

Suzanne, September 1997

The key turns in the lock.

Must be Pip, messing about. Again. Didn't he learn anything from what happened before?

On my canvas, my little brother's face is crinkled up in a Cheshire cat grin. And I bet it's the same on the other side of my bedroom door.

'Pip, unlock the door and let me out. You're in enough trouble already.'

An hour ago, he was sheepish and sorry, but he can't keep that up for long. I picture him on the landing, his paint-stained fist stuffed into his mouth, trying to keep quiet. He can never keep it up. Laughter always fights its way out. *Silly Pippin.*

I wait for the giggles but hear nothing.

I try to return to the painting I'm doing of him and Mum on Porthcurno beach, but the silence won't let me. How long have I been in here? Long enough for the sun to move round and turn my room into an oven.

'Pip, come on.'

Then I see it. My *own* key, on my window ledge. It can't be Pip who locked me in because only my parents have the spare.

I put down my fine Filbert brush. Goosebumps spring up along my spine.

When I came up to my room, the house was full of the usual Saturday sounds drifting up the stairs: Pip strangling blue-black scales out of his recorder; Mum's Moulinex grinding raw beef into pink, wormy mince; a DJ mumbling dedications on Radio 2.

But now there's nothing.

I focus on my easel. I promised Miss Hamilton I'd try a landscape, but as usual, people crept into the picture. I love the stories faces tell, and all the colours I can use to bring them to life. Mum's pale cheeks turned Madder Rose by the Cornish sunshine. her hair dripping with salty water. Pip's eyes forming wicked crescent moons: he'd just told a joke. The sand is Winsor Yellow, the sky Cerulean, flecked with fat gulls in titanium white.

OK, my birds look as clumsy as dinosaurs but Miss Hamilton says practice makes perfect. She's the best thing about moving to secondary school. She thinks I could be a proper artist one day.

I hear a deep, adult sigh from the landing. Not my brother.

'Dad?'

'Suzanne. Listen to me.' My father's voice is tight.

'Pippin was only playing, Dad, I can save up for new turps—'

'It doesn't matter now.'

Hope surges. Sometimes Mum manages to stop one of his moods developing.

'So, we can still go to see *Men in Black*?'

He mutters something I can't hear – as though he's talking to someone else. Then, 'Suzanne, this is important. You must promise me you won't come out straightaway.'

'Daddy, what's wrong?'

'Just be a good girl and wait fifteen minutes. No, twenty.'

'Has something happened, Daddy?'

I'm nearly too old to call him that, but sometimes it calms him down.

'Don't try my patience, Suzanne.' I hear anger in his voice. It sounds like Cadmium Red. 'Promise me you'll do as you're told.'

'I promise.'

My mouth has a strange taste, greasy like the oil paints.

A flash of silver appears at the bottom of the door, as he pushes the spare key to my bedroom through the gap. It rests on the dense threads of the new carpet, where Pip spilled the turps and Saturday started to go wrong.

'Daddy, it's OK. I already have a key.'

'I know.'

'But . . .'

I stop. My father always has a reason.

'It's ten past twelve now, Suzanne.'

'Yes.'

Except my clock radio says 12:15. Mum sets it five minutes fast, because I'm allergic to mornings, like Snoopy on my duvet cover.

'At half past – no earlier – unlock the door, and go straight downstairs, don't open any doors. Go to number 26 and tell Len to phone 999.'

He and Len used to be friends. Now Dad says Len is an interfering old sod.

'Are you hurt, Daddy?'

A pause. 'No.'

'I'm scared.'

'Don't be, Suzanne. Repeat back what I said.'

'At . . . at half past, I unlock the door and go downstairs and get Len to call 999.'



I step away from the easel. The floorboard creaks.
'Suzanne! Don't move.' The anger deepens. *Lamp Black.*
I stop. Did he hear me – or is he watching through the keyhole?
'That's better. Good girl, Suzanne. I know I can trust you.
And . . . remember, you're my best girl.'

'Daddy? Daddy, wait—'

Light shoots through the keyhole, falling on the carpet in the shape of a Ludo piece. He's gone.

I listen to the house, but all I can hear is my own rapid breathing. I breathe through my nose to slow it down, like the asthma nurse taught me, but now the resinous smell of the spilled turps makes me dizzy.

Have I done something wrong? Telling on Pip, making Dad cross? He is never cross with me.

I close my eyes, focus on the sounds of the avenue: lazy birdsong; the clatter of two skateboards; a soapy sponge sloshing against Len's beige Ford Sierra. But inside, nothing stirs. There are three other hearts beating in the house – four if you count our dog Marmite's, and, of course, I do – but the silence is total.

I'm afraid.

I open my eyes. The red twenty on my clock radio turns to twenty-one. Nine minutes left.

Something is happening on the other side of the door. Voices on the landing, footsteps on the stairs. Male voices. Murmuring, disagreeing.

I strain to hear but the thump of my heart drowns them out.

'Pip? Daddy?' I call, even though it's not his voice I hear.
'Who's there?'

Silence.



Dad has been acting strange for months. Has something happened? Images of what might be beyond that door fill my head.

I blink. Did I imagine the voices? I must have. There are no other sounds, not one.

On the carpet the metal key glows in the sun. Should I unlock the door now?

I mustn't. I'm his best girl, and I promised.

And eight minutes won't make any difference to whatever is on the other side.

Georgia, March 2017

1

I can't remember this man's name, but he kisses better than a stranger should. We stagger along the seafront, leaning against the turquoise railings to catch our breath before kissing again. After a while the gulls become bats, silhouetted against the blinding moon, and the pier winks at me over my stranger's shoulder.

'I'm up here.'

I point towards the square, wishing I lived further away, so we could kiss-walk some more.

'Wow. You live in a wedding-cake house. I've pulled a rich chick.'

We climb the chequerboard steps, holding on to each other. Hungry. Every time I try to put the front door key in the lock, he kisses me again. But finally we're tumbling into the flat, and . . .

Shit.

The door to the living room is ajar – he can't go in there.

'Not that way.' I pull the door closed. It slams.

'What are you hiding?'

'Six children and a bad-tempered pit bull. So don't go in there unless you want to be savaged while the kids sing "The Wheels on the Bus".'



'I'm a teacher. Kids don't scare me.'

I step back, staring at this man I've brought home. I sensed he was safe, and just that bit drunker than I am. But can I be sure? I've covered enough cases where victims felt exactly the same thing.

Suddenly this seems a bad idea.

'Look, I—'

'Is that uncool?' he says. 'Are we meant to know nothing about each other?'

I laugh. 'It's not a quirk or anything. It's just . . . simpler. I'm not looking for a relationship.'

'Well, that's a coincidence, because neither am I.'

He smiles, and I step towards him.

It's OK. He's OK.

Alcohol has softened my focus a little, but my instincts are always sound. This man is harmless.

He follows me into the bedroom. We kiss – sour apple, bitter hops – and begin to undress each other. It's slow, frustrating, him fumbling with the buttons and zips of my stuffy courtroom clothes.

Without a word, we agree to undress ourselves. But my ochre blouse is still a battle, the too-tight buttoned cuffs catching at the end of my wrist. The fabric rips as I pull it past my knuckles.

'In a hurry, are we?' he says.

I answer him by unhooking my bra and letting it fall on the floor. Daring. Confident. It's easier to pretend to be something you're not with a stranger.

'Race you!'

The teacher is wearing less than me, so wins the game, naked now while I'm still wrestling with my tights. He pushes me back



into the bed, lies down beside me, and pulls my pants and tights off my legs in one inelegant, effective move.

‘You’re bloody beautiful.’

I pull him towards me. He reaches down to his discarded jeans for a condom. I like him more for not having to ask. But not enough to want to learn his name.

He pushes into me, and I don’t even care what my own name is anymore.

2

It's two in the morning and I can't sleep because of what's hidden behind the living room door.

I move away from the teacher's body. He runs hot as a radiator, and when the cool silk of the kimono touches my skin, it tingles.

I tiptoe into the front room and shut the door behind me.

The shutters are open, and I work by the violet moonlight. The canvas is still tacky, so I cover it with a light tarp, and manoeuvre it behind the folding screen. I pick up my acrylics and tidy them away too.

Sketches and notes litter the honeyed parquet floor. When I first saw this flat, the bay took my breath away: the view, and the clean light that pours through the floor-to-ceiling windows. But the floor space has proved just as valuable. Where Victorians used to dance and flirt, now my notes on killers, rapists, dealers and cheats jostle for position.

I tidy up quickly, glancing at each handwritten sheet to file it in the right place, but trying not to let the details linger. My work-in-progress shows a husband and wife screaming at each other like tetchy toddlers fighting in a sandpit, faces mottled pink with outrage.

I imagine for a second what the teacher would say if he came in now, saw the portrait. This grisly pair were briefly infamous,



not even for fifteen minutes, but long enough that he might remember their bland, cruel faces. They were convicted for manslaughter of their infant son. It should have been murder. I wonder what the man in my bed would think: what kind of person paints pictures of the worst humanity has to offer?

I scoop up my original sketches, the court reports, the photograph of the child unlucky enough to be born with them as parents. In my portraits, I build up the layers, to reveal people as they really are, the secrets they hide even from themselves.

The sketches go in the dove-grey armoire, next to past cases. A cupboard full of people I've condemned with a smear of pastel, from a fire-starting teenager to a poisonous pensioner. I have to wrestle the cabinet doors closed: there's too much crammed inside, I should have a clear-out.

As I straighten up, my thighs ache. I want to go back, wake the teacher up for more, forget about the pictures, the stories, the *evil*.

Too late. I'm already contaminated by what I've remembered about the case.

I fetch a glass of tap water, then climb into the huge armchair that always makes me feel child-sized. Through the window, the sea is indigo, separated from the sky by a ribbon of velvet-black horizon. Above it, something flashes white: a star, exploding millennia ago? Or perhaps just a gull's wing catching moonlight.

My eyes are playing tricks on me from lack of sleep. I let them close.



3

'Hello, sleepyhead. I made you coffee. I couldn't find tea.'

The touch on my arm makes me flinch. But now I remember. It's the teacher, so close that I can smell my toothpaste on his lips.

I open my eyes; outside, the sky is 5 a.m. grey. I know this time of day. But I am not used to sharing it with another living thing.

'Hello.' My voice is croaky. *'Yeah, I don't drink tea. It reminds me of funerals.'*

A question creases the teacher's forehead, but he stops himself voicing it. He has strong, open features that would be difficult to sketch. Usually, I can see through good-looking people, find a crack that shows their secret weaknesses. But this man is hiding nothing. It's so rare that it's remarkable.

'Where did you hide the pit bull and the six kids, then?' he asks.

'In the cupboard. All my dirty secrets, locked away.' I reach out to take my mug; steam rises from the black surface. *'I'm Georgia, by the way.'*

'I remember. What's my name?'

I blush. *'Sorry. The cider . . .'*

He laughs and holds out his hand to shake mine, his skin warm.

'I'm Niall. Pleased to meet you.' He sips his own coffee, looks round the room. 'It's an amazing flat. And you live here on your own?'

I nod. 'Where do you live?'

'Kemp Town. This room is probably bigger than our whole flat. And there are five of us, sharing.'

'I'm very lucky. I'm . . .' I am about to tell him the usual half-lie, that I lost both parents as a child, but I don't want the sympathy and the questions that'll bring. 'I came into some money, a couple of years ago.'

'Good on you.' He shrugs, to show he doesn't resent my luck. 'I ought to get off in a minute. Can't show up at school in the same clothes. They notice everything, the kids.' He grins. 'Wasn't exactly how I expected the Monday pub quiz to turn out.'

'Me neither. A school night. Aren't we terrible?' A memory of last night passes between us. 'But you can finish your coffee.'

He walks towards the window and I watch him take in the view: the sea, the promenade, and closest to us, the genteel garden square. *No ball games. No barbecues. No dogs allowed.* Someone should tell that young fox, brazenly crossing the grass.

The sky begins to lighten. Niall's broad shape is silhouetted against the glass and part of me wants to reach for him again.

Movement on the grass catches my eye. The fox again? No. The shape is wrong. It's a person. A child. A boy, dressed in the reddest pyjama top I've ever seen.

I catch my breath. Rough sleepers sometimes camp down there for the night, before they're moved on, but there's no sign of a tent or a sleeping bag. And the kid can't be older than four or five, plus he's only half-dressed, in pyjamas . . . No, it's a child's football strip.

Thank God Niall is here. A teacher will know what to do.

‘Should we go down there?’

Niall looks at me. ‘Sorry?’

‘The boy. He shouldn’t be on his own.’

‘What boy?’

I stand up and point towards the kid, statue-still in the centre of the lawn. His red clothes make him glow against the emerald grass. Who knows how many of my neighbours must have seen him already, but decided he was someone else’s responsibility. People make me sick.

‘I hope he’s not been there all night. He must be frozen.’

Niall leans forward, so close to the window his breath frosts the cool morning glass. Then he looks back at me, laughs nervously.

‘I can’t see anyone.’

I tap the window impatiently.

‘*There.*’

I glance at Niall: perhaps he’s short-sighted.

But when I turn back towards the green, the boy *has* gone. How? There wasn’t long enough for him to reach the pavement or disappear behind the shrubs that fringe the gardens.

Niall says, ‘There’s a fox down there. Maybe that’s what you saw.’

The animal stares me out.

‘I’d seen the fox already, but . . .’ I stop. There really is no one else there. ‘You’re right. My hangover must be worse than I thought.’

‘Long night, eh? I really should go, before it’s light.’

He reaches out to touch my hand and I feel his blood, pulsing. I am lonely, suddenly, at the thought of him being gone.

I take a deep breath.

‘You know, you get a great view of the sunrise from the bedroom, on a clear morning like this.’

His eyes widen. ‘Really? Well, I wouldn’t want to miss out on that, would I?’

I take his hand. However hard I try to convince myself, there are still times when I really don’t want to be alone.

4

‘When he asked you if you wanted to have sex, what did you say?’

‘He didn’t ask. It . . . Things were moving faster than I wanted them to. But when he was about to . . . When I realised what he was about to do, I said no.’

‘And that’s the word you used?’

Oliver Priest, for the prosecution, leans in towards the young woman, his voice kind and courteous. It’s one of his tactics. He already knows the defence will try to portray her as a slut or gold-digger who knew exactly what she was doing when she went into the footballer’s bedroom. It’s Oli’s job to make the jury remember that she is somebody’s daughter, somebody’s friend. Somebody like them.

‘Yes. I told him to get off, that I didn’t want *that*.’ His witness speaks softly. She’s brave, this one. No TV link, no screen to prevent her having to see the accused. ‘And when it . . . happened, when he forced himself . . . I said no. Three times.’

Her cotton dress is demure, neckline high, hemline below the knee. *Tea roses*, I write, *flesh-tint pink, with viridian leaves. No thorns*. Her name is Julie Tranter though, of course, the law bars journalists from identifying women making an accusation of sexual assault. The reasons are sound, but the ban does mean the public can struggle to see victims as real people.



Perhaps I might use a blur of that floral fabric to suggest how vulnerable she must feel.

‘You said it out loud? You didn’t just *think* it?’

‘I *screamed* it the third time. He heard me. But . . . his expression didn’t change at all.’

I glance up at the footballer in the dock, his face flinty. He hasn’t looked at the witness box since the girl took the stand. That must tell its own story.

I write: *in denial*. Try to commit him to memory, because while the court is in session, I’m not allowed to sketch a single line. Instead, I have to rely on my notes, jot down word portraits of the characters I must bring to life after the court adjourns. Court artists are yet more proof that the justice system is a relic, unfit for the twenty-first century. But then again, if the judges ever *do* decide to let the cameras in, I’d lose my job, and the little power I have to make the guilty pay.

‘Why did you feel you had to shout?’

‘Because he wasn’t stopping. I was . . . terrified but still, I had to try to make him hear me. To stop it. To stop *him*.’

‘And do you think he *did* hear you?’

‘Your Honour.’ The footballer’s barrister is on her feet. ‘My learned friend is asking the witness to speculate on things she can have no knowledge of.’

The defence barrister is petite, with silky blonde curls poking out from under her wig. I know what the jury will be thinking: surely no woman could defend a guilty man?

But ‘Cruella’ gained her nickname for playing dirtier than any male lawyer would dare. She will dwell on intimate details – contraception, underwear, periods – that mean nothing, but taint the young woman for the rest of the trial. And I bet she’ll hint at a fondness for rough sex, to explain away the bruises



mentioned in Oli's opening address. By the time she's finished her cross-examination, Julie Tranter won't even be sure herself if she consented or not.

'I agree,' Judge Ronaldson says. 'Do tone it down a little, Mr Priest. But I think we'll leave it there for today in any case.' He stifles a yawn. 'Ten tomorrow, members of the jury. Thank you for your attention today.'

'Court rise.'

The timing of the adjournment is a small victory for Oliver: the jurors will fall asleep tonight with the woman's testimony in their minds.

As soon as the judge leaves, I quickly sketch the defendant's sharp suit, the full pout of his lips, before he's taken back down to the cells.

'Get my good side, will you, Georgie?'

Oli passes alongside the press bench as the court empties.

'Wow,' I say. 'I think that's the first time you've admitted you even have a bad one.'

He smiles. 'OK, my *better* side.' He leans in, so no one else hears. I smell the sharp, grapefruit tang of his moisturiser, the one he has sent specially from America. 'How are we doing with this one?'

'Bribing the judge is working,' I whisper.

'Shh.' He leans in even further; his wig has slipped and I glimpse a fresh crop of white along his real hairline. He'll be happy with the added gravitas. 'Seriously, how are we coming across?'

I smile at the barrister habit of calling their witness *we*.

'She's likeable. Believable.'

I put my notebook in my bag, and we walk out of court together. Of course, I won't tell him how I plan to give the prosecution a helping hand.

Oli frowns. 'You think? Allowing yourself to be groped in a steam room, without knowing who was doing the groping? It's not exactly Jane Austen.'

I sigh. 'She knows what to expect from Cruella?'

'As much as any of them do.'

We've spent hours discussing this. Despite his single-sex public-school upbringing, Oli is one hundred per cent the feminist when it comes to rape trials. He specialises in cases where the victims need someone to speak on their behalf, and the Crown Prosecution Service instruct him because he is bloody good at it.

'How's Imogen? Can't be long now.'

The frown on his face melts away.

'Three weeks. Maybe. They say first babies are always late.'

'Yours will be bang on schedule, I bet you.'

'I'm bloody terrified, Georgie. Control issues. You know.'

I smile. 'Fatherhood will suit you. You've waited long enough.'

It's one of those rare moments when Oli doesn't seem to know what to say.

'Georgia! I need to talk to you about your ideas for the six.'

Today's TV producer, Toby, shouts at me across the corridor. Neena Kaur, the reporter, is already heading outside to do a live broadcast for the rolling news channel. My sketch of the afternoon's proceedings will go into a more polished report for the flagship bulletin at 6 p.m.

'Duty calls, I see,' Oli says. 'My best side, remember? And when the jury's finally out, let's grab a coffee.'

'I'd love to.' I remember something. 'Actually, it'd be great to chat through some of your old cases. I've been asked to do a commission for an art book. I might need some contacts.'

‘A book, eh?’ Oli’s eyes light up. ‘I always knew it was only a matter of time until your talent was recognised—’

‘Georgia, we really do need to get this in the bag,’ Toby says, pushing himself into the conversation.

Oli raises his eyebrows at me.

‘Can’t stand in the way of the public’s right to know. We’ll make a date, right? Toodle pip, Georgie.’

‘*Cheerio*, old thing,’ I say, watching him as he heads towards the robing room. He turns at the last minute to blow me a kiss.

Toby is staring.

‘Are you chummy with all the barristers?’

‘Only the ones I nearly married,’ I say, walking out of the courtroom, down the grand staircase. ‘What’s the hurry with the sketch?’

‘They’ve a lot of late-running stories tonight. Want our package sent asap. What are you planning? We want Sam Carr in it, obviously.’

It takes me a moment to remember that Carr is the footballer’s name. I had stopped thinking of him as a person. But I already know what I want to draw.

‘Did you catch the moment when he scowled at the prosecutor over the evidence about the girl’s clothes being ripped?’

‘So long as it doesn’t imply he’s guilty.’

I shake my head. ‘I’d *never* do that.’

‘You must have a hunch, though?’ He smiles. ‘All these years staring at crims in court. Can’t you tell whodunnit?’

For a moment, I feel like telling him the truth – who I really am, what I’m trying to do – just to see his reaction. But instead, I scoff.

‘Of course I can’t. You can’t judge a book by its cover.’

Daylight blinds me as I step through the courthouse doors.

A few steps ahead, the footballer and his entourage punch their way through the paparazzi. He's headed for the limo parked on double yellows.

Whirr, click, whirr.

The cameras flash and the pack members call out. 'Over here! Mate, mate, look this way. Play the game!'

The footballer blinks in the glare of the sun, gropes for his Aviators. *Arrogant?* Tick. *Obscenely wealthy?* Tick.

Guilty? Almost certainly . . .

'How'd it go today, mate? You in the clear?'

Above us, the flat blue sky fills with flapping wings. The gulls plunge down from the Gothic turrets, their eyes focused on the swelling crowd, looking for food.

I cross the busy road. When I look back, more people are piling out of court: lawyers too rushed to remove their raven-black robes; scruffy, plain-clothes detectives; finally, the spectators, swapping notes after their free day out.

Neena is brushing her hair in the satellite truck mirror, ready for the live two-way. She's the only reporter I consider a friend – the rest are chummy enough, but they'd sell their granny for a front-page lead. I wave, and she waves back, and then I shoulder my way into the Barely Legal Cafe.

‘All ready for you, Georgia.’

Manny, the owner, greets me with a smile and a double espresso.

‘Cheers.’ I yawn, think of last night. ‘I need it!’

The beaded curtain flicks across my face as I walk through to the storeroom. Whenever there’s a trial in Brighton, I use Manny’s as an impromptu studio. My pastels case lies open on the chest freezer. The aluminium easel has a sheet of 360 gsm card pinned to the board, angled to catch the light from the yard.

I sharpen my pencil, test the point of the lead against the flesh of my little finger. Sharp enough to pierce the skin. I step back from the easel and . . .

The fear makes me freeze.

Fear of the blank page, fear of getting it wrong, fear that a guilty man will walk. I am always scared of failure, but some cases feel more personal than others.

‘Got all you need?’

Toby steps into the room. He clearly thinks he should be in a war zone, not slumming it at a seedy sex case in the provinces.

‘Yup. Except peace and quiet.’

‘Remember. It doesn’t have to be great art. Just has to be there on deadline,’ he says, as though it’s him, not me, that has spent the last thirteen years on the press bench.

I’m not an ‘artist’ to the people that hire me – I’m just another hack. So long as my drawing of the footballer is cartoonishly recognisable, it’ll do.

Toby is waiting for me to reply, but I turn sharply back to the easel and he slopes away.

Anger fuels me. Pencil touches paper. In a first, fast movement, I sketch in the oak boundaries of the court, then the shapes of the defendant, the prosecutor, the judge.



I could draw the regulars in my sleep. Oli, still too bloody handsome for his own good. The eternally tetchy Judge Ronaldson, whose eyebrows resemble little hamsters scrabbling up his forehead. Cruella, girlish, but pulsing with bottled-up venom.

Now the accused. The reason I do this.

As my hand sketches his shape, I replay the evidence in my head.

Once I've made a man look guilty, there is no way back. Jurors are told to avoid news coverage when they're on a case, but most can't resist a quick google during the big trials. And the cliché is true – my pictures paint a thousand words, none of them good. Facial expression, composition, even the vividness of the pastel colour I use can create an impression of evil, if that is what I intend.

Have I ever changed a verdict? There's no way of knowing. But I try my best to see justice done. And it's a consolation to know that even if a guilty man is acquitted, my picture – and the question marks it seeds in people's minds – will follow him for the rest of his life.

'You're late.' Toby pokes his face through the curtain. 'I've promised to send it by half past, and if there's a problem, I need to know now!'

'I never miss a deadline.'

He tries to push past me to see the picture.

'Where's his bloody face?'

'Toby, I was doing this job while you were still doodling Ginger Spice's cleavage in the margins of your exercise book. Trust me, it'll be there.'



‘But—’

‘Just go . . .’

I pull out my notes, try to focus on them, not the rumble of the coffee grinder, the hum of the post-court rabble. The words swim; either my handwriting is getting worse, or I need reading glasses. I squint.

Lazy posture, my very first note reads, makes his Savile Row suit look like a sweaty nylon off-the-peg.

An image comes to me: when the girl first spoke, Sam Carr sat up straight for the first time. He must have realised all that sponsorship money wasn’t going to buy his way out of this. The pout left his lips and . . .

I saw evil.

All doubt leaves me. Carr deserves all he gets. I lean in and he comes to life with slick black hair, and lips straight as tramlines, bloodless next to his sunbed tan.

Two minutes to deadline.

I position myself so I can work without looking directly at the face I’ve drawn. In court, I never make eye contact; I learned how dangerous that can be in my first ever case. But there’s still something stopping this image coming alive. On instinct, I add two dots of Prussian blue to his pupils, smudge the blue with the black.

The footballer stares right back, arrogance tempered by alarm.

I smile: *Yeah. You’re not getting away with this if I can help it, you piece of shit.*

‘Done,’ I call out.

Toby pushes past me to grab the easel and carry it into the street where the cameraman is waiting.

As I make my way through the crowded cafe, I feel the weight of what I've done. It's never easy, but it is needed. Outside, the cameraman is zooming in on my sketch. From this distance, I can see it's not my best work, but at least it's there on time.

Neena waits for the tape.

'Cutting it fine, George.'

'What can I say? I'm a perfectionist.'

6

Day three, and it's time for Cruella to cross-examine the alleged victim. I wish I could skip this part, I already know how it always goes . . .

'What *was* going through your mind when you entered that steam room?'

The barrister's robe casts a shadow across the court. She licks her lips: it's one of her tells, a sign she's about to go for the kill.

'That it was *hot*,' Julie Tranter says, only just managing to stop herself adding 'duh'.

I wince.

'That it was *hot*,' repeats Sam Carr's barrister. 'Steamy, I presume.'

'Yeah. Because it's a steam room.'

I can't quite see from this angle, but I am pretty sure she rolled her eyes.

'And you were in there with three men you didn't know.'

The young woman sighs and straightens the skirt of her crimson dress. The wrong colour. But the jury would have judged her just as harshly for wearing the floral one two days running. *She hasn't been home. Perhaps she is that kind of girl.*

'I knew them. We'd been chatting right before. In the spa pool.' She sounds sulky.

'Ah. So you knew their names?'



'I knew who *he* was.' She nods towards the footballer without looking at his face. 'Not the others. But they seemed like nice lads.'

'Nice lads. Yes. And who left the spa pool first?'

'They did.'

'Mr Carr and his two teammates? And then you followed them in?'

'Yeah. I like steam rooms.'

'You liked the idea of getting close to a famous footballer, too, didn't you?'

Silence. The young woman realises she's walked into a trap. I've been where she's been. In the witness box, you feel like the star attraction in a travelling freak show. And utterly alone.

Oli is on his feet.

'Your Honour—'

Cruella gives a magnanimous wave.

'Fine, I'll withdraw that last question. Now, tell me about this steam room. Can you give me an idea of the space? Was it, say, the size of the jury box?'

'No. Much smaller. A third of that.'

'So there you are, an attractive young woman, wearing virtually nothing, stepping into a *very* confined space where it's hard to see anything, knowing there were three male strangers inside. Weren't you worried?'

'Not really.'

'Is it not the case that by going into the steam room, you were sending the defendant a message?'

'What message?' Miss Tranter says, defiance in her voice.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Oli has gone very still.

'That you were *up for it*. That you wanted him.'



Oli is on his feet again.

‘Your Honour, my learned friend is putting words in the witness’s mouth.’

Judge Ronaldson sighs.

‘Yes, I think we ought to leave discussions of the steam chamber before we become even more overheated.’

The defence barrister nods.

‘Of course. So let us move on to when you accompanied Mr Carr to the bar, alone . . .’

Oli sits down again. I feel for him – of course, he had to put the young woman on the stand. Without her, there is no case. But it’s always a risk.

Cruella is smiling.

‘What did you say to your friends? When you left?’

‘I said . . .’ The young woman hesitates.

‘Remember, you’re under oath.’

‘I said not to wait for me. I said . . . I was going to have some fun.’

I lean over the long line of porcelain basins, putting in eye drops. The fierce heating in court makes everything dry out, and my head throbs.

‘Georgia. Are you OK? I’ve been worried about you, after last night.’

Maureen Lomax is behind me in the mirror, face set in an expression of fake concern. But her bifocals magnify her gleeful eyes.

‘Hello, Maureen.’

‘Your producer was in a real tizzy. And, artist to artist, you won’t mind my saying, the sketch did lack finesse. Sam Carr

would never have got all the sponsorships and modelling jobs if he looked like a rabid bulldog.'

'I'm not in the business of vanity portraiture.'

'Just constructive criticism!' Maureen takes a tissue; her damson lipstick has feathered into the smoker's lines around her mouth. 'Take my advice, make them prettier.'

'So I can flog them to the criminals when they walk free?'

'They pay for a couple of good cruises every year.' Her thin lips stretch across her teeth as she reapplies her make-up. 'I'm hardly going to hang them on my walls. No wonder you look so tired if you take your work home with you.'

I look away. 'I study them. I want to get better.'

'Oh, darling. Tomorrow's chip paper, that's what our work is. Though this *Art of Justice* book will have a slightly longer shelf life, eh?'

Bloody hell.

'I didn't realise they'd asked you too.'

She laughs. 'I gave them *your* name, actually, Georgia. I like to support young talent. Even when it is still a tad . . . raw.' She pats my hand, her fingers dry as snakeskin. 'You just need to stop taking it all so seriously.' She zips up her bag and tip-taps out across the tiled floor.

I wait a few seconds before following her out into the stuffy corridor, where the press pack waits for the afternoon session to begin. I stand slightly apart, hearing laughter, knowing the hacks will be swapping some sick joke or other. Neena insists the graveyard humour keeps the nastier evidence at arm's length, so it doesn't contaminate our 'normal' lives.

I realised when I was eleven that there's no such thing as normal – at least for me.

I turn my back on the journalists, and head for the window, for a last glimpse of daylight before we go back into court.

Shit.

A boy in a bright-red shirt is standing on the other side of the road.

That boy, the one I saw in the square. His bare feet teeter on the edge of the pavement, his arm swinging a purple soft toy so high it almost hits the passing cars.

It's a Teletubby. *Tinky Winky*, I think; that show had a cult following when I was an art student.

The kid stares straight up at the window. Straight up at me.

There's something familiar about him: could he be one of the barristers' kids, off sick from pre-school?

No. Because barristers' kids don't generally hang around in garden squares in the middle of the night.

Still, at least I know I wasn't imagining him.

Did he follow me from the square?

But I saw him there two nights ago. Where has he been since?

I wave frantically at him, trying to signal that he should get away from the edge of the pavement. But he keeps staring, his toy lifted into the air by the side wind from speeding cars.

No one else is helping him.

I push past the clusters of lawyers and witnesses, run two steps at a time down the marble staircase, through the metal detectors, launch myself at the wooden doors, out into the street.

Thank God. He's still there, on the other side of the road, his back to me now, so I can read the back of his crumpled pyjama top.



11 REDKNAPP

Redknapp hasn't played for years.

The kid turns back and sees me. There's something wrong with his face. A birthmark, or a scar, runs down his cheek, red as a ripe strawberry.

He takes a step towards me. One leg of his pyjamas is hitched up, and his knee is black, as though he's taken a tumble playing football.

He takes another step . . .

'No! No, stay there, stay where you are.' I launch myself towards him. An elderly woman pounds on a horn as I miss walking into her car by centimetres. 'I'm coming—'

A flash of beige and burgundy metal thunders in from my left. The number 7 bus from the County Hospital. So fast. *So close.*

'No, stop!' I hammer on its metal chassis.

The bus is gone. I stare at the pavement, at the empty space where the child was, three seconds ago.

My heart doesn't beat. The world is silent. I force myself to look down at the road, expecting to see a lifeless form . . .

There is nothing on the tarmac. No child, no toy. No blood.

I run towards where he was standing.

'Kid, where are you? Come out, I don't want to hurt you.'

The only place he could have gone is the alleyway ahead of me. But he can't have run that far, that fast. There's nothing to hide behind.

Unless he went into Manny's?

I push the door open, scan the empty tables. Nothing.

'You still hungry, Georgie?'

Manny emerges from the kitchen, his hands and thick fore-arms sheathed in camellia-pink rubber gloves.



‘Did you see a kid?’

I push past him, into the back room. Check under the sofa, behind the storage crates, even inside the bloody chest freezer. Frost coats the shrink-wrapped buns, burgers, mince. There’s no room for a child. The door to the yard is locked and it’s crammed with crates full of empties. Nowhere to hide.

‘A kid?’

‘A boy.’ I think about what else I saw. ‘Four years old, maybe? In pyjamas that look like a football strip.’ I remember the old name on the back. ‘A hand-me-down. He was outside and then he disappeared and this is the only place he could have come to hide.’

‘No kids here.’ He pulls off one of his gloves with a sucking sound and places his hand on my shoulder. Fatherly. ‘I worry about you, Georgia. You always look so serious.’

Adrenaline makes my hands shake and my head pound.

‘There *was* a kid, Manny. I saw him.’

Manny shrugs. ‘Plenty bastards come and use my toilet, without buying nothing, then sneak away. Block my Saniflo. But, Georgia . . .’ He gestures towards the clock on the wall. ‘You late for court now, right?’

Six minutes past two. Toby will be flapping.

‘He was on his own, Manny. A little kid.’

‘Well, if he’s in trouble, he’ll be picked up pronto. Round here’s crawling with police. Here.’ He produces two soft amaretti biscuits from his apron pocket. ‘Sweets, for your blood sugar. Now, back to work, your pictures won’t draw themselves.’

I take the biscuits and head back to court, with one last glance down the alleyway. The kid, whoever he was, is long gone.