

Cafe Noir

by

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Chapter 1

She peered out with the eyes of a hawk, missing nothing. Her wings flapped and she soared high above the chaos beneath her. The drone of traffic, the jumble of people wandering around the city, all seemed so meaningless from where she was, looking down on it from so high above. She could go anywhere, see anything and know anything there was to be known.

She was above it all.

“Silver,” the teacher’s voice called out across the classroom, shattering her wandering thoughts as she stared out of the frosted glass window. She realised she’d been watching the vague outline of a bird as it drifted lazily by, free to go wherever it wanted.

“Sir?” she said dimly, turning to face him while blinking in surprise. She hadn’t expected to hear her name called out since her mind had been elsewhere, focused on more important, or at least, more interesting things. She wasn’t even entirely sure where her mind had been, but at least she knew it certainly wasn’t in her English class with her.

“What is a relative pronoun, Silver?” he asked. His expression was hardening into a frown and he looked annoyed that she wasn’t more focused on the business of studying his subject. His foot had begun to tap.

She sighed to herself and sat up straight, giving the appearance of considering the question as she thoughtfully rubbed her chin. But the fact was that she really didn’t care and any attempt to appear interested was doomed to fail.

She huffed to herself and with a loud sigh, said, “I read somewhere that the human brain has a limited capacity to store information. I don’t know if relative pronouns are important enough

for me to put them in there. Can you give me a written guarantee that I'll actually need to know about them in the real world?"

There was a ripple of awkward chuckling around the room.

"I can guarantee you'll need to know about them for the final exam at the end of this semester," he told her firmly with an angry little frown. There was definitely a little hint of a growl to his voice. "I would think that's real enough for most students!"

She shrugged at him and said, self-assuredly, "I always pass, don't I?"

Again, a flutter of nervous but muted laughter sounded around the classroom.

"Just barely!" he huffed at her grudgingly, but they both knew she was doing rather better than that. "I wish you'd take your studies in this class more seriously. You have the potential to be at the top of this grade, which is where you'd be if you put in just a little more effort.

"I wish this whole class would learn to take things more seriously."

"From the gutter, you can only see the stars," she told him flatly, looking back to the frosted glass where the bird had now left, flown away to who knew where. She wished she was able to leave right along with it.

He grunted at her and his shoulder slumped, he seemed to have given up on her. He turned to another student, who seemed to be taking it much more seriously than she was. "Heng, can you tell her what a relative pronoun is?"

Heng sat up suddenly, frowned to himself and looked quite worried about being singled out. He rubbed his chin, pretending to be considering it while focusing all the power of his mind on this task. "Teacher, is it like marrying your cousin or something?"

Mr Whitley cringed and rubbed his head in weary exasperation. “No, Heng, it’s not like marrying your cousin, or something,” he said angrily. He looked around at the amused but otherwise blank expressions staring back at him. Finally, quite sadly he asked, “Can anyone else tell me what a relative pronoun is?”

Silver put up her hand; her face had a smug little grin on it. “Teacher, is it a pronoun referring to something already mentioned in the sentence?”

He glared at her for a moment before breaking into a weary little smile. “You’re not as stupid as you look, Miss Silver!”

From somewhere at the front of the classroom, someone said, just loud enough to be heard, “Nobody could be that stupid.”

Silver shrugged and said, “Well, there’s Heng!” The laughter was tempered with a little more boldness this time around.

“Alright, calm down or I’ll set you extra homework, or whatever,” he told them sternly, but without much real conviction. He was a man who was clearly resolved to the fact that he was now just doing this for the money. If anyone learned anything, it would be a happy accident that bordered on a miracle.

The classroom noise subsided, but there was still a background buzz of chatter and the teacher did nothing to stop it this time. He just rubbed his temples and seemed to just give in to it all for a moment.

The room was painted cream-coloured, the plaster was chipped and the paint was peeling. Apart from the windows down the side, it was left plain. There were no posters, and no examples of work stuck around as decoration. The teacher stood at the front beside an ancient wooden desk with one wobbly leg, and the students sat behind scratched up plastic-coated panels on plain grey metal frames. A dead cockroach broke up the boredom of the slightly grey tiled floor.

“Relative pronouns matter!” he told them sternly, but his heart clearly wasn’t in it. He probably wasn’t even sure that they really did matter, or why they might.

Silver sat watching him, feeling just a little sad for him. He was as good a teacher as they ever got and he had tried to help them. Some time ago she had quite enjoyed these classes, but now the whole thing was becoming old and stale and her heart simply wasn’t in it any more.

She knew that relative pronouns certainly didn’t matter to her, and she suspected that they wouldn’t have mattered to him, since not very much did.

Silver rolled her eyes and gazed back at the frosted glass. She could see the blurred outlines of cars and small bikes as they went on their way to who knew where to do who knew what. English was her favourite subject, but school had lost all interest for her recently. There was far more to her life, a whole different side to her that the world knew nothing about. She was a girl with many secrets and school now just kept her from them.

“He’s mad at you!” Rya, sharing the desk with her, leaned over and whispered in her ear, her hot breath blown onto her skin and startling her slightly.

She glared over for a moment with an expression that looked angry. “He’ll get over it,” she grumbled softly and calmed herself. “He’s always like this on Mondays. He drinks too much at weekends.”

Rya laughed, and then her face dropped as it seemed to occur to her that maybe she wasn’t joking. “How do you know he drinks?”

“Everyone who works here drinks!” she said coldly. “He comes in on Mondays with a grey line under his reddened eyes, and he takes a deep breath before speaking. He always smells of coffee which he uses to wake himself up. Trust me, he drinks at weekends.”

Rya laughed. "You don't know that. You made it up."

Silver shrugged and looked back out of the window. She was sitting in the left corner of the room, right at the back, on the far side from the door. "I'd drink myself if I had to teach you!" she said softly. "Trust me. He's a drinker."

The bell had gone and the class had made its way out. Silver was, as usual, the last to leave, waiting for everyone else to go first, watching everything as they went. There was always an excited rush as if there was something outside of great importance they had to be doing. Most of them just took out their phones and began playing games on them.

"Silver!" Mr Whitley called out. "Can I have a word?"

She sighed and turned to him, her fists digging into her sides as she glared defiantly. "Do I have a choice?"

"I'm worried about your grades, Silver!" he told her. "Your homework this week looked rushed. If I didn't know better, I'd say you weren't really trying lately; at least not trying your best."

She nodded knowingly back and said in agreement, "Maybe you know better than you think." Her tone was hostile, far more hostile than she intended for it to be. She regretted it as soon as she had spoken the words.

"I'm worried about you!" he told her as he sat himself on the edge of his desk. Neither one of them made an effort to approach the other and there was slightly too wide a distance between them. Silver was already edging back, widening the gap.

She sniffed and looked away. "Don't worry about me. I'm fine, I can look after myself. I don't need anyone looking out for me."

He huffed to himself and shook his head. She thought he looked a little sad. "I'm worried anyway. Your grades are slipping," he told her.

She grabbed her bag and zipped it closed, before throwing it casually over her shoulder and turning to leave. "I'll look into it."

"Silver, what's going on with you?" he asked.

She looked back at him fixedly, her expression unreadable. She said coldly, "I'll try harder. Can I go?"

He just sighed and nodded since there was nothing else he could do.

Rya had ordered herself a coffee, and a second one for Silver, as usual. The school had a canteen upstairs, a makeshift arrangement of haphazard displays selling food that was to be eaten on various metal tables. People milled about, but their favourite table was free, as usual. Rya had slung her bag over the back of it just to make sure that nobody else stole it while her back was turned.

She peered over to the stairs but there was still no sign of Silver walking up them to join her. The girl behind the counter stared back emptily and handed over two plastic cups, one with a frothy sweet latte for her, and one with a strong, dark, bitter iced coffee with no milk or sugar for Silver.

The girl slammed down the change and looked away, as Rya took the drinks without making any effort to acknowledge her, either. She made her way over to the table, and finally Silver's head appeared at the top of the stairs. She turned and began making her way over to join her friend.

She picked up Rya's bag and flung it into a different chair, taking her place at the rear of the table with her back to the wall where she always preferred to sit. She looked around, taking everything in, seeing every detail.

Rya grinned as she made her way across the hall with the coffees in her hand. She was slender with her black hair tied back ferociously, so tightly that it pulled at the edge of her eyes. She

always dressed gaudily, with bright, angry colours that told everyone to look at her. In comparison, Silver dressed very conservatively. She was a thing in the shadows, a person that happily went by unnoticed. She was fairly plain, ordinary looking, slightly larger than average in height and build but not enough to be considered overweight. She wore dark colours, blended in, and she never did anything to draw attention to herself—not outside of class, at least.

During the week they wore uniforms, but on Saturday, they were free to wear their own clothes. Silver liked it—it was like each and every student had their personality written on them for her to read. They were sentences that spelled out a story.

“Are you in trouble, Silver?” she said in a sarcastic sing-song voice.

“With Teacher Whitley?” she scoffed, not even taking the idea seriously. “I’m his best student—you lot can barely string a sentence together compared to me.” She thought about that for a moment. “Even compared to a chimpanzee in most cases.”

Rya passed her the coffee, sneering at the dark and bitter thing as she did. She sat herself down opposite. “Well you are American. You’ve been learning English all your life.”

“Half American,” Silver corrected her, smiling thinly. “I learned English from Disney movies.”

Rya tutted at her from behind a grin. “Why you always got to sit with your back to the wall? Are you crazy or something?”

Silver looked at her with a neutral expression. “You think it’s weird that I like to have my own chair? You convinced yourself you’re a lesbian because you’re scared of guys. Compared to you, I’m a picture of mental health!”

Rya fluttered her eyelids and smiled sweetly. “Men only want one thing, you know? Men cheat on you, you know? You have to

respect my life choices. You're meant to be my best friend: you should support me as I make my way through life."

Silver snatched up the coffee and sipped at it through a cheap and horribly thin plastic straw. "I do support you. I just don't agree with you. You can't make yourself a lesbian just because it's more convenient. It's like trying to make yourself a racehorse when you're really a donkey.

"Rya, I worry that you're really a donkey."

Rya grinned and ignored the very deliberate and not unreasonable comparison of herself to a smelly, four-legged animal with a reputation for being brainless. "I'm proof that you're wrong. I have three girlfriends right now. I'm a great lesbian!"

Silver sipped at the brutally strong coffee and winced slightly. It was bitter and harsh, too long brewed by someone who knew nothing about coffee, who saw no art in it. "Three girlfriends?" she said. "Are you sure you're a lesbian and not just a man?"

Rya made a big show of looking down at her slender body. She looked up suddenly with a beaming smile. "Pretty sure."

Silver knew this conversation was going nowhere. She shook her head and just smiled back at her thinly. "So long as you're happy!"

"I bought you a coffee—that's what kind of a friend I am," she told her, pretending quite badly to be annoyed by all this. "I'm a great friend. You should be happy for me!"

"Your family is rich—you should buy the coffee. My company is worth paying for." She made sure that she sounded as if she meant it, and perhaps she did. "If you had to actually pay me for all the help I give you at school, you'd have to buy me a whole coffee shop!"

Rya just grinned at her. She leaned forward and said excitedly, "I have a secret."

Silver leaned forward too. Sarcastically, she whispered, "If this is about Teacher Whitley being wanted in America for marrying a horse, I know for a fact it isn't true. A student in Grade 9 started that rumour after he got a D- in his monthly test. Also, I checked, and he used to be married to a really fat woman from Wisconsin who had an unusually hairy upper lip."

Rya just stared for a moment. She blinked, looked quite surprised and said, "He was married to a horse?"

Silver sighed to herself. "No, a really fat woman from Wisconsin with an unusually hairy upper lip."

Rya frowned. Behind her eyes something was happening where something rarely ever did, a thought of some kind, but it was quickly dismissed before it could take root in the infertile soil. "I don't care about Teacher Whitley."

This was true and Silver knew it. She had got 5% in her last homework after being asked to write a poem and returning one with the title, 'Why I don't care about English,' that was comprised of a single line that read, 'I hate your class but I'm rich so I'll pass.'

She rolled her eyes and sipped again at the pretty awful coffee. "What's your secret then? Who sent you naked pictures this time?"

"Better!" she said excitedly in her loudest singing voice. She leaned even further forward. She lowered her voice respectfully and almost whispered, "Heng has a crush on you."

Silver sighed and looked away, her expression that of someone who had just tasted something many years past its best.

"Silver!" Rya said with a frown, sitting up suddenly and pointing accusingly. "You should date him. He's got money and isn't bad looking, apart from his nose and eyes and face. He dated that girl from 11B who always wears the green band on her wrist. She's hot! He dumped her because she was obsessed with Justin Bieber."

He found a poster under her bed with lipstick marks on it. They weren't near the face, if you know what I mean."

Silver stared back blankly for a moment and slowly, loudly, took a sip of coffee, never taking her eyes off her friend. "I always know what you mean. You have the subtlety of a brick to the face."

"He's got a car!" she said, as if trying to sweeten the deal.

"Adolph Hitler had a car!" Silver retorted moodily.

"Who's Adolph Hitler?" Evidently, Rya wasn't doing much better in history class either.

"He's not my type," Silver told her slowly, in words she hoped that even a donkey might be able to understand.

"But he's got a car!"

Silver flopped back into her chair and wondered if there was actually a way to explain it so that she would actually be able to understand. Perhaps with pictures? "He's just not mature enough for me."

"He's 19!" Rya exclaimed. "He's older than you, and he's dated hot girls, even though he lost them to posters of Justin Bieber. How many guys date hot girls, and then want to date you? Not many! Not many who don't wear glasses." She smiled very sweetly.

"No!" Silver said firmly.

Rya looked sad. "But it's so hard for you to find a man because, well, you know."

Silver narrowed her eyes and glared at her. She asked quite sternly, through gritted teeth, "Because what?"

"You know," Rya said with a flutter of a sympathetic smile. "You're a total bitch."

Silver grumbled to herself and said bluntly and with a sense of finality, "That's true, but I'm still not interested."

"Fine," Rya grunted. "You marry a horse. I don't care."

She huffed and shook her head. "Nobody is marrying a horse."

Rya glared at her. "You might have to. I wouldn't date you unless you lost a bit of weight and sorted out your hair. It wouldn't hurt you to dress a bit better either, maybe shave your knuckles a little bit."

Silver stared at her, just wondering what might be going on in her head. Clearly it wasn't much. "I don't want to date you!"

"I know!" she said with a happy smile. "I'm out of your league and it would crush you when I dumped you to go out with your best friend."

"Rya..." Silver never bothered to finish the sentence.

Chapter 2

It had been a long morning, and she only got through it with the aid of coffee, cynicism and incredibly pointed sarcasm. Luckily for her, the coffee was free and the rest came easily.

As she walked out of school after the final lesson, pacing through quickly with steps as wide as possible, Rya came up and handed her a thin, weak plastic cup with thick, strong black coffee over ice swilling around in it. Silver snatched it up, nodding graciously as she sipped a swig through the straw. She wasn't really in the mood for socialising, even if it did come with free coffee. To be fair, she was rarely ever in the mood for socialising these days, no matter what came free with it.

Rya grinned at her and asked sarcastically, "Are you going to your job now?"

They only studied in the mornings, so the afternoons were her own. She'd found herself a job and had settled into the routine quickly, actually rather enjoying having something productive to do. Still, some of the other students looked down on her for it; Rya most of all.

None of them worked. It was a private school, and while not expensive by Western standards, it was more than most people could afford. Many of the students were spoiled and had been living off their parents' wealth for so long that they could never hope to survive without it. To their eyes, she was beneath them, and it was unthinkable that they might one day have to take a job to support themselves, at least outside of the family business.

"I like my job, Rya," she told her flatly, tired of trying to explain it to her.

"This afternoon I'm going to sit next to a pool," Rya said with a vicious little grin. "My mother is getting our nails done, so the

woman is coming to the club to meet us. She's good at painting them! I'm having a different flower painted on each one, except the first two, obviously. What are you doing this afternoon?"

Silver glared at her. It was another little joke at her expense, but one that, as usual, missed the mark.

"That woman probably hates you!" she said thoughtfully. "It's like the girl upstairs in the coffee shop. She serves you, but always looks at you like she's afraid of you until you turn around. Then her eyes narrow and she glares at you for a moment when she thinks nobody's looking. She's poor. She came from a family with nothing, and she's been working in the school since she was 13. She's only 15 now and she knows that she'll never have a proper education so she resents you for being luckier than her. Secretly she hates you, but really she's sad because she knows she's not pretty enough to marry someone with money, so she'll be stuck working there in that life forever.

"I see it in her eyes."

"It's not my problem!" Rya shrieked angrily, as she sipped at a sugary, frothy latte with pink bits floating around in it. "Why do you say things like that when you know it makes me sad? I don't care about her or her horrible life."

"I say it because you don't care about her or her horrible life!" Silver explained, flashing a wry little smile. "I watch people and I understand them. People are actually very interesting if you take the time to listen to what they have to say. Understanding other people helps us to understand ourselves."

Rya frowned at her. "You don't understand me, or you wouldn't say horrible things to me. I buy you coffee every day and it's good for your popularity to be seen with me.

"I'm the number one lesbian in our school, you know?"

Silver shook her head at her. She said with a sigh, “You’ll never get it. I don’t know why I bother trying to explain it to you.”

“I don’t want it,” she grumbled assuredly. “You’ve been weird ever since you got that stupid job. What kind of an office is it you work in anyway?”

“It’s just an office,” Silver told her. “It’s nothing special.”

“Something about you changed since you got that job. You seem different somehow!” Rya narrowed her eyes and glared at her. Suddenly she broke into a beaming smile. “You like someone who works there.”

Silver looked up startled. “No I don’t!” she said defensively, but flushed red at the suggestion anyway, rather giving herself away.

Rya laughed. “Yes you do! There’s a man working there that you like. I knew it!” She clapped her hands excitedly, spilling her latte as it splashed out from the cup.

“I don’t like anyone,” she grumbled and turned away. She sipped at her coffee and frowned to herself, angry that Rya had been endowed with some sudden insight and was actually finally right about something. “I’ve got to go—I don’t want to be late to work.”

“Every second with this man counts!” Rya said playfully. “Is he handsome? Is he funny? Does he have a great personality? Is he, therefore, totally out of your league?”

Silver almost slipped up and protested that he wasn’t out of her league at all, but caught herself just in time. She drained the coffee with a loud slurp and tossed the plastic cup towards the dustbin. She paused momentarily to throw one last little glare her way. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Rya,” she said, almost angrily.

Rya smirked to herself and began rocking back and forth like an excited child. “Tomorrow I’ll have the prettiest nails in the whole school. You don’t just become the number one lesbian in school, you know. It takes work, dedication and effort.”

“And a psychotic personality disorder!” Silver added, snatching the keys to the scooter from a very practical bag. They were a small bunch clipped to a small black metal rod sharpened to a point. It was quite unladylike, and in that way, completely fitting.

“You’re just jealous,” Rya told her.

“Envious!” she corrected. For a moment, Silver assured herself that this simply wasn’t true. No part of her would want to be seated next to a pool, idly having her nails painted while sipping on cocktails and enjoying the sun. Well, perhaps a small part, if she was completely honest.

“Goodbye, Rya!”

The ride to work was a short one, but the traffic in town was chaotic, unpredictable and dangerous. Her scooter was a small automatic that required no great skill to manage. It was plain, a dark red-coloured thing that didn’t stand out in a crowd, and could easily melt away into the background.

She rode it like she stole it. She flung the throttle open and sped through the gaps, pushing herself to ride as fast as she could, weaving about violently. It was all good practice, she told herself.

The bike was whizzing along, and she stepped it up into oncoming traffic, flashing the lights as she went straight past a slow moving car, wringing every ounce of acceleration out of the thing. She felt the lightness in her chest, the flutter of adrenaline, the thrill of riding too fast, too dangerously.

It wasn’t just that it was her nature to drive this way, to take risks: it was something else. Nobody could beat her on these roads, nobody could get away. She could keep up with anyone and she took pride in that fact. While Rya was content with things she could pay others to do for her, Silver took pride in what she herself could do, in the things she actually achieved.

A person like Rya was proud of what she had: Silver was proud of what she was.

She flung the bike into a sharp right bend and went directly into a side road, heading the wrong way down a one way street. Other scooters wobbled to the side as she went directly at them, grinning to herself behind the smoked black visor of her helmet.

She slammed on the brakes, causing the cheap tyres to skip on the road, chattering a protest as the bike pulled up to an angry stop outside the office.

The engine automatically cut as she flicked down the metal stand, and she dropped the bike clumsily down to the side. She slammed the bars to the left and roughly locked the steering. She snapped off her helmet and hung it on the mirror, stepping away with a confident swagger to her walk. It was a confidence that had come to her recently, a strength the job had given her; or perhaps it had just helped her find in herself, as she preferred to think.

She pushed open the office door and stepped inside, smoothing down her slightly curly black hair and wriggling her shoulders to pull her top back into place.

The office was basic—incredibly and strikingly basic. It was a small place with half a dozen tatty old desks dotted around and a few locked cabinets. Two heads lifted to look at her, two sets of eyes fixed on her as she stepped inside.

“Afternoon,” she called out in polite greeting.

The two of them grunted at her and then looked back to their computers.

The youngest of the pair looked up over his monitor. “Edward was looking for you earlier. I think he’s got a job for you, something new, or something—I don’t know; he’s the boss, you should ask him.”

Silver went over to her desk and flicked through the pile of reports that had built up in her in-box. “Something new?” she said with interest.

He stood up and slid out from behind his desk. He grabbed a horribly thin plastic cup from the edge of his work-space. It was filled with a thin black liquid that had at least three cigarette butts floating around in it.

“Something came in. I don’t know what—I’ve got a full load this week,” he told her with unprofessional disinterest. He tipped the liquid out into a plant-pot, and then filled the cup with water from a cooler and drank it, even though it must have tasted appalling and was still a long way from clean. He didn’t even seem to notice, his sense of taste (and the plant) having died some time ago from his constant abuse.

“I don’t remember the last time I had a full week!” Silver scowled back at him. “What are you working on right now, Baz?”

He gasped as he finished off the water. Baz was somewhere around his mid-twenties and nothing mattered to him; nothing at all. It was as if there was something wrong with his brain. He just wasn’t emotionally capable of taking responsibility for anything. She had often wondered what had happened to make him like that; was he just born that way, or had some terrible dark thing happened to him that had twisted him into some kind of shallow idiot?

“I’ve got a missing person,” he said matter-of-factly. “Some girl left the coast last month heading for town and nobody has seen her since. She owed a lot of money, so I reckon she’s been hacked up and buried in the jungle. I hope so anyway, because I spent all day watching her cousin’s house yesterday and nothing happened at all, so I reckon she probably deserves it.”

Silver blinked at him. He probably didn't mean it, although perhaps he did. It was very difficult to tell with him, but she liked to hope for the best.

She turned to the other man, working studiously in the corner. "What about you, Marcus?" His desk was neat, tidy and orderly. The in-box was empty as it always was, and everything was where it should be.

"Infidelity," he said with a slightly weary sigh, but otherwise without showing any interest in talking with her. The others groaned along with him. "I've had three this week, all left for me to deal with, as usual."

Silver looked at him behind the monitor, the blue/white glow of the screen lighting his face. He was slim, almost gaunt, and his hair was trimmed short. He wore metal, wire-rimmed glasses, which she was convinced he didn't really need, and he always dressed as if he'd not quite finished dressing. If he wore a shirt, he had a way of making it look as if a tie was missing. If he wore a T-shirt, it looked as if he should finish it off with a hat.

Despite all that, his face was perfect. He seemed to glow with pure, raw sexual energy that only she seemed to be even remotely aware of. He looked like a film star somehow, some American actor taking the lead role in a movie. He didn't look exactly like any particular one of them, nor a combination of any she could think of. To her, he just looked perfect.

He was dedicated, totally committed to his work. He seldom drank, didn't smoke, ate carefully and didn't fit into the office at all. None of them really did, of course.

To her, he was perfection in human form, the only man she'd ever met that she really admired, but he was nearly thirty and made it quite clear that his interest in the people in the office would never extend beyond the office. He was quiet, careful and seemed to

deliberately avoid speaking with other people. He was like that with her most of all.

“Sorry you got all the infidelity,” Silver said, trying to sound sympathetic and slightly maternal. Instead, it came out sounding plain sarcastic. He looked up with his perfect clear blue eyes, blinked at her, and went back to his work with a huff.

She scolded herself for sounding insincere and tutted at herself for it. He flustered her. Something about him just made her awkward and clumsy.

“What did you get, Silver?” Marcus looked up once again and stared at her fixedly.

He rarely used her name, and hearing the sound of it coming over his lips made her heart flutter slightly, and she quickly turned away so he wouldn’t catch her as her face flushed. It was probably too late, of course. Marcus rarely missed anything.

She checked over the schedule from her in-box and groaned. “Four hours of watching a coffee shop to see if the owner comes in.”

Marcus and Baz exchanged glances. Baz grinned at her. “Lucky you. At least you can get a decent coffee on expenses for that. Yesterday I was sat outside one of those places that makes smoothies from fresh local fruit. I spent the whole morning in the toilet feeling as if a donkey had kicked me in the guts.”

He wasn’t wrong—at least she would be able to get a decent drink while she spent the entire afternoon doing nothing. The other bit was true too—there was only one toilet in the office and it smelled as if a rat had died in it all through the day before; quite a big rat, and one that had been sick for a very long time.

“It’s boring, though,” she protested weakly. “I didn’t become a private detective to sit around in coffee shops all day.”

Marcus and Baz looked at one another, both looking as if they were trying to work out a very confusing joke.

It was Marcus who spoke after a lengthy pause and he said with a confused frown, "But that is pretty much all we do. I've drunk so much coffee in the last six months that I actually think I'm getting chest pains."

Silver shrugged. "I know that, for a lot of the time, we are just sitting around drinking coffee and watching things, but I just wish it would be a bit more exciting sometimes."

Marcus seemed to be glaring at her. He peered out with his very serious eyes above the rims of his glasses. "What are you, 18 years old? I don't really think you should be doing as much detecting as you're actually already doing. I think things are quite exciting enough for someone your age."

Silver took moderate offence. He might be attractive, but he was going too far if he questioned her ability to do her job. "I've got just as much experience as you, and I can punch harder. Don't forget that," she told him, finding some inner strength to temporarily resist his charms. It was quite temporary and she flashed an awkward smile.

Baz laughed because it was widely known that she could punch with a frighteningly unnatural force. In fact, she was known around the office as a 'frighteningly unnatural force.'

Marcus just looked back to his computer and carried on clicking away on his keyboard as if none of this had happened.

"That told him," Baz said, running his hand over his head and fluffing up a pile of unruly light brown hair. "I think he actually might be too boring to be a private detective. I think he'd be happier selling insurance or maybe arranging small loans for people; ideally, boring people, I guess."

He looked over to her to join in the joke. She was annoyed at him enough to play along, but hesitated as she looked over at him.

She felt her face flushing red as she thought about just how cute he was. He was incredibly cute.

“He doesn’t watch enough black and white detective movies!” she said finally, stopping short of insulting him directly.

Marcus grumbled and looked up at them both. “Life isn’t like a movie, and it certainly isn’t like the old black and white detective movies that Edward is such a huge fan of. Some femme-fatale isn’t about to walk into this office and set us off on an exciting case that’s going to change our lives, you know. Mostly, we just hang around in coffee shops playing with our phones and regretting the bad decisions we made in our lives.”

“You never know, do you?” Baz told him sarcastically. He gestured to the door. Behind it was suddenly a world of possibility and truly anything could happen. They all looked at the door expectantly, as if it could open at any moment and a huge, massive, life-changing case could simply step through into their lives.

Suddenly, the door opened! Silver gasped, Marcus looked up sharply and Baz took a reflexive step backwards in surprise. There was an awed silence.

Edward walked in with a bottle of bleach and a brush. He looked around at the eyes staring raptly in his direction. He shrugged a little and held up the bleach. “Someone did terrible things to the toilet yesterday and it’s not my turn to clean it up. Whoever was late the most times this week is on toilet-duty.”

The silence turned to weary groans.

Chapter 3

Silver sat in the coffee shop, sipping at a lukewarm, wet cup of iced coffee. The ice had long since melted, flooding the coffee with water, taking the edge from the sharp, bitter taste. She tried to pace herself, taking slow, tiny sips, and taking as long as possible between them. She was on a four-hour watch to see if the owner of the coffee shop returned, and four hours crawled by at too slow a pace, especially for a teenager who was so full of caffeine and cynicism.

She knew nothing more than the few details of the case that were printed on the assignment sheet. She didn't need to know any more and maybe she was better off not knowing.

Edward always made sure she was handed a certain type of assignment, duties she could handle without threat, without requiring a level of maturity of which she might not yet be capable. While she told herself she could handle anything, the others maintained that they knew better about that. Still, no assignment came without risk and she accepted that they were just trying to protect her. In truth, she quite enjoyed it.

In fact, conventional wisdom told her that perhaps the simplest jobs carried the greatest danger. A genuine criminal discovered by a detective might make threats, but would likely act with some professionalism. They wanted less attention, not more, and would likely try to limit the problem by backing away from it. A husband discovered cheating could be a very different thing.

The file told her almost nothing, but at least she knew enough to suspect that his business partner was probably the one paying for her services. Why business partners would want to spy on each other was anyone's guess.

She sat, staring across the room at the door for a moment. Her mind wandered as she thought what might be the story behind

the job. Often they weren't told—they had their orders and they simply followed them. Other clients chose to offer more information. It was entirely their choice, of course. She was left with time to wonder about what really might be going on. To her, not knowing everything was the hardest part of the job: she always wanted to know more.

She absently toyed with her phone, imagining that she might be embroiled in some international mystery, some conspiracy that could bring down the government of a country. Perhaps they were spies, covering up a murder; perhaps this was industrial espionage to steal some new invention and beat the competition to the market? She sighed and reminded herself that all this was highly unlikely since she was just teenager watching for the owner of a low-end coffee shop.

She looked up sharply as the door opened with a ping. An electronic noise rung out as it swung open. Her mind filled with the pictures she'd seen in the files. Trying to look as if she wasn't interested at all, she began checking out the person coming through, comparing him to the profile images she'd been sent.

To her horror, it wasn't the man she was watching for at all—it was Rya. Her blood ran cold, a finger of dread crept up her spine and she stared transfixed at this awful spectacle, hoping against hope that she wouldn't be noticed.

"Silver!" she cried out quite loudly as she noticed her, beaming a happy smile across the room and waving wildly, hopping up and down on the spot like a puppy on Red Bull. "I thought you were too poor to have coffee in a nice place. I see you are still too poor to have your hair done properly or to buy nice clothes, but this is a great start."

"Rya!" she huffed, muttering to herself under her breath. She quickly glanced at her phone and noticed that she still had an hour

of observation to go before she could sign off. She was trapped, stuck there like a rat in a trap. All she could do was hope that Rya wasn't going to try to join her.

"I'll come and join you," Rya cried out excitedly. Hope rarely lasted long against the sheer weight of her crushing presence.

Silver grumbled under her breath. This was bad; she was on a case observing a subject, and Rya blended in about as well as disguising a pile of bricks by putting a hat on it.

"Rya..." she began to protest, wanting to explain that she was busy, but she quickly realised she couldn't. She was sitting alone in a coffee shop with her phone on the table and nobody else was around. She had no choice but to play along and hope Rya wouldn't notice anything was going on.

"What's going on?" Rya said way too loudly, as she made her way over. "I thought poor people had to have jobs or something. Aren't you meant to be in an office somewhere doing something boring?"

Silver glared at her but managed to wear a false smile. "They didn't need me this afternoon, so I came out for a coffee," she began. She was just about able to smile but she was churning with frustrated rage inside. "I just wanted to be on my own for a while somewhere peaceful and quiet." It wasn't the most subtle of hints.

"Great!" Rya enthused, dragging a metal-framed chair noisily across the tiled floor. "You can be alone with me. There are people around that would kill to spend time alone with me."

Silver just stared at her and somehow managed to keep that fake smile painted on her face. "There are people in this town who are prepared to kill not to, as well. If the two sides were to fight, the victory would be swift, painful and decisive."

"You love me!" she told her. Then she frowned, looked worried for a moment and added, "But you're not my type so I can

only love you back as a friend. This is the kind of love a young boy might have for a puppy, before it grows big enough to be boring and he arranges for daddy to drive to a secluded place and throw it out of a moving car. That never happened, by the way—at least, not officially.”

She smiled a bit more honestly. “That’s not going to be a problem, but I will be more cautious if you ever invite me to go on a long drive with you.”

Rya looked at her quite seriously and said in a firm voice, “A best friend! A big, cuddly best friend who doesn’t take their hair seriously.” She looked her up and down and was definitely sneering. “Or her clothes. Or her smell.”

Silver looked up. Her professionalism kept her alert and she noticed every movement behind the counter, just in case anyone came in through a staff entrance or any other door that she wasn’t aware of. A waitress wandered around behind the counter and a low sound of someone laughing came from the kitchen. There was no sign that anything had changed.

“...Or her nails.”

“Do you really think of me as big and cuddly?” she asked, beginning to frown. For some reason, that had struck a chord. Rya nodded her head and smiled. “Very big but not really that cuddly.”

“Nice!” she huffed. It could have been worse, she thought to herself. Rya was bad but she was used to her. At least it was just her, and nobody else, that she had to deal with.

“Tara and Cara are joining me. They’ll be here any moment. It will be just like at school only nobody will be doing any work,” she said excitedly.

“So exactly like school then!” Silver said with a sarcastic drone.

Rya nodded but the finer points of humour tended not to hit the mark with her. She was more of a 'falling over on a banana-skin' sort of girl than a 'sophisticated use of sarcasm' person. As nobody was crashing to the floor on discarded pieces of fruit, she wasn't currently laughing.

Of all the people to join them, it had to be those two, Tara and Cara. They were possibly the most empty and hopeless people in the entire universe. These were two people who shared virtually the same name, as they didn't have enough personality to bother having one of their own.

"Why are you hanging out with them now?"

Rya smirked, and then looked at her with a confused frown. "Tara is hot, and Cara is rich. If they were one person, they'd be perfect for me. I can't decide which one I want to date. The shallow part of me says I should date Tara because looks are important to me, but the deeper part thinks I should date Cara for the money. You see, there are hidden depths to me."

"Yeah. You're like a sewer!" Silver nodded, keeping a completely straight face.

"Ha!" she gasped in surprise. "You think I'm just a gold-digger?"

Silver shook her head and told her very seriously, "I don't think you even have a shovel."

Rya looked at her and narrowed her eyes. "You are going to behave, right?"

Silver narrowed her eyes back at her. "No."

"I don't mean behave like you always do. I mean you have to behave well," she explained, since it obviously wasn't clear enough the first time. "I might want to date one of these girls so you have to try to be nice and not be...," she thought about it for a moment, "... a total bitch, as usual."

Silver just looked at her for a moment. She said sourly, "I can't promise to try."

"Silver," she snapped. "I want your promise that you won't be a total bitch today, or else you'll have to leave my table."

She frowned and said, actually a little confused, "It's my table."

"Promise!" she hissed at her.

Silver cast an eye to the counter where nothing much of anything was happening. She had to calm things down before they started drawing attention to themselves. Grudgingly, she gave in and said, "Alright, I promise to try not to be a total bitch."

Rya put her hands together in front of her, bounced in delight in her chair and gave her a bright angelic grin. "That's all I ask. See, you can be a little bit reasonable when you try really, really, really hard."

"Really, really, really, really hard," she corrected with a wry little smirk. "But I can't promise that the next time you say something utterly stupid, I'll be able to stop myself from reacting."

Rya seemed confused. "I don't say stupid things. I make sharp observations about hair and clothing and poor people, and why they're probably a bad thing."

Silver sat back and regarded her carefully. "Poor people are a bad thing?" she asked, just to make sure she had heard that right. "Is that what you just said? I just want to be absolutely clear that I'm understanding you correctly."

"No!" Rya laughed at the very suggestion. "I said they were probably a bad thing. I can't say I've actually put much thought into it since I don't care about poor people at all. I can't help thinking it might be better for them if they simply didn't exist. That would mean there'd be even more money for those of us who are already rich, so it seems like a win-win for everyone."

“But then who would bring you your coffee? Who would do your nails, and who would you moan about all the time?” Silver asked, appealing to whatever sanity might be buried in there somewhere.

She shrugged to herself. For a moment there was a tiny flicker of an expression on her face that might suggest something was going on in her mind; perhaps an idea had struck her. She said, “I guess you could do it.”

“I’m not... What?” Silver was speechless.

“Well, I’d pay you, of course, because I’m rich and you’re poor. Mind you, you’d be gone, too, if all the poor people disappeared. This might actually be a serious problem. I can’t imagine a government minister would come to my house and collect my garbage,” she said thoughtfully, or at least her version of it.

“Rya, I’m not poor. My mother runs an NGO. My family has plenty of money,” she explained using short sentences and very simple words.

“You’re not poor? Why didn’t you say? Then that’s great so, when all the poor people disappear, you can bring my coffee and do my nails! It’s perfect.”

It was hard to imagine that there was a brain in there somewhere, but biologically there had to be since she was clearly still capable of making sounds.

“I tell you all the time, you just never listen, or remember, what people say to you,” she reminded her.

“It’s probably not that I don’t remember: it’s probably more that I don’t care,” she explained with a sweet smile. Silver thought that, to be fair to Rya, it probably was exactly that.

Silver huffed at her. “Talking to you is like watching Korean drama. I feel as if I actually lost 10 IQ points in the last two minutes.”

She grinned widely and said breezily, “I like Korean drama.”

“Wow!” Silver said in mock surprise. “You’re making my points for me now. You really don’t need me at all anymore, do you?”

Rya shrugged, “I like to keep you close by for when all the poor people vanish.”

“Of course you do.” Silver smiled in spite of herself.

“But there’s one thing I don’t understand!” Rya said thoughtfully.

“Just one thing?” she said sarcastically. “I saw your last grade scores. There doesn’t seem to be much of anything you do understand.”

“Silver. If you’re not poor, then why do you work? I mean, what’s the point of working if you don’t absolutely have to?” she asked.

Silver looked at her and then looked away. “I like to work,” she said dismissively. “And what I do with the money I earn for myself is my own business.”

Chapter 4

Silver slipped away to quickly use the toilet. She had instructed Rya to watch out for the boss, since she'd heard that he made the best coffee. She was confident that selfish motivation would ensure that Rya did her job adequately, especially since all she had to do was be awake and in possession of a pair of eyes.

She checked her phone: there was still almost an hour to go before the observation finished and she would be free to leave. Another hour stuck with Rya, and her endless opinions about poor people and how they were probably a bad thing, lay before her like a road mostly made out of holes.

As she came back towards the table, what she saw made her heart sink. Tara and Cara were sitting there, staring blankly with an equally vapid smile painted on each of their faces. She had hoped against all reason that they might not actually show up.

They weren't bad people. They were just equally dull and so oddly alike that everyone thought they were sisters, twins, clones or somehow shared a single brain. Tara was quite pretty but Cara, despite looking strangely similar, was quite plain. Her nose was too flat, her eyes were too far apart, she was too big, too small, too rounded, too pointy and just plain wrong. There was nothing really about her that made her less attractive: it was just that the individual parts didn't quite add up to a very pleasant whole.

Tara's parts did. She was pretty all over and was quite lovely until you spoke to her, and then you'd quickly discover that she had the depth of a puddle and the warmth of a Burger-King chip. If Rya genuinely thought that poor people should really vanish off the face of the earth, then perhaps Tara would happily run them all over in a car first, and Cara would probably be happy to pay for the petrol. Perhaps they belonged together after all.

Why exactly Rya would want to date one of them was anybody's guess. Everything she'd seen suggested that they came as a pair, so perhaps she'd have to date them both, Silver mused. She reminded herself to try and be nice, if only so as not to draw too much attention to them all. She walked over and sat back down in her chair, and luckily, nobody seemed to notice her.

"Hi," she said, trying just to be polite, as she couldn't quite bring herself to quite manage to appear friendly. Tara and Cara turned to look. They stared at her for a moment and both broke into a smile that was as false as their nails.

"Hi," Cara droned back. "I don't know your name, I don't think. I'm Cara."

"Yeah, we share a class together," Silver told her. She frowned to herself. "We have done for two years now."

Tara giggled to herself, "I'm not good with names."

"But I'm not... What?" Silver mumbled and looked over as the explanation from one seemed to be coming out of the other one.

"She's Silver," said Rya. "It's not her real name. It's her surname, or her father's surname, or something. Whatever it is, she doesn't like her real name and makes everyone call her that... Poor people are crazy, I don't know."

"Silver, this is Tara, she's pretty; and this is Cara, she's rich. Tara and Cara, this is Silver. She's neither of those things and has messy hair. She hits really hard though and sometimes I annoy people so it's nice to have her around."

Silver opened her mouth to speak but Rya just carried on, without seeming to have the need to stop for air.

"That's how we met, actually. A boy was picking on me back in Grade 3 and she punched him in the face and broke his glasses. He cried like a flushed toilet but she told him that if he told his mum she'd break his thumbs. Also, he'd have to admit he got beaten up

by a girl, which he didn't want to do but, frankly, I think he was more interested in keeping his thumbs working.

"I bought her a coffee to say thanks for beating up the boy, who really, I had a crush on. To be honest I didn't like him any more, after seeing him crying and bleeding all over the place. I think it might have had something to do with why I decided to just give up on men and become a lesbian. Not with her, though, because she has hairy knuckles. I mean if I'm going to be a lesbian I might as well date girls who act like girls and don't go around punching people in the face."

When Rya explained something, it usually posed more questions than it answered.

"Oooo," Tara squeaked excitedly. "I wish I had someone to beat people up for me."

"I can ask my driver to beat people up," Cara said with sudden enthusiasm. "He shot someone once and my Daddy found out, so now he has to work for us for hardly anything. It makes me feel much safer knowing that my driver might shoot someone for me one day."

Silver just sat there taking all this in. Eventually she said, "I don't just go around punching people. Rya and I are actually friends now, even though she's a terrible person."

"Just friends!" Rya snapped suddenly. "Buying her coffee is a bit of a tradition now, even though she rarely punches people anymore."

"Coincidentally, I'm actually thinking about punching someone right now," Silver said sweetly.

The waitress appeared with a tray of iced somethings. Silver's was the usual no-frills black coffee over ice, while the three others were drinking creamy, frothy, needlessly vibrant mixtures of sugar and chemicals. Silver winced at the sight of them and noticed, quite

bitchily, that all of the other girls were irritatingly quite a fair bit thinner than her.

“I got you another coffee since yours was finished,” Rya told her. “I’m trying the caramel and white-chocolate latte with whipped cream and cashew nut.” She took a long draw through a wide green plastic straw and smiled. She carried on grinning and put down the clear plastic cup to the table. Bluntly, and without the grin pausing for a moment, she said, “It’s crap!”

“I had it before,” said Cara.

“It was OK,” Tara said.

Silver just looked at them for a moment and wondered what you might end up with if you somehow mixed them together in a gigantic blender and then let them set in a fridge overnight. The best you could hope for might be a quite pretty boring sludge whose driver might shoot you one day. She didn’t feel it would still make up one whole proper person.

“So,” Rya began, as if she was about to be manipulative and cunning. “Cara, I hear you’re rich and Tara is pretty. I’m both of those things. Perhaps we should date.”

“Date?” said Tara.

“I’m not a lesbian,” Cara said.

“That’s perfect!” Silver said with a sarcastic grin. “Nor is Rya. She’s just scared of dating men in case they try to do anything.”

Cara frowned curiously and seemed to be thinking deeply about this. Finally, she said, “That’s a good point!”

From behind an equally curious frown, Tara added, “I dated a man once, and he tried to do something.”

“What?” Rya said in sudden shock. She leant forward, her eyes wide with expectant anticipation at what awful tale might follow.

Tara looked around at the others and said slowly, a note of disgust to her voice, "He tried to teach me to drive."

Silver huffed angrily.

"It was quite bad," Cara explained. "She crashed his car into a wall. She tried to make the owner of the wall pay for the damages, but he refused and blamed her. In the end it was all just a terrible mess."

"This is why you have a driver," Tara said sadly.

Cara agreed sadly, "This is why I have a driver."

Silver sipped at some coffee. It was shallow, empty and without substance, much like this quite awful conversation. To try and get things back on track, she said, "So you're not lesbians then; you're not going to date Rya?"

"I don't know," Cara rubbed her chin.

Tara frowned thoughtfully. "What would dating Rya actually involve?"

Silver looked at them both again. She was quite well-versed in human behaviour, but that didn't seem to apply here.

Rya sat back and happily explained, "Well I'm a proud lesbian, but I haven't actually done any lesbian things except hold hands with a girl, and that felt a bit weird if I'm totally honest. I'm looking to take things quite slowly, I suppose. I quite like the idea of us dating as Cara is quite rich and Tara is quite pretty. Then people could be jealous of me for two different reasons."

"Both of us?" Cara and Tara said together.

Silver wished she could just leave, but there was something quite compelling about this. It was like driving past an accident and slowing down to take a good, long look. She asked, "You want to date both of them?" Silver wasn't shocked exactly, or even surprised that she'd thought of it, but the boldness of her approach and sheer stupidity of the idea was quite impressive.

Rya grinned widely and nodded, seeming like she was quite pleased with herself.

Tara and Cara looked at one another. They said nothing: they didn't twitch, their faces never seemed to move, but something happened; between the two of them some information had to have been exchanged. They looked back and gave small, measured shrugs.

"Sure," said Tara.

"Why not?" said Cara.

"Why not?!" Silver mumbled to herself under her breath.

"Where do I start?"

"Excellent!" Rya clapped her hands together excitedly. "Let's celebrate tonight. Your driver can pick me up around 8, and you can take me somewhere nice and buy me dinner."

Cara seemed quite happy at the suggestions, and Tara said non-committally, "Sure."

Silver noticed a flutter of movement out the back. She sat up straight, grabbed her phone, and began looking as if she was playing with it as she set the camera to take a picture, just in case. She peered out through an open door behind the counter that gave a small, but tantalising, view to the back. She was hoping to see a face appear, hoping that the target might show. If he did, and if she could get that shot of him, then she could leave the shop, and this ridiculous conversation, behind. None of the others paid any attention to her, as she knew they wouldn't.

"So do we have to do lesbian stuff now?" Cara said thoughtfully, casting a look at Tara and then at Rya.

"You mean you two?" Rya raised an eyebrow as Tara and Cara looked at one another curiously.

"Yes," Tara agreed with a nod.

“Without me, when I’m not there?” Rya cocked her head to one side curiously as she slowly thought the matter through.

“Yes,” Cara nodded.

Rya smiled. “That will be fine. I somehow feel that that would make me more of a lesbian.”

“And no less of an idiot,” Silver added with a sigh from behind her phone. Nothing happened behind the counter, no face appeared. Off to the left she heard a door closing, somewhere out the back. Perhaps there was an exit she didn’t know about.

Tara and Cara looked at one another and smiled.

She quickly looked around. The shop was glass-fronted, and all the customer entrances were far from the counter. The shop was on the corner of a long row of shops. If someone left, they couldn’t go out to the left. If there was an exit, it had to be the other side. Determined to get a shot, she quickly excused herself and pretended she had a call.

She slipped from her seat and made her way to the door, hoping that she might catch whoever had left outside the shop and snap their picture. She held her phone pressed up to her face and glanced around, looking for whomever it might be, trusting that a teenage girl playing with her phone would go unnoticed.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw a slightly older than middle-aged man walking purposefully out from an alley. It wasn’t exactly how she’d imagined him, but it looked enough like the man in the picture for her to take a chance. She held up the phone and snapped a series of shots, all the while smiling and talking inanely as if she was on a call to a boyfriend. Nobody ever noticed a teenage girl chatting on a phone, even if the phone was pointing its camera lens at you, and the thing was making clicking noises. She was as effectively invisible as she would have been if she had real super-powers.

With a smile on her face, she made her way back inside, gratified that this whole miserable afternoon would last no longer than the last half of a cup of iced coffee.

She sat down to find the three of them chatting, and realised they hadn't even missed her, perhaps not even noticed she had left at all.

"My Mum," she explained with an awkward little smile, holding up the phone before laying it back down on the table.

Rya looked at her and grinned. "I didn't think it was your boyfriend, or the hot guy at work you have a huge crush on. Sorry, you're just not that interesting."

She groaned, "How come you can barely remember your own name, but you didn't forget that?"

"I don't know how these things work!" Rya shrugged. She really didn't.

She gulped down the last of her coffee in one go. "I'm going to go. You three have fun tonight."

"I'd invite you but... You know!" Rya smiled a sympathetic smile and tutted to herself as if she was thinking about something sad that she had no control over.

Silver frowned at her and said grumpily, "What?"

"You know..." Rya said softly, drawing out the words far longer than necessary. She had a sarcastically supportive expression on her face and tutted to herself, like someone who had decided that nothing could be done but who would have helped if he could.

Silver shook her head.

"I just think you'd spoil it for me," Rya said. "You know what you're like!"

Silver stared blankly, mystified at just how on earth she managed to function, and a little annoyed at herself for allowing her

to function around her. Clearly in Grade 3 the wrong person had been punched in the face.

“I’d hate that,” she said, pretending that it really made any difference to her.

“I know,” Rya said very sadly. “And also, it will be somewhere full of very rich and pretty people and your hair looks as if it grew out the top of a coconut and you have the fashion sense of a homeless person. I’m really only thinking of you, you know?”

“I’m so lucky to have a friend like you,” she said sarcastically.

Being largely immune to sarcasm and subtlety, Rya replied, “Yes, I know.”

Chapter 5

Edward sat himself on the edge of her desk and looked at the picture, and then looked back at her once more. She could always tell when he was troubled by something, since he made no great effort to hide it.

Usually, and frequently, he did the opposite of that. Once, Baz had accidentally left the lens-cover on a camera and had taken a dozen shots of a subject that were returned entirely black. That hadn't gone down particularly well, and there was a great deal of shouting, some threatening to shove the cap into various bodily orifices it had no chance of fitting into, and then a long, eerie silence about which Baz would never speak again.

He looked again, frowned, and then smiled. Then he smiled and frowned at the same time, and said, as if he were delivering the worst possible news: "Well, we can't really use it. I know you did your job, but we needed a picture of him inside the business. The client could argue that this is just a street and nowhere near the coffee shop. He could argue that the man might have just been walking by. It's just not enough, I'm afraid."

He rubbed his temples wearily. He was a direct person, which was a polite way of saying he was usually blunt and often aggressive. He'd always been very supportive of her and usually managed to keep his brashness under control, but she could tell she'd annoyed him this time.

What was worse was that his argument was perfectly reasonable, and she already knew that the picture wouldn't hold up in any court of law, anywhere.

"But perhaps the client just wants to know if he visited the shop? This picture does sort of prove that he did," she suggested

weakly. There was no escaping from the fact that she must have missed him coming in. The mistake was on her.

Edward sighed to himself in exasperation. “Well, this is the usual problem when the client doesn’t bother telling us why they want evidence and what they want to use it for. He paid for a block of 10 hours of observation over three days. We’ll try again tomorrow and hope to get a better picture somehow. Don’t worry about it this time.”

Silver sighed. It sounded as if he was questioning her ability, and worse, she felt as if she’d let him down. “You want me to get a picture of him inside the shop? He only seems to visit briefly, and doesn’t do any work. Even if I get a shot of him inside, it wouldn’t be proof he’s working there—only that he went inside.”

There was no refuting her argument and Edward didn’t try. He looked away and said, “We’re just paid to observe. All we have to do is cover the building for 10 hours and get a picture of him if he turns up. You’ve done your job so far, and you’ve actually done well. I doubt the others would have even thought to get a shot of him leaving from the side entrance, and I appreciate that you’ve tried. It’s just that it’s not what we were asked to do. I’ll include the picture in the report but, really, I need more. I doubt anyone could have done any better than you did.”

Marcus looked up from his computer, and made a slight grumbling noise in protest. “I would have!”

Baz was behind his rubbish-strewn desk where his feet were resting while he leaned back in a chair that could collapse at any moment. He laughed and said in agreement, “Not me. I would have tried to get a date with the hot waitress though.”

Silver glared at him and narrowed her eyes. “Always the professional, Baz! I don’t think there were any hot waitresses.”

Baz looked sad and shook his head. "This is why I prefer bars to coffee shops. After a few beers all the waitresses are hot."

Edward frowned at him as sternly as he could, which wasn't actually particularly sternly, but he was trying. "You know you're not allowed to drink on duty, right?" he said.

Baz just shrugged, smiled, and carried on playing with his phone from behind his desk, which was apparently under all the rubbish, somewhere. He stretched himself out backwards, still grinning, and wiped a mop of messy hair from his eyes.

Silver thought to herself and then said with sudden confidence, "I can get a picture. Leave it with me!"

"Well, the job is just to watch. The picture is secondary. If he doesn't show up, then that's what we put in the report." His tone was a little firmer than perhaps he'd intended. He softened and added, "But if anyone can do it, then I'm sure you can."

Marcus looked up again. "You know I'm the lead field-agent in this company?" he grumbled. "She's just a teenage girl that blundered into this job by accident while looking for part time work as an office assistant."

Silver looked over and just blinked as her brain reeled in surprise, trying to find just the right thing to say. What wasn't the right thing was absolutely nothing, and that was all that came out of her mouth. He was so damn pretty that it was tough to be mad at him, but right now he didn't look like the perfect future boyfriend. He just looked like a man whose nose hadn't been broken and she was filled with a sudden urge to fix that problem for him.

She found her voice and managed to say, "Marcus, I just do my best out there, you know?"

"I don't blame you," Marcus told her, sneering and looking away, turning back to his computer. It seemed as if he couldn't even be bothered to make eye contact as he spoke. "I blame Edward for

hiring a kid to do a grown-up job, and sending you out into potentially dangerous situations. I mean, what kind of company pays a teenage girl to spy on people?"

Edward stood up, straightened his back, and glared at Marcus for a moment. He cast a supportive glance at Silver and then smirked to himself. "Marcus, you're on toilet duty today. I need that toilet clean enough to eat my lunch out of, and you're in the office all day doing research, so the job is yours."

Marcus never looked up from the computer, but grunted to himself and seethed quietly.

Baz just sat grinning at him. "I had a curry last night, Marcus, an authentic Indian one. It's really not sitting right, and I don't think it'll be pretty when it makes its way out. Sorry about that."

Marcus grumbled but said some more nothing.

"If there's any way to do it, I'll get the picture," Silver told him assuredly. She couldn't allow herself to let him down again.

Edward looked back at her and smiled. "I know," he said. "And don't worry about what Marcus said. You're doing fine; you're a good field agent and one day you'll be running this office and I'll retire to the provinces, buy a little farm and raise chickens and pigs." He smiled as if his mind had drifted off to some far off place. She smiled to herself: his mind often did that and less often did anything else.

But with thoughts of pigs, and Edward raising them, instead of forcing slices of them into his mouth at breakfast, she wasn't quite sure what to make of his slightly odd ramblings. She made the tactical decision to say nothing about it and instead focus on the real world around them.

In the real world, Edward grabbed up a bunch of files and began heading towards his office. The unit was quite small. There was only a large reception area and a small office behind it, which

Edward had claimed as his own. If clients visited, they spoke in there, but that was very rare. Most of their communication was done online, and in some rare instances, they met in coffee-shops somewhere nicely anonymous. The clients preferred it that way and so did Edward, since it meant they didn't have to hire an actual cleaner.

She got up from her desk, followed him into the office and said conversationally, "What are you working on right now?"

Edward smiled weakly and chuckled to himself. He had shown that he was a man who appreciated curiosity and he had fostered it in her. He had done a lot to support her in the time she'd spent there, acting as something of a mentor, if not a particularly good one.

"I have several ongoing cases I'm working on," he told her. "I've got this missing person case I've been working on for six months. We're getting nowhere with that, but the client pays and I don't argue with clients who pay."

She smiled back and let him continue.

"I've also got this coffee-shop thing. I don't know why we're tracking the guy. It's just yet another case where we know next-to-nothing as usual. I got you covering the shop, but I've got freelancers covering the other places he might go. We don't know who he is yet but once we get a name and a trace on him, we'll build up a dossier. I think that's what the client wants. Who knows? I only know it pays well."

Edward tossed the heavy files onto the edge of his desk and they slammed down hard, kicking up a layer of sandy dust that always seemed to cover everything. He rubbed his temples again. "I've not slept," he explained with a smile that she took to mean that the situation would need to be rectified very soon.

"Can I help?" she asked.

He shook his head. "You're a good agent, one of the best I've had, but you have limits. I can't send you to a bar to watch a seedy client all night. You're too young and you're a girl. You'd stick out like a sausage in a vegetarian lasagne. I used Baz last time, but he's not terribly reliable when I send him on all night watch anywhere that sells alcohol and is filled with pretty girls."

She understood only too well. "Marcus then?"

"I need him on the research," he said with a sigh, "He's good in the field, but he's even better on the computers. I can't spare him right now. The sad fact is that despite running the company, right now I'm the most expendable agent we have!" He chuckled to himself but there wasn't much humour to it.

Silver flashed him a supportive smile. "Can I at least get you a coffee?" she suggested.

Edward smiled back, closed his eyes, grinned, and nodded at her slowly. "Oh yes!"

When she'd been very young, Silver's mother had been quite a traditional woman who would never have dreamed of marrying a foreign man. She'd been a shy, retiring young thing when she'd met her American father. They had dated for some time, so the story went, after meeting in a local shop where she sold him bottled water every day. She had learned enough English to get by and they slowly struck up a friendship.

He'd been living in the country for some time and had many contacts. He'd paid for her to go to school to improve her language skills and eventually put her on a path towards running an NGO, a charity organisation to bring education to those who couldn't afford it. But he had left eventually, as men often did, leaving a hole in all of their lives. It was a wound that had never quite managed to heal.

“Eat your rice!” she scolded in excellent English. They spoke only English at home, even though they were all fully bilingual.

Silver pushed the food around her plate with a fork. She just wasn’t hungry. She found herself preoccupied with the problem of the photograph that she’d missed at work. She knew she’d let Edward down, even though she’d actually gone beyond the rules of the job in trying. She told herself that nobody could have done any better, even Edward himself. But while all this might be true, she still felt like she’d come up short. He’d done so much for her, really believed in her when nobody else would, even when she didn’t believe in herself.

She wouldn’t even be in the job if it wasn’t for him. She’d still be cleaning up the office and managing spreadsheets, which was still better than scrubbing the toilets and trying to keep Baz’s desk tidy. Anything was better than trying to keep Baz’s desk tidy!

“I’m not hungry, Mum,” she told her with a sigh.

“You’re too fat anyway!” her little sister, Marita, said happily. She sat staring at her older sister with a wicked little smile. She was thirteen, and probably wouldn’t make it to fourteen if she kept it up.

Silver glared back at her. “You know, we’ve got the same genes. I was skinny at your age, too, and looked just like you, except my nose was nicer.”

Marita looked at her angrily and flashed a sideways glance at her mother. “That’s not true?” she said.

Her mother nodded solemnly. “And you eat far more sweets than Silver ever did. You’ll be lucky if you’ve got any teeth left by the time you’re her age. I might even have to get the doors widened, or else you could end up sleeping outside on two mattresses stitched together.”

Silver grinned at her, forgetting for a moment all about the world of private detectives, capturing evidence, school quizzes and

the politics of dating. For just a fleeting moment, she was just a big sister annoying her little sibling. She said, with a wicked grin, “And you’re not as smart as me either which means you’ll have to marry rich if you don’t want to end up collecting tin-cans at the side of the road to make a living.”

Marita grimaced and then frowned angrily back at her. She turned to her mum and asked, “I’m smarter than Silver, aren’t I, Mum?”

She shook her head firmly. “No, you’re not. You’re doing poorly in your studies. She always did really well, especially in English.”

Marita looked deflated but then put on a more rebellious facade, crossing her arms over her chest defiantly. “I’m not going to collect tin-cans at the side of the road!”

“Of course not!” their mother said firmly. “I can probably get you a job in my NGO. Maybe you can clean up the floors, scrub out the toilets? You don’t need good grades to do that, so you should be able to manage.”

She looked angry for a moment and crossed her arms tighter, pouted, and sat staring at her empty plate in silence.

Her mother gave Silver a little wink. “And how is school going?”

She shrugged. “It’s fine. Mr Whitely isn’t as good a teacher as we had last year, but I’m getting straight ‘A’ grades as usual. I’m expecting a high C in maths but I’m working on it. I might be able to do better.”

Her mother nodded as if that was satisfactory. Her tone darkened as she asked, “And your work?”

Silver grimaced to herself. Her mother didn’t approve of her taking a part time job, and many arguments had arisen from that

subject. She said, "It's going well. As you know, it's just office work, but I'm learning a lot and have plenty of free time for my studies."

"Your studies are more important," she said firmly leaving no room for argument or disagreement.

She huffed and looked straight up to her. "That's why I put my studies first."

"You don't need that job, Silver," she said after a lengthy pause. "Next year is your last year of high-school. You should be entirely focused on that. You don't need the money: you have your allowance. I support the idea of you working, but I think it can wait until after your national exams."

"I can manage," she said simply.

"And what do you do with this money?" she asked sternly. She pursed her lips and glared at her accusingly. "What does a young girl like you want with money anyway?"

"I'm saving it," she said, looking away, not comfortable with lying to her mother. She put down her fork and said respectfully, but with a certain amount of force, "I'm finished now. Thank you for the meal. I have homework to attend to now."

Her mother nodded, clearly not satisfied that everything had gone her way, but measuring what small victory there might be available to grasp against the ferocity of the battle she would have to fight in order to win it. "Thank you. You may go."

Marita glared at her angrily. "I've got homework too, and I don't want any cake tonight."

Her mother gave her a knowing smile and said, "If you do all of your homework then you can have some fruit before bed."

She'd somehow managed to lose her own fight by winning it. "OK."

Chapter 6

The staff in coffee shops never noticed anything suspicious about having the same person sit in them day after day. Customers came and went, appearing briefly and vanishing just as quickly as they arrived. Sometimes, they might become a regular, but just as often they might never appear again.

They were places that people went sometimes to be alone or just to think. The staff would never look twice if a person were to sit for hours just staring at the walls or to quickly drink a cup of tea and leave.

After school was behind her, Silver made her way to the same shop, the same one as the day before, so that she could begin another block of observation. She was booked in for four hours, but she might cut it down to three, if it was clear that nothing was happening, and put the extra hour onto the next day. She parked her tidy little scooter outside the shop in an alcove in the road that served for people to leave their vehicles. A very old, very dark man with sun-damaged skin came over, dressed in a dark blue uniform, topped off with a little cap. It had bright badges and medals stitched on with the name of his security company emblazoned across them. He smiled and flashed her a set of chipped yellowed teeth as he handed her a ticket that had spent some time screwed up in his pocket. She watched for a moment as the withered, tired old man clipped the stub to her bike, his hands shaking a little from his advancing years.

People like him came up from the provinces with no education, no skills and no abilities. They took what work they could get, making just enough money for a subsistence lifestyle, earning enough for somewhere to sleep and enough to eat for the day. To some, it was better than nothing.

Her mother's NGO was trying to change that, but real change came hard and was still generations away.

She smiled back at him and said, "What's your name?"

He looked up at her surprised, and then nervous, as if he must have done something wrong. He stammered back very respectfully, "My name is Lay." His eyes widened for a moment.

She was quite pale, pale enough to be taken for a foreigner, and it often surprised people when she spoke their own language fluently. Not many people would have taken the time to ask him his name, still fewer if there was no problem to be sorted out.

"Thank you for looking after my bike, Lay," she said with a polite nod. "I'm sure you'll take good care of it." She smiled and walked past back up to the shop door. His eyes followed her and his face broke into a wide, happy smile that lit up in his eyes.

When she left she would return the ticket with a small tip, which the people in his position often relied on to get by. It was the least she could do when she had more than enough for herself.

The coffee shop was reasonably good. The coffee tasted better than most, but still had an odd, slightly sickly after-taste to it. Many used boiled tap-water which never quite tasted right, but this one made an extra effort and used filtered water, delivered daily in huge plastic containers. She had seen them load the machine with fresh beans from a silver foil-sealed bag, and so she knew they were of a decent quality. If she had to be stranded all afternoon in a coffee shop, then there were far worse places to be stuck.

The door chimed as she opened it and the staff looked up expectantly and leapt into a rousing chorus of greetings that was absolutely unwelcome. She smiled back awkwardly and asked, "Can I get an iced Americano, with no sugar, please?"

A girl behind the counter nodded and smiled back respectfully, flustering around awkwardly while making a huge effort

to be as polite as humanly possible, and then go at least two steps beyond that.

She looked over to the table she had sat in before, the one giving the best view behind the counter. Her heart skipped a beat. At the table sat Rya, grinning at her and giving her a friendly, but exaggerated, little wave.

“Oh no!” she muttered under her breath. Rya held up an iced coffee and rattled it around, making it quite clear that it was for her. She looked to the waitress and said, “I’m sorry. Please cancel that. My friend is here already and got me a coffee. Thank you.”

The waitress thanked her profusely and made a huge effort to melt back into the scenery, as if she wasn’t a person at all.

Silver went over and asked, without any pretence at being polite about it, “What are you doing here?”

Rya grinned at her. “I come here a lot; my Daddy likes this place. I thought you’d be here today. You said you didn’t want a coffee so I knew you were going out for one after school. You also didn’t tell me where you were going and you always tell me where you’re going, so I knew you didn’t want me to know, and if you didn’t want me to know then it had to be somewhere that I knew as well.”

Silver sat down and looked quite impressed. “You worked all that out for yourself? On your own?”

Rya nodded proudly. “I did. I’m not as stupid as I look, or as you say I am, or Mr Whitley says I am, or my Mum.”

She snatched up the coffee and grumbled at her. She had no choice but to make the best of it. “I just wanted some time alone to do my homework away from the noise at home,” she lied but was happy that is sounded fairly convincing. “You’re noisier than the noise at home.”

“And I wanted someone to ask me about how my date went last night with my new girlfriends.”

Silver sipped at the coffee. She scolded herself for letting Rya get the upper hand on her. It was bad enough that anyone could have figured out where she'd be, but it seemed far worse that it was Rya. She felt as if she'd been outwitted by a small child that eats paint.

“Go on then!” she told her. There was no escaping it: she was going to hear every sordid detail and she knew it. She braced herself.

“It went great!” she exclaimed happily. “We didn't do any lesbian things like kissing girls or holding hands. We just had a very expensive meal and Cara paid for it.”

“I'm happy for you,” Silver told her sarcastically. Would that be all there was to say? She could only hope.

“Well, they did lesbian things,” Rya frowned and looked as though she was reliving her surprise over what she'd seen in the back of the car. “They kissed a lot and held hands a lot too. Hands went up skirts and there was a lot of moaning. It was all a little bit awkward if I'm absolutely honest.”

Silver was surprisingly unsurprised by all this. “I'm less happy for you now,” she noted dryly. “So they're proper lesbians now? You actually turned them into proper lesbians and then just sat there watching? I presume this wasn't in the restaurant?”

Rya rolled her eyes. “I wasn't really watching. I played with my phone mostly and tried to keep out of the way. At one point I chatted with the driver. It turns out the person he shot was his ex-employer and he killed him for taking advantage of his criminal past, but Cara's dad doesn't know that part. I don't think he's a very nice man, and it's probably not a very good idea to piss him off.”

“So a great date, according to you, is when your two latest girlfriends make out in front of you while you play with your phone

and chat with some guy who killed his last boss? Am I following this correctly?"

Rya nodded and smiled. "Yeah, it was great. So long as I don't have to do anything and no hands are going up my skirt, I'm happy."

"You may be the world's worst lesbian!" Silver told her.

"Or the world's best!" she said and held up a finger as she made her point.

"No!" she said firmly. "I'm actually not sure exactly what you are, but it's somewhere near the polar opposite of best."

Rya narrowed her eyes, huffed and said, demonstrating that there was something going on behind her eyeballs, even if just for a tiny, fleeting moment: "A shoe is still a shoe, even while nobody is wearing it."

"That might be the smartest thing you've ever said," Silver said, impressed for the second time that day. It was something of a record. "You know the real reason why you're not comfortable doing lesbian things is maybe because you're not actually a lesbian? A shoe is still a shoe, even if it decides it wants to be microwave oven."

"I don't want to be a microwave oven," Rya said firmly, as if the suggestion had offended her. "I want to be a shoe."

"But sadly you're not a shoe, you're a...," she paused momentarily, "... well I don't know what you are, but nobody is putting their feet inside you, or anything else."

Rya cocked her head to one side and said thoughtfully, "People put their feet in microwave ovens too, you know?"

Silver rolled her eyes and made a low grunting sound at the thought of someone putting their feet in a microwave oven for recreational purposes, which apparently made perfectly good sense to Rya. She said, "Only people who are so stupid that they must have had very serious cranial trauma or are completely insane would do that."

Rya fluttered her eyelids and smiled sweetly. She shrugged, saying “I don’t see a problem with it.”

Silver imagined herself hitting someone. She quite enjoyed it, not to the degree of absolutely loving it, but certainly more than the person getting hit. With a weary sigh she finally said, “Of course you don’t.”

“I’m confused now. All this talk of footwear, kitchen appliances and cranial trauma have left me wondering what the hell we’re actually talking about.” Rya sipped at a frothy brown gloop topped off with a generous blob of white cream that was, in turn, topped off with a smear of brown syrup.

“I was starting to wonder what we were talking about too, and why on earth we were talking about it.” Edward had once explained to her that a keen mind could learn something from every interaction; every facet of the world had something to teach us. Of course, he hadn’t met Rya.

“You should have seen me last night!” Rya smiled wistfully, as any thoughts she might have had may have dowelled on the previous evening. “I was wearing a flowing silver dress with matching heels and a white-gold necklace. I had my hair put up and had my makeup done and I looked amazing. Every man in the room turned to look as I stepped into the restaurant.”

“Why was that? Did you fall over?” Silver asked, making it sound like a serious question. She actually felt a little pang of jealousy at just how easily everything came to Rya. There was no depth, no concern beyond the trivial matters that had drifted to the surface. Life held no challenge for her and she simply floated along with it. Perhaps the lack of challenge made her weak and superficial but maybe she was simply as free as a bird flying through the sky. For a moment, she envied that. Her life was stacked with problems and challenges, beset with obstacles for her to overcome. She’d

never shied away from them, but for a moment she imagined her life without them.

“I looked beautiful,” Rya told her simply. “I looked like a dream. Tara looked quite stunning also and Cara had even made a bit of an effort. We ate seafood and just enjoyed the attention.”

Silver asked, even though she wasn’t particularly interested, “Was the food good?”

“No!” Rya said happily. “My Mum can cook better.”

Silver frowned and said, “Your Mum?”

Rya smiled and said, “Well, your Mum. My Mum is afraid of kitchens. She says that’s where women’s souls go to die. That’s why we prefer eating at your place where it’s already too late to worry about all that.”

Silver opened her mouth to speak as her brain loaded another charge of sarcasm into the chamber and prepared to fire. She stopped herself as she heard a noise and it dragged her mind back to matters of greater importance. She turned and made out voices: a man’s voice and the polite squeak of staff trying ever so hard to be respectful. She reflexively stood up and snatched her phone from the table. Before she knew it, the camera was ready and she was preparing to snap a shot.

“Is everything alright?” a member of staff asked, as Silver edged forward towards the counter, craning her neck to get a better look.

She grumbled at herself. She’d been swept up and had foolishly drawn attention to herself and she’d let herself get noticed. The young woman was staring at her, just waiting to be told what the problem was. Silver picked up her coffee and stepped towards the counter, thinking fast. All she could think of was getting that shot, that one picture of him in this building, that piece of proof the

client wanted, that evidence that would make Edward smile and take a little of the load off him for a while.

“Can I speak to the manager?” she heard herself say.

“The manager?” She looked terrified and cast a worried glance behind the counter.

“Yes,” she smiled warmly. “Nothing is wrong, but if he’s available I’d love to speak with him.”

“I can see...” she shrugged meekly, bowed and scuttled off behind the counter.

Excellent. Now he might come out, but what she was going to do next was still something of a mystery to everyone, especially herself. She felt a bead of sweat prickling nervously at her brow and her heart fluttered excitedly in her chest as her stomach knotted.

She felt the heat of her nervousness wash over her, even under the cool rush of air from the nearby air-con unit that was breathing its cold, refreshing breath down on her.

After a painfully long moment, he stepped out from the back. There he was. He had a confused look on his face. He was wearing a frown but trying to appear approachable as well, in case a problem had come up that he might have to deal with. He was short and stocky and had a big, rounded stomach jutting out above his brown leather belt. His face was careworn with deep wrinkles and his hair was thinning and turning white but had been dyed and glued to his head with styling gel in a vain attempt to hide his age.

“Miss?” he asked, looking around to see who she was with, trying to decide if she was important.

She remembered what Edward had told her and it filled her mind. When he’d first given in to her constant request to be allowed to do field work, he’d told her to remember who she was. She was just a teenager, a girl who was young and naive. He warned her to mind her limitations and learn to use them as positive things. He

told her to hide behind people's expectations, and always let them see her as what they expect to see.

Suddenly, she knew what she was going to say. It was so obvious, really.

"Good afternoon," she began with a very friendly smile and a gracious bow of her head. "I'm from the high-school just down the road and I write articles for the school newspaper. I'm doing a small piece about local coffee-shops and would like to recommend yours to the other students, with your permission, of course, since it's my favourite local shop."

He flashed her a delighted smile, and whatever professional barriers he was hiding behind vanished instantly. He said happily, "Yes, of course. That will be no problem at all."

"Thank you so much!" she said as if she was relieved to hear it. "Would it be possible to get a picture of you for my article, perhaps with us standing together?"

He beamed with delight at the prospect. "Certainly." He flashed an angry face at his staff member and gestured rudely for her to quickly go and grab the phone from Silver and take the picture. She quickly complied.

"Do you have any words for our students, Mr...?" she left the last word hanging for him to fill in for her as his waitress snapped off a series of shots.

"Study hard and one day you could maybe have my success!" he said bluntly as if he meant it. He added proudly, "Mr Chorn Visal. I own this shop."

"You are so kind, Mr Chorn. Thank you so much!" She held her hands together and bowed to him as the custom demanded. He bowed back happily.

"Thank you, young lady."

Silver sat back down to finish her coffee, and more importantly, this rather hollow conversation.

“What was all that about?” Rya grunted at her.

“I like this coffee shop. I just wanted to thank the owner,” she said, knowing Rya would essentially believe any excuse she was given. She suspected that if she told her that the owner was a monster from Mars in a rubber human-suit then she’d probably run out screaming.

“I hadn’t actually completely finished telling you how amazing I looked last night,” she grumbled.

“Oh, that’s a shame,” Silver said bluntly. “I had actually completely finished listening.”

She smiled to herself. Edward would be proud of her. She’d got the picture but, even more than that, she’d taken the initiative and got the subject’s name. This should bring a smile to his weary old face.

Chapter 7

"I'm impressed," Edward said, as the news brought a smile to his weary old face, just as she'd hoped it would. "You caught him right under the coffee-shop's name. Now this is evidence—nobody can refute this."

"And he told me his name, and that he owned the shop," she added proudly, not that she could prove much of the last part, or that it even mattered.

"Well done!" Edward said to her proudly, and loud enough for everyone in the office to hear. "You've used your initiative and moved this case forward nicely. Not many agents in this place can use their brains for anything beyond soaking up alcohol."

Marcus snapped up from his research. "I don't even drink," he grumbled.

Edward glared at him. The toilet was already quite clean, and Baz's curry was just a distant and unpleasant memory now.

Marcus tutted to himself and then he said, "I'm not saying it wasn't a job well done, but let's put it in perspective. She just walked up to a target and asked him right out for his name. She's lucky she didn't put the whole case in jeopardy. A stunt like that could have ruined everything."

Silver protested, "I was careful."

He glared at her and his nostrils flared. His eyes seemed to bore into hers and she felt her knees weaken. She looked away, flushing nervously and hoping he wouldn't notice, although she knew he probably would.

"Leave it out, Marcus," Baz called out through a half-chewed something that he'd taken far too big a bite out of. "She did good this time. The girl has balls."

“Maybe if you took the job more seriously, then you would also have an issue with the fact that we’re working alongside an 18 year old child who just took the lead in what’s currently our biggest case!” Marcus said back sternly.

“And maybe if you did your own job properly, that 18 year old child wouldn’t have had to take the lead in this case,” Edward said sternly, as he dug his balled fists into his sides and glared at him. “We’ve got a name now, so we’ll put a freelance agent on him and get his address.”

“How?” Marcus shrugged. “This isn’t America. There’s no database of contacts.”

Silver sniffed to herself and said, “I took pictures of all the cars outside and their number-plates. If he was visiting the shop, then it’s reasonable to assume he drove there. There were only three, and one was quite small and old, so there’s only two to watch for. The security guard was sitting to the right when I arrived; when I left he was sitting next to the white one, so I think that was probably his.”

Marcus glared at her and looked away, flushing red angrily.

“Are you actually annoyed at her because she did her job properly?” Edward said. “Or are you angry because she did something that you don’t think you would have managed to do?”

“Probably both,” Baz smirked at Marcus, although he never looked up to see it.

“Well, now we have the target’s name, and the number-plate and a description of his car,” Edward said finally. “By tomorrow I want his home address and a tail on him at all times.”

“I’ll have it,” said Marcus, his voice a low growl. He looked over to her and flashed her an acid glare.

She wished it had been a friendlier look, maybe over breakfast.

School the next morning was the same as ever. Mr Whitley gave them a comprehension exercise which was little more than reading a small, irrelevant chunk of a story from a book and answering questions about it. The story was a mystery thriller about a detective stepping very much out of his depth. As she read it, there was a knowing, wry smile on her lips, and she wished that, just for once, she might be allowed to step out of hers.

It had been an important break in the case to get the man's name, but really, they were hardly changing the world and she knew it. Often in cases like these, the details were vague or outright lies. Whatever dark and gloomy secret might be going on behind closed doors, it was likely to cause just as many problems for the client as it did for the subject of the case. For that reason, it was seldom revealed.

Cheating spouses were the most common thing they dealt with. It might be a woman cheating on her new boyfriend while taking his money, or a man sleeping around behind the back of his wife. People didn't share the details of such things out of their embarrassment that they were in such a position in the first place. People preferred to keep their mistakes to themselves.

The owner of the coffee shop was quite possibly sleeping with someone behind his wife's back; imagining it was something more intriguing was just wishful thinking, and not really very realistic. Still, while she read the tale before her in the book, the short excerpt from a novel, she dared to imagine that this was bigger somehow, that it was something to actually be excited about.

"Silver!"

She heard her name called, and found Mr Whitley's finger pointing at her. "Question 4, what do you think was the motivation for the detective?"

It was as if fate had singled her out for some reason. She thought for just a moment and then said, drawing heavily from personal experience, “I think people choose to become a detective because the world around them is such a twisted mystery. They don’t feel as if their own life makes any sense and try desperately to see a pattern that might show them what it all means. I think finding a job that does just that appeals to people who feel lost, but who are trying to take back some kind of control over their lives.”

There was a silence in the classroom that was followed, quite quickly, by a muted sound of muttering voices.

“I see.” Mr Whitley looked at his book and up again. “Well that was a good answer, of course.”

“Thank you.” She looked back to the text and just imagined once more.

“Of course, what I meant was what was the detective’s motivation for doing what he did in this extract?” he asked her again.

There was an awkward chuckle. She glanced up to where Rya was staring back at her with a curious frown. She silently mouthed the word, “What?”

“Well, it was his job—he had to do it,” she guessed with a non-committal shrug of her shoulders. “He didn’t feel as if he had a choice.”

Mr Whitley looked around and sighed to himself. “His job, yes. He had to do it, yes. No choice!” He sighed, somewhat sadly, and muttered, “I know how he feels.”

Silver sat at the back of their usual table, Rya at her side as Tara and Cara came along to join them, holding hands as they made their way over, causing a slight but noticeable stir and a smattering of turned heads.

“Your girlfriend, or girlfriends are coming,” Silver pointed out.

They smiled back, looked into one another’s eyes, and then back to them as they each pulled out a chair, pushed them close together and sat down.

“I don’t like it,” Cara said, huffing through her nose and frowning a weird little pinched up frown that pulled her eyebrows together.

“What?” Silver asked before realising she didn’t care.

“English!” said Tara, rolling her eyes upwards and sighing.

“I don’t like English either,” Rya agreed. “I don’t like anything really. I just come to school to see my friends and surround myself with people who aren’t as good as me but wish they were. It’s good for my self-esteem.”

“I need better friends,” Silver said with a groan.

All three looked at her, none of them seeming to take any real offence.

Tara flicked back a bead of thick black hair, fluttered her thick, fake eyelashes and said with her thick and empty voice, “You’re weird.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she told her.

“You are though,” Cara added. “You’re really odd. Sometimes I actually think you like school, but other times it’s as if you hate it, but I can’t figure out which one it is or why it might be that, whatever that is, or isn’t.”

“What do you think you could figure out if you really had to?” Silver asked quite seriously, suspecting the answer would be ‘very little.’

“Why aren’t you more like us?” Tara looked to Cara who seemed to sense that it was happening and turned to face her at the precise same moment so their eyes met perfectly for just a second. Then they both turned to look back.

“I was never dropped on my head as a baby?” she suggested.
“I don’t drink water out of a lead cup?”

“But why are you such a total bitch?” Rya added bluntly, the kind of bluntly that a car driven by Tara might smash into an innocent wall that was just standing around minding its own business. Perhaps even more blunt than that.

Silver just looked at her and then sighed to herself.

“Seriously,” said Cara.

“Why are you?” said Tara.

“I’m not a bitch!” she told them firmly.

“Total bitch,” Rya corrected.

Silver looked at her with angry eyes. “You know, some of us have a brain in our heads that we actually use for more than just mounting our cheekbones onto,” she snapped. “When you actually look around you’ll see that the world around us is kind of shitty. I don’t think that the best way to deal with that is to think that poor people should all vanish, pretend I’m a lesbian, be mean to everyone while thinking I’m better than they are, dress up in fancy clothes, get people to buy me things or sit around all day trying to convince myself that my life actually matters when I do absolutely nothing with it.”

“Nor do I!” Rya exclaimed in horrified surprise. “I mean, who would actually do that?”

“You do that,” Cara told her earnestly, and a little apologetically.

Tara said, with a note of sincerity, “That is exactly you.”

Rya seemed confused. She looked around, she rubbed her chin, and thought about it; really, really thought about it. She said finally, “No. I don’t see it.”

“Sometimes I wish I could be like you,” Silver said more calmly.
“I wish things just didn’t matter to me. I wish I came from a happy

family with plenty of money who just never had to do anything. I wish I was prettier or skinnier. I wish I wasn't so tall or my hair was straighter. I wish I fitted in better with the people of this country or the Westerners like my father was. I wish my father hadn't left me. I wish I could make a real difference. I wish anything we did actually mattered."

"Silver..." Rya leaned forward and said very softly, "You need to go shopping."

"No..." she grumbled and wearily rubbed her temples. She knew she was wasting her time but she couldn't help herself. "There's no miracle cure for the world. You can't fix it by throwing around money in a clothes shop. You can't sit around all day drinking overpriced coffee while playing with your phone and expect everything to turn out OK. It's just life. It's not OK, and it isn't going to suddenly get that way. It's just life. Sometimes it sucks and you just have to take responsibility for your part of it and do the best you can. That's all there is. It's just you doing the best you can."

She picked up her coffee and just huffed to herself. She put it down, shook her head, sighed at the whole lot of them and got up to leave. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm off."

"What was that all about?" Rya shrugged, seeming mystified at the outburst, but not appearing to take it personally.

Cara said, "You can solve any emotional problem by throwing money around at it. I do it all the time."

"Can't you? I don't know what she's talking about," said Tara.

Silver threw her bag over her shoulder and vanished down the stairs, grumpily pushing her way past anyone standing in her way.

Chapter 8

She rode angrily on her way to the office, going faster than she knew was safe and taking even more risks than usual. Rya was annoying her more and more as time went on. They had been friends for many years and had grown up together from small children to the edge of adulthood, but they were people who actually had very little in common and the gulf between them was becoming more and more obvious.

Silver had few people in her life that she considered proper friends. Very seldom did she let anyone in, preferring to keep herself to herself. Letting people in meant letting people hurt you, and she'd been hurt enough already.

Rya was different. The things she said were cutting, but they had no real effect. She was a blunt knife with the edge filed away, or a gun with no bullets in it. She wasn't really spiteful: she was just unthinking. But all this had gotten worse lately. Just as the job had changed Silver, helping her grow and mature, Rya had become more spoiled and less considerate. They were both changing and the changes were in opposite directions.

She pulled up outside the office, tucked shyly away down a narrow alley where you'd have to know exactly what you were looking for if you were to have any hope of finding it. It was no accident that it was suspiciously close to several coffee shops. Edward maintained it was because he wanted to be centrally located, but they all knew what he was really all about.

As she walked into the office, Marcus didn't even look up to acknowledge her, and Baz was missing completely. Edward appeared from behind his office door, his head peering out with a worried look on his face.

“Silver!” he barked, sounding angry about something. He looked relieved to see her, but anxious as well. “Can I see you in my office, please?”

She felt nervous. He’d never actually spoken those words to her before. She’d never done anything bad enough to be called into the office on her own. His office was a place where they’d often sit after work, the three of them, since Marcus wouldn’t join in, and watch old movies and throw things at the television. During the day, it was his sanctuary, but never before had it been a place that had seemed intimidating. Now all that had suddenly changed.

What scared her more than anything was the idea that one day she might, one day, lose this job. One day Edward might come to his senses and realise that he was sending a teenage girl out to do field work, slap himself on the forehead and scream at his reflection in the mirror for being so damn stupid.

She quickly flashed an angry look at Marcus who wriggled slightly on his seat and pretended to be fascinated with whatever he was doing on his computer. He made a big and conspicuous effort not to look in her direction. She wondered what might have been said behind her back.

She walked slowly to the office as Edward disappeared back inside.

This job was really all she had. It was her identity; it was order amidst the chaos. It gave her a feeling that she had some small measure of control over her life, even if that feeling was largely an illusion. More than that, it paid well and that money was vital to what she was doing, to that one thing she was more passionate about than even the job. What would be left if all this was stripped away from her?

The sad fact of all this was that Marcus was more important to the business than she was. He worked full time and was trained

and qualified. If he'd confronted Edward and forced him to take sides, she wouldn't come off well and she knew it.

With a sinking feeling, she pushed open the door and stepped inside. She felt a rush of cold air from the air-conditioner which was running at full blast. She knew this had to be bad. Edward was thrifty and had lived in the country long enough to be well used to the heat. He ran the air-con infrequently and only used it when he was angry or bothered about something.

He was sitting behind his cluttered desk, glaring at his monitor with a frustrated frown. "Sit down, Silver," he said simply, gesturing to the chair opposite his. The soft glow of the screen picked up the deep grooves in his forehead below his thinning and greying hair. He looked as if something was bothering him and she was beginning to get very nervous about what that might be.

She pulled out the chair. It was a plush leather piece of office furniture, since clients occasionally were invited to sit in it. The rest was very basic and it looked every inch the down-at-heel image of a low-rent detective's office from a movie made decades ago. She had often wondered if that was deliberate; was Edward himself living out some childhood fantasy?

As she sat down she said, "Is everything alright?"

"No," he said snappily, almost before she'd finished speaking. He looked up at her and flashed a fatherly smile as if doing so took quite some effort. He leant back in his chair and sighed. "I have a problem," he told her earnestly with a big sigh.

She nodded back and said, "OK." Her stomach tightened into a knot and she was beginning to sweat, even under the ferocious blast of cold air venting from the side wall.

"Silver, you've been doing this job for how long? Nearly six months of field work now, right?" he began wearily.

She nodded. She did not like where this was going. She wrung her hands together nervously and thought about Marcus. Had he done this? Had he stabbed her in the back for some reason? She wanted so much for him to like her, and yet all he did was resent her at every turn. The more she tried to act professional to impress him, the more he hated her for it. Now, perhaps, all this had cost her everything.

She felt a tear of frustration welling up in her eyes, but she choked it down and battled with herself to stay calm.

“I’ve always been very careful to give you assignments where there’s absolutely no risk,” he began. “I’ve kept you out of harm’s way; I’ve put you on simple jobs in public places. I’ve always tried to make sure that you were in absolutely no danger from whatever this job might throw at you and given you assignments that weren’t critical to a case.”

“I know,” she said frowning, and looked away shyly. “I know you have tried to look after me and I have always appreciated it.”

“Well, I have a problem now,” he told her. His eyes looked worried; he seemed more nervous than she was. She just wanted him to say it, get it over and done with. “Silver, I don’t have enough staff to mount and cover a surveillance. Baz just suggested I put you on it as team leader, and after your performance yesterday, it did get me thinking that maybe you’re ready, maybe you really could handle it.”

She sat up straight suddenly. These words changed everything and the knot in her stomach vanished instantly, to be replaced by a rush of excitement. “OK!” she said, leading him to carry on.

“Silver, I need someone to cover a guest-house and watch a room to see who comes and goes. Now it’s not as easy as it sounds and I need pictures of everyone who goes in. The big problem is that it’s the same case as the owner of the coffee shop, and he knows

you now. From what I can gather, this is a pretty routine infidelity case—he's using the room to meet a woman, we think, but we do know that the room was rented out for the whole month.

"Now we need photographic evidence of who comes and goes so we can wrap this one up. Setting this up means you have to think on your feet. You have to find the best place to take the watch, find a way to get the right angle. It takes initiative. It's not something I can teach you: it's something you have to work out for yourself when you get there. It's a big responsibility."

"I understand," she agreed excitedly.

"If he finds out he's being watched, he could turn on you. I hate to ask you to do this and I'm leaving the decision entirely up to you. I need you to tell me honestly if you think you're ready for this." Edward looked really quite concerned.

"I'm ready!" she said firmly, flushing excitedly and beaming a happy smile. She didn't even have to think about it. "I'm ready. I can do this."

He smiled back supportively. "You'll need to set up your own vantage-point. Expenses will cover a room if you think you need to rent one. I'll leave all the details to you."

"I won't let you down, Edward," she said proudly.

"I know you won't..." he told her and then his face hardened. "At least you had better not!"

The guest-house was in a quiet part of town. People sat outside on old wooden benches, glaring at her suspiciously as she went inside. Eyes followed her about as she stood for a moment in the oversized lobby. She could see hammocks behind the makeshift counter where the staff slept at night. The walls were discoloured, and the cream-coloured paint was peeling from the cracked walls. Two battered old

scooters were parked inside, dripping oil onto the dirty, cracked tiled floor.

It didn't seem like the kind of place a successful business owner would take a girlfriend—or did it? Was it exactly what she should have expected, a place that nobody would think of looking, a place where nobody cared who came and went? She wondered what she should have expected. Was there really ever an answer to that?

She noticed a black plastic dome on the ceiling, flashing a red light at her where a camera seemed to be watching, perhaps recording everything.

“Can I help you?” A slender man stood up from behind his desk lazily. He didn't bother to look up and the words came out as if they were deeply ingrained through habit.

“Do you rent long-term?” she asked, looking around.

He shrugged and nodded and his eyebrows raised, flashing a momentary look of being impressed that she spoke the native language so well. So few foreigners did and she looked every inch like one of them. “Sure.”

“My brother is coming into town on business and has asked me to find a suitable room for him,” she explained. “He's looking for somewhere where he won't be noticed, or run into his ex-wife, but also he's a little bit fussy. Can I see the rooms you have available and have a look around? My brother will happily pay you for your time, of course.”

The man shrugged, smiled and fluffed up his untidy mop of jet black hair. “Sure.” He rattled around under the counter and dropped a bunch of keys on the wooden top. “These rooms are available right now. Feel free.”

She snatched them up and smiled warmly. “That's great.”

She walked off past the small lift that looked as if it was maintained by, at best, a trained dog, and carried on to the stairs instead. She wasn't afraid of lifts: she just wanted to check out vantage points from where to set up her surveillance. The steps were quite tall and they coiled around the lift-shaft awkwardly. The room she had to watch was number 104, and was probably located somewhere on the first floor. The numbers on the key fobs made it clear that there were at least two rooms available, with some on the ground level as well.

The stairway opened out to a long corridor with six evenly placed doorways off to the right and only two on the left. There were no balconies, and no windows. At the end was a closed emergency exit that probably went outside to a set of metal stairs she'd noticed before, running up the side of the building.

She grumbled to herself. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to set up except the rooms themselves. At least they had spy-holes in the doors, little fish-eye lenses to let you look out and see who was outside.

Edward had always told her that they were the last resort. Many times they'd sat in coffee-shops, sipping slowly at brutally strong local coffees while watching a subject together. At first, he'd just agreed to allow her to tag along out of boredom, she suspected. She'd pestered and pestered him to take her out with him on a surveillance and he'd eventually given in to her pleading and done just that.

As the weeks went by, they'd sat in shops all around the town, he pouring out his wisdom and experience and she absorbing every precious detail like a sponge, drawing it all in and putting it together in her mind.

Edward had been a policeman for many years, but a savage and bitter divorce had cost him both his house and his family. In the

end, he'd given up and moved away. She reminded him of his daughter; she'd figured that out early on, and had happily used it to her advantage. Truth be told, he was also very much the father she'd never had.

105 sat opposite the target door. As luck would have it, the door she wanted was at the end of the corridor which made everything a little easier. She quickly flicked through the fobs and found that 105 was available. From the sheer volume of keys, it seemed that most of the rooms were.

She smiled to herself. Perhaps the spy-hole was the last resort, but it was better than nothing.

She smiled sweetly to the man at reception and put the keys down on the counter. "I'll take this one," she said, holding up the appropriate fob with the keys dangling below.

He shrugged and handed her a book to fill in. "\$12 a day. Food is available, and there's a menu in the room. Takes about thirty minutes to cook for you. Sheets are changed weekly, towels daily..."

He droned on with the details, as she made up a fake name in the book and filled it in. Edward had authorised a week's rent on the room from expenses and so she booked it for that long, hoping it wouldn't take all week, or at least that she wouldn't be stuck there alone for all of that time. She'd done room surveillance assignments at various times before, but only covering for Baz for a few hours while he stepped out for whatever it was he stepped out for. She'd never been allowed to set one up before and take the lead. While being given the responsibility was exciting, the reality of it was that it was actually quite dull once the equipment was set up.

"Drink?" he grinned suggestively, and held up a can of beer. She looked up from the book to see him wink at her flirtatiously. She smiled shyly and said, "Maybe later." She found him as attractive as

an unflushed toilet, but he clearly liked her and that might be useful later on. She handed him the money and he counted it carefully, looking up several times to grin hungrily at her.

She made sure he always found her looking straight at him and smiling back as if she enjoyed the attention. As she headed off to the room, she even glanced behind her, as women do if they have an interest in a man they've met. She knew how to keep him interested and, if he was interested, he might be useful.

She let herself into the room. Inside, it was larger than she'd imagined, and reasonably awful. The place obviously catered to short-term residents, to couples who wanted to hook up quickly and in private, away from prying eyes. It was basic, with a sturdy wooden bed, a tattered sofa, an empty wardrobe and a bathroom that had just the bare minimum necessary. It was finished in the same cream-coloured paint as the lobby, with white tiles running just over halfway up the walls

She slung her bag onto the bed and began emptying out the contents. She picked up a wide, blunt little tool and went to work on the door. She unscrewed the spy-hole and pulled the entire thing out. It was a brass tube with a curved smoked glass lens in it to give a wider than usual view. It was a standard size that was used commonly all around the world.

In its place she fitted a wide-angled camera that was made to look as if it belonged there and cost only seventeen dollars on Ebay. It took just a few minutes to finish up, plugging it in and switching everything on, and then she opened a small laptop and checked it was all working. Straightaway, the device paired up and she began recording everything onto a large external hard drive. She was satisfied that she had the target doorway nicely covered.

Inside the bag, she also had a Bluetooth security camera, which she intended to mount at the end of the corridor. It was well-weathered and very much the kind you'd see in every building anywhere you might care to look. People were so used to them nowadays that nobody really noticed them anymore. Putting up an extra one of her own wouldn't attract any interest, even from the people working in the building.

She smiled to herself. This was all going to be easy.

Chapter 9

After setting up the cameras, the afternoon was spent lying on the bed, trying not to think about all the horrible things that must have happened on it. She distracted herself by playing on her phone and catching up on her homework.

The work hadn't been difficult, but it had somehow left her feeling drained to the point of exhaustion.

Setting up the spy-hole camera was exciting, but fitting the wireless security camera at the end of the hall really got her adrenaline pumping. Knowing she could be caught at any moment was exciting. At any second, the subject might literally walk out of the lift, or a member of staff might be coming round to deliver a fresh towel. Even if she was spotted by a guest, it could cause problems that she might not be able to talk her way out of.

She loved it. This was what it was really all about for her.

The rest of the six hours that followed were much less exciting. While drying her hair roughly with a towel, she said, "Nothing happened. Nobody visited the room all afternoon."

Edward sighed to himself through the speaker of her phone. He grumbled, "Was Baz on time to relieve you?"

She nodded, even though he couldn't see her. "He was early and brought me a coffee. He said I'd done a good job on the setup and that he couldn't see any better way of doing it himself," she said rather proudly.

Edward's voice laughed cheerfully down the other end of the phone. "Well done. I had faith in you. I knew you could do it. I had much less faith in Baz, I'm afraid. His desk looks as if a bomb has hit it. With you now firmly in the field, I'm going to have to look at hiring another office girl."

“I appreciate being given the chance,” she told him graciously. “It has been six months, so it probably is time to look at getting someone else to do the filing!”

“Alright,” he began, and she imagined him rubbing his temples. “Don’t bother coming in tomorrow. Go straight to the field. You’ll relieve Baz. He’s there until midnight tonight, and then he’s back in the morning. I need you to do another shift there in the afternoon, I’m afraid.”

“No problem,” she said happily.

“Speak soon!” he told her and hung up after she replied politely.

She flung her phone onto her bed and it landed softly. She stretched her aching muscles and yawned as she made her way out to the kitchen where her mum was cooking dinner. A shower often woke her up, but this time it didn’t seem to have made much of a difference, but at least she didn’t feel so hot and sticky; and it was nice to feel clean again after lying all afternoon on a bed that had seen things a teenager shouldn’t have to imagine.

“You came home late tonight,” she scolded.

Silver looked away, hoping not to have yet another argument about it.

“I was at Rya’s, doing my homework. You know how she struggles with it. She likes it when I’m there to help her. The time got away from me, that’s all.” She hated lying, but had been doing it for so long that it was almost second nature to her now.

“You’re secretive, you’re late home nearly every day, and you’re always on your phone,” Mum said as she turned to face her, glaring angrily. “I know what’s really going on, you know! A mother knows!”

Silver stopped in her tracks, a wave of nervousness washed over her. “What do you mean?” she said defensively, feeling her face flush. “What do you think is going on?”

“Are you seeing a boy?” her mother snapped at her. “Tell me the truth.”

Silver broke into a smile and chuckled at the suggestion. “I’m not seeing a boy, Mum,” she told her firmly.

“You’re at that age,” she said suspiciously. “I know what it’s like, hormones everywhere, not knowing if you’re coming or going. But I know how men are, too, and I know how it feels when one you like gives you a little bit of attention. It’s like a drug—you want more and you’ll do just about anything to get it. That’s how a nice young girl like you ends up in trouble.”

“I’m not stupid,” she said firmly. “I know what men are like, and women. I’m not going to get myself into any trouble.” She’d seen it and heard it all many times before. She’d seen many, many cases of people cheating on one another. She knew how truly rare good people were. She knew it as well as anyone.

Her mother turned away and huffed to herself while stirring something that reeked of garlic and angry chillies. “That’s what I thought when I was young,” she said, and Silver could hear the regret in her voice.

Silver turned away and frowned to herself. She said softly, “I’m not like you.”

Her mother looked up sharply and snapped at her, “I know you’re not. You’re more like your Dad!”

“Well, I’ve only got your word for that because he left when I was four,” Silver said angrily as the subject caught a raw nerve.

“That’s my point.”

Silver took a deep breath, peering angrily out from under a deep scowl. “Well, maybe I’ve got better taste in men than you?”

Maybe I won't marry some bastard who'll walk out and leave his family behind when it all gets to be a bit too much like hard work."

"Men are all the same," she growled. "You won't find that out until it's too late. You never do."

"Well, maybe you're the problem!" Silver shouted, her temper flaring. "Maybe you just never stopped moaning at him the way you're always moaning at me, and he just had to get away from you."

"It wasn't me he was running away from!" she shouted back angrily.

Silver stopped in her tracks. The point her mother was making was obvious and the words began to form in her head and were going to come out of her mouth. She couldn't stop it; she was going to say it! She was going to say out loud the thought in her head that she'd been too scared to even consider for so long. It had lain hidden there, lurking in the shadows, creeping around in the depths of her mind. It was something she was afraid to face, but it had always been there and would never leave.

She heard her own voice saying, "So he left because of me?"

Tears began to stream down her cheeks. The brave face she showed the world, the sarcasm she hid behind, the sharp insults, the veneer of strength, just crumbled away as she heard those ugly little words coming from her own mouth. It made it worse; it made it true. He hadn't left his wife: he'd left his family. He'd walked out on a little four year old girl, whose daddy was her whole world, and the emptiness he'd left behind was a hole that she could never fill.

She turned and ran back to her room, slamming the door behind her. She sank into her bed and gave in to it all.

Chapter 10

“You seem different today,” Rya noted, which was impressive since she almost never noticed anything that she didn’t want to own.

“You’re quiet and seem troubled by something.”

Silver said quietly, “I’m fine.”

Rya shrugged, “It’s fine by me too. I’ve never seen you this unbitchy. I like it. If we could keep this up, sort out your hair, lose a little weight and get you into some decent clothes that didn’t look as if you won them in a fight with a homeless person, I’d be quite happy to have you at my side while I do things.”

“I’m glad my personal problems amuse you,” she said sarcastically.

“Oh, it’s not just you.” Rya explained. “I quite enjoy other people’s personal problems. I like it when other people are suffering. It helps to remind me just how awesome my life is.” She looked straight at Silver and grinned widely. “You are suffering, right? Does reminding you how awesome my life is make it better or worse? I can never tell with ordinary people. You’d think they’d be thrilled for me, but often they just seem even sadder when I tell them how great it is to be me. Sometimes they even get angry.”

“Angry would be the direction I’d probably choose,” Silver seemed to be thinking about it. “It’s probably a thing you might want to avoid, as I’m within easy striking distance of you and can hit so hard that the gym teacher, in my last report card, called me ‘horrifying.’”

“I imagine he was talking about your hair,” Rya shrugged. “Would a coffee cheer you up?”

Silver allowed a flicker of a smile to flutter over her lips. She shook her cup of iced coffee and the ice shuffled together inside, rattling noisily. “I already have a coffee.”

“Yeah, but you’re just massive and it must take more than just one human-sized coffee to fill you up.”

“I am perfectly the average size for a Western female!” Silver sighed.

“But you’re half Asian and the memo doesn’t seem to have gotten through to your genetics. Maybe your mother is like a vending machine that had run out of Coke. Instead, it just put out some fizzy orange stuff instead. I’m standing there with my gassy orange drink thinking, ‘Yeah, this will do but it’s not what I was hoping for.’ I’d feel a bit cheated if I was you.”

“Lucky for you, you’re not me,” she said sadly. “Your dad never left you, your little sister doesn’t hate you, and your mother isn’t moaning at you all the time about things you have absolutely no control over.”

Rya rolled her eyes. “Oh no! Is that what this is all about? I was hoping it was something fun, like the guy you like has a really pretty girlfriend that you just found out about.”

“There is no guy I like,” she told her firmly and not entirely convincingly.

Rya grinned widely. “I don’t believe you.”

“Alright...” Silver looked straight at her and shocked everyone by being brutally honest about it. She even shocked herself. “There is a guy I liked at work but he’s a dick and I’m starting to kind of hate him. Either way, he’s not interested in me, so it doesn’t really matter at all, does it?”

“You should become a lesbian,” Rya shrugged and said very matter-of-factly, as if it was just that simple to change the very nature of who you are at a whim. “A lesbian who knows she’ll never get with a super-hot lesbian like me, of course. You do know that, right?”

“Maybe I should aim for Cara. She’s rich, isn’t she? You’d like that since you keep telling me to date rich people, wouldn’t you?” she suggested.

“No. Not Cara,” Rya frowned. She looked around to make sure nobody was listening, not that anyone was... Ever. “Honestly, those two are a little bit weird. They seem as if they’re so into each other, there’s no room for me at all. I mean, look at me. How could they not want this? I mean, being lesbians together was all my idea and they seem to have stolen it.”

Silver smiled. “Well, they’re both shallow and superficial already. Do they really need more of that?”

“Of course!” Rya exclaimed. “They’re amateurs compared to me. My superficialness begins where theirs ends. I am an enormously deep well of shallowness.”

“Yes,” she agreed unreservedly. “You must be very proud.”

Rya nodded and smiled widely. She clearly was. Very proud.

Baz was on duty at the surveillance, which meant he was lying on the bed, watching what she strongly suspected was porn on his phone. As the door clicked open, he sat up suddenly in surprise, which was no surprise to her, since he should have been watching the camera feeds, obviously wasn’t, and hadn’t been for some time.

“Silver,” he said nervously. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

She looked around. He was fully clothed, alone and was using the equipment for its proper function for a change. “Well, it actually looks as if you’re mostly doing your job for once.”

“Well then, it definitely isn’t what it looks like,” he joked and swung himself over to the edge of the bed. “You’ll be pleased to know that nothing has happened. Nobody has been near that door all morning or all last night.”

“Great,” she muttered sarcastically to herself.

“Yeah, we’re stuck here for another two days unless we catch him at it,” Baz grinned at nothing in particular. “With your permission, I’m off to get a late lunch and claim it on expenses. You’ve eaten, right?”

She had grabbed something quickly on her way over. “Sure, and I’ve got snacks for later.” She always planned ahead. “Why do you need my permission? You never ask Edward’s permission to do anything.”

“Well, I don’t respect Edward,” he said earnestly with a shrug. “You took the lead on this surveillance so you’re the boss on this one. It’s your setup as far as I’m concerned.”

She swelled with pride to be taken so seriously, even if it was only by Baz, who she didn’t take seriously. The job made everything seem better. She could tolerate everything else in her life so long as she had this to focus on. “Thanks, Baz. That means a lot.”

“Coming from me, it means nothing,” he quipped, but the throwaway joke didn’t land too far from the truth. “It’s just four hours today for you and then I’ll be back.”

She settled in, unloading her homework onto the bed. “Sure.”

“Anything you want me to bring?” he asked, throwing on a blue cap and grabbing his bag to leave.

“I’m fine,” she assured him.

And with that, he left to extort a free lunch from his boss who, if he ever found out, might roll his eyes, shout, grumble a little bit and then forget it had happened a few minutes later and invite everyone to watch an old movie with him after work.

An hour of maths left her in no mood for another hour of maths, but to complete the assignment, that’s what it looked like was going to have to happen. She checked the camera again, tapping gently on the laptop screen and peering outside the door through the monitor.

There was nothing. There was no movement of any kind and there hadn't been all day.

She cast a glance to the bottom of the screen to the clock. She was less than halfway into her shift and still, nothing had happened. Perhaps it never would. Frequently, these kinds of operations went nowhere at all, no matter how well they were set up.

She rolled over onto her back, swiped a pen from the side of her book and began tapping it softly onto her teeth, thinking all this over.

Why would someone rent a room? If he was cheating on his wife, then why not take his girlfriend to a different place each time—it would attract far less attention, surely? Something about all this just didn't quite make sense, not that she had much experience to draw on. Edward didn't put her on many infidelity cases because they were just too sordid for a teenager to have to deal with, or so he said. Many of them required working longer and later hours than she could get away with, so often it wasn't even an option.

She thought about all this some more. What she wouldn't give to get inside that room and look around. Had he left clothes in there? Were there clues to be found in the pockets of a jacket? Was the answer to all this in a drawer beside the bed?

She tried not to, but her brain had already begun to work on a solution. She knew that the simplest, and probably best, thing was to stay right where she was, but her mind had other ideas and some of them were starting to take root in the fertile soil of her imagination.

She knew the man on reception liked her, and that was something she could easily turn to her own advantage. She rolled over and looked at her own laptop. With a few clicks, she opened the system and checked the storage on her hard drive. It was a large

drive and was still almost empty. There was enough space for what she had in mind.

“Don’t do it, Silver,” she muttered to herself. She rummaged through the setup bag at the bits and pieces that came with the kit. She pulled out the cable she was going to need if she was to completely ignore her own good sense and better judgement.

If it went wrong, Edward would be disappointed in her, but if it went right, she could deliver just exactly what they were there to find.

She grabbed her laptop and made her way to the door.

Each step towards the lobby made her heart beat a little faster. She shouldn’t be out of the room—the target might walk in at any moment and see her, but any number of other things could also potentially go wrong. This was a terrible idea.

The cameras would keep working in her absence and, if anyone came in, they would have to pass her by in some way. Whatever evidence there was would still be collected, no matter what she did.

She came up to the counter and smiled at the man behind it. It occurred to her that she wouldn’t even have had any way of knowing if it would be the same man there.

Lucky for her, it was.

“Hi,” he said with a lopsided grin as he eyed her up and down greedily, making no effort to hide what was going on in his mind.

She managed not to openly shudder at the thought, but was totally resolved that whatever was going on in his mind wouldn’t get the opportunity to go any further.

“The Wifi isn’t working well,” she told him, looking around. Beside the counter was a small room with blinking lights piercing the

darkness inside. What she was looking for must be in there, she thought.

“I don’t know,” he smiled broadly, in a way that seemed massively inappropriate to the situation.

She smiled back at him and shyly looked away. “Don’t worry,” she said sweetly. “I know how to fix it.” She pointed to the little room and said, “Is it in there?”

He flustered as she stepped behind the counter and made her way very confidently into the tiny room. Actually, confidently was exactly how she didn’t feel. He could stop her at any moment, grab her arm and simply ask her to leave, but he didn’t. He stepped back in surprise and just watched her go, carrying her laptop before her and taking the lead.

“What are you doing?” he gasped, clearly quite confused by all this.

“I’m fixing your Wifi!” she told him with a shrug as if it were obvious. “I can make it much faster and work better for free. It’s a trick I learned from my cousin. He owns an internet provider company and drives a Ferrari.”

He seemed impressed, as she knew he would be. She thought of her little Honda scooter and hoped the man wouldn’t remember it was hers, and realise how unlikely all this was. It didn’t seem as if that was going to be a major problem.

“I can’t really let you in there,” he said from behind her as she opened the door. He sounded both confused and nervous at the same time.

“It won’t take long,” she winked at him. “It’s not actually illegal. Don’t worry. You just get more power.”

“For free?” he looked suspicious.

She nodded. “Can you get me a drink?”

“A drink?” he looked worried now as she pushed open the door.

“Sure!” she gave him her most flirtatious smile. “Coffee.” She rummaged in her pocket and handed him some cash. “Get one for yourself as well. There’s a really great place outside.”

He looked around, thinking this through and not getting anywhere very fast. “Sure,” he shrugged finally.

She had a few minutes before he could get back. She clicked on the lights and looked around. A small bank of tired old equipment was in front of her. At the top was a time-lapse recorder that digitally stored what the cameras in the building saw. She grinned at it happily. She laid her laptop down, threw open the lid and typed in her password. She fumbled for the cable and plugged it into the bank of recorders.

It took several seconds for the laptop to find the device after she had plugged her USB lead into the backup terminal. The software opened at a leisurely pace and she quickly went about copying all the data onto her computer. She grumbled impatiently at it, angry that it wouldn’t go any faster.

She flashed a look back outside. It was still quiet. She had never bought coffee from outside but that might buy her a few extra minutes, as he tried to work out what she was talking about and which seller was meant to be the one she meant.

Her heart was pounding in her chest as she looked around. She felt alive.

She dashed out behind the counter and searched for the keys. She rifled quickly through the drawers until she found a box of duplicate keys, the ones the cleaners used and the staff, should they ever need to access a room in an emergency. She found it easily, the key for room 104.

As she held it in her hand, she really felt a surge of excitement. She

was copying all of the security footage. She could review it, find out who had been coming and going; she could see who had gone in and out for the whole week, not just the day since she'd set up in the room opposite. Now she was looking at the key, she could get in, search it and find out just exactly what was going on behind that door.

“Hello.”

She looked up, startled to see the receptionist looking back at her, proudly holding two plastic cups of iced coffee, both filled with sugar and thick, sweet milk. The thought of it turned her stomach.

She dropped the key into her pocket and kicked the drawer shut before he came around the counter and noticed what she'd been doing.

“Great,” she said, looking back to the little room. It would still be several minutes until the backup was complete. She had to stall him till then.

He began to come round to the back of the counter, which was fair enough really as it was his counter and that was exactly where he was meant to be. She walked up, blocking his way. She was as tall as him, probably a little larger and he stopped in his tracks, as if he was somewhat intimidated by her.

“Thanks for going for me,” she said, grabbing the cup and taking it from him. He moved up very slightly so that the skin of their hands just touched and he flashed her a sickly grin.

Would it really be so hard to be a lesbian, she wondered? Then she remembered Marcus, who was kind of a dick but was so pretty she just wanted to mount him in a frame and hang him on her wall. At this point, she didn't much care if he survived the process.

She just wasn't built that way, unfortunately, any more than Rya was.

“You’re very sweet,” she said, trying really hard to sound as if she meant it.

“You’re very sweet,” he told her with an awkward attempt at sounding interesting and flirtatious that came out sounding more like a brain-damaged gerbil was being held underwater.

It couldn’t be much longer, she thought to herself, listening intently for a little ping that would let her know that the copying was complete. Was she really going to have to drink this?

He sucked up some coffee through his straw.

She smiled and looked down at hers. She could literally see spoonfuls of sugar pooling at the bottom of the cup along with the ice. The milk itself was sweet, and worse, it was milk. Milk gave her a stomach-ache and tasted awful in coffee.

She knew she had no choice but to take one for the team. She took a small swig. The sweetness exploded in her mouth as if she’d swallowed a hand-grenade full of sugar. It took a great deal of effort not to spit it out, but somehow she managed to keep a mostly straight face, apart from a slightly pained look in her eyes and a little squeak from somewhere at the back of her throat. “Nice,” she croaked insincerely.

“Where are you from?” he began, trying to look relaxed and a little bit cool. He actually looked neither.

She went for another sip when she heard it. Ping.

She smiled and this time she meant it. The download had finished.

“Oh, somewhere else. You won’t have heard of it,” she told him snappily, turning quickly to retrieve her laptop. She unplugged it rudely and hid the wire, slamming the lid shut as she came out.

“This was great,” she said quickly, earning herself a confused expression from the very confused young man. “We should do this again some time.”

He shrugged, and as he did, someone stepped through the door. Silver squeaked and dropped to the floor, hiding herself under the counter. She heard the even more bewildered receptionist hand the key to the gentleman who grunted a reply above her. She couldn't quite make out what he said.

She sat there for a moment, lost, confused as she saw the fob to room 104 being passed up. She knew him but it couldn't be him. It just couldn't be, could it?

How could it be him?

Chapter 11

It couldn't be. It just couldn't be.

Silver sat at the table by herself, nursing a cup of barely acceptable coffee in the school canteen. It was over-brewed, and the beans were of a poor standard. She'd become quite an expert on the proper flavour of coffee over the last six months, and this wasn't a good one. Working in the field with other agents usually meant spending hours on observations with a drink in front of you, and the conversations often ended up revolving around it. Still, the taste barely registered, as she stabbed at the ice with the straw distractedly.

She hadn't slept well the night before, and the rest of the surveillance had gone by in a blur. After what she'd seen at the counter, her mind was distracted. She still had the duplicate key and the surveillance footage from the security cameras, but she hadn't watched it that night. She couldn't bring herself to, and instead she locked herself in her bedroom and focused on finishing an especially boring history assignment.

It was him! There was no getting away from it. It couldn't be who it was, but it was who it couldn't be. He'd walked in furtively, toying aimlessly with his car keys, and looking behind him to make sure nobody was watching him, never suspecting someone who knew him might be right ahead, furtively hiding herself behind the hotel counter. Even with his head mostly turned around, she knew him; there was nobody else it could have possibly been.

But it made no sense.

"What you doing?" Rya had sat down next to her, unnoticed since her mind was off somewhere completely else.

She sighed, looked up, and flashed a friendly little smile. "Just thinking. You should try it."

Rya grinned. "It's a terrible habit—no good ever comes of it. I heard it can make your hair go all curly and horrible."

"Yeah, maybe you're right for once," she agreed and sipped hard at her coffee.

Rya sat back and crossed her arms over her chest. Her eyes widened and she peered at her suspiciously. "Did you just agree with me?"

Silver laughed a little—it was a rare sound and Rya reeled back in surprise.

"What now?" she gasped. "What's going on with you? Did someone ask you on a date? Did you have a date last night? Was it a successful date with lots of passionate moaning and regrets afterwards? Was he the one with the regrets? I bet he was the one with regrets."

Silver just looked at her, shaking her head in amazement. "I didn't have a date."

"I know you didn't," she laughed. "You never have a date. I spoke to Heng about you. He said he'd like to take you for a nice drive in his car and take you out for dinner. I don't know what's wrong with him, but you need to grab this rare opportunity."

"It's not opportunity he wants me to grab," Silver said with an indignant huff. "I'll pass."

"Hmm," she grunted, flashing her a little glare that wasn't quite angry but looked as if it was getting there. She turned away and muttered softly under her breath—but still loud enough to be heard. "You could do with grabbing someone's opportunity. It might cheer you up."

Silver looked over to her and said thoughtfully, "Do you ever think about stuff? I mean ever really think?"

"No."

Was she joking? She tried again, “You don’t ever think about anything?”

“No!” she said more firmly. “I just do things, I don’t think about them. People who think annoy me. They always have opinions and think they’re right about everything.”

“Rya, are you really a lesbian?” she asked bluntly. “I mean, I know you’ve dated guys before, and you told me that you’re scared of guys so you decided to only date girls. I mean, nobody decides to date girls if they’re not really attracted to them. So what is it really? Were you always a lesbian or are you faking it?”

Rya smiled and gave a little shrug. “Why the interest in my personal life? Are you writing a book? Am I in it? If I am, make me even hotter than I am in real life and funnier. I always wanted to be funnier.”

Silver shrugged back. “I was just thinking.”

“Thinking about my personal life? Thinking about a situation in which I might potentially be naked?” Rya frowned and shook her head as if finding a naughty child with its hands where they shouldn’t be. “Maybe it’s you that’s a lesbian?”

“I’m afraid not,” she smirked. “I think it would be easier if I was, but that’s not how life works.”

“Life works?” Rya joked, quite out of character in that she made a good point.

“Do you know anyone else who’s gay? Anyone else in your family?”

Rya frowned. “God, no. If they were they’d never admit it. It would bring shame to my family. Even I know I’ll be married one day and will have children. That’s just how it is.”

Silver gave a thoughtful expression and considered this carefully. “But what if you were married and you still liked girls.

Would you see girls still, do you think? Would you cheat on him to go out with other women?"

Rya frowned at her. "I don't know," she said dismissively, and waved her away with her hand. "Too many questions, and you're getting me dangerously close to having to think. I don't like it. Talk about something else."

Silver nodded to herself. "Sure."

"Just go back to being a moody bitch. I think I like you better that way," she said sourly. "Actually, I'm not even sure I like you at all."

Silver left school as early as possible. There was the usual rush at the gate, as a swarming mass of students rode their scooters out through an opening just wide enough to walk through. The road outside was blocked with triple-lined parked cars making her exit even more dangerous. Normally, she happily let the crowds do their thing, sacrificing the five minutes she would have to wait for the mess to die down. This time, she marched out of school with a purpose. She had parked up closest to the gate in readiness and she was driven to battle her way out. Today, every second counted.

She forced her way through the crowd, bustling to the front, stopping only just short of ramming challengers out of her way.

Once on the road, her progress was similarly swift. The driving was chaotic and dangerous as it always was. People swarmed out of side roads without looking, often playing with their phones while riding, driving down the wrong side of the road, and jumping traffic lights as it suited them. Her eyes were wide open, and her concentration was at its peak, directed straight ahead. She forced every inch of performance from her little bike and made every second count.

She finally pulled up outside the office, skidding the small back wheel to a halt on the cracked concrete floor. She made her way inside quickly.

The office was deserted, as the current workload was crushingly heavy. Only Edward was there, and he came from the office with a frown, not expecting to see anyone, and certainly not expecting her.

His frown took on a more confused twist and he looked at his watch. "Silver?" he said. "What are you doing here? You have a shift at the hotel in forty minutes."

"Edward," she said, and bit her lip awkwardly. "I have something to tell you. We need to talk."

They both sat in the office; she had perched herself on the comfortable office chair which elevated her slightly above the level of Edward's own dilapidated old seat. He claimed it was perfect and that he'd grown to love the old thing, but she knew he was just too cheap to replace it.

"We had a slightly unexpected break in the case yesterday!" he smiled. "I hear that the room had a visitor. A man?"

"Yes," she nodded in agreement. "He came to the room and stayed for approximately twenty five minutes before leaving. He was alone the whole time."

"I look forward to seeing your report." He flashed her a smile, but it was a weary, hard-worn smile of a man who had seen too much. "You know, I thought this was a simple infidelity case; I never expected there to be a gay element. It's nice when something new happens—it breaks up the monotony a little bit, don't you find?"

"But that's not what you came all the way over here to see me about, is it? What's on your mind?"

“Edward,” she said, and looked away, almost afraid to meet his gaze. “Edward, I need to tell you something.”

He sat back, his face turning grave. “Go on...” he prompted.

“Edward, I know the man who went to the room,” she explained. “I know who he is.”

Edward nodded. “Go on...”

She swallowed hard and looked straight up at him, their eyes meeting. “He’s my friend’s dad. My best friend at school, Rya. He’s her father.”

“Oh,” he said grimly, and leaned further back in his seat. He took a deep breath as his eyes shifted uncomfortably, and his fingers rapped lightly on the edge of the desk. “I see.”

“I didn’t know he was gay...” she began, her mind spinning and racing on ahead of her mouth. “That is... I don’t even think that he is gay. I’m pretty sure he isn’t. It doesn’t make any sense.”

Edward let out a restrained chuckle. “Silver, you’re going to find that life doesn’t make sense most of the time,” he began. “I’ve been doing this work for more years than I’d care to say, and believe me when I tell you, you’ve just seen the tip of the iceberg.

“Think about it this way: humans have two primary motivations: one is to survive long enough to pass on our genes, the other is to pass on our genes as aggressively as possible. In simple terms, that means that if people are not busy dying, then they’re screwing, and who they’re screwing often makes no sense whatsoever to an impartial observer.

“I’ve seen men with beautiful wives cheat on them with women twice their own age who look like they’ve been stung by a swarm of angry wasps. I’ve seen young girls dating horrible, creepy old rich men to support their actual boyfriends. I’ve seen muscle-bound body-builders strutting around with transgender women who are taller than they are. Black with white, white with Asian—and

everything in between. Human relationships are complicated as hell, and the only damn thing you can be sure of is that what's really going on in someone's heart is the last thing in the world you'd probably ever think of.

"Nothing really shocks me anymore. Everyone is different, and they all want different things. When it comes to life, you have to leave your expectations at the door and just get on with it."

She nodded along, and for some reason her thoughts dwelled on Marcus. What was it that attracted her to him? What was it that made his eyes light up to her like a beacon, and why did his smile make her stomach fizz when he flashed it in her direction? Was he really even attractive, or was it all in her imagination? What was it about him that drew her in? Why wasn't she attracted in the same way to Baz, or Heng, or anyone else for that matter? Why did it have to be Marcus, a man who at first never seemed to notice her, and then later came to openly resent her? Why him?

"It's just... There was no sign," she said sadly. "I never saw it coming. I thought they were happily married, her parents. I actually envied that about her, how her family seemed so strong. She always had a mother and a father, her Dad doing well and giving her everything she ever needed. Now I find this out..." She shook her head at the thought and looked away sharply. "This will crush her!"

"You can't tell her any of this, you know," Edward told her firmly, almost sternly.

"I know," she agreed with a sad little shrug. "I signed a confidentiality agreement. I'm going to have to see her every day knowing this, and never be able to say a damn thing."

"And that's just how it has to be," he said, nodding his head sadly. "In this job, you are going to see things that will make you question what it's all about. It just goes with the territory I'm afraid."

“It’s what we chose,” she said after a lengthy pause, echoing a phrase that he had said to her many times in those early days, while they sat together watching people’s lives unfold before them. They pulled back the veneer, and behind it was rarely what you’d expect to find. It was the role they had taken for themselves, to see beyond the surface.

“Truth can be a funny animal. Most people never see it, because they never look for it. They’re happy to live their lives with their eyes shut—and good for them. But we can’t do that; we go looking for what’s underneath. The truth is often ugly, cold and harsh. It’s hard to accept, and it hurts to see it. But it is the truth regardless, and nothing changes that.”

It was a polished speech he’d delivered to her before, almost word for word. She’d always imagined he’d got it from a movie, some old detective drama that had sparked his imagination in some way. Perhaps it had been the thing that had driven him off with a passion to become a private detective and live out his dream.

It made her smile, though. It had never made much sense to her before, but now it filled her mind and made absolutely, completely, perfect sense. It was pricking at her emotions. It was ugly and it did hurt, but ignoring it wouldn’t change it. She couldn’t pretend it wasn’t there or choose not to see it. She just had to live with it, but at least now she did know, and knowing it made her stronger.

“Thanks, Edward,” she said. “You always seem to know what to say, even though you always generally say the same things.”

“I’m old,” he shrugged. Then he smiled a wry little smile to himself. “As you get older, you’ll find that there are only ever one or two real solutions to any problem; everything else is just finding ways to avoid dealing with it. I prefer solutions.”

She suspected he was probably right, as he often was. She bit her lip again nervously. "There's something else."

"Oh no!" he said jokingly.

"I did something," she began haltingly. "I don't know if I should have, but I did something at the hotel."

Edward leant forward with a concerned look forming on his careworn face. "What did you do?"

She paused for a moment awkwardly, wondering what his reaction might be. Would he be angry with her for overstepping the mark? Had she jeopardised the whole case with her rash actions?

"I copied the security video footage from the hotel security system," she said, nervously looking away. "It seemed like the right thing to do at the time."

"You did what?" he said in surprise, his mouth agape.

"I backed up all the time lapse video to my computer. The man on reception tried to flirt with me, so I sent him out to get me a coffee, and while he was gone, I copied all the security footage for the last week."

His eyes were wide open in surprise. He let out a gasp of air and said, "How much did you get?"

"Everything," she told him with a nod.

Edward pushed his palm onto his forehead and screwed his eyes tightly closed. "Just when I think I've seen everything, you go and do something like this..."

"Is that a good thing?"

"So long as you didn't get caught, and you're absolutely sure you left nothing to lead them back to us, then yes, it's a very good thing. If I had an office full of agents like you with brains in their heads and the balls to take sensible risks, then I'd be a happy man!"

"I wasn't sure what you'd say," she breathed a very heavy sigh of relief. "I don't actually have balls, so it's difficult to judge."

He smiled back, shaking his head once more in amazement.
“You’ve got more balls than anyone else in this office. Let’s see what
you got, shall we?”

Chapter 12

She sat in room 105 and stared at the clock on her phone. Her shift had been uneventful, which surprised nobody. They were so short-handed that they had nobody to cover the room in the morning, so she'd spent some time going through footage to see if anything had happened.

It hadn't.

She lay on the bed, her right leg bent so her foot rested flatly, and her left crossing over, the calf resting on her knee, kicking her foot in the air. She did this a lot when she was thinking, not that it ever seemed to help.

She hadn't mentioned to Edward that she had the key to the room; even she knew that that was probably a step too far. She wasn't even sure what she was planning to do with it. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but now she was left wondering what she was even thinking when she took it. Maybe she hadn't been thinking at all: she was just swept up with the romance and intrigue of it all.

She and Edward had watched the footage together in his office, for all the use it was. Over the last week, the room had been visited twice by two men together, and three more times someone had come alone. The cameras weren't clean or well-focused, and the footage was so hazy that it wasn't possible to make out much detail, so that the faces all looked like the same horrible blur.

She had argued with Edward that it didn't look like a relationship was going on, and she couldn't get the thought out of her head that there must be something more to all this than a simple infidelity case. Edward had assured her it was probably just wishful thinking on her part and nothing more besides. Even he had to admit that it was a strange kind of affair, when the people

involved in it didn't often go to the same place at the same time together.

It was difficult to argue with his experience, and he was certainly right that she didn't want it to be true. The thought of Rya finding out that her father was cheating on her mother with another man was sickening to her stomach. She would never believe it at first, but then, what might it do to her state of mind when she finally did accept it? What would it do to her to have her perfect little life come crashing down around her?

For once, Silver felt as if she was the lucky one. Her father had left when she was young. She had struggled and grown stronger from the struggle. She had learned to defend herself and was ready for much of what the world would throw at her. Rya was not. This would crush her.

From personal experience, she knew how hard it was for a young girl to escape the betrayal of her father. He was the one man above all others that she should be able to trust most. He was meant to be her guide to all men: he was meant to teach and prepare her for the world.

Being let down in all that was emotionally devastating.

Silver was strong. She was a person who could stand on her own two feet, but Rya wasn't. She relied totally on her family, and completely on her father. She wondered what it would do to her if she came to know the truth.

She grumbled to herself about having too much time on her hands to think, and a mind that went off too easily at wild tangents. But what if there was something else going on? Who really knew what was going on behind door 104? Maybe it wasn't what they thought at all.

The key lay on the bed next to her. It filled her mind, occupied every thought. It would be so simple to just go into the room, look

around, and see if there were any clues. What might the waste-bins reveal? What might lie at the bottom of the wardrobe, or be tucked unseen under the mattress?

She sighed. There would be nobody to relieve her this time. The cameras would be set to record and would be checked in the morning. She could leave in half an hour and go home, but her thoughts would never leave this building, not until she had answers to all of these questions.

At least for once, she got home on time. Her mother looked at her even more suspiciously, as if her doing what she wanted was even more a sign of guilt than anything else. “Nice to see you on time for once,” she said as Silver parked up.

The house had a very large living room, just over half of it taken up with furniture, and the rest used to park their vehicles. Her mother owned a small car, and moaned constantly about the traffic and how difficult it was to drive it in town. Silver’s scooter was tucked down the side, neatly out of the way, but it made it difficult even to get off of it.

“I’ve got more homework to do—I wanted to get back and make a start,” she explained, not entirely a lie for once, but not quite the complete truth either.

Mum put down her pad and gave her daughter a larger share of her attention. “How was work?”

Silver shrugged to herself and gave a little sigh. “Difficult.”

“It would be easier to quit,” her mother told her, with a sarcastic little smirk and a smug expression that just made her even more determined never to do so.

“I’m not going to quit!”

“You got a letter.” Her mother picked up the pad once more and settled back to whatever it was she was doing on it. In front of

her, a dubbed Korean drama was playing noisily away; a handsome young man and a pretty girl with a lost expression were hugging in the rain to overly dramatic music played at an inappropriately loud volume.

“A letter?” she said and frowned to herself. Letters were a rare thing in this town, since there was only one post office and even fewer postmen.

“From work, I think,” her mother said distractedly. “Your wages, I assume.”

“Right,” she grumbled. “Of course! From work!”

She locked the door behind her, keeping the world at bay, especially the intrusive world of her family.

She tried to remind herself that her mother cared about her, and that she was only trying to be supportive, in her own way, but it was hard to accept. Attacking her job felt as if she was attacking her life. It was so much a part of her identity now that she would be lost without it. She would always defend it fiercely.

She ripped open the sealed top flap of a large A4-sized manilla envelope. Her company had an alias that it used for communications. Officially, it was called, ‘Universal Imports.’ Edward had always told her that this was a very clever joke, and she’d figure it out one day. It did stop the wrong kind of people from knowing what they really did, and her mother certainly qualified as the wrong kind of person.

She pulled out the report inside and began reading through it. She sat on the edge of the bed and went through, scanning her eyes over the details, making sense of it all with keen, professional eyes.

“Yes!” she whispered to herself excitedly. “There has been progress at last.”

Dinner was the usual fare, a thin soup served with rice and pickles. Her mother was not an imaginative cook, and rarely stepped far beyond the very few dishes she was certain she'd mastered. Silver was far less certain about that and this may have been among the reasons that they ate out often.

"And what did you do today?"

Silver was roused from her thoughts and looked up. Her mother was looking to her younger sister, to whom the question had clearly been aimed.

Marita began to sulk and pushed food aimlessly around the bowl. "I don't know. Nothing. It was boring!" she replied moodily.

Their mother sighed to herself. "Cleaning up bathrooms is boring too," she said. "Education is what makes the difference. Pay now to invest in your future, or pay the price for the rest of your life."

"Yes, Mum," she grumbled. "You always say that. It's written on your company wall. We all know you didn't make it up yourself."

"It doesn't make it any less true," she told her evenly, but with a certain amount of forcefulness. She turned to spread some of the joy around the room and Silver cringed, knowing it was her turn next. "And how was your day?"

She had hoped that nobody would ask. "It was fine," she lied unconvincingly. She realised how unconvincing she had sounded when both of them were staring at her, looking as if they were going to speak.

She briefly wondered what their reaction might be if she just told them the truth. Perhaps she should say something like, 'My day wasn't great because I'm secretly working as a private detective and accidentally discovered that my best friend's dad is having an affair with a man who owns a local coffee shop. I tried not to let it get to me while I monitored the room all afternoon, trying to decide

whether or not to break in illegally and search for evidence. How was yours, Mum?’

On balance she decided against it and instead made up something that was also essentially true. “I’m having trouble in maths with equations and formula. I’ve downloaded some extra worksheets for practice, but I’m finding it hard.”

“Good,” her mother said proudly and turned to her sister, her expression suddenly changing to a frown. “Why can’t you try that hard? You should try to be more like your sister.”

“I don’t want to be more like her,” she protested angrily. “She’s fat and boring.”

“She’s not fat!” her mother scolded.

“I’m not boring!” Silver snapped.

“All she does is work, work, work,” she grumbled. “And all you two do is argue. Who wants to be like that?”

Silver just looked away. Who indeed? “I’m going out later,” she said softly, changing the subject with the subtlety of an SUV hitting a pedestrian.

Her mother rolled her eyes. “I don’t like you going out at night. Last night, not half a kilometre down the road, an SUV hit a pedestrian. People don’t drive safely in this town.”

“I’m just meeting Rya for an hour. She wants to talk to me. She’s not good at maths, either.”

There was more rolling of eyes. “She’s not much good at anything.”

This was a fair point and it was hard to argue. “She’s been my best friend for seven years,” she said. “I’m used to her many, many terrible flaws. You just have to learn to live with it.”

“Like a tumour,” she grumbled.

Silver shrugged, having nothing much to add to that. “Yes, like a tumour,” she agreed.

Rya was seated at the usual coffee-shop, not far from the school. Her dad liked it, apparently, and now she knew why. A rather graphic picture of her father's sweaty body entangled around that of the coffee shop owner sprung to her mind, where it wasn't entirely welcome.

She waved, but her face didn't have the usually cocky, self-assured grin pasted all over it. Perhaps she'd found out what had been happening, she wondered.

"Silver, I bought you a coffee," she said, pointing at a plastic cup on the round glass table-top. The coldness of the cup had made moisture run down around it and it was, by now, sitting in a small, but growing, puddle.

"Thanks," she said, taking a seat opposite. "It's 8pm. I don't normally drink coffee this late. I'd never sleep."

"And you need all your beauty sleep!" Rya grinned, that usual cockiness asserting itself momentarily.

"What I need is a new best friend," she grunted at her, flashing her a sarcastic smile.

Rya shrugged as if thinking that through very seriously. "I think we both do. But who else but me could put up with your bitchiness and horribly disfigured appearance?"

Silver frowned deeply. That was probably a little much. "I will concede that my bitchiness is somewhat out of control, but many people think I have a pretty face."

"Oh darling..." Rya said sadly, cocking her head to one side and looking very sympathetic. "People used to think that mixing coffee and milk was a terrible idea, but look at us now! We've moved beyond such primitive ideas as a society. Not you, of course, but proper people. People are often just stupid."

Silver just stared back incredulous, aghast. "Am I really not pretty? Not even a little bit?"

"Some people might think so," she said with a shrug. "Heng seems to think so, or he thinks you're desperate enough to put out on a first date. I'm not sure which, but I do have my suspicions."

"Did you just call me here to insult me?" Silver was starting to get annoyed, which was nothing particularly new. With everything else on her mind, this was all something she could well do without. For the most part, Rya was harmless, but the words she was saying were starting to reflect the darker thoughts in her own head.

She was in danger of crossing the line.

Rya grinned and said, "It wasn't the only reason."

Silver just frowned at her.

Suddenly, the grin was gone. Rya lowered her voice and said softly, "Something terrible has happened."

Silver felt a flutter of nerves as her stomach tightened. Had she found out about her father? It was certainly possible, she imagined. It was time to try out that poker face she'd been working on. "Really?"

"Really!" she agreed.

Silver waited and nothing happened. "Well?" she said sharply, growing impatient. "Come on, what happened?"

Rya looked around, but the shop was almost empty. Finally, she said, "It's Tara and Cara. I've decided to dump them."

"Is that all?" Silver sighed loudly.

"Is that all?" scowled Rya. "How bad do you want things to get? Don't you think that's bad enough for me right now?"

Silver looked at her and gave her a measured little smile. "For now," she agreed.

"I caught them making out together in the back of the car," she explained.

“You knew about that, though. You said you were OK with that.”

Rya nodded in agreement. “Yeah, but this time there were no clothes involved.”

Silver couldn’t help smirking at the thought that Rya thought that this was important, or even unexpected. Poker face. “No clothes at all?”

She shook her head, then stopped as she remembered. She shrugged and added, “Cara was still wearing her left shoe.”

“I didn’t think you had a problem with this,” Silver huffed.

“There was more to it,” she sighed. “They didn’t want me to join them. When I opened the door, they just told me to shut it and go away for half an hour. I felt a bit insulted to be honest.”

“If they had asked you to join them, would you?”

“No!” Rya crossed her arms defiantly. She looked as if the question had offended her. “Of course not.”

Silver was at a bit of a loss as to what to say.

“One time at school yesterday, Tara called me ‘Cara’, and on the Wednesday before that, Cara called me ‘Tara.’ I could see where their minds were, and they weren’t on me. This afternoon Tara called me ‘Tara’, which honestly just freaked me out a bit, and I think that’s when I decided I should end it.”

Silver tried very hard not to laugh, and just about won the battle. “Well, I’m sure you’ll find someone new soon enough.”

Rya looked away sadly. “Tara was very rich. I don’t think you understand how very rich Tara is. I’ll miss her.”

“Cara!” Silver corrected. “Tara was the pretty one.”

“Right, Cara,” she shrugged. “It doesn’t really make any difference, does it, not when they even forget which one they are themselves, sometimes?”

"I think you'll live," Silver told her. "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

"Ahhh." Rya yelled suddenly in exasperation. "I knew you'd say something stupid and selfish like that."

"What?" She gasped.

"My uncle got drunk and fell off the roof once, and broke his spine," she said angrily. "It didn't make him stronger, did it? It just meant he had to spend the rest of his life rolling around in a wheelchair, peeing into a bag."

"How dare you call me selfish?" Silver could feel her temper rising. "How dare you call me selfish! You're a fake lesbian, and your fake girlfriends have left you to go and be real lesbians together. So what? What difference does any of that make? Some of us have real problems to deal with. You might even have real problems yourself that you don't know about because you're too busy being a delusional, self-absorbed bitch."

As soon as she'd finished, Silver regretted saying every word of it.

"What?" Rya said softly. "What problems? I don't have any problems." She looked away and rubbed her nose.

Silver calmed herself down. She'd already said too much.

"Well I do! Everyone has problems. Real people have real problems."

"I think you should go," Rya said, her voice barely a hiss, and her face contorting into an angry snarl.

"I was thinking the same thing. I don't know why I bothered coming over here to listen to you. I don't know why I bother trying to help."

Rya glared at her. Seconds passed by, and her face never moved. Suddenly, she leant forward and snapped loudly enough to plunge the whole shop into silence: "Then don't."

Chapter 13

Silver and Rya sat together, staring at the whiteboard as the teacher wrote formulae for them to copy into their books, without very much explanation to back any of it up. What it meant was largely a mystery, and how he'd got a job teaching it was a larger mystery still.

"Silver," Rya whispered, just barely loud enough to be heard.

She looked over, surprised to be getting spoken to at all. That morning, the atmosphere had been frosty between them. Rya had seen her coming as she'd arrived at school, stuck her nose in the air, and made a big show of turning away sharply in an effort to ignore her. While Rya was flustering around angrily and blaming Heng for not looking where he was going after she walked into him, sending books everywhere, Silver had taken the opportunity to slink off and get her own coffee. She had sat on her own in the canteen, brooding moodily to herself while sipping at the almost terrible coffee and trying not to notice how almost terrible it really was. But she had been pre-occupied; her mind had been elsewhere.

"What?" she whispered back, expecting an apology. Well, not expecting one exactly, but just hoping.

"You can't borrow my pen," she told her frostily. "Not today. Today, no pens will be done the borrowing to."

Silver hadn't expected that, any more than she'd actually expected an apology. "I don't want to borrow your pen!" she exclaimed, shouting under a confused whisper.

The teacher looked around, frowned, and turned back to the board, tutting to himself the whole time. He began squeaking his pen noisily back on the glass-smooth white surface.

Rya put her pen on the left where Silver could easily reach it, as if doing so was taunting her with it. She straightened it, making a huge show of making sure it was absolutely parallel to the edge of

the desk. Silver watched in bemusement as she fiddled with the cheap blue plastic piece of stationery from the school store. It was nothing special at all.

“Well, you just can’t,” Rya sniffed proudly. “You can’t borrow my pen.”

“What?”

“I might consider letting you touch a pencil if you ask me very nicely, but this pen...” Rya told her firmly, with all the weight of an incredibly important announcement. “Never. Never shall you again borrow this pen again.”

“That’s my pen,” said Silver, no less confused. “You borrowed it from me last week.”

“It’s my pen!” she hissed, as loudly as whispering would allow. “I didn’t borrow your pen. I don’t borrow your things like a common poor person. I stole this pen from you last week, and now it’s mine. It’s mine, and you can’t borrow it.”

Silver reached over and took it, placing it inside her pale blue pencil case which smelled vaguely of scented erasers and wooden pencils.

Rya frowned at her thoughtfully. She hissed quietly, “I will admit, I hadn’t thought of that. It didn’t occur to me that you’d just take it. For that, I’m not going to let you borrow my pencil after all. I have thought about it, and on reflection I think it’s a bad idea. You must just learn to save your money, and get your own pencils.”

“I don’t care about your pencil,” Silver snarled, as if talking to a normal person, about something that made the slightest, tiniest bit of sense.

“Are you threatening to take my pencil?” she gasped.

“What?” Silver raised her voice, which earned another grumble from the teacher who, this time, didn’t even bother to look round at her.

“You threatened to steal my pencil,” she said, scowling angrily. “I feel threatened.”

“Well, I’m sorry if...” she began.

“I accept your apology!” interjected Rya, cutting her off quickly with a wide grin. “It costs nothing to be reasonable. I’m glad you finally realised that this was all your fault.”

“What?! I didn’t...”

“And...” she cut her off, barging her way forcefully into her stream of consciousness. “I accept your apology for your terrible behaviour last night towards your best friend, when she was feeling sad, unattractive, vulnerable and unwanted.” She looked as if some great horrible burden had been lifted. “How do you live like that?”

“What the hell?” Silver gasped.

The teacher turned round suddenly, put his finger to his lips, and loudly made a shushing noise to them.

Rya yelled, “You shush!”

“I can’t believe you managed to get a 500 word essay,” Silver said to her, finding it fairly amusing and much deserved. Actually, it was quite easy to believe.

“I’m not really sure what I did wrong. Maybe he’s jealous of how pretty I am, or how rich. Maybe he’s secretly being driven mad by his desire to have me.”

Heng, Cara and Tara (whichever one was which) were with them, standing in the corridor as she made this wildly inappropriate remark. They all winced at the thought of it, and grunted in disgust.

It was Silver who dared to speak first. “He’s nearly seventy years old, and is trying to teach you maths. The only desire he’s being driven mad by is the one to go home and die.”

“Oh no,” said Cara looking worried.

“Maybe he wants me?” Tara said, looking from face to face for urgent reassurance. She frowned as her eyes fixed on Heng, who looked back with the same expression a puppy might have if it was sitting at your feet with one of your favourite shoes in its mouth, a mangled mess of teeth-marks and saliva. “What are you?”

Heng looked behind him where, of course, nobody was. He pointed to himself and said with a confused smirk, “Me?”

“Yes. You!” Cara sniffed.

“He’s Heng!” Rya explained. “He’s got the hots for Silver.”

Tara rolled her eyes, something she clearly didn’t enjoy. “How awful!”

“We’re surrounded by crazy people!” said Cara with a huff.

“Come on, Cara, let’s go.”

Silver narrowed her eyes as she watched them turn and leave. “Get rid of them...” she sneered.

Rya looked at her and shrugged. “I’m having second thoughts. They do make me laugh.”

“Yeah, well, thinking isn’t what you’re best at.”

“And respectful sympathy isn’t what you’re best at,” she scolded, her voice barely a hiss. “So we’ll have no more talk of my life not being amazing. My life is the envy of everyone that isn’t me. Sometimes I even envy myself. That’s how great I am.”

Silver looked at her and couldn’t help but wonder. Did she know? Was she aware of what her father was doing? People usually knew, she’d found. Edward had told her many times and he seemed to be right about it. Wives knew their husbands were cheating on them on some level; boyfriends knew they’d been betrayed. People might not want to face it, but they usually knew. They didn’t hire detectives to find out the truth, they hired them in the hope of being convinced they were wrong about it.

Did Rya know what her father was doing behind door 104?
Did her whole family suspect, perhaps?

“So long as you’re happy...” she said blankly.

“I’m blissfully happy. I’m happy in a way that you could never hope to be.”

Rya had to know something was wrong. For once, her posturing was obvious, transparent, and as hollow as the person behind it. It was a defence that had grown up around her emotional wounds. Perhaps she was never as empty, vapid and meaningless as she pretended that she was. Perhaps...

“You’re just jealous because my life is amazing, and you’re just an overweight blob of bitchiness that nobody would ever want to date, unless he had the brains of a small chimpanzee with learning difficulties!”

Heng stood there grinning, and gave a little wave as they both instinctively looked at him.

“Alright, that’s it,” said Silver, incensed. “You’ve crossed a line now. I’ve had about as much of you as I’m going to take; I’m up to here with your bullshit.” She held her hand up to forehead and her eyes flashed angrily. “You can’t just go around insulting people, because your family has it a little better than the rest of us.”

Rya smiled cruelly. “Yes I can...” she hissed.

“Not if you don’t want me to slap that vicious little smile straight off your face, you can’t!”

“I don’t think I like the way you’re speaking to me right now,” Rya said haltingly. “In fact, I don’t know why I bother with you at all. Do I look like a charity? Why should a pretty, successful, popular, rich girl like me want to hang out with a mess like you?”

Silver flushed with rage. She fought back the urge to lash out as her blood boiled inside her. There was a throbbing in her temples as her heart pounded in her chest.

She clenched her teeth and angrily growled, “Don’t then! I’ll save you the embarrassment, and leave you to get on with your perfectly imperfect, pathetic and meaningless little life.”

As she turned, swiped up her bag, and stalked angrily towards the door, Rya yelled after her, “Good! I will! And you owe me a pen!”

The ride home went by in a blur. Rya dominated her mind: thoughts of her filled every last corner of her imagination. She ran over scenarios in her mind, imagined lashing out with a vicious blow that she so clearly, and so richly, deserved. She imagined herself telling her what was happening behind the door and crushing her with the immensity of the news. She imagined what might have happened if she’d just backed down and let her oldest, best friend just win this one little battle.

Maybe she was right. Maybe she was just a mess? Maybe she was just a damaged little girl who missed her daddy, and this was something she just couldn’t escape or grow up from. Maybe all this was really her own fault, and while she never really believed it, she couldn’t shake the feeling that the blame was largely hers. Was it all her fault? All of it?

She parked up and stepped away from her bike. She stopped to look back at the thing. It was hers in name only. It had been bought and paid for by her mother, a gift that she’d never earned and done nothing to really be worthy of.

Even her job was something she’d blundered into and, perhaps, she owed everything to Edward who had mentored her and taught her everything she knew. It was he who had turned a naive little teenager into the one thing in her life she felt even remotely proud of.

Rya looked down on everyone, thinking herself better because her family had given her special privileges, but was Silver really any

different? She'd been born with advantages of her own and she revelled in them. But what had she done for herself? What had she really achieved that made her special, that really set her apart? What did she really have that she could be genuinely proud of?

Her mother was at work, her sister still at school. She went to her room in silence, without having to talk to anyone, and that was just how she needed things to be.

She felt empty inside, as if a chunk of her soul had been scooped out. The fight with Rya had shaken her to her core, not least because of their history and their closeness over the years. But it was also because it brought to the fore the things that troubled her about herself. It made her face the things that bothered her, to be confronted by the things she was least willing to face. There were things about herself she was still scared to confront.

She stepped out of the shower, a blue towel wrapped around her, and another in her hand as she towel-dried her hair roughly. She was still preoccupied with it all. Was she a mess? Was she really so very different from everyone else? If not, why did she have so much trouble fitting in?

She stood in front of the mirror and looked into her own face, her own sad eyes. She threw off the blue towel and it came to rest in a crumpled heap, half lying on the bed, half draped across the floor.

She stood for a moment just staring at herself in the mirror as she stood naked before it. She sighed as she ran her hands slowly along her sides to her hips. She wished she could be a little slimmer, and perhaps not so tall. Maybe she'd look better if her shoulders weren't so broad, if her skin was a different colour. She looked at her face and wondered if she was pretty. Were her eyes too far apart, too small or too big? Was her nose too wide, too large, and did it fit her features properly? Was she good enough? Would anyone she liked ever really want her?

Why did nobody want her?

She just stared at her reflection, and for a moment she just wished above all else that she could be different, just different. With a tear just starting to trace its way down her cheek, she wished she was just someone that people wouldn't want to leave.

Chapter 14

After changing into normal, everyday clothing, Silver made her way to the office. Today her heart wasn't in any of it. She felt as if her emotions had been dragged through the dirt already and she wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed with a good movie, a bucket of chocolate ice-cream, and to cry herself to sleep before seven o'clock.

She normally managed to keep such things under control, choosing to ignore, rather than face her feelings, but lately, they were coming to the surface, and they were coming so fast that she was afraid she might drown in them.

She was confident that she could hold her own in this man's world she lived in, not just surviving, but doing well. But the inescapable fact remained, though, that she wasn't a man. They seemed to ride on top of their emotions, rolling along the surface of them so easily and she tried to do the same. But she couldn't. Her heart pricked at her too strongly; she was fighting back a tide that would one day engulf her, and she was starting to realise that it was coming, and perhaps there was nothing she could do to stop it.

She rode along without enthusiasm and pulled up outside, kicking the stand down and sitting for a moment, just waiting. She took a deep breath and looked at herself in the little bike's mirror as she hung her helmet onto the bike, not really thinking anything, just staring sadly for a moment into her own eyes.

The job made everything else tolerable. So she'd had a fight with her best friend? It wasn't the first time, and it probably wasn't going to be the last. So what, if Rya had said things that had hurt her? It didn't mean they were true, and even if they were true, getting upset about them wasn't going to change anything about it.

Marcus simply wasn't interested in her. Maybe she just wasn't his type? She really didn't know that much about him, since he spoke so rarely about himself. Maybe he had a girlfriend; maybe she was just too young for him, or maybe he just didn't have time for a relationship. There were so many reasons for things being the way they were that she didn't need to take any one possible explanation and accept it as the only one. She was a smart, intelligent girl, and she knew that much, at least. She was certainly smart enough to know that life wasn't fair.

So why did it all hurt so much?

She stepped into the office with a false smile painted on her face, assuring herself that she could do this, and that nobody would be able to tell how empty she felt inside. She was a professional, after all. She was young, but she held herself to the same standard as all the other agents. Her emotions were her own, and they were hers to control. They'd be nobody else's problem, she told herself.

Marcus looked up as door swung closed with a soft click. He looked straight back down again.

"Morning, Marcus," she said with a happy-looking smile on her face.

"It's the afternoon," he grunted back at her from his research.

She huffed at herself, cringing disproportionately at her very slight mistake. She tried again. "Good afternoon, then. How are you?"

"Busy!"

She frowned to herself and thought sarcastically about how well that had gone.

Edward flung open the office door and stepped outside, closing it gently, pushing down the brass-coloured door handle and gingerly pulling it shut. He looked worried: the colour had drained

from his usually quite ruddy cheeks, and his eyes locked onto hers with an expression somewhere close to panic. He took a deep breath.

Silver's eyes widened and she waited, slightly worried about what she might have done wrong this time.

"Silver, I've got someone in the office," he told her, taking a moment to glance back at the door. His voice was barely above a whisper.

She stepped forward, getting increasingly concerned. She'd only seen Edward look this worried a handful of times before, and all of them involved a woman he'd met while drunk.

"Silver," he said through a shallow breath, while he looked straight at her and bit his lip. "I've got the client here. He insisted on coming to the office. Now he insists on meeting you."

"Me?" she pointed to herself as she said it out loud, her voice rising at the surprise. "Why me?"

He huffed, sighed and shrugged back to her. "You were the lead agent in setting up the observation and you recognised the subject. He wants to meet you and ask you some questions himself."

She looked at him, and then quickly glanced over at Marcus. He looked up for a moment and their eyes met. He shrugged and looked back to his work, the blue-white light of his monitor glowing in his pretty eyes.

"This is unusual, isn't it?"

"Pretty unusual," he agreed with a nod which gave way to yet another heavy sigh. He looked back and sharply inhaled a lungful of air. "He doesn't know how young you are so, unless it comes up, don't mention your age."

"OK," she agreed, and nodded back.

“If he asks, just make a joke about it; say it helps with your work, and really you’re in your mid-twenties, or something,” he told her, his voice strained and dripping with stress.

Marcus looked up but didn’t turn his head. He said, “She does look like she’s in her mid-twenties, so that shouldn’t be a problem. Even if she doesn’t act like it!”

For a moment, her heart fluttered. Had Marcus thought about her much? Had he not shown any interest because she was just too young for him? Had he considered it and thought she was just a teenager, but then thought, perhaps, that she was impressive and mature and showed some real professionalism? For just a moment, she dared to hope.

“Ready?” Edward almost gasped.

Seeing him this flustered only made her even more nervous, but she nodded and said, with a knot of tension growing in her stomach, “Yes, I’m ready.”

She wasn’t ready at all. As she stepped into the office, she began to realise that. Adrenaline made her heart flutter, and sweat began to prickle at her skin uncomfortably. The man stood up to meet her. He smiled quite warmly, but he had a tangible presence: he was a man who commanded authority.

He was around average height, but above-average build and looked fit. He was middle-aged, but clearly took care of himself, and had none of the more obvious signs of advancing age. His hair was still brown with just a few hints of white, and it looked as if it was still the original colour, not dyed or artificially coloured.

His eyes seemed friendly but serious. They peered into hers, measuring her up expertly. She felt somehow as if he had stripped her secrets bare; as if he had peered into her soul and everything about her was his to know.

“You must be Silver!” he said, more a statement than a question. He held out his hand in formal greeting.

Reflexively, and without a second thought, she reached out her own hand and they shook. His grip was firm and confident. Without even realising it, she had decided that she liked him.

“I’m Peter Nicholson,” he said, flashing her a neutral smile. He politely remained standing while she took her seat. Edward shuffled around the desk to his own chair. It was all suspiciously tidy; he’d evidently put in a considerable effort into giving a good impression. Considering that the usual effort he put into keeping the office tidy didn’t extend very far beyond getting someone else to do it, this was rather an impressive feat.

The client sat down, watching her the whole time with an odd smirk on his face. She flashed him a little glance out the side of her eye. He was looking straight at her, but as their eyes connected he looked away. She knew that his interest in her wasn’t sexual, but wasn’t entirely sure how she knew that. Whatever his interest really was, she wasn’t entirely sure about that, either.

Something about all this was very odd.

“So you’re Silver,” he began. “I gather you’re the lead agent in my investigation. It’s you that quite expertly set up the surveillance, and identified the subject. Is that correct?”

She felt a swell of pride at his words. Whatever this was about, she wasn’t there to answer for any apparent failings in her work. He seemed more curious than anything else.

“Yes, that’s right.” There seemed no need to tell quite how she came to identify the subject. Some details were better kept to herself.

“I’ve read the report,” he continued. “It was impressive work for someone of your age. I was especially impressed with your recovery of the hotel security videos.”

She looked at Edward who looked back to her. His lips opened and he breathed in, leaning forward as if about to speak. He said nothing, though.

“I am young...” she agreed, and looked back to him. She flashed him what was intended to be a professional smile. “But I’m lucky enough to have had an excellent, and very experienced, teacher who has guided me every step of the way.”

He nodded to himself and looked back to Edward. “Very good,” he said with an expression of satisfaction. “You’ve done excellent work. All of you.”

Edward’s face broke into a smile of relief.

“And with that, I think that we’re about done,” the client continued, clapping his hands together. “I’ve got the information I need. I’d like you to conclude the observation now, and I’ll arrange payment by the end of the day.”

Edward looked slightly awkward, and shuffled nervously in his seat. “You know, you do have three hours left on the block booking?”

“I know,” he said with intimidating authority which dominated the room. “Naturally, I’ll pay for the remaining hours, as you’ve entirely fulfilled your end of the contract...” He turned and flashed a glance at Silver. He added, “And admirably so.”

She flushed proudly, and for a moment all her problems were forgotten. “Thank you,” she said. And with that, her nature got the better of her: she felt compelled to ask more. Somewhat shyly, she began, “Can I ask why the subject was under surveillance?”

As soon as she’d said it, she realised her mistake and wished she could take back the words.

Edward flashed her an angry glance and sharply inhaled a deep breath, sucking it noisily in through his gritted teeth as she cringed inwardly.

The client looked at her with a wry little grin. “Curiosity. A commendable trait in the young. I imagine your job must be like that of a postman, always delivering packages. Inside those boxes are mysteries, something of incredible importance to someone else, and your job is to bring that importance to someone else’s life, without ever knowing what it contains or what impact that might have.”

Silver just stared, a confused look on her face and a slightly vacant grin.

He continued, “I imagine then that one of two things will happen. You will either come to accept that what’s inside the boxes will forever remain a mystery to you, and will slowly close yourself off to it. Eventually, you will convince yourself that it simply doesn’t matter; that you’re content to remain forever in ignorance.”

Silver was fascinated, she’d never considered anything like this before. “Or?” she asked.

“Or you’ll end up having to open the box to find out what’s inside,” he told her with a shrug. It was obvious really. “I wonder what you’ll decide to do. I wonder what kind of person you really are.”

Silver left the office, her head spinning. All the thoughts of her argument with Rya churned around, mixed up with the truth of what her perfect family life might really be like. Her own personal problems rolled around her head too, thoughts mixed together like fingers trailed through a palette of paint and then smeared across a dirty canvas.

What this man had said had made sense to her. In many ways her job, the secret part of her life, was just a way of making sense of the chaos; and that the truth hiding behind the cracks in the wall was something she was striving to find. The truth of the world, the

truth of herself...it was there somewhere and she was struggling, through her work, to find a way to discover it.

Now she was facing a new realisation. Was she really just an agent that delivered an unknown package? Was she no more than a cog in the wheel, never driving itself any closer to the secrets that hid behind her veil of reality?

What was she? What had she really become?

Despite the confusion, the pride remained: the warm glow spread through her body and the smile on her face was, for once, the real thing. Nothing could take that away from her and, for now, she was floating on a cloud of acceptance. She not only belonged, but was good at what she did. She was elated, and just for a moment, she let herself be happy.

“You’re a bitch!” said Marcus suddenly, bringing this tiny fragment of happiness crashing down around her harder than if the roof had collapsed on her head.

For a moment, she was speechless, and her mouth gaped open in silent surprise. Her mind couldn’t register that the words she’d heard were the words her brain thought it had heard. The gap between the two was vast, and the sound echoed about in the chasm between the two.

Eventually, she cried out defensively, “What?”

“You’re a bitch,” he said again, hammering the message home so the part of her brain that was desperate to deny hearing it was completely out of luck.

“What have I done?”

Marcus’s face was screwed up into a growling expression of frustrated rage. “Some of us actually work, you know? Some of us actually deserve to be here. I trained for this in three different countries. I worked in law-enforcement for a year to qualify for my

certification. I have experience, I have training, and I am the one person in this office who actually knows what he's doing."

"But..." she began, backing away and not knowing what exactly she was meant to say to him.

"Then along comes some young office girl who flutters her eyes at the old man running the company. You get the old fool's head filled with stupid ideas, and the next thing I know, you're the lead agent in actual field work, when you've got no more idea what you're doing than a dog behind the wheel of a car."

Her lips opened as a part of her brain decided to say something. The rest of her brain stopped it, since it had nothing much to offer. A squeaking sound came out.

"You're nothing but a nuisance in this office," he grumbled, the bulk of his anger spent.

She'd never heard him raise his voice before; he seldom even looked up from the screen.

He looked her up and down in disgust, and more calmly he sneered, "I can't even imagine what he sees in you."

If he'd have punched her in the guts, it might not have hurt so much. She teared up instantly, her eyes reddening almost as soon as he finished speaking. She bit her lip and choked back tears, fighting the flow that was swelling up behind her eyes. From anyone else, it would have been a horrible thing for her to take, but from him, from Marcus, from the man she secretly had deep and confusingly strong feelings for, it was intolerable. It was all too much.

She stood for a moment, her knees shaking, her head swimming with self-loathing as all the buried, hidden fears and bottled up things she most hated about herself swam to the surface. Rejections, doubts and the worst anxieties about the way she looked jumped up, all vying for attention, all happiness, all pride completely blotted out by the shadow of this unstoppable swarm of doubt.

She was alone. Edward was in the office with the client, Rya had abandoned her, her mother had been emotionally absent for years, and her father was long gone. She felt as if she had always stood alone, and was finally now buckling under the weight of this burden that she didn't have the experience or the strength left to cope with.

She wanted to say something that would crush his petty jealousy, but she had nothing. Her mind was clogged solid with the load. Without realising it, she was running to the door. Her breath was ragged as she heard herself panting in shallow, rasping pants. She was desperate to escape. She had to get out, with the urgency of a person gasping for air in a vacuum, or drowning in the depths of a deep dark well that was trying to swallow him whole.

She heard the door slam as she dashed outside, closing it with all the force she could muster, and then she gave in. The floodgates fell under the pressure, and the tears began streaming down her face. She slammed her helmet over her head, the dark visor locked down so nobody would see, and she took off, plunging her little bike out into the traffic, hoping it would simply swallow her up.

Chapter 15

It was only her professionalism that got her to the assignment at all. Most of her mind was screaming at her to go somewhere else, to run forever and never look back. She wanted to go somewhere where none of this mattered, where she could be accepted just for who she was.

She took off her helmet and hung it on the mirror. She ducked down to look into the other one and stared for a moment at her reflection as it gazed sadly back at her.

She sniffed loudly. Her eyes were reddened and puffy, and there was no disguising the fact that she'd been crying. On the ride to the guest-house, she'd sobbed, she'd wailed, and she'd cried her heart out. Huge salty tears had streamed down her cheeks as the floodgates that usually held back the torrent of emotions gave way and she temporarily lost control.

She forced herself to stop feeling it all. She swallowed down her emptiness, the gnawing hollow feeling inside that was devouring her. Marcus's words were bad enough, but that final look he gave her was burned into her mind. He'd looked up and down and sneered at her in disgust. He thought nothing of her. He looked down on her and rejected everything she was, and spat on everything she'd tried to make of herself. It was destroying her from the inside out, clawing away at the tired shreds of whatever it was she was left hanging onto.

Wearily, she went inside, turning away to ignore the staff, keeping her head down while she fiddled aimlessly with the keys, hoping to be ignored. She was in no mood for a discussion with them or anyone else.

She trudged up the stairs, which were quicker than the lift anyway. Her soft shoes barely made a sound against the cream-

coloured floor tiles that led her to the end of the corridor. She looked up, focusing on the door, thinking about nothing else for a moment. She didn't want to think about anything else. She wanted to sink everything she had left into the job and let it consume her. She wanted a short, brief respite from all this, and working was the only way she knew that she'd find it.

She turned the key and went inside, giving one final look back to the door opposite, room 104.

Baz was lying on the bed, fiddling with his phone and looking bored. The room smelled vaguely of banana-flavoured biscuits and coffee. There was a faint aroma of cigarettes where he'd clearly made an effort to blow smoke out through an open window. The smell turned her stomach, but at least he'd tried.

"Are you here to relieve me?" he grinned to himself, closing down whatever it was he was doing on the phone.

For a moment, he didn't look up as she shut the door behind her. He didn't notice her face, and she wondered how long it was going to take before the questions began. Once they started, how long would it be before she buckled?

"We're clearing out," she said softly. "It's over."

Now he did look up. Her voice, even though she'd struggled to keep it even, to keep all hints of emotion out of it, had cracked. There was no disguising that something was wrong.

"Hey, are you alright?" he asked, clambering to sit up straight. With the bed creaking and groaning under him, he shifted himself up and swung his legs out to the side.

"I'm fine," she said. She frowned and turned her back to him, but her shoulders slouched and her head was hung. For even a terrible detective, the message was clear.

“Did you have a crash? Are you hurt? I’ve seen how you ride. I’m amazed you’ve gone this long without hitting anything, to be honest.”

An involuntary smile fluttered across her lips, and even the act of smiling lifted her spirits just a little. “I didn’t crash,” she told him, turning to peer at him out the side of her eyes. “The bike’s fine. I’m fine. Really.”

“Boyfriend?” he persisted.

Hearing the word made it feel like a splinter of ice had been rammed through her chest. She closed her eyes, swallowed, and tried to compose herself.

“Do you even have a boyfriend?”

She looked at him and smiled at the irony. “I don’t,” she said.

“I don’t have a girlfriend either,” he told her with a shrug. “It’s all too much trouble. It’s like you find this person you like, and then slowly discover how wrong you were to feel that way in the first place. It’s like very slowly pulling a rubber mask off a monster in an old cartoon.”

She shrugged and looked up into his sympathetic gaze as he looked down into hers. A friendly smile was on his lips and it reflected warmly in his eyes, lighting them up and brightening his whole face.

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” she said again very softly.

“Well,” he shrugged. “Life has a million ways to get you down, kick you while you’re down, get you even further down, and then kick you some more. I guess you know that already?”

She nodded. With a wry smile, she whispered, “That sounds about right.”

“So what is it then? Family? Absent father? Overbearing family? A boy you like doesn’t like you back? Big fight with your best friend? Pressure at school? Trouble at work? What?”

She nodded at all of that, and then began to cry. She tried to stop the tears, but she just couldn't fight it anymore. As she gave in to it all, the floodgates didn't open: they shattered, as a wave of feelings washed through her and she was simply dragged along with it. All the pain seemed to come at once, crushing her. She could hear the sound of herself sobbing loudly.

She felt a pair of arms wrap around her, and she slumped down into them. Without even thinking about it, she flung her arms around him too, holding him tightly as the tears rolled, the emptiness inside finding its way out.

"It's OK," she heard him say, and she felt safe in his arms. She felt protected from the world. She held him close, feeling her body pressed up against him as he held her. He patted her head as if he was soothing a wounded puppy. She wasn't terribly impressed with that bit, but being held more than made up for it.

The crying quickly died down, and they were just there. The room was silent, except for the sound of them both breathing. She could feel the rhythmic thumping of his heart beating in his chest, and felt that, at the same time, he must have felt hers. She felt connected to him, to something real for once, and she found that she liked it.

She pulled back her head and looked up. He was a little taller than her and was looking down with a slightly worried frown over a warm little smile.

"Are you alright?" he said.

She was. She actually felt a lot better, either from letting the emotions out, or because he was there, supporting her. She suddenly felt very close to him and held him tightly. "I'm OK," she sighed, just loud enough for him to hear.

She looked into his eyes, and the pair stared for a moment rather too long. A fresh wave of emotion crashed over her, but not

dark and awful like before. This was something different, but she was being swept up with it just the same.

She leaned in, stretched herself upwards and their lips met. Before she even realised what she was doing, she was kissing him. He began to kiss her back. Their eyes closed as they floated along on the sensation of closeness.

Suddenly, he pulled away. He looked at her with a confused expression. "I shouldn't..." he said, but clearly it wasn't his heart doing the talking.

She pushed herself into him and said softly, "I want to."

They kissed again, and she felt herself melting into the feeling of being surrounded, of being washed away with someone. The kissing became more intense, and she felt an urgency building up inside her. The feelings that had stirred within her were growing: they were becoming a need, and she felt as if all she wanted to do was to give in to them.

She felt his hand at the base of her skull, pulling her into him as she pushed back. His other hand traced over her hip, over the tight denim of her jeans, and tracing up under her blouse, caressing the skin beneath.

"Ow!" he snapped, pulling his head back suddenly and frowning.

"Sorry," she winced, realising she had bitten his lip a bit too hard and drawn a little blood. It wasn't enough to break the spell, and they were kissing again before she knew what was happening.

"It's fine," he muttered through their tangled lips, his tasting vaguely of bananas and tobacco.

As his hand reached up under her shirt, a sudden wave of doubt hit her. Was she too fat? Would he be disgusted? Were her breasts too small, too flat, too wide? Would he reject her, too?

She followed along, her own hand searching the skin of his back up under his shirt.

The pair began shuffling towards the bed, but he misjudged it, tripped, and fell backwards onto it, landing in a heap as the bed flexed painfully beneath him. He lay there for a moment with a silly grin painted on his face.

She looked down. Was this a good idea? She worked with him; they had known each other for a long time. What would Edward think of all this if he were ever to find out?

He reached up his hand for her to join him. As their fingers met, she knew that, for right now, in this dingy little room in this one moment, she just didn't care about anything else.

She went to him, and again his arms were around her, and everything else just seemed to melt away. The stress, the anxiety, the constant wonder of whether she was really good enough just didn't matter anymore.

He wriggled under her and threw off his T-shirt, discarding it rudely into a pile on the floor.

His skin was pale, paler than his face and he was a little hairy, which suddenly seemed odd. She'd never thought about him without a shirt on before, and now here he was, unbuckling his belt and grinning, with a slightly hairy chest, a bad tattoo on his shoulder, and socks that didn't even come close to matching.

Her own hands began unbuttoning her blouse. She found herself thinking, 'This is really happening? Am I really doing this?' But she was. Her hands were moving quickly. She was throwing off her clothes just as quickly as he was, and she almost felt like an observer, just watching as this was all being played out in front of her.

She could barely believe this was all happening, let alone that it was happening with Baz. It seemed almost surreal. She could stop

it all at any time, just turn away, put her blouse back on and say it was all a horrible mistake, but she didn't. She didn't feel as if she was in control. Something primal was driving her, some need that he just might be able to fill.

His grin widened as she unclipped her bra. There was a final moment of hesitation before she took it off. Her hands cupped her breasts, holding them in place. She could feel the smile on her face, an awkward, stupid little smirk that was carving itself across her lips whether she wanted it to or not.

He sat up quickly and began kissing her. She gave into it, throwing her arms around him and her bra fell away. Now she could feel his skin against hers, rougher and more masculine as he held her. His hands searched her skin, running all over, sending tiny electric shocks through her, up and down her spine.

She could feel him fumbling at her jeans. He was groping at the button that held them up. It was really happening now. Once they crossed that line, there would be no going back. She knew that if she let this happen, she was going to let it all happen. Surprising herself, she found she had no great problem with that.

After a few tense, impatient moments, she grumbled at him, "Not like that. It opens the other way." She fumbled with it herself for a few seconds and it unlatched, falling open.

Now the kissing was urgent. The last of the clothes were falling off, and passions were rising. She could feel his breath shortening as he became more excited, more aroused.

He pulled down her underwear and they were finally naked. To her relief, he never mentioned her body; he never recoiled from anything, never even so much as frowned. He just carried on, exploring her and making her feel accepted and whole, all the while grinning happily.

They sat on the bed in a naked embrace, kissing as his hands traced freely over her body, caressing her all over. Finally, he whispered in her ear, "Are you sure?"

She grumbled at him, a low grunting noise before she sighed to herself. She pushed him back hard, surprising him. He lay there looking up at her, happily confused.

She jumped on top, aroused and ready to go as far as he would take her.

Chapter 16

She lay there, staring up at the ceiling, slightly breathless, and her thoughts rather jumbled, fogged by the stark reality of what she'd just done. Her naked body was covered with a fine misting of sweat, and was being cooled by the running air conditioner. Much of the sweat wasn't hers, which was a thought that just wouldn't settle comfortably in her mind.

She lay there thinking about nothing much in particular. Her mind was numb for a moment, and she was floating along on a cloud of indifference where, somewhere, something inside her mind was shouting out loudly about what a complete idiot she was.

Baz moved around next to her, making the old wooden bed creak and grumble and the mattress flex its well-worn springs.

She heard his voice say, "Wow. That was pretty intense. I certainly didn't see that coming."

"Intense!" she agreed, as her mind came back to reality slowly, dragging itself out of a moment of quiet reflection in which she had tried to drown her problems in a shallow puddle of regret.

"I didn't know you felt that way about me," he ventured enthusiastically. "How long have you been wanting to do that?"

"Oh, I don't like you," she replied somewhat bluntly, turning to face him quickly as he lay naked beside her, his head propped up on his arm.

He frowned, looking a little confused and a tiny bit hurt.

She realised that she should have thought that comment through a little more. She tried to make up for it by saying, "It's not that I don't like you. It's just that I don't find you attractive. Not that you're unattractive—it's just that you're not really my type." She cringed at herself; this wasn't going well. "I just like a different kind

of man, normally. I normally go for intelligent, good-looking men!" This wasn't going well at all.

"But what, then?" he shrugged, looking a tiny bit more hurt, and much more confused than before. "Did you just use me? Am I just a conquest for you? Am I nothing more than a piece of meat?"

She looked straight at him, into his slightly pained eyes. "No, I do like you as a person. I just got caught up in the moment, that's all."

"Filled with passion, were you?" he said and lay back, grinning to himself.

She smiled sympathetically. "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to throw myself at you. That was a mistake—you just caught me at a low point."

"It was my pleasure," he said, slumping back down on the bed. "You're lucky it was me that was there to catch you."

She lay there too, her left arm covering her breasts, her right covering her pelvis. It somehow made it all a little more tolerable, even though she knew it was a bit late for all that now. He had done much more than see her naked already.

"Silver," he called out softly, his voice taking on a serious note. "Were you a virgin?"

"No!" she snapped grumpily. "Why would you ask that? Did you get the impression I was a virgin when I threw you on the bed and jumped on top of you? Is that the normal behaviour of virgins, do you think?" Then an even less pleasant thought occurred to her about why he might have asked that. "Was I not very good?"

"No, you were fine!" he told her quite non-committally. "It's just that... you're young, and I wondered if you'd ever slept with a guy before. I mean, you're clearly very self-confident, it's just... you know..."

She didn't, and had no burning desire to have it explained to her. Very grumpily, she said, "I'm glad I was fine!"

"I mean you were good," he said, sounding not entirely honest and probably a little worried.

There was a long period of silence, and she spent it frowning at the white plaster ceiling.

His voice cut into her thoughts. "I was good?"

She turned her eyes towards him. "You were fine!"

"Just fine? I mean, it's actually been a while and I wasn't really ready for it. I hadn't even showered today. You don't expect your colleagues to strip you naked and throw you on a bed in the middle of the afternoon."

"Yes, I know," she told him. "But you always secretly hope, right?"

He shrugged. "Well... Probably not Edward. I don't think anyone wants that, do they?"

"So me, then?" she asked. "You always secretly hoped?"

"You mean, did I ever think about having sex with you?" he asked, and then shrugged again. "Sure. I think about having sex with everyone. I think about sex a lot. I just don't actually do it very often."

"Clearly," she agreed with him. "Saying things like that is probably a part of the problem."

He rolled over again noisily, shaking the whole bed. "I wasn't very good, was I?"

She sighed, "You were fine." Suddenly, she realised that she didn't really want to talk about this, and he was the person she least wanted to talk about it with in the whole, entire world. "It was quick, but it was fine, I guess."

"Quick?" he said, thinking it over. "Next time will be better, I promise."

“Next time?” she cried out, sitting up suddenly. “What do you mean, next time?”

He looked hurt again. “No next time? I like there being a next time. Next time is often my favourite time.”

It hadn’t been an entirely horrendous experience, but the thought of repeating it had simply not occurred to her yet. Faced with it now, she really didn’t know how she felt about all this. “I don’t know. I haven’t exactly had time to think all this through.”

“Me too,” he admitted. “The blood hasn’t gone back to my brain yet.”

She grimaced at the thought, and had a sudden, overwhelming urge to take a long, hot shower. She wondered if there was any bleach.

A shower and a few minutes to think did help to clear her head. There was no heater, but the cold water running over her skin was raw and physically jarring, a welcome break from the sharp little emotional problems inside her head to be washed over with something so real and simple.

She couldn’t wash away her mistakes, take back the argument with Rya, or change what had happened with Baz. Those things would have to be dealt with, no matter how much she might wish they wouldn’t.

She stepped out of the bathroom, wrapped in a small white hotel towel that was just a little too small to properly cover her up.

She smiled to herself and said, “You know? When I walked into this room, I thought I had problems, and then this happened and my problems don’t really seem so bad anymore.”

He sat upright, blowing smoke from his cigarette out of the window. He was still naked but had, at least, put a towel across his middle. “Because I’m so good?” he suggested.

She smiled at him thinly. "No, Baz."

"Fair enough," he said, taking a last drag and then flicking the butt out of the window. "You know, if this became a regular thing, I'd be OK with that."

She began hunting for her clothes while holding the towel in place. "I'm sure you would, Baz."

"I don't just mean an occasional sex thing," he assured her. "I'm thinking of the real thing, with dates and stuff. I would actually take you to dinner first, next time."

"That's so romantic," she said sarcastically. "You'd actually take me to dinner before the occasional sex thing? I really am a lucky girl, aren't I? I feel like I'm finally living the dream!"

He continued thoughtfully, "I think I could do better next time. I think I could last a bit longer."

"I don't really feel like being your practice toy," she told him bluntly.

He began to smirk. "Did I give you an orgasm?"

She looked at him and gave him an acid glare. "No, Baz. You didn't give me an orgasm. I don't think I really want to talk about this anymore, OK?"

"OK!" he said. He sighed and looked out of the window again for a moment. "I had an orgasm."

"I know you did. I was there for the whole ten seconds leading up to it, remember?"

"It wasn't ten seconds!" he said defensively. "And I did say I'd do better next time."

"And I said there wasn't going to be a next time."

He looked at her and frowned. "You never actually said that. You said you hadn't decided."

“That was before you wouldn’t shut up about it!” She found her underwear and flung it on the bed. With that, her sad little pile of clothes was complete.

“What if I shut up?”

“I don’t know,” she said earnestly. “At this point, it actually seems like you’re incapable of doing that.”

“I’ll shut up then.”

“Great!”

She scooped up her clothes and looked at him. He made no signs of turning away, covering his eyes, or doing anything else that might suggest an awareness of the situation. With a sigh, she turned back to the bathroom.

“All I’m saying,” he persisted, beyond all sane reason, “is that it doesn’t seem quite fair that I had an orgasm and you didn’t. I mean, you are already naked.”

“What?” She could scarcely believe these words were coming out of his brain, anyone’s brain, or anyone at all with a brain that had any kind of functionality whatsoever. “Are you seriously suggesting that we should go again?”

He shrugged and said with a smirk, “Well, you are already naked.”

“Baz,” she began quite calmly. “If you don’t shut up, not only will that be the first, last and only time you have sex with me, but it will be the last time you have sex with anyone, because I will kick you so hard in the nuts that you’ll cough them out a few seconds later; and their journey through your body will be so swift and violent that they’ll leave a sizeable dent on the inside of your skull.”

“I was just trying to be fair,” he protested. “Does your mother know you talk like that?”

She glared at him. “Life isn’t fair, Baz. Nothing about this is fair, is it?”

“It’s fair on me—I had an orgasm. To be honest, this is turning out to be a pretty good day for me, so long as you don’t end up kicking my nuts straight out of my mouth.”

She couldn’t help but smile. “OK, Baz.”

“What?” he asked with a huge grin. “We’re going again?”

“No, I mean I won’t ruin your day by kicking your nuts straight out of your mouth!” she told him, heading off to the bathroom.

He grunted, “If it was up to me, we’d go again.”

They sat on the bed, dressed. It was almost as if it had never happened, and only her memories of it remained; the awkward memories of their tangled up, sweaty naked bodies; the grunting, the moaning and that weird, screwed-up face he made right at the last, final gasp.

“So we’re done!” Baz said after a lengthy pause and with a notable little sigh.

“Are you still going on about this?” she grumbled.

“No,” he said. “I mean the job. We’re packing up and heading out? We’ll never know what’s been going on behind that door?”

She felt a little pang of conscience about her lack of professional conduct. Having sex with her colleague was probably more of an issue, though, on balance. “Yeah, we’re out.”

“Nobody came today,” he said. “Who knows what’s been going on in there?”

“Yeah.”

She thought about this for a moment. The client’s words resonated with her more strongly than ever. Was she just a postman, delivering a sealed package, destined never to know the truth behind the wrapping? What was her real motivation? Was she doing this to get to the truth, or was it really just a job to her, a

means towards getting money, the money a means towards getting what she really most wanted in the world?

“You know, I think I do want to know what’s going on behind that door,” she said, and suddenly it all became a bit clearer. She knew what she had to do.

“Well, me too! But how?”

She looked him straight in the eye, eyes she’d looked into while sharing the most intimate thing two people can experience. Now, she wanted him to follow her into something else. She suddenly needed him more than ever.

She bit her lip awkwardly, and his face seemed to soften, something like a lovesick teenager staring at his lifelong crush. She frowned slightly at him disapprovingly and said, “Baz. I have a way to get inside.”

“A way to get inside?” he said, intrigued. “Inside of what?”

“Edward can’t know about this,” she told him firmly. “If we do this, we’ll have to turn off the camera and do it ourselves. It can’t have anything to do with the agency. We can’t leave any evidence.”

“This is exciting,” he said, grinning.

“Baz...” she held out her hand and slowly opened the fingers. Inside, was the way they were going to do it. “I have a key to 104.”

Chapter 17

She was nervous. Her heart was strumming in her chest, and her head felt light with anticipation. What was inside? What questions would be answered, and what challenges might face them once the door to that room opened up and let them in? She looked up and down the corridor, as if at any moment someone might just step out of the lift and see her.

Baz stood behind her, awkwardly peering around with the expression on his face of a man in a paddling pool with his jeans rolled up, but who was already a little way out of his depth.

“How did you get a key anyway?” he whispered, despite nobody being around who might possibly hear them. She held the key just in front of the lock. It hovered in her hand, which shook very slightly as she wondered just whether or not this really was a good idea after all. It was happening regardless: if nothing else, that was one thing she was absolutely sure of. “It’s the spare. I took it when I copied the security video footage.”

“We would be in so much trouble if we got caught in there,” he noted redundantly.

She stepped back a tiny bit, shuffling back into him. He jumped in surprise as she touched him, and then looked around like a startled cat.

“Do you think we shouldn’t do it? I mean, nobody has been here for days. We’re pretty safe, right?”

“Yeah, but if we did get caught in there...” he said. The sentence trailed off, not needing an ending, as they both knew what the consequences would be.

“But don’t you want to know what’s behind that door?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“Of course,” he told her. “This is fun. It’s like we’re living in a detective story. Not a very good one, maybe one aimed at a young adult audience... But still, it’s an adventure.”

She thought about what an odd thing that was for him to say. “Well, it’s now or never. You can go and hide if you want to: I’m going in. If you don’t have the stomach for it, go downstairs and keep a watch for me.”

“I want to see, too,” he assured her firmly. “Why should you get all the fun?”

She looked at him, her eyes narrowing into a sarcastic sneer. “Well, you got all the fun earlier, so I think that’s only fair.”

“Hey! I said I’d do better next time.”

“And I said I hadn’t decided if there’d be a next time.” She held out the key, now just a few millimetres away: a tiny push forwards and she could turn the lock and step inside. “I’m doing it.”

With that, she struck out with the key, clicking it into place inside the brass barrel. It slipped in with a ripple of tiny metallic pins.

“Did you actually stick it in?” Baz gasped.

She grunted to herself and said under her breath, “That’s exactly what I was wondering earlier. Let’s hope this doesn’t turn out to be quite as disappointing.”

The door opened and they slipped quietly inside. Baz took one last nervous look back, and then clicked the door shut behind them.

“You know I can pick locks, right? I mean, what kind of private detective can’t pick locks?”

Silver felt a huge swell of exhilaration: her heart fluttered, and then began pounding in her chest. She could feel the blood throbbing in her ears. Her stomach was knotted tight, and her breathing was shallow. She grinned to herself, feeling alive—really, truly alive. This was what it was all about for her.

She slid inside the room and looked around. It was almost identical to the one they'd been set up in on the other side of the corridor, just backwards and opposite, like looking at the reflection of the same thing in a mirror. The bedclothes were the same shade of dark green, faded lighter at the edges from the ferocious tropical sun, and even more ferocious Chinese laundry soap. Nearby was a small, neatly folded pile of fresh towels that hadn't yet been touched. The room smelled both clean and musty at the same time, but somehow neither one nor the other. The unmistakable scent of cleaning fluid hung on the air, the door not being opened in some time to let it out, and the heat had made the air feel stale.

There was nothing there to be seen, nothing to make it stand out as anything beyond an empty room. There were no dead bodies piled up in the corner, no damning evidence to be seen, no large grey filing cabinets filled with proof, arranged neatly into alphabetical order for easy reference.

Baz gasped from behind her, shocking her out of her thoughts as her eyes scanned over every detail.

"What?" she almost cried out at him.

"Nothing," he said with a shrug. "I was just expecting something more, that's all. No need to say anything sarcastic to that, by the way. You can let just one of them go by, can't you?"

She grinned back at him. "I think I've made my point already."

"We should go," he said, peering back out towards the empty corridor. "There's clearly nothing here. This was a bust!"

"You go," she told him boldly. "I just got here. I'm searching the place. Edward said that everything is a sign, and every object has a story to tell. Every item can say a word, and an intelligent mind can make those words into sentence that can tell us everything we might ever need to know. This room has a story to tell us."

“Really?” he grunted. “Edward also once said that Feminism is probably proof that god is a man with a sense of humour, and the devil is a woman without one. At the time, he was very drunk on cheap gin and expensive tonic. You know he gets most of his pearls of wisdom from old black and white movies, right?”

“I know that,” she hissed at him under her breath. “I know you don’t respect him, but he’s helped me more than any man ever has. He has always been there for me, even when nobody else was. He believes in me.” She looked around, her eyes focusing on every tiny detail, not that there were many. It seemed like a very ordinary empty room in a very ordinary guest-house. But it couldn’t be: there had to be something.

“You don’t have a thing for Edward, do you?” Baz gasped. She glared at him. “No. Why?”

“I just wondered if I had any competition, that’s all!” he told her, sounding a little jealous.

She rolled her eyes at him.

“Just checking!” he protested loudly. “So then... What exactly are we meant to be looking for?”

That was an exceptionally good question. “I don’t know. You take the bathroom, I’ll search in here. Look for anything that stands out, I guess.”

They quickly went about a rudimentary search, both of them pretending to themselves that they had a vague idea what they were doing, and had the vaguest clue as to what they might be looking for.

Baz called out, not quite quietly enough, “I’ve found a toothbrush. It’s dry and it smells vaguely like toothpaste. I’ve also found some toothpaste and an open bar of soap. What sentence do these words spell out to you?”

She rolled her eyes some more. “Well, at least that tells us that someone has been spending some time here. Someone has been sleeping here at some point.”

She opened the wardrobe and found a few items of clothing. She quickly went through, searching pockets, and rifling through for any signs of something solid, or even the crinkle of paper that might be lurking in a pocket. Inside were three locked drawers with no key in sight. She muttered a word under her breath that would upset her mother.

She jumped up and quickly ran her fingers along the top edge of it, hoping that the keys might have been hidden there. There was nothing but dust and half a dead mouse. She squealed discretely and wiped her hands on her trousers.

“I found some coffee next to the kettle,” Baz said very seriously with an angry frown.

“So?” she said sharply.

“We didn’t get any free coffee!” he grumbled. “Why didn’t we get any free coffee? Why did we have to buy our own coffee like peasants?”

“Baz, focus!” she told him. “We need to get out of here as quickly as possible.”

“There’s nothing here! All there is in the bathroom is a few hygiene products and a small set of keys that don’t fit anything.”

“Keys!” she snapped up suddenly. “Where?”

“Hanging up!” he told her, pointing back to the wall they were swinging around on. “They were just hanging next to the window on a little peg.”

“Get them!” she told him with a sense of urgency, as a fresh wave of excitement washed over her.

He went back in, grumbling to himself about not being her slave, or something to that effect. As the promise of there being a

next time hung over him, he effectively was and she didn't pay a great deal of attention to it.

He passed the little ring of keys to her and she snatched them up eagerly as she moved again to the three locked drawers. They were soft, dark coloured wooden things. They wouldn't stand up to a serious amount of pressure and the keys were tiny, with barely any teeth. The locks were flimsier than the wood. Still, any damage would be seen, so forcing them open simply wasn't an option.

She flicked the first of the keys into the last of the locks in the bottom drawer. If anyone had something interesting to hide, they'd usually put it in the bottom drawer, Edward always told her. It wouldn't turn and a small amount of pressure began to cause the key to flex.

"Any luck?" he said, peering over her shoulder.

"No," she grunted and switched to the second key. It latched and turned to the right easily with a small but satisfying click. She beamed into a wide smile. "We're in..."

"Well?" he asked excitedly.

She pulled the drawer out sharply. Inside were many packets of still more coffee; large silver and gold-foil packs of ground beans. She rummaged around inside, hoping that there was something more. There wasn't. "It's just coffee," she moaned.

"There's loads of it though!" said Baz, impressed. "Let's take one."

"You think it might be evidence?" she asked seriously.

"Evidence of what?" he shrugged. "Look again. It's free coffee!"

For some reason, she grabbed a bag and angrily flung it at him, slammed the drawer shut and locked it. She moved up to the next one. It opened on the first try.

"Empty," she said with a sigh.

“And the last one?” he said, his attention focused on the bag of coffee, which to him was clearly worth the risk of getting caught.

She snapped open the last drawer, and her mouth fell open. “Wow!” she muttered with a happy smile.

“Is it free sugar?” Baz said excitedly. “Cigarettes? It couldn’t be free beer?”

She wanted to punch him in the throat, but that was probably something that could wait for later.

“Better,” she told him. “It’s a passport and a sealed manila envelope. It’s actually real, genuine, actual, proper evidence at last.”

“There’s no beer?” he asked. “Did you get right down the back?”

“There’s no beer!” she snapped.

He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “OK,” he grumbled. “I was just asking.”

She quickly got her phone and began snapping pictures of what she’d found. “OK. This is as good as it gets. Put the keys back and let’s get out of here.”

Baz didn’t need telling twice. “What about the envelope?” he grunted as he headed to the door.

Silver took a moment to take a last look around. There was a single window leading out to a ledge beyond. If someone was in the corridor, there was, at least, some way out. But this was the moment of truth. If they could make it out of the room without anyone seeing them, then they were free, and would have completely gotten away with it.

“I can’t risk it. If we open it, they’ll know.”

Baz pressed his ear up against the door for a moment, just listening for any sign of movement outside. Satisfied that there was nothing beyond, he gingerly, slowly and endlessly cautiously began

to open the door. He peered out through the crack up towards the lift.

Satisfied it was all-clear, he quickly slipped out and she followed him. As they did, he pulled the door closed behind them until it clicked shut once more.

Just at that moment, they heard the lift make a clunking noise. Silver looked up the corridor and gasped. The key back to their own room was still in her back pocket, and the doors would swing open at any moment.

They were outside, exposed and caught with no hope of escape. If they were seen, how could they explain why they were there?

Baz looked at her. She looked at him. His eyes were wide and his mouth began to gape open. Her heart pounded, her head swam.

The lift doors fell open with a swooping mechanical clatter and a foot began to step out.

Quickly, without even thinking about it, she threw Baz to the wall and began kissing him.

He was stuck somewhere between surprised and thrilled about it and began to respond, even before he realised what she was actually trying to do.

He pushed back, his lips pressing hard against hers.

Suddenly, they heard a cough. Both of them stopped and realised that whoever had stepped out of the lift had come straight up to them. They looked at one another for a moment and both looked concerned. It was over: they had been caught. Her attempt had failed.

Excitement gave way to fear as she looked slowly over.

A young woman, with a look on her face as if there was just nothing left in the entire world that she cared about, sighed and

held something up.

“You want towels?” she asked wearily.

Chapter 18

Silver ate distractedly, her mind somewhere completely different as the family chewed their way through some take-away fried rice, and something with noodles, which all tasted as if it was made almost entirely from chilli and garlic, with some green things thrown into it for style.

“What did you learn at school today?” her mother asked her with a sigh, breaking the awkward silence across the dark wooden table.

Nobody seemed interested in answering, but finally Silver looked up. “Nothing,” she shrugged. She actually smiled a little, as she realised how much she sounded like her stropy little sister by saying that. Perhaps they weren’t so totally different, after all. She tried again, saying, “We reviewed some material in maths, and we went over reflexive-pronouns in English.”

“And you’re confident with the material?” Mum asked with an accusing frown.

“Of course I am!” she said a little too sharply. “I did all the review questions myself. Some of the students couldn’t do it themselves; Rya tried to do it herself, but failed, as usual.”

“You had better not fail!” she warned.

Silver said nothing. She took another mouthful of rice that was so spicy that, if she dropped it, it might burn a hole straight through the ceramic floor tiles. “I have homework tonight,” she said. “I need to study, and I think it’s going to be a late one.”

“Hear that?” she said, turning her attention to her sister who huffed and looked away. “Your sister is going to study tonight, but you bring no homework home as usual. I wonder if I called your teachers, would they tell me that you got no homework today?”

“I didn’t get any!” she grumbled and pushed around some of the terrible food with a fork.

“I need to get started,” Silver said finally. “I’ve had enough to eat, and I’ve got a lot to get through tonight.”

Her mother glared at her at first, and then reluctantly nodded in approval. Their eyes met and there was the same usual tension between them that was always present in that house. She stood up to leave, and then made her way to the kitchen to drop her plates by the sink. She was followed by the sound of her mother grumbling at her sister for her continual lack of effort. She grinned to herself that, lately, it wasn’t she who was the target of her mother’s frustration at how her life had turned out; and made her way off to her room.

She locked the door, pushing in the brass button until she heard the very satisfying click of the metalwork sealing the door. She had made herself careful through routine practice: it was second nature to her now, and she spread out some study material on the bed, even though she had no intention of using it. It was just for show, if her mother invited herself into her bedroom.

She opened a tatty old laptop and plugged the charger into an even older, tattier plug socket that was barely still fixed to the wall. The two pins rocked around in the holes until the little orange charging light lit up.

She switched it on. It was loaded with Linux Mint, a far more secure operating system than anything else, and it was faster too. It booted in seconds, and the screen flashed to life with her menu items along the left. She opened a web-browser, hers being set up with every imaginable privacy option so her internet use would be as anonymous as possible.

All this had been learned through work. Edward had insisted on using the most secure equipment, just in case. At first, she’d just

thought he was paranoid, but she'd come to respect that this was the better way.

She opened one of her many fake online accounts and began searching for the name of the man in room 104. She had his name, his date of birth, and his country of origin. He was Keith Peterson, the most boringly-named man in the whole history of boring names. He was in his early 50s, and had been born in England. He was chubby, with flushed cheeks, his hair was white and almost gone, and he would look at home in the corner of any bar, any cafe, any restaurant in any town. He wasn't a person you'd notice in a crowd of any size.

But as much as he looked like a nobody, he was most definitely a somebody. There was a reason for his being in that room, and something just wasn't adding up properly in her mind. It was even more confusing that his passport was there. That meant that this couldn't just be a relationship that Rya's father was engaged in. This just had to be something else.

She began to search.

The next morning, she was even more distracted than she had been the night before. As she walked through the school gates, Heng was standing around waiting for her, forcing all thoughts of Keith Peterson scuttling to the back of her weary mind. He grinned widely as he saw her and began walking over towards her. His attention, no doubt, was to annoy her as he lumbered over with a fixed grin, while sloshing coffee from a plastic cup. It was likely that annoying her wasn't his actual intention, but it was going to be the net result, she felt sure.

"Silver!" he said with boundless enthusiasm, the kind of enthusiasm that only a teenage boy, with a car and no real understanding of how the world works, could have.

She winced as she heard him calling out to her, closing her eyes and cringing inwardly. “Heng, I’m busy,” she told him firmly, hoping against hope that he might take the hint.

His expression fell as if his smile had been held up by wires hung on a nail above his head, and someone had cut them all with a pair of scissors. “But you just got here!” he mumbled softly in weak protest.

She stopped and huffed, drawing in a deep breath and resigning herself that, even though it was going to be brief, a conversation of sorts was going to happen anyway and was largely unavoidable. “I’m sorry, Heng. I know how you feel about me, but I just don’t feel the same way.”

His face fell a little more, as if someone had taken those same strings, tied them to a brick and dropped it. “I was just saying hello,” he said softly, his voice barely a murmur as his eyes looked down sadly.

“Heng,” she began. “You’re a nice person, so long as what I hear about you skinning cats when you were younger isn’t true... But I just don’t see you the same way that you see me.”

“I had to skin them before I could cook them...” he muttered to himself, unknowingly destroying any last lingering shred of hope he ever had.

She flashed him a sad little smile. “Heng, sometimes people just want a certain kind of thing. They can’t help what it is that they want, they just want it. We don’t always get to choose who we are or what makes us happy. Some people like blue, and some people like pink. It’s just the way we’re made.”

“I like orange,” he grumbled, the point evidently not getting through.

“I’m very flattered that you like me,” she told him. “It’s really sweet, but I just don’t feel the same about you and nothing that could ever happen would change my mind about that.”

She watched as his shoulders sagged, as if he was being deflated. It all began to resonate with her, far more personally than she’d intended. Marcus had rejected her. The way he’d looked down on her made her realise exactly what he thought of her as a person. Perhaps it wasn’t her fault; perhaps his tastes didn’t reflect on her at all. It was just what it was. Life was like that and it was nobody’s fault. It was just life.

“I have a car,” he whimpered, sounding desperate, sad, sadly desperate and desperately sad all at once.

“I don’t need a man with a car,” she told him more firmly. “I don’t need a man to give me anything that I don’t already have.”

He looked up at her confused, which was his usual expression, minus the grinning.

“If I choose someone to be my boyfriend, it won’t be so that he can give me the things that I want. I’ll choose a man who can help me be the person I want to be.” For a moment her thoughts flashed back to Marcus. What was it exactly that she saw in him anyway? They’d barely even spoke: she knew next to nothing about him. Was it just about the way he looked? Was it all just a silly infatuation?

“Don’t you want to be a girl in my car?” he tried hopelessly.

“No, Heng! I’ll choose a man that’s got things in common with me. I’ll choose someone that likes what I like, that challenges me and helps me to grow, while I help him to be the best person he can be, too. We’ll both have dreams that are similar, and we’ll chase after them together. We’ll make each other better people by being together.”

“And you don’t dream of being in my car?” All this was clearly just too much for him to process. “What if I let you drive?”

“Heng, I’m very flattered that you like me, but I just don’t feel that way about you,” she told him quite firmly now, as any degree of sympathy seemed to be detracting from the message.

“Never?” he shrugged.

She shook her head sadly at him. “Never,” she agreed.

He looked down and huffed.

“We can be friends, but nothing more. I hope that’s alright with you.” At least she was being nicer about it than Marcus was. She reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Heng.”

“It’s OK,” he said, his voice a mere whimper. He held up a plastic cup of black iced-coffee, wrapped in a transparent cellophane bag. “I bought this for you, but I don’t think you can have it because you don’t take things from men or something. I can’t say I really understood a lot of what you were saying.”

She took the coffee from him. “Coffee is the exception to every rule,” she assured him. “Friends can buy me coffee. In fact, maybe that should be a rule on its own.”

Heng frowned as his brain tried to work. “So, now we’re only friends, and I have to buy you coffee?”

She nodded back and began sipping at the cool, bitter liquid. “I think that would be best,” she told him with a wink.

Heng’s face lit up once again, with a wide goofy grin.

“Great!”

Chapter 19

She sat on her scooter for a moment, staring at the door, and the door seemed to stare back, mocking her somehow. Marcus would likely be inside since he was by far the best researcher they had. He rarely left the office unless they were short in the field, and, with the case wrapping up, he was quite unlikely to be anywhere else but at his desk.

She had behaved emotionally yesterday, and there was really no way he wouldn't have noticed. She had turned and run out hurriedly, before crying openly like a child with a skinned knee. It was hard to imagine how anyone might not have noticed! Even a blind, autistic psychopath, who thought that a fidget-spinner was a great idea, would have spotted that one.

She had given him power over her, shown him that he was in control. This was quite a long way from ideal, and she had put considerable thought into going through every way she would have done things differently, if she could somehow turn back the clock.

But she couldn't.

Edward had trained her well, in terms of pressing her advantage, taking charge of situations and keeping her emotions in check. It was always a wise thing to do, he had explained, but rarely was it ever the easy thing to do. He always told her that she was young, and that she had time to learn, but that just seemed like an excuse now. It wasn't good enough to hide behind her age, not any more.

So, she sat on her motorcycle and she stared at the door, knowing she would have to go in and face him sooner or later. She tried to prepare herself mentally for that eventuality and she wasn't doing a very good job of it.

Finally, she stepped off slowly, hanging her helmet on the mirror without enthusiasm. The work had become her life, and she always took to it with such eager relish—but not today. Today was a day where she would have to face running away from Marcus, and then running into Baz.

She stepped up and swung the door open, wincing to herself as it creaked with a customary groan of the old woodwork and rusted, dry hinges.

Marcus, for once, wasn't behind his computer, where she would have preferred him to be. From that vantage point, they could at least pretend to ignore each other. Instead, he was perched on the edge of his desk, thumbing through a file. He looked up as she came in, huffed to himself, and looked back down, trying his best to ignore her anyway. From the look of him, he felt as bad about this as she did.

She looked away, sighing to herself. This was going to be awkward for both of them. She wondered if she should go over and apologise for losing her temper and running out as she had. It was unprofessional, at least. Maybe she should simply ignore him; perhaps she should be angry and confront him for the things he had said.

He sighed and slowly hefted himself up from the desk, moving as if his slender body was actually huge and ungainly. He looked over to Baz who was sitting at his own desk, his feet up on it, dislodging a pile of papers and junk, some of which had already spilled over onto the floor.

He very slowly stepped over to her, the file hanging limply at his side, his head hung sadly.

Silver frowned and looked away as her face flushed in embarrassment. She felt the tension in her shoulders and was sure

her face was reddening. Worrying about that seemed only to be making it worse.

“Silver,” he began haltingly, stopping for an exaggerated intake of breath. “It occurs to me, on reflection, that I should apologise to you for some of the things I said to you yesterday.”

Silver just wished all this would end. She nodded in agreement and muttered, “OK.”

“I was upset, obviously, but I have to say that I’m sorry about the way I spoke to you.”

“Thanks,” she said, her voice barely a whisper. Then she heard her own voice saying, “You were a dick!”

“Yes!” he agreed, casting a look back at Baz, who was grinning happily. “That also occurred to me.”

The little voice inside her seemed to be finding the strength to grow louder. “Marcus, you have no right to speak to people the way you spoke to me,” she told him angrily. She wondered where these words were coming from, since she didn’t seem to quite have control over them. “You’re constantly angry at me for doing my job, when I’m just trying to do my best. It’s not my fault that I’m younger than you, and maybe a little luckier. Life is like that sometimes, and it’s about time you learned to accept it.”

She glared at him and felt a surge of anger welling inside her. “Of the two of us, it’s you that needs to grow the hell up, not me!” she told him sternly. “Now, we’re a team and we’ve got a job to do, so why don’t we get back to it?”

“Right...” he said with a huff. His attention turned to the file he’d been carrying the whole time. “I’m writing up a report on the surveillance. This is pretty much it for today’s workload, unless anything happened that you didn’t include in your report?”

“There was one thing!” she said, quickly stepping forwards. Baz also sat up sharply and began to look worried. “The name of the man

who was renting the room. His name was Keith Peterson, around 50 years old, and British. It wasn't the coffee-shop owner."

Marcus looked impressed. "How do you know that?"

Baz continued to look worried.

"I had a chance to look at the register. His passport details were in there, so we know it's his real name."

"Great," Marcus shrugged. "I'll put it in the report."

"No!" she snapped.

"No?" Baz and Marcus said together, freezing on the spot.

Marcus stared at her and his left eyebrow twitched upwards.

"We need to look him up. We need to find out who he really is!"

Marcus began shaking his head, awkwardly amused. "What would be the point? We've already done what we're being paid to do, and the client is happy with that."

She felt a swell of anger light her up from inside. Through gritted teeth she said, "Marcus, I wasn't asking you, I was telling you. I'm sorry if I didn't make that clear. We're going to look him up, and we're going to find out everything we can about him. I already tried for hours and found nothing. You're more experienced than me, so I need you to do it."

Marcus's eyes locked onto hers, and his mouth opened as if he had something to say. If he did, nothing much came out.

"Keith Peterson, 50 years old, give or take, British," she stated once again. "As the lead agent in this investigation, I'm not handing in what I consider to be an incomplete report. We're doing this properly and professionally."

There was an awkward silence for a short time, before eventually Marcus spoke. "Fine. Leave it with me," he said, turning his attention back to his desk.

“Great!” she said, with no slight surprise. “Thank you, Marcus.”

She allowed herself a smile as the wave of anger melted and was washed away by a growing rush of pride instead. Whatever control she’d let slip away was now back, and she would never make that mistake again. Now, she needed coffee, so she took the cue to exit into the kitchen.

Baz followed her in and said in a hushed tone, “Wow!”

Silver nodded in agreement and couldn’t hold back a broad smile. She said, “I’m finishing this, Baz.”

He looked shocked, and took a moment’s pause before replying, “You’re talking about the case, right? You’re finishing the case?”

It was her turn to look confused.

He glanced around the door at Marcus, who was now quite occupied at his computer, and then turned his attention back to Silver. He leant in forwards, lowering his voice yet further. “You’re not finishing things with us? Right?”

She leant inwards and lowered her voice to match. “There is no ‘us,’ Baz. It was just a silly little mistake.”

“My Mum always said I was just a silly little mistake, but look at me now!” he said.

She looked at him now, and found it quite difficult to be anything more than unimpressed. He was dressed in the same jeans as the day before, a T-shirt that looked as if it had retired several owners ago, and his desk looked as if it had been fished out of a canal.

“I think I’m going to side with your Mum on this one,” she told him with the brutal kind of honesty a person like him probably needed to hear.

“Well, I’m not going to force it. All I’m saying is that I had a good time, and I’ve started to think that I could really get to like you,” he whispered. “This isn’t just about sex for me. Have a think about things and let me know what you decide. You’ll get no more pressure from me.”

She looked at him and found, to her surprise, that the idea didn’t make her want to violently gag. “You’re one of the scruffiest things I’ve ever seen, Baz. You’re less tidy than the dustbin next to your desk. In fact, you’re less tidy than your desk. Your clothes look as if you fought a homeless person for them, but somehow everything else about you makes it look as if you still managed to lose that fight. You always smell a little bit like a dog that was recently on fire, and you don’t care about anything that I think is important.”

“All fair points!” he agreed. “I’m not saying that there’s no room for improvement. I could certainly use a woman’s touch, I will accept that!”

“Perhaps. If that woman had endless patience, thick rubber gloves and a cattle-prod, maybe!” Truth be told, she wasn’t as entirely opposed to the idea as she could, and maybe should, have been. She actually found the attention quite flattering; she was beginning to enjoy it. Being around him somehow made her feel more adult, more complete. She felt more like the person she really wanted to be. To her surprise, she caught herself smiling and noticed that she had stepped a little closer to him.

“So that’s a definite maybe?”

“I do love how the words I say leave my mouth meaning one thing, and arrive at your ears meaning another,” she sighed. “No pressure, remember! I’ll have a think about it and decide if your mother was right, or if I need to buy a very large cattle-prod. I have

to warn you that the girls are probably going to be sticking together on this one.”

“That’s all a man can ask!” he smirked at her.

“Baz!” she turned to him and bit her lip thoughtfully. She was almost afraid to ask but she did so anyway. “Why me? Is it just because I slept with you?”

He shrugged. “Why not you? I never thought of you like that before, but afterwards I got to thinking how cool it would be. We’re both into the same crappy movies, we both have chest pains from drinking too much coffee, we’re both private detectives who look good naked, and we both use all our natural talents to earn barely minimum wage while putting ourselves in mortal danger for no good reason whatsoever.”

A little smile fluttered over her lips. “You think I look good naked?”

Baz nodded in what seemed like sincerity. He said sarcastically, “I think you do! Not as good as me, of course, but I can’t hold you to those kind of ridiculous standards, can I?”

She turned away and looked quite pleased with herself.

“What about me? Do I look good naked?” he whispered suggestively in her ear.

“Sure,” she shrugged. “When you’re not wearing those horrible, crappy clothes, it’s easier to decide where to stick the cattle-prod.”

Marcus looked up from behind his computer and said loudly, “Come and look at this.”

Silver came over first and leant over his shoulder, craning to see what he’d found. The chubby, white-haired man’s face was staring back at her.

“This must be him,” Marcus began. “He’s English, and he’s been living around Asia for the last ten years. He’s involved with several investment companies and some export services. It’s actually not that common a name, and he’s the only one linked to financial interests in this part of the world, so I guess it must be him.”

“Yeah, it’s him! He looks just like his passport picture.”

“Well, here’s a list of his business interests.” Marcus pointed to an area of the screen that showed a sizeable list of investments in companies with immediately forgettable names. It didn’t seem like this was a man to trust with your life savings.

“Any with ties to this country?” Baz asked, swept away in the intrigue.

“Several,” Marcus told him. “But where do we start? We don’t even know what kind of business this man is meant to be dealing in.”

Silver rubbed her chin. “We could investigate the client.”

There was an awkward silence, before Marcus spoke. “Why would we do that?”

She was getting out of her depth now and she knew it. So far, she’d been able to justify her interest as professional, but she was in danger of wildly overstepping the mark. “If we knew where his financial interests were, we would know which of the companies the two of them were connected with.”

“No,” Marcus said firmly.

“We’ve done it before,” Baz told him evenly. “For big contracts, Edward always likes to investigate the client and find out what’s going on. He calls it threat assessment.”

“We can’t investigate our own client. We don’t know anything about him, so we wouldn’t be able to even if we really wanted to.”

“We really don’t know anything at all,” Silver grumbled. He was certainly right about that.

“Well, what do we know?” Baz rubbed his chin and perched himself on the edge of the desk. “I mean what do we really know about any of this?”

Silver smiled as it hit her. “We know that Keith Peterson has had dealings with my friend’s father,” she said with a smile. “Maybe he’s the key to all this.”

Chapter 20

Rya was sitting by herself. She was playing on her phone, tapping away at the screen, paying no particular attention to the world around her, as if everything that was out of her immediate field of vision simply didn't exist. She was in the corner of the coffee-shop, exactly where Silver had expected her to be. Rya was a simple creature, one of habit and routine, so predicting her movements was easy enough.

She took a deep breath and mentally prepared herself to step inside. The glass door swung open heavily against a spring, and an electronic ping chimed as she pushed it wide. Still, Rya never looked up from whatever it was that she was doing. There were a few others in the shop, similarly occupied with their own phones and laptops which had become their whole world for that time.

Silver braced herself once more for what she was sure would be a relatively unpleasant encounter. Still, at that moment, all she cared about was the truth, uncovering it and finding out what all this was about. It consumed her, and she had no choice. There was just something about all this that filled her with an unavoidable curiosity, and she simply had to know.

The words the client had said to her had touched her deeply. She really wasn't satisfied anymore with delivering reports: she needed to go deeper: she needed to unravel the mystery and get to the truth. She felt as if he had almost challenged her to do it.

Rya looked up startled as she pulled out a chair, and it grated noisily across the floor. Her eyes narrowed defensively as she looked up and saw who it was. "What do you want?" she grumbled. "Go away. Go be fat somewhere else."

"We need to talk," Silver told her. Her voice was firm and confident, and left little room for any protests. It was the tone

Edward used when he was giving briefings, when he was warning agents not to overstep their boundaries, and when he was handing out the toilet cleaning rota on Monday mornings. She even impressed herself.

“I’ve got nothing to say to you!” Rya flung her phone down on the table and sneered at her. “You want to apologise to me, do you? I think it might already be too late for all that.”

“No,” Silver said simply. “I’m done apologising to people for the stupid things they’ve done to me. I’m here to talk to you.”

She shrugged and flashed her teeth behind a sarcastic smile. “I don’t care what you have to say.”

“Rya,” she began softly. “I know.”

Rya peered at her and her smile dimmed. Suddenly she looked uneasy. Silver had hit a raw nerve. “You know what?”

Next to nothing, if truth be told. What she did know was that below the surface of Rya there was almost nothing else. She also knew that whatever was going on, there was a good chance that Rya would know something about it. She could use one of these things to bring out the other, if she could make it appear that she was in control of the situation. As Rya could barely manage to dress herself, getting her to tell her everything shouldn’t be too hard.

“I know!” she said again, more firmly this time.

Rya’s face fell and she glared back at her suspiciously. “You don’t know anything. How could you know anything? How could you know anything and have hair that awful?”

Silver took a deep breath. Rya knew something: there was no doubt about it. Whatever it was that was going on, it was worrying her a great deal. “I know about your father. I know what’s been going on with your family, I know all about what’s been going on.”

Rya recoiled away, pressing herself backwards into her chair. She gasped in surprise. “How? How do you know?”

“Does it really matter how?”

Rya’s surprise turned to anger, “So you know. So what?”

“So we’re two best friends that have had a silly fight, but we’re not children anymore. You’re a rude, stuck-up little bitch who treats me like shit, but I’m willing to forget all that and put the past behind us. It’s not as if I’m going to tell anyone else about it.”

Rya looked away, an angry expression on her face. Suddenly, it melted, deflated; her posture softened. “What do you want?” she huffed finally, as if she was just too tired to fight all this anymore.

“I really just want to help. We’ve been friends for a long time, even though you’re a completely horrible person to everyone around you. If you were a dog, we’d have strangled you. Heng would probably have skinned and eaten you. Still, I’ve known something has been wrong with you for quite a long time.”

Rya looked up sadly. “Did you just compare me to a dog?”

Silver nodded. “A terrible one, yes.”

“If anyone finds out...” she let the words hang. After a pause, she looked up at her with a pair of very sad eyes. “You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

Silver shook her head. “If you let me help you, then of course I won’t,” she said, remembering how Edward had taught her to give the person a good reason to want to work with you. It seemed so easy to lead the conversation along when you knew how to do it.

Rya sighed deeply. “OK then.”

“Start from the beginning, then. How did all this start?”

Rya tutted to herself. At first, she seemed to be fighting back the words, then a vague smile fluttered over her lips and her face softened. Perhaps it was a relief for her to finally talk about it.

“My Dad has no money. His businesses all went bad a long time ago, and he lost everything. He borrowed and he borrowed; he

even worked with my uncle, but he couldn't make enough to pay off all the debts he'd built up."

Silver listened intently as it all poured out.

"They threatened to take his land because he used it to secure loans to buy his car and set up his business. He had to drive a nice car, have a nice watch, the latest phone. He said that if he had all of those things, then everyone would think he was a success and business and money would just come to him. It didn't work, and soon it was obvious that he was going to lose everything we had.

"That's when he met this English man. He offered him a business opportunity. He had to raise enough money to buy into it, but it was huge, so long as he didn't mind breaking a few minor laws. He sold everything, even though we had nothing much left to sell. Our house is just empty now: there isn't even any furniture left inside. We all sleep on a mattress on the floor under a fan.

"Still, he borrowed more and more. My Mum and Dad fight all the time now, and they're always shouting at me to go out, to get away from them. My Mum said that if this goes wrong, they're finished. There's nothing left. I think they even stole from their families to raise the money."

"Wow!" Silver muttered in surprise. "That's even worse than I thought it was."

Rya chuckled sadly to herself. Her voice was barely a whisper and she said, "It's really bad."

"I'm so sorry," she told her, reaching out her hand and resting it supportively on top of Rya's.

She looked up sadly, her eyes glazed with a fine misting of tears. She sniffed and wiped the corners of her eyes with her thumb and forefinger. "I've not been a very good friend lately," she said apologetically. "It's just that I'm so scared of turning into you. I'm so

scared that, one day, I won't have money to have my hair done properly and I'll have to wear ugly, horrible clothes like you do."

Silver held her tongue as she rolled her eyes.

"Oh God!" Rya cried out. "I like being pretty. Please don't let me end up like you!"

Maintaining a demeanour of being absolutely calm and in control, despite badly wanting to smack some of the 'pretty' off her friend's head, she asked, "The English man—what kind of business is he involved in?"

Rya looked up at her, wiped the tears from her eyes and said, "I don't know. It's business. We're scared to talk about it. My Dad deals with all that kind of stuff. "

"Not very well, apparently!" Silver told her, earning herself a frown. "What else do you know?"

"Not much," she admitted with a shrug. "My Mum says that if this fails, we're finished. We'll lose the house. I might even have to take a job myself like a common, ordinary person like you!"

"I actually like my job," Silver protested. "And I don't do it because I need the money."

"I might have to get a job like a normal person," Rya whined pathetically, casting an accusing glance at a waitress. She looked up hopefully. "Do you think I qualify?"

Silver shook her head firmly. "No."

She looked even more worried at that. "You don't think I qualify for a job?"

Silver smiled at her. "Sorry, I thought you meant as a person."

Rya sniffed and smiled thinly at that. "How do you even get a job?"

"You just find a job. It's not that hard really. You just have to be willing to work."

Rya frowned and grumbled to herself, shaking her head sadly. "Willing to work..." she repeated back as if that was going to be a massive problem.

"You'll get through it, just like I did!"

"And you get enough money to live?" she asked, clearly with no great understanding of how anything in the world actually worked.

"I make enough!"

Rya looked at her for a moment and frowned. After thinking something over carefully, she asked, "Enough for what? What exactly do you do with the money you earn?"

"It's a secret!" she told her with a little smile. "I'll tell you one day."

Silver sat at her desk, something she rarely had time to do these days. She sat, staring at the screen as the internet stretched out before her. It was a twisted myriad of answers, but she was lost as to what exactly the questions were that she was meant to be asking.

"You look like you're in your own little world!" Baz observed as he came over, putting a mug of steaming coffee down beside her.

"Thanks," she said out of habit, without even looking up. "You know, I know this guy is bringing something into the country. It's high risk, dangerous, worth a lot of money. I just don't know what it is."

"Drugs?" Baz shrugged. "Diamonds, gold, stolen phones, pirated software. It could be absolutely anything."

He was right, of course. She had to narrow it down somehow if she hoped to work this out. She turned to face him and began rubbing her chin thoughtfully like a smart person. "What do we know about him? I'm sure the answer is obvious. We're missing something here. I know we are."

Baz perched himself on the edge of her desk. Just for a moment, she was sure she caught a whiff of deodorant. He sipped at his own mug of coffee. "You know what helps me think?"

"It better not involve any suggestion of me being naked," she warned him, just a little too loudly. She quickly cast an eye over to Marcus, who was totally immersed in his computer terminal and was paying them no attention at all.

He frowned and looked thoughtful. "I was thinking of coffee, but now you mention it, naked coffee does sound pretty good."

She smiled at him. "Shut up, Baz," she said and picked up the mug. She sniffed at it; it wasn't up to their usual standard, but it still smelled pretty decent.

Suddenly, realisation dawned on her. "What is this?" she asked, holding up the mug.

Baz looked at her as if she'd suddenly painted herself fluorescent orange and decided to stand for government, while wearing a dead ginger cat on her head. "It's a mug of coffee," he said with a shrug. "Do you need me to draw you a picture of what to do with it?"

"I mean what coffee?" she grumbled.

"Oh!" he said, suddenly making sense of it, and then probably realising it didn't make sense. "It's the free coffee we found in the room."

"Coffee!..." she said excitedly, and opened a new search at her terminal. "Where's the packet? Bring me the wrapper."

Baz put his mug down and went off to get it, a silly grin on his face. He came back quickly. The foil pack had been rudely torn open, but the label was still plain to see.

"Café Noir," she said, typing it into a search engine. "Made by the Wang Jing company, in China."

“Chinese coffee!” Baz exclaimed in surprise. “They’ll copy anything. Still, it doesn’t taste half bad.”

She beamed him a happy smile. “It’s banned!” she said, pointing to the search results.

“Why would anyone ban coffee? It’s like a delicious punch in the face to wake you up when you’re feeling like you need a delicious punch in the face to wake you up!”

“Did you ever hear about the plastic rice?”

“Sure,” he agreed. “I don’t know if it’s an urban legend, but some company in China was apparently making fake rice. Much cheaper than the real thing, but dangerous. It gave you cancer, or something.”

“Yeah!” she agreed enthusiastically, and a little impressed that he knew about it. “Look at this!” She pointed to a news report on an alternative media site.

“Fake coffee beans... banned in China... Made from roasted cockroaches and waste machine oil... Known to cause cancer, heart disease, chronic flatulence, blindness, swelling of the tongue, internal bleeding, anal seepage, vomiting and impotence.”

He looked at her and blinked. He looked down at his mug of coffee and then back to her.

She said, “You know something is really bad if it’s banned in China!”

“Yeah!” she said, putting the mug down heavily on her desk and backing up very slightly away from it. “I’m not drinking that.”

“Marcus!” Baz shouted, pointing at the mug on his desk.

Marcus looked up, grunted and looked away again, totally uninterested. “Leave me alone, I’m busy!” he snapped rudely.

Baz shrugged and frowned at him. “Your coffee’s getting cold, Marcus!” He turned his attention back to Silver, who was reading the list of ailments again.

“This must be it then!” she said excitedly. “This man is bringing in banned, illegal coffee.”

“So what?” Baz shrugged.

“So what?” she snapped at him. “So it’s going to be far cheaper. They can sell it in bulk, make a killing, and get out before anyone finds out how dangerous it is. That’s what all this is about. My friend’s father must be involved in importing it and distributing it around the coffee-shops. The coffee in the room must have been trade samples.”

“Coffee?” Baz said slowly, as if pondering the matter carefully.

“Coffee!” she said, nodding slowly.

“Someone is tampering with coffee? I’ll not stand for that.”

“It’s monstrous,” she agreed.

“We’re going to have to kill them,” he said thoughtfully.

She slapped him on the arm, “We not going to kill anyone, unless you annoy me again, in which case I might be forced to. Will you please take this seriously?”

He began to chuckle. “I am taking it seriously. I’m impressed that you cracked the case. I just don’t know what you expect to do with the information.”

“I haven’t quite worked that out yet,” she was forced to admit.

Chapter 21

When Silver got home, something was clearly very wrong. The front door had been left swinging open, and there was shouting coming from inside the house, a shrill sound of a woman's raised voice pierced the late afternoon air.

She pulled in and threw her helmet down quickly, then quietly took her pepper-spray out from her bag. She always kept it close, along with some other things that could be used as weapons if she ever had to defend herself. Edward had taught her some basic self-defence, but in all honesty, he wasn't really very good at it.

Her heart was racing as she made her way through the house, keeping the spray canister in her right hand, holding it out and ready while her left arm was forward of her face to defend herself if anyone should try to attack, just as she'd been shown. She hoped he'd shown her correctly.

Suddenly, the screaming started again, a low reedy voice, and then a deeper, louder and much more angry one. Silver breathed a sigh of relief and put away her weapon. It was the voices of her mother and sister as they yelled at one another. It was certainly not the first time, but it was worse than she'd ever heard it before. This was really angry: this time they meant it.

She shook her head and stepped into the kitchen, wishing she could have just slipped quietly up to her room instead.

"But the fact remains that you are failing five of your classes!" her mother screamed, her face red and the veins in her neck jutting out.

Her sister looked back defiantly and shouted with a highly animated wave of her arms, "I don't care. I don't care about school. You never went to school and you got a good job. Why do I have to study if you didn't? It's not fair!"

“Young lady, school is not a punishment. A good education is a privilege!” she yelled back.

They both stopped when they saw her. All eyes were focused on her, which didn’t make her feel comfortable at all. “I’m going to go and study!” she said awkwardly, pointing up the stairs to her room.

“Silver, your sister is failing school!” her mother said, as if it were somehow her fault. Her voice was low and measured but strained from the effort of shouting so hard. She sounded calm, but it was the kind of calm that someone in the midst of a rage could only manage with a force of will. “The teachers tell me she makes no effort in class, and her homework is usually either late or copied. She seems to think there’s no problem with that.”

Her sister screamed suddenly, her shrill voice piercing her ears painfully. “It’s only a few classes. I’m still good in science.”

“You need English and Maths!” she screamed back with sudden ferocity, her voice a piercing and deafening roar. “You can’t do anything in life without English and Maths. What kind of scientist can’t count?”

“You don’t know how hard it is!” she yelled, throwing her arms about and stamping on the floor defiantly. Her face was bright red, fuming with impotent teenage rage.

“If you think it’s hard now, just wait until you’re in the real world on your own with a pair of children, and no proper education, so you can’t understand how anything works. Then you’ll see how hard things really are!”

Silver had never seen her so angry before. There was always a sense of unease in the house but the tension between them had never reached this level. It was as if the place had always been filled with gas and the tiniest spark might ignite it. Now the spark had most definitely been lit.

One of the problems with Silver was that she would never back down from a fight. The problem with her mother was that she'd never see anyone else's point of view. To Silver, it seemed that her way was the only way.

Her sister looked furious. "I'll just be more careful who I marry then!" she cried out, looking angrily smug and pleased with herself.

Her mother's reddened face went pale and she swiped out with her hand suddenly. There was a loud slapping sound that plunged the room into an awed silence.

Silver stepped forwards to break them up, but hesitated and just froze where she was, her mouth hanging open as she gasped in surprise. It was all oddly surreal, and she could scarcely believe it was actually happening.

Had her Mum really just slapped her little sister round the face?

"I hate you!" Marita screamed in pained horror, really throwing her lungs into the last word so the sound echoed around the kitchen and seemed to hang on the air like a cloud. She turned and ran off. Her mother reached out to grab her but thought better of it. Her hand reached out, but stayed open, and then slumped limply to her side.

She seemed more surprised than anyone and looked shocked at herself, and more than a little embarrassed.

"I hit her," she said softly, as if reeling from her own actions. For a moment, she looked down at her own hand and then back to her daughter.

"Mum, you've got to calm down!" Silver told her, coming forwards gingerly. "You're pushing too hard. You're pushing all of us too hard."

She looked over angrily and snapped, "And what if I don't? She could end up alone like me. She could end up with no work and

no prospects. I don't want her to have to rely on anyone, because everyone will always let her down."

"Not everyone lets you down, Mum," Silver said softly.

"Men always will," she hissed acidly.

"Some men!"

Her mother looked over, her eyes sad and tears beginning to take shape. "Why can't she be more like...?" She shook her head at herself, letting the sentence trail off. "Even if she was just a little more like you, it would be better. At least you always try!"

"Mum," she smiled to herself. "I'm a mess. I'm only just starting to figure things out myself. I make mistakes too you know. I'm hardly a role model for anyone."

Her mother looked away as a tear traced down her cheek. She wiped it away roughly with the palm of her hand "Nor am I! Role models don't go around slapping their own daughters."

"Mum..." She stepped forward, but her mother waved an arm, gesturing her to go.

"Just go and study! There's another envelope for you from work. It's in the living room. A courier dropped it round at lunchtime."

"Are you sure I can't help?" she said. It felt strange having their roles reversed, but suddenly it felt as if her mother was the one in need, and she should be offering support.

She wiped away a fat little tear and said, "Just go. Leave me alone."

Silver locked the bedroom door behind her. She sighed, took a deep breath, and sat herself down heavily on the side of her bed. It hurt her to see her mother and sister fight. Maybe they were just too alike to be friends. Maybe her sister just had some growing up to do,

or maybe her mother needed to change. There had to be some middle ground to find between them, she thought.

She opened the envelope. It was unusual to get more than one report in a month, and she could only hope that there might be some kind of important news. If so, she was certainly eager to find out what it was.

She rummaged inside and her fingertips found a stapled-together clump of papers. Unpending it, the papers fell out, sliding out of the package onto the crisp white sheets of her bed. She snatched up the report and began reading it. She skipped through the preliminary parts of the information, and searched for what might really matter.

Then she saw it—a name. Her heart skipped a beat. She gasped loudly as a wave of excitement crashed into her. She read quickly, eagerly searching for anything more.

She discarded the report to the side of the bed and snapped open her laptop. It lit up quickly and flickered to life with a happy little chime.

Excitedly, she opened the browser and began to search. All there was in the report was a name. They hadn't included a picture, either because they couldn't find one or because a final report would be coming soon. She searched for the name through social media, but at first nothing came up.

Her palms were hot and wet and her hands were shaking with anticipation. She began laughing to herself, as her brow prickled with a fine tracing of sweat. Was this really happening?

Then, she found a picture. She opened it.

As it flashed on the screen, her blood ran cold.

“Oh no,” she gasped. “It can't be.”

But right there in front of her, it was, and there was no escaping it.

“Mum, I have to pop out,” she said with a sense of urgency as she quickly made her way down the stairs, running and leaping down the last few. “I’ve left my study notes with Rya. We’re going to go over them together at the coffee shop.”

“But I was just about to order out,” she replied in a weak protest. She looked hollow, empty, like Silver had been earlier that week when life’s claws had dug into her. “I was going to get pizza, since that’s her favourite. I had hoped we could eat together as a family.”

Silver stopped in her tracks at the bottom of the stairs. “I think you two need to talk,” she said. “I have to go out; I’ll get something with Rya. I’m sorry, Mum. This is important.” She reached out and hugged her warmly, placing a little kiss on her mother’s cheek. “I really have to go.”

Her mother looked up the stairs, clearly not relishing the challenge before her.

“OK,” she said finally. “Have a good time.”

Her scooter pulled up outside the office and she jumped off. To her relief, there were lights on inside, which meant someone was still in there. She had keys, but there was an alarm and only Edward knew the combination.

She needed to be inside.

The front door was locked, but she let herself in and stepped quickly inside, moving with a sense of urgency. The lights were on in Edward’s office, but not in the reception. As she clicked them on, Edward’s door swung open and his face peered out suspiciously from behind it, his cheeks flushed, his eyes unfocused. He looked half asleep, and she felt sure that he must have been drinking.

“Silver?” he said, frowning in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

Behind him, she could see the flickering light of a television, and the unmistakable sound of the overly-dramatic score of some old black and white movie.

“I left some things behind,” she said apologetically. “I didn’t mean to disturb you. I hope it’s OK for me to just let myself in.”

He came out from behind the door. He didn’t seem entirely stable and he slurred slightly as he spoke. “It’s fine. You don’t disturb me.”

She went to her desk. “I won’t be a minute,” she told him. She switched on her computer and shuffled some papers around.

“Silver, you are welcome here any time,” he told her, balancing himself on the edge of the doorway. “I know I’m your boss and sometimes I have to be in charge, but I just want you to know something.”

If she wasn’t sure he was drinking before, she certainly was now.

“You are like children to me: you’re like my family.” He stopped and looked thoughtfully away into the distance. “I know Baz is a little difficult to take sometimes, and Marcus is a bit of a dick, but still, that’s how I think of you all. You, Silver, are probably my favourite. I especially like that you’re not difficult to take sometimes, and not a bit of a dick.”

She smiled to herself. “Thanks, Edward. I look up to you, you know?”

He stiffened and looked away proudly. “I’m sure you do!” he said, very slightly sarcastically.

“We all do,” she said.

“It was quite a shock to me when my wife left,” he said, his thoughts leading him who knew where. “I’d seen it coming; of

course I had. She went off with some other guy with more money, or a bigger penis, or better... something, and she took my family along with her.”

Silver looked up and just listened for now.

“I know some men can take it, but I couldn’t. I had to just get away from all that. That’s why I came out here.” He looked away into the distance again, as if he was watching all this playing out on a television screen. “That’s why I’m a little rough with you at times. It’s because I just want the best for all of you. I know you’ll be great at whatever you do, and nobody gets great by having greatness licked onto them by kittens. It takes work, it takes dedication and a strong will. You understand don’t you?”

She nodded. “I know. I’ve always respected you, and I’ve always appreciated everything you’ve done for me. You’re a good man, Edward.”

“Respect and appreciation!” he waved his hand in the air in a huge theatrical gesture. “Two things Baz and Marcus struggle with, but you get so right.”

“They do really,” she told him, and perhaps, very deep down, they really did.

He laughed to himself. “Well, at least I know you respect me. But you won’t if I keep making a drunken fool of myself. I’m going to go and watch this damn movie and then go home and pretend my life is just barely worth living.”

“Goodnight,” she said as he waved his goodbyes and went back into his office, closing the door behind him.

Chapter 22

She pulled up outside the hotel and stared up at the sign on the front. It was lit up in tasteful blue neon with the letters picked out in polished metal.

From the office, she'd found the address that she needed, and quickly made her way straight there. Now that she was sitting outside, her heart was beating hard in her chest, her mouth dry, and her palms were sweating. She had never felt more nervous in her life about what she was about to face inside.

After all this time, could it be that everything she'd been searching for, everything she'd wanted could really be right inside that hotel, ready to answer every question she had to ask?

The hotel was a big one, a gigantic rectangular slab of painted-white concrete with a sprawling glass reception area at the front. She stepped off the bike and was given a parking ticket by a man dressed in a security guard's uniform. She barely acknowledged him: her thoughts were elsewhere this time, and she couldn't drag them back to anywhere else.

The glass doors slid open automatically as she stepped towards them, beckoning her inside. Every step got harder as she put one foot in front of the other. At first, she'd been so motivated, so excited, but that had given way to nervousness even before she'd left the office. Now, she didn't even know how she felt. She had no idea what she was doing. She didn't know what she was going to do, what she was going to say, what questions she was going to ask.

"Can I help you?" the receptionist asked, piercing into her jumbled thoughts and bringing her snapping back to the here-and-now with a start.

Silver looked up, blinked, and then slowly heard the words play out in her head as she dragged her mind together. "I'm fine, thank you," she said. "I know where I'm going."

She stepped towards the lifts, two pairs of golden metal doors set behind wooden frames against a red-painted plaster wall. She pressed the arrow button and it lit up, glowing back at her with a red light and pinging loudly.

Almost instantly, the doors to her left slid open, inviting her inside. She looked inside, staring as if it were a monster that was set on devouring her soul. The lift was going to carry her to her fate: it was going to take her to the thing she most wanted, and perhaps, the thing that scared her most in the entire world. It was going to a place where there would finally be answers to questions that had terrified her for most of her life.

With her head down, she stepped inside. She took a deep breath and pressed the button to the third floor.

Her head was spinning now, filled with questions as the doors closed, and, with a slight jerk, the lift began to ascend. Her stomach was knotted, her whole body felt light and tingled with adrenaline as she waited for the short ride to end. The numbers flashed by quickly and the sense of movement ended. With a metallic sound, the doors slid open and she stepped out.

Her mouth was dry and she swallowed nervously, looking up and down the corridor to get a sense of how the numbers worked. She saw it to her right: room 305. It was the address recorded on the account in the office. There it was, right in front of her.

She walked down towards it, the sound of her shoes hitting the ceramic tiled floor echoing around the space. She almost felt that a hand was pushing her back, as if someone in front of her were trying to stop her, some invisible force fighting against her. She carried on, pushing against herself to keep going, to get to that door.

The door itself was no different from any other, but it seemed to radiate energy: it seemed to light up in her mind, glowing brightly like a beacon or, maybe, like a warning. She held up her hand to knock on it, balling her fist tightly. She felt a last moment of hesitation. Once she knocked, there was no going back; there could be no escape. Her mind was reeling, as she watched her hand come down against the painted white wood of the door. She heard the sound of herself knocking and the noise filled her senses. Suddenly, her mind exploded with doubt. She was gripped by it: she felt an urge to run, to escape, to just get away from there.

She heard movement inside. What was she going to say? Her mind was reeling. She didn't know what was going to happen. Her breath was ragged, her mouth was dry, and there was a ringing sound in her ears. She forced herself to stand tall, to face what was coming. She realised she was shaking.

The door swung open, finally. Behind it, was Peter Nicholson, the client. He smiled warmly, his eyes lighting up happily as he saw her, but there was more than that to his face. He seemed to know everything already.

"Silver!" he said, in a welcoming manner. It was almost as if he had known she was coming.

She could barely speak, but she forced herself to say, "Can I come in, please?"

"Of course," he told her and stepped back from the door, gesturing her to step inside.

The room wasn't as nice as she thought it might have been. From the outside, the hotel looked quite special, but inside, the rooms were a little depressing. It was little more than a box, really, with a pair of beds and a few items of furniture dotted about. On one was a suitcase left open, and clothing was neatly scattered across it where he was clearly packing up ready to leave.

“Can I get you anything?” he asked, as she looked around, taking it all in.

“Water,” she agreed, noticing again how dry she felt.

He smiled and bent down to a small fridge set underneath a heavy-duty wooden desk. It had a television perched on top of it that wasn't switched on, but he'd set up a laptop instead and had been working.

“So. What can I do for you, Silver?” he said as he handed her a small plastic bottle.

Her mouth was dry. Her brain swam with thoughts and churning emotions. Her mouth opened to speak, but nothing came out. She tried again, breathing heavily.

Tears started to form in her eyes as waves of emotion crashed over her. She fought back, trying desperately to stay in control.

She forced the words together into a sentence, forced it into her mind, and then opened her mouth. “Are you my father?”

He smiled back at her and wiped away a tear of his own. “Yes,” he said simply with a nod. “I'm your father.”

It was all completely overwhelming. Tears began streaming down her face, no matter how hard she tried to fight it. She felt his arms around her, and she gave in to it all, one more time.

Sometime later, she found herself sitting on the edge of the bed while he sat beside her in silence. Moments passed between them, neither really knowing what to say.

“I'm OK now,” she said, looking up into his eyes. They were dark brown, much the same as hers. She wondered how much about him would be much the same. How much would they really have in common, she wondered.

“How did you find out?” he asked. He took the bottle from her hand and took a sip before giving it back.

"I work as a detective," she explained. "Every month, I put all of my wages towards finding you. That was why I went to the agency in the first place. About a year ago, I was determined to find you, and thought about hiring a private detective. I went to the agency to find out how much it was going to cost. "It cost a lot more than I thought."

"So you worked there instead?" he prompted her.

She nodded. "I took a job as an office junior at first. I hoped I could learn enough to start searching for you myself. I earned enough to pay them to begin searching. They never knew it was me of course; I was just an anonymous client that hired them over the internet. I made them deliver reports to a post-office box, and paid a courier to collect them so there would be no connection to me.

"I learned everything I could about the job so I could carry on searching myself, and I caught the owner's eye. He could see I was keen and started taking me out on routine assignments. Before I knew it, I was working as a field agent. I love it!"

"That's great!" he said, resting a supportive hand on her shoulder.

She looked up at him, and her mind swam with so many questions. But one was foremost on her mind. "Why did you leave me?" she asked, afraid of the answer.

He smiled sadly and sighed. "I didn't want to leave you. I had to do it to protect you." He sighed again and looked back into her eyes that were just begging for more of an explanation than that.

"I watched you. I've been watching you all your lives. I couldn't just walk into your home, but I could hire your company to do a routine surveillance for me. I did that in the hope of meeting you. I've wanted to meet you for so long."

"Why didn't you just tell me who you were?" she said as she looked away.

His face changed; he looked deeply troubled. His hand reached out for hers, and gripped her tightly.

“I’m a journalist,” he explained. “Years ago, I was investigating high-level corruption. I had all the evidence: I could prove everything. Then one day, they came to the house. Men with guns, and men who clearly had no problem with using them. I didn’t know what to do, so I left. I knew they were following me, so I led them away. I published the story, thinking that once I did, they’d lose all interest in me, as it was too late to change anything, then.

“I was wrong. All I did was paint a target on my back. I knew that if I went home, I’d lead them right back to you, to all of you. I stayed away, hoping that one day it would all blow over. Eventually it did, but, by then, it was too late. It was too late for me to just go back and be a father and a husband. By then, I’d lost my family.”

“You could have sent me a message!” She pulled away her hand and looked at him accusingly.

“I wanted to. I wanted to so many times.” His shoulders looked heavy from the weight he was carrying. “When it happened, you were so young. After that, time just got away from me. Around three months ago, I found out that someone was looking for me. I hid under the radar, and did some digging of my own. Then I found out that it was you, not the angry mercenaries with a score to settle that I’d been expecting. I made myself easier to find, and took this job to bring me right back here so I could see what kind of a person you had become.”

She hung her head into her hands. She made a tiny screaming sound from the sheer frustration of it all. “But why? Why did you choose all this over your family?”

“I can only be the man that I am!” he told her. “I had a story that needed to be told. People were dying; they were suffering because of the actions of some evil people. I had to get that

information out there and hope that it would make a difference. That's who I am."

She understood that only too well. It seemed that they had more than eye-colour in common.

"I don't regret what I did," he told her. "But I regret that it cost me my family. That choice has haunted me every day of my life since the moment I left."

"I grew up without a father," she told him pointedly. "We struggled all of our lives. What you did hurt all of us."

"It hurt me, too," he assured her. "I made a very hard choice, and I can't tell you how sorry I am that you had to pay the price along with me."

She found it harder and harder to blame him for any of it. "I always thought it was my fault," she began sadly, with a tear in her eye. Her voice cracked as she spoke. "I always thought I'd done something wrong. I thought I was too loud, or too naughty, and you just got mad at me and left. I thought you just didn't love me."

"Oh no!" he said and reached out, throwing his arm around her and pulling her in close. "It was never anything like that. I watched you grow up as often as I could. I knew you were going to be special, and there wasn't a day that went by when I wasn't proud of the intelligent young lady you're turning into."

He smiled and fumbled in his pocket, pulling out a beaten-up brown leather wallet. He flicked it open with one hand and held it up. Inside, behind the cards and the money, was a picture that was even more battered than the wallet. It was of her, a small child, and he was holding her proudly in his arms, smiling at the camera. "I never stopped thinking about you," he said. "Not ever."

She began to cry again, but this time, she was smiling.

Chapter 23

Her head was still spinning from it all. In the space of a few minutes, she had met her Dad and now they were eating dinner together like a normal father and daughter. This was something she'd dreamed about since she had been a little girl. The simple act of sitting opposite him, able to ask him any question she liked, able to tell him about the day she'd had, was a fantasy that was now coming true right in front of her. She could hardly believe it. It all seemed as if it was a dream somehow, and she was afraid she might wake up and find that none of this was really happening.

As they ate, she wondered what he would really think of her. They really knew so little about one another: what were they going to discover, she thought? Who was he? Did he have another family, a wife, a girlfriend? Was he rich, poor? Did he play sports? Did he drink too much coffee?

"How much do you know about the case?" he said, cutting away a small piece of cheesy-covered pasta with his fork. He had covered it in pepper, the way she always did, and watching him do it had made her smile.

"I know it's fake coffee from China," she said. "I know that nobody here knows anything about it, so it's not even illegal yet, like it should be." She felt a swell of pride from knowing she'd done a proper investigation, from knowing she'd found all the answers herself.

He grinned at her, perhaps feeling exactly the same way.

"Well done," he said with a proud glow.

"You're investigating this too?"

"I have been for some time," he explained. "The product was banned in China, so now there are millions of dollars' worth of this crap stored in warehouses that nobody is allowed to sell there. It

seems like the obvious answer was to bring it all here. They likely figured that by the time anyone found out, it would be too late.”

“But people could die!” She frowned angrily, unable to comprehend how anyone could be so callous. If she’d thought of it further, she would have found that she never wished to understand that kind of mentality.

“How far would you go for that kind of money? This could make a lot of people very rich. In my experience, people quickly forget their morals when there’s something to be gained.”

“I won’t forget mine,” she told him firmly.

He flashed her a supportive smile. “Good! But these people are dangerous. These people have been left with tons of this product. They’ve invested in it, and now they can’t sell it. They have a choice of becoming rich by selling it here, or losing everything by not. People in that position are at their most threatening.”

She thought for a moment. “What are you going to do?”

He shrugged and poked at his food thoughtfully. “You decide,” he told her. “You tell me what you want me to do about it.”

“Tell the story!” she said simply, as if there was nothing to even think about; as if there was no other choice to make.

“From what you’ve told me, your friend’s family will lose everything if I do,” he explained. “Dangerous people might even come after you. They’ll easily find out about your investigation. You’re making a target of yourself, of your whole agency. How do you feel about that?”

Of course, he was right. She frowned and looked away, weighing it all up. There would be consequences. “But if I don’t, people will get sick. People could die from drinking this coffee. I couldn’t live with myself if I made a choice like that.”

“That’s right. But sometimes, doing what’s right means making a choice that doesn’t come easily. Sometimes, there’s a price to pay, and it’s people like us that have to pay it.”

“But it’s still about doing what’s right,” she said firmly, her decision clearly made.

“So Rya will lose everything, and you’re going to take a risk with your own safety that could fundamentally change the way you live. Are you absolutely sure that you want to do this?”

She nodded bravely. “I’m sure. There’s really no choice at all.”

He nodded back and his face held the expression of a man who not only understood, but completely agreed.

“Silver, I’m not trying to excuse the choices I made, but can you now see why I made them?”

She looked straight at him, back into those familiar brown eyes that so often had stared back at her from the mirror.

He was right. When it came right down to it, choosing not to do the right thing simply wasn’t an option for her. Condemning Rya’s family to the choices they’d made was a small price to pay for informing people everywhere about the dangers of this coffee. If they were lucky, it would quickly be banned altogether. If not, then at least people could make the choice for themselves. At least they’d be aware.

“I see why you did it,” she sighed. The truth was, she might well have done exactly the same thing in his position, and very likely would have. She breathed out heavily and said, “I don’t blame you, Dad.” She giggled, it sounded so strange to call him that, but she’d wanted to say it for so long.

He chuckled to himself. “I blame myself, don’t worry about that. You grew up without a father, I lost my whole family. That wasn’t easy to live with.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” and, as she said it, she realised it was the truth. She had played out this scenario in her mind countless times. Sometimes, she would hate him for leaving: others, she’d forgive him. She had been afraid of what she might find, but, in the end, all there was to find was the truth.

He smiled back at her. “The story will be on the news in the morning,” he assured her. “It’ll be on the internet tonight, and be on the news-stands by the time people get out of their beds. Everyone in America will know about this by tomorrow night, and we can hopefully get it banned all around the world. It will be over.”

“Good,” she smiled back. They were so alike! She realised just how much like him she really was. She slipped a mouthful of cheesy pasta into her mouth. It was pretty good. She couldn’t believe she’d never tried this dish before. “So what does this mean?”

“It means that some bad people are going to lose a lot of money!”

“No...” she shook her head and looked a little worried. “What does this mean for us?”

“Us?” he cocked his head to one side. “What do you want it to mean?”

She laughed. “I want to see you again. I want to get to know my father!”

He grinned widely and began to nod. “I have to go back to America tomorrow morning. The flight is booked, and I have a schedule to work to. I have to leave quite early, in fact.

“I can come back. I have some holiday time due to me. Maybe you could come over and visit me there sometime? Until then, we can exchange details. I’m sure we’ve both got a hundred questions burning away inside us. We can stay in touch now, if you want to.”

“I’d like that,” she told him.

He looked away thoughtfully. Finally, after a lengthy pause, he asked, "Are you going to tell your mother that you found me?"

"No," she said firmly. Then, less firmly, she said, "I don't think so." She looked up at him and frowned thoughtfully. "I don't know. Do you think I should?"

"It's up to you," he told her. "I'm sure you'll make the right choice. I trust that you'll always make the right choice."

The next morning, the sky was bluer, the sun was brighter, birds sung more cheerfully, and everything was just a little better in every way.

Silver walked into school through the wide doorway, and Rya caught her eye, waiting for her off from the side. She began walking over. Silver wasn't sure what exactly to expect: were they friends again or not? Who could possibly tell with Rya, whose brain was like a bucket-full of confused worms?

"Silver," she said with a nod of greeting.

"Rya," she nodded back.

Rya shrugged. "You're going to have to buy me a coffee from now on. My Mum said we're finished. My Dad's business investment didn't work out. We're going to lose the house, we think."

"I'm so sorry!" she said with a small pang of guilt. She couldn't help but feel somehow responsible for the direct influence she'd had in this happening to her. She reminded herself that it was all happening because her father had made bad, desperate choices that put other people at risk. When the truth becomes somebody's undoing, only a fool would blame the truth.

"Less empty apology, more free coffee!" Rya told her. She clapped her hands at her. "I like it frothy and sweet!"

"The way you like your women?"

Rya frowned and grunted. "I don't think I can be a lesbian any more. I'm going to have to find a rich man to marry now, aren't I?" she moaned with a sigh.

They began climbing the stairs towards the canteen.

"Well, it's nice that you've developed a coping strategy, and already planning for the future. Well done!"

"A girl has to live!" she said as she shrugged. "With that in mind, I already have a job interview for this afternoon."

Silver looked shocked. "You have a job interview?"

"I found it on the internet," she explained. "I phoned this morning, and a very weird-sounding man said I could come in this afternoon and talk about it."

"That's amazing!"

"It's just office work," Rya explained. "A bit of filing, a bit of cleaning up, I should think. It means I can stay in school until the end of term. A girl has to live!"

"Well, I'm very proud of you!"

"And guess what?" she said enthusiastically. She leant over to whisper the best bit as if it was a big secret. "It's at a detective agency. I'm going to be like a spy! How cool is that?"

Silver's heart sunk in her chest and her face followed. "That's not cool," she grumbled. "That's not cool at all."

"Ha!" she laughed. "You're just jealous because I'm going to have a much cooler job than you! What is it you do anyway? I'm guessing you're not a receptionist at a hair salon."

"So you'll be cleaning up after the agents?" Silver asked with a smug little smirk. "Bringing them coffee, doing what they tell you to do?"

"Yeah!" she shrugged. "I guess so. I don't know how these things are meant to go."

Silver nodded thoughtfully. "I can make that work."

Rya looked a little puzzled. "Good for you, I guess!"
"Do you want a lift?" she asked. "I'm going that way."
"Yeah!" Rya grinned. "That would be cool, thanks."

Any moment now.

"Wait, I didn't tell you where this place is!" Rya said, as the penny finally dropped.

Silver walked into the office, followed by Rya, who was really quite puzzled by all this now. Baz looked up and grinned at her. Marcus looked up from the computer, said nothing, and went right back to whatever it was he was doing; probably playing video games, if Baz was right about him.

Silver sat at her desk, huffed, and flopped back comfortably into her chair. She turned to Rya who was now just staring in shock, unable to quite make sense of anything she was seeing.

Silver pointed to the door. "The manager's office is through there. While you're here, would you get us all a coffee? Baz takes it black with one sugar, Marcus likes milk and no sugar. Edward, the boss, takes it the same way I do. I think I'm going to skip the coffee today and have one of those herbal teas. I think it might be time to cut down a bit on all the caffeine. I'm drinking way too much of that stuff. It isn't good for me."

Rya began to smile and look around awkwardly as if this was all some terrible joke that was being played on her. "I don't... understand..."

"New office girl?" said Baz, as he perched himself on the edge of Silver's desk and just stared at her for a moment. "She's a bit skinny, isn't she?"

Rya's expression had all the indignation of someone whose head had been flushed down a toilet. "I'm beautiful!" she said angrily.

Marcus called out from behind his monitor, “She’s not my type.”

Baz nodded in agreement. “What is your type, Marcus?”

Silver looked up in interest.

“I’ve told you before, time and again. I like strong, older men.”

“Like Edward?” Baz asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Marcus glared at him angrily, but there was a wistful little glint in his eyes. “Perhaps—if Edward lost a little weight, then maybe, I guess.”

Silver gasped in surprise. “Hang on... You’re gay?”

Marcus huffed indignantly. “Not much of a detective, are you? The hair didn’t give you any clues? The trousers? The shoes? The way I watch men as they walk past?”

She looked him up and down, and once she’d seen it, she couldn’t unsee it. Of course he was gay. That explained everything, except... “You like Edward? My God, I thought I had daddy-issues!”

Marcus shrugged. “I’m not saying I like him, exactly. He’s a little bit overweight, but if he lost it then, well... I’m not saying I like him.”

Rya looked at Silver. She said, her voice quite low, “This place is weird. It smells a bit like a dog that’s been on fire.”

Baz raised his hand. “That’s me. It’s my aftershave—Eau de Chien Brulé.”

Rya frowned at his stubbled chin that had at least three days of growth. “But you haven’t shaved.”

“I haven’t shaved my face!” he told her with a proud flourish.

“He’s hairy like that all over his body!” Silver told her, just to add to the confusion.

Rya frowned angrily and crossed her arms over her chest. She scowled and muttered, “I don’t like this place.”

Marcus said, without looking up, “Nobody likes their job.”

"I like my job," said Baz.

"Me too!" Silver agreed.

Marcus shook his head and returned his attention to whatever it was he was doing.

The door to the office opened and a very grumpy-looking Edward appeared in the opening. He looked at Rya with a confused frown. "What the hell are you? What are you doing in my office?"

"She's the new office girl!" Baz told him.

"Right!" he grumbled and rubbed his hands over his head.

"Did she pass the interview?"

"Not yet," he said, shaking his head.

"There's an interview," Edward told her. "Mine is black, no sugar. The kettle is over there. Off you go."

Dazed by it all, Rya went about the task of making a coffee in dumbfounded silence.

Baz turned to Silver. "So how are you today?"

"I'm good. I'm actually really good."

"Because the hottest guy in the office likes you?" he suggested.

"Third hottest," she corrected him.

He frowned and then grimaced. "Edward? Really?"

"Perhaps, if he lost a little weight!" she told him.

"Did you think about us yet?" he asked.

"No," she told him bluntly. "Honestly, I've been dealing with other things lately. I try not to dwell too much on silly little mistakes."

"I'm so much more than a silly little mistake!" he told her, sounding quite impressively self-assured.

"Baz," she began. "I'm afraid you're buying me dinner tonight, and I'm afraid it's not going to be very cheap."

“And then,” he told her, “I’m going to try to have sex with you afterwards, and I’m afraid it’s not going to be very good!”

She couldn’t help but laugh. “Just dinner, Baz.”

“Just dinner then,” he grinned back happily. “I’ll try to find something else to not be any good at for tonight.”

“There’s so much to choose from.”

“There really is,” he agreed.

As Baz stepped away, Rya, still looking very confused, handed her a mug. “Herbal tea.”

“Thanks!” She pointed to the spot on the desk where she wanted it placed, and switched on her computer.

“Isn’t someone going to get mad at you for sitting in their desk and playing with their computer?” Rya whispered.

“It’s fine,” she said with a wink.

“This place is really weird. Everything here is weird. You’re weird.”

Silver looked around. It certainly was different, but then so was she. Where else could she fit in?

“This is me,” she said finally. “And I like it.”

