excited. The third thing was that last night she had given her telephone number (her real number – she'd been too drunk to make up a false one) to a Scottish investment banker called Alistair. Why had she done that? Must have been the overexcitement. She vaguely remembered slurring something to Sarah about him coming into her life at that juncture being a “ssshhhign” from the Gods. It seemed more like a totally random and unremarkable event this morning but the damage had been done she supposed and she'd made her bed and all that. Hopefully he wouldn't call. She couldn't understand all these women complaining about not meeting enough men, to her it seemed like there was a bloody plague of them.

With these thoughts she got up and used Sarah's bathroom to shower and clean up before padding through to the living area to find Sarah passed out still gripping the phone tightly in her left hand. Bethan walked up to her and tried to release her grip without disturbing her, but the touch woke Sarah up.

“Oh Christ, my head ...” She looked dazed and dishevelled.

“Tell me about it. I think those evil bankers gave us far more vodka Red Bulls than nice girls like us can handle. Amazed I didn’t puke ... must have been my raid on your cupboard before we went out ... Why were you gripping the phone?”

“Hmmm?” Sarah looked momentarily confused before a look of utter mortification crossed her face. “Fuck! You know what I did?”

“Drunk dialled?” guessed Bethan. She’d seen her brothers do it a hundred times so it wasn’t exactly a shock to her.

“Yeah, but it’s worse than that. I called Mike ... the guy in Thailand. Told him I was coming and was excited and I think I may have promised him sex.”

“Oh, come on, Sare, you would have promised Attila the Hun sex last night, state you were in. I’m sure he didn’t take you seriously – anyone could hear you were drunk.” Bethan would have believed this had she not known men’s propensity to suspend disbelief when it came to promises of sex, but she smiled reassuringly and it seemed to help Sarah’s aching head and bruised dignity.

“Yeah, you’re right. He’s smart so he’ll realise. I just feel embarrassed. I’ll e-mail him or something.” She still looked mildly distraught.

“It could be worse. At least you’re victim is on the other side of the world. I gave my number to some Glaswegian pervert last night. My *real* number. How fucking stupid is that?” They both laughed.

“I thought we were drinking with bankers?”

“Bankers is about right. Or something that rhymes with it ... Yeah, well he was one of them.”

“The Scottish one? But he was really cute, Beth!” Sarah didn’t seem to lose her memory after a few drinks to the same degree Bethan did.

“Well, it’s probably irrelevant. He won’t call. But if he does I’ll bare his cuteness in mind. Can’t do him any harm now, can it?” She gave Sarah a devilish smile and said, “Look I better go. I have a few things to sort out at home and mountains of laundry. But I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Great! Congrats again, Beth. At least we celebrated in style, eh?”

“We’d put the Rolling Stones to shame.” They hugged and Bethan let herself out of Sarah’s flat. It was eleven thirty already. She’d stop for a pizza on the way home, salt and cheese would cure or at least ameliorate even the most severe hangovers.

The Pizza Express on her high street was busy and the staff flustered but Bethan secured herself a margherita with mushroom and onion. Although her pizza was a bizarre, tasteless combo that friends, family and pizza staff alike frowned upon, it was her absolute favourite and was an unparalleled delight to Bethan’s unsophisticated taste buds.

*

As Bethan lay back on her bed, fondling her stomach affectionately she felt the rare and surprising urge to tidy up. Her room wasn’t a pigsty but it wasn’t tidy either so she roused herself from the pizza induced coma and began sorting through piles of soiled clothes,

damp towels and discarded knickers. That was both the best and worst thing about living on your own: no one ever sorted things out for you.

She tidied, washed, and scrubbed all afternoon, until at six o'clock she collapsed in a heap on the couch, exhausted. She planned to spend an indulgently lazy night in front of some B-grade movie on Channel Five and she squirmed with pleasure at the thought of it. Without realising it, she dozed off into a fuzzy, dreamless sleep only to be awoken at eight o'clock by the ringing of her phone. She didn't recognise the number on the dial but picked up anyway, feeling adventurous.

"Hello?"

Hello?" Scottish accent. Fuck. She could hang up now. He'd only call back.

"Bethan speaking." She tried to sound officious, like she hadn't worked out who it was.

"Eeerrrr, hi Bethan! Alistair here. We met last night. At Bubbles."

I never get away with anything, she thought, not one single damn thing. "Hi Alistair! I must admit I didn't think you'd call ..."

"I'd never kiss and run lassie, me mum taught me betterrrr." He had a really cool accent she thought, much more interesting than the chavs she dealt with every day. Had she kissed him? She didn't remember but probably – she always felt like a bit of a smooch after a few vodkas. All that audibly manifested itself from these thoughts was a polite little giggle.

“What’re you up to tonight?” She knew she should lie, that telling a man you just met you weren’t up to anything was tantamount to slaggery but she was tired of lies, of being cool, of the games that every magazine told her to play. The truth would have to do.

“Not much. To tell you the truth Alistair I just woke up from a nap. I’ll probably get something to eat ...” If he didn’t pick that one up he was a frontal lobotomy candidate.

“Why don’t I take you somewhere?” He was hopeful and, for the first time, slightly unsure of himself.

This sounded good to Bethan, but she didn’t want a repeat of Pattison’s. Apart from anything else, most of her fancy clothes were drip drying in the shower. “That would be great. But do you, um, mind if we keep it quite low key and casual?”

“My kind of girl!” he sounded pleased and excited, and slightly surprised. Suppose gold diggers came with the territory when you earned as much money as he does, thought Bethan.

They agreed on an Italian on Kensington High Street in an hour’s time. Late for dinner but Bethan was feeling perky after her sleep. She splashed her face with cold water and put a dab of make up on. The night was slightly chilly so it would be jeans and a t shirt with a cardigan, I’m becoming more stylish, she thought before leaving the flat, more of a London girl. She’d thrown away a lot of her older clothes – the ones that were particularly tight and sparkly. She didn’t want to look like that anymore. She had by no means turned into a librarian, she just went for plainer designs with better cuts. In Sarah’s

words: with a chest like that it's better to leave something to the imagination. Bethan had taken that advice to heart. It had stung at the time but it had worked for her.

She arrived at La Cuccina on the dot to find Alistair already there. On the way to the restaurant she had been worried she wouldn't recognise him but she knew him immediately and it was true, he was cute. Well, actually he wasn't cute, but very good looking. He was too chiselled to be cute, his nose slightly crooked and his eyes too blue. His face showed that things hadn't always been like this for him. It was a truthful, gritty, stubbly face with bushy eyebrows and stark cheek bones.

As he stood up to hug her hello his movements were fluid and easy. As he pressed against her he said softly in her ear "I'm glad you came," as if he'd expected her not to. He was a bit taller than her and very lean but muscular. "That makes two of us," she whispered back.

They sat down and, as she began fumbling through the menu, Bethan was reminded of a rather less pleasant Italian meal she'd had only a few days before. She put it out of her mind. She looked up to see the headlights of his eyes looking at her and she smiled, her best, most diverting smile. He smiled back. He didn't ask about her arm so she must have told him last night. She vaguely remembered mentioning an "accident" but she hadn't gone into details. She wouldn't now, either. It was all people seemed to talk about. He interrupted her thoughts.

"Shall I order some wine? I mean ... would you like some?"

"To be honest, I don't really think I do ... Sorry. I'm not one of those psychos who doesn't drink or anything. It's just, well, you saw me last night." Bethan felt slightly

ashamed of her state last night. She wanted to excuse it but didn't because, really, she was glad that she'd given him her number, glad it had led to this meal.

"I did indeed," he smiled, "don't apologise, I'm not drinking either. I enjoy a drink but, well, it's debilitating ..."

He was in mergers and acquisitions, which he briefly and patiently explained. She told him she was in photography, which he seemed very impressed with, especially since it was a lie. He didn't ask how old she was, so she didn't tell him. He'd guessed she was about twenty, she'd guessed he was about twenty-four. Her guess was better than his.

"So, where are you from in Wales, Bethan?"

"Newport. Well, just outside Newport actually."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," he chuckled, "I always say I'm from just outside Glasgow." They shared a smile.

"What's Glasgow like?" She'd never been there and may never go but she wanted to know more about him.

"Rough. Bit like Newport, but much, much worse. There are parts of the city that are actually quite posh now, inner city rejuvenation you know? But I didn't live in those parts. Me dad fucked off when I was three and mum had to work a lot so we ended up in a block of flats that wasn't ... well ... a great place to grow up." He said all this totally without emotion, it was fact to him and he couldn't imagine it having any effect on anyone else. He picked his cuticles as he spoke, often looking down at his hands as he did

it. Perhaps it was to break eye contact, Bethan thought at first, but as the evening went on he did it often, especially when he spoke more than one sentence at a time.

“So how did you end up in London in bloody mergers and acquisitions?” Bethan was totally fascinated by Alistair now; by his life, his job, his face. She wanted him to like her, to want her.

“I was a bit of a nerd at school, Beth. I got beat up a lot. But I also got a scholarship to Fettes out of it. That’s the school where Tony Blair went, as everyone always says. Not that that’s much of a recommendation. Then I went to LSE and got this job straight out of uni. I’ve been very lucky,” he picked his right forefinger; something flickered across his face, “everyone is enormously *proud*.”

“Don’t say it like that. That’s more than anyone I know has ever done. I never even went to uni ...”

“Really?” he looked up and was momentarily surprised and Bethan hoped she hadn’t put him off. “You’re the first person I’ve met in ages who hasn’t.”

“Thanks,” she said sarcastically.

“No I didn’t mean it badly. I think it’s great that you’ve gone down a different path ... Uni’s not for everyone.” He was genuine, it wasn’t a line. He was a man who said what he thought and expected others to do the same. Bethan found this intimidating and pleasing in equal measure.

“Not sure my mum would agree with you. She thinks it’s all a phase and any day now I’ll be back at home attending Cardiff uni or Tech at the very least.”

“And your dad?”

“I don’t have a dad. Well, obviously I have one but we’ve never met.” This comment seemed to interest Alistair but the food came and they were both quiet while they ate, only breaking the silence to politely ask how each other’s food was. Bethan only realised it now but Alistair had ordered pizza *and* pasta, and was chomping through both at a rate even she found impressive.

He saw her looking at his food. “Yeah, I know. I eat a lot, I always have. Growing lad and all that,” he said, patting his flat tummy.

“Me too. Maybe too much ...” She was unsure why she’d said that, it was unlike her. She would never have said something like that around Justin, she feared his judgement too much. Perhaps she’d said it for Alistair’s affirmation, which he seemed only too willing to give.

“Ah, bollocks! A girl who doesn’t like food is a girl who doesn’t like sex Beth if you ask me! I hope you don’t mind me saying that.” This was typical of him, from what Bethan could see. He would temper the Glaswegian lad with the London banker and make it all sound entertaining.

They had dessert and talked until the staff all but turned the lights out to get them to leave. It was one o’clock and neither of them wanted to part.

Alistair had been flirty but not pervy and Bethan got the impression he was lonely more than anything else, just like her. Earlier in the night he’d told her that although he knew people at work, he didn’t have much in common with them, most of them were

toffs, and they were all right to have a drink with but that was about as far as it went. He'd said nothing about sex, nothing about their drunken smooch.

"So ..." Bethan didn't know what to say as they stood on the pavement in the cool, clear night, but she couldn't bare the deafening silence of his late-night, quiet eyes on her face.

"So ... Thanks for a lovely evening Beth. I haven't had such a chat in too long." He made it sound like the compliment of the century and although she'd had nothing to drink, although she knew entangling herself with another man wasn't wise at this juncture, she didn't want to be alone tonight. More than that, she didn't want him to be alone.

As if he could read her mind, he leaned forward and kissed her, and they both knew it was right and all the stars in heaven that shone down on their beautiful heads had brought them there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

She woke up in his bed in Notting Hill with a feeling of exhaustion and elation. The sex had been good and soft and tender. Justin had been great but she always felt like they were being filmed or something, like it was all for show. Alistair was about pleasure and was attentive and had gone a lot longer without sex than her it seemed. They'd stayed up until four thirty. As she rolled over to check the time she heard his voice ask, "And where do you think you're going, young lady?"

He grabbed her around the waist and pulled her on top of him. Despite the crumpled sheets and used condoms and the fact they barely knew each other there was no embarrassment. He seemed delighted to wake up with her in his bed, like he couldn't believe his luck. He wasn't intimidated by her, either. He was confident and savvy and they laughed as their pale bodies reacted to touching.

As he started kissing her neck he said, "It's one-thirty, in case you were wondering ..."

"I was, actually." One thirty! She must have been knackered! Who could blame her?

"I'd offer you breakfast, but I haven't a thing in the house. Let's go out."

"Great! I'm starving!"

His phone rang, and he cleared his throat before picking it up. "Hello? ... Hi Lisa? Oh, right ... well, can't they wait 'til morning? I see. I'm on my way."

He hung up and turned to look at her. "I'm really sorry, Beth, but I have to go to work." His eyes showed regret and slight trepidation – he looked at his fingers, as if they would tell him the right thing to say.

"But it's Sunday!" She felt more than a little dejected, and totally shocked. No one she knew worked on Sundays. She hoped it wasn't a stunt to get her out of his house.

"I know, I know. To be honest, this happens quite a lot. You really do sell your soul to the devil when you go into ibanking ... Everyone thinks we earn such good money but if you work it per hour someone shovelling chips at McDonalds probably earns more than me." This brought a smile to her face as he knew it would and he kissed her and said, "can I see you later? I'll probably get out about seven ..."

"I ... I don't know, I mean." She desperately wanted to see him later but desperately didn't want him to know it.

"I know what this looks like, so I just want to say that this isn't some sort of get-out clause. Last night was great ... all of it," she blushed and looked down, "and I don't just mean in this bed. I loved talking to you and I'd like to keep seeing you. If that's what you want. And, trust me, I'd far rather spend the afternoon in bed with you than on the phone to some prick in New York but I have a big deal ..." He said all this quickly and honestly, without allowing her time to respond. He got out of bed and padded over to the door of the en suite bathroom. She heard him in the shower and thought well this is a turn up. I'll see him later. Why not? At that moment there was no one she wanted to see more.

As she heard the water running over his body she looked around the room and thought it doesn't look like anyone lives here. His bed was large and soft and luxuriously quilted. There was a desk and a chair and a stereo but it all looked new and untouched. There were two photos on his desk: one of him at his graduation with what could only be his mum and another of a placid looking golden retriever. There were a few books on the desk, two financial ones and a murder mystery she supposed he kept for the weekend. But there was no mess, no tissues, no credit card receipts or dirty washing.

He swung open the bathroom door and appeared with a towel around his waist. He gave her a cheeky wink and as he walked over to his cupboard he let his towel slide to the floor and wiggled his bum at her.

"So are you gonna see me later or have you decided I'm not worth the bother?" he asked while sliding into boxers, then jeans, then a shirt. He knew the answer.

"I'll see you later ... Nothing on the telly tonight," she mocked, "what do you want to do?"

"To hide in your arms and drown in your eyes darlin'," he sung, then walked over to the bed and kissed her.

"Do you want to wait here or ..."

"No, thanks. Bit like a graveyard. Think I'll go home. You can call me when you're done." She was dressing now, happy she'd gone casual to dinner. That way she wouldn't look like such a slapper on the way home.

“Yeah, I know. Not very homely. I’m not here that much so ...” He opened the door for her and gave her bum a firm squeeze as she passed him on the way through it. “Must be lacking the love of a good woman.”

They walked down the creaky wooden stairs and past the living room door where a TV could be heard. They walked out the front door and down the front steps. Bethan looked back at the house. It was pretty impressive – bigger and whiter than she’d remembered last night.

“That was my flat mate we passed on the way out,” said Alistair by way of explanation, “I would have introduced you but we’re in a rush and, to be honest, he’s a bit of a weirdo. Works in IT,” he gave her a knowing look. She returned it, even though she didn’t know anyone who worked in IT. “Spends a lot of time downloading cruel and unusual porn ...”

They walked at a rapid rate along the pavement until they came to the tube station. It wasn’t until they had to go to different platforms that Bethan realised they were holding hands. He’d slipped his into hers just after they’d left the house. She felt like she hadn’t held hands with anyone since she was a little girl. The thought made her feel sad.

“Don’t be upset, pet,” he said, mistaking her expression, “I’ll call you the minute I’m done. Okay?”

“Great, see you later.” They kissed one last time and he walked off with his jaunty stride and she wondered how on earth she’d pass the day.

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She managed it. She showered, changed and depilated, anticipating later. She ate some dry cornflakes out of the box because she was hungry and that's all there was. She would go to the shop at lunch time. She called home and told her eager family about her new job. They were all immensely pleased for her without fully understanding what she was now doing and she enjoyed the conversation. They all asked about her arm and she told them that it was fine, didn't hurt at all anymore and she was sure the plaster would be taken off tomorrow.

Then she waited, and waited. Even though she knew he'd only call after seven she still sat next to the phone.

Alistair didn't call. He'd lied, then. At eleven o'clock she switched her phone off and fell asleep – fuck him. All the happiness she'd felt earlier seeped away to be replaced by flapping moths with black wings in her stomach. That was it then. Bastard. The worst part about it was that he'd seemed different. Perhaps something had come up. Well then why couldn't he have called? Or texted? Fuck him, she was going to sleep.

Perhaps it would turn out he wasn't worth the bother.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Monday to Wednesday went quickly – Bethan had a few loose ends to tie up at work, which seemed to make the days go faster. Her appointment on Monday saw the removal of her plaster, which was both a relief and a shock. Even in the short time her arm had been in the plaster, it had shrunk. It looked like a scrawny, pale, budget version of its never-broken counterpart and she spent a good two hours once she got back to work marvelling at the inequality in her limbs. Apparently it would return to normal in a week or so.

She hadn't seen Alistair since she left his house on Sunday morning, although he'd called her and told her work had gone on and he didn't have a minute he was really sorry. His work took up most of his time, if he was to be believed. If he was to be believed his work took up all of his time – from eight in the morning until the small hours of the night. Did she want that? Impossible to tell. It made him selfish that was for sure. He called when he had time, although he was always very nice and chatty. We'll see.

On Wednesday (her last full day at work) they'd thrown her a small leaving do. A cake, tea and a card saying what a fabulous receptionist she'd made, they'd miss her, wished her all the best in whatever she was doing next (she hadn't told anyone but Rakesh, and only told him because he was resigning too). Bethan thought that when she walked out of that building, away from their smug faces and groping eyes, that she'd feel

nothing but happiness, relief to be getting out, excitement at the prospect of better things. Ironically, she didn't. She felt a sadness and uncertainty that struck at her stomach like a blade. The worst thing about living in London was not having anyone to go home to.

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And then it was Thursday morning and sadness went and was replaced by nausea. Nausea so bad that breakfast wasn't an option. The tube ride to Aubrey's house was a rocky, bumpy affair, everyone twitchy, uncertain, grateful for the armed police.

Aubrey lived in Embankment in a large, industrial-type building that he told her had taken Bianca three years to renovate.

"This used to be some sort of textile factory, I think," he bumbled as Bethan looked around at the stainless steel, raw wood and halogen lights.

"Absolute bloody tip when we bought it ... when Bianca ... Well, I mean, she's enormously clever as you can see!"

As he spoke this last sentence Aubrey turned around and gave Bethan a beaming smile like that of a six-year-old on receiving a puppy. This man is harmless, she thought. Harmless and honest and a bit strange and how the fuck does he make enough money to own a place like this?

"My studio's through there," he said. Then, as if reading her thoughts, "Bianca's from a wealthy family, Beth. I'm not really sure why I'm telling you this but her father's a Lord. A Lord who happens to not like me but I am, nevertheless, the father of his grandchildren and so the old git lumps me ..."

Bethan offered him a weak smile, feeling a bit awkward at his words. They carried on walking down the endless corridor until they reached an open plan, minimalist room. There was a rustic dark wood work bench with two very smart looking computers on the top. Apple Macs with monitors like the of LCD televisions you were always seeing ads for. Two big plastic balls where chairs should have been. I hope he's not expecting me to balance on one of those, she thought, I've the co-ordination of Ozzy Osbourne post-LSD. At the opposite end of the room there were large white sheets covering about six feet of concrete floor in front of an enormous white screen. A camera (the only thing in the room she recognised) on a stand, black boxes on the floor that beeped every now and then. All very confusing but quite exciting.

"Well ..." and then, as if he'd remembered what she was there for, "work! You've come at a good time ... This morning's a bit quiet, I'll show you round and maybe we can start some photoshopping," he said, walking towards the computers. "These are obviously the PCs. They look a bit strange I know, Apple Macs. Twice the price but essential for our work. Bianca got these," indicating the balls, "because I loathe the gym and she thinks I'm getting fat ..." he patted his tummy, which only very slightly protruded over his Levi's, "something about strengthening your core ..."

"I hate the gym, too. Do they work?"

"Yeah, I s'pose," he smiled, "but from the look in your eyes Beth I'd say you're a traditionalist. The normal chairs are in the corner."

"I wouldn't want to offend your wife ..."

“Don’t worry, I’ll fabricate an excruciating back problem on your behalf. To be honest, I’m thinking about developing one myself.” They smiled at each other. “So that’s the business end,” he started walking over to the other side of the room, “and this is the pleasure. This is where the photos are taken.”

“People come here?” she was incredulous.

“Yeah ... sometimes. I mean obviously I do a lot of freelance stuff as well. On location for magazines, head and shoulder shots for Jeremy...” Bethan flinched at his name, unsure why.

“Speaking of which, did you like your shot in the paper?”

“Yeah, thanks. Everyone thought it was great.”

“And what did *you* think?”

“I never think my photos look like me, it could be anyone and I s’pose when I see it I realise that I’m one in so many. My life only matters to me. Sorry if that sounds a bit deep.”

“No, I think it’s interesting. And you’re right, by the way. When people who knew you saw that shot they saw something familiar and alien. They loved you but you were ... exoticised to them, and that was appealing. That’s why people love photos, it’s both real and illusion. You’re appalled by that and I have to say, I was too when I first started in this industry.” He talked so much with his hands, they were expressive, lined, hairy. Hands you could paint.

“And most photos are just that – exoticised, unreal, idealised. You’re don’t go round with an enormous smile on your face but page through any album and all you see is smiles. Photographs are in large part about representation. But just like that representation can be idealised; it’s also a huge opportunity. You say photos make you realise you’re life only matters to you. I’d disagree with you there. Photos show that all our lives matter. Look at war photography, or Anthropological photography, or National sodding Geographic if you come down to it! The photos make us realise that there are people, cultures, animals that exist separate to us. That our knowing about them doesn’t bring them into existence.”

“I see what you’re saying. I’d never thought of it like that. Whereas you’ve obviously spent a bit *too* much time thinking about it,” she teased, he took it on the chin, offering a disarming grin.

“Yeah well, I’m a complete obsessive. The worst kind. Almost impossible to live with but my job is everything to me. It has to be Beth. To make it in this industry you have to love what you do. The hours can be crap, models get their period, clients are difficult...”

“You make it sound so glamorous!”

“Yeah,” the black boxes beeped, “ah, and these are the batteries. They, my dear, will become your beast of burden. They must be charged and carried. One of your many and varied responsibilities Let’s go over there.” They headed back to the computers and Aubrey patiently started explaining to her how to edit photos and change the colour, contrast and tone so that they would print better. He pulled up a couple of photos for her

to practice on and she tried to do as he'd shown her. She had quite a natural aptitude for choosing the correct colours, but found the computer a bit baffling.

"It'll come," Aubrey reassured, "you're actually doing very well considering this is your first time."

They'd been working in companionable silence for about two hours, interrupted only by the occasional click of a designer mouse, Aubrey shifting uncomfortably on his ball or Bethan asking a painfully obvious question when he said, "Tea? I'd offer you coffee but it's banned from the house," he rolled his eyes conspiratorially.

"Tea would be great."

"Well you'd better come along as it's you who'll be doing this from now on young lady!" She followed him obediently back down the passage into yet another large stainless steel expanse, only this time the stainless steel was on fridges, cooker, washing appliances. Bethan could see her face in every surface. Were the rich always vain?

Aubrey was showing her how the kettle (which looked more like a satellite dish) worked, even though he didn't seem too sure himself, when the front door opened and a small Aubrey of about eight ran into the kitchen and launched himself at his father's leg.

"Hello Soldier!"

"Hi Dad," said the child, scowling up at Bethan, "where's Jane?"

Bethan didn't know much about children but assumed they hadn't learned manners by eight, although she was sure her mum would still have slapped her if she'd said that, eight or otherwise.

“Jane’s having a baby, Seb. This is Bethan, she’s Daddy’s new assistant.”

“Hello!” said the child grudgingly then, “MUUUUUMMMMM!!!!”

Floating into the room came a vision in a red silk kaftan and matching loose red trousers. She was quite a large woman, magnificent in Bethan’s eyes.

“And this,” said Aubrey, snuggling up to his wife as she came to stand beside them, “is my lovely wife Bianca.”

“Hi!” Bethan shook her hand as Bianca said how do you do? She had short black hair and large green eyes, an intelligent, well-proportioned face and long neck with pale flesh cascading down into mountainous breasts.

“Have you any experience, Bethan?”

“Um, no. Not really.” She fought the urge to apologise, to call this woman ma’am.

“Well,” she said, looking at Aubrey with a raised eyebrow, “I’m sure you’ll pick it up.” Aubrey giggled and walked back to the kettle. He talked to Bianca about husband and wife things as they made tea, Bethan eavesdropping and thinking they seemed happy until Bianca asked, “did you make the champagne order for Saturday night?”

“Oh, shit! I forgot. Sorry.” He didn’t look sorry at all.

“Well, fuck, Aubrey! We need champagne! We can’t have a fucking party without fucking champagne!”

Bethan looked around for the child, remembering how no one had sworn in front of her until she was fifteen. She caught a glimpse of him wondering down the passage in the opposite direction to the studio, seemingly unconcerned about his parents' spat.

"All right, darling!" Aubrey said, gesturing for her to lower her voice, "I'll do it now." Then both of them turned to Bethan.

"Sorry," said Bianca to Bethan, "we really are a bit like Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton!"

"With you as Richard Burton," Aubrey added and all three of them laughed. Conflict obviously didn't endure in this house.

"Are you busy at all on Saturday night, darling?" Bianca asked.

"Um, no. Not that I'm aware of ..." Had she agreed to see Alistair?

"Well then you simply *must* come to our little shindig!"

Bethan's eyes flicked towards Aubrey. "Well, I mean I'd love to if that's okay, I mean, appropriate?"

"What, with him?" shrieked Bianca, "*everything* is appropriate for Aubrey darling! Well lovely to chat but I must go and fetch India from her baby massage ... kisses!" and with that she sauntered out of the kitchen, leaving Bethan staring at her own turquoise pumps and Aubrey gripping the mugs as he started back toward the studio.

"So that," he said half-turning his head to see Bethan following him, "was my wife. You'll get used to her." Bethan made no attempt to comfort him or tell him his wife

was great. Although she was, in a way. She was unlike anyone Bethan had met before. A mix between *Ab Fab* and Lady Chatterley.

“Who’s India?” she asked instead as Aubrey placed the mugs on the workbench.

“My other child. She’s Seb’s younger sister. A lot younger actually – bit of a mistake. She’s only nine months old but bright as a button and very pretty. You’ll see her,” he said the last three words as if Bethan couldn’t wait to see the child whereas in reality she couldn’t care less about babies.

They passed the rest of the morning working, then ordered sandwiches from a nearby deli. Although Bethan was relieved she seemed to be getting the hang of the computer, and that this job seemed so much better than her last, she realised just how closely she would be working with Aubrey, and hoped he was as nice as he seemed and not one of those people who became annoying or irrational or pernickety.

“Well, Bethan, it’s one o’clock so I suppose we’d better be calling a cab.”

“Where are we going?”

“Your first ever shoot. Quite lucky really – all the equipment is on location so you’ll escape the heavy lifting ... We’re shooting in the docklands, for a glossy women’s mag. Standard fashion stuff but it’ll be good for you to get a feel of what we do.” Aubrey was collecting his keys and his camera bag. “Best take your stuff poppet. There’ll be no point you coming back here after the shoot, it’ll be late and you’ll be tired.”

A fashion shoot, thought Bethan, if only I’d known.

*

Oh, fuck a duck! Would you just try and keep your legs together! This isn't *Playboy!*"

It was five o'clock. For the last three hours they'd been standing in the sweltering concrete heat of a wasteland near Canary Wharf trying to get a "contemporary urban decay"-feel to the shoot. Bethan didn't really understand what the hell that meant but was on the verge of hysteria.

The screeching, swearing woman was the Fashion Director from *Amber* or *Jade* or some other pretentious and ridiculous-sounding fashion mag. Her name was Amanda and she was possibly the most arrogant woman in the world. She had spent most of the afternoon telling the model what to do, and then berating her for doing it. She was impossible to please and despite the length of time they'd been there, they'd only done half the number of outfits required for the story.

The model was emaciated. The thinnest person Bethan had ever seen in real life. They never looked that thin in the magazines, Bethan would quiz Aubrey about that later. The model, although not quite as awful as Amanda, was still pretty unpleasant and kept telling Daisy, Amanda's assistant to "stop fucking touching me, you little weirdo."

Bethan liked Daisy. They were about the same age but Daisy was blonde and quite ditzy. Sweet but not street. The make-up artist, hair stylist (both outrageously gay, fabulous men) and Bethan stood around watching most of the time, although Aubrey was taking a lot of trouble to point out light and angles to Bethan, and often asked her to move the screens, or fiddle with the props. She was trying to commit all Aubrey's wisdom to memory, but these really weren't ideal circumstances.

The hours passed and by about seven o'clock everything was drawing to a close. Aubrey even let Bethan take two shots of the model right at the end of the day. They were the first off-set and left while everyone else was packing up. Despite clearly not liking her, Aubrey gave Amanda a sort of triple air-kiss maneuver Bethan could see she would have to learn to make it in this business.

"Keeps me in work, even if it does go against the grain," he explained, as they walked to the waiting cab. "There are hundreds of photographers she could hire, a bit of flirting never goes to waste. That, and an invite to one of my wife's parties ..." then, seeing Bethan's horror-stricken face, "yeah, I know. She'll be there on Saturday night but, don't worry, so will lots of other people that possess social grace."

They climbed in the cab.

"So, what did you think of your first day?"

"It was amazing. It doesn't feel real at the moment but, thanks so much Aubrey, I'm so happy you decided to give me this opportunity, I promise I won't let you down." Aubrey looked slightly embarrassed but Bethan wanted him to know she'd enjoyed it, and that she would stick with it.

"Well ... Good. Um, thank you Bethan. Listen, don't worry about coming in until eleven tomorrow. You've worked hard today and Bianca's having people round tonight and I daresay it'll be a late one ..."

“Okay,” then seeing a central tube station she knocked on the rectangular glass window separating punters from cabbie, “could you drop me here, drive? See you tomorrow,” she said, waving as she got out of the cab.

Bethan bought her tube ticket and marvelled at how quiet the tube was when you weren't travelling at rush hour. What a day! Tiredness swept over her in waves as the tube rocked back and forth, like a sordid skeletal hand rocking her cradle.

The trip only took fifteen minutes, and as Bethan started the short walk from the station to her flat she checked her phone for the first time all afternoon. Three missed calls, all from Alistair.

She texted him: “wotz up? xxx,” knowing he would call her back. The phone rang instantly.

“Does something have to be up for me to call you, ya wee scallywag?” His broad Scottish accent was as soothing as warm milk to her after a day filled with strangeness and anxiety.

“No. I was just being cheap! After all, not all our jobs pay our mobile phone bills.”

“Speaking of jobs, what did ya make of your new one?”

“It was cool, you know? I mean, well different from my last one but I'm counting my blessings there. It was good. I'll give you the gory details when I see you ...”

“And when will that be?”

“Why are you asking me? You’re the one who may as well have a bed at the office.” She wasn’t going to let him forget his oversight and betrayal last week. Not calling was punishable with guilt – he must learn that.

“True, true, hen. I s’pose tonight’s out o’ the question? I’m having a bit of a rough time at work. Could do with some comfort.” She couldn’t work out if he was teasing or serious, or a bit of both. After her long day Bethan didn’t feel like getting back on the tube. He could come to her ... He had to see where she lived eventually ... And she did only have an eleven o’clock start tomorrow ... She should be firmer ...

“Come over,” she said, “I’ll comfort you.”

He was there within fifteen minutes. They made love and afterwards he lay against her chest and told her all about how much pressure he was under at work, talked about mergers and acquisitions in terms she could at least partially understand.

The men he worked for sounded mercenary and calculating, when times were good they invited you to play golf at their country club. When times were bad they had you packing up your desk before you could say “recession.” The amounts of money he dealt with frightened Bethan, she couldn’t even imagine what five billion pounds looked like.

None of that mattered though as the last of the crimson summer evening light crept away from the dusty street to be replaced by luminous red neon strips that made twinkling stars of the moisture in his blue, blue eyes until they closed and his breathing became regular, soft.

“I’m glad you found me,” she whispered into the darkness, and although sleep was tardy in its arrival that night the regularity and comfort of his chest rising and falling against hers made her wish she’d never sleep again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

As I told Michael Winner,” said Aubrey, patting some fat nosed man on the shoulder, “two thousand a day but for you, make it ten!” The circle erupted into laughter, fat nose laughing the hardest.

Bethan, on the edge of the circle, cradling her third glass of wine, smiled as Aubrey walked towards her. “Wants me to do his wedding photos, can you believe it?” he said, giving her a sarcastic look, “vain bastard!” and with that he wondered off to find his wife, who was taking more than a passing interest in a West Indian model called Jimbo.

The party was big, to be sure. The big house filled with big people earning big salaries.

Bianca had style, knew how to entertain. Bethan suspected that’s all she really did. The fairy lights made skins luminous, all the folding-sliding doors pushed right back to reveal the flagstone paving of the patio, leaving the luke summer air to filter in and swirl over bare shoulders, wisp through stray hairs, disperse tinkling laughter and clinking champagne glasses.

Swing music played on the wall-mounted speakers, even in the toilet. Aubrey had told her to bring a friend, had asked her if she had a boyfriend. She'd said she was seeing someone and would bring him. She had, and brought Sarah too.

Sarah and Alistair were getting on famously, her upper class chortle ringing through the air as he charmed the knickers off her. It was great having a boyfriend you could take places, she thought. If she'd brought Justin he'd probably be high as a kite and performing his strip routine on the dining table by now. Bethan had left them to talk and took a stroll around the room. There were all sorts there, as her mum would say. Varied races, sexual orientations, body shapes and nationalities.

She'd bought a new dress for tonight as she didn't have anything suitable in her wild wardrobe. A long, slinky black number that plunged until it reached the space between her breasts. It uncovered just the right amount of flesh and, paired with fake diamond studs, a bit of make-up and a sleek hairdo, made her look a lot older and more expensive than she was. It had the desired effect on Alistair – his jaw dropped when he'd picked her up.

A hand softly gripped her bare shoulder and as she turned round with her glossy lips in a kissing pout for Alistair, a different voice said, "hello, Bethan. I'd love to, you know but my wife is just over there." It was Jeremy.

"Oh God, hi!" she squealed, thoroughly embarrassed, a few shiny heads turned.

"Enjoying the party?" he asked.

"Yeah, ya know. Don't know that many people but it's all very ... very ..."

“Glamorous?” he offered.

“Glamorous.” She looked him straight in his eyes and smiled. He stared at her for a few seconds.

“But you must be here with someone, Bethan, looking like that. Your boyfriend?” his eyes roaming the space around them.

“No. I mean yes. My friend as well though, Sarah.”

“Well ...” Bethan felt mildly annoyed with this man. The humour in his eyes as he looked at her. Him flirting with her while his wife was at the party. Him flirting with her while he even *had* a wife.

“Well, Jeremy, when are you gonna introduce me to your wife?” Three glasses of wine providing false confidence and plenty of butterflies.

“Whenever you like, Bethan, although I wouldn’t necessarily recommend it ... Bit of a snake, you know,” his mouth turned down at the edges and his eyes sparkled. Was he drunk or just enjoying himself?

A woman was walking towards them. From the look in her eye Bethan gathered this must be his wife after all. She had a red bob and sharp features that were calculating whether Jeremy was flirting or chatting. The cool relaxed people seemed distinctly unrelaxed when it came to their partners, thought Bethan. If this was Newport she’d give Bethan a slap and Jeremy a roasting but Bethan knew just how far she was from home right now and suspected, correctly, that she was in for a good dose of patronising, pointless conversation.

“Ah! Kay!” Jeremy hadn’t seen her approach but he had a reckless, dare-you-to-make-a-scene expression when he looked at his wife.

“Well, Hello there ...” she said, a smooth mockingly-sexy voice with more than a hint of bile. Bethan realised that the school Kay and Bianca had attended was probably Cheltenham Ladies College. They had that air of rebellious confidence that only a family fortune can put into rounded vowels and plummy expressions. It fascinated Bethan. What would she have been like if she’d gone there? If she’d entered this bubble of exclusivity and wit?

“This is Bethan ... The Welsh girl from my piece I told you about,” he looked around, seemingly desperate to get away.

“Of course! Bethan! Jeremy barely stops talking about you. Now that I meet you I see why.” What did you say to that? Especially when you were blushing at the prospect of Jeremy talking about you.

He seemed eager to burst that bubble. “Really darling, that’s a bit of an exaggeration. I mentioned you twice Bethan.”

“Did you? Sorry ...” she had been trying to embarrass me, thought Bethan. It worked because now her blush had spread to her almost bare chest. “How are you enjoying working for Aubrey and Bianca?”

“It’s great! I’ve only worked two days but so far thumbs up,” she offered a strained giggle, “But I only work for Aubrey, you know. I’d met Bianca once before tonight.”

“Yes, you work for Aubrey, but it’s Bianca’s money, darling. She pays your wages,” a humourless laugh, “Bianca and I have lots in common, go way back...” Bethan began to realise Kay was drunk, not just icy but drunk. The motion of the party seemed to stop as Bethan looked around her and saw that actually, most people there were pretty drunk. “Both our men are fairly poor but devilishly handsome,” she said, cupping a hand under Jeremy’s chin, “Don’t you think?”

Bethan felt lubricated herself by now, “Devilishly!” she said, giving Kay her lustiest look.

“Well, we must be going,” said Jeremy, “early morning and all that... It was good to see you again Bethan. I hope you’re enjoying your new job ...” he clinched his wife’s arm and they moved away.

“Cheerio!” said Bethan, watching them nudge towards the door. She looked at her watch and saw that it was twelve o’clock. The more respectable elements of the party had left and things were rapidly becoming more raucous. She found Alistair standing against an exposed brick wall, cradling a designer beer.

“Sarah found a larney mate from school so they’re in the kitchen ...” he slid his arm around her waist, “leaving us all alone ...” he nuzzled her ear. She was drunk enough to enjoy it, to want to be at home, his or hers.

“Shall we split, gorgeous?” he asked.

“Yeah, good idea,” she said, giving him her best bedroom eyes. “I just want to say bye to Sarah and Aubrey.”

She found Sarah in the kitchen leaning self-consciously against the counter, trying not to fix her hair in the reflection of the fridge. She was stood with a clean cut blonde man, about twenty five was Bethan's guess. He looked like a rower.

"Sare, just wanted to say cheerio, Alistair and I are calling it a night ..." she gave the rower a polite smile.

"Already! Well, I suppose if I was dating such an attractive Scot I'd be off home early too!" They hugged and Sarah whispered in her ear, "he's lovely Beth, well done."

She whispered back, "Steve Redgrave's not bad either!" then left them to it.

Aubrey was collapsed on the oversized couch in the small living room. All alone, except for a glass of wine.

"Um, Aubrey?" She felt guilty for disturbing his thoughts.

"Beth!" he looked surprised but pleased and most of all, tired.

"I'm off now. I just came to say thanks very much, we had a great time and I'll... see you Monday!"

"Great," he leaned in and gave her a tight squeeze, "thanks for comin'."

She grabbed Alistair and they walked through the main room and out the front door, leaving more than a few people asking who was that?

●

PART THREE

●

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Afghanistan?” the line was crackling, Sarah must have been calling from some backpackers in Phuket.

“Afghanistan,” Bethan repeated, the word loaded with anticipation, dread and excitement.

“Isn’t that somewhat ... *ill-advised*? Have you told Alistair?”

“No.”

“He won’t be pleased.” This irritated Bethan. Bethan and Alistair had only been together for a month before Sarah set off for Thailand, and she thought she knew him so well. And now it was almost September and her life was different. She’d e-mailed Sarah, telling her how well the photography was going, how much she enjoyed it and felt it was the first thing she’d ever been really good at. But her relationship? If you could call it that... They’d grown closer, Alistair and Bethan, a huge comfort to each other. But was it serious? Bethan hated that word but since everyone kept asking she’d had to say yes, actually, it was fairly serious. And yet she hadn’t told him she was going to Afghanistan, had deliberately kept it from him.

“No, I s’pose not ... But it’s my life, Sare, you’re always telling me to be more assertive.”

“But I don’t want you to *die*, for God’s sake! I mean, why would you voluntarily go somewhere people are flooding out of? Where people fear for their lives? Where there’s a fucking *war*?” Ah, Sarah, never one to beat around the bush. No “if you think it’s best”, no “it’s your life” that Bethan had got from her mum.

“I don’t know. I haven’t *got* to go ... I want to. I feel, I dunno, like it could be big, exciting ...”

“Deadly?”

“This phone call must be costing you a lot of money, Sare. I’ll let you know when I’ve made my final decision.” She already had. “You sound like you’re having a good time, anyway.”

“Yeah,” sighed Sarah. Bethan could tell Sarah didn’t want to drop the previous topic but was clearly bursting to talk about her travels. She gave in to the latter impulse. “It’s awesome, Beth. Temples and great food and beaches from a postcard and so bloody *hot*. All you really need is a bikini.”

“Or nothing,” teased Bethan, “how’s the bloke?”

“He’s been really nice, you know? He’s taken time off to come traveling with me before we head back to Bangkok and I settle into this teaching thing.”

“Are you shaggin’?”

“Yeah!” they both screamed with laughter. There was a beep on the line.

“My card thing has run out, Beth. I have to go. E-mail me ...” the line went dead. Bethan looked at her mobile for a few seconds as her screensaver came up. It was a picture of Alistair taken in her bed, smiling up at her with a bare chest and post-coital satisfaction on his face. “I s’pose I better come clean with you, hadn’t I?” she said to the phone.

“You talking to yourself again, Beth?” Aubrey was coming up the passage and had heard her, “first sign of madness, that.”

“Only way I can be assured of intelligent conversation,” Bethan replied. It was a line from *Blackadder* that had stayed with Bethan, mainly because she talked to herself a lot and needed a witty comeback. Aubrey didn’t recognise its provenance and laughed all the way from his belly to his shaking hairline.

“What’s on the cards today? I couldn’t see any shoots in the diary,” Bethan said. One of the things she loved about her job was the variety: one day it was heiresses and poodles, the next it was heroin addicts and Sunday supplements.

“No, indeed, my darlin’, a fallow day. Although perhaps not entirely. The illustrious Jeremy is taking us to lunch.” He gave her a meaningful look.

“I suppose it’s not out of the kindness of his heart?” she offered, and Aubrey shook his head. “Would it have anything to do with a Middle Eastern country about to have its first *democratic election*?” she mimicked Jeremy’s most serious voice as she said the last two words, bringing an even larger smile to Aubrey’s face.

“It might.”

“A country beginning with ‘A’?”

“Very possibly.”

“God, what does he think? That by dragging us round every posh-nosh establishment in South West London that we’ll suddenly see the error of our decadent, wine-soaked Western lifestyles and decide to fight the good fight with him on the other side of the world?” the colour rose on her cheeks.

“Who knows ... but we do have to tell him by tomorrow, so I feel today’s lunch will be particularly fine. Look on the bright side ... You look terribly cross!”

“I’m not, honestly. Just a bit confused. I haven’t told Alistair yet,” she confessed.

“Well, that is a bit naughty, Beth. But I don’t blame you ... Bianca freaked when I told her I was quite up for it,” he mimicked her voice “why can’t fucking Jeremy find another fucking photographer? Do you fucking want to make orphans of our children? A widow of your wife?”

“She certainly has a flair for the dramatic,” said Bethan.

“She certainly does,” he agreed. “But I know you haven’t decided yet, so I haven’t breathed a word to Jezza.”

“Leave him hanging,” she said, giving him a mischievous look.

“Oh yeah” He looked at her. “*Have* you made a decision?”

“I want to go,” she said, and Aubrey nodded. “I’m just a bit, well it sounds silly but, scared ... to be honest.”

“It’s not silly at all, it’s a scary prospect. It’s basically a war zone, even though we can’t call it that.”

So why do I find it so appealing, she thought.

*

Sloane Square on a warm Wednesday lunchtime is an ant colony. A buzzing mass of people shopping, talking, drinking, basking. The air is thick with perfume and petrol and you could fry an egg on the dotted pavement. As their cab pulled up to the lunch venue, Bethan felt relief. The restaurant was a small, elegant Chinese. Delicious smells drifted into her nostrils even as she waited for Aubrey to pay the cab driver. Chinese fare was familiar to Bethan and this was a relief as all the restaurants Jeremy had taken them to so far had been Haute Cuisine, which she found *trés* baffling armed only with fifth-form French.

She spotted Jeremy carefully placed in a window table, but when he looked at her she pretended she hadn’t seen him and looked absent-mindedly down the street. Aubrey touched her arm and held the door open. On entering the smells were even more delicious and Bethan realised she was starving.

Jeremy greeted them both with a warm hug. Aubrey had a social tick of going to the toilet before he sat down in any bar or restaurant. He thought people didn’t notice but it was so compulsive it couldn’t be overlooked. He did the same now, leaving Bethan to sit in the chair their middle-aged Polish waiter had pulled out for her.

“Drink?” asked Jeremy.

“Glass of Sauvignon Blanc,” Bethan said to the waiter. She’d at least learned what kind of wine she liked from all this eating out. She even knew white wine was better with chicken and fish, quite sophisticated for a Newport girl. She smiled despite herself.

“Make that a bottle,” said Jeremy, winking at the waiter. “Have you got good news for me, Bethan?”

“The congestion charge is probably going to go up,” she said neutrally, knowing he liked to play games, “so we can all look forward to a greener planet, cleaner lungs and lighter wallets,” she smiled beatifically.

“Well that’s top banana, Beth, but believe it or not that wasn’t what I meant... have you, and Aubrey, decided about the elections?”

“Liberal Democrats, mate. I think I’ll be old enough to vote by the next one and I feel very let down by Labour and couldn’t bring myself to vote Tory so even though they say it’s a vote wasted ...”

“Bethan!” he was partly irritated, partly amused by her. She had natural wit but she took jokes too far for his liking sometimes, she loved to tease him and he knew it. In truth, he loved to be teased. The waiter was pouring the wine. Jeremy needed a drink.

“I don’t know, Jeremy. And I don’t think it’s appropriate for us to be having this conversation without my employer present,” she took a sip of wine just as the waiter put her glass on the table. “How’s Kay?”

“Fabulous.” It was wryly said. Aubrey sat down at the table with a slightly sheepish look on his face. God knows what he does in that bathroom, thought Bethan and Jeremy as they offered him their most affectionate smiles.

“So how you holding up, Jezza, old boy?” said Aubrey.

“I’d be a lot better if I could find a photographer and lovely assistant to accompany me on my travels, *old boy*.”

“Ah, you lack patience my friend. All in good time, all in good time.”

“Well that’s just the point, there simply *isn’t* much time. The elections take place on the eighteenth of September. I need to cover the build-up sufficiently and for that I, or we, need to leave next week Thursday.” Bethan did the maths, it was Friday now. She saw his dilemma – flights, money, pressure from the paper to find another photographer.

“We’ll do it,” she piped up.

“Will we indeed?” asked Aubrey, halting the smile that was starting across Jeremy’s face. “Just joking, mate, we’re gonna do it. We’re a bit scared but, you know, we thought you’d keep us out of harm’s way and all ...” he winked at Bethan.

“Really, Aubrey, it’s not that dangerous, I mean we’re covering an election,” said Jeremy, missing the joke, “We won’t be embedded with troops or anything like the Iraq footage we all saw. It’ll mainly be interviewing candidates, voters, NGOs ... that’s sort of thing.”

“Right. Good. God, Bianca’s gonna fry me ...”

“Just tell her how good it’s going to be for your career. That’s what I used to do when Kay still cared enough to be concerned about me going into war zones. Now I rather think she’s glad to have me out the way ...” he said this with a shallow chuckle.

“What’s the angle?” asked Aubrey, keen to change the subject and acutely aware of Bethan’s presence.

“Well, they want some coverage around all aspects of the election but, you know, I also want it to be ... *educational*. All most people, even *Guardian* readers, know about Afghanistan can be summed up in two words: Taliban and Burqa.” Aubrey and Bethan nodded, thinking that was about all they knew as well, so perhaps the education would extend to themselves. “I want to work with those notions. To take the idea of the Taliban and extend it into democracy, and how democracy can be interpreted and adapted to a Middle Eastern context.”

“And the burqa?” asked Bethan, trying to recall a conversation she’d had with Sarah on the subject but failing to remember anything but her own obvious offerings.

“That’s the thing, Bethan, you can be my sounding board,” said Jeremy enthusiastically. “There are so many women’s issues surrounding this election, and Afghanistan as a whole. *The Guardian* are particularly keen for me to do some female slants on the whole thing ... My sub-editor is a woman ... There are over five hundred women competing in the election, it’s a real first... Maybe you can help me with what women want to read about ...” he looked at her searchingly and Bethan realised he thought she was much more intelligent than she considered herself to be.

“Yeah, great!” she took a big gulp of wine and ordered Peking Duck, wondering what the food would be like in Afghanistan and feeling slightly nervous about the epicurean side of things. The others ordered and sat back and all three looked at each other, so different but exhilarated by what lay ahead.

Jeremy raised his glass, “To Afghanistan!”

“To Afghanistan!” echoed Bethan and Aubrey, and everyone drank deeply.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Look, I won't be gone long ... It's a big opportunity."

He was really showing off, she thought. Disappointingly, he wasn't really that sensitive and wonderful. And they were having their first row. Emotional words had been exchanged, he seemed to be calming down and she changed the meter of her voice from defensive to soft, soothing. Men are like dogs, they don't always know what's being said but they understand a lot about tone.

"It's not the length of time you're away, Beth, it's *where* you're fuckin' going!" They were in his bedroom. He was squeezing one of those little stress balls as he was talking to her. It would have been comical if she wasn't so upset.

"What d'you want me to do? Eh?" her anger was rising back up and she could throttle him.

"I would have thought that's fairly obvious. I want you to stay ..."

"Stay! And ruin the only chance I've ever had of really experiencing something new?" and then, in a remarkably teenage strop, "I don't understand why everyone is so *against* this!"

"I think you're misunderstanding the situation over there, Beth," he was trying to seem reasonable, concerned. To Bethan it just sounded like the same old patronising

dribble she'd got every time she'd wanted to do something different and new. The dribble she'd got from her mum, her brothers, teachers and now him. Him who seemed so nice and modern and cool and happy and now this. Bastard!

"I mean it's a war, really," he said. "I read the papers ... I know it must seem really exciting and adventurous to you." To *me*, she thought. And who are you? Philius Fog? "But it won't be exciting when you're caught between Taliban soldiers and their targets. I know I must sound like an old fogey ..."

"You know it must seem. You know you sound. If you *know*, Alistair, why don't you just keep quiet?"

He grabbed her arm hard and looked straight in her eyes. He was angry and she was quite scared for a moment.

"Because I love you, Beth. I love you and I don't want anything to happen to you and I don't think you know what you're getting yourself in to ..."

At any other time these words would have meant so much at their first saying. They felt like a weapon coming out of his mouth now. He let go of her arm and walked over to the bed. He sat on it and put his head in his hands and murmured, "but I don't suppose it really matters to you what I think? If you want to go, then go. I know I can't control you. You know it too ..." he sounded as if he regretted the fact. As if part of him wished he could lock her up just for the next few weeks, just until the danger passed.

Bethan was touched by this. She hated conflict and wanted it to be over and for them to be friends again, but she wouldn't bend to his will. She'd never bend to anyone's

will; she'd made that decision before she moved to London. She sat down beside him. "You can't control me, but I don't want you to be cross with me. I'm going and I'm sorry you don't understand. You've made me so happy since I met you," then, trying to lighten the mood, "although not today ..."

"Not today," he echoed. He looked up at her and she realised she'd won. His blue eyes were apprehensive but he wasn't angry anymore. He'd resigned himself and that was all she could really ask of him at the moment.

"So when d'you leave?"

"Thursday."

"Christ ... you left it late to tell me." She thought this might spark a fresh bout of anger but that had passed now. Alistair looked dishevelled and tired but in love with her, and that was her saving grace.

It was Sunday afternoon.

*

The practicalities of going were another thing altogether, and it's not like she could moan to anyone – they had no sympathy for what they saw as her foolhardy, youthful haste.

Jeremy had written her a faintly ridiculous e-mail telling her the climate in Afghanistan was "arid to semi-arid" and that it was still warm there so to pack thin, "modest" clothes with one or two warmer things. Luckily, Bethan didn't leave it to him to inform her. She went on the web and within about fifteen minutes realised she'd need more than modesty, she'd need long everything and coordinating headscarves. This

wasn't too much of a problem as she had plenty of thin trousers and Kaftans were seriously in this summer, so she picked up a few, along with some headscarves, from Oxford Street on Monday afternoon.

She got home with her rustling packets and couldn't resist the temptation of trying out her new look. The kaftans were pale colours: pale green, blue and pink. She put them over white linen trousers and tied the matching headscarves so that none of her dark shiny hair was visible.

Bethan peered into her bathroom mirror and hardly recognised herself. Her large, dark eyes and heavy eyebrows seemed starker; the tan on her face from working outside at shoots made her look swarthy and foreign. She'd never worn more clothes in the middle of summer. She looked like a different person, someone restrained and conservative but undeniably beautiful.

As her hands, feet and face were the only visible parts of her body for the next few weeks, Bethan performed some maintenance in her flat that night. She cut, filed and painted her fingernails and toenails and scrubbed her face until it shone clean.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The most exciting part of any trip is the beginning, the setting off. A car picked Bethan up from her flat, even though she'd told Jeremy she was perfectly happy to get the Heathrow Express. Terminal three was busy as they arrived to check in. It was Thursday evening. The airport smelled of bleach, sweat and goodbye tears. The din of chatting and cellphones was overpowered every few minutes by the dong of the overhead speaker and the officious, crisp female voice that emanated from there. Aubrey had insisted on putting Bethan's bag onto his trolley and as the three of them pushed their way through the crowds to the relevant check-in she felt proud, if a bit self-conscious, to be seen with these two men whom she so admired, so loved.

"God, it's like being there already," said Aubrey. And it was true, there was barely a white face in the building, but that, Bethan, strangely, had hardly noticed.

"Er, I'm just gonna nip to the loo," said Aubrey. He must be nervous, thought Bethan, his social tic appearing at the most inconvenient time.

"Have you got to?" asked Jeremy irritably, "We should really be near the boarding gate by now."

“Look, mate, I wouldn’t spend time in an airport toilet for fun ...” Aubrey said, looking embarrassed. “I won’t be long.” And Jeremy and Bethan watched his denim jacket striding off with express purpose.

“You’ve packed impressively light,” said Jeremy, eager to change the subject and settling on the first thing he saw: Bethan’s small red wheely bag which she’d purchased from the market on Sunday for a mere fifteen pounds.

“I brought thin clothes like you told me,” she replied. At another time she would have made some clever comeback but she was feeling nervous now and was anxious to have Jeremy’s approval. She wanted him to look after her now, more than ever.

She saw a frown darken his face. “Don’t worry,” she said, “by ‘thin’ I don’t mean ‘skimpy.’ Even I’m not that stupid. All my clothes cover my entire chest, arms and legs,” he opened his mouth to say something but she didn’t let him. “Headscarves too before you ask about those,” she said wryly.

“I was merely going to comment that I hoped you’d brought something slightly more, um, pleasing for your days off ...” he gave her a slightly leering look which she chose to ignore. There’d be plenty of time for all that.

“Yeah ... that an’ all ...” she smirked, staring into the middle distance.

“I think this trip is going to be good for you, Bethan. Afghanistan is an immensely interesting place. Totally destroyed by war, of course. You’re going to see things that will be ... deeply upsetting. There’s lots of poverty and, unfortunately, violence.”

“I have done some research, Jeremy,” she half turned and looked him straight in the eyes. “Although I trust you, I wouldn’t do something like this without reading up on it.”

This was true, at least. She’d read about the military operation that had been going on in Afghanistan since 2001, and how many deaths there’d been. How Bin Laden hadn’t been caught and how everyone wanted it to end but no one knew how to go about ending it. These elections, from what she’d read online, were the great white hope for democracy there. A chance for the country to stand on its own two feet and for the Allied forces to make a cool, sharp exit without repairing the billions of pounds worth of damage they’d done. It was a huge bloody mess.

“A huge bloody mess,” she said out loud.

“Well, yes it is, in a way. It could get even messier when the troops leave, which some people think they might.”

“What do you think?”

“I think we’ll be there for years. If we leave in the morning there’ll be civil war by the afternoon; elections or no elections ...”

“But surely if people choose their own leader they’ll be happy. Everyone hates being controlled by the west ...” The last part of her statement was a direct quote from a blog.

“Some will be. But lots won’t. Whatever the outcome of the election and however it’s conducted people will say it’s rigged. Religious minorities will be victimised and that will make them violent.”

“It all seems quite bleak ...” she didn’t really know what to say.

“It all *is* quite bleak. But it’s real and important too. As a journalist my job is to cover this one moment, this one event, in the country’s history. It’s important to do the election justice,” he raised his eyebrows, “if we manage that we’ll be doing well.”

“You two look very serious.” It was Aubrey’s voice.

Suddenly the din of the airport returned to Bethan’s ears where before there had just been Jeremy’s voice. Jeremy’s voice and her thoughts and nothing else.

Jeremy’s face lightened. “Bethan’s getting all political on me.”

“You don’t wanna do that, Beth,” smiled Aubrey. “You’ll turn into a chronic bore like someone else around here ...”

“Let’s check in,” she said.

*

The flight to Kabul wasn’t long. About seven or eight hours according to the chirpy, disembodied Captain. That’s pretty long to me, thought Bethan, whose lengthiest flight to date had been a few hours to Spain. She suspected this trip would be more memorable than that one. If only because alcohol was outlawed in Afghanistan whereas it was positively mandatory in Costa Del Sewage or wherever they’d gone.

As the plane glided through clouds and the seatbelt light switched off, Bethan ruminated on the previous night. Alistair had taken her out to dinner and she'd stayed at him. It had been a great evening in some ways, even if it was punctuated by her tears. It was so pathetic but she felt like a recalcitrant child as he'd held her. She'd done this thing he didn't want her to do and she wasn't sorry but it was so hard and he made it sound as if she'd been talked into it when *she* knew it was her choice. Or was it? She looked to her left (they had given her the window seat so she could take in "the views on the descent") and wondered how much they *had* talked her into it. These big, friendly, vital men who were always so nice to her, who saw her vulnerability and, perhaps a little bit, enjoyed the opportunity to pluck a fresh, naïve daisy when their world was so full of heavily-scented roses.

As for Alistair, there'd been no "sorry" or "I told you so" or "see you don't really want to go anymore". He'd just held her and comforted her and seemed to want nothing more but the warmth of her body and the smell of her skin. An uncomplicated and committed lover, with a foul Scottish temper but room for forgiveness, too.

She'd be away for her birthday. September 15 – three days before the election. Alistair had said he'd take her out to celebrate when she got back, in ten days. What could happen in ten days?

Bethan looked across at Jeremy. He was listening to Dire Straits on an iPod. That just about sums him up, thought Bethan, so cool, so calm, but still ever so slightly dated. A bit too serious. His head bobbed and his eyes closed, no sign of fear. Aubrey, on the

other hand, had taken the aisle seat claiming his bladder was playing him up. Which it probably was seeing as he'd used the aeroplane toilet twice already.

Was Bethan nervous? Afraid? Not really. Jeremy had told her that they weren't being embedded with troops, wouldn't be on the "front line". Apparently *The Guardian* already had reporters for that. Their angle was purely political, human-interest stuff. Aubrey had promised her some good experience too and they'd brought enough cameras so that they could both shoot if necessary.

And, who knew? It might be everything her fluttering, pounding heart wished for.

*

Samira. This is Bethan ..."

"Hi."

"And Aubrey ..."

"Hi."

Samira, according to Jeremy, was to be their guide, their minder, their translator and their driver for the duration of their time in the country. An American-educated Afghanistani woman in her twenties, she was a friend of a friend in London, an author who'd hired her as a guide and translator before and she came highly recommended.

Samira was anything but the stereotype of the downtrodden Arabic woman. Strikingly large brown eyes, immaculately plucked, arched eyebrows, a strong nose and full lips made her look like the poster girl for Qatar Airlines. Her loosely fitted but

modern clothes and large gold earrings, coupled with a confident, clear voice and firm handshake would have made her at home anywhere from Islamabad to New York, from Paris to Hong Kong. She was an Arabic woman but a woman of the world, and totally enthralling to Bethan.

“How long will you stay?” she asked, American intonation adding to the musical quality of her voice.

“About ten days,” answered Jeremy.

They were walking towards the exit of the airport terminal. An airport terminal that was small, hot and spartan. Dirty as hell, too. Perhaps cleaning was no longer important when you were trying to become a democracy.

They stepped outside onto a grey pavement that quickly disintegrated into the dust floor of the car park. It was close to midday in Kabul and the heat inside was nothing compared to the heat outside. The sun shone down from a cloudless blue sky and the air was bone-dry and flavourless in Bethan’s mouth. Her chest felt tight just trying to breathe and it was almost too hot to see. The cruel sun shone down onto the windscreens of a hundred ancient, rusting cars as they carried their bright, western luggage towards they knew not what.

“Your chariot awaits,” said Samira laconically, opening the boot of a beige Skoda with patches of contrasting paint strategically applied in blocks. They struggled with their luggage, trying to fit it into the tiny boot. Aubrey and Jeremy’s bags went in at a push; Bethan’s would have to go in the backseat. With her presumably, she thought as she saw Jeremy climbing into the sweltering heat of the passenger side door.

Bethan tried the back left door to no avail, it just creaked and moaned and stayed put. There was a large shiny crater in the door.

“Sorry, Bethan,” said Samira in her crisp, clean voice, “you’ll have to climb across. Some halfwit drove into me three days ago and I can’t get the door to open.”

“No problem,” sung Bethan, walking around the back and climbing in next to a sweating Aubrey.

Samira started the car with a loud bang and they drove out of the car park in a cloud of exhaust fumes. They had their windows open because the car didn’t have aircon and thus almost choked on the fumes. Only Samira seemed unaffected.

Bethan could see Jeremy was irritable. “Are new cars readily available here?”

Samira smiled. “Yes, they are, Jeremy. I’m sorry if you’re not comfortable but we would stick out so much in an armoured politician’s car ... it would be impossible to go where you need to go.”

Jeremy’s politically correct self bristled at the implication he was a snob.

“I’m not ... *uncomfortable* ...” he said, “I just, well, I mean is it reliable?”

“Oh, yes. We’re at a high altitude here, so the engines last quite well. Rust only sets in after about twenty years or so ...” she was playing with him, making him look and feel embarrassed. Bethan and Aubrey exchanged an amused look in the back seat.

Bethan looked out of the window and saw that Samira was right. There were few cars on the road and they were almost all as old or older than hers. The ground in Kabul

was like talcum powder in various hues of taupe and beige. The landscape so far had a neutral appearance. Dry and neutral and alien.

As she watched the ground whiz by, Bethan zoned in and out of the conversation that Jeremy was having with Samira. She heard them talk about their mutual friend, Roger, who had apparently moved on from Afghanistan to Thailand and proceeded to marry ever more unsuitable women.

Ten hot, dry minutes went by. Bethan could feel the sweat pooling in the small of her back and reached up to smooth some hair back into a ponytail. Samira's eyes flicked to Bethan's in the rearview mirror and gave her a cheeky smile that made Bethan zone back in.

"Well, I was educated at UCLA. I studied Political Philosophy and English."

"That must have been unusual ..."

"Yes, extremely. My mother was German and my father an Afghan politician. I was very fortunate, especially for a woman."

"Why did you come back?"

"You mean why did I come back to a war-torn, underdeveloped country in which women can barely show their faces when I could have stayed in the land of the free?"

"Yes, I suppose."

"I came back because we need people here, educated people, to help. The Russians, the Americans, the drug lords in the South. They've all taken, taken, taken."

Afghanistan is a prize. There's no oil here. No diamonds. The land and the people have had so much taken away. We need to give back."

"Is that why you help ... people like me?"

"Westerners?"

Jeremy nodded.

"It pays well," she joked. "I am hated by lots of people for the work I do, I can't lie. Because of my position, the way I look, my education, I have few friends. But even the people who hate me, the women who despise me because I won't cover my head and I go to the souk alone – I love them. If you come here and tell the people, tell the politicians, what's happening here, I will have done something right. Or tried. It is the trying that matters here. You'll learn that."

They were approaching Kabul city centre, and the view outside the window was becoming a lot worse. The sweet stench of sewage started to drift into the car and more people were visible walking along the dilapidated, potholed road.

"Please put your windows up," said Samira. They obliged and began to see why.

Every time Samira had to slow the car down because of a junction or a turning vehicle, they were mobbed by groups of women and children with their hands out, begging for money. Sores were visible on their hands and the legs of the children and their eyes were sad and ashamed. We always remember our first encounter with true poverty, with someone who has nothing at all. Bethan had seen homeless people and junkies and prostitutes, but not people like this. People who looked proud and noble but

who had no other choice. This was her first encounter with circumstantial nothingness, and she would remember it for the rest of her life.

There was silence in the car – thick, heavy, hot silence. Samira drove on, her wreck of a car protesting every time she changed gears. Bethan swivelled round in her seat to watch the people in the road turn into just another speck on the dirty back window.

“Where are the men?” she asked Samira.

“They sometimes beg, too. But generally it is the mothers that are forced to do that. Afghan people, Bethan, we’re very proud and begging on the airport route, it’s considered ... what is the word? Sacrilegious. But sometimes there is no other way ... You are staying at the Sheraton, yes?” she asked Jeremy.

“Yes.” Bethan wondered what the sleeping arrangements were, would she get her own room? She berated herself for the selfishness of that last thought after seeing people who didn’t have a room, or a house, or food. Was this what it was like to be “socially aware”? she wondered. To always feel guilty that you’re not the poorest of the poor but be secretly glad anyway?

The cityscape wasn’t getting any more attractive. There seemed to be green effluence in the streets, even down town. Then Bethan spotted something that did look pretty.

“What’s that building?”

“What you can see are the minarets of the Ismailia mosque. One of our few remaining landmarks. It wasn’t destroyed by the Taliban or the troops because it’s a holy site.”

“Can we go there?”

“Yes. It’s a very sacred place, Bethan, but I can take you,” Samira looked at Jeremy and he nodded, “perhaps when some of your work is done.”

“Thanks,” said Bethan, feeling a bit like a child who’d just asked for pudding before main course.

“There are some pretty impressive buildings though, Samira,” said Aubrey.

“Impressive by our standards, yes. Well they mostly belong to either government or drug lords who want a legitimate front for their heroin-running activities ...”

“No one does anything about it?” asked Jeremy.

“People have tried but have been killed. The Taliban actively discouraged opiate production, but since they’ve gone people have started producing again in huge numbers. It’s become a huge part of our economy. The only part. Lots of tourists come here solely for that reason – to score a hit of purest Afghan white.”

“But the Taliban were overthrown ages ago,” said Bethan, displaying one of her only slivers of knowledge.

“Yes and no,” replied Samira, indicating towards a large, spangly hotel that stood out from the surrounding buildings like a crystal on a cowpat. “Many of the old Taliban

warlords have been reinstated in our new 'democratic' government. Our good president, Hamid Karzai, feels it's better to have them on the inside than on the outside. That could be because he was a founding member himself, and the Taliban's chief fundraiser for a time. But he is Westernised and speaks good English so the Allies thought he was – what's the phrase? – just the ticket.”

She pulled up to the lobby entrance and turned away from the windscreen to give them all a big smile. “It was nice to meet you all,” she said, in a much more practiced manner than her other speech. “Are you needing me tonight?”

“No,” said Jeremy. “I'm meeting a contact at the hotel tonight. We won't need you until tomorrow lunchtime.”

“Okay, see you at twelve.” They got out of the car, got their bags and Samira drove off without so much as a backward look.

A porter took their bags and they progressed toward the check-in.

“Well, that's probably the most I've learned about a place in one drive from the airport,” mused Aubrey.

“That's probably the most I've learned about a place ever,” said Bethan, and they all laughed.

“Roger told me she had a lot to say, strong opinions, you know. But I think she was the right choice.”

“She was, Jezza, old boy.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

It was the bed she couldn't get over. It was vast. Clean, soft white sheets and a "comforter," which was apparently a quilt laid on top of the mattress to make you feel even snuggler. Invented by the Americans, probably.

Bethan, like Samira, wasn't needed for the rest of the day. Jeremy was engaged for dinner and said he'd see her at breakfast. Aubrey had made a gallant offer of dinner, but Bethan said if he didn't mind she'd rather have room service, a hot shower and an early night. If anything, he looked relieved. They were all very hot, tired and confused from their journey and, after eating a few sandwiches to stave off hunger, they went to their separate rooms. Their rooms were on the same floor (the fifth) but not next to each other.

A hot power shower, a big towelling robe and satellite TV made for a happy Bethan. At about six o'clock she was hungry again and, after perusing the room service menu, ordered a creamy chicken dish with chocolate mousse to follow.

She ate the dinner and then, after leaving her tray outside her door like she'd seen in the movies, she drew the heavy curtains and shut out the dirty, strange city and swathed herself in clean, warm white sheets and entered a dreamless oblivion .

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The main restaurant of the hotel was bustling at breakfast time. Bethan had received a wake up call ordered by Jeremy, and had been told to go down by nine. The breakfast buffet was huge and Bethan couldn't help wondering how they got all this exotic stuff – like poached pears and pain au chocolat – in such a cut-off place. It was all so bright, shiny and luxurious. Bethan spotted Jeremy and Aubrey amongst the sea of heads and made for the table. She felt a little bit nervous as she approached; for some reason eating in front of people she wanted to impress had always been a difficult affair for her, which was part of the reason she'd wanted room service last night .

“Well, good morning, Bethan,” said Jeremy, who seemed in suspiciously high spirits.

“Hi,” she said, sitting down and having an oversized white napkin placed in her lap by one of the swarms of dapper waiters.

“Would madame like tea or coffee?” asked the waiter.

“I love the way you talk,” she told him and then, seeing his blush, immediately regretted it. “Tea ... please.”

“Very good,” he said, giving her a smile.

Aubrey and Jeremy were amused by Bethan's exchange with the waiter. She wanted attention away from her; her blush was rising up to her forehead. “Have you boys eaten?”

“Yes,” said Jeremy. Oh perfect, she thought, now they're going to watch me eat and laugh. Did I come on this trip as a source of entertainment?

“I could definitely squeeze in another few croissants, Beth,” said Aubrey, sensing her discomfort. “God knows, I better enjoy them while I can ... Bianca’s not a big fan. Shall we go and have a look?”

They got up from the table and walked over to the table, where Bethan got two croissants and a bowl of fruit salad with yoghurt (even she was not completely oblivious to a tight trouser button).

On returning to the table and sensing Jeremy’s continued good mood, she asked, “What’s made you so happy?”

“The contact I had dinner with last night,” he said, “she turned out to be very ... helpful.”

Aubrey and Bethan exchanged a dirty grin, which Jeremy observed. “No, you two. Get your minds out of the toilet! I mean that she’s arranged two major interviews for me. The first is this afternoon, with an Afghani arms smuggler who lives – wait for it – in London.” He said this with a triumphant grin.

“Amazing the things that make journalists happy, isn’t it, Beth?”

“Yeah ...” she was also slightly bewildered. “What does gun-running have to do with the election?”

“Well, that could be the question my editor will ask, but I think this guy can give us a strong context of Afghani politics and society ... he supplies arms to the Taliban fighters in the South and has done for years.”

“Oh, fucking lovely,” said Aubrey, “we’re to be the guests of a man responsible for mass genocide. This is definitely one to tell my kids before bedtime ... I hope you don’t think we’re coming with you?”

“What d’you think you’re here for, mate? The croissants? Of course you’re coming with me. Samira’s picking us up at twelve.”

“But surely this guy doesn’t want his *photo* taken for Christ’s sake? He is, after all, an international criminal.”

“I want you to do one of those back-lit shots, where you can only see the outline of someone,” Aubrey looked confused, “Oh, come on. You know what I mean ... I also want some interior shots of his house. In case we need them for a piece on those who are profiting from the war ...” his mind was working fast now, thinking of all the juicy features he could squeeze out of his time in the country. There is nothing more dangerous than an ambitious man, especially an ambitious journalist.

Aubrey opened his mouth to make a further protest but Bethan, wanting to avoid any more argument and feeling her stomach churn as it was, asked, “And the second?”

Jeremy looked lost. “What?”

“The second interview. Who’s that with?” she was hoping it wasn’t another arms dealer.

“One of the candidates. Female candidates. Name’s Hawa Aliam Nuristani. She used to be a TV presenter and is quite a popular figure but, when she decided to run in the

election, she was targeted by extremists and was dragged from her car and shot three times in the legs ...”

“Fucking Hell ...” whispered Bethan. “Is she ... okay?”

“Well, yes. I mean she’s in hospital but she’s stable. Stable enough to give us an interview anyway ...”

“You’re all heart, aren’t you?” Bethan wouldn’t normally have been this bold.

“I am, actually,” he replied, mildly irritated but anxious not to spoil his great mood. “Hawa sees this as an opportunity. She’s going to compete in the election anyway, even if she can’t walk. She doesn’t want to give her attackers the victory of taking her out of the process. She sees the press – and me specifically – as an opportunity to show the world her, and Afghanistan’s, fighting spirit.” He looked almost unbearably pleased with himself.

“Right, well she sounds all right but I’m still not sold on the merchant of death,” said Aubrey.

“It’ll be fine.”

*

“You are enjoying the hotel?” asked Samira, as she and Bethan waited for the men to load their complicated photography and laptop stuff into her boot. Strictly speaking the camera carrying was her job but she’d feigned extreme nerves in a bid to get off the heavy lifting. It’d worked a treat.

“Yes. Very much, thank you,” said Bethan, resisting the urge to speak loudly and slowly, as all British people do when they speak to foreigners. “It’s the nicest place I’ve ever stayed ...”

“It’s the best hotel in the city ... Your boss must have lots of money.”

“The only thing my boss has is a bladder problem,” mused Bethan, as she saw Aubrey run back into the hotel lobby ““for one last pee.”

“What?” Samira looked confused.

“Nothing, sorry. I actually work for Aubrey, he’s my boss. And Jeremy’s newspaper ...” she was trying to think of an uncomplicated word but it seemed there was no need.

“Subcontracts you guys to take the photographs,” finished Samira for her and gave her a beautiful smile showing off her perfect teeth.

“Yes!” said Bethan, with some relief and the realisation that Samira’s English was probably as good as her own.

“Are we ready, ladies?” asked Jeremy, rubbing his hands, with a sparkle in his eye and absolutely no visible sign of fear.

“We are, Jeremy,” replied Samira, and they piled in the car and set off in a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes.

It was a short drive to the man’s house. He lived in the Wazir Akbar Khan district in the more respectable Northern part of Kabul. The hotel was more towards the city

centre but also within close proximity to the main vein road that led North. The area had an air of dilapidated splendour about it, of paradise found yet forgotten or ruined. There were some huge but dated mansions next to piles of rubble of derelict houses. A few swanky security clusters punctuated the streets, with surly armed guards standing at the entrances.

“You should have seen this place in the seventies,” said Samira, “It was Kabul’s Beverly Hills... My mother had a friend up here who was married to a rich carpet importer; she reckoned they were the first people in Afghanistan to have gold taps ...”

When they found the address, Samira uttered a foreign curse under her breath and told Jeremy she hoped he knew what he was doing because really, only seriously dodgy people (mostly politicians) had houses like this in Kabul.

The house was palatial and modern, yet tasteful. Imposingly high sand-coloured walls and a flat roof gave it an authentic look but there was nothing local about the reinforced steel automatic gates straight from the US of A. As Samira’s car spluttered and struggled up the sweeping driveway, Bethan admired the perfectly manicured gardens. Must have taken an industrial-sized irrigation system to keep this lot green.

Never did an old banger of a car look more out of place than on the palm tree-lined driveway of that mansion. A butler opened their doors and showed them inside the house through thick mahogany double doors into a cool, marble-tiled hallway with an impressive staircase in front of them and a fresh flower arrangement for every oil painting that hung on the wall.

The butler returned and led them into a large, dark study where a man sat in an upholstered leather chair. He had a neatly trimmed white beard and wore a camel-coloured suit with a perfectly ironed white shirt underneath. He stood up and held out his hand to Jeremy with a smile, "Suleiman Massoud, a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Jeremy shook his hand cautiously and sat down.

"Call me Sam, everybody back in London does."

When Bethan heard his name she had looked up and, with total disbelief, saw the man she'd met in Knightsbridge, all those months ago. The man who'd offered to "keep" her for a while.

Aubrey was shaking hands with Sam and then he looked at Bethan and she felt bile rise into her throat.

"And you, I think I know," he said, with an amused and interested look. Utter shock was registering on Jeremy and Aubrey's faces as Sam took Bethan's hand and gently kissed it. She felt his short, neatly trimmed beard brush against her and thought, of all the warlords in all the world ...

"How are you?" he asked her.

"Fine."

"I am not a great believer in coincidence but this, I think, is a truly remarkable one, yes?"

“It would seem so, Sam.”

“Sit down, sit down. I will have some drinks brought.”

“What the fuck is going on here?” whispered Jeremy as Sam barked rapid instructions in a foreign tongue at the same butler who had shown them in. It was the only time she’d seen him genuinely flustered and using strong language. The effort of explanation was made up for by that alone.

“I met him in London. He liked me ...” She knew it sounded vague and unhelpful but that was really all there was to tell, even if it was irritating to Jeremy. The looks Sam kept giving her across the veneered coffee table weren’t helping either.

“Well, Mr. Massoud,” said Jeremy, trying to regain his composure, “shall we begin?”

“Please,” Sam waved expansively, “call me Sam.”

“Okay, *Sam*,” said Jeremy through gritted teeth, “tell me a bit about what you do.” Jeremy placed his Dictaphone on the table.

“Did our friend explain my conditions to you?” asked Sam. “No photos of my face, no naming, no identifying. I will tell my story and help you, but not at the cost of my own life ... or my connections in the polite society of London.”

“I understand,” said Jeremy.

“Well, I suppose I am, in many ways, a *despicable* man, as you English might say,” his voice was elocution-lesson articulate, his English accent straight out of

Oxbridge. “When I was still a young man of about sixteen, I was devoted to Islam. I come from the South, a small village much the same as the next. When the Russians invaded in the ’80’s, I fought with the mujaheddin, and I did well at it. I had what you might call an aptitude for violence ...” he took a sip of the tea the waiter had poured into his cup, and encouraged his visitors to take a biscuit.

Everyone was starting to relax, despite the surreal situation, and Jeremy was thinking it would turn into a quality interview. Everyone, that is, except Samira. She wouldn’t drink her tea, wouldn’t eat a biscuit, would barely blink. She just sat and fidgeted and stared at the man in the three-piece suit who sat expostulating about his life.

“When the war eventually ended and we went home, nothing was the same for me. The violence, the destruction I had wreaked, that had been wreaked upon my village, my family ... It made me lose my faith.”

“In God? In government? In Afghanistan?” asked Jeremy, ever the concise reporter.

“All three are the same to me,” Sam said with a resigned look on his face. “I moved to Kandahar and started working for a local gunrunner, who I cannot name ... He was a powerful and much-feared man but I always felt his operation was ...amateur. That I could do better. But it gave me a knowledge of what was needed, of transport links, of weaponry, of what could be achieved. Holy wars still need visceral support. Allah does not defeat the enemy, we must do that ...”

“The enemy?” Jeremy again.

“The Russians, the British, the Americans. After thousands of years of unsuccessful invasions, no one has learned their lesson ... Anyway, when I was visiting my family, I had a dream in which the prophet appeared to me. A good Muslim wouldn’t be telling you even this, as it is forbidden to mention dreaming of the prophet.” Would a good Muslim deal in mass violence? thought Bethan. “He appeared to me and told me that I would become a great man, a man who would influence the destiny of my people, and that it was time to take action.”

“Action of what kind?” Jeremy asked.

Sam ignored the question.

“When I told my father of the dream, he thought it meant I must return to my village and become a respected shepherd, or mullah. I, at only twenty, realised I had to move out of the country. That the real firepower was abroad. After that I was dead to my father, he was a peaceful and wise man and I sometimes think he was right, perhaps the prophet *did* mean that I should return home ... But I did not.”

“You moved to London?”

“Holland first. I knew someone there that helped me. Helped me learn English. Gave me some sympathetic contacts. I began with former Soviet Union countries and moved from there all around the world – sourcing the necessary and sending it back here. Knives, guns, machine parts, cigarettes. All the things that sell well in war time. All illegal.”

“All expensive too,” piped up Bethan, “how did you afford to buy all those things if your family didn’t have money?” Aubrey was walking around the room, taking partial shots of Sam and also a few of particularly impressive paintings, rugs and ornaments.

“Clever girl,” he said, giving her an appraising look. “I have ... other businesses that fund most of my arms dealing. I supply the goods at a very cheap price. I want to help. The British appetite for sex, gambling and heroin has provided me with enough money to keep the mujaheddin fighting for many, many years, *Inshallah*.” Sam looked neither proud nor ashamed as he said this, but Samira looked livid.

“*Inshallah?* God willing?” spat Samira. “God is ashamed of you! You are responsible for so much death, so much misery.”

Jeremy gave her daggers.

“I, my dear, give our fighters *moftakhir*, some *pride*. I supply them with the means to defeat embarrassment. If I wasn’t giving them this then someone else would – at a much higher price.” He gauged the situation and decided he’d said enough about his own circumstances. An astute man. “What are you doing here?” The question was directed at Bethan.

“We’re covering the elections ... For a newspaper,” she said it in a small voice.

“Ah yes, the election. I remember now. Perhaps I can tell you two things that might help you. All the people you will interview will say things like ‘after twenty-four years of jihad everyone wants peace.’ I don’t. Not if the price is a castrated Afghanistan with a puppet government in Kabul.”

“And the second?” she asked.

“If you want to understand our ‘democratic’ problems, go to Kandahar. Kandahar is the heart of Afghanistan and he who controls that region controls the whole country.” He looked at Jeremy. “I think you should go. I think you should leave Bethan here with me.”

“You know that won’t happen,” said Jeremy with no expression. “Perhaps you could give us some information on the nature of your Palestinian contacts?”

It was too late. “No, my friend, I am afraid I have already said too much. And I don’t think the lady here,” indicating Samira, “could stomach the detail.” He gave them a tight smile. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have lots to do today. What is it you say?” he looked meaningfully at Samira, “no peace for the wicked.” He chuckled at his own joke and left the room. The butler escorted them to the car and remained on the porch until they had exited the TV monitored gate and were back on the main road before he turned on his heel and re-entered the cool, quiet house.

Inside the car a storm was raging.

“What the *fuck* did you think you were doing in there?” Jeremy looked at Samira. There was a certain amount of venom in his eyes and Bethan couldn’t tell if the thin layer of sweat on his forehead was from nervous tension, the sweltering heat in the car or sheer, unbridled anger.

“Speaking my mind, Jeremy,” Samira replied, as cool as the marble tiles they’d just walked over.

“You more or less fucked up my interview ...” he was struggling to keep composure, he looked tired, as though the heat was seeping into his angry skin. “He would have kept going ... He might have told us about Palestine,” he wiped his forehead and pinched the skin between his eyes.

“It’s all right, mate,” said Aubrey, putting a hand on his shoulder from the backseat, “I think what he gave us was pretty sensational ...”

“Yeah,” Jeremy sighed, “I suppose it was.”

“Where do you want to go now?” asked Samira with no hint of apology or regret. Her steely eyes were focused on the road, unblinking.

“I’d like to do some canvassing, if that’s all right with you,” said Jeremy sarcastically.

“I think it’s the best idea you’ve had all day!” She gave as good as she got and had seen a hundred men like Jeremy. “I will take you to the streets.”

Downtown Kabul was no metropolis. The buildings became denser, as did the people but, from what Bethan could see, nothing was clean or orderly. Samira took them to the main strip of Jadeh Maywand. Situated south of the dried up Kabul River, it was hot and crowded and dusty. There were tightly packed stalls selling everything from wristwatches to live chickens to delicious smelling *naan*. There wasn’t a foreign face to be seen here, which momentarily alarmed Bethan as she began walking, and then she felt a blush of shame. All the Afghans were polite and humble; hardly anyone even looked these three white strangers in the eye.

The crisp pastry combined with the soft flesh of the cooked apple was fantastic. It might have been the best thing she'd ever eaten.

“Oh my God, this is incredible, Samira.”

“It's my favourite, too,” she smiled broadly, “people usually think all we eat in Afghanistan is curried goat ... Funnily enough, my apple samoosas were one of the things that I missed most about Kabul when I was in the US ... Here we are gentlemen,” said Samira, handing out the delicacies.

Aubrey tucked in immediately while Jeremy eyed his with suspicion. Bethan had just swallowed the last of hers. “If you don't want that, I know someone who does...” all her shyness about eating in front of him was seeping away.

“I'll have it, mate,” chimed in Aubrey, “bloody delicious!”

“Well, there must be something to them since you two are so keen,” he said, and took his first bite, chomping in the manliest, most attractive way Bethan had seen. She never thought someone's samoosa-eating tactics would turn her on but there you go.

“Shall we get going?” asked Samira, “it's getting late ...” she didn't say it wasn't safe to be out after dark, but Bethan picked up a slight twitchiness that indicated as much.

They walked back to the car, silent and wishing for more samoosas. The drive back to the hotel was slightly cooler, thanks to the impending dusk. The sky was turning a gorgeous shade of pinky-violet. This was Bethan's favourite time of day, when the darkness was close but not imminent and all the lights began to come on and twinkle but you could still see where you were going. The long but interesting day had taken its toll

and she felt sleep calling her, despite the early hour. It was her birthday tomorrow, and this sky was some present.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

We're going because I think it's what's best for my pieces on the election ... which is why we're here."

As Bethan approached the breakfast table at the agreed hour (why were they always here earlier than her? Did they have some sort of secret meeting before she arrived?), she could see Aubrey and Jeremy having a disagreement in urgent, fast words.

"Well, I think it's a bad idea," said Aubrey stubbornly, taking a sip of coffee and avoiding eye contact.

"What's a bad idea?" asked Bethan, "has Jeremy decided to run for president?"

"No Bethan, but I'm flattered," said Jeremy, winking at her. He obviously needs an ally, she thought, he's trying to charm me. Charm away, charm away, you charming man.

"We're going to Kandahar," declared Jeremy, as Bethan ordered tea.

"The place Sam told us about?" she asked, not feeling one way or the other.

"I think you mean the only place left in the country where routine killing is still a way of life," said Aubrey drily.

"Oh ... I see. Isn't that where the Taliban still rule?"

“Well,” said Jeremy, shifting uncomfortably under her gaze, “yes, to be honest. But it’s such a unique opportunity to get a grip on the difference between North-South political views. I know a place we can stay and be safe ... I think it’s important we go.”

Great, she thought. This year I will get an untimely death for my birthday.

Without saying anything she got up and weaved her way through the busy tables over to the buffet spread, as resplendently furnished as ever. She picked up a few things she thought looked nice to eat, with no thought as to their fat content. If she was going to be in mortal danger then let them find her with a bulging button fastening her jeans – she cared not.

Returning to the table with a plate piled high, the mood had calmed and Aubrey seemed to have given in to Jeremy’s burning desire – as per, thought Bethan.

“So when do we leave?” she asked, biting into an apple pastry and thinking it wasn’t as good as the samoosa she’d eaten last night.

“Tomorrow. Morning. Seven o’clock.”

“Will Samira be coming?”

“Yes, of course ... As long as she agrees.”

“Although I don’t see why she should,” said Bethan, “after the way you talked to her yesterday ...” She concentrated on her pastry to avoid the glare she could feel on her brow.

“No, I stand by that, Bethan. She was wrong to interrupt and insult my interviewee,” he looked reflective. “But it’s true, I will probably have to apologise... We’ll really need her down there ... Even less English speakers than here and much more hostility towards ... Westerners.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes, Bethan wondering whether to tell them it was her birthday or not. Aubrey excused himself to go to the toilet and as he walked away Jeremy fixed his gaze on Bethan.

“You look very pretty today ...”

“Thanks,” she said, looking down at her pale green kaftan and slim-cut trousers.

“That colour really suits you.”

“Why d’you only say things like that when we’re alone?”

“Why d’you think?”

“Because you don’t want Aubrey to know ...”

“He’s a jealous man ...”

“If he’d wanted to have me he could have tried it long ago ... We’re alone in an empty house most days.”

“Perhaps I didn’t mean he’d be jealous of me ...”

Bethan realised he was teasing her. “Ha ha.”

“Only joking, Beth. Why do you take everything so personally? I make a perfectly innocent comment about your outfit and you assume I’m making a pass at you.”

Was she being stupid? She certainly felt it now ... But no, there was more to it. Perhaps because she’d wanted there to be. God knew she fancied Jeremy so perhaps she wanted him to make a pass at her. He was too smart to play games with, she decided. Out of her league in those terms and anyway, very old in her eyes. Best to leave it alone. She was silent and self-conscious as she finished the items on her plate and wiped her mouth.

Aubrey returned and sat down. “So what you two love birds talking about?”

Strange choice of words, thought Bethan. Sam wasn’t a great believer in coincidence.

“Nothing really,” answered Jeremy for them both, “I think Bethan’s gone quiet at the thought of our travels South.”

“Who can blame her? It brought on a bladder attack and I’m a grown man.”

“What are we doing today?” asked Bethan, keen to change the subject.

“Today we’re going to the hospital to interview Hawa ... That lady I told you about yesterday who was shot when she announced her candidacy ...”

“Another fun-filled day then,” remarked Aubrey as he went back to the buffet.

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You know, Jeremy, I am beginning to think you’re a bit crazy,” said Samira as she drove them at a trundle towards Kabul’s private hospital.

“The feeling’s more than mutual,” he replied, only half joking.

“No, I don’t mean it in a bad way but, well, anyone who wants to go to Kandahar without being embedded with troops ... well ...”

“Will we get attacked?” asked Bethan from the back seat.

“We might ... I don’t know because I haven’t been there for years ... Things might be different, but I don’t think so ...”

“Great,” said Aubrey.

“But I will come with you,” she continued. “I will protect you Aubrey jan,” she smiled, reaching back and giving his knee a playful squeeze which only turned him a paler shade of pale.

The hospital was a sturdy concrete monolith with rectangular windows holding reflective panes.

“Voila!” said Samira as they walked across yet another dusty car park towards the entrance. “I’m still not sure how this place keeps going ... It must be the expats and politicians,” she mused.

The inside of the hospital foyer was depressingly familiar. It reminded Bethan of the Royal Gwent Hospital in Newport where she’d sat on countless Saturday nights waiting for one or other of her brothers to get their wounds stitched up after a big fight or rugby match.

The smell of disinfectant and stale uniforms filled her nostrils and the neon strip lighting made it hard to see. Jeremy as usual was meticulously organised and knew the ward he wanted. Samira asked one of the nurses how to get there and then, proceeding through sterilised double door after sterilised double door, they meandered through the labyrinth of the hospital. What struck Bethan the most was that no one asked them where they were going or what they were doing. Three respectable looking whiteys and a Westernised Afghan could go anywhere they liked.

They found ward 4D without too much trouble and on entering found exactly who they were looking for. Hawa was alone on the ward. She was hooked up to one of those beep-beep machines that measured her heart rate and she had a drip going into her left hand but she sat up straight in bed and was wide awake and showed no signs of pain.

“*Salaam*,” she said, in a smooth, even voice. “You must be Jeremy.”

She was beautiful, even in hospital. She wore a floral shirt that covered her arms and chest but showed just enough of her delicate, carved collarbone to be alluring. Her long dark hair shone and looked freshly washed despite her being bed-ridden for a week at least. She had full lips and almond eyes like Samira’s but rather than brown, Hawa’s were a pale hazel with metallic rings around the outside of the iris, making them not just beautiful but hypnotic. It was easy to see why she had been on TV, her four visitors stood staring for a good five seconds before stepping forward with handshakes, introductions and their best smiles.

They sat down beside her bed in the chairs provided, but not too close – they didn't want to smother her. Samira was equally entranced by Hawa, and had told the others it was like meeting a big celebrity for her – a hero almost.

“How are you feeling?” asked Jeremy.

“Strong,” she replied. “My pain is great at the moment but everyone here, the staff, has been so kind. I am getting the best available care.”

“Good,” said Jeremy, unsure how to proceed for a moment.

“Who did this to you?” asked Bethan, even though Jeremy had given them all a stern word in the car about interrupting him today.

“I cannot be one hundred per cent sure but I have an idea,” said Hawa, shifting slightly as a wince passed across her face. She looked kindly at Bethan. “It is hard for you to understand but there are many people, many men, in this country who would rather see me dead than in government. Women are something to be feared and abused... I made a stand against those men ...” she looked down at her shredded thighs, “and they paid me back for it.”

“Other candidates?” asked Jeremy, aghast.

“Oh, yes. People paid by other candidates, I think. They won't beat me ...”

“For how long will you be in hospital?”

“A long time, they think, which is very unlucky. My candidacy still stands because I haven’t withdrawn ... Will never withdraw ...” she looked sad, “I just hope the campaigning I did before this happened will be enough.”

“We, um, did some canvassing in town and you certainly seem very popular,” Jeremy said. Bethan couldn’t believe he was actually being consolatory.

“Thank you,” said Hawa with a kind smile, “I hope you’re right ... Jeremy ...”

“Yes?”

“I hope you don’t think I am rude or ... how d’you say? designing ... but I want a few things to be said in your article ...”

At any other time Jeremy would have bristled at a comment like this and pompously start talking about journalistic integrity, but he held his tongue. The look on his face reminded Bethan of the way people used to look at Princess Diana or Mother Theresa; he was sort of entranced.

“People will read your article and I want them to know that terrible people did this to me ...”

“They will know that,” he reassured her in a soft voice.

“But I don’t want them to think I am poor.”

“I don’t quite follow ...” he said, frowning.

“She means she doesn’t want people to say ‘poor Hawa,’” Samira explained. “She wants you to tell the truth but also to empower her.”

“Yes,” said Hawa, with a grateful grin in Samira’s direction. “Lots of people are not wanting to hurt women here ... My husband, my Baba ... they are very proud. You must say that it is only the bad men who do this ... I have worry about ...”

Hawa struggled to find the words so Samira helped her by speaking to her rapidly for a few seconds and then she told Jeremy, “She worries about the negative image of women in Afghanistan ... She wants you to show how strong we have had to be – ”

Hawa cut her off.

“Things were very, very bad for us before 2001 ... We are grateful to be free of the Taliban but the Taliban were not everyone.”

“You mean they don’t represent most Afghan men?”

“Is so,” she smiled, feeling more confident in her abilities now. “I meet American woman here in hospital yesterday ...”

“A patient?” asked Jeremy, looking around at the empty ward and empty corridor beyond.

“No, NGO,” said Hawa patiently. She knew many key English words that related to her situation which made her sound more fluent than she was. “She say to me, ‘Liberation, you must be liberated from the burqa!’ I tell her I was in exile during the worst years of the Taliban, that I have only worn a burqa twice in my life ... at weddings!” the others smiled at Hawa’s indignation. “Tell the Americans we can liberate ourselves. They must keep their noses and their money to themselves.”

“But they have destroyed lots, Hawa,” said Jeremy, “do you think they should fix what they have broken?”

She was beginning to look tired. “Over eight billion US dollars of damage, Jeremy ... Yes, they must repair. Then leave. No more money to one side of fighters or the other ... We want democracy – the fighters don’t.” She looked at her legs. “They want this.”

A formidable-looking nurse was entering the ward and Aubrey saw that time was of the essence. He took a few snaps of Hawa, some with her looking into the camera, some looking away. The light and angle of her face weren’t as important as usual – she was photogenic enough to give even an amateur a beautiful photograph.

“Thank you, Hawa, you’ve been very helpful and I will send you a copy of the article,” said Jeremy as he shook hands with her.

“We’ll be rooting for you on the eighteenth,” said Bethan.

“*Tashakor*,” replied Hawa, smiling. Thank you.

“I’m not sure I agree with her,” said Samira as they braced themselves for re-entry into the sweltering car. “I love her but I’m not sure I agree with her ...”

“What about?” asked Bethan.

“That most Afghan men didn’t support the burqa, the Taliban. That most Afghan men respect women who take on untraditional roles ...”

“I suppose she just spoke of her experience,” said Aubrey, picking dirt out from under his nails.

“That’s exactly right,” said Samira. “Hawa is from a wealthy, Pashtun family and that is why she is now able to even think about politics ... Although she is admirable, I wonder if she *should* be in government ... I think she is slightly out of touch with the lives of the Hazaras, the servant class of Afghanistan or Tajiks or Uzbeks or any of our other people. It’s hard for you to understand but her religion dictates that she has had more opportunities ...”

“I thought everyone was Muslim,” said Bethan, feeling stupid.

“They are,” replied Samira. “But the Pashtuns, like Hawa and like me and like that despicable man we met, we are Sunni Muslims – the ‘ruling class,’ if you will. The servants who grew up in our houses with us, Hazaras, they are Shi’a Muslims, and most Shi’as are illiterate and traditionally never got the opportunity to go to school or learn a trade other than housekeeping, cooking ... that sort of thing.”

“That’s terrible,” said Bethan. “Isn’t that illegal?”

Samira just laughed and Jeremy said, “But who is there to serve since the Taliban? Who’s employing these people?”

“I don’t know, Jeremy ... I know things are different now than they used to be... that Hazaras and the Tajiks will get more opportunities in our new democracy, but I still think, if you want a realistic picture of Afghanistan, you have to understand the differences between Shi’a and Sunni, between Pashtuns and Hazaras. The Taliban, they

were formed from the Pashtuns ... they murdered so many Hazaras – slaughtered them like cattle and called it God’s work.”

“But surely Hawa is no more out-of-touch than some of the male candidates you’ve been telling us about,” said Bethan. “What about that man who thinks women who show their feet are immoral? What did he do for the Taliban government? Prevention of vice and promotion of virtue? What a job title ...”

“Al-Haj Maulvi Qalamuddin,” said Samira. “You’re right, Bethan. But he is like a chewed-up piece of leather, Hawa is like a flower. Qalamuddin is so out of touch he doesn’t even think about most people’s lives ... Hawa could make a huge difference. I didn’t mean I don’t want her to get elected, I just mean she needs to be careful – she’ll be open to a lot of criticism. All the female candidates will ...”

They drove on through the early afternoon, past piles of rubble and shattered glass. Every now and then they’d pass a large shiny building and the three foreigners speculated about what went on in there – Samira’s streetwise cynicism had infiltrated the way they thought about the city and the people who lived there.

They pulled up to the hotel.

“Nothing else on the cards today?” asked Bethan, surprised they weren’t going into town to find some more interviewees or fact-find or something.

“No,” said Jeremy. “As we’re leaving tomorrow there’s a whole lot of writing I need to do on Kabul and the interviews and opinions we’ve seen so far. I have a busy afternoon but you, my dear, are freed up.”

Bethan felt relief – she was feeling exhausted for no good reason and would love an afternoon in bed. She squirmed with pleasure at the thought.

“But seeing as you’re having a relaxed afternoon perhaps we should all meet for dinner tonight?” suggested Jeremy.

“I’m busy,” said Samira, with no further explanation.

“Sounds great,” said Aubrey, “see you both in the restaurant at seven.”

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After a lengthy afternoon sleep and a shower, Bethan searched her clothes for something that would do for a smart dinner. The best she could come up with was a simple turquoise strapless dress and some hoop earrings. They made her look sexy rather than smart but it wasn’t like they were going to mosque.

The restaurant was much nicer at night than in the morning. Softly lit with some sort of jazz playing discreetly in the background it was almost romantic.

Bethan saw she was a bit late and that the others were there already, talking in a friendly, lively way. They were friends again, thank God. Bethan had noticed Aubrey had been a bit tense over the past few days, perhaps they all had.

“Hello,” she said, taking her seat and drinking in their admiring glances.

“Hi,” said Aubrey.

The menu was straightforward, so Bethan stuck with chicken and potatoes whereas Aubrey ordered some exotic curry and Jeremy had fish. They ate hungrily and made small talk about the trip so far, about Samira, about going home.

“But you’re enjoying it, Bethan?” asked Jeremy.

“Yeah ... well I’m not sure *enjoy* is the right word,” they both nodded at her, understanding exactly what she meant. “I mean some of it’s been horrific, like all those beggars and Sam with his own personal war. But it’s probably the most interesting thing I’ve ever done in my life.” This was the truth but then, she thought, it doesn’t have a whole lot to compete with. “I’m glad I came.”

“Good,” replied Jeremy, and looked at her hard for a long minute.

Still peckish and feeling the need to escape the look she said, “anyone fancy dessert?”

“Well, actually we’ve sort of arranged that ...” said Aubrey mysteriously.

Jeremy gave a cryptic hand signal to their waiter who reappeared with a silver trolley with a big cake on it. The cake was pink with burning candles on it and as the surrounding tables turned to look and smile, Aubrey and Jeremy began singing a very out of tune happy birthday and, when their waiter joined in with his accented English, Bethan actually laughed out loud and thought this was the best birthday she’d had since she was six.

The waiter put the cake on the table.

“Make a wish,” said Aubrey.

She blew the candles out and made a wish that might have destroyed her but would come true before the end of the night.

“I don’t know what to say ... how did you know?” she asked as the waiter disappeared back into the kitchen and she began to cut generous chunks of cake for the three of them.

“It was on your passport,” said Aubrey. “I noticed when I was snooping through it.”

“You thought we wouldn’t do anything, didn’t you?” teased Jeremy.

“A reasonable assumption if you didn’t know,” she replied and he nodded and smiled.

The waiter reappeared with three ice buckets, a bottle of champagne in each. He popped the three corks as instructed by Jeremy and then placed three glasses in front of each of them.

“Now, I had to threaten a coup to get this stuff, even though it’s only Moet and I wouldn’t look at it in London, it’s the best we can do here ...” Bethan was thinking that Moet was just fine with her. “So I got a bottle each and, because I know you’re not the most proficient of drinkers, Bethan, Aubrey and I are going to have a double Scotch for every glass of champagne.”

Aubrey and Bethan looked at him and then at each other in total shock.

“Right,” he said, playing up to them. “Let’s get raucously drunk and celebrate the beginning of Bethan’s adult life!”

They all took a big swig of champagne and a forkful of cake and Bethan thought *adult life!* I'm eighteen and sat in a hotel in Afghanistan with two middle-aged men drinking champagne that probably cost as much as my monthly rent to procure.

The thought didn't hold her for long. Nothing did that night. The three of them sat up late and drank and drank at their respective paces until they'd forgotten where they were going tomorrow, forgotten what they were there to do, forgotten about the children and the guns and the bullet wounds. And it was glorious! They talked about nothing and everything and enjoyed each other's company shamelessly and in equal measure. Bethan told them things that night about her life and her home that she would never have done anywhere else – drunk or sober.

It was two o'clock and the cake had either been eaten or defaced and crumbs lay on the less-than-white table cloth next to three empty champagne glasses and a quarter of a bottle of scotch. Aubrey had faded first, he wasn't used to drinking as much whisky as Jeremy and he was so drunk he was slumped in his chair, beginning to softly snore. The waiters were mopping the floor and stripping the tables and it was so obvious they should be tucked up in their big white beds, even Bethan knew it.

"We should take him upstairs," she said, drunk but surprisingly not feeling sick or silly.

"Yes, we should," said Jeremy, rubbing his forehead with a sigh. "Did you enjoy tonight? I know getting drunk with two old men is probably not as fun for you as it was for us but I hope you didn't find it too tedious ..."

“Oh, shut up!” she giggled, a bit too loudly. “To tell the truth I probably had a better time tonight than I would have in London,” she said, feeling more than a little unfaithful to Alistair.

“Well ... Let’s get him upstairs ...”

They did their best to wake Aubrey so that he could at least prop himself against them. Jeremy did most of the carrying, with Bethan opening doors and calling lifts and Aubrey insisting that this was bloody stupid, he could walk on his own.

All the way up Bethan felt drunk, confused and guilty for what she was feeling towards Jeremy. Perhaps it was just vanity and she was flattered that he had paid her so much attention tonight, gone to so much trouble to make her birthday special. Or perhaps she was lonely and scared and needed comfort. None of them were good reasons and she knew it and didn’t know why she felt like this and cared even less.

After what seemed like a lifetime they reached Aubrey’s room and Jeremy plonked him on the bed. Bethan took his shoes off, loosened his top button and spread a blanket over him. Jeremy was watching her do all this, and when she turned round the intensity of his stare made her beat a hasty retreat towards the door. He followed and as he left the room he softly closed the door behind him, his hand remaining on the handle as he looked up at her.

“I just wanted to say thanks, Jeremy.” She found it hard to hold his eyes but made herself. “I’ve had a great time and really appreciate all the trouble ...”

“It was no trouble, Beth – I enjoyed doing it for you ...” And then it came and his mouth was hot and wet on top of hers and he was pushing her into the hotel wall the way she’d always wanted to be pushed and wasn’t sex a great equaliser? She felt no nerves anymore.

They stayed there and kissed and kissed until there was nothing for it but to go back to his. If she was ever going to say “no” in her life this would have been the smart time to do it, but she didn’t. She let his hairy hand with a wedding ring on the third finger lead her all the way to room 522. He was so eager to get inside that his hands faltered as he slid the room key in and out and Bethan smiled despite herself. Men were all the same.

Or similar, at least. As she unbuttoned his light blue shirt, the smell she remembered from their first meeting in Notting Hill filled her nose. It was the smell of age and sin, but it was so sweet that for a moment it smelled like something Bethan needed. He lifted her dress over her head and there she stood naked except for a small pink thong.

“You’re so beautiful,” he said, taking her soft breast in his mouth. She could feel his stubble against it. Having never had a father, she didn’t realise that this was what it felt like when your father kissed your cheek as a child. She didn’t have any thoughts along those lines – it was just different, that’s all.

They fell onto the bed and the rest of their clothes went the way of all flesh. As he lowered himself on top of her, she couldn’t help noticing the slightly protruding flesh around his middle that went toward the bed before the rest of him did and the hair on his

stomach tickled her own so that she smiled. He smiled back at her, mistaking her happiness.

It was sordid and she knew it but that made it exciting and she did it willingly and without doubt.

It turned out Jeremy was proficient but out of practice in the sack. Most blokes she'd slept with had come very quickly the first time; she'd had to wait until the second or third round for more than five minutes of full sex. She'd made them use a condom, too. So lots of things were different with Jeremy, but what did she expect? Carbon copies? Perhaps a little bit. Perhaps it freaked her out a little bit, but the change was delicious.

He rolled off her exhausted and they lay in silence, panting. Bethan turned to look at the clock and saw it was four-thirty. They had to be up and on their way to the airport in an hour and a half. He put his palm on her stomach and sighed.

“Will you stay here with me until we have to leave?”

“No, I don't think that's a good idea, do you?”

“I wouldn't have said it if I didn't think it was ...” he gave her a wolfish smile.

“Well, I still don't think it is.” She wasn't pissed anymore; the experience had sobered her up and left her with nothing more than a faint nausea and aching, damp thighs. She stood up and wrapped his toweling robe around her – it was miles too big, but at least it was clean. She bent over and fished her dress off the floor. She shoved it in one

oversized pocket and her g-string in the other and padded out of his room and down the corridor to her own.

When she got inside, she took off the robe and got into the shower, washing off sweat, make-up and semen to help forget. She dried herself and got into her clean bed and lay, eyes snapped open, waiting for the phone to ring and tell her it was time to leave Kabul.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

This is Nazeer,” said Samira, stepping out of the white Land Cruiser. A desperately hungover Bethan, Jeremy and Aubrey looked on, barely raising an eyebrow. “He will be driving us to Kandahar ... and staying there with us.” She saw their puzzled faces. “He used to be in the military.”

That was easy to believe. As he too exited the vehicle and picked up their bags and tossed them into the boot like so much tissue paper, he cut an impressive figure. Nazeer was tall, well over six feet and almost as wide. Unmistakably Afghan but wearing combat trousers and a snugly-fitting shirt that hinted at Herculean biceps, he was definitely the man to have with you rather than against you.

“Hello,” said Nazeer, shaking their hands and bowing slightly at the neck. This was evidently the extent of his English as from that day forward they would never hear him speak in anything but Pashtu .

“He says it’s nice to meet you and it will be a pleasure to take care of you,” said Samira, after a brief exchange with him.

“Tell him it’s mutual,” said Aubrey.

“Is he expensive?” asked Jeremy. “And necessary?”

“Extremely,” replied Samira.

“Extremely expensive or extremely necessary?”

“Both.”

“Right ... How do you know him?”

“He is a family friend.”

“I’d hate to be in your family,” cut in Aubrey.

They all got in the car, Nazeer driving, Aubrey next to him and Bethan sandwiched between Samira and Jeremy in the back.

“You didn’t say we’d be driving to Kandahar,” said Jeremy.

“No, Jeremy. I told you I’d get you there. The best – and only – way to get there is on the Kabul to Kandahar highway. Well, it’s not totally safe but we have Nazeer and since you *insisted*...” there was laughter in her eyes, like she had just told a joke.

“Right ...” Jeremy’s brain seemed to be having trouble taking it all in, perhaps he was even questioning his decision, but all he said was, “how long will it take?”

“The road is 480 kilometres long, so it should take about five hours.”

“That’s not so bad,” said Bethan hopefully. A long and bumpy car ride on no sleep and a champagne headache wasn’t her idea of a good time.

“But there are many places where the road not so good for one reason or another. So it will take about seven, but don’t worry.” She didn’t qualify her last statement.

“Isn’t the whole point of a highway that you can drive on it?” asked Jeremy testily.

Samira translated his comment for Nazeer and they both laughed and then Nazeer said something.

“What did he say?” asked Aubrey.

“He said Jeremy is a funny guy.”

At least the Land Cruiser had air conditioning which made it much more bearable for its passengers – especially the way Nazeer was rolling along at pace. It wasn’t clear if the vehicle belonged to him or he had just procured it – the only explanation Samira offered was that he used to drive tanks.

Bethan sat in silence and thought about the night before while the others talked. Jeremy hadn’t changed towards her this morning like she thought he would. If anything he’d been friendlier – offering to carry her bags, getting her a croissant from the buffet which she couldn’t eat. Now she felt his leg against hers in the back seat and wondered if it would ever happen again or if he was being so nice because it was over. Hard to tell. They’d both showered and changed and everything was erased, just like that.

Every now and then he looked at her and smiled, not a loving smile but not a forced one either. Bethan’s hangover was subsiding slightly now with all the mineral water she’d drunk and she began to feel very, very tired.

After an hour of driving the conversation inevitably turned to their destination.

“The further south you go, the more conservative it is,” Samira said. “Bethan and I will have to cover our heads and feet even if we didn’t in Kabul.”

“Why is there so much violence in Kandahar?” asked Bethan.

“After the Taliban were overthrown in 2001 the government basically left the south to itself, with few troops and less controls. After the initial scare, the Taliban started coming back and now they want influence again ...” Samira explained.

“But Karzai’s the president, what do they hope to achieve?”

“This election isn’t for the president, Bethan,” answered Jeremy. “It’s for the *Loya jirga* or what we’d call a parliament. Each area votes for its parliamentary representative, like at home, and then they take up a seat in the government in Kabul ... It’s a House of Commons with no House of Lords.”

“Oh,” she said, slightly resentful that he’d taken it upon himself to educate her. “And so the Taliban are trying to get their man in,” she concluded.

“Exactly,” said Samira.

“But surely they won’t let some murdering bastard or drug lord or whatever get elected?”

“That’s the whole point about democracy,” remarked Samira wryly, “you can vote for whomever you want. Okay, so no one wants the Taliban back, but the old men return, hide their guns and say they’ve seen the error of their ways and people believe them and vote for them ... and if they don’t, then the guns are brought back out.”

“It’s all pretty shocking,” said Bethan.

It was but she was getting increasingly tired and the car was so cool and Jeremy and Samira were talking about extremism and her eyes were so heavy...

*

She woke up with her head resting on Jeremy’s shoulder. She looked at the digital clock on the central consul of the Land Cruiser and saw she’d slept for three hours. She felt a bit better but very groggy and quite hot despite the air con. Samira and Nazeer were talking softly in Pashtu. She wasn’t the only one who’d fallen asleep – Aubrey was headlollingly unconscious in the passenger seat. Bethan could feel from the regular movement of Jeremy’s breathing that he too was asleep. She wondered how long he’d let her sleep on him, being careful not to move and wake her, before he’d succumbed himself. Quite touching really. He felt soft and comforting and she almost didn’t want to lift her head away from his smell.

Samira stifled a giggle.

“What’s funny?” asked Bethan, rubbing her greasy eyes.

“Sorry, Bethan, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“You didn’t. So what’s funny?”

“Nazeer was just saying he wonders what you were all up to last night that has made you so tired.”

“Well, it’s no big mystery. We were drinking. It was my birthday, so they got champagne and stuff and we stayed up until 2am. That’s why we’re tired.”

That and the fact that after we left the bar Jeremy and I had sex until four-thirty and then I couldn’t sleep for butterflies, she thought.

“Oh,” said a slightly disappointed Samira. “Well, happy birthday.” She spoke to Nazeer, presumably relaying what Bethan had just told her; but for all Bethan knew she could be telling him that Bethan was a sex slave they’d brought over with them.

“Nazeer says happy birthday.”

“*Tashakor*,” said Bethan, impressing both herself and the other two by remembering the only word she’d learned since arriving.

“Did you enjoy last night?” asked Samira.

“I’m not sure *enjoy* is the right word,” Bethan said, smiling. Wasn’t that the truth?

“But, yeah, it was fun.”

Nazeer asked something. “Nazeer wants to know if you drink a lot ... as a Western woman.”

Bethan was more than a little embarrassed at the question. She knew in Afghan society it was a taboo for women to drink, even before the Taliban came to power. “Well, no, not really. Well, yes, on weekends and stuff. But I don’t really like it ...”

“Well, that’s probably a good thing because I doubt you’ll be seeing much of it in the next few days.”

They drove on and the road became bumpier, dustier, and more heavily patrolled by men in uniform.

“Who are all these men?”

“Security personnel,” said Samira. “They have to patrol because there were quite a few ... incidents and so now they are here to keep travellers as safe as they can be.”

The car went over a large pothole and jolted Jeremy and Aubrey awake. Aubrey rubbed his head and swore. Jeremy looked as though he'd forgotten where he was for a second and then looked at Bethan and remembered.

Eventually the men thinned as they pulled into Kandahar. It was officially a city but it seemed more like an overgrown market town to Bethan's eyes. They entered through the North where the housing was uniform and evenly laid out but not well kept. Stray dogs and thin children played in the street and kicked up the dirt, making the bottom few inches of the houses red-brown with dust.

As they got closer to the city centre, Bethan saw that buildings became slightly larger and more official-looking but they were still essentially the same everywhere you looked, white rectangles with small, neat windows and flat roofs. The streets were straight and grid-like but unpaved and thus Kandahar was even dustier than Kabul. Much dustier.

They drove past a busy market where goods of all kinds were changing hands. Bethan noticed there were far more men here than in Kabul and they were talking, smoking and trading in the centre. They drove past a busy building, beautifully engraved

with colour, mosaic and gold leaf and Nazeer told them, via Samira, that it was called Khirqa Mubarak and was one of the holiest sites in the whole country as the remains of a King whose name Bethan couldn't pronounce were said to be in there.

They drove back out through the southern suburbs of the city where it was a mirror image of the way they came in.

"Where are we going? I thought we were staying in Kandahar?" asked Bethan.

"Just outside," explained Jeremy. "Samira didn't think it was entirely safe for us to find lodging in the town due to the unstable political climate, so she's arranged for us to stay in a local village ... Bit of Afghan culture for you, Beth," he smiled at her.

"Right." Not so sure I like the sound of this, she thought. Nazeer drove on, poker-faced until they reached the top of a small hill and they looked down at Samira's instruction. There was a small cluster of about ten huts .Just a few hundred metres apart from the huts were two white buildings next to a glassy lake.

"That's where we're staying," she told them. "The village is called *Abi* and I've arranged for us to have the two cottages."

They proceeded down the hill and trundled through the tiny village. Everyone was inside, sheltering from the strength of the midday sun. They pulled up outside the cottages and Nazeer brought the Land Cruiser to a stop. He climbed out and the others followed. Bethan stood in the heat and smelled the air. It was sweet and salty from the lake. The sky was a piercing, cloudless blue. The foreground was the same dusty colour as the town but the hills in the distance looked purple-black. It was like being on holiday,

she thought. A bit too barren, too dusty, too alien but yes, this was still one of the most beautiful places she'd ever seen.

The lake was so still it reflected the mountains like a mirror and Bethan wanted to touch it, to break the perfection. She walked up to the shallows, slipped off her shoes and entered. It was cool and clear to the bottom. She could see tiny brown fish swimming around her painted pink toenails.

"Can we swim in here?" she asked Samira.

She smiled kindly. "Not really Bethan. I'm not sure how kindly the locals would take to you in your bikini ..." Bethan looked crestfallen and embarrassed. "Maybe at night," Samira consoled her, "when there's no one around. That's the best time to go swimming anyway." They walked up the bare path to the first cottage to find the men inside, putting bags on each bunk.

The Sheraton it wasn't. Each cottage was like a little concrete box with three creaky, iron-based beds against the walls with bugger-all else in there. The windows were small to keep out the heat in summer, but the flip-side of this was that the rooms were lit with a dark blue, shadowy hue. The bathroom was worse. Bethan saw a potted hole in the ground with what could only be described as a small hosepipe next to it.

"What's that for? Where's the toilet?" Jeremy and Aubrey had broad smiles on their faces as they saw her look of horror. Nazeer joined in when he realised what they were smiling at.

“That’s the toilet, Bethan,” Samira explained. “All our toilets look like that in this country. You just didn’t have one in Kabul because you were staying in a European-owned hotel.”

“Well, I don’t know how to use one!” Bethan said. For some reason, the whole toilet thing was bothering her more than it should.

“We can talk about it later,” said Samira, clearly embarrassed to be having this conversation in front of the men.

“Consider it a life-skill, Beth,” quipped Aubrey.

“Bastards!” she said.

“Right, well. Bethan and I will take the other cottage. You men can have this one,” said Samira in a voice that didn’t invite debate.

That’ll put the brakes on with Jeremy, thought Bethan. If it’s meant to be ...

Bethan and Samira strolled over to their building which was identical. Samira gave Bethan an awkward, stilted and sanitised lesson with the new toilet, which made Bethan wish she was dead.

“Can I have a shower?” she asked Samira.

“Sure.”

Bethan stepped out of her car-dirty clothes and ran the tap. But there was only one.

“Samira?” she called.

“Yes?”

“There’s no hot water.”

“I know.”

“Only cold then?”

“Yes.”

“Right.”

Fuck. The water was very cold and felt even more so on Bethan’s hot and tired skin. It was one of the quickest showers she’d ever taken but also one of the most refreshing – she only really started to feel its benefits after she got out and felt the air coming in through the open window and stroking her wet skin, cooling her off.

She emerged in a towel into the main room which seemed to slightly embarrass Samira and made her look around to check the men weren’t near. Bethan started rifling through her bag for a clean kaftan and underwear.

“We’re lucky to have running water at all,” remarked Samira. “The only reason we have it is because these were adapted so that travellers could stay over. The rest of the village washes in a bucket.”

“How nice for them,” said Bethan, knowing how she sounded but in no mood for another moral lesson or historical debate. She was overtired and wanted to be on her own.

She longed for her locking room in Kabul, the privacy and comfort it afforded her now a distant dream.

While Samira showered Bethan walked over to the other cottage, approaching cautiously as she knew the men would have showered too. She knocked on the door and Jeremy looked up from his bag. He had a towel around his waist and she saw the white line where his swimming trunks must have started as he was nut-brown and freckled above it but sheet-white below it. Despite the age and the intimidating demeanour, she wanted him. Maybe not now, she was tired. But later.

“Hi,” she said. Nazeer left the cottage and walked down to join Aubrey at the side of the lake. On seeing him, Aubrey started to have a hilarious, charade-like conversation with Nazeer, trying to breach the language gap with exaggerated swimming and sweating gestures.

“Hi.” Jeremy was completely unselfconscious. Disturbingly so. He just stood there in the coolness of the room, with water droplets on his chest, in his towel, looking at her.

“I thought I might have a sleep. I’m, um, quite tired.” Only after she said it did she realise the reference.

“I bet you are. Feeling pretty bushed myself.”

“Is it okay?”

“Is what okay?”

You and me, she wanted to say.

“For me to have a sleep?”

“Yes, of course.” He looked slightly embarrassed. “I’m not your master and commander, Beth. There’s nothing else planned for today anyway – only dinner tonight.”

“Thanks.”

“Look, about last night.” Oh God this was excruciating, she thought. Why do I always have to get the “look about last night” speech. What was he going to say? Enjoy it, it was a one-off? I was horrendously drunk and you’re female?

“What about it?” she said. She wouldn’t betray her feelings to him, her uncertainty.

“Thanks,” he said, quite seriously.

She didn’t know what else to do so she laughed, “Well, you’re very welcome.”

He looked mildly rebuked. “I’m serious, Bethan ...”

“Sorry, it’s just I’ve never had that response before.”

“Well then you’ve been with the wrong people,” he said.

No, she thought, just a different generation.

“Well ...” He came over to her and she looked over her shoulder furtively but to her relief found Aubrey still putting all his bodily effort into communicating with a very amused Nazeer.

He gripped her arm softly and then ran his finger from her shoulder to her elbow. "I'd like to do it again," he murmured in her ear before he kissed her.

This is not good, she thought. Last night when they'd been together she had enjoyed it and been turned-on but today her legs almost collapsed under her when they kissed. Turned out she preferred him sober to drunk. She pushed him away.

"They'll see."

"I don't care."

"I do."

"Do you?" he said, trying to inch closer again.

"Yes, I fucking do. I know this may surprise you, but I really *like* my job and I really *don't* want to lose it because I'm in and out of bed with you ... I don't give a toss about your wife or the fact that you're married. I just want Aubrey to think of me as good at my job, not as *your* bit on the side, okay?"

He looked a bit surprised, a bit amused, but acquiescent nevertheless. "Okay. Mum's the word." He let go of her arm. "Go and have your sleep."

She did. She slept and slept and was only woken at dusk by Samira telling her they were going to get food. She got up and pulled her kaftan over her head and then wrapped a headscarf around it.

She stepped outside and noticed it was much cooler. Should she take a jacket? No. It wasn't that cold. Then she looked up at the lake in front of her and saw the dusk sky,

resplendent pinks and purples in layers with the last glow of the sun shining on the tips of the hills, making them look like they were on fire. Her stomach rumbled as she watched small insects break the glass surface of the water and she walked over to the other cottage to find the others standing by the Land Cruiser.

“Hello, sleeping beauty,” said Aubrey, touching her hot cheek. “You feeling better?”

“Yes, thank you,” she said with a sleepy smile. “Famished, too.”

“Good,” said Samira. “Nazeer’s going to take us to what he claims is the finest lamb kabob establishment in the city.”

Bethan didn’t normally eat lamb. She was brought up in Newport, but had spent her summers on the farms in the surrounding rural areas, picking potatoes and sweeping cattle sheds for extra money. One summer she’d worked on a farm where a couple of ewes had died during lambing that spring and the rest of the flock were unable to provide adequate milk. The farmer (a grizzled old thing called Sonny with tufts of white hair coming from the most unlikely places) had stabled three lambs and they had to be fed ever day, three times a day. One of Bethan’s jobs as dogsbody had been to muck out the lambs and also to feed them. At first they were timid little creatures, but after they realised Bethan’s express purpose every time she came to them was to provide them with delicious warm milk they treated her with affection. She caressed their soft, white heads as they drank and they soon started to bleat every time they saw her approach. When she had to leave the farm in autumn to go back to school it was the lambs she was sad to part with, not Sonny or the local worzels who picked the potatoes.

She had to make an exception that night. Firstly, lamb was the only thing on offer. They bought it from a food stall where three young men were selling the kabobs like the proverbial hotcakes. Secondly, she was so hungry she couldn't wait to eat, and fell on the meat when it was put in front of her. Thirdly, it was delicious. The lamb she'd eaten before was pungent and strong-tasting and always unpleasantly chewy. The kabob she sat eating by the deep fountain near the middle of the city was succulent, soft and marinated to perfection. I could get used to the food here, she thought.

The five of them talked and ate and talked and ate as the darkness descended and the streets got quieter. There were noticeably fewer Afghans and increasing numbers of Allied troops, enforcing curfew.

The others, it turned out, hadn't slept and were feeling deeply fatigued in a way unimaginable to the well-rested Bethan. They took the short walk back to the jeep with at least two kabobs filling each of their stomachs and trundled back to base.

They exited the truck quickly, and all of them except Jeremy and Bethan wanted to turn in early.

"I want to look at this incredible night sky," said Jeremy, calling their bluff. "It must be the most number of stars I've ever seen."

"Well, we'll leave you to yourself then, mystic Meg," joked Aubrey. "Come on, old man," he said, patting Nazeer on the shoulder as they walked into their room.

"I'm afraid I'll have to sit it out too," said Samira and, in fairness, her face looked haggard she was so tired. Samira didn't show it but the travelling had taken a bigger toll

on her than the others – she'd begun to feel personally responsible for this funny group of foreigners, and she knew how dangerous the south could be.

“I'll come and look,” said Bethan. “I'm not that tired after my monster sleep.”

She joined Jeremy and they walked down to the edge of the lake.

“That wasn't too hard,” he laughed, and looked across at her.

“What on earth do you mean, Mr Brazier?” she laughed. “I thought we were coming to look at the stars ...”

“They are beautiful,” he said, looking up.

And it was true: the sky was black velvet and the stars diamanté studs. With little or no artificial light coming from the ground it should have been almost pitch, but a three-quarter moon as white as freshly fallen snow provided soft but piercing light.

“They are,” she echoed. “Do you do this often?”

“Look at the stars? Only when I'm feeling poetic.”

“That's not what I meant.”

“I know.”

“Well?”

“The answer's no.” He turned his gaze away from the sky and onto her face, bare of make up and framed by a pale pink headscarf.

“Not often?” She was pushing it, she knew, but she was becoming jealous of his affection – wanted to know the truth and also not to know it.

“No. I married Kay when we were both very young. I’ve never really loved her in a passionate way, but we get on well and she’s smart ...” Please don’t tell me she doesn’t understand you, thought Bethan. “I’m not going to lie to you and tell you you’re my first affair, but I’ll tell you the truth and say that you’re my third. Ever. And I’ve been married twenty years.” He took his gaze away from her and looked back at the sky. “I don’t know what we’re doing, Beth. Perhaps it was wrong of me to ask Aubrey to bring you here, wrong of me to pounce on you in the hotel ...”

“It’s not like I needed much persuasion,” she said, and then she became the comforter, the seducer. She touched his face and he took her hand and she kissed his.

“No, you didn’t, did you?” He smiled and then sat on the ground and she straddled him and everything was all right again. No more words.

And if the others weren’t sleeping soundly enough to block out the noise, then they just put it down to the mysterious rumblings of a foreign place.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The day before the election dawned still and clear like any day in that region at that time of year. There was no indication from the pale blue sky what the coming days would bring.

“I want to go into town and talk to the people,” said Jeremy. “I want to find out what they’re thinking, what they’re feeling about the election.”

“Okay,” said Samira slowly. She was learning to deal with just such sweeping and demanding requests from Jeremy, and to enable them. What Jeremy’s colleagues didn’t know back in London was that without Samira Jeremy’s Afghanistan project would probable have come to very little. Samira had a brief exchange with Nazeer and then turned to Jeremy. “We leave in ten minutes.”

“Right,” he said, gathering up his pen and pad.

Aubrey and Bethan had already got their equipment together and they sat glumly on the low wall outside the cottage, swinging their legs.

“I’ve got to be honest, Beth, I’ve had enough now. I want to go home.”

“Just a couple more days and we’ll be off again,” she said, understanding how he felt.

“Do you think we shouldn’t have come?”

“No ... not at all. I’ve found it all very interesting, but I understand that you probably miss London more than me – there’s more there for you.”

“You don’t miss Alistair?” That was the thing about Aubrey, he was so thoughtful. He remembered everyone’s names and their relation to her.

The sound of his name made Bethan flinch and Jeremy look up from where he was fussing with his bed. She knew she should choose her words carefully.

“I do miss him but, you know, it’s been exciting and he’s so ... busy all the time.” Why had she said that and made it sound like he neglected her? He didn’t. His job was just very demanding. But it was out and Aubrey nodded slowly and Jeremy started moving again in the corner of her eye.

Town that day was busier than the night before. For one thing, there were more troops around, their big black boots stomping up the dust and the bright sky reflected in their mirrored sunglasses.

After they’d found somewhere to park the Land Cruiser (gear-lock on, steering wheel padlocked – Nazeer was convinced it would get hotwired) they began walking towards the market. Turning around a corner, they were confronted by two tall, helmeted army officers almost as wide as the white rectangle they stood next to.

“What you lot doing ’ere?” He was ginger, the first soldier; fair skin struggling in the hot sun and Middle English accent that sounded out of place.

“We’re researching,” said Aubrey, speaking quickly.

“Researching what?” said the other. He was darker, hairy arms. Their tone was hostile and they resembled nothing in the world so much as big, hot robots.

“The elections,” said Jeremy, attempting to carry on walking. The dark one put out a restraining arm.

“You’ll go when I say you can sunshine.”

“So you’re jourmos?” Ginge again.

“Yes.”

“What about them,” indicating Samira and Nazeer. Bethan was happy Nazeer couldn’t follow the exchange. He looked bored and gazed alternately at his boots and the sky.

“My interpreter and driver,” explained Jeremy, more patiently now, with a better grasp on the situation.

“Right,” said the dark one. “You wanna be careful, mate. Going round this place with two such pretty ladies.” He smiled, showing hungry white teeth.

“Thanks, officer. I’ll bear that in mind.”

“On ya way now.”

And they were. All except Nazeer feeling slightly winded.

“That was a bit off,” said Aubrey.

“They have to do their jobs,” said Samira. “They’re supposed to check any suspicious goings on. For all they know Nazeer and I could have been holding you against your will.”

“Well, I hardly think ...” started Jeremy and then went quiet after receiving a look that told him Samira had meant the last bit as a joke. But it was that tense sort of joke that always leaves you a little bit afraid.

Jeremy touched the small of Bethan’s back as they walked into a small, dark teahouse off the main market square.

“This looks like a good spot to do some canvassing,” she said.

“It does indeed.”

They sat down and ordered some tea. They were offered opium as well, which Samira declined on their behalf without a hint of indignation.

“Big seller round here, is it?” asked Aubrey.

“Real big seller,” said a man at the next table, clearly stoned off his head.

“You speak English?” asked Jeremy, clearly thrilled to have a native Afghan to speak to without the hindrance of an interpreter.

“Yes ... I am speaking it.” The man had dark circles around his big, dilated eyes. He looked tired but wide awake and had track marks down his arm that told them he didn’t just smoke the stuff.

“Do you live here?”

“Almost ... he takes most of my money ...” He adjusted his turban and coughed loudly. A loud, wet cough which suggested the outcome of tomorrow might not mean all that much for him anyway.

“I meant in Kandahar.”

“I am living in Kandahar.”

“Will you vote tomorrow?”

“Yes ...” he was finding the words. “It is ... we must exercise our right.”

“Will you vote for the Taliban?”

“No.”

“You don’t support them?”

“No. We were all happy to see the Taliban leave. But now they are coming back and perhaps ... this is not all bad.” His eyes were glassy and he was having trouble focusing but was enjoying the attention of the foreigners, with the vanity of a true addict.

“What do you mean?” No response. Jeremy gently touched his linen arm. “Please explain.”

“The Taliban ... Yes they were very bad – but people were good. Every man, he must grow the ...” he said, stroking his chin.

“The beard?”

“Is so. Because then we see who is man and who is boy... Now lots of the boys are ... like men.”

“You mean pedophilia?” There was no recognition in the man’s eyes, just smaller and smaller pupils.

“That’s what he means,” confirmed Samira. “It went on a lot down here before the Taliban. It was quite commonplace among the Pashtuns.”

“Jesus,” said Bethan, surprised that no one else was that bothered about it.

“And the poppies?”

“The poppies, the poppies. Everyone he is wanting to stop the poppies,” the man let out a child-like giggle, a sound so incongruous with his appearance it startled them.

“You don’t want them to stop?”

“I think they must get the poppy ... we were not allowed it before. The Taliban they are saying it is full of sin,” a sardonic smirk, “but they all like it.”

“I thought the Taliban encouraged poppy production,” said Jeremy, addressing himself to Samira. She shook her head.

“No, the Taliban no like poppies ... So now it is difficult because the good times look like the bad times ... maybe this is what democracy is ...”

The man teetered on the verge of consciousness and, with a final suck on a small china pipe, fell into the abyss.

Nazeer was saying something to Samira.

“Nazeer says we should leave soon ... This is a well-known opium den and we might get hurt ... for asking questions.”

“He might have mentioned that before,” said Aubrey. “I don’t suppose you want this guy’s picture, Jez?”

“No, I think we can do without that.”

They left the tea house and walked along the streets, interviewing passers-by through Samira. All they talked about was poppies, Taliban, war. War, Taliban, poppies. Jeremy seemed pleased with the interviews though and they all had their picture taken – smiling faces showing white teeth reflecting white sun.

“Can we ask them not to smile?” Jeremy said to Samira.

“Why?”

“Because it’s going to be a serious political feature and it’ll devalue the urgency of the situation somewhat if they all look like they’re going to Disneyland.”

“I think we should leave it,” said Bethan. The camera she was carrying was getting heavier by the minute.

“Why?”

“Because if it was me, and I was answering your boring questions, I’d be well pissed off if you told me what to do in my photo ...”

“Okay, point taken,” he sighed. “Let’s stop for lunch.”

They got a sort of meatball pancake with goat’s cheese and spices. It was aromatic and delicious and they ate it sat on a shady curb, all in a line. What a motley crew we must look, thought Bethan with a smile at the glances of the passers-by. The stuffed pancakes were large and satisfying, particularly since breakfast had become a thing of the past.

They spent the afternoon talking to people around the market, and learned with some alarm that the Taliban had been shooting on sight Afghans who were carrying voting cards. People were scared that afternoon, the smiles fading with more and more reports of election violence. Those who were going to vote became reluctant to say who for, and later even that they would vote.

“The human cost of freedom,” said Aubrey, philosophically.

“I think we’ve done about as much as we can for today,” said Jeremy.

“Yes, we must leave,” said Samira, looking increasingly edgy.

“Will the village be safe tonight?” asked Bethan.

“Yes, it will,” replied Samira. “It is tomorrow that we must be careful.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

It didn't feel right from the start – they would all admit that later. The air was too still, the queue for the polling station too orderly, the look on the soldiers' faces too knowing.

There were separate polling stations for men and women. The people that had turned out had an air of shaky defiance about them, many of them needing encouragement from government aides and troops. The soldiers carried their AK-47s diagonally across their chests and offered lazy, dutiful smiles when people looked like they were about to cave. They were delivering democracy – today was a historic day and they could tell their grandkids they'd seen it dawn.

The eerie morning mist that had told of autumn's approach was burning off and, by eleven o'clock, had left only a plague of small but thirsty insects as a reminder of its presence.

Bethan stood with Aubrey next to the women's queue, taking photographs of women holding voting cards when they were allowed to do so. They weren't the only photographers there that day, nor Jeremy the only journalist. They'd all been made to wear navy blue, sleeveless bullet-proof vests with the letters 'TV' printed loudly in white on them – whether they worked in that medium or not. Purely precautionary, they were assured by an army personnel officer, as he handed them out and watched roughly twenty media representatives grow more fearful with their wearing.

All they made Bethan feel was hot. Hot and resentful that no one was really talking to them. That everyone was standing, still and mute with their ballot card in a sweaty grip, waiting to do what they came for. The air was still and the people were quite, with only the sound of the stamp from inside the buildings producing ripples of noise.

The sweaty, quiet trepidation was justified when a truck drove into the square, with men in black turbans and beards riding on the back. Justified when it became clear that they were much more bullet-proof than everyone else. Justified when the soldiers told everyone to get down and the men loaded their guns and released the safeties. Proved right when they opened fire and all that could be heard was a deafening pop pop pop pop. Proved right when Bethan saw, with a knife-stab in her stomach that Aubrey wasn't next to her behind the building and that it was Jeremy's hand that was holding her head down, so close to the dust that she could feel it coating her eyeballs.

They stayed down, no heroics, no looking for the others. Eventually the firing stopped and, after about thirty seconds of silence and dust-settling, they stood up. The sight that greeted Bethan's eyes sent sharp, painful pins and needles into her fingers and toes. Adrenalin, perhaps, or shock. From that day she would get the pins and needles every time there was a loud bang, every time she was ever frightened or taken by surprise. Her future lovers were scorned whenever they crept up on her, for it would always bring the pins and needles.

The taupe dust was stained with pools of poppy-red blood and there were about seven bodies lying on the ground. The stench of shit and sweat clung to the dusty air.

“Someone must have a gut wound,” said Jeremy quietly, putting his hand over his nose and mouth and encouraging Bethan to do the same.

People – reporters, voters, and photographers were popping up from behind jeeps, poles, walls, mounds of dust and looking for their known associates. There were screeches of relief and of naked horror and disbelief. Samira and Nazeer emerged dust covered from the opposite side of the building, but where was Aubrey?

At first Bethan could only panic. But then she saw that he stirred slightly, the figure in the pale pink shirt that lay on the ground. Bethan and Jeremy had the sickening moment of realisation.

“Jesus ...” it was a prayer, not a blasphemy. Jeremy went to him, squatted down in the dust and took his pulse.

Bethan stood three feet away, watching. The bile rose in her throat and the pins and needles were so strong now that she could barely move her hands and feet.

“It’s my leg ...” said Aubrey, his voice soft and pained.

Bethan dragged her useless feet over to them and looked at the two black-red punctures in the left thigh of his khaki combat trousers. Punctures. Bullet wounds. Blood.

“Are you okay, Aub?” she said into his ear. “Can you hear me?”

“Yeah, Beth. I can hear you ... Any chance of a doctor?”

Samira used the soldier’s radio to get the air ambulance people in. They were coming anyway, having been alerted to the incident by the complex network of radio

transmissions operating on that day. They only ended up lifting Aubrey and an American journalist – the wounds of the other internationals ate them alive and Afghans didn't get airlifted.

The helicopter swirled the dust, making it difficult to open your eyes. As soon as the paramedics came running up to Aubrey, Bethan felt better. Whatever happened now, at least someone knew what they were doing. Her relief was reflected in the faces of Jeremy and Samira.

The medics were French, reassuring in their broken English. Once they'd put him on a stretcher and carried him into the helicopter, they strapped up Aubrey's left thigh and gave him some injections which Jeremy told Bethan were probably morphine or antibiotics to stop infection. Bethan and Jeremy peered in through the helicopter door and watched Aubrey pass out – from pain or painkiller. The medics told Jeremy they would stabilise him in Kabul and then he would be flown back to his home country.

“But he will be all right?” asked Jeremy, begging the Frenchman for only one word.

“It is impossible to say ... From what I 'ave seen ze bullets 'ave gone through his leg and not, er, ruptured ze major arteries ... But I make no promise ...” he patted Jeremy on the shoulder and shut the door behind him, leaving them to scatter away from the helicopter before it blinded them in taking off again.

They walked back to the Land Cruiser, studiously avoiding the voting site, which they knew would still be a scene of carnage and devastation.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The ride back to the cottages was a silent one. Tears rolled down Bethan's cheeks one after the other. Jeremy touched her arm every now and then, trying to comfort her but needing comfort himself. Samira sat stunned and stony faced in the front seat, while Nazeer avoided eye contact and concentrated on the road.

It was after lunch but no one was hungry. When they got back Bethan went noiselessly to her bunk and lay on it curled in a ball facing the wall. Through the hot, piercing afternoon she heard Jeremy asking Samira if Nazeer could take him into town that night so that he could phone about Aubrey and send in his report.

Samira tried to tell him it wasn't a good idea and they had a brief and tired argument before she said "fine, have it your way."

Bethan wasn't sure where Samira went for the rest of the afternoon but she didn't come into the room – no one did. Bethan just lay there, hour after hour after hour, totally unconscious of the time passing. She was thinking about everything and nothing. One minute her mind was like the marketplace, the next like the sky. She cried intermittently and, although she didn't realise it, passed in and out of consciousness.

When Bethan saw the colour of the wall change with the sun going behind the mountains, she knew they would be going into town soon. The acid gurgled in her

stomach and she realised she hadn't eaten all day. Should she go with them tonight? Or pretend to be asleep when they came into her room? Could she face Jeremy, the person who'd done all this and more?

She involuntarily shivered. She wanted to pull the blanket over her but was scared to move before she'd made her final decision about revealing her waking state to the others.

She would go, she decided, trying to sit up. She'd been still and silent for so long that the rustling of the bedclothes was deafening. Was this grief? No, Aubrey wasn't dead. Well, not last time she'd seen him, could be by now but you couldn't think like that.

She walked outside and felt the evening was a lot more advanced and a lot colder than she'd at first thought. She went back into her room and fetched a cardigan and pulled it around her sad, slow body.

Jeremy was at the edge of the lake, sitting with his knees tucked up to his chest, an unlikely position for a man his age. She sat down by his side and mirrored his way of sitting. They looked at each other. Whereas her eyes were bloodshot and swollen from crying and lying flat all afternoon, his eyes were clear, sharp and full of regret and apology.

"How are you?" he asked her.

"I'm okay." Her voice sounded croaky and weird. "You?"

“Not okay. I really want to go into town now ... I want to call that number the ambulance guys gave me ... And work needs my report. Where the fuck is Samira?” His tone was aggressive and tired. Bethan felt sorry for him.

She put her hand on his hairy forearm, “It’ll be okay, Jeremy. It’s not your fault... Don’t be angry.”

“Of course it’s my fault. And it would be just as much my fault if it were you who’d been shot ... I brought you both here.”

“We decided to come, you didn’t make us. God, let’s not do this, it’s so pointless. Okay?”

“Okay.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, watching the flies and mosquitoes tap-dance on the surface of the lake. Jeremy reached out for Bethan’s hand and she gave it to him and they sat there like that until they heard Samira and Nazeer walking and talking in their direction. They broke the connection, each thinking how stupid it was that they couldn’t even hold hands at a time like this because of their guilty consciences.

“Should we go now?” Samira asked Jeremy.

“Yeah,” he’d lost his venom.

They piled in the Land Cruiser. The village was slightly livelier than they had seen it before, with signs of life through the windows. People sat on the floor, in a circle, eating and talking about the shootings that day. Most of the villagers hadn’t gone into town, hadn’t wanted to vote. They’d seen too much come and go to seek out new sources

of worry. So they lit their candles to stave off the dusk, cooked their food to stave off hunger and waited for this, too, to pass.

Kandahar, by contrast, was eerily quiet. The food sellers were mostly gone, every one replaced by an armed soldier, smarting from their loss. The lamb guy was still there but he wasn't the jostling, jovial man of a few nights earlier. He was nervy, stealthy and suspicious. Everyone wanted to eat except Jeremy, who ran into Kandahar's only telephone café without a backward look.

"We'll get one for him," said Samira, touching Bethan's arm. "He'll feel like it once he's done his duty."

Samira, Nazeer and Bethan kicked up the dust to the lamb van, where they ordered four kabobs. It was only when Bethan was half-way through hers that it dawned on her that now, as she ate, Jeremy was finding out if his friend, her boss, was alive or dead.

After they finished eating they sat down on the curb outside the café, listening to journalists' voices speak urgently into disintegrating plastic receivers as the dark got heavier and heavier. What was taking so long? It felt like she'd been waiting forever, listening to Samira and Nazeer talk in quiet voices and feeling her body tense up and sweat with anxiety.

Then Jeremy darkened the light coming from the doorway and at first it was hard to see his face. Then he came closer to them and Bethan saw he wasn't crying and thought that must be a good sign.

“He’ll be all right.”

“Thank God,” said Bethan. “Where is he now?”

“In Kabul. In hospital. They’re stabilising him there and then he’s being flown back to the UK tomorrow. Bianca’s arranged for him to go straight into a BUPA hospital for treatment and recovery.”

“Did you speak to him?”

“No. But I spoke to the doctor. He said there’s a risk of infection but it’s not big.”

“So what took you so long?” asked Samira.

“Once I knew Aubrey was going to be all right I called in my report, then called Bianca – who hates me – then booked Bethan’s and my flight back to London the day after tomorrow ...”

“Oh.” Samira looked surprised. “Leaving so soon?”

“Yes. We’re done here and I need some time off ... I thought I’d take Bethan somewhere tomorrow ... anywhere interesting around here? Preferably outside of Kandahar?”

Bethan felt surprised and obviously happy. She was so utterly relieved that Aubrey was going to recover; it felt as though a huge, bleeding knot in her stomach had just been untied. And now Jeremy wanted to take her somewhere... Why? To make up for witnessing a brutal shooting and giving her post-traumatic stress disorder? Or did he just want to make her feel better?

Samira was talking to Nazeer who was explaining something to her with sweeping hand gestures. Jeremy and Bethan just looked at each other, no smiles, no jubilation, just understanding that the worst was over and they would leave soon. Anxiety was ebbing out of their bodies, leaving a serene yet sharp emotion for which there is no name.

They walked back to the car, and as Nazeer undid the variety of locks and chains around the steering wheel, pedals and gear stick Samira told them, "Nazeer says there's a picnic spot near here, called Baba Wali. It's very beautiful and quiet and safe. He thought it would be good for you two to go there tomorrow, to be calm in that place."

"That just the sort of thing I had in mind. Thanks," said Jeremy.

They drove back, Bethan feeling hotter by the minute. When they got back it was late and the stars and moon were low and bright.

"I'm going for a swim," she told the others, getting out the car and half walking, half stumbling, towards the lake. No one argued, they just got out and watched as Bethan stripped down to her thin cotton vest and knickers and left her long, pale clothes crumpled up in the dust.

The water was cool but not cold on her hot legs, and as she plunged deeper she thought how different the water looked at night. In the day it was clear, grey-blue, a thing of innocence. Tonight it was black; black like a pool of oil or a tar pit. Once you put yourself into it, that part was gone. Bethan totally submerged herself, let the tar flow through her hair, into her ears, between her toes. As she stayed down there she saw Aubrey and blood, saw Jeremy and flesh, saw the women and children begging so they

could eat. Saw Alistair and thought “what have I been doing? What has happened to me?”

She came up for air and let herself float on the surface, looking at the moon. The water was blissfully cool; she felt the air brush over her. That was better.

She swam in towards the cottages and found Jeremy sitting on the bank.

“You didn’t have to wait,” she told him.

“I thought someone better make sure you don’t drown.”

She stood over him and he reached up and stroked the downy fluff on her thighs that was wet and plastered down. Bethan bent down to pick up her clothes thinking: He can see everything now this cotton is wet but it’s not like he hasn’t before.

She turned and looked at him. “I’m so glad Aubrey’s okay and he’s going back home. And I’m looking forward to tomorrow.” He opened his mouth to ask her to stay with him for a bit, but no sound came out and she simply leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Good night, Jeremy.”

She walked into the cottage and could sense Samira was awake but pretending to be asleep. Bethan fumbled for her towel in the blue-black of the bathroom and, after drying off, climbed into bed and slept the best sleep she would have in Kandahar.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“Will these keep?” asked Jeremy, holding up a packet of sticky-looking buns.

They were in a small food store with a bakery attached, picking out food for their picnic on their way to Baba Wali.

“Yeah, why not?” Bethan replied. “They look nice. S’pose chocolate’s off limits?”

“In this heat? It’d melt in seconds ...”

They walked out of the shop with two brown paper bags full of food – far too much for two. Samira and Nazeer were just going to drop them off and return later, Nazeer had some relatives he wanted to visit before they returned to Kabul tomorrow.

After driving for about twenty minutes, they reached Baba Wali. Set on the shadier slope of the Argahandab Valley, it was much lusher and greener than other parts of the South. There was plenty of shade under old trees and breathtaking views that made Bethan think how oddly quiet it was. If there was somewhere like this near London, it would be swarming with people – tourists during the week, Londoners getting out of the smog on the weekend.

Today the spot was near deserted, with only a few foreigners (probably also journalists and photographers) having the same idea as Bethan and Jeremy. Nazeer kept

driving and only stopped when they found a shady, deserted patch of grass to occupy for the afternoon. He helped unload a blanket and water from the boot and then drove away. Samira had told them not to stray from the point, and that they'd return in approximately three hours.

"This is incredible," said Bethan, sitting down on the blanket Jeremy had just spread out for her.

"Good old Nazeer."

"I'll miss them both, won't you?"

"Yes. They've been very good to us," he said, taking a seat beside her and taking a gulp of water whilst admiring the view.

"Do you think they know about us?"

"I think they know something ... Especially Samira. But they probably just think we're strange, over-familiar Brits."

"Yeah." Bethan drank some water herself. "Aubrey should be at home by now."

"With Bianca fussing like crazy, no doubt."

"Don't you like her? I always thought she was quite cool."

"Quite *cool*, yes. But essentially pointless."

"That's not very nice."

“But true. She’s very controlling of Aubrey. I know they love each other which is more than a lot of us but I fear, after this, she’ll become even worse.” He peered into a paper bag. “And she’s never liked me.”

“Right ...” Bethan was looking at him thinking God you’re vain.

“You think I’m too harsh about her?”

“No ... Well, maybe a bit. You can’t expect everyone to like you all the time. I don’t think she liked me at first but we get on okay now... I think she’s just jealous of Aubrey’s attention.”

“Where did you go in town?” he said, referring to Bethan’s five minute absence while he paid for the food.

“To use the phone.”

“Who did you call?” He already knew, and she knew he knew.

“Alistair.”

“Why?” he asked.

This is a bit much, she thought. She knew he’d called Kay several times. And anyway, what business was it of his?

“Well, firstly to tell him I’m *alive* ... And, secondly, because I wanted to speak to him. Is that okay?” she said sarcastically.

“Sorry, Beth. I’m being childish, I know.”

“You are quite.” She wanted to change the subject. “What time is our flight tomorrow?”

Jeremy didn’t seem to want to talk about leaving but said, “Late afternoon. ’Bout fourish. We’ll leave here early tomorrow morning then go straight to the airport.”

“Shall we eat? I’m quite hungry.” And I’d like to put something in my mouth to stop me from talking, she thought.

“Beth ...”

“Yeah.”

“All I want to say is that people come to all sorts of different arrangements, you know? Like Aubrey and Bianca. I mean, they’re happy. But something else might make you happy, me happy ...”

“Can you pass the rolls and bananas please? I’m about to pass out.” *Arrangements*, she thought. That word again. Why did people use that word when they didn’t want to be honest?

“Are you listening to me?”

“Every word.”

Jeremy passed her the rolls and bananas, and took some cured pork and croissants for himself. They prepared their food in silence. Once it was ready, they leaned back on their elbows and ate it, watching the speck-people moving about in the trough of the valley, in the unforgiving afternoon sun.

“God, it’s hot,” said Bethan, feeling the need to say something.

“Colder at nights now, though ...”

“Yeah, bet it’ll be the same when we get home ... only not as hot in the day.”

“Yip ... I can’t believe we’re talking about the weather.” He started to laugh and she joined in. They were laughing harder than they should be – the heat exerting its manic influence. A young girl who didn’t know better and an old man who should; led at an angle, facing each other and making occasional eye contact. And laughing.

Suddenly Jeremy stopped laughing and leaned over and kissed Bethan. She thought no, I made a deal with the lake last night that I would stop this, that it isn’t right for me. But she’d been immersed in the lake’s coolness last night, thinking about a young Scot waiting for her and the awkwardness she’d feel the first time she felt young flesh again. And now she was with Jeremy again, all-powerful, sexy, protective Jeremy who just might love her. So she kissed back a bit more before she pulled away. The doom hadn’t gone; it was just waiting on the plane back to Heathrow. Let it stay there for a bit.

“You’re bored of me, Beth?” he asked, looking wounded despite his attempt at a joke.

“No, no. But we should really stop, don’t you think?”

“I don’t. As it happens.” He looked away from her and back to the hot stick-people and she knew he was formulating a mini-speech in his head. She’d grown to know him well. It’s unknowing him I’ll have to master, she thought.

“Sorry,” she said, feeling the weight of the silence. “I didn’t mean to be a spoil sport.”

“You’re not. The ironic thing is that you’re right – we *should* stop. But I don’t want to. You’ve made me realise what a boring, lacklustre existence I lead and you’ve taken it away. I don’t know how I’m going to do without that.”

“I’m not sure it’s me that’s taken it away, or made you realise or whatever. I think it’s this place.”

“What d’you mean?”

“I don’t feel like I have much to lose with you anymore, so I’m just going to tell you what I think.”

“Okay,” he said, but his expression had an amused, this-should-be-good look to it.

“Well, in London, you go to the same parties with the same people, get drunk enough to be honest and forget about all the things that make you unhappy. You have sex with Kay once a month ...”

“More like every six.”

“Whatever. And you’re so busy with reporting the world’s wrongs and clinging to this great job you have, that you’ve worked so hard to get, but you still don’t have the answers, and you’re still not happy.”

“Oh really?” He said mockingly and she thought, he doesn’t understand how hard it was for me to say all that. No bloody idea.

“Yeah.”

“So what’s going to make me happy?”

“Well, how the fuck do I know? I’m just telling you what I think.”

“Right.”

“And you know what else?”

“What?”

“You came here and you saw people who have nothing but they still have more than you because they have *faith*. And they ... sort of ... accept life and don’t blame people and stuff like we do. And I think it gets to you in a way you can’t explain.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because it gets to me too. And then I think I’m only eighteen and I want the answers so imagine being your age and not having them. And realising that not earning a hundred grand a year and not meeting Rupert Murdoch actually wouldn’t have made a damn difference.”

She expected anger after all that, but he only looked resigned.

“Thanks, Beth. I wish I hadn’t asked and just thought you weren’t attracted to me any more.”

“I am attracted to you. I just ... don’t want to be anyone’s mid-life crisis, you know?”

“Yes, I do. But I promise you’re not my mid-life crisis, or anything like it.” He bit into a fat, purple fig. “But pretty much everything else you said was right.”

Historically, the eating of figs has almost without exception brought about physical intimacy between men and women and that day was no different. Bethan had only had the most rudimentary encounters with the strange, soft fruit before that day, but found Afghan figs to be both sweeter and juicier than the ones she’d tasted at home.

She didn’t know what it felt like for him but to Bethan it felt like a goodbye session. They went at it harder and longer than before, and probably abandoned themselves to it more, felt less guilt but more pain.

The afternoon drew to a close, and when the Land Cruiser came within sight, it looked like the hearse of their short, ill-advised affair.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The drive back to Kabul was lively and chatty. It's funny how when you know you won't have to put up with someone for a really long time (or perhaps ever again) you suddenly have warm, friendly feelings towards them, even if you didn't particularly have those feelings before.

Samira and Bethan had always been on good terms, but on that trip they were best friends. Jeremy and Nazeer had never spoken a word, but there were smiles galore and good, trusting eye contact.

They pulled up to Kabul airport and Jeremy paid Samira in the car while Bethan got out (money had always embarrassed her) and went round the back to watch Nazeer fetch their bags.

They all hugged and smiled at each other liberally, the Brits knowing they'd never see the Afghans again and the Afghans knowing the same. But it was a good-natured farewell and Bethan (the sop) even felt her eyes prickle. Not particularly for Samira or Nazeer (although she was fond of both) but because of all the things that had happened there, and they could never be undone and might never get better.

So it was with some relief that Jeremy and Bethan checked in and went to the dirty, empty departures lounge. Bethan went to the only shop in the terminal and bought

two bottles of water – for the equivalent of about five pounds. Never mind, we did well out of you, she thought.

They read and coughed until their boarding call came and they made the long walk, with only a handful of other Brits and three burqa-clad women, to their boarding gate.

The eight hours home to London went faster for Bethan than the eight hours to Afghanistan. She finished the book she'd been reading, ate the sandwich the air hostess brought her, and even dozed off. She woke with an hour to landing and felt so excited to get home and see everyone again, and not tell them what had happened ever because she wasn't one of those people who believed a problem shared is a problem halved.

Jeremy looked twitchy.

“Ah! You're awake,” he said.

“Um-hum.”

“So ...” he looked around. “What are we going to do?” He was already different, she thought. Somehow while she'd been asleep his London personality had started seeping back into him and now he was worried-Jeremy, the Jeremy who wanted to have his cake and keep it.

“I thought we decided that yesterday,” she said groggily.

“Did we? I must have blinked and missed it.”

She turned and looked straight at him and thought: enough of your games. “Okay, you have two choices,” she spoke slowly, clearly. “If you tell me you love me, and you really want to be with me, then I would say yes and keep seeing you and, who knows, eventually leave Alistair and only be with you.”

“But that is how I feel about you...”

“Just wait,” she said, scolding in her voice. “*If* that’s how you feel, I won’t turn you away. But then you have to leave Kay and we have to be proper,” she registered the look of sheer shock on his face. “Yes, that’s right. Leave your cut-glass wife and live god-knows-where with an eighteen-year-old Welsh girl who none of your friends know and even less would approve of.”

“That’s ludicrous!”

“You won’t do it?”

“It’s not that I won’t. I can’t. Don’t you see it would ruin my life? Make both of us unhappy.”

“Exactly. You can’t do it, won’t do it, never even intended to do it. But Alistair would, you see. Okay, so we don’t know each other that well, but I know he’ll take care of me and not run off in the middle of the night to be with someone else,” Jeremy just looked at her, and it dawned on him that, in a funny way, she was smarter than he’d ever be. “So, you see, you’ve chosen the second option without even knowing it.”

“And what’s that?”

“That we see each other when you come to Aubrey’s, and we’re polite and friends even. But we can’t be together like we have been ...”

“Can’t you say it?”

“I can say it,” she met his eyes. “We can’t have *sex* anymore, like we had *sex* in Afghanistan.” Her emphasis on the word embarrassed him, like she’d wanted it to.

“I see. Second option it is then. And you wouldn’t consider a compromise between the two?”

“I’ve never been very good at compromising. Sorry. But I do think you’re great and always will love you just a little bit.”

That was it. No fight, just a cheeky suggestion of stolen moments and dark hotel rooms that was quickly thwarted by a girl who was normally deeply tempted and interested in that sort of thing.

The pilot told them they were about to land. Relief flooded over Bethan. She would see Alistair soon. And although she never thought she’d miss that bloody bed-sit, it appealed to her more than a cottage by a lake in a hot place that had scorched her insides.

They walked out of the terminal, side by side.

“Quite cold,” she said, turning to rummage in her bag for a jacket.

“Well, it’s almost October. Share a cab?”

She looked up from her bag, clutching her jacket. "I'll get the Heathrow Express. We live in totally different parts of town."

"It doesn't matter."

She zipped up her bag, stood up straight and put her hand firmly on his arm. "It does."

She left him standing outside the terminal and walked, without looking back, to the elevator that would take her back down into the bowels of London, onto an aluminium rocket, propelling her forward, forward, forward like an October wind blowing a sheet of newspaper down a grey Notting Hill street. Past a tube station and a café and down, down into Kensington Gardens, where it comes to rest on a small wooden bench and the young, beautiful face on the page looks away to the West, thinking about home.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“I thought you might not come back.”

He hugged her, after they'd kissed. He smelled clean and warm, the wool of his dark green jumper scratching her cheek. It was lucky she'd got back on the weekend, he'd come straight to her when she'd called. An admirable and much underrated quality in a man.

“What d'you mean, *I might not come back?*” she was mocking him because the truth of the statement bit into her throat.

“Back to London, back alive, back to me ...” He walked over to the bed and noisily sat on it; it was still the only habitable piece of furniture in the room. The familiarity of its creaky uncomfortableness made them smile.

“And yet here I am... in glorious technicolour.” It was something her Gran used to say. From another era – like Jeremy. But there was no room for him now. There was plenty of space in Afghanistan, but not in the brown bed-sit. Not with Alistair already on the bed.

“Here you are,” he looked down at his hands, about to pick and then he looked up at her, smiled, “I'm so happy you're back.”

“You could have fooled me, you look a bloody misery.” She walked over and sat next to him. She didn't touch him, not being affectionate by nature.

“I just missed you – you hardly called me ...”

“There wasn’t much opportunity,” was that true? “I told you that before I left ...”

“Yeah ... I know. Sorry.” He leaned over and gave her a kiss and she knew she’d done the right thing. The kiss became more than a kiss and his love was like calamine lotion on a bee sting. This was normal. Normal, normal, normal. And normality was more than welcome at the moment.

She lay next to him, panting on the pale, cheap sheets she’d bought because the ones that had been left on the bed freaked her out. He asked about Aubrey.

“They said he’ll be okay ... Jeremy told me the name of the hospital he’s in. I thought I might go and see him tonight,” disappointment momentarily crossed Alistair’s face. “Much later.”

“I’ll come with you.”

Oh shit. He couldn’t do that.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“No, I want to. I think you’ve done quite enough on your own...”

“No, really.”

“Why? Don’t you want me to come? I’ve met Aubrey and his wife,” he looked sulky and suspicious. “I thought you might like the company.”

Where did she go from here? To hell. “I would. Of course. Come along. Thanks.”

*

It wasn't the Royal Gwent. Turned out BUPA hospitals were more like hotels. Bigger, though. And harder to navigate. After getting lost three times they found Aubrey's ward. Part of the confusion was that he'd been moved. "Out of the woods" according to the nurse who redirected them. Alistair told Bethan that was good.

Room 502 had a white door with an aluminium handle, ajar with voices coming from inside. Bethan knocked gently and poked her head inside. What she saw made her want to slam it shut, sprint down the corridor, out of the hospital and home. Home to bed-sit, home to Wales, home anywhere.

Aubrey was led in bed with his leg in a sling – no great surprise there. Bianca was sat in a chair next to him, looking out of the window with a bored and slightly pissed off look on her face. It was the third leg of the triangle that made Bethan's stomach flip and explained Bianca's expression – Jeremy had obviously had the same idea as her. She really should have thought of that.

"Hiya!" she said, putting on the cheeriest, least surprised voice she could manage.

"Hi Bethan, Hi Alistair!" said Bianca, a tired but genuine smile on her face. She was more casual than Bethan had seen her before, wearing a loose fitting, camel coloured jumper and wide leg jeans. Her face was scrubbed of make up, and her eyes were tired but she looked beautiful, soft.

Alistair kissed her cheek and sympathetically asked how she was before shaking hands with the two men. Everyone was being so nice and grown up and for some reason Bethan felt the immediate urge to smack them all across the head.

“How’re you doing, boss?” she asked Aubrey. She could feel Jeremy looking at her across the bed but studiously avoided his eyes.

“I’m fine, Beth. On so much morphine I’ve never been happier,” he looked at Bianca, “we’ll have to get some in for our next party, darling.”

She smiled back at him and touched his hand without saying a word. It must feel like the bottom of the universe fell out for her, thought Bethan. Perhaps one day she would feel like that about Alistair. Over time, with love and experience and life.

Bethan and Alistair sat down on the other side of the bed from Bianca and Jeremy and now she couldn’t avoid it; couldn’t even help herself. She looked up at Jeremy, he met her gaze and gave her a smile.

“Jeremy’s been into work today,” said Aubrey and Bethan thought, why is he saying this? What has this got to do with me?

“Oh yeah ...” she tried to sound interested.

“And he said people loved the photos you took, the ones for the special report ...” Aubrey coughed and it sounded wet and tired.

“Those digital ones I e-mailed through,” Jeremy continued. “Of the people in that dreadful marketplace ...”

“They liked them?” asked Bethan. Her vanity overrode her concern. Concern for Aubrey, concern Alistair might guess, concern Jeremy might say something.

“They loved them,” he reassured her and, if things had been different and they were still far, far away he might have touched her hand or stroked her face. But it was Alistair’s hand that squeezed her knee, and she squeezed back, loving him for his love for her.

“So,” said Aubrey after a lengthy drink of water, “it looks like you’re going to have your first ever shots published in *Britain’s leading newspaper!*” He always used that quote, never called it *The Guardian*. Bethan couldn’t tell if it was mocking. Probably.

“Oh my God!” It was a positive squeal. She hated sounded juvenile but really, if she didn’t squeal now when would she?

She calmed down and remembered why she was there. She began asking about Aubrey and his leg. He didn’t recall much about the incident, or the paramedics or being flown back.

“The first thing I knew I woke up to my beautiful wife ...”

“Who you’ve turned grey ...” she looked around, “between the three of you!” Bianca was more relaxed now. She could afford to be. Her husband would be okay, her life would go back to normal.

“I’d better go ...” Jeremy stood up, shook hands with Aubrey and kissed Bianca’s cold cheek. Was he going home to his wife? Or to the office? Bethan wondered if he’d

made love to Kay earlier like she had with Alistair or if he'd even seen her yet. But she didn't particularly care.

She'd liked Jeremy, found something in him she'd needed. But she'd never loved him and couldn't allow that to develop. She let him hug her one last time on his way out and if the others noticed it was a strong, close hug then no one showed it.

His footsteps echoed down the corridor and Bethan said goodbye in her head, goodbye in her heart. Alistair and Bethan stayed about another twenty minutes but by then it was dark and Aubrey looked tired.

"We better be off, it was great to see you Aub. I'm so glad you're gonna be fine."

"Yip. Me too. And don't worry, I'll have you back in the studio in no time ..."

"I'm not worried. You've got to get better first ..."

"Take care of the *wee lassie*," said Aubrey to Alistair, who smiled and nodded.

Alistair insisted they get a cab back to his – it was cold and Bethan wasn't wearing enough clothes to brave the walk to the tube station. The streets of London were dark and wet and the orange light of the street lamps shone luminescent on the slick-black road and the rippling puddles.

Lovely way to see London: on a rainy night from the back of a cab. On a rainy night from the back of a cab through eyes that didn't need to worry anymore.

EPILOGUE

October 2008

It was a large, white room. Nothing on the walls or floor or ceiling except framed pictures. This was the kind of room, these were the kind of people, that would have intimidated her a few years ago, thought Bethan.

Except that tonight they were all there to see her, to view her work. And the pictures hanging on the walls were the ones she had taken: portraits (some of tramps, some of nobility), landscapes, street children and prostitutes.

“Champagne?” A waitress in starched white shirt that blended into the wall held out a tray of flutes.

“Yes, please,” said Bethan, taking a glass and firming her grip in an attempt to stop shaking.

Bethan looked down at her white, low-cut dress. Had it been a wise choice? She'd know in the morning. A number of journalists were coming tonight, to review her appearance as much as her work. She'd chosen the white to show off the remnants of her summer tan, gained off the Amalfi coast with Alistair. As she moved her hand to her mouth to sip her drink something sparkled: another remnant of the holiday with Alistair.

He'd proposed, she'd accepted. They were young but he loved her and she loved him and she had decided that was enough after all.

"Aubrey and that crazy wife of his have arrived," said Alistair, slipping his arm around her waist.

"Best I be sociable then," she said, kissing him lightly on the mouth.

As she approached Aubrey's face broke into a wide smile. There'd never been any bad feeling between them – even after she left him to set up on her own a year ago. He'd always been genuinely pleased for her; something she'd found rare in other people. He'd taught her everything he knew and she'd gone far with it.

"How the hell are you?" he asked, giving her a warm embrace. And then, eyeing her up and down, "You look very sexy tonight! For the benefit of the press? Very unlike you."

"Oh shut up, you old perv," said Bianca as she air-kissed Bethan and Bethan (just as proficiently) air-kissed back.

"Well, gotta scrub up every now and then, ya know?" said Bethan, her eyes on the entrance.

Sarah walked in, with a devastatingly attractive blonde: Iris. Since her last in a string of ugly and unsatisfying stints with men (the culmination of which came in Thailand when she was left on Phi-Phi for a syphilis-ridden Swede) she'd found women a far more sensible option. She'd "experimented" (her word) for about a year before

finding Iris. Blonde, tall, suited Iris who worked in graphic design and had the perfect temperament for Sarah's neuroses.

"Hello darling," Iris purred as they hugged. "Love the dress."

"Thanks. You guys look great, too." And it was true. Since publishing her book and freelancing for women's journals, Sarah had really begun to shine.

Bethan excused herself and went over to her slightly awkward, very excited family. Her mum and the boys were staring at a black-and-white, slightly distorted picture of the house she'd grown up in: *their* house.

"What d'you think?" she asked, ready for any sort of answer knowing that lot.

"Yeah, great," said Ryan, tilting his head. "Bit out of focus, though, innit?"

"It's lovely, pickle," said her mum. "We're all so proud of you ..." she fiddled with her earring. "Do I look all right?"

Bethan looked at her mum. Green evening dress, subtle make-up, she'd even had her hair done.

"You're the belle of the ball mum," she told her, smiling.

The place was filling up now, Bethan recognised fewer and fewer people until, looking over to a large self-portrait, her heart sunk into her stomach as she saw a tawny, fit figure staring into it: Jeremy. She'd seen him a couple of times before she'd left Aubrey's, but their conversations were short and empty, and one gentle brush of her hand with his was all he had allowed himself. But she hadn't seen him in over a year and all

the memories of the mad, dangerous, suicidal time they spent together came flooding back as he turned his face towards hers.

Looking round to check Alistair wasn't near (although she needn't have worried, she'd never told him and he hadn't guessed) she strolled over as calmly as she could manage.

"Hi," she looked at him.

"Hi Beth."

"No Kay?"

"No Kay."

"Do you like the exhibition?"

"It's wonderful. You've done so well."

What else could he say? she thought.

"I didn't really want to put that self-portrait in. thought it was vain ...," she said.

"How much is it?"

"A lot." She was taken aback, then resorted to her best form of defence: humour.

"You probably couldn't afford it."

"I bet I could."

"Take it. It's yours if you want it." Why had she done that?

“Thank you. I’ll cherish it like no one else will.” That much was probably true.

“Well, I better be ...”

“So you’re engaged now?” he looked at her left hand, sparkling obnoxiously in the low light.

“Yeah.”

His eyes softened and he looked about to say something but then thought better of it and all she heard his voice say was, “Good luck. I’m very happy for you ... Happy all this has turned out well.”

Me too, she thought.

Sam didn’t believe in coincidences. Bethan didn’t believe in luck.