



# I

She knew what she had to do. She had planned it meticulously, silently, over the past week. No one suspected a thing. They never paid her enough attention to notice.

They were all so much more than she was. She was weak and pathetic and overly reliant on the men in her life. Men who would use her and control her. Men like her father and her brother. She had tried so hard to take advantage of the chance she had been given; the chance to live a better life, but she had failed time and time again.

She parked the car in a deserted car park and climbed out. It was still dark. Swinging the rucksack on to her back, she secured the straps tightly around her shoulders and waist. It was heavy, and when she stooped to check the laces of her walking shoes she had to be careful that it didn't tip her off her feet. As she stood, the wind felt icy against her cheeks, and she pulled the sleeves of her jacket over her hands before setting off up the hill.

The path wound upwards through bracken and rocky outcrops. Ahead she could see the top of the sun breaching the horizon. Everything was silent. There were no birds to herald the dawn or wildlife to welcome its warmth. It had been a particularly cold January. Snow had fallen across the UK, and she passed a few icy white patches lingering at the side of the path.

If she were in a better state of mind, she would have thought it beautiful. But she was not. The self-loathing had become so bad that she had not been able to face her reflection in the mirror for months now. She managed to style her hair by touch and had stopped wearing any make-up. Others had congratulated her, misinterpreting her actions as a statement of liberation. But it was nothing more than self-hatred.

As she neared the top of the hill she twisted the thick elastic band on her left wrist in a figure of eight and looped it around her right wrist so that her hands were tethered in front of her. The elastic dug into her skin and her shoulders ached from the weight on her back. She might be determined but she also knew she was weak. There was every chance that at the last moment she would panic and chicken out; she had to be sure changing her mind would make no difference. That was why she had filled the rucksack with stones.

Paula would understand in the end. She would be better off without her. Stronger.

The ridge above the loch was exposed and the gusts even colder. She leaned into the wind, picking up pace and widening her stride, one foot in front of the other, until without pausing she stepped off the edge and plunged feet first into the freezing water below.

*Day 1*

Gerald Porter sat upright at the small table. The mop of red hair he usually wore long and a little unkempt was today brushed back from his face. With no press or public to see, there was no need to cultivate his trademark ‘man of the people’ image. The glass of water in front of him remained untouched and the seat opposite empty. He knew they were leaving him to stew; expecting that the longer he spent in this windowless room alone, the more desperate he would become to speak and escape. But Porter was stronger than they knew.

An hour and forty minutes later the door opened and a smartly dressed Asian woman entered. Her black hair was secured neatly at the nape of her neck and her dark eyes studied him, not with the awe and respect he was used to but with curiosity and a touch of impatience. She was accompanied by an older man. The one who had brought him to this room earlier today. What was his name again? It had been a town, Chester or Lincoln maybe?

‘Mr Porter, I am Detective Chief Inspector Mirza. I believe you’ve met Detective Inspector Bristol.’

*Bristol.* His first wife had been from Bristol. He should

have remembered that. He did not respond to their introductions. There was no need. They knew who he was.

DCI Mirza sat in the chair opposite. ‘I understand you are having some trouble recalling your whereabouts from 8am on Wednesday 24th January until midday on Friday 26th?’

Porter smiled. She got straight to the point. You had to like that.

When he did not respond she continued. ‘Your PA informs us you had not booked any leave and that you claimed your last-minute trip was urgent. She also told us that having no details of your whereabouts in your diary for this amount of time is rare, if not unprecedented. So, where were you?’

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘You know why.’

‘Explain it to me.’

Mirza placed her hands together on the table and leaned towards him. ‘A serious accusation has been made against you, Mr Porter. It would be in your best interest to cooperate.’

Porter sat back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head. ‘It’s not my responsibility to prove my innocence. It’s your responsibility to prove my guilt.’

‘But surely it’s in your *interest* to prove your innocence. This will be less painful if you do. Now, why don’t you tell me who you met and why?’

Porter returned to his previous position with his hands on his thighs and his back straight.

‘Did you take a charter flight out of Luton airport to Dubai on Wednesday 24th January?’

Porter said nothing.

‘Who did you meet with out there, Mr Porter? Was it someone you don’t want us to know about? Is that why you’re hiding it from your own government?’

For the next twenty minutes, the DCI asked her questions and did her very best to tease and then goad him into replying. She was good, too. He could see why she’d made it so far in the police. Her ability to switch from helpful advisor to powerful threat was skilful, elegant almost. But he said nothing.

‘Mr Porter, as you are unwilling to cooperate, I have no choice but to detain you for longer.’

‘Good.’

Mirza’s eyebrows rose at his response.

‘Hold me under the Terrorism Act. That gives you fourteen days to interrogate.’

‘Are you confessing to working with terrorists, sir?’

He waved his hand to communicate that her need to know was irrelevant. ‘You have no idea what you’re dealing with here, Detective Chief Inspector. So, detain me for fourteen days. No charges, no bail and I will speak to only one person about this matter.’

‘And who might that be?’ The policewoman straightened her graceful neck.

‘Dr Augusta Bloom. And I suggest you get her here ASAP.’

Augusta Bloom let the others stride ahead as they reached the summit of Ingleborough mountain in the Yorkshire Dales. She wanted to take in the view. It was the kind of crisp cold winter's day that provided clear skies as far as the eye could see, from the snow-capped peak of Whernside to the north, then across the valley towards her childhood home of Harrogate. Following her mother's move into a care facility, Bloom had recently bought a small cottage just outside the town with the proceeds from the sale of her family home. She needed a base for when she visited from London; she enjoyed the escape to the fresh air and hills.

The walking group she had joined today was new to her. The people were nice enough, although the pace was a little slow for her taste. She had made the mistake of mentioning she was a psychologist to the older man with the walking poles and flat cap, and found herself deluged with details of his wife's battle with depression. She repeated that she was not a clinical psychologist, so had little insight into mental health, but the man was in transmit mode. Sometimes it was better to say she worked in research.

Her phone was on silent but she felt it vibrate in her jacket pocket. She was surprised she had signal up here.

The number was blocked, which usually meant the police were calling.

‘Dr Bloom, this is DI Bristol of Westminster Police. Can I ask if you’ve ever had any professional dealings with Gerald Porter?’

She stepped away from the group. ‘As in the Foreign Secretary?’

‘Yes. He’s asking to speak to you and we would like to know why.’

Bloom had no idea. She had only ever seen the man on the news. And why were the police calling? ‘Is he in custody?’

‘What makes you ask that?’

‘I assume you’re not in the habit of managing a Cabinet minister’s diary, Detective Inspector.’

‘He is refusing to speak to anyone but you. Why would that be?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never met him. What is he accused of?’

‘I’m afraid that’s classified.’

‘I see. So what do you want me to do?’

There was a pause before the DI said, ‘How quickly can you get into central London?’

Bloom hung up after agreeing to make her way to the capital by early evening. It meant she would have to dip out of the walking group and start heading there immediately. She had intended to stay in Yorkshire for a week and have a well-deserved break. It had been a rough year. An old client, Seraphine Walker, had resurfaced, intent on impressing Bloom with an elaborate game she had designed to recruit fellow psychopaths. Bloom’s closest



friend and business partner Marcus Jameson had been caught in the crossfire and their relationship had been changed for ever – a fact that brought her great sadness.

Several hours later, Bloom arrived at the Ministry of Defence's Whitehall building in London as instructed. Once she had passed through security she was met by DI Bristol and escorted to the lifts. He selected LG4 and they descended into the basement. She knew this building was reported to have as many floors below ground as above. It contained Churchill's war rooms, where he and his advisors had worked during the Blitz.

Once out of the lift, the detective inspector followed signs to zone seven and eventually came to a stop outside room thirty-one. He made small talk along the way about the cold winter they were having but gave no details of what she should expect behind the door and so she did not ask.

Foreign Secretary Gerald Porter sat at a small table in a windowless room with a smartly dressed woman who introduced herself as Detective Chief Inspector Mirza.

'Mr Porter. I'm Dr Bloom,' she said, holding out her hand.

'Thank you for coming,' he said, taking her hand in both of his as if there was a long-standing affection between them. His trademark red hair was brushed back neatly from his face and his green eyes held her gaze for a second or two longer than was polite.

'I'm not sure how I can help,' she said to both Porter and Mirza as she took the seat next to the DCI.

‘That makes two of us,’ said Mirza. ‘So, Mr Porter, you have what you wanted. Shall we begin?’

‘Indeed we shall, once you and Bristol here kindly step outside.’ Porter smiled at the policewoman with a warmth that did not reach his eyes.

‘That’s not happening,’ the DCI said immediately.

‘I said I would speak to one person and one person alone.’ His gaze moved back to Bloom.

Mirza continued to protest and explain that it was critical she hear his explanation personally, but Porter simply stared at Bloom and in turn she stared back. This was all very odd.

Eventually Mirza nodded to DI Bristol, who opened the door for them both. ‘I will be standing outside,’ she said in a final attempt to exert her power, but it was clear the Foreign Secretary had won that battle of wills.

When they were alone, Porter relaxed his posture and averted his gaze.

‘Your reputation precedes you, Dr Bloom. I appreciate your swift response.’

‘What reputation would that be?’

Porter ran his hands through his hair and ruffled away the neatness. ‘I have heard good things from influential people.’

‘Which people exactly?’ Bloom was unsure how a senior politician would have come across someone like her. They hardly moved in the same professional or personal circles.

‘I need your help with something of a sensitive nature.’

‘Is this to do with why the police wish to speak to you?’

Porter raised his eyebrows. ‘No, I would not trouble you with such mediocrity,’ he said. ‘But I am prepared to offer the Detective Chief Inspector a deal. If you can meet my request, I shall respond to hers.’

‘I don’t think she will go for that.’ Bloom had not missed the policewoman’s tone of impatience. She was not a woman used to being batted away, Bloom guessed.

‘Don’t you worry about that. It is all in hand. What I need from you is help with a personal family matter. My older sister, Greta, has been tormented for years because of her daughter Scarlett. She has begged for my help but the timing has never been right. Politically.’ He met her eyes again. ‘You understand.’

Bloom knew family scandals could be kryptonite to political ambitions. ‘How old is Scarlett?’

‘Twenty-nine.’

‘Has she been in trouble?’

‘Not that I know of.’ Porter smiled but did not expand. He looked like he was enjoying himself.

Bloom considered the options. ‘She has contrary politics?’

‘I expect so but that’s not the issue.’

‘OK.’ Bloom waited.

‘Have you heard of Artemis?’

Bloom looked at him blankly. ‘The Greek goddess?’

‘The organization dedicated to furthering women’s rights.’

‘Unfortunately not.’

‘Greta tells me Scarlett has had some involvement with them over the years.’

‘And you view that as a bad thing?’

Porter’s lips twisted into a now condescending smile. ‘I’m not a misogynist, Dr Bloom. I have no problem with women who earn their place in the world.’

Bloom chose not to take issue with the concept of a woman having to earn her place. This was not the time. ‘I still don’t understand why you need my help.’

‘Scarlett is my sister’s only child. Greta raised her alone. They spent all their spare time together until Scarlett went to university, and then everything changed. Over the course of that year Greta had less and less contact with her, and it has now been nearly ten years since they last spoke.’

Bloom raised her eyebrows. It wasn’t unusual for the relationship between parents and children to change when the latter left for university, but this was a bit different. Bloom wondered at the nature of the mother–daughter relationship. Was their apparent closeness healthy, or was there something Scarlett might feel aggrieved about, enough to cut all family ties?

‘You want me to reconcile your sister and your niece?’

‘I hear you are something of an expert when it comes to uncovering why people go missing. Scarlett not only fell out of contact with her family but also all of her friends.’

‘Have you asked Scarlett yourself? Perhaps there was a good reason she chose to cut ties with her past.’

‘I received one email from her about five years ago, saying she wanted to make her own way in the world and Artemis was her family now.’

‘How did you feel about that?’

‘I didn’t have a problem with it but I now understand that no one in the family has been able to reach her for a number of years. Her phone and email are all defunct. You think it lax of me not to have helped sooner?’ he said in response to Bloom’s silence. ‘In my defence, Greta can be somewhat drawn to the dramatic and we have not always seen eye to eye. But the time comes when you face the kind of thing that leads you to make amends.’

Bloom wondered if this was whatever DCI Mirza was so keen to talk to the minister about.

‘Have you or Greta spoken to the police?’

Porter narrowed his eyes. ‘I made it clear. No police. Police mean press. That’s why you’re here. I want this investigated quietly. Scarlett’s father passed away when she was a child, but he was a wealthy man and he left her a cool £2 million to be accessed at the age of twenty-one. Greta tells me this is no longer in the trust-fund account. Can you believe she never bloody checked the money was still there until I told her to? In all these years of bleating on about Scarlett.’

‘When was it moved?’

‘Not long after her twenty-first.’

‘Could she have simply placed it in a personal account?’

‘Of course, that’s possible – but if this group has defrauded my niece I can’t afford for that to become common knowledge. Am I making myself clear?’

Bloom nodded. She could see how this might prove embarrassing for a politician with a history in corporate finance. ‘What’s Scarlett’s surname?’

‘Marshall.’

Bloom wrote it down. 'How worried are you?'

Porter rolled his eyes as if this was nothing more than a favour he was doing for his dramatic sister, but Bloom caught the tension around his mouth. The whole thing angered him.

'If Scarlett's motives are rational, I have no concerns.'

'But you suspect they may not be?'

'That is where you come in. I need a spy and you are exactly the kind of woman Artemis wants in their ranks.'

## 4

Detective Chief Inspector Mirza was waiting for Bloom when she emerged from the room.

‘What did he tell you?’

‘He asked me to do him a personal favour and said in return he would answer your questions. What exactly has he done? The basement of MOD Main Building isn’t the usual place to question someone.’

‘Well, Gerald Porter is not just anyone. We have a PR nightmare on our hands if this isn’t handled right. What favour has he asked for?’

Bloom looked down the brightly lit corridor and couldn’t help wondering what was beyond each of the closed doors. ‘I asked first.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t tell you that.’

Bloom studied the DCI. She was attractive, with flawless skin and large brown eyes alert with intelligence. On the train to London, Bloom had emailed one of her trusted contacts in the Met to ask if they knew DI Bristol of Westminster Police. They had confirmed that Bristol worked for Mirza, who had been promoted six months earlier to an undisclosed posting with the Ministry of Defence. Bloom’s police contact had no idea what the secondment related to. It was as tightly zipped as any undercover operation, he had said. Based on who Mirza

had in custody, Bloom guessed the DCI was tasked with handling any criminal activity perpetrated by Members of Parliament or the government itself. If this was true Mirza and her team were to keep in line the very people who funded and managed the police service. They would need to be squeaky clean, tight on process and highly sensitive to the fallout of any investigation they undertook.

‘But he could have told me everything in there. So you’d already accepted the risk of my finding out by inviting me here and then leaving me alone with him.’

Mirza pursed her lips into a tight ball. ‘I did my research before we called you and the bosses spoke highly of you. They even recommended I attend your course.’

‘Well, it’s coming up soon. I’m sure we could squeeze you in.’ Bloom taught an annual module on the psychology of crime to senior leaders at the College of Policing’s Harrogate site.

‘If Mr Porter told you nothing of value then there is little point briefing you myself. He is clearly stalling for some reason.’

‘I can’t tell you if he said anything of value if I don’t know what the information you need is. You can trust my discretion, Detective Chief Inspector, as I’m sure your bosses also told you.’

Mirza took a long breath in, then sighed. ‘We received an anonymous tip that Porter has been selling secrets.’

Bloom frowned. ‘He’s the Foreign Secretary, why would he take a risk like that?’

‘The money or the power. I tend to find it’s one or the



other. Plus he has the opportunity: lots of meetings behind closed doors with bigwigs from around the world. I suspect someone knew what he was doing and waited for him to trip up. Last month he took an off-the-books trip to Dubai to meet someone he doesn't want us to know about.'

'Well, he mentioned nothing about any of that to me. He simply asked me to try and reconcile his sister and his niece, who've been estranged for a number of years.' She was careful with her words, aware that Porter had said he wanted no police involvement in his family situation. It would not serve her well to break his trust now, before she knew what all this was about. 'He said if I can do this, he'll answer your questions.'

'He's buying time. I wonder why. Did you agree?' When Bloom indicated she had, Mirza said, 'Thank you. You had every right to decline.'

'Reuniting people is what my partner and I specialize in, and when the police call I make it my business to do whatever I can to help.'

'Can you do it in fourteen days?'

'You're holding him under the Terrorism Act?' She knew that was the only condition under which a suspect could be detained for so long.

'Can you?' Mirza repeated.

'I shall do my very best.'

*Day 2*

The website for Artemis was slick and minimalist. Its home page simply stated its purpose as a force for positive change through the empowerment of women. The other three pages were labelled Testimonials, Membership Details and About Our Founder. Bloom clicked on the latter. The group's founder and CEO, Paula Kunis, was described as a vocal champion of women's rights. Her biography listed the many international conferences she had addressed and boasted that she had shared the stage with the likes of human rights lawyer and wife of Hollywood royalty Amal Clooney, and former prime minister's wife and barrister Cherie Blair.

On the testimonials page she watched a short video in which a range of Artemis members from different professions and corporations congratulated the group on its inspirational message and collaborative network. Then she checked out the membership page and saw there were various levels of involvement women could have, from paying a small monthly fee to gain access to online resources and discounted events through to full corporate membership listed as 'price on application'. It also included a number of forthcoming seminars Artemis was running

in the city. There was no mention of Scarlett Marshall anywhere. Given the organization's clear efforts at self-promotion Bloom was surprised they were not capitalizing on one of their members' links to government.

'G'day, g'day,' said her business partner Marcus Jameson as he came to look over her shoulder at what she was reading. 'How was the Foreign Secretary?'

Bloom smiled at him. It was a source of huge relief that he had reverted to his cheery morning greetings again after their recent troubles. She was under no illusion that her perceived transgressions were forgotten but at least he was trying to behave like normal.

'Put it this way, I told the DCI to tread carefully and watch his tendency to use verbal trickery to dodge her questions.' Bloom took note of the contact details for Artemis. Their HQ was located in Edinburgh.

'Typical politician.' Jameson took his seat and opened up his laptop.

'Hmmm,' said Bloom. 'That was not what she'd meant but if the cap fits . . .

'What did he want you for?'

'He wants me to further the cause for women's rights.'

Jameson choked a little on his coffee. 'Gerald Porter is interested in women's rights? I thought the guy was one step away from Trump in his views.'

'His niece is a member of Artemis, a women's networking group-cum-campaign. He thinks there's something odd about it.'

'Course he does. It isn't populated by the plummy-accented public-school boys of the establishment.'

She pursed her lips. ‘He wants to pay me to spy on them for him. He blames them for Scarlett becoming estranged from her family and he wants us to find her and reunite them.’

‘Be careful. This group might be a problem for him in some way. It could be nothing to do with his niece, just politics. Don’t be his pawn.’

‘I haven’t accepted yet. I told him I would speak to his niece and then take a view as to whether we can help in any way.’ She turned to face him. ‘The police are holding him under the Terrorism Act in the MOD’s Whitehall building.’

Jameson’s eyes widened. ‘Blimey. What’s he done?’

‘I was sworn to secrecy but in short they think he may have betrayed us in some way.’

‘Us, as in . . . ?’ Jameson gestured with his hands to indicate *all of us*.

She nodded. ‘But more importantly I don’t trust this “find my niece” story. He must have all manner of people who could do that. Why me, a stranger to him?’

‘You think Artemis is linked to whatever he’s done?’

‘I think there’s a very strong chance.’ She turned back to her screen and signed up to attend an Artemis seminar running in three days’ time called Pursuing Gender Equality. She wanted to see for herself what the group was about.

Jameson sighed. ‘Why don’t we get simple missing person cases any more? Why do we have to get involved in large-scale cover-ups?’

Bloom smiled at her ex-MI6 partner. ‘You love it.’

‘I’m not sure that’s true. Speaking of which, your friend’s preliminary court hearing is coming up. Are you planning on going?’

Bloom’s old client Seraphine Walker was facing trial for inciting the murder of a Bristol optician, among other crimes.

‘I expect so. You?’

He scowled. ‘If I never see that woman’s face again, it won’t be a day too soon.’

## 6

Greta Marshall's home was a modest detached house on a sprawling estate near to Milton Keynes. She opened the door on its chain and peered out, as if expecting a genuine threat to be waiting on her porch.

'Mrs Marshall, my name is Augusta Bloom and this is my colleague Marcus Jameson. Your brother Gerald has asked if we can provide some help with your daughter Scarlett. I left a message on your answering machine to say we would call by. Did you get that?' Bloom had spent the morning calling Greta Marshall with no joy, and so they had decided to take a drive out this afternoon.

Greta narrowed her eyes but nodded. She still held the door on its chain and showed no intention of releasing it.

'Could we have a quick chat, please? We'd like to find out if we can be of help to you and your daughter.' There had been no luck locating Scarlett via Artemis. Bloom had called the number listed on their website, posing as an old school friend attempting to trace fellow pupils for a reunion, and been told in no uncertain terms that they did not share details of their members. They would neither confirm nor deny that Scarlett was part of their group.

'Gerald sent you?'

'That's right, yes.'

Greta stared out at her with a mixture of suspicion and fear. Her hair was neatly styled in a helmet of large curls and she wore a string of pearls over her cream blouse. Bloom resisted the urge to glance at Jameson.

A moment later Greta closed the door. Bloom and Jameson waited to see if she would release the chain. When nothing happened, Jameson knocked again.

‘Mrs Marshall? We are here to help. Genuinely,’ he said.

‘Leave it, Marcus. She’s not going to let us in.’

‘How do you know that? Maybe if we pitch it differently. Tell her what we do and the successes we’ve had.’

Bloom was already walking back down the path. ‘That look on her face when she asked if Gerald had sent us? I don’t think she trusts him. She’s possibly even scared of him. And by extension she doesn’t trust us.’

Jameson came to her side with a sigh. ‘I see your point. She does look like something of a mouse.’

They reached his car; the Audi estate was new, a little treat he had bought himself for Christmas. Bloom guessed it was a reward for the trials of the past year.

‘Let’s look into the extended family. See if there’s someone we can go through who Greta trusts,’ Bloom said. ‘Did you make any progress with Scarlett’s whereabouts?’

‘She has no social media presence that I could find. She’s on the council records as living at her mother’s house but she’s never registered to vote, here or anywhere else. I’ve asked Lucas to dig deeper.’ Lucas George was the freelance technical wizard they employed for any online research.

Jameson paused, then tilted his head in the direction of the house next door to Greta's. 'Twitcher. Two o'clock.'

Bloom did not look in the direction Jameson had indicated. 'Do you want to go or should I?' They both knew a neighbour who hovered at the curtains could be a useful asset.

'It's a man, so you go. Use those feminine charms.'

Bloom gave him a withering look then walked up the adjacent path and knocked on the curtain twitcher's door. A man in his seventies answered. He had white hair that grew in a halo around a large shiny bald patch.

'Good afternoon. I wonder if you can help me? I'm trying to trace Scarlett Marshall, Greta's daughter. I knocked next door but didn't have any luck.' She wasn't entirely sure whether this man would have been able to see Greta open her door a crack. She assumed probably not but chose her words carefully anyway. 'You'd be doing me a huge favour if you could tell me whether she still lives here.' She often found that a plea for help coupled with a direct question had people answering before they thought better of it. On this occasion, however, she need not have worried.

'We haven't seen Scarlett for many a year. She seems to have abandoned her poor mother. She's not well, is Greta. Something of a recluse. I said to Marjorie before she passed, God rest her soul, that girl should be here looking after her mum, doing her shopping and the like.'

'Does she ever visit, as far as you know?'

The man shook his head. 'I like to make sure Greta has fresh milk and bread so I get some for her every



week when I go to Tesco's. It's not far away. One of those twenty-four-hour superstores.'

'I'm sure we could all do with a neighbour like you looking out for us.'

The compliment clearly pleased him and he opened the door a little wider. 'It's icy out there. Why don't you step in, and I'll tell you about Scarlett.'

Twenty minutes later Bloom climbed into the passenger seat of Jameson's car. It was lovely and warm and he was listening to Radio 2. As she closed the door and put on her seatbelt, he said 'Radiohead. *The Bends*' in response to a competition question.

'Any joy?' He turned down the radio.

'Peter was a chatterbox. Filled me in on all the local gossip. Seems Scarlett has not been seen since Christmas eight or nine years ago and her mother hasn't heard from her for almost all of that time. Greta herself never leaves the house and relies on the likes of Peter to bring her food and supplies. Seems like the neighbourhood has a nice little care network going.'

'She's a recluse then?'

Bloom nodded. 'Sounds like agoraphobia. The last time anyone saw her outdoors was a few years ago when she sat on the step in the sun.'

'So could Scarlett be similarly reclusive? Is that why she's not been around?'

'Agoraphobia doesn't tend to be hereditary, as far as I know. It's often caused by a culmination of life events that heighten a person's anxiety. They could certainly

both be anxious in temperament, however. That's often a shared characteristic in families.'

'A worried parent raises a worried child?'

'Something like that, yes. Peter told me Scarlett was a happy girl, always popping in for tea and cake with his late wife. They lived next door throughout her childhood. Apparently she was a keen gymnast in her youth but gave it up in her early teens, probably because her mother couldn't take her to the various events. I asked if Greta and Scarlett were close and he concurred with Gerald Porter, saying they spent a great deal of time together and always seemed happy in each other's company. He had no explanation for Scarlett's absence, only that perhaps there had been an argument but he and his wife felt it would be rude to ask.'

'The overly polite Brits strike again. How many times do we hear that people don't ask the important questions because they're worried it would cause offence?'

Bloom couldn't disagree. They had dealt with many a case of missing family members who had been mistreated or abused under the noses of neighbours who felt they shouldn't intrude.

'I called Lucas while you were in there. He's found little trace of Scarlett online. She has a Facebook account but hasn't used it in a decade. He did find a few school friends who had discussed her absence on their Facebook pages and appealed for her to get in touch. But this was years ago.'

'There's no such thing as a private conversation these days.'

‘True. I chose a good time to leave the espionage business. It’s hard to spy when anyone with computer skills can track your every movement.’

‘Are you telling me you left because you couldn’t hack it any more, old man?’

Bloom expected a smirk. Her partner usually enjoyed her attempts at humour but instead he flashed her a look of irritation and changed the subject.

‘I’ll ask Lucas to send me the contact details of Scarlett’s friends. See what they can tell us.’

Jameson had left his job with MI6 a number of years ago, opting to work on more rewarding investigations with Bloom. He had never revealed why he chose to walk away from his career and start over, but Bloom suspected something traumatic may have triggered it. For all his charm and humour, Jameson could be easily angered and was often overprotective of vulnerable clients, particularly women.

She said, ‘Something is definitely amiss here. This should be simple. Porter said his niece was estranged from her family but otherwise had told him she was happy living her own life. So why can’t we find her? Why is she a ghost?’

‘Maybe she’s dead.’ He shrugged. ‘You must have considered it. Her uncle said the last contact he had was five years ago and she’s not been to see her mother for even longer.’

‘If her mum was ill she may simply have run away. Some children can’t cope with a sick parent.’

‘They don’t have to be ill. My father drives me and Claire crazy and he’s perfectly fit and healthy.’

Bloom smiled. She could relate to that. Her heart surgeon mother had been a formidable character before the dementia set in. She could chastise Bloom with nothing more than a look. It had been a relief to escape to university.

‘We should probably talk about that, by the way.’

‘What? My mother?’

‘Your decision to leave the spy game.’

Jameson started the car. ‘Nothing to say.’

‘It’ll be a quick chat then.’

His jaw twitched and he turned the radio back up.

*Nine years earlier*

Scarlett joined the meeting as late as she dared and took the last seat on the back row. It was no surprise to find most of the people there had chosen to sit on the three rows at the rear, leaving the front two pretty much free. It was a session on improving assertiveness after all. The tall girl next to her wore a pretty green sundress buttoned up the front and gladiator sandals. Scarlett crossed her thin cardigan over the vest top that was past its best and had started to shed bits of cotton at the seams.

‘Hi,’ said the girl, flashing Scarlett a look from under her fringe. She had thick blonde hair. The kind that hung neatly in the style it was supposed to, which in this girl’s case was a chin-length bob.

Scarlett smiled but didn’t speak, as the woman at the front had already started. Politeness was important. It was one of the few things she remembered her father telling her and so she clung to it, as if living by his rules might somehow keep him alive.

She listened to the talk with predictable dismay. She didn’t want to work at her assertiveness, or to push herself to train her mental muscles, or to face the cringing embarrassment of standing in front of strangers like one

poor volunteer was doing and being brave enough to 'have a go'. She wanted a download or an upgrade, something instant and metamorphic. If she could have taken a pill and crawled into a chrysalis to emerge the next day as an assertive new version of herself, she would have taken it. Who cared whether it had been fully tested, or approved by some medical advisory board; she would swallow it without hesitation.

She had always been a people pleaser. From as young as she could remember she had delighted in a *wow* or a *well done* from her parents. After her father died, she grabbed the opportunity to help her mum cope, feeling less empty with every *Thank you, sweetheart* and *Isn't she a good girl?* But by the time she reached secondary school she realized trying to please everyone was a handicap. She never felt able to say what she wanted or what she thought or even just no. It left her feeling like she wasn't really there. Her friends asserted their personalities and their preferences with pride. They bravely announced who they fancied or what music they liked while she just nodded and went along with the majority, scared to say something wrong or ridiculous.

'I could never get up there like that,' said the blonde girl as the meeting ended. She nodded towards the volunteer who'd 'had a go' and was now receiving pats on the back from a small group of older students at the front of the room.

'Me neither,' said Scarlett, desperate to escape before anyone asked her to be brave.

'I'm Melanie.'

‘Scarlett.’

‘I like your necklace.’

‘Oh, thanks.’ Scarlett touched the thin gold chain with a heart pendant that her friend Tracey had bought her for her last birthday.

‘I used to have one similar that my nan gave me but I lost it. I’m such a scatterbrain. What are you studying?’ she added, because this was one of the mandatory three questions you asked as a new student, along with *Where are you from?* and *What A levels did you do?*

‘Accounting and Finance. First year.’

‘Nice. I’m doing Geography. First year too. I’m not sure I like it though. I might try to change.’

‘What to?’ Scarlett was intrigued. She didn’t know changing your degree subject was an option.

‘Oh I don’t know. I’m also really indecisive.’ Melanie giggled and her cheeks reddened a touch. ‘Maybe I should try Accounting and Finance.’

They walked out side by side. Scarlett tried to think of something interesting to ask her.

Melanie waved to a group of girls already in the hallway. It was midday on Saturday so the student union was fairly quiet, most of its population either nursing hangovers or playing sports.

‘A few of us are going to Albert Dock for a milkshake. A new parlour’s opened up. Do you want to come along?’

‘Oh no, sorry, but thanks.’

‘Please, it’s always nice to have new people to talk to. And they make milkshakes out of Mars Bars. How cool is that?’

Scarlett smiled. That did sound cool. She had no plans and it was a sunny day. Plus Melanie looked so keen for her to go along and she did need to make friends.

‘Sure. OK. If you’re sure the others won’t mind.’

‘Of course they won’t.’ Melanie linked arms with her. ‘The more the merrier. Come on.’



*Day 3*

Lucas George came into the office first thing to meet Bloom and Jameson as arranged. He was a short guy of stocky build, with rosy cheeks and blond hair cropped close to his scalp. When Bloom first met him she had found his crumpled shirt and scuffed trainers concerning. But her worry was unfounded. Despite appearances, he was sharp, organized and efficient in all manner of digital investigation work and had quickly become an essential part of their team.

‘Lucas, my man,’ said Jameson, patting George on the back. ‘How the devil are you?’

Once the men had swapped a few pleasantries, Bloom took her seat and kicked off the discussion.

‘So far we haven’t had any luck finding out where Scarlett is or how we can get in touch with her. Artemis won’t release any membership details over the phone, which is fair enough, but I understand she has no digital footprint to speak of either, Lucas?’

‘Only a shell persona. As I told Marcus, she is registered to vote at her childhood home but never has, she has an old Facebook account without any recent activity, and she isn’t on Instagram, Twitter or LinkedIn. I checked

some of the old platforms such as Friends Reunited and MySpace but again nothing.’

‘That’s unusual for someone of her generation, isn’t it? Can we learn anything from her Facebook page?’

‘It looks fairly standard for a young girl in her late teens at the time. She didn’t post much – mainly pictures of her with her friends and the odd cheesy inspirational quote.’ He brought up Scarlett’s page and scrolled through the images on his iPad so Bloom and Jameson could see. The quotes she had posted included: ‘When you think about quitting, think about why you started’, ‘No one can make you feel inferior without your consent’ and ‘Use your smile to change the world. Don’t let the world change your smile.’ Then there were a handful of pictures of girls with arms around each other, smiling into the camera.

‘Scarlett is the red-head on the left in this picture.’

Bloom took the iPad and enlarged the photograph. Scarlett was the kind of girl it would be hard to describe. She was of average height, with straight shoulder-length auburn hair; not as pretty or glamorous as her friends; neither skinny nor curvy. ‘The quotes might imply she was feeling disillusioned with things but she seems happy enough in the photos. Anything further?’

‘Only that she doesn’t appear to have an email address or mobile phone registered in her name. I found a Hot-mail account she’d had around the time she emailed her uncle but it’s no longer active. I can dig a little deeper to see if I can get into the Artemis membership database or look for bank accounts, loans and the like?’

‘Hold fire for a bit,’ said Jameson, knowing that this next level of investigation was not entirely legal. ‘There’s nothing to suggest Scarlett is in trouble. She may just be one of the few who choose to stay off grid. What about the Artemis group? What do we know about them?’

Bloom answered. ‘Their website describes them as a women’s networking group and campaign. Their founder and CEO, a woman called Paula Kunis, is building quite the reputation as an influencer. She has spoken at over twenty international conferences on improving gender diversity in businesses and even did a TED Talk in 2017 in light of the Me Too movement.’

‘Was it any good?’ said Jameson. ‘I take it you watched it?’

‘She was impressive. She’s clearly a lady who’s good on her hind legs, as my father would have said.’

‘She also has over thirty thousand Twitter followers,’ said Lucas, looking up from his iPad.

Bloom continued: ‘She was born in America. Came over in the early two thousands according to her bio and worked for a large hotel chain on reception. After a short while she started an in-house support group for the women with low-income jobs she saw as being unfairly treated, such as cleaners and waitresses. She then convinced senior management to rewrite their policies to ensure equality for all and give women access to professional and managerial careers.’

‘Surely most companies were doing that by then anyway?’ said Jameson.

‘You’d be surprised,’ said Bloom. ‘There’s a lot of unconscious bias influencing how companies operate.’