

Prologue

I watch Yasmeen sleep, her breath shallow, her mouth slightly parted.

She is so beautiful.

Wherever she goes people stare at those eyes, heavy-lidded, flecked with amber.

At mosque, when she takes her usual place, her hijab secured tightly under her chin, I can see her lips move. They are garnet red as she murmurs her prayers.

Here, on the bed, I am dazzled by her all over again and I nearly change my mind. There's still time. I could call an ambulance and they would inject her with drugs, attach her to machines.

I pull out my phone and my finger hovers over the number nine.

But no. I have made up my mind.

There was a time when I would have done anything for this girl and she would have done the same for me. In this cruel world we stood shoulder to shoulder against those who would torment us. When I lost hope she held my face in her hands.

'God will provide.'

I wonder then why she has chosen to wreck everything. To bring this family to its knees. To crush me like a can.

Her chest rattles and I picture myself sitting here in Yasmeen's bedroom, watching this girl I have loved so well. Watching her die.

Do I still love her?

With all my heart.

Yet I am immobile as her life creeps away.

She lets out a tiny gasp and a pink bubble forms on her lips.

When it bursts I know it is over and through my tears I whisper the words she cannot say for herself.

'I bear witness that there is no God but Allah.'

Chapter One

May 2009

'Un-bloody-believable.'

Lilly Valentine leaned against the wall and sighed. 'I paid for all this to be up and running last week and I still can't make outgoing calls.'

The telephone engineer was lying on the floor, unscrewing a socket. 'There must be a glitch in your system,' he said.

'A glitch?'

'That's right. There are often problems with the fibre optics.'

'Listen, mate, I'm trying to run a law firm, not sit for a degree in telecommunications.' Lilly heaved her backside into a chair. 'Can you fix it?'

'I'll need a new circuit board,' said the engineer. 'Can I come back tomorrow?'

Lilly shook her head in despair.

'Try not to worry,' the man laughed. 'Teething troubles are routine.'

Lilly smoothed her hand over her pregnant belly and

looked around at the new offices of Valentine & Co. Unopened post was spewed across the doormat, files littered every seat, the espresso machine still in its box and the potted plant had already died.

‘Trust me,’ she said. ‘Nothing in my life is ever routine.’

As the engineer stood to leave Lilly leaned over and opened a box of headed notepaper. The smell of fresh ink escaped.

The engineer looked over Lilly’s shoulder. “Valeriam and Co.,” he read. ‘Ain’t that a type of sleeping pill?’

Lilly closed her eyes tight and hoped this was all a bad dream. When she opened them everything was exactly the same.

‘Un-bloody-believable.’

The heat of the smoke makes Ryan’s lungs sting but he holds it in and counts to five.

Only girls can’t take their weed. And batty boys.

Lailla wags her finger. ‘You gonna get caught with that.’

Ryan laughs in a cloud of grey. ‘You worried about me?’

‘I think you a big enough boy to be looking after yourself, Ryan Sanders,’ she winks.

Naz and some of the other boys whistle but Ryan knows Lailla is only messing. She flirts with all the boys at school but everyone knows she’s going with Sonny. He’s eighteen and picks Lailla up in a black Merc. Personalised reg plate and everything. Respect to him ’cos Lailla’s well fit.

Ryan, Lailla and their friends meet here every lunchtime, on the grass between the lower school

playground and the boundary wall. The headmistress calls it the Orchard Green but there ain't no trees or nothing. There used to be a climbing frame but someone fell off and broke his shoulder so they took it down. It gets muddy sometimes but it's the furthest point from the classrooms that they can get without breaking the rules. Not that Ryan gives a shit about rules, but some of the others are a bunch of pussies, innit.

The girls giggle and apply lip gloss while the boys smoke and chat them up. Ryan sometimes deals a few baggies. Nothing major.

'Who's your friend?' asks Ryan, nodding at a girl hovering in the background.

He's seen her around school, though she's not in any of his sets, except in art. She's got long shiny hair to her waist and a shy smile. He tries to catch her eye but she's looking anywhere but at him. She don't seem like the type to hang with Lailla, to be honest, and he wonders why she ain't indoors revising or some shit.

Lailla grins, showing her sharp white teeth. 'Why you asking?'

'You know me,' says Ryan, 'I like to get to know all the pretty girls, innit.'

Lailla smiles again but her eyes narrow. She don't like anyone else to get the attention. Likes to be top dog, she does.

'Aasha,' she pulls the girl by the arm, 'come say hi to Ryan.'

The girl flushes and checks the ground.

'So you can't speak now?' Lailla laughs. 'Can't look a boy in the eye?'

There's something cruel in Lailla's voice, like she enjoys her friend's embarrassment. Girls are like that, though, thick as thieves one minute, bitching about each other the next.

Aasha lifts her chin as though it were made of concrete or something. When she finally, painfully, meets his gaze he can see his reflection in her eyes. 'Hi.'

'She's a good Muslim girl,' Lailla tells him, 'so don't be getting no ideas.'

Ryan laughs. A good Muslim girl. He's heard that like, what, a million times before.

At least half the kids at school are Muslim, and yeah, they can chat in Urdu or whatever and they don't make a big thing of Christmas, but they ain't that different. Sometimes there's trouble, like that time the Mehmet brothers got the school play stopped, but Ryan stays out of it. You can't judge a person on whether they're white, black, brown or fucking green, can you? And girls are girls, whether they cover their heads or not, innit.

'A good Muslim girl,' Ryan makes a face at Lailla. 'Is that what you are in the back of Sonny's car?'

Lailla gives him a playful slap. 'Be nice.'

He approaches Aasha, his head cocked to one side. 'I'm always nice.'

Where else would one tombola ticket cost five pounds? Lilly shook her head. Only at Manor Park, her son's prep school, would such a thing be considered reasonable.

'How many do you need?' asked Penny Van Huysan, one of the mothers running the stall.

Penny, like most of the Manor Park parents, was minted. Her idea of budgeting was to cut down the housekeeper to four days a week.

'Who's in charge of the tea tent?' asked Lilly. 'Ronnie Biggs?'

Penny rolled her eyes. She and Lilly were long-standing friends. Despite the Yummy Mummy appearance and her addiction to Harvey Nicks, Penny was kind and honest, and often provided respite care to disabled children whose own parents were on the brink of collapse.

'Have you seen the prizes?'

Lilly scanned the table. Diptyque Candles, a Cartier fountain pen, vouchers for dinner at The Ivy.

'Very nice,' Lilly nodded, 'but nothing I need as much as five quid in my purse.'

'Every penny goes to disadvantaged children.'

Lilly patted her stomach. 'Which is exactly what this one will be if I chuck away my hard-earned cash.'

Lilly felt strong arms circling her waist and smelled the familiar mix of lemon and leather that meant Jack was near.

'Is this one giving you grief?' Jack asked Penny.

'Pleading poverty as usual,' said Penny.

Lilly leaned into Jack's embrace. 'We can't all be married to millionaires.'

'In my next life I'm coming back as a hedge fund manager,' said Jack.

Lilly nuzzled his neck. 'Don't you bloody dare.'

He touched her pregnant belly gently. 'How's Frank?'

'Frank?' Penny raised an eyebrow.

'Don't go there,' Lilly warned.

Jack had spent weeks trying to engage her in naming discussions. Lilly flatly refused.

‘Then I’ll choose myself,’ he’d said.

‘Not interested,’ Lilly had replied.

‘Frank,’ he’d declared. ‘A good solid name.’

‘The only Frank I ever knew ended up doing a five stretch for attacking his neighbour with an axe.’

‘I thought you weren’t interested,’ he’d retorted.

‘Come on, Jack.’ Penny waved a book of tickets. ‘You must have the luck of the Irish.’

Jack laughed. ‘That’s the lot from the Emerald Isle. Trust me, there’s nothing lucky about Belfast.’

‘You managed to tie Lilly down, didn’t you?’ said Penny. ‘You must be doing something right.’

Jack kissed Lilly’s cheek, winked at Penny and pulled out his wallet. ‘Och, give us a couple then.’

‘You didn’t have to do that,’ said Lilly as she and Jack wandered around the May Fayre.

The school grounds lent themselves to the resolute Englishness of the celebrations, children streaking across the extensive lawns, gobbling ice creams. Blossom blew in the spring breeze like confetti. A white marquee seemed at home next to the immaculate cricket pitch.

Jack shrugged. ‘A copper’s wage may not be six figures but I’m above the breadline.’

‘Unlike this struggling solicitor,’ Lilly laughed.

‘We’ll get by.’

‘We’ll have to,’ said Lilly. ‘I can’t even get the sodding phones to work.’

‘Good,’ said Jack.

‘Good?’

‘Haven’t I been saying all along that you should wait until after the baby’s born to set up shop?’

Lilly rolled her eyes.

Jack had made his feelings abundantly clear. *Ad nauseam*.

But she wasn’t some chicken on an egg. As much as she wanted this baby, and imagined little fingers curled around her own, she couldn’t be expected to sit around all day incubating.

‘I worked right up to the week before I had Sam,’ she said.

‘You weren’t forty then,’ Jack replied.

Lilly gave him a playful punch on the arm and anticipated one in return when she felt Jack stiffen. She followed his eye line and saw Sam and his dad walking towards them. Things had been tricky in the past between Jack and David. Hell, things had been tricky between Lilly and David. Her ex-husband had a talent for winding everyone up.

‘Hey big man,’ Lilly called to her ten-year-old son.

Sam was wearing a straw hat garlanded with flowers and ribbons.

‘I’m loving that look,’ said Jack.

‘It’s for morris dancing,’ said David.

‘And there was me thinking it was his rugby kit,’ said Jack.

Lilly kicked Jack’s ankle. For Sam’s sake, a truce had been called and they had each agreed to be as civil as possible.

‘It looks great, Sam,’ she said.

'It looks totally lame,' Sam scowled. He glanced at another group of boys in similar attire. 'People will think I'm with those dorks.'

'Still, you've a good chance of being crowned May Queen,' said Jack.

Sam put up a fist but couldn't resist a laugh.

'Can Sam have tea with you, David?' Lilly asked. 'I've got to see a man about a phone.'

He shook his head. 'Sorry. I've got to collect Cara and Fleur from baby massage.'

Lilly felt heat rising up her neck. David's girlfriend, Cara, and their child always seemed to take priority and it infuriated her. Truce or not, she opened her mouth to remind David that he had two children.

'I'll take him back to the cottage with me,' said Jack. 'You're cool with that, aren't you, Sam?'

Lilly mouthed her thanks.

'Can we call at the shop for crisps?' asked Sam.

'Sure,' said Jack.

'And in the baker's for a cake?'

'Why not?'

David pointed to Lilly's bump. 'I suspect you won't be following the school of firm parenting, Jack.'

Lilly gave her ex-husband a cold stare. 'I'll settle for the school of just being around.'

Aasha knows she should be listening to Mr Markson. Maths is her worst subject. She'll definitely get As in everything else. Maybe even A*s in geography and art. But maths has always puzzled her. Who really cares how you work out the average score on dice? And why would

you ever need to calculate the average speed of a train from London to Inverness? She'd been to Scotland once for a cousin's wedding and it had taken eight hours in the car to get there. She and her brothers had bickered most of the way, and she'd been sick in a lay-by near Birmingham, but no one had asked her to work out their average speed.

But as her dad is constantly reminding her, she needs to get at least a B.

'Or no good university will even look at you, and what then?'

What then, indeed.

She tries to drag her attention back to the lesson but in seconds it's wandered back to where it was before. Ryan Sanders.

Aasha can't believe she's giving him head space. He's such a loser, in the bottom sets for everything. He'll be lucky to scrape any GCSEs, never mind a good grade in maths. The only thing he's any good at is art, and then he doesn't turn up most of the time. Not that she's noticed him. Or even cares.

'An ASBO kid,' her dad would call him.

Not that Ryan has an ASBO, or at least not one that Aasha knows about. But he's that type. A bad boy.

'Bet I know who you're thinking about,' whispers Laila.

Aasha feels the heat creep around the base of her throat. 'I'm not thinking about anyone.'

Laila giggles. 'So why are you writing his name all over your notebook?'

Aasha looks down and gasps. She's doodled Ryan's name all down the margin.

'Your brothers will kill you,' says Lailla.

Aasha turns over the page and smooths it down.
'Shut up, Lailla.'

She forces her eyes back to the white board but she can still hear Lailla laughing – just like she can still see Ryan's name through the paper.

'Any chance of a coffee?'

The engineer was once again prone on the brand-new carpet in Lilly's office, ferreting about in the socket and squinting like Popeye.

Lilly indicated her espresso maker still in its box, and turned her attention to the printer. She lifted the lid and rooted around. Where the hell did you put the ink?

'You ain't really cut out for this,' the engineer observed.

Lilly bristled. 'Just fix my phone.'

But he was right. Of all the people best suited to organising things, Lilly had to be at the bottom of the list. She was a litigator, a case lawyer, a court-room brawler.

She pulled out her mobile and called her old boss.

'Rupes, it's me.'

Rupinder laughed. 'How's it going?'

Lilly poked suspiciously at her printer. 'It's a bloody nightmare.'

Rupinder gasped. 'Is something wrong with the baby?'

'Oh, that.' Lilly patted her bump. 'No, everything's fine.'

'So what's the matter?'

'I just don't know how you did it.' Lilly looked mournfully around the office. 'How did you run everything so efficiently?'

'Ah,' Rupinder caught her meaning. 'Well, for one thing, I had help.'

Lilly nodded. When she'd worked for Rupes there'd been three partners, a handful of secretaries and the old bull dog on reception, Sheila. Lilly never thought the day would come when she missed the interfering old battleaxe, but at least she could work the photocopier.

'I can't afford to hire anyone,' Lilly said. 'Not until I'm up and running.'

'And how will you manage that on your own?'

Rupinder's voice was, as always, the epitome of calm. Lilly wished she were still around, that they could work together.

'I miss you, Rupes.'

'I miss you too.' Her words were like balm. 'But you still won't manage on your own.'

Lilly pushed out her lip. 'I'll just have to.'

Sam licked the sugar off his fingers and eyed the last doughnut.

'Are you eating that?' he asked.

Jack patted his six-pack. Since the enormity of becoming a dad had hit him, he'd decided the very least he could do was try to stay alive. He'd started slowly, refusing the odd takeaway curry. He'd curbed the beer and upped the running. Before long he began to enjoy his new regime and now ate no wheat, sugar or dairy. It drove Lilly insane.

'Fill your boots.'

He watched Sam devour it, enjoying the pale sunshine streaming in through the kitchen windows.

'What?' Sam spoke through a mouthful of jam and grease.

'You're just like your mum,' said Jack.

Sam frowned. 'Thanks a bunch.'

'Your mother's a fine woman.'

'Whatever.'

Jack shook his head. When had Sam turned from wide-eyed boy to grunter?

'She always does her best for you.'

Sam rolled his eyes. 'I barely see her.'

'All that's going to change,' said Jack. 'What with the baby coming, she's promised to take her foot off the pedal.'

Sam raised an eyebrow.

'Mark my words,' Jack promised, 'things will be different.'

Sam wiped his sticky lips with the back of his hand and stood to leave the room. When he got to the door he turned.

'Just because you want it to be true, Jack, doesn't mean it is.'

When the engineer had finally left, Lilly put her feet up on her desk. Her ankles were swollen to elephantine proportions. She felt like an overstuffed cushion, all lumpy and uncomfortable. She didn't remember being like this when she was pregnant with Sam. Then again, that was over ten years ago and she hadn't yet hit thirty.

When the door opened she remained in the same undignified position. What the hell did the phone guy need now?

'Are you open?'

A young Asian man looked at her doughy toes.

'Not exactly,' said Lilly, and struggled to get upright.

'Oh,' he said, but didn't move.

'Can I make an appointment for you?'

Lilly scabbled around for the diary she'd bought especially. It was leather bound with gold lettering and had a whole page for each day. Her plan was to colour-code clients. She'd promised herself faithfully to avoid criminal and childcare cases: there was no money in either. Red for family, green for property. It was her first step to getting organised. Now, where had she put the damn thing?

She grabbed a biro and a ticket for the dry cleaner's.

'Next Tuesday?' she asked.

The young man stroked his goatee. Lilly could see now that he was in his late teens, nineteen at most. A boy really.

'Thing is, I've got my mum in the car,' he said, 'and we really need to talk to someone.'

'I don't want to be unhelpful,' Lilly smiled, and opened her arms to encompass the chaos, 'but as you can see we're not quite up to speed.'

He ignored the telephone wires that crisscrossed the floor and levelled Lilly in his gaze.

'My sister killed herself and we need to know what to say to the police.'

Lilly watched the woman sitting opposite. Her body was frail, lost in the folds of her plain brown shalwar-Kameez. Her eyes were down cast to arthritic fingers that lay gnarled and motionless in her lap.

'I'm so sorry for your loss.'

The other woman didn't acknowledge Lilly's words but continued staring down at her hands.

Lilly moved two phone directories, a box of manila envelopes and a broken laptop from her desk.

'Sorry for the mess,' she muttered. 'Like I said, we're not really open yet.'

The boy gave a perfunctory nod and drew himself up. Lilly could see he was barely able to contain his tears.

She opened a drawer for a legal pad. Amazingly there was one inside.

'Can I start with your name?'

'Anwar Khan,' he said.

'And your mum?'

Anwar's eyes darted towards the woman beside him. She looked old enough to his grandmother. Strings of thin grey hair escaped from the woollen shawl draped loosely over her head. Her face was lined and worn.

'Deema Khan,' he said.

Even at her name Mrs Khan remained impassive. Lilly assumed she must be in shock.

'And you say your sister died recently?'

'Yes . . .' Anwar coughed to clear his throat. 'She took an overdose.'

'I'm sorry.'

Anwar took a deep breath as if to steady himself. 'It's very important to us that she's buried as soon as possible.'

'I see,' said Lilly.

'Mum is devastated.'

Lilly cast a glance at Mrs Khan, who continued to contemplate her lap. If it were Lilly, and her son had topped himself, she was sure she'd be screaming and

wailing. But then grief did strange things to people, didn't it?

'And what can I do to help?' asked Lilly.

Anwar cleared his throat again. Lilly's heart went out to this young man, so evidently forced to take control of what must be a terrible situation.

'The police still have Yasmeeen.' He paused. 'You know, her body.'

'When did she die?' Lilly asked.

'Two days ago.'

Lilly smiled kindly. Two days wasn't very long in the circumstances, though she understood it must seem like for ever to the family.

'Have they given you any indication when they will release it?'

Anwar shook his head. 'That's why we're here. We want someone to speak to them, make them understand how important this is.'

Lilly looked from Anwar's poor stricken face to his mother, who seemed oblivious to her surroundings. Her heart sank. She had promised Jack that there would be no more stress. No more clients needing to lean on her. She had to think of the baby.

'I'm not sure you actually need a solicitor,' said Lilly. 'Can another family member not help?'

Anwar pushed the heels of his hands into his forehead. 'Mum can't deal with this, Miss Valentine.'

A cursory glance told Lilly he was right. Deema Khan was nothing more than a shell.

'What about your father?'

'He's dead,' said Anwar. 'I'm the head of the family'

so it falls to me to ensure my sister has a proper Islamic funeral.'

Lilly saw that the burden of responsibility was physically weighing the boy down, and sighed.

'Give me the officer's details and I'll see what I can do.'

Lilly parked in a side road and walked towards the police station, wondering why the Khans hadn't chosen a local solicitor. Perhaps they thought she might have more sway with the police. The idea made her laugh out loud. Still, there were plenty of others she could have redirected them to.

She swallowed down her guilt, telling herself this wasn't going to be a difficult case. It wasn't even a proper case. Just a chat with a copper. Absolutely nothing stressful. She knew Jack wouldn't be pleased but if he'd seen the look on Anwar's face he'd understand.

The High Street in Bury Park was throbbing with shoppers laden with carrier bags and trolleys. Grocers piled their stalls high with melons, oranges and custard apples, their skins covered with indentations like a thousand dirty fingerprints. Lilly stopped to smell a plastic container of lemons, their leaves still attached.

'A pound a bowl,' the shopkeeper called from inside.

A woman reached past Lilly for a handful of okra. She was enshrouded in black, even her eyes covered. Only her toes were naked, brown and soft, peeping out from under her burka, in leather flip-flops.

Behind her, a girl of about sixteen rattled into her phone in Urdu. The startling cerise of her hijab matched her nail varnish and handbag. She handed

over a pound and took her fruit without stopping for breath.

The traffic crawled to a standstill as drivers stopped on double yellow lines to collect waiting relatives or chat to friends in the street. The smell of incense wafted through the air.

After the stuffy environment of Manor Park it made Lilly smile. It made her feel alive.

'Saag, very good for baby,' the shopkeeper shouted, waving a bunch of spinach at Lilly.

He wore a beige Afghan-style hat that Lilly was sure he didn't need in the May sunshine.

'How can I resist charm like that?' Lilly laughed.

By the time she arrived at the station she had spinach, ginger, a can of coconut water and an interesting fruit called a pow pow. And it had taken a lot of willpower not to buy a jewelled sari in peacock blue.

At the front desk she looked at the notes she had taken during her meeting with Anwar and pressed the buzzer.

A blonde WPC came into the reception. Her shirt was tucked neatly into her trousers and displayed a tiny waist and flat stomach. Lilly stood as near to the counter as her own pumpkin-sized belly would allow.

The WPC's eyes couldn't resist a flicker towards Lilly's girth. It was quick but Lilly clocked it. When she'd been pregnant with Sam she'd bloomed. The apples of her cheeks had a rosy glow and she'd worn her jeans until the sixth month. This time, she felt like the bloated corpse of a humped-back whale.

'Can I help you?' The WPC's smile was as perky as her chest.

'I'd like to speak to DI Bell,' said Lilly.

'Is he expecting you?'

Lilly tried a smile. 'I called to say I was on my way.'

The policewoman nodded and skipped away. Lilly lowered herself into one of the metal-framed seats. She could feel the steel tubes tattooing their pattern onto her bum.

At last the WPC returned and ushered Lilly through. She gave a puzzled look at Lilly's shopping, shrugged and led her through the corridors at such a spritely pace Lilly could barely keep up. When they arrived at the foot of a steep staircase Lilly let out a groan. Plastic bag in one hand, she grabbed the banister and hauled herself up. By the time she arrived at the inspector's room she was gasping for air.

'Good grief,' said DI Bell, leading Lilly to a chair, 'are you OK?'

Lilly took a deep breath. 'The stairs . . .'

The DI frowned at the WPC. 'Why on earth didn't you show Miss Valentine to the lift?'

'I didn't think.'

DI Bell waved her away with an impatient flap of his hand. 'Young people these days can't put themselves in anyone else's shoes, can they?'

He didn't wait for Lilly's reply but turned instead to pour her a glass of water.

Despite the fact that it was her own wellbeing in discussion, Lilly didn't like his tone with the young woman and gave her an apologetic smile as she left. Everyone had been young once, hadn't they?

'So . . .' DI Bell smiled and displayed perfect, even, white teeth. 'What can I do for you?'

Lilly clamped her lips over her own crooked teeth and wished her mother had made her wear a brace as a child. Sam and all his friends sported matching train tracks; some even had the hugely expensive 'invisible' ones that turned a disgusting brown when they drank Coke. When they came off they would all troop back to their dentists for the obligatory bleaching.

'I understand you're overseeing the death of Yasmeen Khan,' she said.

DI Bell nodded and handed her the glass. His fingers were surprisingly small, the nails clean and buffed.

'I've been instructed by the family to ascertain when you intend to release the body.' Lilly sipped her water. 'I'm sure you understand that they are very keen to bury their loved one.'

DI Bell nodded again. 'It's natural for any family to want to make arrangements.'

His accent was public school. In the past this might have grated, but Sam sounded exactly the same.

'And as Muslims, they would be expected to carry out the necessary prayers and ablutions as soon as possible,' she said.

DI Bell raised an eyebrow. 'And as a police officer I would be expected to carry out an investigation into any death for as long as necessary.'

'I'm not suggesting otherwise,' Lilly smiled. 'I'm just asking you to take into account the family's religion.'

'I will of course take that into account,' DI Bell

straightened his back, 'whilst continuing with my investigation.'

Lilly gathered her patience. She was tired and uncomfortable. Her feet were bursting out of her shoes. Why did coppers have to turn everything into a row?

'The girl killed herself. What exactly is it you need to investigate?'

'I simply want to assure myself that this matter is as cut and dried as it seems,' said DI Bell. 'And I would assume Yasmeen's family would want the same. Whatever their religious affiliations.'

Lilly levelled the man in her sights. Now she listened carefully, his voice was all wrong – too stilted, trying much too hard. He said all the right things but it was as if he were reading from a script.

'Why don't we speak again in two days?' she said. 'I'm sure that will give you ample time.'

The plate of pakora smelled so delicious Lilly's stomach lurched. She could almost taste the chilli and coriander.

'Please,' said Anwar, and gestured for her to take one.

Lilly's smile was rueful. 'Spicy food is a bit of a problem at the moment.'

This was an understatement. A month ago, when Lilly had cracked and had a takeaway delivered, she had barely swallowed three spoonfuls of chicken korma and a nibble of chapatti when the heartburn kicked in and she'd been up all night chugging on a bottle of Gaviscon.

Anwar gave a polite smile and passed the plate back to his mother to be returned to the kitchen.

After a momentary rattling of crockery and cupboard doors she resumed her place next to her son. On a chair to the side of the room sat a man in his early fifties. He wore white cotton kurta pyjamas and kufi cap. He scowled at Lilly from behind a long grey beard.

‘This is my uncle,’ said Anwar.

Lilly held out her hand. ‘Pleased to meet you.’

The man looked from Lilly’s face to her hand and back again before finally taking it in his. ‘Mohamed Aziz.’

Lilly cringed at the sweat on his palm and surreptitiously wiped her hand against her leg.

‘Have you spoken to the police?’ asked Anwar.

‘Yes,’ said Lilly, ‘I met with the officer in the case about half an hour ago.’

“‘Officer in the case?’” Mohamed sneered. ‘The sad passing of Yasmeen is not a case.’

‘It’s a figure of speech,’ said Lilly. ‘The officer who has been assigned to look into Yasmeen’s death.’

Mohamed shook his head, clearly dissatisfied with Lilly’s explanation.

Then the the door burst open and a teenage boy and girl burst in.

Anwar jumped to his feet. ‘What are you two doing back here?’ he said. ‘I told you to stay at Auntie’s for the afternoon.’

The girl straightened her hijab. ‘She felt ill so we came home.’

‘OK then,’ Anwar was still on his feet, ‘why don’t you go upstairs?’

The girl looked at Lilly and knitted her brow.

‘Listen to your brother,’ said Mohamed.

The girl frowned but turned as if she might head for the stairs.

The boy, however, was not so easily persuaded. He squared his shoulders, openly aggressive. 'Who's this?'

'We'll talk about it later,' said Anwar.

The boy folded his arms across his chest. 'I want to talk about it now.'

Anwar pursed his lips but Lilly caught his glance towards his uncle, who gave an almost imperceptible nod. Evidently, Anwar did not make all the decisions for the family.

'Fine. This is Miss Valentine,' said Anwar. 'A solicitor.' He turned to Lilly. 'This is my brother, Raffique Khan.'

'Pleased to meet you,' said Lilly, and held out her hand.

Much like his uncle, the boy looked at her hand as if there was nothing he would less like to do than shake it. But Lilly had dealt with stroppier teenagers than this in her fifteen years of practice and she held fast, her arm outstretched. Eventually he had no option.

'Why do we need a solicitor?' Raffique asked

'You know perfectly well.' Anwar sat down heavily. 'We need the police to release Yasmeen's body.'

'The police are racist scum,' the younger brother spat. 'They will do whatever they can to make us suffer.'

Anwar sighed. 'Don't start all that, Raffy.'

Raffy kissed his teeth. 'So why is my sister's body still in their morgue?'

Anwar looked at Lilly, his eyes pleading for some help.

Lilly cleared her throat. 'As I was trying to explain to your uncle, the police will not close this matter until

they have assured themselves that Yasmeen's death was either suicide or accidental.'

'And how long will that take?' asked Mohamed.

'I've given them two days to review the matter and get back to me.'

Raffy threw his arms in the air. 'I can't believe we're just gonna sit here and agree to that.'

'So what do you suggest?' asked Anwar.

'That we sort this out ourselves,' Raffy shouted. 'Do you honestly think that if it were one of us Yasmeen would just hang around chatting with solicitors?'

Anwar rolled his eyes. 'OK, Raffy, let's go down there and storm the place.'

'Why not, man? Better than leaving everything up to her.' He jabbed a finger at Lilly. 'She's probably in on it with them.'

Anwar groaned. 'She's a lawyer.'

'She's *fakir*.'

Lilly had had enough. In situations like this, feelings ran high – of course they did. She was a past master at letting clients get it all out of their systems. Vulnerable kids often covered their fears with swearing fits and throwing chairs, and who could blame them? The lawyers that represented them knew when to take cover and wait but they also knew when to call a halt to the hysteria.

'Why don't you call them?' she asked.

Raffy's eyes flashed. 'Call who?'

'The police.' Lilly pulled out her mobile and laid it on the table. 'I'm sure they'll be only too happy to tell you what a pain I am. That I am most definitely not in on *anything* with them.'

Raffy glowered at her but Lilly held his gaze. 'Sadly, there's no love lost between me and Her Majesty's constabulary.'

At last Raffy looked away. 'I still don't see why we can't use one of our own.'

'Do we really want someone local sticking their noses into our business?' asked the girl, who Lilly had almost forgotten was there. 'Hasn't Mum suffered enough?'

The girl rubbed her mother's arm and Deema's hand fluttered upwards as if she might touch her daughter. Eventually it just sank back into her lap as if she were incapable of giving or receiving comfort.

'Saira is right,' said Anwar. 'We need to keep this as quiet as possible.'

'Absolutely,' said Mohamed.

Finally, Raffy's shoulders loosened and he let his head drop. 'Fine,' he muttered, 'whatever.'

DI Bell straightened his tie. His appearance mattered to him very much. Being slightly shorter than average he struggled to get shirts and suits off the peg.

He watched the chief superintendent pacing his office and wondered if the Force had the higher ranks' uniforms especially made. When his own time came he would pay his tailor to run one up, just in case.

'I don't have to tell you,' the chief super stalked to the window, 'that the country is in the grip of racial tension.'

'I'm well aware of that, sir,' said DI Bell.

'Then I don't have to tell you how tricky things are in Luton in particular.'

Bell nodded. The local Muslim community was one

of the most disadvantaged in Britain. A feeding ground for the young, the disenchanted and the angry. It was no coincidence that the 7/7 bombers had begun their fateful train journeys from Luton. The redtops had nicknamed Bury Park 'Al-Qaeda Street'.

'You're too young to remember the last serious race riots.' The chief super wagged his finger. 'But I was a sergeant in Brixton in 'eighty-one. I saw at first-hand what happens when positions become polarised.'

Bell stifled a yawn. 'That must have been tough, sir.'

'Forty-eight hours of pitched battle. Petrol bombs raining down on us, for the most part.'

Bell promised himself that when he wore the stripes on his shoulder he would never bore junior officers with tales of distant heroism. Sure, he would start a few rumours, let Chinese whispers do their job, but he would remain dignified in his silence.

'Your father was there, of course,' said the chief super.

Bell nodded impassively, like he always did when the old man's name came up.

'One of his team took a direct hit,' the chief continued. 'He would have been burned alive if your father hadn't reacted as quickly as he did.'

Bell's face remained impassive but inside his mouth he bit his cheek.

'There were no paramedics, of course – far too dangerous,' said the chief – 'so your father took off his own jacket and rolled the man in it. Left himself completely open, of course.'

Bell imagined the burly silhouette of the old man, the burning skies of South London behind him.

‘It was absolute chaos, and I don’t mind telling you that the rest of us were struggling,’ the chief pointed at Bell, ‘but not your father.’

Time to change the subject.

‘So what is it you want me to do about the Khan girl?’ he asked.

The chief super was a flinty pragmatist, but even he wouldn’t actually order the release of Yasmeen’s body. Would he?

‘I don’t want you to do anything.’

DI Bell felt a stab of disappointment in the other man. His lack of conviction made him look weak. Something else he would never allow. As the old man never ceased to point out, you had to show the lower orders that you were a man of iron.

‘What I want,’ the chief super continued, ‘is an assurance from you that the current situation is absolutely necessary.’

So that was it. The old bugger wanted something to say if the shit hit the fan. An excuse.

‘All I can tell you, sir, is that I’m not entirely convinced that the girl killed herself. Something about it is all wrong and I think it’s only right we look into it.’

‘Quite so,’ said the chief super. ‘But we don’t want to open ourselves up to accusations of racism.’

DI Bell knew exactly what to say. ‘Don’t you think it would be more racist not to follow up the death of a young Asian woman? I mean, sir, if she were white we wouldn’t just leave it, would we?’

The chief super closed his eyes, evidently weighing up the rock and the hard place.

'Fine. Continue the investigation,' he said, 'but be ready to give a decision and release that body as soon as possible.'

'Their lawyer wants an update in two days,' said Bell.

The chief super raised his eyebrows. 'They've instructed a solicitor?'

'She came to see me earlier today,' said Bell. 'A Lilly Valentine.'

The chief super groaned.

'You know her, then, sir?'

'We've had several dealings in the past,' said the chief super, 'and none has been what you would describe as a pleasure.'

'She seemed pretty harmless.'

'Do not underestimate that woman,' the chief super warned. 'If Luton is a tinderbox then Valentine is just the type to light a bloody match.'

At least one day a week they have biryani for supper. Somehow Mum always manages to pick the day when she has the most homework.

'You don't like my food now, missy?'

Aasha sighs. Of course she likes her mother's food. Biryani is one of her favourites, especially when there are crispy fried onions crumbled into it. The problem is the clearing up. There's the dish the meat has been in, the bowl the rice has soaked in, the onion pan and then the cooking pot itself, caked and hard with slow-baked spices. And because it's their mid-week treat her father will insist it is served with the maximum ceremony of side dishes.

She rinses the third pickle dish under the tap and checks her watch. Seven thirty. She can hear her brothers in the sitting room, laughing at some comedy with Catherine Tate. It annoys her that they don't offer to help.

Mum would never let them, of course, but they could at least ask.

'There,' says Mum, and puts away the last spoon. 'Finished.'

'What about the floor?' asks Aasha.

Her mother insists on 'doing the mop' after every meal.

'I'll do it,' says Mum. 'You get on with your school work.'

Aasha watches her mum bend down for the bucket. She seems much older than her forty years. A lifetime of looking after her husband and sons has wrung her dry.

Aasha grabs the mop. 'Go sit down, Mum.'

'What about your maths?'

'I got it done at lunchtime,' Aasha lies.

An hour later Aasha is tucked up in her room. It's the smallest one in the house. The boxroom, as English people call it. There's hardly enough room for her single bed and wardrobe. There's certainly not enough space for a desk like her brothers have.

'Aasha can use the dining table,' her father says.

Fat chance. It's always covered in letters from Pakistan, her brothers' self-defence magazines and piles of clothes for ironing. This week Dad has been dismantling an old radio and the parts are scattered across it.

Anyway, Aasha prefers to spread her books out on her bed. That way she can be sure of some peace without

anyone telling her what to do or what to think. Here in her ill-lit cupboard she is mistress.

She logs on to her laptop and looks at her maths homework. Algebra. She'll be in for a tough one tonight.

After twenty long minutes trying to work out how Y can possibly equal X, a box pops up in instant messenger.

Lailla says: I've been very naughty.

Aasha laughs and types her reply: *Aasha says: What have u done now?*

She waits for the answer, imagining her friend's candy-pink fingernails dancing across the keyboard.

Lailla says: I've told Ryan u fancy him and he should msn u.

Aasha is about to send a stinging response when another box pops up.

Ryan wants to be your friend.

Aasha chews her lip. She knows full well what her dad thinks about her having anything to do with boys. And as for a boy like Ryan, well, he'd send her 'back home' on the next plane in forty-two pieces.

'No nice doctor or lawyer will want to marry a girl whose been running around the town with every Tom Dick and Henry.'

And he's right. Take Lailla. It doesn't matter how many times she insists that she and Sonny have never gone all the way, no one believes her. So even if it's true, which Aasha very much doubts, no boy will want her afterwards.

Then again, messaging isn't exactly the same, is it? It's not real life. No one can say you've done anything wrong, can they?

The box pops up. Another message from Lailla.
Lailla says: *PMSL at u angsting over what to do!!!*
Aasha doesn't know whether she's more cross at Lailla for knowing exactly how she'd react or herself for being so predictable.

Well not this time. This time she'll live a little. If you could call it that in virtual reality. With a nod to her own courage she accepts Ryan as her friend. Almost immediately she regrets her decision.

Ryan says: *Hi beautiful.*

Aasha says: *Hi.*

Ryan says: *What u doing tonite?*

Aasha says: *Not much. U?*

Ryan says: *U gotta guess. Is it a. thinking about Lindsay Lohan or b. thinking about Aasha Hassan?*

Aasha says: *c. doing ur maths homework.*

Ryan: *Ha ha. Ur a funny grrl.*

Aasha is breathless and pink and doesn't know what to say next. Fortunately Ryan sends another message.

Ryan says: *Will u meet me after school tomoro?*

Aasha says: *I don't think I should.*

Ryan says: *Come on. I'm nowhere near as bad as everyone says.*

Aasha considers what to say next and almost squeals at her own daring.

Aasha says: *That's very disappointing.*