

LETTERS
to my
YESTERDAY

KARYN SEPULVEDA

IMPACT PRESS

First published in 2018 by Impact Press
an imprint of Ventura Press
PO Box 780, Edgecliff NSW 2027 Australia
www.impactpress.com.au

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:
ISBN: 9781925384550 (paperback)
ISBN: 9781925384567 (ebook)

Cover design: Kate VandeStadt
Internal design: Brugel Creative



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This book is dedicated to the memories of
Roberta Crozier and Mary Harrison;
two very strong women

Rose



1928

If these walls could talk, Rose thought as she washed the front steps of her house, which also served as the entrance to her General Store. It was her evening ritual. As soon as she'd tucked her little ones in for the night, she'd walk around to the side of her house, fill up two large buckets with water and empty them over the steps. There were too many tramps about looking for a place to sleep and, as sad as Rose found that, she wouldn't be having them slumbering on the entrance to her livelihood.

As she picked up the empty buckets, she noticed a car parked a little way down the street. Oddest thing she'd seen in a long time, a car in her street, so far from town. *Who on earth would have driven it out here?* she wondered. Rose would have liked to take a closer look at the car, but she didn't dare leave her little ones in the house on their own like that. Instead, she craned her neck and stood on her tiptoes in order to get the best possible view. It was one of the fancier cars, wide and sturdy-looking. She saw a shadowed figure laying in the front seat; somebody was sleeping in there. That was odder still, she mused. If a person could afford a car, what need would they have to sleep in it? Rose shrugged. She'd learned not to waste time trying to figure out the oddities of life.

She walked slowly down the side of her house, her bare feet enjoying the feel of soft grass and dirt beneath them. She placed the buckets in their spot by the tap, ready for the following evening. Before going back inside Rose placed her hand on the cool brick wall of her house and thanked God for the day. She thanked Him for the money she'd made in her store, for the food she and her two children had eaten when so many were going without. And then, like every night, she thanked Him for her house, her and her children's own place in this world: *Thirty-three Maher Street*. 'If these walls could talk,' Rose whispered silently as she entered the house and locked out the chaotic world for the night.

'There we go, Marie, last spoon. All gone, good girl,' Rose smiled as she wiped the mouth of her three-year-old daughter. She looked over to her eldest child Lucas and nodded happily at him also spooning the last of his porridge into his mouth. They'd always appreciated their food, Rose's children, as though they knew how lucky they were, even as infants, to be eating three meals a day.

It was 7 am and Rose had already taken in the delivery of milk for the store. Now that the kids were fed and changed, she led them to the door that connected the store to her house. 'Behave now,' she said to them as they ran through. Every morning it was the same; the children stampeding through to the front counter, ready to meet any customers who turned up early. The two of them were mostly well behaved though, so Rose couldn't complain. Lucas helped where he could – being only five did not stop him from trying to tidy the shelves and sweep the wooden floors. And of course Marie did everything that her brother did, so she toddled along after him all day. Rose unlocked the glass front door, swung it open and placed a smooth rock in front of its edge to act as a doorstop. A couple of regular customers, Mrs

Leon and Mrs Knightly, were already waiting by the front fence, gossiping in hushed whispers. Rose waved at them and tried not to roll her eyes as they guiltily waved back and strolled over. As though Rose had no idea they talked about her. They talked about everyone; if they didn't gossip about a single mother who built a new house and opened her own shop, they could not rightly be known as busybodies.

'Good morning, Mrs Leon, Mrs Knightly,' Rose said and nodded at each of them as they walked past her into the store.

'Rose, you look well this morning,' Mrs Leon said. Mrs Knightly smiled in agreement.

Rose smoothed the front of the pale green dress she'd made herself. It was patterned with soft white flowers and was her favourite. 'You are kind.'

The ladies waited by the corner of the large wooden counter, which stood at the front of the shop. Rose gathered their usual order: fresh bread, milk and a quarter pound each of Arrowroot biscuits.

'And a jar of jam if you have it, Rose, I'm not fussed on the flavour.' Mrs Knightly always said she wasn't fussed about things, when she actually fussed over everything. Rose picked a jar of plum jam she had made only days earlier and placed it on the counter.

'No strawberry, Rose?' Mrs Knightly inquired.

'I'm afraid not.' Rose recorded the items in her register book.

'Hullo,' Lucas called out from the other end of the counter, where he'd climbed up and was in the process of helping Marie up to join him. Rose glared at him and he jumped straight off, dragging his sister along for the ride.

'Oh dear, you're a little wild this morning, Lucas,' Mrs Leon said and shared a knowing look with Mrs Knightly.

Because he doesn't have a father. Rose could practically hear their thoughts.

‘That’s three and six, thank you, ladies.’ The women clicked their tongues and rummaged through their purses, as though the price was not the same as every morning. Rose just smiled and waited. After two and a half years on her own, she no longer cared what most people thought of her; as long as they paid their bill.

By midmorning the store fell quiet. Rose was arranging a fresh batch of biscuits on a display platter when she heard a familiar call.

‘Mrs Rose, hullo,’ called Apanie and Rose waved at her from the front window. She watched Apanie and her young son, Konol, walk around the front fence. She loved the way they walked: slowly, easily, almost floating. She was sure if she searched she would not find any footprints left by them. Rose came outside to meet them. Konol had already joined in Lucas and Marie’s game of flicking rocks across the yard.

‘Good morning, Apanie,’ Rose said.

‘You well, Mrs Rose?’ Apanie asked.

‘I am, thank you. And how are you?’

‘Good, good. I’ve got your branches.’ Apanie handed Rose three perfectly shaped Eucalypt branches. They were just the right length and width, as always, to cover the modest box of fruit and vegetables in the store. Apanie had introduced Rose to the branches when she’d first opened her shop. Rose had met her as she wandered down the street from her home with the Biddegal people by the Georges River, looking for buyers for the branches. Apanie had explained that the branches gave the fresh produce shade and the scent of the Eucalypt kept the vegetables fresher for longer. She’d delivered fresh ones to Rose every fortnight since.

‘Thank you.’ Rose handed Apanie three shillings.

Apanie smiled warmly and wished Rose happy weeks ahead. She gathered up her son, called out goodbye to them all and then they were off, walking peacefully back down the road. Rose never spent long with Apanie, but she'd come to look forward to their business together, to enjoy the sense of calm that Apanie seemed to radiate.

Rose squatted down in the dirt with her children. 'That's a decent pile of rocks you've collected.'

'Look at this one, Mummy.' Marie held up a smooth grey rock, quite similar to the rest, though Rose marvelled over it for a moment.

'Can your rocks live without you for awhile?' Rose asked.

Lucas shook his head. 'Rocks aren't *alive*, Mum.'

When he wasn't smiling, which wasn't often, Lucas looked so serious and concerned. So much like his father. Marie on the other hand was giggling at the thought of living rocks.

'Of course they're not alive.' Rose stood and dusted off her hands. 'Now, who's helping me with the ice-jars?' Lucas jumped up, followed by Marie, both shouting in excitement as they ran ahead of their mother back into the store. Rose fussed a little about how dirty they'd become so quickly, wiping their hands and faces with a damp washcloth. Truthfully though, she liked them all dirty like this. A child covered in dirt is a child who has been having fun, she believed. Lucas collected the dozen glass jars from the back storage shelf, which had been washed and dried the day before. He placed them carefully onto the counter then climbed up beside them. Rose lifted Marie up and sat her down too. She had the children take turns of mixing the freshly squeezed juice from an orange and two tablespoons of sugar into a jug of water. They stirred joyfully with their chubby little hands clasped together over the metal stick Rose kept for stirring. Then they watched as Rose poured the mixture into each of the jars. Lucas and Marie skipped behind Rose as she made several trips

carrying the jars to her kitchen and placed them into the ice compartment of her refrigerator. She made these ice-jars every day in summer; they cost next to nothing to make so she only charged a halfpenny each for them. After school during the warmer months, many children came to buy one as their weekly treat, happily licking away on the cool orange ice. Some days, to Lucas's and Marie's delight, there would be an ice-jar left over and they would slurp and suck on it, their sticky chins covered in sweet cordial.

Once the ice-jars were freezing away, Rose encouraged Lucas and Marie to run along and play outside again. As she watched them gather yet another pile of sticks in the front yard, Rose noticed a car slowly driving up the road, creating huge dust clouds on either side. She was sure it had to be the same car from last night; the chances of two similar-looking cars driving down her small road in just twenty-four hours was ridiculous. Sure enough, the car pulled over to the same spot. But this time the driver's door swung open and a well-dressed man stumbled out, straightening his fine, yet rumpled clothes as he stood tall. Rose shook her head; he looked as though he'd had a heavy night of drinking. She walked over to where Lucas and Marie were playing and watched the man squint into the bright sky and take in his surroundings. He caught Rose's eye and waved cheerfully at her as he walked towards them. *Well who in the world could this be?* Rose wondered, noticing that the stranger's smile was rather nice. He wandered right over to where Rose was standing with her children, nodding and smiling as he pointed to the sign on the store-front window.

'Good morning, ma'am, children,' the man said and pretended to tip a non-existent hat.

'Good morning,' Rose replied, though didn't return his smile.

'Hi!' Lucas said.

'Hi!' Marie repeated.

‘Is that your car?’ Lucas asked.

‘Yes, sir, it is,’ the man replied.

Lucas puffed out his chest and Rose almost giggled. Lucas loved to think of himself as a grown gentleman, so to be called ‘sir’ was the highest of compliments.

‘And is that your store right there?’ the man asked, pointing over the children’s shoulders.

‘Yes!’ declared Marie.

‘Well, yes, it’s ours and our Mum’s,’ Lucas explained.

‘And do you serve tea, Mum?’ The man turned to Rose and she couldn’t help but return his warm smile this time.

‘I suppose I do sometimes. We’re more of a general store, but I can muster up something for you. Stay here and play, kids,’ Rose instructed, and led the customer to her store.

Sitting at the counter with a hot cup of tea and two thick slices of buttered bread in front of him, the man finally extended his hand to Rose.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself. My name is Charles. Thank you for your kindness.’

Rose shook his hand. ‘No kindness at all. You’re a paying customer, I’m assuming.’ Rose looked at Charles steadily.

‘Of course, I am, yes.’ Charles took out a small wallet from his jacket pocket and placed a pound note on the counter. Rose took it and gave him change.

‘May I ask what business you have out this way?’ Rose asked, unable to contain her curiosity.

‘No business, just pleasure.’ Charles grinned and took a bite of the bread, crumbs falling all about.

‘Sleeping in your car you mean? Was that you I saw parked out there last night?’

Charles raised his arms like a guilty bushranger.

‘Yes, that was me.’ Another bite.

‘Well, do you always sleep in your car?’

‘Ah no, last night was a first fortunately. I was the guest of honour at a farewell party and I didn’t want to drive home in, ah, the state I was in, so ...’ He shrugged.

‘And now you’re back.’

He suddenly cleared his throat then coughed loudly, pulling out a handkerchief to cover his mouth. Rose filled a glass with water and passed it to him.

‘Thank you. Sorry about that, I don’t cope well without sleep. Yes, I am back. You see, my friend lives a few roads away, I’m not sure how many, but enough to alert a drunk man that he’s in no state to drive.’ Charles let out a dry, husky laugh. ‘I went back there this morning to let them all know I’m alive. They were only barely alive themselves though, I’m afraid. Not a cup of tea or slice of bread in sight. I remembered seeing the sign for your store last night, so thought I’d pop past for some nourishment on my way home. It will make the drive much more bearable.’ Charles swirled the tea in his cup and took another sip. ‘Great tea,’ he said and lifted his cup in a salute.

‘Thank you.’ Rose grabbed a cloth to wipe down the counter.

‘So, how long have you run this store, ma’am?’

‘It’s Rose, and almost two years now.’ The pain of that time sometimes felt so raw that it seemed to be only yesterday.

‘Why do I feel there is an interesting story behind you owning this place? I’m assuming you do own the store?’

Rose nodded. ‘Yes, I do indeed, along with the house.’ She knew her eyes shone with the pride she felt in being able to say this.

‘What’s the story then?’ Charles sipped at his tea slowly, taking small bites of bread in between as though relishing the taste. Rose wasn’t sure why, but she didn’t hesitate. She shared her story with this perfect stranger.

‘My husband died suddenly almost three years ago,’ she began, surprised by the steadiness of her voice. Perhaps enough time had passed that she could now say those words with ease.

‘I’m sorry,’ Charles murmured.

Rose nodded an acknowledgement. ‘He wasn’t sick, he just collapsed on the way home from work one evening, just like that. Heart failure, apparently. So I found myself with a two-year-old and a tiny baby, alone. We’d been renting a small house, just down the road actually, and I’d been stashing away a little from every one of John’s pays. John was my husband.’ Rose savoured his name for a moment; she hadn’t said it in such a long time. Charles was watching her intently while he ate.

‘I’d managed to save almost five hundred pounds over the years, not enough to buy a house, but it was a good start. But I hadn’t any idea how I could work while looking after the children. Then one evening I was walking up and down the road to soothe little Marie to sleep and I noticed the vacant land, right here. And I thought, imagine if there was a store in this spot. Close to all the houses and the school not so far down the road. What a terrific spot. And perhaps there could even be a little house attached for the owner to live in. I thought about how nice that would have been. And as I was standing here on the grass, I saw it. I saw the brick house, with its huge front yard, filled with trees for shade. I saw the big open windows of the store out the front, with a fancy ‘General Store’ sign. I saw display counters adorned with my homemade bread and biscuits. And then I saw myself, with my children in my arms, sitting on a warm and comfortable couch in our own home, our own place, safe.’

Rose suddenly became conscious of all that she’d just said out loud for the first time, to a stranger, no less. Charles was watching her with such fascination, she felt the need to explain herself.

‘I mean, I wasn’t crazy, I didn’t actually see it in front of me. I wished for it I suppose, I –’

Charles cleared his throat again. 'I think I know exactly what you mean. Please, Rose, go on.'

'Yes, so I imagined this life for my children and it was as though a great burning fire was lit beneath me. I learned quickly that it was almost impossible for a woman to receive a loan from the bank and I didn't have any wealthy family or friends. But I did have Will the Butcher, my husband's best friend. He was very supportive of me and ran his own business. He agreed to take out the loan in his name and after a matter of weeks I had the money. So now, here I am. Thanks to God and Will the Butcher.'

'And to Rose,' Charles added.

'Yes, and to Rose,' she agreed.

Charles had long since finished his tea and bread and Rose felt a tiny rush of shame at talking about herself for so long. She wasn't sure what had come over her, but Charles was a good listener, and she'd enjoyed telling her story all at once like that.

'Well that was the best story I've heard for a while, thank you,' Charles said and wiped his mouth with his napkin.

'Thank you for listening, Charles. You'll have to tell me at least one thing about yourself before you leave.'

Charles stood and scratched at his chin. 'I'm a pilot,' he said straight-faced.

Rose laughed. A pilot that sleeps in his car; he was having her on.

'You're truly a pilot, Mr, ah -'

'Smith, Mr Kingsford Smith,' Charles finished.

The name seemed awfully familiar to Rose.

'So you're flying somewhere then?' Rose asked.

'Pardon?'

'You said you were the guest of honour at a farewell party?'

'Yes, I was. New Zealand actually. First thing tomorrow morning, I'll be flying my new plane with a friend.' Rose eyed him carefully, still not sure if he was joking or not. Lucas ran

in, holding his sister's hand carefully up the few stone stairs, then dropping it once they were inside and running over to Charles's side.

'Did you say you're a pilot?' Lucas asked, barely able to stand still.

'Lucas,' Rose scolded. 'It's rude to listen in to my conversations.'

'But I knew all that stuff already. It's not listening in if I already know it,' Lucas reasoned. Then he turned back to stare at Charles, his head leaning all the way back so he could see the man's face.

'I did say that, young man,' Charles said.

'I'm Lucas and this is Marie,' Lucas said. 'She loves planes, really loves them. We draw them all the time. We were just drawing one outside, do you want to see it?' Lucas didn't wait for an answer. He grabbed Charles's hand and led him to the front yard. They all looked down at the impressive sketch of a plane scratched into the dirt. There were two tiny stick figures inside the cockpit, seemingly waving out.

'Is this you and your sister?' Charles kneeled down so he was at Lucas's eye level.

'Yep.'

'Mum doesn't get to fly in the plane?' Charles asked.

'Mummy doesn't like planes,' Lucas said.

Rose felt her cheeks flush as she thought of all the snide comments she'd made to Lucas about planes. The thought of heights in general terrified Rose, but when she read about planes in newspapers it made her feel particularly nauseous to think of a human up in the sky like an out-of-place bird.

'Hmm. Would you and Marie like to go on a plane one day?'

Marie squealed and jumped up and down, her delight almost bursting through her tiny body. Lucas showed slightly more restraint and bounced a little, shouting 'Yes!' over and over.

Charles chuckled. 'It won't be anytime soon, but if you can be patient, I promise that one day, I'll come back and pick you up for that flight. If it's all right with your mum, of course?'

As Charles smiled at her, it suddenly dawned on Rose who he was. Charles Kingsford Smith. *My goodness*, she thought, and couldn't believe it had taken her so long to put it together. He was quite famous of late for his flying endeavours. In fact she had just read in the newspaper last month that he would be attempting to fly the first successful route to *New Zealand* this year. She remembered thinking he would most likely crash over the ocean and die like the pair who'd already failed at the attempt. Now that she'd met him, she definitely hoped she was wrong about that.

'Ah, I suppose, maybe if it's a short one, over land, that might be fine,' Rose said, causing a whole new round of squealing and jumping. Finally Charles stood up. He reached down and patted both Marie and Lucas on the head, then took Rose's hand in both of his, shaking it gently.

'It was a pleasure to meet you and hear your extraordinary story about this extraordinary home,' he said.

Extraordinary. Rose allowed the word to fill her mind for a moment. A man who had fought in wars and made flying history, thought that her home was *extraordinary*.

'Thank you, Charles, it was a pleasure to meet you too.'

'Smithy. Please call me Smithy. I will see you all again.'

'Good luck on your trip, Smithy,' Rose said, not sure that they would ever see him again.

That night at bedtime Rose cuddled the children in close to her, one curled up beneath each of her arms. She was pleurably exhausted after a full day of work. But she was happy. She supposed she'd been happy for a while now. She missed her husband of course; she'd loved him. And life would certainly be

easier with him still alive. But telling her story to Smithy today made Rose realise how strong she was, how much she had to be proud of. She kissed the top of her children's heads, breathing in the soft smell of soap in their hair.

'If these walls could talk,' Rose whispered and she held them closer still.

'What would they say, Mum?' Lucas asked, his eyes wide, ready to hear the secret of the whispers his mum always talked about.

'They'd say this is an extraordinary house. It's ordinary, yet amazing in so many ways. So it's extra-ordinary.'

'But why? What happened here?' Lucas was very disappointed the ghosts he'd imagined whispering in the walls of his house didn't have anything more interesting to say.

'It's not so much *what's* happened here, it's more than that. It's who's been here, what's been spoken about, what's been hoped for, what's been fulfilled. But even more than that, my darlings, it's about what's *yet* to happen here.'

'Well, what's that then?' Lucas tried one more time, crossing his fingers and hoping it was something spooky.

'Anything. Anything could happen here. And that is what is so extraordinary about our house. Anything is possible at thirty-three Maher Street.'

CHAPTER ONE

Marie



PRESENT

Marie pulled firmly on the curtains, opening them all the way and allowing the soft, early morning light to shine through her café. This was Marie's favourite time of day; before anyone arrived, her mind filled only with the day's possibilities. Her staff arrived at 6 am, so Marie always ensured she was in the café thirty minutes earlier to turn on all of the equipment, make herself a cappuccino and sit at her favourite table in the front corner of the café, right by the window. Marie sipped her coffee slowly, and in her mind ran through her regular morning questions: *day: Thursday; date: October 29th; Prime Minister: Malcolm Turnbull; name: Marie Crozier.* Done. She nodded with satisfaction; she was still with it. She drained her cup, stood up with new caffeinated energy and started her day.

'Morning, Marie,' Dax grinned as he walked into the café. Marie was sure she'd never seen her chef Dax without a smile. For the last twenty-odd years he was often the first person she saw in the morning and she was grateful for that grin.

'Good morning, Dax. I've already got the cheesecakes in the oven, so I'm up by one point.' Dax made a big deal about checking his watch and shaking his head. When Marie first hired

him, they were in fierce competition over who cooked the most dishes throughout the day. The winner would have a later start the following morning, along with bragging rights. Over the last few years though, Dax had taken over most of the cooking. Marie's only points now were earned by the cheesecakes she still made every second day and the odd sandwich or salad.

'It's cheating when you start before me,' Dax mocked as he pulled his bright red apron over his head. Marie didn't have a uniform for her staff; all she asked was for them to dress with at least one bright colour. Dax usually wore jeans and a plain t-shirt, but he had several brightly coloured aprons to choose from each morning.

'Rubbish, it's not cheating. Now write up my point or I'll dock your pay.' Dax sighed and stood on his tiptoes to chalk up a point on Marie's side of the small board stuck to the fridge. The wind chime attached to the front door signalled their first customer and Marie could guess who it would be. She left Dax in the kitchen and walked through the café to find one of her regulars, Dee, waiting at the front counter, eyebrows furrowed as she studied the take-away menu. Dee visited Marie's café on her way to work at the local public school almost every morning, yet she still studied the menu each day as though it was full of new possibilities.

'Good morning, love. How are you?' Marie said and reached over to kiss Dee on the cheek.

Dee placed her hands on each of Marie's arms and gently squeezed them as she answered. 'I'm all right. I'm tired actually – I think I'll need a double-shot flat white today. How are you?'

'Double shot it is and I'm good, love. Why don't you take a seat this morning? If you're tired you should sit and eat a good breakfast.'

Dee nodded. 'I will, thanks. I'll grab an omelet with spinach and cheese, thanks Marie.' Dee sat at one of the stools at the counter.

Marie's café wasn't large; most people described it as cosy, which pleased her. The twelve wooden tables and large counter were an extension of her home. Most customers who dined by themselves sat at the counter, which offered eight brightly cushioned wooden stools. Marie was just about to take the order over to Dax when Katie rushed in, her jacket slung over her arm and hair tousled like she'd just woken up.

'I'm so, so sorry, Marie, I slept through my alarm, but that's not an excuse, I should set two. I'm sorry, I'll get started straight away.' Marie held her hand up to shush her. She liked Katie, her full-time waitress, but she didn't care for her dramatic entrances.

'Katie, it's five past six, you're barely late and we have exactly one customer. Go in the back and calm yourself down before you start.'

Katie nodded. 'Thanks, Marie, I'm sorry,' she said as she rushed off towards the kitchen, waving at Dax on her way through to the little storeroom where the staff kept their belongings. Dee caught Marie's eye from her seat and raised her eyebrows slightly while stifling a laugh. The problem with Katie, Marie thought as she took Dee's order over to the kitchen, was that she attracted chaos. Her life was full of it: ex-boyfriends, unpaid bills, parking fines, lost keys, lost wallets. She was sweet, but far too flighty. Not that Marie was judging her – she was almost as flighty herself at twenty and it had been quite fun at the time.

Dax was surrounded by ingredients, preparing for the many breakfast orders that would soon start rolling in.

'First one's up,' Marie said and placed the order on the clip hanger that ran along the prep-bench.

'My first point,' Dax winked and then shouted a hello over to Dee. Dee waved back. Katie came tumbling out of the storeroom

and Marie tried not to scold her. Couldn't she just walk instead of jumping about all the time? At least she'd tidied up her hair and she looked quite cheerful in the turquoise shirt she was wearing with her jeans (Marie ignored the rips around the knees, she knew the shops sold them like that). The door chimed and voices filled the café. 'Ready for a big day, Katie?' Marie smiled.

'I am. Thanks for understanding about the alarm, I promise tomorrow—'

Marie patted Katie on the back. 'It's fine, love, fine. Off you go and get to work.'

Katie rushed to the front counter to greet the small group of well-dressed men who had come in.

Marie leaned on the bench beside Dax for a moment. 'That girl may well need to be medicated,' she said, intending a joke but sounding far too bitchy. Dax laughed though.

'Ah, Marie, tell me about it. But we all do better with some medication, right?'

'Hear, hear,' Marie agreed, and went to greet the next group of customers coming in.

'Fourteen dollars, love,' Marie said.

Dee held her credit card over the EFTPOS to tap. 'It was delicious by the way. Food tastes so much better when you're sitting down,' she said.

'I think so too.'

Dee checked her watch as she waited for her receipt. It wasn't even 6.45 yet, but she seemed anxious to be on her way.

'Do you have a big day?'

'I do actually, yes. I've got a few meetings and a call with the department and well, yes, a big day.' Dee's phone started ringing. The ring tone was a song, full of drums and some sort of whistle. A woman sitting at the counter right beside Dee shook

her head and a strange look came over her face, as though she was disgusted by a smell.

‘Could you turn that down?’ she spat at Dee.

Dee switched her phone to silent and turned so that she was facing the woman.

‘I’m sorry my ringtone disturbed you so much,’ Dee said, her voice full of venom. ‘Enjoy your coffee.’ Dee turned back to Marie and said goodbye. She’d barely taken a step away when the woman muttered, ‘I *hate* wog music.’

Dee froze and Marie had an uneasy feeling in her stomach. She didn’t know this customer sitting at the counter well, but she visited regularly and always seemed to be complaining about something. Dee walked back over so she was standing beside the woman again, who kept sipping her coffee.

‘What did you say?’

The woman placed her coffee down slowly and turned so she was looking up at Dee. She was very pale, with mousy brown hair. In comparison to Dee’s olive skin and silky black hair, she was colourless.

‘I said, I hate wog music.’

‘I thought so. Well I happen to hate that word, so can you keep your opinions to yourself next time?’

‘No, actually I can’t. It’s a free country and if I hate wog music I can say it to whoever I want.’ The mousy woman’s voice was loud, but shaky.

Dee stood very still and Marie noticed that her fists were clenched against her side and she was breathing deeply. Marie worried for a moment that she may hit this flimsy woman. Instead, Dee smiled broadly and spoke with her face close to the woman’s in slow Arabic. ‘*Laydak yawm eazim ahmaq ghyr almutaelimin.*’ Then she leaned over the counter and kissed Marie on each cheek.

‘Have a beautiful day, Marie,’ she said and marched out of the café. Miss Mousy turned to the man who was sitting beside her.

‘Did you hear that? What the hell did she say to me? She’s probably a gypsy and put a curse on me.’ Marie thought about being polite. This woman was a paying customer. On the other hand, Marie was too old to put up with crap. She shuffled over on her side of the counter so that she stood directly opposite the woman.

‘Excuse me, as soon as you’re finished your coffee, I’d like you to leave and not come back to my café. And that woman is a highly respected school principal speaking to you in this lovely free country of ours in Arabic, not gypsy.’ Marie was only mildly aware of the gasping woman mouthing off at her as she walked back to her kitchen, a small applause building throughout the café. Dax patted her arm when she reached the kitchen.

‘You a feisty old woman when you want,’ he laughed.

‘I’ll take that as a compliment. Give me a point for it.’ Marie went through to the storeroom and sat down on one of the fold-out chairs. Her heart was hammering away in her chest and she couldn’t explain why. Yes, it had been thrilling to tell that woman to leave, but why did she suddenly feel so ill and tight in the chest? She closed her eyes and breathed slowly. After a few moments her heartbeat returned to normal and she could convince herself she was fine. Old women were allowed to feel suddenly unwell, especially after a bit of excitement. She soothed herself and slowly stood up to get on with her day.

CHAPTER TWO

Isla



PRESENT

The mornings were still hard. Those few lingering seconds between sleep and waking were the most difficult of Isla's day. But she no longer lay in bed lost in her past. Every morning she threw her covers back and walked straight to the shower in her luxurious ensuite. As the steamy water washed the memories away, Isla became strong enough to face the day. Perhaps one day she would wake strong enough. Perhaps.

'Macchiato, thank you.' Isla handed over her coins and moved to the side of the counter with all the other dreary customers, waiting for their first caffeine hit of the day. The café beneath her office was small and impersonal. She'd ordered the same coffee, five days a week for the past two years, but still the staff looked at her blankly, as though they truly had no idea what she would order. Of course it could be because Isla had a 'forgettable' face. A boy from her high school had actually told her that once. They'd only been sixteen and were quite drunk, but still, it stung. And she remembered the comment far more than she should.

'Macchiato,' the barista called with the Italian flair that Isla wasn't able to manage. She nodded her thanks and sipped her

coffee slowly as she pressed the elevator button that led to her office. She had a very busy day ahead of her and she couldn't wait.

'This is a very different client,' said Simon, Isla's boss.

Isla nodded in agreement. They'd never worked with a school before. It would be challenging, but she was excited. Their initial meeting with the Department of Education had gone well. She had the team's ideas represented in a solid presentation and the budget was secured. From all angles, this project looked set for success.

'I've got it under control. I'm meeting the principal –' Isla checked her notes, '– Dee, at 2 pm. I'm looking forward to it. This is a new facet of our business that I'm really excited about. Aren't you?'

'I am and I'm glad you have it under control, because I have no time for this. I'm off to Hong Kong tomorrow so I'll need you to run this one.'

It took a lot of effort for Isla not to roll her eyes. It was her job as Marketing Director to run this; Simon's need to continually check if she 'had it' was grating. He didn't need to be at that meeting, he didn't need to double check her numbers and presentation, he didn't need to interfere with her work. But he did. Constantly. Instead of saying any of this, Isla politely smiled and wished him a good trip.

The school was easy to find, though a parking space was not. Isla did three laps before she gave up and began looking for a spot a few streets away. She'd grown up in this suburb of Hurstville, moving away when she was ten. But it looked completely different now, over twenty-five years later. The school was on the corner of King Georges Road; one of the worst roads in Sydney, in Isla's opinion. All of the nearest side streets had been changed to one-way and were brimming with parked cars.

Isla felt claustrophobic as she manoeuvred her car into a tight parking spot several streets from the school. She loved her own place in Dural, in the North West of Sydney. It was a nightmare to negotiate during peak hour, but at least once she was home she could breathe in the leafy green space around her, and park her car without panicking.

She was sweating a little by the time she reached the front office of the school. She took out a tissue and patted her face, swung her handbag over her shoulder and pushed open the heavy glass door. The receptionist immediately held up her hand, so Isla just paused, feeling about a centimetre tall, and waited in the doorway. The receptionist had fierce lines around her mouth, which were exaggerated as she spoke on the phone. The lines made Isla think of a dragon for some reason. *Dragon Lady, that's what I'll call you*, she thought, mentally high-fiving herself. After a moment, Dragon Lady hung up the phone, peered over the top of her glasses at Isla and said, 'Ye-es?' This was almost too comical for Isla to respond to. She was being treated like a child by the school office lady. She cleared her throat and stepped all the way into the office.

'Hi, I'm Isla from Market Thrive. I have an appointment with Dee at 2 pm?' Isla wasn't sure why she said it like a question. It had been scheduled weeks ago.

'Ms Dawood is with a student. You can take a seat over there.' Dragon Lady pointed to three poorly upholstered chairs that sat in the corner. Isla checked her watch: 1.54 pm. *Okay, I'll sit down, Dragon Lady*. She wiped the chair before she sat down, which was dumb, because now there were germs all over her hands. Due to her unreasonable fear of gastro, she discreetly used her hand sanitiser. She'd had a horrific case of it as a teenager, which involved throwing up on two other students and several times on the train on her way home. It still chilled her to think of the faces of everyone as they watched her heave. As a result she

took no chances and so far had never had it again. Thinking about gastro, Isla realised that the office had a slightly vomit-like smell. She wondered how many children had thrown up right here in the reception area. She was trying not to squirm in her seat when a door behind the receptionist's counter swung open and a tall, elegantly dressed woman walked over with a broad smile.

'Hi Isla, I'm Dee. Nice to meet you.' Dee shook Isla's hand with a firm grip despite her soft, delicate hands.

'Hi Dee. Thanks for seeing me.'

Dee gently tapped Isla's elbow and directed her towards the door she'd just come from. Isla smiled rather coldly at Dragon Lady as she walked past. In return she received a glare and possibly a nose-flare. She followed Dee down a narrow hallway to another door. To Isla's disappointment, Dee's office was basically the same as the reception area: a desk made of cheap-looking wood, faded blue carpet and old vertical blinds covering the windows. Isla had expected something far nicer. Dee wore a beautifully cut navy, three-quarter length dress with cream stiletto heels. Her dark hair waved and bounced around as though it had been freshly blow-dried. Isla had expected an office to match. Although the fact that it smelled of expensive perfume gave it an edge on the front office, Isla reasoned. She sat in one of the chairs facing Dee's desk. The nameplate on the desk read: Adeena Dawood. *Adeena*. Isla preferred that to Dee; it was a pretty name.

'I'd love to hear in your own words, Dee, what you're hoping to achieve from this marketing campaign?' Isla's only contact so far had been with the NSW Department of Education and while she understood and in fact *felt* the purpose clearly, she wanted to ensure they were all on the same page.

Dee leaned back a little in her chair and took quite a big breath before she spoke.

‘Well, I’m sure you already know that South Public School will be named as the first publically recognised interfaith school in Australia. It’s always been interfaith, of course, all public schools are, but this will be the first time it will become a public focus of the school.’ Dee leaned forward, smiling. ‘I’ve been working with leaders from different religions on a curriculum with a focus placed on the common ideologies being recognised and understood, their similarities compared. Basically, we’ll be teaching the *ethics* of all religion to the students, rather than the rules as such.’

Isla had loved the idea the moment she’d heard about it. She’d grown up with parents who identified themselves as ‘spiritualists’ or in other words ‘believers of all religions’. She thought the idea of focusing on religions’ similarities, rather than their differences, was a poignant one. Dee’s enthusiasm was everything Isla had been hoping for.

‘And you’re targeting parents along with the general public in the campaign?’

Dee nodded. ‘Yes, I believe that if we’re successful, it will be a curriculum picked up by all schools in NSW.’

‘And hopefully one day all of Australia,’ Isla added.

‘Precisely.’ Dee had a terrific smile. And then, just like that, Isla remembered his smile. The tiny little teeth that never got a chance to fall out. She felt the room shrink and her breathing sped up. *No*, Isla told herself. *You will not do this now. Stop. Focus.* Isla knew Dee was concerned, she was aware she was asking her if she needed a glass of water, but Isla concentrated only on slowing her breath. On stopping the thoughts. She would be back in control in a moment. And she was.

‘I’m sorry, I’m okay, honestly. I just haven’t been feeling well. Thank you,’ Isla took the glass of water Dee must have gone to fetch her. She sipped it slowly, allowing the cool water to calm her further.

‘You worried me then. You went as white as a ghost.’ Dee sat back down, but her eyes were full of concern. Isla placed her glass on the table and took out her notebook, determined to continue the meeting.

An hour later, Isla was on her way to a little café a few streets from the school. Dee had suggested she go grab a coffee and wait out the ‘mad 3 pm rush’ of cars. Isla was glad to be back in the fresh air. The meeting had gone very well. She had a clear enough vision to order some mock-up designs now and get her writer started on the wording. She turned into Maher Street and had a wave of recognition. *Hadn’t she been here before?* Very likely, her own family home was only minutes away. And then she saw the house. Thirty-three Maher Street, with its quaint corner store out the front of an old-fashioned brick home. Yes, of course she’d been here. As a very little girl, she’d come and spent her pocket money on lollies. A lovely old lady had run it and always given her extra lollies for free. There was an old-fashioned, wooden sign now, reading simply, ‘Café’, hanging in one of the large front windows. The shop had always been full of light from those huge windows, Isla remembered. She walked along a paved path that had been built into the front yard, leading from the driveway, over to the front door of the café. The door was open and as Isla stepped inside, she felt her senses awaken. There was the smell of freshly baked bread, the warmth of the sunlight hitting the wooden tables and chairs, and then there was the sound of laughter. It was coming from behind the counter, where an elderly lady was sitting on a stool, laughing with two middle-aged women sitting beside her. The elderly woman looked up at Isla and waved.

‘Good afternoon, love. Are you taking a seat or just a takeaway?’ She didn’t move from the stool, but it was obvious she was the owner. Isla wondered if this was the same woman who’d sold her

lollies as a child. She couldn't remember what she'd looked like, but she remembered she'd always been smiling.

'Hi, I'd love to take a seat if that's okay?' Isla asked.

'Of course, love. Anywhere you like and I'll send someone over to take your order.' The old lady stood from the stool with surprising stealth. Isla had expected her to groan and move slowly, walking off with a limp. But no, this woman who looked to be over eighty stood without fuss and strolled off towards an open-style kitchen at the back of the café. Isla found a small table in the front corner, right by one of the windows. The large trees in the front garden blocked the view of the heavy traffic in the street beyond, creating an illusion of a country feel. Isla looked around the café, admiring its sweet and homely set up. There weren't many tables, probably only a dozen. They were all adorned with different-sized jars filled with arrangements of wild flowers and greenery. The kitchen was out of the way in the back corner, yet was stunning enough to draw attention. It was 1950s inspired, with colourful, oversized appliances. The fridge was a pale yellow, with a huge metal handle. The splashback was tiled with the same pale yellow tile. The stove, oven and range-hood were all black, which caused the bright blue appliances like the toasters to stand out brilliantly. It was the best kitchen Isla had seen and sure beat her cold, stainless-steel modern one at home. The real attraction of the café though was the wooden counter, which was right at the front, opposite the entrance. It was a thick slab of rich brown timber, polished to perfection and lined with brightly cushioned stools. Besides the middle-aged women sharing a coffee there was a small group of what looked like university students seated at the other end, chatting intensely in front of the screen of a laptop. Actually, most of the tables were taken, yet it didn't feel busy; there was a sense of calm in the café. And Isla breathed it in.

‘You look deep in thought.’ A friendly voice broke through Isla’s silence and she opened her eyes. She wondered how long she’d been sitting like that and felt her cheeks warm. The old lady was standing by her side, smiling down.

‘Sorry, I was actually.’

‘Nothing to be sorry for. What can I get you?’ Isla hadn’t looked at the menu, so just ordered her usual macchiato.

‘You’re not hungry?’

Isla realised she was starving. ‘I’d love a sandwich actually. Maybe a toasted cheese one?’

The lady winked at Isla. ‘I can manage that. It won’t be too long, love.’

Isla watched as the woman sauntered off, stopping by a table on her way and picking up an empty plate with a big smile. She was dressed beautifully, this lady. She wore a simple short-sleeved dress. But it was made from a lovely blue, green and white swirling pattern. It sat elegantly on her slim body and was matched with sensible yet trendy brown sandals. *Gosh I hope I look like her when I’m that old*, Isla thought.

Only minutes later, a young waitress brought over Isla’s coffee and sandwich. The sandwich was crunchy on the outside and soft and gooey inside. Isla ate it quickly and finished with the perfect macchiato as she stared at the trees in the garden. When she finally stood up to leave, her tummy was full and she felt more content than she had in a while. She would have to thank Dee for suggesting this place; the traffic wouldn’t seem nearly as bad now. Isla waited behind a young couple with a baby to pay at the register. The baby kept peeking at Isla through a gap in its pram. Isla smiled and made some funny faces, causing the baby to squeal in delight. She moved out of the way for the couple to navigate the pram outside and then focused on paying her own bill, blocking out the baby’s happy gurgles. She was doing well today.

‘How was it, love?’ The old lady smiled at Isla.

‘Delicious, thank you. The best sandwich I’ve had!’

The old lady laughed and tapped away at the iPad on the counter, which impressed Isla even more.

‘Well that’s good to hear. That’s twelve dollars thank you, love.’

Isla tapped her card against the EFTPOS and wondered again if this was the same woman who’d run the store.

‘Do you mind me asking, have you always owned this place?’

The lady’s eyes shone as she nodded. ‘I have. It was my mother Rose’s before mine, but I’ve been running it for the last fifty years. The last twenty-five as a café; it was a store before then.’

‘I know! I used to come here. My family lived close by and I used to come up to spend my pocket money on lollies.’

‘Did you just? Well it’s very nice to see you again.’

‘Isla, I’m Isla.’

‘It’s wonderful to see you again, Isla. I’m Marie.’

CHAPTER THREE

Dee

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PRESENT

‘Mr Nugyen, nice to see you. James made the representative basketball team, did he tell you?’ Dee smiled as the small man nodded and bowed his head at her. He was the father of one of the school’s most talented athletes, but was very hard on him, Dee knew, so whenever she saw him she tried to remind him of his son’s greatness. He didn’t speak much English, but she hoped he understood her. James beamed at her from beside his dad and she winked at him before moving on to talk to another parent. It was afternoon bell time and Dee made it a point to be in the parent pick-up area every afternoon. She’d worked with principals who sat in their office far too much and forgot how to relate to their school’s community. Her mentor though, Mr Richard Lawson, had immersed himself in school life. He’d known the names of almost every student, regularly taught lessons and greeted parents in the morning and farewelled them in the afternoon. Dee strived to follow in Richard’s footsteps. She liked to think she did it her own way, though. She caught the eye of a particularly negative mother then and braced herself.

‘Mrs Olowitzch, hello.’ Dee smiled.

‘Ms Dawood, this parking is ridiculous. We should get council up here again. Honestly, we’ve all had enough.’

Dee nodded and agreed that it might well be time to connect with council once more. She didn't mention that she spoke to a member from council weekly in an attempt to create a solution for the growing traffic concerns around the school. 'Let's bring it up at this week's P&C meeting. Will you be coming?'

'Yes, yes, I'll be there. But the parking is a joke, it is an absolute joke.'

'I'm as frustrated as you, Mrs Olowitzch. I'll see you at the meeting.' Dee walked away swiftly and spent the next twenty minutes talking to as many other parents as she could.

At 3.20, she walked over to the staffroom to prepare for the afternoon meeting. It ran every Wednesday from 3.30 pm till 4.30 pm and it was the bane of most of her staff's existence. To be honest it was the bane of her existence too, but the material they covered was demanded by the Department of Education and there was no way around it. Dee's deputy, Sean Gilroy, was already in the staffroom setting up the bowls of chocolates they provided each week to soften the staff.

'You beat me to it, Sean,' Dee said. Sean was a fantastic deputy; the best Dee had worked with in her ten years of being a principal. She never had to ask twice for anything.

'You know I take chocolate duty seriously,' Sean popped a Malteser in his mouth then offered the bowl to her. Dee was about to say no as she'd been watching what she ate lately, trying to get a little fitter. But they were discussing reporting criteria this afternoon, always a fiery topic, so she grabbed a small handful of Maltesers and shoved them all in her mouth.

As Dee wrapped up the staff meeting she felt exhausted. She understood how overworked her teachers were; she remembered the overwhelming prospect of starting reports when she was a classroom teacher. But she was always a little taken aback by the feistiness of some of her staff.

‘How are we supposed to write thirty reports, plan for next year *and* learn about this whole new bloody faith-thingy curriculum? It’s too much!’ Anne Leroy, a staff member of over twenty years had been the harshest of all.

‘I understand, Anne, I really do. It’s so much work and we’re all so tired. We need those Christmas holidays to come faster! Look, I will give everyone a full day of release next week to get reports started and we’ll take the new curriculum on step-by-step. We’ve got more release time promised by the department in preparation for that later in the term.’

Anne had sniffed and muttered something Dee didn’t hear, but everyone else seemed cheered by the idea of a day out of class.

‘Again, thank you everyone. You know how brilliant I think you all are. We’ll get through this stressful time together; remember you can approach your stage leader, Sean, or myself at any time with concerns. Have a great evening!’ The room erupted in chatter as the teachers made their way out of the staffroom, most stopping to say goodbye to Dee and a few even thanking her. Dee told Sean to go home as well when he started cleaning up the tables.

‘Honestly, Sean, off you go, your wife needs you.’ Sean had recently become a father for the first time and she knew his little girl didn’t feed or sleep well.

‘Have I told you today that I love you, Dee?’ Sean grinned and almost ran from the room. Dee smiled as she tidied up the tables, collecting the empty bowls and throwing away chocolate wrappers. Sean seemed like a great husband; he was always talking with concern about his exhausted wife and knew all the ins and outs of his baby’s routine, so he obviously did his fair share. He reminded Dee a little of her own husband, who she knew would be cooking tonight. Oliver worked just as hard as Dee in his job as an IT specialist at Macquarie University and their family workload had always been split fifty-fifty – even

when Dee had been at home on maternity leave with her boys. She longed to be at home now, but she knew there was a few hours' worth of paperwork in her office. She headed there, ready to tackle as much as she could, but was determined to leave by 6 pm, no matter what.

'Where are my boys?' Dee shouted as always when she opened her front door. The delicious smell of curry greeted her like a gentle hug as she entered her home. Oliver's curry was his specialty and he usually cooked it on a Wednesday, when Dee was often most stressed. She heard a unison call of 'Hey', as she dropped her bag on the hallway table and slid off her shoes, enjoying the cool of the floorboards beneath her feet. Every time she came home she missed the sound of her little boys, thundering down the hallway, squealing for mummy and throwing their arms around her as she covered their faces in kisses. Despite them being sixteen and fourteen now, something inside of her was still disappointed when they didn't run out to say hello. But as she reached the kitchen and found her almost-men helping their Dad prepare dinner, her heart melted.

'Hi lovely, how was your day?' Oliver asked, leaning in for Dee's kiss. He was wearing his ridiculous apron emblazoned with a picture of a chiseled man's torso. It looked so silly on top of his work clothes, but he loved it.

'It was good. What about you guys?' Dee kissed her youngest boy, Adrian, on his cheek, which smelled a little sweaty. Then her eldest, John, reached over the bench to kiss her cheek. He smelled like aftershave; Dee made a mental note to tell him to share it with Adrian.

'Well, mine was insane. I was happy to leave early,' Oliver said, stirring a yellow curry in the huge pot on the stove. He always made double servings so they could take leftovers for lunch the next day. Adrian shrugged.

'Mine sucked. All the teachers at our school suck.'

John punched him in the arm. 'That's coz you're a retard.'

John! Don't say things like that – you know better.' She turned to Adrian. 'Year eight's tough, habibi, you know that. Just put your head down and do the work and don't waste time complaining about your teachers, okay?'

'Yeah all right,' he sulked, and punched his brother back.

'Enough. How was your day, John?'

'Good,' John replied. Dee raised her eyebrows and waited.

'I had a good day. We played soccer against St Marks and won. I scored two goals.'

'Awesome.' Oliver reached out to high-five John. Dee hugged him. Her boys always hugged her back properly. She'd heard of other teenagers withdrawing from their parents, and even though she had to admit they talked to her a whole lot less than they did when they were little, they were still affectionate and Dee loved it. Finally John pulled away.

'All right, thanks. It's not a big deal, I always score goals.' John laughed.

'Ha, yeah we know, Mr Big Head. Just pass me the plates,' Oliver teased and Adrian laughed. Dee put her arm around his shoulder.

'Are you going to play soccer next year, honey?'

Adrian shook his head. 'Soccer sucks. Anyway, you said if I keep going to karate I don't need to do any other sports, remember?'

Dee raised her hands. 'I know, I know, I was just asking. You're the karate master and we can keep it that way.' She placed her hands in prayer position in front of her chest and bowed to Adrian. He rolled his eyes, but there was pride in them too. He'd always excelled in karate and was already a black belt.

'Dinner's ready. Grab your plates and let's go,' Oliver instructed. They all grabbed their plates and served themselves,

before settling down together at their oversized wooden dining table to eat. They didn't pray, but they always paused for a second once they were all sitting down. Oliver had started it when he and Dee first married. They'd sit together to eat, he'd hold Dee's hand and look at her, look at his food, smile and then begin his meal. Dee had automatically joined in and only weeks later asked him what it was all about.

'I'm silently giving my thanks, for my gorgeous wife and food,' Oliver had said.

'Who are you thanking?' Oliver didn't believe in God, so, while Dee loved the idea, she was a little confused. Oliver had just shrugged.

'I don't know. I'm thanking you, I'm thanking me, I guess I'm thanking the universe or something. I'm just grateful, you know?' And Dee had known. She used the moment of silence to thank Allah, and it had been their tradition ever since.

'So, where should we go on holidays in January?' Dee asked when they were all finished eating. It still amazed her how fast Oliver and the boys ate. It amazed her even more that she now kept up with them.

'Oh, I don't know, honey. Don't you think we've left it a little late to book anywhere?' Oliver asked, wiping his mouth. As it was the last week of October, Dee thought there was plenty of time. But Oliver usually liked to book their holiday a year in advance. Last year they had stayed home for the summer holidays, spending time with Oliver's father after his mum passed away. But he was living happily with Oliver's sister now and wouldn't miss them for a few weeks. Dee longed to go somewhere far away and lay by a pool, reading a good book.

'Can we go to Hawaii?' Adrian asked.

'Or Europe?' tried John.

'I was thinking more like Noosa, or Hamilton Island. Somewhere warm but not too far.'

‘Yeah, I like Noosa,’ Adrian said. John nodded and shrugged.

‘Yeah, okay, that would be nice. But do you think we can get accommodation?’ Oliver asked, his eyebrows furrowed.

Dee smiled, imagining them all lazily walking along the beach, eating out every night, swimming at sunset; it would be bliss. ‘Leave it to me.’

Dee placed her book on her bedside table as Oliver came to bed. He’d completed his nighttime routine of checking the boys were in their bedrooms, setting the coffee machine for the morning and double-checking the doors and windows were locked. He lay back on his pillow, his arms behind his head. Dee curled up beside him, placing her head on his chest.

‘So what do you think about Adrian hating all his teachers?’ she asked.

‘He doesn’t hate them. Well, maybe he does hate his religion teacher; what’s her name again?’

Dee sat up. ‘Mrs Itsines. Why does he hate her?’ She was picturing the young, soft-looking teacher she’d met at the parent-teacher interviews.

‘Well, you know she told the class Adrian was Muslim.’ Oliver said it casually, as if it was something Dee had not only known, but accepted.

‘She what?’

‘Didn’t he tell you? Last week they were discussing religions of the world or something like that and she asked Adrian to tell the class about the Muslim religion. He was pissed off. I can’t believe he didn’t tell you.’

Dee felt a burning sensation rise through her stomach to her chest. ‘I can’t believe you didn’t tell me. When was this?’

Oliver sat up then, too. ‘I don’t know. Last week, on Monday I think, or that’s when he told me anyway, on our way to karate. Sorry, I thought you knew, ’cause he said you told him not to

take it personally, that he wasn't a Muslim, but even if he was, there was nothing wrong with that and he had every right to share what he knew about the religion.'

Dee was racking her brain. That definitely sounded like how she'd respond, but he hadn't told her. She wouldn't forget her son, who was sensitive about all things cultural, telling her something like that. She lay back on her own pillow.

'He didn't tell me.'

'Huh, that's weird. Well I guess he knew what you'd say.'

Dee sighed and Oliver lay down close to her, draping his arm around her waist.

'You're upset.'

'Of course I am. He didn't come to me, and worse than that, he thought he already knew what I'd say.'

'Well, was he right? What would you have said?'

'Probably exactly that. Because there isn't anything wrong with being Muslim. I'm Muslim, for God's sake. Why does he have to be so ashamed of it?' Dee knew she was being unfair. He was only fourteen, plus most of his friends were Catholic, and that was because they – like Adrian – had been sent to the best school in their area, which happened to be a Catholic school. She guessed she just wished he'd have a little bit of pride in his Lebanese background, like John. Perhaps it was because of how they looked. John was the male version of Dee, black hair, dark eyes and deep olive skin. Adrian was fair like Oliver.

'He's not ashamed, honey. Put yourself in his shoes: he goes to a Catholic school, he hears everything the news has to say about Muslims and then he's put on the spot to explain the religion? Come on, even you would crack under that pressure.'

Dee wouldn't, but she saw Oliver's point. 'You're right, I know. I just wish he spoke to me about it. Maybe I'll take him out for lunch this weekend, try and have a chat?'

Oliver kissed Dee on the cheek. ‘Sounds like a plan. Goodnight, lovely,’ he said as he switched off the lamp.

Dee tried to close her eyes, but she kept seeing the same thing: herself as a young girl, being screamed at by a strange woman with a face full of hatred, calling Dee vile names over and over. Suddenly, the strange woman’s face from her childhood memory was replaced by the pale face from the café. Dee hadn’t told anyone about her encounter that morning. She almost called Oliver the moment she left the café, but then stopped. It wasn’t worth rehashing. It had been a ridiculous encounter with a ridiculous person. Most people were better than that woman and her prejudiced views, Dee believed. She tried to believe. Weren’t they? She found her mind wandering to places she didn’t want it to go. She reached into her bedside drawer, took out the small bottle of sleeping pills and swallowed half a tablet. It only took a few minutes for the pill to blur her memories and make her forget her son’s confusion, before she fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.