

Prologue

AFRODITA DUSHKU WAS staring out of the window of the high-speed train as it carved its way through the Scottish countryside. She had no idea how long she'd been in the sleek and modern carriage, which was nothing like the one she'd travelled on during her interminable trip all those months ago. She assumed it was months, but so much had happened that she'd lost track of time, so it could have been a year. One thing she could say, though, was that British trains were far superior to Albanian ones.

The lush, green scenery clearly fed by the driving rain sped by in a blur as the train's velocity pushed droplets horizontally along the windows. She couldn't get used to the colour of the countryside in the UK after the dry, dusty Mediterranean climate of Albania. It was seemingly so cold and wet all the time here.

Soon the landscape became more built up, with housing and factories, as the train began to slow, presumably for a stop. She couldn't understand the announcement that erupted out of the tinny speakers, but she did hear the word 'Falkirk'. The train pulled to a gentle halt at a station and the signs that read *Falkirk* confirmed what the announcer had seemingly said. The doors hissed open and a few passengers got on board, stowed their luggage in the racks and settled in their seats. Very soon the doors were shut again, and the train gathered speed as it passed into what looked like the edges of a town.

One of the recently joined passengers, a youngish-looking man

wearing a hoodie and baseball cap, walked along the carriage, a phone in his hand, which he was apparently studying. There was something about him that didn't add up. He had no luggage, and his dark, swarthy complexion just didn't seem to fit with the other passengers. Suddenly, he looked from his phone, straight at her, before immediately averting his eyes again. Afrodita froze, her blood like ice water in her veins. He was wrong. He didn't belong. She stared at the table in front of her, trying not to show that she was trembling.

She pressed her back into the firm, yet somehow yielding upholstery of the comfortable seat, and tried to relax, despite the lump in the base of her spine. The thought of what was causing the lump in her back made a fresh wave of nausea grip her stomach. She shuddered violently, and her head swam.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the ticket, which she looked at with feigned interest, and then let it fall from her fingers onto the floor. She reached down to pick it up and took the opportunity to glance behind her. There was no sign of the suspicious newcomer. She breathed, just a little, as she sat back up straight.

An elderly lady with short, dark hair and a gentle face nodded at her, a smile in her kind eyes. The woman said something to her in English, the tones of which seemed to indicate concern, but they meant nothing to her. She understood a little English, but it hadn't been a priority for her, and it most definitely hadn't been encouraged by Jetmir.

Afrodita averted her eyes, feeling the hot flush in her face intensify so that it almost burned. Even without the language barrier, she didn't want to speak to anyone. Another wave of nausea overcame her, like a fist wrenching at her stomach. She couldn't afford to be sick, not here, not now. It would draw far too much attention, which was the last thing she needed. Without looking up, she leapt to her feet and staggered off to the toilet

cubicle at the end of the carriage. The electronically operated doors opened agonisingly slowly, and she felt that every occupant of the carriage was staring at her; her cheeks flushed even more. The doors closed at a pace that seemed even slower than they had opened. Willing them to shut faster, she felt the urge to vomit rising in her throat.

As soon as the doors hissed shut, she engaged the locking mechanism and retched and coughed into the stainless-steel toilet bowl, although all that came out was a thin, acidic yellow drool. It had been so long since she had eaten that there was nothing in her shrunken belly. She heaved again, trying to limit the noise. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and she shuddered at the icy feeling in her stomach. She panted, trying to regain her composure before she stood up, her head spinning.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror. The blush on her thin face was fading as she returned to her more usual pallor – just like the colour of the wheat bread dough that her mother used to knead in the kitchen of their tiny house in Albania. Her long, dark hair was scraped back into a ponytail, which was greasy, lifeless and badly needed washing, but facilities at the London apartment were sparse, and there was rarely hot water. Her forehead was dotted with acne, and her green eyes were flat – surrounded by dark circles. To her, she looked much older than her twelve years. Not yet a woman, but no longer a child. Her grubby, baggy tracksuit jacket and loose track pants gave no signs of the figure that was hidden beneath. Another benefit of the voluminous garments was that they effectively concealed the flat package that had been tucked by Jetmir into the small of her back and secured with parcel tape that encircled her tiny waist. She hadn't asked what was in the package, as Jetmir wouldn't have told her in any case, and she'd often found it best not to question it.

Her stomach gurgled, a mixture of nausea and hunger. It had been hours since she'd eaten, and yet despite the twenty-pound

note in her jacket pocket, she had shaken her head each time the food trolley had passed her seat in the centre of the train. She didn't want to talk to anyone, and she was so scared that she didn't think she could eat without throwing up.

There was a sudden pounding on the door, which caused Afrodita to flinch. 'Tickets,' came a deep, authoritative male voice.

Fear gripped Afrodita, her stomach lurching again, her breath rasping, her face greasy with sweat. She had no choice; she had to leave the bathroom and return to the carriage. She ran the tap and splashed some water on her face, before drying it on a coarse paper towel. She took one last look at herself, inhaled deeply and pressed the button to open the doors again. The progress was painfully slow; she held her breath, only letting it out when she saw the uniformed ticket collector who had walked the train length earlier.

'Ticket?' he said, his face and voice softening as he looked at Afrodita.

She wordlessly held up the ticket that Jetmir had given her, and the guard gave it a cursory glance, before nodding, his eyes registering concern.

'Are you okay?' he said. His voice was kind and Afrodita wondered if he was a father.

She just nodded before heading back to her seat, her stomach spasming as she tried desperately to control her breathing. She felt hot tears begin to well, which she swiped away and glanced at the lady opposite her, who smiled as Afrodita sat.

She'd delivered a few much smaller packages before, but this felt different. Previously she'd taken packs wrapped in clingfilm that she concealed in her underwear and she had only visited smaller towns within a couple of hours of London. This package felt like it was at least a kilogram, and her destination today was much farther away. She'd never even heard of Glasgow, let alone travelled there.

Her instructions, given harshly by Jetmir, rang in her ears: ‘Speak to no one. Look at no one. And do nothing to attract any attention. If you lose the package, the debt will be yours, Afrodita, and if not yours then we know where your sister is in Albania. You understand me?’ His black eyes glittered as he’d handed her a ticket, a scratched mobile phone and a twenty-pound note at a railway station in London. He had messaged her on the phone on several occasions as the train passed through stations, clearly just to let her know that he was tracking her, presumably with the device. It made her anxiety even worse, knowing that she was being watched and wondering if one of the Mafia Shqiptare, the violent Albanian gang, really was on the train with her as Jetmir had suggested there would be. She looked around the carriage but saw only bored passengers reading, tapping on computers, or staring at phones or tablets, earbuds in their ears. No one showed her any interest, apart from the kind-looking woman opposite, whose gaze she still refused to meet.

‘Relax,’ she muttered to herself, but she knew it was pointless. Today was different. Today she was doing something that she suspected could get her into big trouble. She’d had no contact with the police in London, invisible as she was. However, if they were anything like cops in Albania, she didn’t want to encounter them ever, and particularly not now.

Afrodita took several deep, deep breaths, trying to force the panic away. ‘Get hold of yourself,’ she said under her breath, reminding herself of Jetmir’s earlier words. ‘You look so young and innocent, Affi, that no cop or gang-banger will suspect you. Do as we tell you and you’ll be fine.’ She’d smiled as he’d lightly brushed his fingers against her cheek. He could do this, just a touch from him could make her feel special, despite the other side of his personality being so dark and scathing.

She was so tightly wound up that she flinched and gasped

when the phone in her pocket vibrated. Concern crossed the lady's face, but Afrodita didn't meet her gaze as she picked it out.

Thjesht largohesh nga Falkirk? read the message on the screen.

Po, she replied, her face flushed, the feeling that she was being watched flaring again.

She craned her neck to look behind her and then she saw him. A new face that she hadn't seen in the carriage before. One that had most certainly appeared after they had stopped at Falkirk. He was young and muscular, with a short goatee. He stared down at the phone in his hand, his baseball cap perched on his head. His eyes flicked up and momentarily caught hers before he hurriedly looked down again. Her heart began to pound in her chest. Who was he? She knew that couriers had been robbed before; was he going to rob her?

Her mind felt as if a cog had worked itself loose and her mouth was suddenly bone dry. If she lost this package, then the whole debt would be hers and she'd have to work it off. She couldn't run away – where would she go? She had no money, no papers, she spoke barely any English. She was effectively a prisoner. Worse still, the gang had made it clear that if she did run away then it would be her sister in Albania who would pay the price.

She enabled the selfie camera on her phone and pretended to check her face with it whilst zooming in on the man in the baseball cap. Her stomach almost shrank inside her. He was staring straight at her, there was no doubt about it. His phone was clamped to his ear and his lips were moving, but his dark eyes were fixed directly on her. She felt the panic surge in her like an irrepressible wave.

All semblance of calm deserted Afrodita as she leapt to her feet, desperate to be away from her watcher. She needed to escape, find somewhere to hide, just to be anywhere else. She was going to be robbed – she knew it. She stumbled away, lurching to one side as the train jolted on the rails. She blundered along the carriage, feeling the rising spectre of sheer, unadulterated terror beginning

to overwhelm her. She risked a glance backwards and saw the man in the baseball cap rise to his feet, still talking on the phone, but he had more of a sense of urgency in his movements now.

He was coming for her.

Afrodita broke out into a run towards the sliding doors, not caring about all the other passengers turning to watch.

‘Stop,’ a deep voice came from behind her, but she didn’t pause, didn’t glance back. The doors opened as she approached and she made her way past the toilet that she had been in just a few minutes ago. The sliding doors in the next carriage came apart, far too slowly for her liking, and she risked a peek over her shoulder again. The man in the baseball cap was closing in on her, his face firm and determined. ‘Stop,’ he commanded again.

Afrodita turned and entered the carriage, but to her horror her path was blocked. An older man with short grey hair was standing, legs planted firmly, looking directly at her, his face hard.

Afrodita froze, as if suddenly her feet were glued to the floor. She let out an involuntary yelp, before she felt her legs give way, and she fell to the floor, curling up into a ball in the narrow corridor.

‘Nr!’ she felt herself shout; her eyes screwed shut as she prepared herself for the inevitable beating that would come.

But there was nothing. No one touched her, no one kicked or punched her, there was just silence.

She opened her eyes, only to see the man in the baseball cap squatting next to her, looking concerned whilst holding out a small leather wallet that had an official metal crest on one side and a photograph of the man on the other.

‘Police,’ he said, his voice soft, a kind smile on his face. He spoke again, but the words meant nothing.

He and the older grey-haired man gently helped her to her feet and they all moved back to the space between the carriages where the toilet was. Panic and confusion were still gripping her,

but something in the attitude of her captors made her begin to relax a little.

The man with the baseball cap handed her a mobile phone with a nod, and Afrodita took it and raised it to her ear.

‘Hello?’ said a woman on the other end, in Albanian.

‘Hello,’ replied Afrodita, in a small voice, her mind whirring like an out-of-control clockwork toy.

‘My name is Samira and I’m an Albanian interpreter who works with the police. What is your name?’

‘Afrodita,’ she said.

‘How old are you?’

‘I’m twelve,’ she said, so quietly it was barely audible.

‘The gentleman who has handed you the phone is called Greg and he is a police officer. He wants me to assure you that they know what is happening to you and that you have been tricked. Afrodita, these officers are here to help you. You’re safe now.’

Afrodita’s face crumpled, and she wept, tears coursing down her pale, thin face.

1

Three years later

VALERIE SMITH SMILED with affection as Affi sat on the kitchen chair and put on her brand-new trainers, a huge, beaming grin spreading across the girl's face as she admired the Asics once they were securely laced. She was dressed ready for action in running leggings and a lightweight running jacket. Her long, shiny auburn hair was secured with a Day-Glo headband. She stood, admiring the multicoloured trainers. A Jack Russell terrier fussed around her feet, sniffing the new shoes.

'Valerie, they look so amazing. I'll be running at light speed with these bad boys on, as long as wee Jock here doesn't chew them, eh boy?' she said, giggling and tickling the ears of the little dog, who instantly rolled onto his back, demanding continued attention. As she looked up at her foster mother, her green eyes shone with a mix of pleasure and amusement, her skin was clear and bright.

'Aye well, price I paid, I expect a gold medal, my girl, so happy birthday,' said Valerie.

'We can try now; I need to train today. Can you drop me at Fyrish? I want to run up the hill. I need to get stronger,' she said, stretching her arms above her head, unfurling her long, lean frame. She had a natural runner's physique, with long legs, a slim body that carried no excess weight, and most importantly, the heart of a lioness. Affi had entered Valerie's life almost three

years ago now, and she and her husband, Reg, had watched her blossom from a terrified twelve-year-old who'd experienced such misery to the bright, clever and talented young woman that she now was.

'What, now? It's your birthday, lady, and Reg will be back soon. Maybe today of all days you can have a day off?'

'Please? I can be there and back in an hour, Valerie. I feel I need to try these mega creps out,' she said, bouncing from foot to foot.

'Creps?' said Valerie, shaking her head.

'Slang for trainers, Grandma.' Affi giggled, a trace of her Albanian heritage evident in her voice, which was quickly being edged out with a soft Highland twang.

'Cheeky wee thing. Come on then, lady. I'll drop you at the car park and you can call me when you're back, and I'll collect you. I'm cooking your favourite tonight.'

'Is it haggis?'

'No, pizza.'

'Thank God for that,' she said, laughing. 'Will Reg be back in time?'

'I hope so. He's out on the hill with some tourists who are going after some fallow bucks.'

'Ew, I don't like venison and I feel bad for the poor wee things. Why do they have to shoot them?'

'They need controlling, and it gives Reg the job he loves. Can you imagine him in an office? He'd be scunnered all the time.'

There was a ping from Affi's phone. She picked it up from the coffee table and looked at the screen, her face splitting into a wide smile.

'Who is it?'

'It's Melodi wishing me happy birthday. She must have found a phone, bless her,' she said, eyes shining at the message from her sister in Albania.

'Oh, that's nice, toot. I've a call with Katie at the solicitors

soon. Home Office seem to say that they'll look on the application for her to join us, but they need some more evidence. It's been such a bureaucratic nightmare; we want your sister here with us all.'

'Soon, hopefully. I hate thinking of her in that horrible home.'

'It's not as bad as yours was. Hopefully not too much longer, toot. We're doing everything we can.'

'I know you are, Valerie, and I love you for it, even if you are getting very old.' She flung her arms around her foster mother's neck and hugged her tight.

'Cheeky wee mare. Come on, let's go.'

They left their small cottage just outside the pretty Highland village of Evanton, in Easter Ross, where Affi had been since arriving nearly three years ago having been rescued from the traffickers. Back then she had almost no English, was badly underweight and was almost in a perpetual state of terror. It had taken time and effort, and there had been many ups and downs, but they'd grown into a family, and now Valerie couldn't imagine life without their little firecracker of a foster daughter. The missing piece of the puzzle was twelve-year-old Melodi, still in a children's home in Tirana. They were trying to reunite the siblings, but the paperwork was mind-blowing. Affi was now with them indefinitely on a permanence order with authority to adopt, but the hurdles for adoption were such at her age that they were all happy with the status quo.

Valerie looked at her foster daughter as she buckled herself into the passenger seat and felt an almost overwhelming surge of love for the girl. She'd grown so much from that startled child into a confident fifteen-year-old who was beginning to excel at school, after a few hiccups early on. They'd discovered that she was a talented athlete, particularly in distance running, which had become her passion, at first representing her school, then onwards to the district competitions and very

soon heading towards national trials. She'd found a real focus after some difficult times, and it had been transformational. Valerie's heart ached for the poor wee thing, with all the cruelty she'd suffered in her earlier years, there were bound to be good times, and bad times. She just hoped that the bad times were behind her now.

'What?' said Affi, her eyebrows raised but lips turned up at the edges in amusement as she met her foster mother's gaze.

'Pardon?'

'You're staring at me, Valerie. What is it?'

'Just thinking how quickly you're growing, Affi Smith. You're turning into a beautiful young woman, you know. Boys will be chapping my door down soon.' Affi had quickly taken their family name, mostly for security, but she was happy to be known as Affi Smith at school. It made life less complex.

'Don't be ridiculous. No one notices me at school.' She turned away, securing her hair behind her head with a scrunchie.

'Aye, you wait, girl. You can do much better than Lewis McPhail, that's for sure.'

'Oh, Valerie. Lewis is nobody. I only dated him for a tiny while as he had a car,' she said, giggling.

'Well, that's no reason. He's a bad one, that boy. Just like his father.' Valerie pursed her lips, put the Vauxhall into gear and moved off the drive.

'Aye. That's why I dumped him, you know. He's leaving me alone, and he hasn't called or messaged in a while. Anyway, enough about boys, I have a race soon and I want to hit the hill. My power isn't good enough, so let's get to Fyrish.'

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Twenty minutes later Valerie was steering the little Vauxhall into the car park at the base of Fyrish Hill, which was swathed

in woodland. There were only a few cars dotting the car park and no other walkers about. Being early spring the trees were beginning to shake off their winter malaise and a green haze was already overpowering the light brown of the foliage that had been dominant through the harsh cold months. The weak sun was casting late-afternoon shadows through the trees and there was still a chill in the air as Affi opened the car door.

‘Will you be warm enough, toot?’ said Valerie, shivering as the breeze hit her.

‘Valerie, I’m about to run almost two miles up a very steep cnoc that normally takes people two hours to scale. I won’t get cold – if anything I’ll get far too hot.’

‘Aye, but I worry about you. It’s awful slippery.’

‘But I have spanky new trail runners on. I’ll be fine.’

‘You have your phone?’ said Valerie as Affi stepped out of the car.

‘Of course.’ She shook the iPhone in front of her and slipped it in a zip pocket. She pulled on her compact CamelBak rucksack and secured it in place, taking the flexible straw out and sucking a mouthful of water from it.

‘Well, call me when you’re at the top, and I’ll make tracks back. I need to pop to the shop, so I won’t be going home, okay?’

‘Sure.’

‘Be careful,’ said Valerie to her foster daughter’s retreating back as she ran off at her usual breakneck pace towards the footpath that led steeply up to the summit of the cnoc. She shook her head with affection at seeing the tall, lean frame speeding through the trees and out of sight. She was a formidable character, that girl, and any man that took up with her would have his work cut out. She smiled at the prospect. She and Reg had never managed to have kids, but they couldn’t have loved Affi more if she had given birth to her. Her heart pounded with emotion as she thought about the last few years they’d shared with that girl. They’d had

the full range of emotions with her, from intense, powerful love, to exasperation and occasionally fear. Affi hadn't always made the best decisions, but it was a relief to see that she'd found her passion.

Valerie engaged the gear and steered out of the car park. She needed to get to the shops to get some food in for Affi's birthday tea. She smiled in contented anticipation as she drove off.

2

IT WAS NOTICEABLY colder at the summit of Fyrish as Affi sprinted the last three hundred metres to the monument perched at the very top. As always, she was astonished by the view that stretched for what seemed forever all the way to the Cromarty Firth and the Black Isle that hulked, its black soil stark against the ice-blue sky. Massive oil rigs sat in the firth juxtaposed jarringly against the beauty of the sweeping landscape. She reached for her straw and sucked thirstily at the cold water as her breath began to return to normal. She checked her watch, nodding at the time which was right up there with her best efforts. These hill runs were exhausting, but she really was feeling the benefit in the strength of her legs and, perhaps most importantly, the indefinable attribute of operating in the pain zone. The more you experienced that pain, the more effectively you could perform within those parameters. She was determined that she would make the national squad in the next few years.

She walked up to the monument, transfixed by the folly that sat overlooking the firth. It was as ever mysterious as it was curious. They'd had a school field trip here a while ago, and the local historian, a short, grey-haired woman called Verity, almost fizzed with enthusiasm about the folly, which had been built in 1782 by Sir Hector Munro. He had been an army man in India and once he retired to the Highlands, he wanted to recreate a monument similar to the Gate of Negapatam in Madras. She shook her head

at the incongruity of the huge monument, a trio of arches, the central arch slightly higher than the others, with ruined pillars to either side. She remembered that she thought it strange that Sir Hector's justification for building the folly was to provide work for displaced and starving Highlanders after the clearances. She couldn't shake the feeling that it sounded like slave labour to her.

Her breathing now under control, she picked her phone out of her pocket to call Valerie. She frowned seeing the red battery sign indicating that she had very little power left. As always, the old phone dropped its charge quickly in the cold, and it was starting to get chilly as a biting wind whipped from the Cromarty Firth attacked her exposed skin. She shivered, feeling her fingers begin to numb as she scrolled to Valerie's name. She pressed dial, but the phone's screen went immediately blank.

'Shit,' she muttered, pressing the button to power it up again, feeling suddenly exposed on the top of a hill, all alone. She looked around her but could see no one else about. The phone stayed frustratingly blank. She swore again. She'd have to run back down and hope that Valerie would be there soon. The light was beginning to fade as the early-spring sun dipped towards the horizon, taking any warmth in the air along with it.

She turned back towards the monument and caught movement just beyond one of the pillars. Was someone there? She felt a chill shoot up her spine that wasn't caused by the buffeting wind.

'Hello?' she called as she walked towards the far pillar. A lone figure stood there, facing away from her towards the wide-open vista that stretched towards the hulking Munro of Ben Wyvis.

He was a lean and compact figure wearing a lightweight insulated jacket and wool hat. His hands were stuffed into his pockets as he stared out across the dramatic landscape.

'Excuse me, my phone has just died. Can I borrow yours to call for a lift?' she said, feeling a knot of nerves in her stomach.

The figure didn't turn around; he just continued to stare at the

scenery. Affi wondered if he was listening to music or something, but a part of her subconscious told her that something was wrong. She suddenly felt very alone and very exposed on the side of this sheer, steep hill.

She opened her mouth to ask again, but then thought better of it. She'd just run back down the hill; surely Valerie would be back soon.

She began to turn but froze when a cackle came from the figure. It was a low, throaty sound, somehow familiar to her.

Run, she thought, but it felt like she was stuck, her feet held by the soft ground.

The figure turned, a smile across his slim, unlined face.

Horror hit her like an express train. The face, once so handsome, was punctuated with cruel, dark eyes, a half-mocking smile and stained teeth; it was unfathomable in the shadow cast by the tall stone column of the monument.

'Hello, Affi.' His voice was deeper and harsher than she remembered, mocking, his mouth split in a wide smile that in no way touched his eyes.

Affi let out a scream, terror gripping her like she'd been shocked by a faulty plug, and then she ran. She ran as if her life depended on it, the fear coursing through her veins.

3

AFFI DIDN'T STOP. And she didn't look back until she was at least three hundred metres from the monument. Glancing over her shoulder, she could see that the figure hadn't moved an inch, still rooted to the spot, staring out towards Ben Wyvis. She carried on running as fast as her legs would carry her, thankful for her new grippy trainers and intimate knowledge of the slippery and craggy footpaths.

She didn't stop again. She sprinted as hard as the terrain allowed her, her head feeling like it was full of static electricity, her thoughts jumbled.

How? Here and now on the top of a cnoc in the Scottish Highlands. Now more than ever she wanted to be home, in her bedroom with the dog at her feet and her family downstairs.

She slowed her pace as the terrain levelled off and she entered the woodblock that led to the car park. She looked behind her again, but there was no one to be seen. She gradually came to a walk, and stopped for a moment, breathing heavily, checking over her shoulder, but there was still nothing. She pulled out her phone again, pressing the power button. Her heart leapt as it briefly sparked to life but then it died almost immediately. She hissed with frustration. 'Shit, shit, shit.'

As she entered the car park, she saw a large Volvo SUV parked, with a middle-aged woman wearing a baseball cap by the open tailgate. She was fussing a Labrador, whose tail thrashed as she

tickled his ears. She looked over towards Affi and smiled, her face lined and soft with bright eyes.

‘Are you okay, hen?’ she said, her face suddenly registering concern at the sight of the shocked teenager. Her accent was a mix of Glasgow-laced Scottish with something else that Affi couldn’t put her finger on.

‘Can I borrow your phone, please? I need to call my mum, someone is trying to hurt me.’ Affi felt the words tumble out of her.

‘Oh my goodness, hen. Are you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘I just need to call my mum,’ Affi said, the tears prickling in her eyes, feeling cold against her hot, flushed skin as they trickled down.

‘Of course, come and sit down and I’ll fetch my phone,’ she replied, closing the tailgate of the Volvo and going to the rear passenger door and opening it wide.

Affi felt a wave of relief course through her as the lady handed her an iPhone. She woke the screen. A code request flashed up.

‘Needs to be unlocked,’ said Affi.

‘Ach, of course, I’m useless with technology, hen. My husband says I’m a disaster, which is why I have an old bloody phone. Hold up, let me fetch my glasses, and take a seat, hen. You look terrible. I think I have a flask with some tea, here.’

Grateful, Affi sat in the scratched and worn leather of the Volvo, her breath harsh in her throat after the running. ‘Please hurry, I must call my mum,’ she said.

‘Aye, I have it now. Wouldn’t you like me to run you home, hen?’ she said, offering the phone.

‘No, thank you. I just want to call Mum,’ said Affi, accepting the phone, her hands trembling.

‘Are you sure? I’m heading off now, so it’s nae bother, hen.’

‘I’ll be fine, thank you.’ She looked down at the phone and pressed her fingers to the screen. It was blank, dark and inert.

Affi looked up, just as she felt a sharp jab in her thigh. Terror gripped her as the woman, her previously kind eyes now hard and cruel, stood back; a syringe glinted in a shaft of sunlight. She had a phone to her ear.

‘I have her’ was the last thing Affi remembered hearing, as the world shifted on its axis and everything went black.

4

DS MAX CRAIGIE and DC Janie Calder faced each other in his cramped garage, both lathered in a sheen of sweat. Max held up the boxing pads high and barked at Janie.

‘Right, come on, you’re lazy. Go again, jab-jab, cross, jab, uppercut, and finish with a straight, yes?’

‘You’re a shite, DS Craigie. I have no idea why I put myself through this with you. All I did was offer you a lift to work,’ said Janie as she launched into the combination of punches, the gloves smacking into the leather of the pads that Max moved with tremendous speed, the jabs, crosses and uppercuts landing.

‘Stop moaning. Harder and faster this time, punch through the pad, imagine the pad is DI Fraser’s face, and move your head and feet. I could lay you out any time, you’re so bloody static,’ Max continued to bark at his friend and colleague, who had arrived early to collect him before work. It had become a twice-a-week routine that they work out in his garage gym before work, improving each other’s techniques in their chosen sports. Max was a boxer, Janie practised mixed martial arts, and both had come a long way with each session.

Janie grunted as she lay into the pads, shifting her body weight, her head constantly moving as she smacked at the pads, her face grimacing with effort.

‘Better, much better. Water break,’ said Max, throwing Janie a plastic water bottle, which she drank from thirstily.

‘Bloody sadist, you are, Craigie,’ she said between gulps, smiling widely with the adrenaline of the exertion. ‘My turn tomorrow – your kicks are shite still, and your grappling is garbage.’

‘Ned’s sport, Janie. Kicking, wrestling and shite, not pure boxing.’

‘Aye, right, because boxing has no connection with criminals, right? Wasn’t Tam Hardie a boxer?’ she countered.

‘MMA, as well, which is why I battered him.’ Max turned to throw his pads on the bench. Suddenly and with lightning speed Janie grabbed hold of Max as his back was turned, her forearm digging into his windpipe and locking into place by gripping against her other arm, her free hand forcing his head forward and securing the lock. Max tried to struggle, but she tightened the rear naked choke. Max felt his oxygen supply cut off, and the blood suffusing in his ears. He tapped her forearm twice in surrender and she released him, with a snort of laughter.

‘Bloody cheat,’ said Max, rubbing at his neck.

‘Sorry, what were you saying about wrestling?’

‘Aye, well, it’s still a ned’s sport. You just got lucky. One more second and I was gonna batter you.’

Their banter was interrupted by Max’s phone buzzing on the weights bench.

‘Predictably it’s Ross. He must be listening to you imagining punching his face,’ said Max, picking up the phone.

‘Your idea.’

‘Ross?’ said Max.

‘Are you two twats gracing us with your fucking presence this bastarding morning? I have work, lots of work to give you, and something else has just come in,’ he blasted in his rough Highland accent. Ross was full of bluff, bluster and foul language, but it was mostly a façade.

‘Aye, Janie and I are just finishing a workout at home. I thought we weren’t in until midday?’

‘I’ve no desire to hear what you two bloody weirdos are up to, and you’re a married man, as well, Craigie. I know I said twelve, but something’s come up. Get your arses in here double quick.’ The phone clicked in Max’s ear.

‘Whilst I couldn’t hear that, it sounded typically Ross levels of bluntness,’ said Janie, wiping her face on a towel.

‘He wants us in double quick. Something’s going on.’

‘Aye, well, I need a shower first.’

‘I need a bloody coffee more,’ said Max as he raised his water bottle to take a long draught. ‘Katie will be making a pot right now. Come on.’

They walked out of the garage, feeling the bite of the morning chill. It had been misty when they had gone into Max’s makeshift gym, but the rising sun had quickly burned it off, and it was shaping up to be a beautiful early-spring day.

‘View just gets lovelier, Max,’ said Janie, looking into the distance from the front of Max’s small, semi-detached farm cottage. The uninterrupted vista down to the Firth of Forth was dramatic and stunning, and the sun’s pale rays danced on the surface of the expanse of water.

‘Perfect, isn’t it?’ said Max.

An eruption of barking came from the side of the house and three dogs trotted around the corner to greet Max and Janie. It was Nutmeg, Max’s little shaggy blonde cockapoo, and his neighbour’s two dogs: the larger, similarly coloured Tess, who tried to remain serene, her tail wafting; and Murphy, an old, shambolic, happy dog, who was an unidentifiable mix of breeds.

‘Morning, Max. It’s a grand day,’ said the short, stout figure of John, his elderly neighbour, who appeared soon after the dogs.

‘Morning, John. It sure is,’ Max replied, smiling.

‘Come on, you two, in the house and leave Max alone,’ he barked at his two dogs. They sheepishly loped off, disappearing into the house, tails wagging.

With Nutmeg on their heels, Max and Janie walked into the house, thoughts of showers and coffee uppermost in their minds.

‘You two are disgustingly sweaty. If I wasn’t so relaxed and trusting of my husband, I’d be worried about what you’d been up to. Morning, Janie,’ said Katie, a big smile stretching across her face as she sat at the breakfast bar, a pot of coffee and a pile of buttered toast on a plate in front of her.

‘Morning, Katie. You’re completely safe. I wouldn’t touch Craigie with a barge pole,’ she said, laughing.

‘Neither would I right now. Look at the sweaty state of you, Craigie. Coffee and toast here, help yourself,’ she said, screwing her nose as Max kissed her on the cheek.

‘Life saver,’ said Janie, pouring out two cups and reaching for a slice.

‘Melissa okay?’ said Katie.

‘Aye, she’s grand.’

‘You must both come for dinner soon. It’s been far too long, particularly with you two and your inability to not work stupid bloody hours,’ Katie said, standing up and brushing toast crumbs from her business suit.

‘It’s not our fault. Ross Fraser is a slave driver, and it sounds like something has come up. He’s just called full of bluster and foul language.’

‘Well, that’s hardly unusual, is it? Sounds like standard Ross Fraser. How’s his health kick going?’

‘Badly. He’s back on the biscuits, big time. Mrs Fraser is not happy at all, and he’s constantly moaning about her.’

‘He’s like a cartoon character, your boss is. He’d be impossible if it wasn’t for the fact that he’s actually quite nice underneath the disguise.’

‘Well, it’s a very good disguise, as the last few weeks he’s been particularly irritable,’ said Janie.

‘Right, enough of this, I have work to go to. What are you two up to?’

‘Quick shower, then in. Something’s brewing. You have much on?’ said Max, taking a long pull on his coffee, his mouth bulging with toast.

‘Yeah, a bit of a worry, do you remember me telling you about Affi Smith?’

‘Errm, possibly?’ said Max, his voice indicating that he didn’t remember.

‘He definitely doesn’t remember, Katie. He never listens to a bloody word I say either,’ said Janie, chuckling.

Katie smiled. ‘He has a brain like a sieve, Janie. You must remember her, a lovely Albanian girl who was trafficked over and was running drugs for a mafia gang. With Valerie and Reg, Reg is the ghillie who was going to take you on the hill, remember?’

‘Yes, of course. I was looking forward to some venison.’

‘Well, she’s been doing brilliantly, despite the Immigration service being a pain in the arse. I had a meeting with her and her foster family about her application for indefinite leave, and about the possibility of Affi’s twelve-year-old sister joining her from her children’s home in Albania. Well, she’s gone missing. Went for a run and disappeared. It’s so worrying; they’re the nicest people. She’s on a permanence order with Highland Council, and they have authority to adopt.’

‘That sounds concerning. What have the local cops done?’

‘Not much from what I can see. Valerie and Reg are going out of their minds with worry, and it sounds like the local cops haven’t taken it as seriously as they might.’

‘How long has she been missing?’

‘Two and a half days, now,’ said Katie, her brow furrowed.

‘That doesn’t sound good. Surely it was categorised as high risk,’ said Janie.

‘I don’t know, but she had some ups and downs with boys

and a bit of school-skipping up until about six months ago, but since then, she's really settled and has discovered athletics. She's destined for national squads. It just doesn't make sense, but it seems to me that the local cops are just treating her as a regular absconder.'

'Is she?'

'Like I say, not for a good while. She'd really turned a corner.' Katie pursed her lips, which Max recognised as a sign of worry.

'Want me to ask about?'

'Would you, babe?'

'Sure. What's her full name?'

'Afrodita Dushku, although she's known as Affi Smith; she's taken the foster family's name, mostly for security reasons. Her location and identity should have been completely confidential. She's just turned fifteen and she's a lovely kid.'

'Okay, I'll have a little poke about and we'll see what we can come up with, as long as Ross isn't sending us to Benbecula or somewhere, which you can never be sure of.'

'Thanks, babe. Right, I'm off. Don't work too hard.' Katie smiled, and left the kitchen.

Max watched his wife's slim form as she walked out of sight towards her car.

'Punching above your weight there, Craigie,' Janie said.

'Takes one to know one, Calder,' Max riposted.

'All going good?'

'Aye, touch wood, things are going great. Right, we need to get weaving – big bathroom is all yours, I'm in the en suite.'

'Oh, to have more than one bathroom, you've no idea.'

'Well, you will live in the expensive bit of Edinburgh, Calder.'

'Where it all happens. Right, ten minutes and I'm good to go and see what tier of foul-mouthed abuse our erstwhile leader has in store for us.'