

MADAME BUROVA

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RUTH HOGAN

TWO
ROADS



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To Jean and Peter Hogan
Mum and Dad
I love you



*Never tell a secret, never tell a lie
If you break a promise you will surely die
Say your prayers at bedtime, God forgive your sin
Then when you get to heaven the angels let you in*



The Promise



Madame Burova was a woman who knew where the bodies were buried. She had spent a lifetime keeping other people's secrets and her silence had come at a price. Some revelations – forbidden affairs and minor indiscretions – had been easy enough to bear. Like feathers on the wind. But others, dark and disturbing, had pricked her conscience and been a burden on her soul. She had seen the lovers and the liars, the angels and the devils, the dreamers and the fools. Her cards had unmasked them all and her cards never lied. Madame Burova knew the killer, the victim and the murder weapon.

Outside, the warm, late-summer twilight was smudged with soft thumbprints of light from the illuminations strung along the promenade. High season was coming to an end, but for now the screams and squeals of excitement from the funfair still carried on the wind; soprano notes duetting with the baritone of the waves booming onto the beach and rattling the pebbles as they slunk back into the sea. Madame Burova – Tarot Reader, Palmist and Clairvoyant – proclaimed the painted sign on the front of the booth where she had been dukkering, as her Romany mother always

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called it, for over fifty years. Today had been her swan-song. Madame Burova was retiring: reluctantly, sadly, but inevitably. Her mind was still sharp and her gift as infallible as ever. But she was weary of other people's lives – their questions, their problems and their secrets. She needed rest and a little piece of life for herself while she still had the chance. She sat down in a chair beside a small round gypsy table covered with a velvet cloth, where her crystal ball stood next to a silver-framed photograph of her long-dead, beloved borzoi, Grisha. The rings on her fingers flashed and sparkled as she picked up two brown envelopes. She had been entrusted as their guardian and had kept their secrets safe and silent for all these years. She turned them over in her hands. The hands that had held countless others and read the future in their palms. The envelopes held a secret that had troubled Madame Burova more than most, and now the time had come for her to open them and fulfil a promise made long ago.

1



1972

Imelda Burova checked her appearance in the bedroom mirror and was satisfied. So was Rod Stewart. ‘*You wear it well*’, he sang, his voice rasping out from the small radio sitting on her dressing table. The dress, a green velvet midi with a fitted bodice and balloon sleeves, was Biba and had been bought especially for today on her last trip to London with her mother, Shunty-Mae. *Today* was Imelda’s first day as proprietress of the family’s dukkering booth on the promenade. Shunty-Mae had taken it over from her own mother, and it was there that she had taught Imelda to read palms and tarot cards, and to fathom the past and future from the depths of a crystal ball. Various Romany aunts and cousins had helped out for a summer season here and there, but the booth belonged to Shunty-Mae and now she was handing it over to her only daughter. Today, Imelda became Madame Burova – Tarot Reader, Palmist and Clairvoyant. She drew back the curtains to let the early-morning sunlight stream in. Shunty-Mae was in the back garden by the open door of her caravan, smoking a cigarette and cursing. Now in her early seventies, she was still an

extraordinarily striking woman with sea-green eyes and only whispers of silver in her long black hair. She had left her travelling life behind when she married Imelda's father, Alexei, but had flatly refused to give up her traditional gypsy vardo and insisted on keeping it in the garden. Whenever she and Alexei rowed, she stormed off to the vardo and often slept there.

Imelda could hear the clatter of pots and pans, and her father whistling in the kitchen downstairs as he prepared to cook breakfast. He had a fiery temper that was easily a match for Shunty-Mae's passionate outbursts, but whereas his anger was quickly spent and soon forgotten, his wife's could sometimes smoulder like hot coals and flare again at the slightest provocation. Alexei was a successful tailor with his own shop, but a gorger, a non-Romany, and Shunty-Mae's family had objected vehemently and vocally when their courtship was discovered. The pair had eventually eloped, and faced with a fait accompli the Romany relatives grudgingly accepted the marriage. Their love for one another was immutable, but their life together a volatile alliance of disparate cultures and traditions.

There was a groan from beneath the rumpled covers of Imelda's bed and a long, pointed nose appeared.

'Get up, you lazy hound!'

Two soulful brown eyes and a pair of furry, floppy ears emerged, followed by a wriggling body on gangly legs with a crazily wagging tail. Imelda had found the puppy a few weeks ago, scavenging in the bins along the promenade. He was painfully thin, and his feet were sore and bleeding. But his sorrowful gaze was

irresistible, and Imelda was instantly smitten. She took him home. Shunty-Mae had not been happy, but Alexei had been delighted.

‘He’s a borzoi!’ he had declared. ‘A fellow Russian!’

‘It’s a dog,’ Shunty-Mae had objected. ‘It’s probably got fleas.’

Imelda rarely crossed her mother, but when Shunty-Mae had told her to get rid of the puppy, she had been adamant.

‘If he goes – I go with him!’

Shunty-Mae had eventually yielded, fearful of losing her daughter and knowing that this was a battle she would not win. But she attempted to dignify her capitulation by disguising it as oblivion. She simply refused to acknowledge Grisha’s existence and completely ignored him. Shunty-Mae had given birth to four sons before her longed-for and only daughter eventually arrived, and it was clear from the start that Imelda had inherited her mother’s independent spirit and stubborn streak. The first word she had spoken was ‘no’.

Imelda hurried downstairs followed closely by the now wide-awake puppy who skittered into the kitchen and immediately sat down at the feet of Alexei, who was frying eggs for Imelda’s breakfast.

‘You need a good meal inside you, Melda. It’s a big day.’

Imelda poured herself a mug of tea and sat down at the table.

‘Why’s Mum in the vardo?’

Alexi served her two eggs on toast and smiled.

‘I told her not to go to the booth today. To let you have your first day as the queen bee in peace.’

Grisha had squeezed underneath the table and was nudging Imelda's knee with his nose. She slipped him a small piece of toast.

'I take it she didn't welcome your advice, Papa?'

Alexei sat down opposite her and took a deep draught from his mug of tea.

'She said that I obviously thought she was an ugly, interfering old woman of no more use to anyone, and that next I'd be plotting to have her put in a home and then I'd run off with some gorger floozy.'

'I said *cheap* gorger floozy!'

Shunty-Mae was at the back door, listening. She walked over to her husband and looped her arms lovingly around his neck before planting a kiss on the top of his head.

'But now I forgive you. If you cook me some eggs.'

Imelda glanced up at the clock on the wall. It was eight o'clock and time for her to leave. She wanted to be at the booth early and savour every moment of her first day of sovereignty. She fed a final piece of toast to Grisha whilst her mother struggled valiantly not to notice, and then grabbed her bag, coat and puppy and swept off down the hallway. Madame Burova was on her way.

Jeanie peered into the mirror and wondered if she could get away with a bit more eyeshadow. For once, she decided not to push it. Her dad would be waiting downstairs to see her to the bus stop and she didn't want a row to spoil today. He preferred a more natural look to what he called Jeanie's full face of slap and he even thought that her skirts should be below the

knee. She had eventually resorted to taking her lipstick and eyeliner with her and applying it on the school bus, and rolling up her skirts at the waistband after she'd left the house. Honestly – she was sixteen! But he treated her as though she was still a kid, even though today she about to become a working woman. She was already planning how to spend her first pay packet after she'd given her dad some rent money. He hadn't wanted her to pay him anything at all, but she was adamant. For as long as she could remember, it had just been the two of them. He had always looked after her and put her first and now she wanted to contribute. Maybe he might be able to buy himself something nice for a change. Top of Jeanie's list were some new nail polish and a Billie Holiday LP. She might not share her dad's views on fashion, but their taste in music was much more harmonious. Ray had raised his daughter on the greats: Etta James, Nina Simone, Ella Fitzgerald, and, of course, Billie Holiday. Jeanie scabbled through her jewellery box, pulled out a simple gold band on a chain and fastened it around her neck. It had been her mum's wedding ring and she wanted to feel that her mum was with her today. For luck.

'Jeanie! What the bleedin' hell are you doing? Do you want to be late on your first day?'

'All right, all right! Keep your hair on, Ernie. What's left of it.'

What was left of her dad's hair was hidden under the peak cap of his uniform as he waited impatiently for his daughter at the foot of the stairs. Ray Rogers had been delivering milk for over ten years, and he loved his job.

But since Benny Hill had topped the charts with his song about the hapless milkman, Ernie, Jeanie had not been the only one to rib him mercilessly. He clipped her playfully around the ear as she galloped down the stairs and gave him a twirl.

‘How do I look?’

Ray shook his head and smiled wistfully. She was the image of her mother at the age when she and Ray had begun courting. ‘Where’s my little girl gone? You look lovely. And very grown up. Your mum would’ve been proud of you.’

It was exactly what Jeanie needed to hear. Although she would never have admitted it, her excitement was matched by apprehension. It was her first day working as a clerk at a swanky private secretarial college in town – earning her own money and making her own way in the world. Jeanie had big dreams, and this was where they began. Ray gave her a tight hug and a peck on the cheek. ‘Come along, sweetheart. I’ll walk you to the bus stop.’

‘Didn’t you look in the mirror when you got dressed this morning?’ Ruby Campbell raised her eyebrows at her eleven-year-old son before pulling him towards her by the lapels of his blazer and releasing him so that she could straighten his crooked tie.

‘There. Don’t you look smart? Randall – look at your boy.’

Her husband raised his eyes from the newspaper he was reading and grinned.

‘He looks like a proper young man. And handsome too – just like his daddy.’

Madame Burova

Their son was, in fact, a striking blend of his parents' genes. His blonde-haired, blue-eyed mother and Jamaican father had produced a beautiful child with eyes the colour of aquamarines. But his good looks had done him no favours with his classmates and as a new term in a new school threatened, Treasure was wary. He smiled obligingly at his dad, but Ruby saw the doubt in her son's eyes and the knot in her stomach that she had been trying to ignore since she woke that morning twisted and tightened just a fraction more. Treasure was a tough little boy – small and wiry, and fast as a hare. But Ruby knew that for him life was not always easy. She remembered the 'no blacks' signs in the windows of the flats that she and Randall had seen when they were hunting for their first home, and the casually cruel insults they had endured simply for being seen together and holding hands in public. Treasure wasn't black, but he wasn't white enough for some people either, and no man's land was never a safe or comfortable place to be. She watched him struggle with a few spoonfuls of cornflakes before pushing his bowl to one side. Ruby wished that there was something that she could say or do to protect him from the bullies and the bigots, but she knew that he would have to fight his own battles and forge his own armour with whatever resources he could muster. Growing up was hard for anyone, but for kids like Treasure it was always harder.

Randall folded up his newspaper and pushed back his chair from the table.

'What's in my lunch box today, darling wife?'

Ruby laughed. 'The same as usual: corned beef and tomato. The only thing you'll eat in your sandwiches.'

‘Why should I have anything different when I found the perfect filling? Delicious, nutritious and fulfilling all my wishes!’ Randall traded a loving kiss on his wife’s cheek for his packed lunch and on his way out of the kitchen placed both hands on Treasure’s shoulders and gave them a squeeze.

‘Good luck, son. Have pride in yourself and you’ll be fine.’

Half an hour later, Treasure stood outside his new school. His stomach churned and his heart beat so hard that he could hear its frantic rhythm pounding in his head. Swept along by the mob of noisy children streaming through the gates, he had never felt so alone.

Madame Burova stood in the doorway of her booth and closed her eyes. The sound of waves and swooping gulls and the chatter of passers-by washed over her. The late-afternoon sun warmed her face and a salty breeze ruffled her hair. Grisha stood beside her, his black nose twitching and his feet fidgeting – eager for a run. It had been a good day and the cash box was almost full. A coach party of Women’s Institute ladies on a day trip had kept her busy for a couple of hours and passing trade had been brisk. When she nipped to the café next door at lunchtime to pick up a coffee and a cheese roll, she had pretended not to notice Shunty-Mae wandering along the promenade with studied nonchalance. She hoped that her mother had seen the queue of customers waiting patiently for readings outside the booth. The crowds were thinning now and the owners of shops and cafés were pulling down their shutters. Imelda fetched her coat and bag and clipped Grisha’s

Madame Burova

lead to his collar before he dragged her outside, heading for the beach. She reined him back just long enough to close the door to her own little kingdom behind them and turn the key in the lock. It had been a good day.

2



1972

‘I want you to tell her to stop hiding my baccy!’ Ernest Plumb was one of Imelda’s regulars. He was a short, stocky man with a bellicose air, who trailed a pungent whiff of mothballs and pipe smoke in his wake. Since his wife, Joan, had died, he had come to see her every few weeks to continue the constant bickering that had been the mainstay of their forty-two-year marriage. Imelda had tried explaining to Ernest that spiritual readings weren’t like telephone conversations. She couldn’t simply dial dead people and have a chat at will. Joan was no more cooperative in death than she had been in life. She only came through when it suited her, but today she did have something to say and Imelda struggled to suppress a grin.

‘Joan says that she’ll stop hiding your stinking tobacco when you stop living like a filthy pig and wash the net curtains at the sitting-room window. And she wants you to stop smoking your pipe in the house. She says that’s what your bloody shed is for.’

‘It’s not like he uses it for anything else,’ Joan grumbled. Imelda could see her standing behind Ernest with

her hands on her hips. 'He's no gardener – he wouldn't know a daff from a dandelion. And as for DIY – he's never so much as changed a light bulb. And he needn't think I didn't know about those mucky magazines he kept in there. *Health and Efficiency* my—'

'Perhaps if you just gave the curtains a quick wash and opened the window when you lit your pipe?' Imelda's suggested compromise was not well received by either party.

'Those nets need a damn good boil wash, and when I say outside, I mean outside!' Joan was not to be swayed.

'I won't be dictated to by a dead woman! It's my house and I'll smoke where I like.'

Imelda was pretty sure that he wouldn't. Not if he wanted a quiet life.

Once Ernest had paid and left (and promised to return in a couple of weeks), Grisha leapt from the blanket where he had been snoozing, hoping for a walk. Imelda opened the door a crack and peered out. It was raining heavily, and on the distant horizon the sky and sea were almost indistinguishable from one another. Grisha tentatively poked his nose outside, only to have it battered by a barrage of raindrops. He swiftly retreated to his blanket where he lay down with an exaggerated sigh. Imelda followed him and knelt beside him. He had been her constant companion since she had rescued him from a life on the streets, and never before had she loved a living creature so easily and utterly. She took his head in her hands and kissed his wet nose.

'Never mind, my boy. We'll go later. How about I fetch you a sausage roll from the café?'

Grisha gently wagged his tail. Maybe the rain wasn't such a bad thing after all.

Next door to Imelda's booth, the café was heaving with both regular customers and day-trippers taking shelter from the inclement weather. The holiday season was over now, but coach trips and tourists kept coming for most of the year. The café was owned and run by Ruby Campbell's sister and brother-in-law, Diamond and Jack, and Ruby was sitting at the counter drinking coffee and sharing the gossip from Larkins Holiday Park, where she worked as assistant to the newly appointed general manager.

'It seems like a daft time to appoint a new manager right at the end of the season,' said Jack as he drained some more chips from the fryer.

'The whole park's being given a revamp, and Marty has been brought in to oversee the work.'

'Ooh, it's Marty now is it? That's a bit familiar,' Diamond teased her sister.

Ruby was excited by the changes. The holiday camp had grown tired and shabby, and guest numbers had dwindled over the past few years. Marty had ambitious ideas, including plans for a whole new programme of entertainment. He had already booked a Wall of Death stunt motorcyclist for next season and had asked Ruby to help him seek out other new acts. She was both flattered and proud that she had been given more responsibility.

'I've found three sisters who do a mermaid act,' she told Diamond. 'They perform synchronised swimming to music in an aquarium and their costumes are gorgeous!'

Jack could barely contain himself. 'Shame there's not four of them. They could call themselves Diana Bass and The Sardines!'

Diamond threw a tea towel at him, but he wasn't finished yet. 'Maybe I should offer my services. My Tom Jones impersonation is legendary. Our Gareth says I could moonlight as a professional doppleganger,' he said, swivelling his hips.

'Your Tom Jones impersonation is only legendary for sounding nothing like him and our son is as tone deaf as you are,' countered his wife as she took two plates of eggs and chips from him and served them to one of the tables.

'There is someone in the family who can sing though.' Diamond returned with a stack of empty plates and passed them over the counter to Jack along with a chit for a new order of two bacon rolls and a pot of tea. 'Jeanie's got a lovely voice and she looks more like her mum every day.' Jeanie was their niece and the daughter of their late sister, Emerald. 'She's doing ever so well at her new job, according to her dad. Not sure how long she'll stick it though. She's a livewire, that one, and the secretarial college sounds a bit dull if you ask me.'

Ruby checked her watch and drained her coffee cup. Her lunch break was almost over. Diamond handed her a large slice of chocolate cake in a paper bag. 'Here. Take this to have with your afternoon tea.' She winked cheekily at her sister. 'You can share it with Marty.'

Ruby took the cake from Diamond, but she wasn't going to eat it. She would save it to give to Treasure when he came home from school. He hadn't said

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anything to her, but then he didn't need to. She was his mother. She knew that something was wrong.

The bell above the door rang and Jack waved at the young woman who rushed in from the rain.

'Now this is exactly who you need to keep your guests entertained at Larkins,' he told Ruby. 'Let me introduce you to the amazing Madame Burova – tarot reader, palmist and clairvoyant!'

3



1972

Jeanie propelled the post trolley along the polished wooden floor of the corridor, singing more loudly than she should have been. She had been warned about it several times before, but she couldn't seem to help herself. The acoustics in that part of the college building made the temptation too great. 'I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm' was her current favourite and she twirled the trolley in a full circle as the corridor widened at a junction. A door opened and a stern-looking woman in a tweed suit peered crossly over her glasses at Jeanie.

'Miss Rogers! I believe that you are employed here to deliver the post, not second-rate renditions of cheap romantic ditties. Please conduct yourself with a little more decorum. My students are trying to work, and they will be able to concentrate considerably more easily if they are not subjected to your deplorable caterwauling.'

Jeanie exposed her teeth in an expression that was more akin to a snarl than a smile, but answered demurely. 'I'm truly sorry, Miss Sharp. I don't know what came over me. I suppose I'm just so happy in my

work.' She picked up a pile of brown envelopes fastened together with an elastic band and handed them to Miss Sharp, who snatched them from her and then shut the classroom door in her face.

'Miserable old cow! How dare she call a Billie Holiday classic "cheap". Bloody caterwauling. I'll give her caterwauling,' she howled loudly before rattling off with her trolley at perilous speed to continue her round of deliveries.

At lunchtime in the college refectory, Jeanie was finishing her cheese and tomato sandwich when a young woman, whom she recognised as one of the students, approached her table and asked if she could join her.

'I'm Vivienne,' she said, holding out her hand having set down a cup of coffee on the table.

'Jeanie. Take a pew. What can I do for you?'

Vivienne was slim, slight even, with long, blonde hair and grey eyes, but there was something determined in her manner and expression that belied her delicate physique. She sat down opposite Jeanie and shrugged off the cardigan that was elegantly draped around her shoulders.

'You have an amazing voice.'

Jeanie smiled. 'Ha! So, you're one of Miss Sharp's? My apologies for disrupting your shorthand lesson.'

Vivienne stirred her coffee. 'I hate shorthand, and I'm no fan of Miss Sharp either. She's a dried-up, bitter old spinster who hates us because we are young and have our whole lives ahead of us. All she's got to look forward to each night is Ovaltine and an empty bed.'

Madame Burova

'If you hate shorthand, what on earth are you doing here? This *is* a secretarial college. Just in case you hadn't worked that out yet.'

'Escaping from my parents.' Vivienne took a packet of cigarettes from her handbag and offered one to Jeanie, who declined. She lit one for herself and blew out a long stream of smoke.

'Well, I suppose that's not strictly true as they're currently in America. I'm escaping from their plans for me.'

Jeanie leaned back in her chair to avoid the cigarette smoke that was wafting in her direction.

'And what are their plans?'

'To marry me off to some eligible young man from a good family. Someone who works in the City and plays in the country.'

Jeanie wrinkled her nose in disgust. 'God, that sounds a bit dire. So, what's your plan?'

'Not sure yet, but by persuading them to let me come here, I've bought myself some time to think of one before they get back.'

Vivienne flicked the ash from the end of her cigarette. 'What about you? What are you doing here?'

'Earning my keep until someone pays me to sing for a living.'

'Well with a voice like yours, I'm sure that won't take long.'

Jeanie was flattered, but also fascinated by her new friend. She was so sure of herself, so grown up, and yet she could only be a year or two older than Jeanie at the most. She felt a sudden need to impress her.

'I'm singing tonight – at Larkins. Come along if you like.'

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‘What’s Larkins?’

‘The holiday park. They’re having a talent show – looking for new acts. Anyone who’s good enough might get a permanent job there when the season starts.’

Vivienne delved into her handbag and retrieved her powder compact. She considered the invitation as she carefully reapplied her lipstick. For some reason, Jeanie was suddenly desperate for her to accept. Vivienne snapped the compact shut and dazzled Jeanie with the full beam of her smile.

‘I’d love to.’

4



1972

‘Well this is no good at all. You wouldn’t be able to hear yourself think.’

Shunty-Mae was not at all in favour of Imelda giving readings at Larkins Holiday Park and she was making it her business to raise objections at every turn. The newly refurbished entertainment lounge was a large room with a stage at one end facing numerous rows of red and gold chairs, and a bar at the other. A rotating glitter ball hung from the ceiling, showering the room with a twinkling confetti of tiny lights, and gilded palm tree lamps stood in columns along the walls. At the foot of each palm tree was a pair of pink flamingos flanking an outside martini glass containing a paper umbrella and a plastic cocktail cherry.

‘It looks like a brothel!’ she added.

Imelda laughed. ‘And how would you know?’

Imelda hadn’t yet agreed to do anything, but Ruby had invited her along to take a look. The recently appointed manager had asked Ruby to organise a talent show to audition new acts and when Shunty-Mae had heard about it, she had insisted on coming too.

'I wouldn't be doing readings in here,' Imelda reassured her mother as they took their seats amongst the packed audience. 'I'd have my own booth.'

Imelda never felt very comfortable in a crowd. The white noise of so many different voices, thoughts and energies often gave her a headache and she was glad when a man appeared on stage in a very dapper tuxedo and tapped the microphone to get proceedings underway.

'Good evening ladies and gentlemen, and thank you so much for coming. My name is Marty Mount and I'm the new manager of Larkins Holiday Park. We have a real treat for you this evening as we search for new stars to provide top-class entertainment for our lucky guests this coming season. So, sit back and enjoy, and don't be afraid to let us know what you think. And here to introduce the first act is my glamorous assistant, Ruby Campbell!'

Shunty-Mae rolled her eyes and whispered rather too loudly to Imelda, 'And doesn't he just think he's the cock of the walk?'

Ruby, dressed in a figure-hugging black frock, walked onto the stage a little self-consciously and took the microphone from Marty, who looked rather put out at the enthusiastic applause and whistling that greeted her appearance. She cleared her throat nervously before announcing the first performer.

'Please give a warm welcome to Magic Melvin and his Unbelievable Balls!'

Magic Melvin was a small, skinny man with a black moustache and a quiff that looked as though it had been painted to match his facial hair. He made his entrance on a unicycle, wobbling precariously as he

pedalled furiously backwards and forwards to maintain his balance. And then he dismounted. Bizarrely, it turned out that the unicycle was simply his chosen mode of transport rather than part of his act. Once his feet were on solid ground, he produced three golf balls from his sleeves, proclaiming, 'As if by magic!' and began to juggle them accompanied by the theme tune to *Match of the Day*. Next, he pulled tennis balls from his trouser pockets and repeated the rather pedestrian performance. The audience was growing restive. Attempting to spice things up, Melvin threw the balls a little higher and hopped first on one leg and then the other. However, his increased exertions had an unfortunate effect on his hair, which rather than being dyed was, in fact, a hairpiece that clearly hadn't been satisfactorily secured and was now slipping backwards with every hop. The climax to Magic Melvin's act was an attempt to juggle footballs and for one ball to bounce on his head with each rotation. The attempt failed and Melvin and his hairpiece parted company. They were both rather unkindly but justifiably booed off stage.

'That bloke *has* got unbelievable balls if he calls that an act,' the man sitting behind Shunty-Mae and Imelda grumbled to his wife.

Up next was a comedian, who quickly had the audience in stitches, and Marty Mount rubbing his hands. Shunty-Mae, however, was not impressed with his risqué jokes, which she thought were a little too blue for her daughter's ears.

'What kind of a place is this?' she demanded.

'Well, what do you expect in a brothel?' Imelda replied with a grin.

The comedian was followed by Titus Marlow, a tall, imposing figure with alarming eyebrows. He wore a dark suit and an expression of barely concealed menace. Titus was a hypnotist and having coerced several 'volunteers' to join him on stage, he placed them in a trance and got them to embarrass themselves by singing, dancing, doing silly walks and sitting on one another's laps. The audience found their humiliation hilarious and Titus received a standing ovation.

The next act was a husband and wife and their performing doves. The beautiful white birds hopped obligingly from a series of perches onto various props including a miniature trapeze, a small seesaw and a brightly coloured roundabout. They flew on command to pluck coloured silk handkerchiefs from the hand of the husband, circle the stage and then land on the hand of the wife. Well – most of them did. There was one bird who looked a bit truculent from the start. He preferred preening his feathers to paying attention to the commands being given by his master and he performed each trick rather grudgingly. Imelda thought he seemed a bit bored. She was right. All at once, he decided to go solo. He flew high over the heads of the audience and landed on top of one of the palm trees where he sat pecking at the gilded leaves. The act was brought to a hasty conclusion and the remaining doves were returned to their cage. But the audience was clearly far more interested in how the renegade was going to be retrieved. The husband approached the base of the palm tree, accompanied by an agitated Marty, who was not at all happy that his expensive interior design feature was being used as a perch by one of the performers. The bird was

eventually persuaded to fly down, but not before relieving himself from his lofty perch, depositing generous white splashes on the suits of both men standing beneath him. The audience was highly entertained and even Shunty-Mae was unable to suppress a sanctimonious grin.

Ruby reappeared on stage to calm the commotion by announcing the next act. Sara-Jade Virtue was a fine-looking woman comfortably past her fortieth birthday, with a body as lithe as a teenager's. She wore black tights and a leotard sprinkled with sequins, and was swathed in a series of sheer, sparkling lengths of cloth. As she sashayed around the stage accompanied by some Egyptian music, she discarded each veil with a seductive swirl.

'A woman of her age should know better than to flaunt her body for all and sundry to gawp at,' hissed Shunty-Mae to Imelda. 'She's practically naked. This so-called holiday park is little better than Sodom and Gomorrah!'

But it was soon apparent that Ms Virtue was much more than an exotic dancer. She was also a contortionist of extraordinary skill. She lay down on her stomach facing the audience and raising her torso on her forearms, she swung her legs backwards over her head and folded her feet underneath her chin. In the same position, having untucked her feet, she used one to take a cigarette and place it between her lips, and the other to light it with a match, both handed to her by Ruby. The audience was transfixed. She then performed a series of manoeuvres so fluid and improbable that they seemed to defy the presence of any bones in her body whatsoever, save for her skull, and those in her hands and feet.

Her final flourish was to fold herself completely and inexplicably into a small suitcase and close the lid. The silence that followed stretched almost to the point where the audience became fearful for her fate, but then she burst from the case with a triumphant smile and rearranged her limbs into a more conventional configuration in time to take her bow.

The next act could only be an anti-climax. It was a man tap dancing with biscuit tins on his feet.

The final performer of the evening was a young woman called Jeanie Rogers whom Ruby proudly introduced as her niece. Jeanie looked very young, but as she took the microphone from Ruby, her confidence was unmistakable. She looked completely at home in the spotlight on stage. As soon as she began to sing, the audience was stunned into absolute silence. The voice they heard was that of a world-weary jazz diva, but it came from the mouth of a teenage girl. The disparity was mesmerising. *'I put a spell on you,'* Jeanie sang, and the audience was bewitched.

After the show, Imelda was keen to go home, but Shunty-Mae perversely insisted that they stay for one drink. It seemed that, despite her protestations, she was quite enjoying herself. At the bar, Imelda found herself standing next to Ruby and her niece.

'Madame Burova! I'm so glad you made it.'

'Imelda. Please call me Imelda. So am I. Your niece was the star of the show. You must be so proud of her. I have no need to read her cards to be sure that she will go very far indeed.'

Ruby was clearly delighted and gave the blushing Jeanie a hug.

Madame Burova

‘Jeanie, this is Madame Burova – Imelda. I’m trying to persuade her to come and give readings to the guests at Larkins.’

Jeanie smiled bashfully as she disentangled herself from her aunt’s embrace.

‘How fascinating.’ An elegant young woman had appeared at Jeanie’s side and was coolly observing Imelda with her pale grey eyes. Imelda met her gaze and felt just the slightest prickle of apprehension.

‘Vivienne! You came! What did you think?’ Jeanie was clearly very anxious to hear her friend’s opinion.

‘I thought you were wonderful, darling. Now what would you like to drink?’

‘She’s having an orange and lemonade,’ said Ruby rather pointedly. ‘Can I get you one?’

‘No thanks,’ Vivienne smiled, completely unfazed by Ruby’s tone. ‘I’ll get my own.’

Imelda ordered and paid for two vodka and tonics and returned to the table where Shunty-Mae was happily people-watching. Shunty-Mae frowned as Vivienne took Jeanie’s arm and led her away from the bar.

‘That Jeanie has a God-given talent,’ she said admiringly and took a large swig from her glass. ‘But the other one – she’s got the devil in her.’

5



Now

It was a new pencil case kind of day. Although it was many years since Billie had left school, that was how she always thought of a crisp, sunny day in September. She still remembered the shiny shoes that rubbed a little, stiff collars and cuffs, and the too-long sleeves of a blazer that was bought to grow into. On the first day of a school year, Billie's uniform was always pristine and she always had a new pencil case. Her mum had made sure of it.

23 Honeyhill Road was a small, neat terraced house with bright white net curtains at the windows. But beyond the nets the house was empty save for the memories that it held. The 'sold' sign outside had gone up earlier that week, and Billie was here to take a last look around her childhood home and bid a final farewell. The front door caught on a pile of junk mail as she pushed it open, and the air in the hallway was warm and still and slightly fusty. There was a rectangle of wallpaper where the pattern was still bright, unfaded by the sun. It had been preserved by her graduation photograph which had hung there in pride of place – one of the first things visitors saw when they came

into the house. She walked through into the kitchen where they had eaten so many family meals together. Hurried breakfasts of tea and toast before school for her, and the bus depot for her mum and dad, where they had both worked, met and fallen in love. She could still picture her mum standing at the counter making sandwiches for their packed lunches while she sang along to songs playing on the radio. She remembered picking fresh mint in the garden for all those Sunday dinners, and the smell of bread sauce simmering in a pan and turkey roasting in the oven on so many Christmas mornings. Billie unlocked the back door and followed the well-worn path down the narrow garden. The path on which she had drawn hopscotch squares with chalk, and the garden where she had played with Bubble and Squeak, her pet guinea pigs. The lawn was a little overgrown now, and the narrow flowerbed that bordered it was sprinkled with weeds. But soon, no doubt, it would be covered in decking and dotted with carefully chosen architectural plants in zinc containers. The couple who were moving in next month had shared with her their plans for a 'low-maintenance outdoor entertaining space'. Billie wandered back inside and glanced through the door to the lounge, where she had sat together with her mum and dad on the sofa watching TV and sharing boxes of chocolates and bags of crisps – their Saturday night treats. After her mum died and her dad became ill, she had come home to look after him and they had watched travel documentaries together. Just before he died, he told her that he felt as though he had travelled the world without leaving his armchair.

Upstairs, there were two bedrooms and a bathroom. The smaller room had been hers, and when she had moved back in just over a year ago, the posters from her teenage years were still Blu Tacked to the wall. George Michael wearing ripped jeans and a leather jacket, Rick Astley, Whitney Houston and Patrick Swayze. It was sad to think that they were all dead now apart from Rick, and he had been her least favourite anyway. In her parents' bedroom, the Laura Ashley wallpaper had been there since the 80s. Her mum had saved up and then splashed out on it. The paper had a cream background with tiny sprigs of blue flowers and her mum had loved the pattern. It hadn't been cheap, and they never had money to throw around, but she had seen it in a magazine at the hairdresser's and set her heart on it. Billie remembered that there hadn't been quite enough, but to save the expense of another roll, her dad had left a gap behind the chest of drawers. Her mum never knew.

It had been a happy house and they had been a close-knit family. Billie had always felt safe in the certainty of being loved. Even when her dad had died here, the memory of it wasn't sad. It had been his time to go, and he left peacefully, without pain, sleeping in his own bed. When she found him the next morning, he almost looked as though he was smiling. And now, on this new pencil case kind of day, there would be a fresh start for Billie. The house was sold, she had said her good-byes and now she could move on. But to what?

As Billie locked the front door for the last time and dropped the keys through the letterbox, Rita Barnet, the elderly neighbour, came out to speak to her.

‘End of an era, Billie. That’s what it is – the end of an era. I still remember the day when your mum and dad moved in, only a few weeks after us. They were good friends to me, especially after my Tony died. I’m not looking forward to the new lot moving in. They look a bit la-di-da to me.’

‘They seem all right, Rita. You probably won’t see that much of them. I think they both work in the City.’

Rita folded her arms and hugged them to her bony chest. ‘What did I tell you – la-di-da.’

Driving back to her flat, Billie pondered for the umpteenth time what she might do next. It was exciting considering the possibilities, but also a little daunting to have so many choices. Since her divorce had been finalised the previous year and she had taken voluntary redundancy from her job as a university lecturer to look after her dad, her life had been somewhat in limbo. But now she was completely free. With her modest redundancy payment and her share of the proceeds from the marital home, she could even afford not to work for a while. There would be little left from the sale of Honeyhill Road as she had persuaded her parents to take advantage of an equity release scheme to supplement their meagre pensions, but even so, there was enough in her bank account to finance a modest sabbatical. Maybe she could go travelling – take a gap year. She grinned at the thought of backpacking around Australia in a pair of shorts and hiking boots. Glamping for a week in Dorset was probably more realistic – and definitely more comfortable at her age.

She parked her car outside the large, slightly run-down Edwardian house where her rented flat took up the entire second floor. The paint on the front door was flaking off in places, but the stained-glass panels were still intact and along with the original brass knocker and a rusty boot scraper in the porch, they gave the entrance an air of faded grandeur. In the shared lobby she collected the mail from her allocated metal post box and climbed the stairs to her front door. The flat was light and airy, and even had a small balcony where she was attempting to grow some herbs and a couple of pots of geraniums. The bare walls were punctuated with well-framed prints of paintings she loved and knew intimately from her years of teaching history of art, and various antiques and curiosities were displayed on side tables and in cabinets around the room. Unlike her university lectures, her collection was neither curated nor hung to demonstrate any meaningful narrative. It was simply a cacophony of clashing colours and contrasting styles that brought her daily joy. Skulking in a corner was a set of golf clubs, undisturbed and gathering dust since Billie had propped them there on the day that she had moved in. She kept meaning to sell them. She had learned to play to pacify Giles, her ex-husband. He had insisted that they try something new together in an attempt to resuscitate their ailing marriage. Giles had suggested golf, but Billie would have preferred salsa, so they tossed a coin. Golf won and Giles loved it, but it bored Billie to death and finally finished off their marriage. It was a mercy killing. Giles became secretary of the golf club and Billie became a free woman once again. Perhaps now it was time to sell

Madame Burova

the clubs and find a salsa class. In the galley kitchen she flicked the switch on the kettle and while she was waiting for the water to boil, she sifted through the post. Amongst the bills and junk mail was a brown envelope, which she knew from the postmark must be from their family solicitor. It was probably something to do with the sale of her parents' house. She poured boiling water over a teabag in her mug and then tore open the envelope. As she read what was written on the pages it contained, her whole world washed away like the chalked hopscotch squares of her childhood in a sudden downpour of rain.