Prologue

Teresa

'Time for sleep, boys and girls.'

Padre Armando's breath rises like smoke in the freezing air as he speaks.

'Now, close your eyes and listen to the Lord's Prayer. Let us ask Him to keep and protect us on this journey.'

Gure Aita, zeruetan zarena,
Santu izan bedi zure izena,
Etor bedi zure erreinua
Egin bedi zure nahia.

While the priest recites the prayer, his voice a ghostly murmur, I turn on my side and look out into the night sky, its black edges merging with the swollen sea. From this position I can hear the ship creak and groan as it moves through the waters, like a bow slowly scratching the strings of a cello. The sound reminds me of the folk songs my sister used to sing in the town square back home.

Home. The thought of it makes my heart hurt. How can it be that I am here, in the middle of the ocean, miles from everything that is familiar, all that I love?

As the prayer comes to an end and Padre Armando's voice falls silent, I think once more of my sister, but this time she is leading me through a crowd of people. We pass a newsstand and I catch the headline on the front of the morning paper: *THEY STEAL OUR CHILDREN*. I want to ask her if that is true. Is that what is going to happen to me? But I do not speak, as she has instructed me to stay silent. 'I will do the talking, little one, do you understand?' She is dressed in a dirty old overcoat and scuffed shoes, while her long, chestnut hair is unwashed and falls in messy tendrils round her face. It is odd to see my sister, who has always been so particular about her appearance, in this state. But these are different times, desperate times, and her black eyes blaze as she storms into the processing centre and thrusts me into the arms of a plump female volunteer. 'You must take her,' she pleads, her fingertips digging into my shoulder blades. There are some questions then, muffled voices that I cannot quite make out. 'Eight years old,' I hear her say. The woman looks at me suspiciously. 'Eight years old?' she repeats, taking in my tiny frame. 'You sure?'

The deck beneath me is rough and uncomfortable and I shift position, turning on my left side, away from the sea. I look at the sleeping children lying around the deck and the thin outline of Padre Armando as he sits upright in the corner by the lifeboats, his hands clasped together, his head bowed, the gold of his crucifix glinting in the moonlight.

'Come back for me,' I whisper into the freezing night air, hoping that my voice will carry across the waves, over the sea. That, wherever my sister is now, she will hear it and know that I need her. 'Take me home.'

I shake off the blanket and tiptoe across the deck. When I reach the side of the ship I stand and look out across the black water, listening for any sound, any sign that she has heard my cry. All my life, my big sister has been there for me, has swept me up in her arms when I am scared, come running when I call, soothed me with her calm voice when bad dreams wake me in the night. Yet now, as I stand here, my hands clasping the railings, the only sound I hear is the thick, black silence of night. For the first time in my life, she has not come to my aid when I call, and I realize with a sickening dread that this is it. This ship, these strangers, are all I have now.

I stagger back towards the sleeping children and collapse in a heap at the feet of Padre Armando.

'Try to rest now, child,' he says, his voice almost swallowed by the fierce wind. 'There is nothing to fear. You are safe.'

But I know, as I close my eyes and let the motion of the waves lull me to sleep, that I will never feel safe again.

1

Corinne

PRESENT DAY

'The ambulance has arrived at the house, Anthony. The paramedics will be with you any moment now.'

I breathe a deep sigh of relief as the red dot that has been flashing across the screen for the past five minutes finally settles on the address.

'Oh, thank God. Thank God,' says the man on the other end of the line, his voice trembling. 'And thanks, Corinne. For everything. I couldn't have done this without you.'

I have spent ten minutes talking this young man through CPR for his mother, who had collapsed with a suspected heart attack. He was so panic-stricken at first, I didn't think he would be able to perform the procedure. There was also the added stress of a child screaming in the background. Yet, thankfully, using all my skills as an emergency call handler, I managed to calmly coax this man into focusing on his mother until he could detect a pulse.

'You're welcome, Anthony. All part of the service.'

I hear the voices of the paramedics in the background

before Anthony clicks off and my shoulders loosen. The ambulance got there in time. Anthony's mother is in good hands now.

As I wait for the next call, I lean back in my seat and look around at my colleagues, who are dotted about the room. There is something about the dispatch centre – the broad, windowless room, the weighted silence broken in sporadic bursts by the voices of the operators – that makes me feel calm. No matter what might be going on in my life, when I get to my pod and put my headphones on, see the familiar red lines streaking across the map of London on the computer monitor in front of me, I enter what we refer to as 'the zone'. For the duration of the twelve-hour shift, we cannot see the outside world. We have no idea whether it is night or day, warm or cold, stormy or still out there. Our thoughts and focus are directed solely on the disembodied voices on the other end of the line.

I see Ed, leaning forward in his seat, talking urgently into his headset. Ed has only been here a few months, but he was thrown in at the deep end with a major traffic accident on his first night. That's the thing about this job: nothing can prepare you for what's going to come in. It's how you deal with it that proves whether you are going to cut it long-term. Ed, though visibly terrified, kept his nerve and handled the emergency with a calm efficiency that impressed even the old-timers like me.

I've been here ten years – my first job after university – and during that time have been privy to the worst that life can throw at a person. I have heard people gasping for breath, listened as anguished relatives tried to resuscitate their loved ones, heard screams so blood-curdling they penetrated my bones. Yet I manage to keep all those horrors contained in my pod. I never take them home.

That is because, if I let my emotions take over, I will sink. Ever since I was a child, I have been able to tap into the feelings of those around me. At school the air would buzz with the other children's thoughts, their happiness, their pain, their insecurities. It was so intense I would sometimes put my hands over my ears to try to block it all out. As I grew up, I learned how to deal with those feelings, how to keep calm and centre myself so I wouldn't become overwhelmed. Over time, this centring has become a kind of shield I place between myself and others, to the point where most people think that I am aloof or impassive. Little do they know that, if I allowed my true nature to come through, then I would be so overcome with the emotions of the people on the other end of the line I wouldn't be able to do my job. Better to have people think me cold than have that happen.

After a hysterical sous chef in Clapham suffering third-degree burns and a motorbike accident on Streatham Hill, my headset falls momentarily silent, and I feel my

stomach rumble. Time for my break. I gesture to Ed then take myself off to the staffroom.

Sitting on the soft green beanbag chair, my usual spot, tucked away in the far corner of the room, I peel open my plastic takeaway box and greedily devour mouthfuls of cold – yet delicious – dosa, the hit of potato, pancake, mustard seeds and spice sending me into a temporary food coma. While I eat, I take my phone and go through my inbox, skim-reading, and make a mental note of the HR email outlining the details of an upcoming staff training day in Kent. Then I click on an online petition calling for the preservation of an ancient yew tree located in an East London churchyard, sent by my Uncle Robin at midnight. I smile as I read his accompanying message: *It would be much appreciated if you could add your name to stop the heartless bastards destroying yet another piece of London's history. Oh, and a gentle reminder that my new series starts this Thursday at 9 pm . . .*

All signed, I hastily reply. *Working night shifts this week but will watch the first episode on catch-up. Can't wait to see it xx.*

Closing my emails, I pause for a moment to scrape every last crumb from the box, the hungry feeling suddenly replaced with a shiver of adrenalin. Time to get back to it. I go to wash out the box and am just trying to locate a clean tea towel when my phone starts vibrating. My chest tightens. Calls at this time of night are never a good sign. I yank the phone out of my pocket and see the words *Unknown Number* flash onto the screen.

'Hello,' I say, placing the box on the draining board to air-dry.

There is a hissing sound on the other end of the line, like the static on an old recording. The person must be in an area with poor signal.

'Hello. Who is this?'

I can hear a woman speaking. Her voice sounds muffled, as though she is in a windowless room, or trapped underground.

'Please, you have to help me,' she cries. 'You have to find my little girl. She's trapped.'

I abruptly switch back into work mode. With the phone pressed tightly to my ear I rush back to my pod.

'It's the big old Georgian house,' she says, her words tumbling out so fast I can barely keep up. 'Rochester Place it's called, you can't miss it. It's hidden away, behind Larkin Road, down the little pathway. It has a bright red door and a magnolia tree in the garden. Telephone number: BAL 672. Please hurry. I think the house might have been hit. There's so much smoke. You have to help her. Do you promise me you will? She's just a little girl. Eleven years old. Just make sure she's okay, will you do that? My name is Mary. Did you get that? Mary.'

'Mary, can you tell me where you are?' I say, wondering if this person is someone I know, a neighbour perhaps. They are all aware that I am a first responder. 'Hello? Are you there?'

With a sick feeling I realize that the line has gone dead. And as it was an unknown number, I can't retrieve the call.

'Everything okay?' says Ed, peering over the top of my screen from his pod. 'What was that?'

'Someone called my mobile,' I say, looking down at the notes I've scribbled. *Child trapped. House has been hit. Smoke. Rochester Place. Georgian house off Larkin Road. Red door. Magnolia tree. BAL 672.* 'A woman. She said there's a child trapped in a house. I'm going to have to call it in.'

'Strange that they called your mobile and not 999,' says Ed, frowning. 'Could it be someone you know?'

'I don't think so,' I say, as I type *Larkin Road* into the system, prompting the computer to automatically dispatch the fire service. 'It came up as an unknown number and I didn't recognize the voice. She had an Irish accent, sounded quite elderly.'

Almost immediately a red dot appears on the map, hovering over the familiar broad stretch of Larkin Road. Zooming in, I see what looks to be a square patch halfway down the road, jutting off to the left. Larkin Road is just minutes from where I live, yet I had no idea it had a side street leading off it.

'Did you say the child was trapped?' says Ed, adjusting his headset. 'If so, you might want to alert the fire service first. It could be an explosion.'

'Already done it,' I say, watching as the dot on the map stops moving.

With a potential gas leak or explosion, the fire service must attend first in order to deem the area safe. I also have an ambulance on standby, waiting for the all-clear. I sit, my eyes fixed on the screen. This part can take a while, and every second feels like a lifetime. But, after just a few minutes, a male voice comes through my headset.

'Hello, it's Ian Turner, fire and rescue. We're at the address and there's nothing here. No house at all – just a back alley. We've done a door-to-door of the houses on Larkin Road that back onto the side street and there's no one here needing assistance. Are you sure you got the right address?'

I look down at my notes.

'The caller said it was a large Georgian house called Rochester Place, just off Larkin Road,' I say, aware of Ed's eyes on me and hoping I didn't mishear the woman. 'She said it had a red door and a magnolia tree in the garden.'

'Well, if there was a house like that here we'd notice it,' he says with a sigh. 'There's just a load of bins and what looks like some sort of compost heap.'

'Are you sure?' I say. 'The caller was very clear and—'

'I am sure, yes,' he says, cutting in with more than a hint of irritation in his voice. 'Now, we're leaving the scene.'

He clicks off, and I lean back in my chair, my heart racing.

'Hoax call,' says Ed, shrugging his shoulders. 'It happens to the best of us.'

I nod my head. He's right, of course. I have dealt with hundreds of hoax calls in my time. This was just the latest. I adjust my headset and try to refocus, try to block out what has just happened, but as I sit, waiting for the next call to come in, all I can hear is Mary's voice: *Please . . . You have to help her . . . She's just a little girl.*

2

Teresa

MAY 1937

'Good morning, my child. It seems that God has blessed us with a calm sea today.'

Padre Armando is standing above me, his face half in shadow. He clutches his crucifix in his hands and begins to mutter a prayer. Beside me, I feel warm, musty-smelling bodies twitching, and I remember, with a sick feeling, where I am.

I woke early, thoughts of home drifting through my mind. While the others slept, I watched as a black cloud crept steadily towards the crescent moon. Above it, a pinprick of light, which may have been a planet, flickered on and off, reminding me of a happy memory from three summers earlier.

It was a June morning. I was five years old and standing with my sister in the window of our small apartment. Outside, the town square was quiet and still – no market that day, not a soul about. It was warm and bright, the sun already strong despite the early hour. Katalin had her Leica camera in her hand, wanting to capture the summer morning light. I asked her how it worked, and

she put it in my hands, explaining how the lens brought all the light rays together into a single point, creating a sharp image. Then, taking the camera from me and placing it carefully on the window seat, she walked over to the mantelpiece and picked up the glass ornament that had been there, in that spot, for as long as I could remember.

'Look at this, little one,' she said, returning to the window. 'This is called a prism. Our father gave it to Mother when they first met.'

I climbed into her arms, inhaling the scent of her: the citrus tang of her perfume, the medicinal herb-like odour of her shampoo, the earthy undertones of her skin.

'Watch what happens when it finds the light.'

I watched as Katalin held the glass aloft. Streaks of rainbow light fractured the glass in a dazzling display.

'Look how the light diffracts,' she said gently. 'How it splits into multiple possibilities. You know, Father used to say that the prism teaches us about life after death.'

Her eyes glistened, but I could not tell whether it was the sharp sunlight or talk of the dead that made them so.

'I like to think that this world is one of many, Teresa,' she said, sighing deeply. 'Like these strands of colour. How wonderful to think that those who have gone before, all those we have loved, may be living still, out in some other dimension alongside ours. And that, one day, those

separate strands will come together again, even for just a moment.'

My sister smiled at me, her dark eyes full of hope and wonder. I reached out towards her, but her face dissolved into the darkness and I was back on the ship, surrounded by sleeping strangers.

'They're serving breakfast below stairs,' says Padre Armando, his voice rousing the other children from their sleep and sending my memory scattering across the deck. 'I recommend you visit the washrooms first.'

My legs wobble as I try to stand. Sleeping in one position on hard wood has left my body feeling heavy and sore. Above me, the sky is almost white, and a pale light envelops the deck, making strange shadows of the children as they yawn and stretch and throw off their blankets. When I get to my feet, I drape my blanket round my shoulders, my fingers brushing against the hexagonal cardboard disc they pinned to my coat at the station, the numbers 2034 stamped in the centre. My name, it seems, was left behind on the station platform at the barriers beyond which Katalin was not permitted, trailing in her wake like steam from a kettle. Gone, like the glint of light inside the glass prism she gave me as she handed me over to Padre Armando. 'Take this and remember what I told you,' she whispered. 'We will be together again very soon. No more than three months, I promise. Now, be brave, little one. Be brave.'

'I can do that,' I tell myself, as I follow Padre Armando

across the deck towards a set of wooden steps. 'I can be brave. For Katalin.'

The area below deck has been transformed into a makeshift dining room. While Padre Armando's group, and several others, had commandeered the upper deck, another set of children and their guardians had found themselves sleeping down here. I saw them on my way to the lavatory before bedtime, dozens of children crammed top-to-toe on mattresses that covered every inch of the floor. But now the mattresses have been stacked up against the wall, and rows of tables have taken their place. The air smells of burnt cooking fat, eggs and body odour. The other children hurry towards the food and I reluctantly follow. But as I get closer, the trays of grey, fatty bacon and watery tomatoes churn my stomach.

I turn to go back up the stairs to the deck but am stopped in my tracks by the tall, thin figure of Padre Armando.

'Come now, child,' he says, guiding me back towards the serving hatch. 'You must eat. We still have a long journey ahead of us.'

As a woman in pink, her hair scraped severely back, slops the food onto a plate, I think of Katalin's words at the station: *be brave*. And though my eyes are watering already at the thought of another day without her, I tell myself that I cannot fear a plate of food, no matter how disgusting it looks, not when my sister is facing untold dangers for the sake of our country.

'Good girl,' says Padre Armando, nodding at my piled plate, as I join him and the rest of the children at the table. 'Now, let us give thanks for the bounty God has placed before us this morning.'

As he says grace, I look around the table at the others. There are four girls and two boys. The girl sitting next to me, hollow-cheeked, with cropped auburn hair, looks close to my age. The others seem older. One of the boys already has the beginnings of a moustache, though he can only be fifteen at the very most. Katalin told me the authorities would only take children between the ages of five and fifteen. I have barely spoken to any of them, so terrified was I when Padre Armando pulled me from Katalin's arms at the station barriers. Crying so much I could just see a blur of colour as the priest introduced me to the rest of his charges in the cramped train compartment. I sat with my head down for the entire journey, only looking up when Padre Armando said we had arrived at the docks. When we boarded the ship, I kept my eyes lowered. If I saw the ship and the children and the volunteers, then it would be real. If I kept my eyes on my black patent-leather shoes, the shoes Katalin had bought for me on my last birthday, then I could pretend that none of this was happening, that it was all a bad dream.

Now, in the cold light of morning, I can see that the other children are as confused and wary as I am. The girl next to me hasn't looked up from her plate of bacon

and eggs, and I can hear sniffling coming from one of the older girls. The sound makes me feel uncomfortable, as my own tears are never far away and I am trying my best to be brave.

'You have finished?' says Padre Armando, as I push my plate away. 'There is still some bacon there.'

He points at a congealed piece of fatty meat nestled against a soggy pile of scrambled eggs. I nod my head and am about to take my plate back to the serving hatch when the boy with the moustache leans over and grabs it from my hand. I sit for a moment and watch as he shovels the food into his mouth. I remember what Katalin told me when we arrived in Bilbao after travelling for two days – how the city had been ravaged by food shortages, its people half-starved.

'Princess. Thinks she is better than us. Probably one of them . . . a dirty Nationalist.'

I look up and see the boy who took my food sneering at me. He shakes his head and raises his middle finger. Padre Armando puts his hand on the boy's arm and whispers something in his ear. The boy nods then continues to eat. I want to leave the table, but I dare not move.

How can he think that I am a Nationalist? For someone like me, there can be nothing more damning than to be thought of as one of them. Don't they realize that I am the sister of the fearless Katalin Garro, the woman who would lay down her life to protect the Republican

government – the legally elected government – from Franco and his fascists? Then I remember that here on this ship I am just another child in borrowed clothes with a cardboard disc pinned to my coat. No one here knows about my sister or her reputation. While the children eat, I close my eyes and think of the cinnamon buns Katalin used to buy for me from the bakery near my school.

I last went there just a few days before our town was wiped off the face of the earth. I had been sent on an errand by Katalin. She had told me I was to ask José, the baker, for a bag of cinnamon buns. And, though the buns would be warm and delicious, I was not to open the bag until I came home. Katalin made it clear that I should hand her the bag as soon as I got home and I would be allowed a bun as a reward. I had been doing this for a few weeks now, and though I did not really understand why I was not allowed to open the bag, I enjoyed the sense of responsibility. Katalin had entrusted me with this job and I did not want to let her down.

When I arrived that day, a queue was already forming outside the pretty white building with its bright blue shutters. As I drew near, I saw José's handsome face peeping out of the hatch, his mop of black hair, his navy-and-white striped apron smeared with flour. There were lots of people in front of me, but José, spotting me, gestured them to one side. 'Buns for the Garros,' he cried, holding up a brown paper bag.

I could hear the disapproving noises from a couple of women in the queue: what right had Katalin Garro's skinny sister to push in front, to get special attention? Though some of the men removed their caps and stood back to let me through. When I reached the front of the queue, José handed me the bag of buns as usual, but I noticed when I took them from him that his hands were shaking. 'Tell your sister,' he whispered, glancing sideways at the disgruntled women, 'that the largest bun is just for her.'

'Hey, princess.'

I look up and see the moustached boy glaring at me. Padre Armando and the rest of the children have left the table and it is just the two of us.

'Your home was completely flattened, wasn't it?' he says, picking pieces of food out of his teeth with his grubby fingernail. 'I heard there is nothing left of it.'

He stops picking and stares at me, expecting an answer.

'The priest told me where you came from,' he says, flicking a piece of gristle onto the floor. 'The spoilt little girl, looking at me, as though I was some sort of beggar, some shit on her shoe. But you're just like the rest of us. At least my city is still standing.'

He starts to laugh raucously, and I turn my face away, recalling the words of a couple standing behind us at the processing centre in Bilbao.

Nothing left? Are you serious?

As the grave. My sister is an ambulance driver. She was one of

the first on the scene . . . said it was like gazing into the bowels of Hell . . .

The woman spoke the name of my town then, and tutted sadly, as though she were speaking of the dead. I looked up at Katalin, who was holding my hand. She smiled, as if to reassure me, but her eyes were sad. We both knew that we would never see our home again, never walk along the cobbled streets of our town eating warm cinnamon buns, never dance to folk songs in the square, or stand at the window of our apartment and watch the morning sun rise above the terracotta rooftops. It was gone, swept away like crumbs from the bakery floor. Our lovely town was no longer home; it was just a name, a name that had horrified the world.

'Guernica.'

I turn back to the boy. His eyes are blazing.

'I can't believe you come from there,' he says, shaking his head. 'My uncle said it would have been a miracle if anyone survived. Tell me, did you see the planes approach? They say it was the Condor Legion, sent from Germany to help Franco. Is that true? Did you see them? What about dead bodies? I hear there were arms and legs flung around the market square, so many they couldn't tell which were from the butcher's stall and which were human.'

'Stop!' I cry, jumping up from the table. 'Leave me alone, do you hear me? Just leave me alone.'

I run up the wooden steps towards the deck, my heart pounding in my chest.

When I reach the top, I am almost thrown backwards by a gust of wind. I cling on to the rail and try to steady myself as I step out onto the deck. A thick fog hangs in the air, making it difficult to see where I am going. The ship tilts to one side and I sway with it, feeling the morsel of greasy bacon and eggs I ate earlier rising forcefully back up my throat. A wave crashes over the side, drenching me in seawater.

Wiping my eyes, I try to locate the place where Padre Armando put our mattresses. All around me, scenes of panic, confusion and chaos are unfolding. Children screaming, bodies tossed about the deck like rag dolls, smashing against the sides with sickening thuds. The ship tilts to one side and I sway with it, nausea rising inside of me.

I stagger towards the centre of the deck, where, I hope, there is less chance of being thrown over the side by the roiling waves. Behind me, someone screams: 'We're being attacked. He has sent his ships to sink us. The Lord save us. We're going to die.'

I was told I would be safe on the ship, that no harm could come to me once we had departed Spain. Now it looks like I will die here, in the middle of this wild, angry ocean, and I am all alone. Then, I feel someone's hand on my arm, and I am hauled to the ground.

I look up and see a girl with cropped auburn hair and

large brown eyes. I recognize her from the breakfast table. The thin girl. Her name is Ana. As another wave hits the deck, she pulls me to her chest.

'I'm scared,' I cry, pressing my face into the soft wool of her cardigan. 'I don't want to die.'

'Shh now,' she whispers in my ear. 'We're not going to die.'

3

Corinne

PRESENT DAY

Mary's desperate voice is still echoing in my head as I cross Garratt Lane and make my way to Tulsi, the twenty-four-hour café in Tooting run by my wife and sister-in-law.

When I checked my phone at the end of my shift, it showed that the call had lasted just forty-five seconds. Yet it had seemed much longer than that. Was Ed right? Had it just been a prank? It certainly seemed that way, but I've been in this job long enough to spot the hoaxes: the time-wasters who think it's funny to call 999 and fake an emergency, or the drunk revellers who ask if we can send an ambulance as it will get there quicker than a taxi. These calls are the scourge of the service. Not only do they cost money, but they put lives in peril, as real emergencies are left hanging while we attend to the jokers. I'm mortified to think that I fell for a prank and sent a full fire crew out – and with Ed watching me too.

So why do I have this certainty at my core that Mary's call was genuine? She called my mobile. How would a

prankster get hold of that number? And there was no sense that this was someone playing around. I could hear the terror in Mary's voice. It was palpable. *Please . . . You have to help her.* The words burn into me as I walk into the café. I'm so preoccupied I barely notice the boy hurtling towards me until it's too late.

'It weren't my fault,' he cries, jabbing a bony elbow into my side which almost knocks me over. 'It was him. He pushed me.'

He points behind him to where a group of teenagers – three shaven-headed boys with surly expressions, and a smirking girl with blue streaks in her black hair – are standing next to an upturned table, a pile of broken crockery at their feet. It is then I notice my sister-in-law, Rima, standing by the counter, her arms folded across her chest, her white apron stained with yellow turmeric patches.

'I don't care whose fault it was. I won't have you disturbing my customers,' says Rima, moving back to let my wife, Nidra, through with a dustpan and brush. 'If you can't behave yourselves then you're not welcome here. Now go on. Out.'

She rushes at the boy, who looks pale and thin in his oversized blazer, his close-cut ginger hair accentuating razor-sharp cheekbones, and marches him to the door. The others follow suit, their heads bowed. Only the girl is still smiling.

'I said it weren't my fault,' repeats the boy, turning to

Rima, his voice shaking with anger. 'What right have you got to throw me out, eh? I'm waiting for an answer.'

His face is just inches from hers. I move towards them, ready to intervene if necessary, but I have forgotten how formidable my sister-in-law can be in these situations.

'Hey, tough lad,' she says, putting her hand out to ward him off, 'I don't get intimidated by skinny kids whose voices haven't broken yet. Now get out or you really will be in trouble.'

The boy staggers back while the others explode into fits of laughter.

'Ha, your balls haven't dropped,' shrieks one of them as they tumble out onto the street. 'That's what she meant.' The boy glares at Rima then shuffles out, slamming the door behind him.

'What was all that about?' I say, helping Nidra right the table and place the broken crockery into a bin bag.

'Just daft kids,' says Rima, shaking her head. 'What do you expect? Guzzling fizzy drinks at this time of day. They go mad with sugar.'

'It was a bit mean of you to say that to the skinny one,' says Nidra, tying the handle of the bin bag into a thick knot. 'Poor kid will never hear the end of it.'

'Listen, anyone who sticks their face in mine like that is going to be dealt with firmly,' says Rima, marching into the kitchen. 'Alexa, play "Smooth Operator".'

As Sade's soothing voice trickles through the café,