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prologue

The General watched as his Liberation Militia commanders took their places around the imposing mahogany dining table. He studied each of them in turn. Years of self-discipline honed from childhood made it easy for him to keep his expression neutral. Six men and three women finally settled and looked at him in respectful anticipation. Most of those around the table were older than the General who, though in his late thirties, was the youngest leader the L.M. had ever had.

'The room's clean?' the General turned to ask Morgan Green, his personal assistant and right-hand man, who sat, not at the table, but just behind him. Next to Morgan sat Tanya, Morgan's assistant. They were the General's retinue and he was hardly ever seen without one or both of them in tow.

'Yes, sir. I've had the place swept for bugs and other surveillance devices twice. We're clean.'

The General's searching gaze lasered slowly but steadily around the room. They were meeting in the country mansion of a Liberation Militia sympathizer who was also a prominent Nought businessman. There were one or two 'prominent' Noughts in most areas of society now. One or two. A promising Nought ballerina or successful

Nought stockbroker or Nought assistant to the assistant of the Chief of Police was always trotted out and put on show for the nation's media. How clever of the dark-skinned Crosses to 'allow' the occasional pale-skinned Nought to 'make it'. Successful Noughts were a safety valve. A sop for the Crosses to point to and say, 'See! He's made it. And if he can and you can't, then that's your fault, not ours.'

Not only was the meeting top secret, it also required the highest level of discretion. The commanders had arrived at the house over the course of the previous few nights, each under cover of darkness, in blacked-out cars and only after the surrounding area had been scanned and checked to ensure they weren't being observed. It was late winter and the sky was hauntingly dark. The damask curtains with blackout lining had been firmly drawn since mid-afternoon. Two crystal chandeliers above the vast table twinkled and glittered around the candle-shaped electric bulbs, like fairy lights on a tree at Crossmas time. Each of the walls around them was decorated with oak-wood panelling. An ornate and understatedly expensive silk rug had been placed under the table, covering the hardwood floor. Portraits and landscape paintings reflecting the owner's very conservative tastes had been hung at regular intervals over the panelling.

'Brothers and sisters,' the General began in a practised tone. 'The General Election date has been set. In just over twelve weeks, the country will go to the polls. It's time for all of us Noughts in the Liberation Militia to make our voices heard like never before. Make no mistake, we are being watched. We're being watched by our L.M. brothers

and sisters who have given up their freedom or, in too many cases, their lives, in the quest for true equality between Noughts and Crosses. Failure is not an option. In front of each of you is a folder containing your objectives. Each of you has a target which is to be eliminated before the forthcoming election. Some of the targets are strategic buildings, some are our enemies in prominent positions. As regional commanders, you will be in charge of the planning and details.' The General paused to give himself time to fix each commander with his piercing brown-eyed stare. 'I *know* you won't let me down. None of us in the L.M. can afford to give up this fight until we have social justice and political equality for all Noughts.'

Murmurs and nods of assent quickly stilled as the General tapped impatient fingers on the mahogany table.

'Failsafe rules apply. None of you will know about the work of the other commanders. You will each ensure that the assignments you give your lieutenants remain the province of those lieutenants and no one else. I hope that's understood.'

'Yes, General.'

'Of course, General.'

'I'm also personally taking charge of the planning of a major event which will act as a devastating blow to the so-called authorities. It will take place the day before the election. We are all going to play our part in ensuring that this government is toppled.'

'If I may ask, General, what is this major event?'

The General turned to look at the man who'd just spoken – Jonathan Kidd, the regional commander of the South-West. Jonathan, more than any other person at

the table, loved to ask questions. Inappropriate questions. Why was that? Why more questions from him than all the others put together?

'Jon, it's not our place to question the General,' Anna Tenski, the regional commander from the Mid-West, reprimanded quietly.

'No, Anna,' said the General evenly. 'This isn't a dictatorship. If Jon or anyone else for that matter has something to say then I encourage them to say it. I hope each of you feels able to express your ideas and voice your concerns to me at any time. I value your input.' The General turned to face Jon directly. 'It's better that you don't know, Jon. You're a valued member of my council and I know you and everyone else here would rather die than betray your brothers and sisters in the L.M., but what I have in mind will make every one of us fugitives for the rest of our lives. The Secret Service will leave no stone unturned in their efforts to hunt us down. Only two people will be involved in the job I have in mind, myself and one other. And it'll be carried out on that basis.'

'Of course, General,' said Jonathan, not once averting his eyes. 'I want you to know that you can count on me and all I have in any venture you propose.'

'Thank you, Jon,' said the General before turning back to face the other commanders. 'You have ten minutes to look through your folders, then I'll see each of you privately in the study to hear your initial thoughts. Analyse and memorize the contents of your folders – you will not be allowed to take them away with you.'

The General stood up. Behind him his P.A. did the same. As Tanya, the assistant P.A., made moves to follow

them, the General looked at her and almost imperceptibly shook his head. The assistant P.A. remained in her seat.

Without a backwards glance, the General headed out of the room. He didn't need to look back to know that Morgan, his P.A., was following him or to know that all eyes in the room were upon him.

'What's wrong, General?' the P.A. asked once they were safely out in the hall, the dining-room doors shut firmly behind them.

'What makes you think something's wrong?' asked the General through narrowed eyes.

Morgan didn't reply. He didn't have to. He had known the General for many years now, had even served in the same L.M. resistance cell as the General's brother. And the last four years had been spent in the General's employ. Morgan knew just about every emotional nuance the man had. He could calculate from the way the General stiffened his shoulders or linked his fingers, or the way his face would suddenly become devoid of all expression, the very depth and breadth of his anger.

After all these years, Morgan reckoned he was perhaps the closest person the General had to a 'friend'. And that was saying something, by virtue of saying nothing at all. In spite of the ability to decipher his moods and looks, Morgan didn't really know what made the General tick. All he knew was the General, ate, slept and breathed the Liberation Militia. Maybe that was all the *raison d'être* the General needed.

'I want Jonathan Kidd put under twenty-four-hour surveillance. I want his phone tapped and a tail put on him around the clock,' said the General.

'Why, sir?' asked Morgan, surprised.

'You know me, Morgan. I don't trust anyone. And Jon worries me.'

'Yes, sir. I'll put our best people on it,' said Morgan evenly.

'Good. You do that – and I want regular reports, understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You've checked out the study? It's clean too?'

'Yes, sir. I've bug-swept the entire house.'

'Good. Give the commanders another five minutes, then send Anna to me first.' The General made his way into the study. Just as he was about to close the door, he turned to Morgan with a frown. 'You know what?' he began. 'I want *all* their phones tapped. Report anything suspicious to me.' And he quietly shut the door behind him.

Morgan watched the closed door with a frown.

The General was a brilliant man, dedicated and utterly ruthless – but Morgan was growing increasingly anxious about his behaviour. If he carried on like this, it would be the General and not the Cross authorities who would bring about the end of the Liberation Militia. This new offensive the General was planning was by far the most audacious, not to mention the most ruthless, in the Liberation Militia's history. They were going to hit targets up and down the country within the same seventy-two-hour time frame. And even Morgan didn't know the details of the General's personal project. He'd put good money on it being something spectacular though. Merciless and spectacular.

Morgan couldn't help thinking that if the objective was to swing Joe Public's sympathies round to the L.M.'s way of thinking, then this was a bizarre way to go about it. But the General had moved on from trying to win public sympathy quite some time ago. His philosophy was strike, strike hard, and whilst your enemy was still reeling, strike again. Which of the General's life laws applied? Number seventeen: *The only good Cross is a dead Cross*? No, probably number eighteen was more apt. *Ask and don't get – but demand with menaces and receive with equanimity.* The General's life laws – a numbered series of rules that he lived by. He said they kept him alive.

It wasn't Morgan's place to challenge the General – he'd die before he did so.

But it didn't stop his misgivings. Morgan didn't have to wonder what had happened to make the General so single-mindedly focused on the L.M. He was one of the very few who knew. The General was without a doubt the most successful of all L.M. rulers in terms of making sure that the L.M. was never far from public consciousness. He was a brilliant tactician, that much had been proven time and time again. And he had the drive and determination to lead the L.M.

But to lead it where?

Sometimes such single-mindedness could be as much of a curse as a blessing. Blinkers kept you focused, but they also stopped you seeing the broader picture. Morgan sighed. He had to hold onto the belief that the General knew what he was doing. Had he been in charge then he might've chosen a less rocky route but they all wanted to get to the same destination, didn't they?

When the General lay in bed night after night with just his thoughts for company, did doubts slink around him, whispering silkily in his ear – or was he too disciplined to let them anywhere near? Who did the General call on when he was troubled or needed somewhere to rest his head and lighten his load? The General was admired, respected, definitely feared – but he wasn't liked. Not a bit of it. Everyone called the man 'sir' or 'the General' and in spite of their shared years together, Morgan certainly wouldn't dream of calling him anything else – at least not in front of others. The General had a number of passports and papers, each with false names and varying identities. But Morgan was one of a very select few who knew the man's real name. How long had it been since the General had been called with affection by his birth name by anyone but his mother?

How long had it been since anyone had called him Jude?



Three months later . . .



one. Callie Rose

These are the things I know for sure:

My name is Callie Rose. No surname.

I am sixteen years old today. Happy birthday to me.

My mum is Persephone Hadley, daughter of Kamal Hadley.

Kamal Hadley is the leader of the Opposition – and a complete bastard.

My mum is a Cross – one of the so-called ruling elite.

My dad was Callum Ryan McGregor.

My dad was a Nought.

My dad was a murderer.

My dad was a rapist.

My dad was a terrorist.

My dad burns in hell.

Every time my mum looks at me, she wishes with all her heart that my dad had lived – and I hadn't.

These facts are the only things that are mine and real. Everything else in my life zigzags around the truth. So I don't mind so much that I'm leaving it all behind. There's nothing here worth holding onto.

Nana Meggie once told me that when you die, you go to heaven and it feels just like home.

But I don't know what home feels like.

I'm not talking about the dictionary definition either, I mean the definition that comes from the heart. Not some abstract notion of what home is meant to be, but what it's meant to *feel* like. That kind of home I've never had. So no thoughts of heaven for me. I guess I'm on my way to the other place. Like father, like daughter – at least, in that respect.

Now I think about it, I've been on that journey for quite a while. And in a few hours, I'll reach my destination. But in the meantime, I have a few minutes to sit and be still and force all trace of any regrets away . . .

I did so love it here at Nana Jasmine's private beach. If the rest of the world was like this place, I'd have no need for the contents of the carrier bag on the sand beside me. A single deep breath filled my lungs with pure sea air. If only I could live for ever within that one breath. The coastline and the sea stretched on beyond imagination. But magical as they were, it was the beach that held me. And it wasn't one of those characterless picture postcard beaches either. It was scattered with driftwood and kelp, coarse sand and rocks big enough to clamber up and over. The sea skittered away from the beach, ever changing, always moving, never still. I could see why this place used to be one of Mum's favourite haunts.

It really was beautiful.

The sea was darker towards the horizon and the sky was at the tail end of what must've been a riotously coloured sunrise. I wanted this moment to last and last. The very air around me was charged with sadness and a strange excitement.

'Callie, you've forgotten all about me, haven't you?'

I turned to my companion. 'Of course not. I—'

'You haven't said more than two words to me all morning,' he interrupted. 'Why invite me here if you're just going to ignore me?'

I regarded him, incredibly sad that he didn't understand – but then how could he? Why did I ask him to meet me on this beach? To share the sea and the sky and the way I was feeling. To be with someone who wanted to be with me. To have a witness to my last morning. But he didn't understand.

'I'm just not in a chatty mood, that's all,' I tried to explain.

'So what kind of mood are you in?' he asked.

I shrugged, but he misunderstood what that meant. His face got closer to mine, his lips brushing against mine. Not for the first time. But for the last. I couldn't cope with it. It was too graphic a reminder of all the things I'd never have. I pulled away.

'Don't. I'm not in a kissing mood either,' I told him.

A moment's silence, then he said, 'Fair enough.'

We both turned back to look out over the sea. But the moment was ruined. I stared out again towards the horizon. But now the sea was just dark water and the sky was nothing but the careless swipes of a few colours. So what? None of it mattered. What was the point of any of it?

'Callie, what's wrong?'

I stood up, dusting the sand off my trousers. He stood up too, never once taking his eyes off me.

'Nothing's wrong. I have to go now,' I replied, bending to pick up my carrier bag.

But he grabbed my hand before I could reach it.

'Talk to me. What's wrong?' he asked again.

'Please don't do this,' I said, surprised at how close to tears I felt. I swallowed hard. It did no good. Maybe venom would dislodge what *tendresse* couldn't. 'Why don't you just go? I didn't even want you here but you insisted on being with me, like some kind of pathetic puppy.'

Harsh words to drive him away. If he walked off now without a backwards glance, then so could I. But he stood his ground, not even angry with me. I wanted him to be angry with me. I needed that.

But to my surprise, he kissed me again. And he'd never kissed me like that before – hard enough to make my heart jump around like an Olympic gymnast, but soft enough to make me want to close my eyes and breathe him in and hold onto him for dear life. At first I was too stunned to pull away, but that didn't last long. I pushed at his chest, catching him off guard so he had to step, almost stumble back to keep his balance. And that's when I seized my chance, terrified I might not get another. I grabbed my carrier bag, turned tail and ran. Ran just as hard and as fast and as far away from him as I could. I took the stone steps of the cliff two and three at a time.

'Callie, wait . . .' he shouted after me. 'I'll see you tomorrow, Callie. Wait . . .'

I forced myself not to listen. I breathed heavier than necessary to drown out the words behind me.

Keep running, Callie. Never stop running.

See you tomorrow? All my tomorrows had become today – and today was all I had left.

Less than ten minutes later, I entered Nana Jasmine's house. Nana Jasmine rattled around alone in a huge mausoleum of a house. Her only regular companions were her Nought personal assistant, Sarah Pike, and Mrs Soames, the Nought housekeeper and cook. Nana had given Mum and me our own keys so we could come and go whenever we wanted. Mum never turned up unannounced but I often popped in, mostly after school. Nana Jasmine's house and Nana Meggie's house – where Mum and I lived – were equidistant from my school, Heathcroft High. In opposite directions, but equidistant. Nana Jasmine refused to sell her 'cottage', as she called it. It was part of her divorce settlement and she was determined to hang onto it, even though it was much too big and impossible to keep comfortably warm in winter. But Nana Jasmine said she was the house and the house was her and that's why she couldn't part with it – whatever that meant! If I were her, I would've sold it in a hurry and used to the money to make friends and have fun.

Nana Jasmine's lonely.

After her divorce from Grandad Kamal, she never even dated again – which was a shame 'cause even though she's ill, she's still really pretty and doesn't look anything like her real age. I asked her once why she hadn't remarried.

'A marriage like mine leaves scars,' Nana Jasmine replied. 'My scars are still . . . painful.'

Over the years I guess the scars had never healed. I know now that some scars never do.

'Nana?' I called out.

Usually Mrs Soames or Sarah appeared before I'd made it halfway across the hall. But not today.

'Callie, love? I'm in the kitchen,' Nana Jasmine replied, projecting rather than raising her voice. Nana Jasmine didn't believe in shouting unless there was a fire. I made my way into the kitchen – still the largest I'd ever seen.

'Hello, Nana,' I smiled as I headed towards her. I caught the way her gaze fell on the carrier bag in my hand. I clutched it tighter – noticeably tighter. Smiling, Nana Jasmine came towards me, the obligatory glass of orange juice on one hand. She kissed my forehead, the way she always did and pressed the juice into my free hand. I waited for her to head back to the fridge before putting down my carrier bag.

'Thanks for coming to see me,' said Nana. 'Oh, and happy birthday! I'll give you your present before you leave.'

'You don't need to give me anything,' I told her.

It wasn't as if it was going to get much use.

'I know I don't, but I want to,' Nana said firmly.

I shrugged, unwilling to argue. 'You're looking much better today, Nana.'

It wasn't just a plastic line. Nana Jasmine's eyes were sparking and sparkling. It was a vast improvement on the last time I'd seen her.

'Thank you. I am feeling better.' Nana smiled, ever polite.

'I really can't stay long,' I told her, sipping at my OJ. 'I have an appointment and I can't be late.'

'A few minutes with me won't make you late,' said Nana Jasmine.

I watched as she poured herself a glass of sparkling

mineral water. Nana Jasmine never drank anything stronger than fruit juice and most of the time it was just bottled water. She was so practically perfect in every way, I reckon she was born with a halo and angels singing the Hallelujah Chorus around her head.

'OK, what's so urgent?' I asked.

'Drink your orange juice and then I'll tell you,' said Nana. 'You need your vitamin C.'

Anything for a quiet life. I knocked back the OJ. Nana Jasmine took the glass away from me and rinsed it out before putting it in the dishwasher. Well, at least she'd let me finish it!

'So what's this appointment you have that you can't miss?' asked Nana.

I didn't reply. I didn't want to lie.

'Is it something to do with Jude McGregor?' Nana Jasmine stunned me by asking.

The answer must have inadvertently shown itself on my face because Nana said grimly, 'I see.'

'Is that why you asked me over here? To give me a lecture about Uncle Jude?' I asked belligerently. 'Because if it is . . .'

One word, just one syllable of disapproval said against my uncle and I'd be out of the house so fast Nana Jasmine would wonder if she'd imagined my visit. I glared at Nana, almost daring her to say something, but she surprised me again by smiling. Just smiling.

'Callie, I wanted to see you on your birthday. What's wrong with that?' said Nana. 'Have a seat, Callie, love. I want to ask you something.'

Suspicious, I sat down at the breakfast bar before

carefully placing my bag at my feet. Its contents were too precious to be let out of my sight – even for a second. Nana sat down next to me.

'I have a couple of questions,' she said.

'Go on then,' I said sourly, which only made Nana Jasmine smile more.

'Don't sulk, darling. It's a most unattractive habit,' Nana said, her eyes twinkling. But then she glanced down at my carrier bag between our two chairs and the amusement in her eyes faded. 'Callie, d'you promise to answer all my questions truthfully?'

I considered. 'I'll tell you the truth or I won't say anything at all – how's that?'

'Fair enough. Are you a member of the Liberation Militia?'

Wow! Nana Jasmine wasn't mucking around. Straight for the jugular. I didn't answer. But then I thought, Why not? What possible difference could it make now? My life was my own – no one else's.

'Yes, I am,' I said, lifting my chin.

'I thought so.' Nana Jasmine nodded thoughtfully. 'How long have you been a member?'

'The last two years.'

'I see. When did your uncle first get in touch with you?'

'Four or five years ago. I can't remember exactly.'

Nana's look of shocked surprise was quickly masked. 'Did you . . . did you have anything to do with those terrible things that happened last weekend?'

No way was I going to answer that one.

'I see.'

Did she see? What did she see? Too much or too little?

'This appointment you're in a rush to get to – has it got anything to do with the L.M.?'

No answer.

'Very well. Don't worry, Callie, I won't pry any more.' Nana Jasmine stood up. 'Before you go, could you help me with something?'

'What?'

'I need a few bottles of wine up from the cellar. That'll give me a chance to decant my red wine properly and make sure the white is properly chilled,' said Nana Jasmine.

'Is that all what you called me over for then?' I said.

'Yes, dear. And that was dreadful grammar, by the way,' said Nana evenly. 'You're . . . you're very close to your uncle, aren't you?'

Although Nana Jasmine's tone was even and non-confrontational, she still managed to sound like she was accusing me of something. I really had no idea how she did it. Her expression was carefully neutral, there was very little inflection in her voice and yet she managed to convey her disapproval of Uncle Jude in a way that left very little room for doubt. Well, I wasn't here to talk about Uncle Jude.

'I'll help bring up the bottles from the cellar but then I really must go,' I said.

'You're not going to help me prepare the rest of my lunch?'

'I haven't got time, Nana.'

'Fair enough. After you've brought up my wine, I'll

phone for a taxi to take you to wherever it is you want to go.'

I nodded. And then it hit me. This would be the last time I saw Nana. The last time I spoke to her. The last time . . .

NO! Don't think like that. Don't even think. I was going to do something worthwhile. My whole life had been leading up to this day and I wasn't going to shrink away like a coward now. Like Uncle Jude said, I was going to make a difference.

A sudden, strange, sad fatigue swirled round me like a gossamer shroud. I stood up abruptly.

Shake it off, Callie Rose. Get it together.

'Are you all right, love?' Nana Jasmine frowned.

I nodded. 'Just got one or two things on my mind, that's all.'

'Well, help me bring up the bottles from the cellar and then I'll leave you in peace,' smiled Nana. 'Give me a hug first.'

I was about to argue – why did I need to hug her before bringing up a few wine bottles? But then I remembered . . . How could I have forgotten? Nana Jasmine stood up and put her arms around me. For once, my arms didn't dangle at my sides like overcooked spaghetti. I hugged her back, breathing her in.

Saying goodbye.

Leaving my bag on the floor, I let Nana lead the way across the kitchen and down the stairs to the cellar. My bag would be safe enough with both of us in the cellar together. The cellar door was already unbolted. Nana Jasmine pulled on the handle with both hands, her lips a

thin line with the effort it cost her to move the heavy door. I placed my hands beside Nana Jasmine's and opened the door with her. It didn't creak or groan. The door, like the rest of Nana Jasmine's household was too well oiled to make any kind of vulgar protest. To squeak would've been 'bad grammar'. And Nana Jasmine wasn't into that. The door itself was solid oak, nearly three metres tall. Snaking, almost sneaking across the door from the wrought-iron hinges, was black iron scrollwork. Nana Jasmine stood to one side so that I would walk past her.

'So where are these bottles?' I asked.

'The Château D'Azonama 'ninety-five is at the other end of the cellar,' said Nana. 'Four . . . no, five bottles should be enough. Let's go and get them.'

I headed down the narrow aisle between rack upon rack of vintage wine on either side of me. The racks were lined up like elemental soldiers, with the wine bottles lying prone. But as I approached the far end of the cellar, I got the shock of my life. Someone came out from behind one of the tall racks of wine. I recognized her even before she turned to face me. I stopped abruptly. What the hell was she doing here? I'd sworn never to even stay in the same room as her again and I meant it. I spun round, ready to make for the door – only to stop abruptly for the second time.

Nana Jasmine was pushing the cellar door shut.

'Nana . . . ?'

'I'm sorry, love, but I can't let you do any more of Jude's dirty work,' said Nana Jasmine as the door continued to close. 'I love you, Callie Rose McGregor. Don't ever forget that.'

And in the next instant the cellar door was closed. I sprinted for the door, practically diving for the door handle just as the bolts were being slid home from the outside. The sound of the bolts was more final, more resounding than the peal of funeral bells.

I was too late. Panic rose up, searing and unstoppable like erupting lava.

'NANA JASMINE, OPEN THIS DOOR!' I pushed down the large metal handle, then pushed at the door, but I was wasting my time.

'LET ME OUT!' I screamed.

Beyond the door, I could hear nothing but silence. Not even footsteps walking away from me. The door was too thick, too solid. I spun round to glare at the woman I hated most in all the world.

My mum.

This whole thing was a set-up. A ridiculous scheme to stop me from following Uncle Jude's orders.

Uncle Jude's orders . . .

A groan ripped through my body as something worse occurred to me. Here I was, locked in Nana Jasmine's cellar with a woman I despised – and my carrier bag and its contents were out there, on the other side of the door.

Out there with Nana Jasmine.