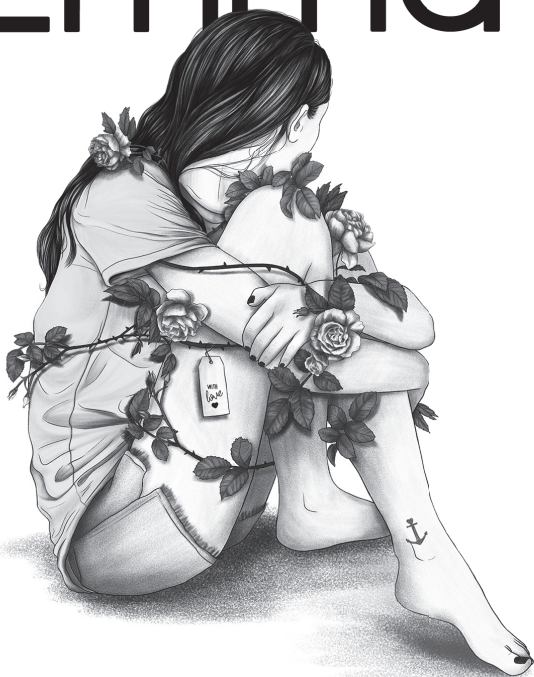


KISSING Emma



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SHĀPĀRĀK KHORSĀNDI

BELLATRIX
★

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Dedicated to the memory of Nyousha Movagharzadeh,
the most wonderful, adored and talented young woman,
whose excitement was so catching
1/11/1995–30/7/2019

This story touches on some hard-hitting themes.
If you find yourself affected by them, there is a
list of resources at the end that may be helpful.

ONE

When your mum has been all over the internet, accused of murdering your dad, well, life changes.

We weren't the perfect family. My dad wasn't the sort who would put me up on his shoulders and call me his little princess. He was more the shut-your-mouth-or-I'll-knock-your-teeth-out type.

Not the whole time. He had his moments. Sometimes he took me to the pub with him. I'd only be little, about six, and he'd buy me a lemonade and pour a bit of his beer in it, which made it taste funny. I wouldn't show it on my face, though, because when I drank it, my dad patted my back and said, 'That's my girl!' That little bit of praise from him made me feel so happy. Proud. His mates would all laugh and say, 'Chip off the old block!' I know it doesn't sound like the most fun afternoon, but when I was little, it was one of the few times I had his attention for a *good* reason.

He'd drink and tell his mates stories that made no sense to me, but when they roared and hung on to his every word, he was a king in my eyes. That was my dad. Fun sometimes, then giving my mum a black eye sometimes. All dads were like that, weren't they? That's what I thought, anyway.

I'd see other dads: the ones down the park, laughing with their kids, talking to them, gently taking them off a climbing frame or carrying them on their shoulders. They'd give the mum a little kiss while the kids played. But they couldn't be like that all the time, I'd think. I bet at home they were all like my dad. I bet they were angry and shouted and made the mum cry – but when they were out and about, they were gentle.

I loved my dad. I honestly did. Even when he was off his head, shouting, and the woman in the flat below would bang on her ceiling with her cricket bat. (I reckon she had to stand on her dining room table to do that.) Sometimes he ran out of our place to tell her to 'shut up you mad old bitch', which gave me and Mum a bit of a breather.

We'd know, just from the way he walked into a room or came into the flat, what mood he was in. Just by his footsteps, we knew whether he was going to start on us or not. Mum would say, in a voice so low only I could hear, 'Go to your room, Emma.' Low and urgent. I would flee, no eye contact with Dad, and go straight to my room. I'd look nowhere but straight ahead, my legs moving despite feeling numb with

fear. I'd get under my bed and curl up as tight as I could, putting my hands over my ears to block out whatever noise my mum and dad were making. Shouts, cries, Mum begging. That was the worst. I'd wait for the air to go still, and then Mum would come and crouch by my bed, reaching her hand underneath it for me to hold. I'd take it and crawl out, without looking at her. It always seemed too soon to look. Instead I'd just press against her, and she would hold me. When it was safe, Mum would sort out whatever mess he had made of the flat and of her.

As I got older, there were more bad bits than good bits. Dad's stories and jokes all got swallowed up by a stream of ranting and swearing. He drank at home, then he went out and drank again. He picked on Mum even more. She was 'fat' and a 'hag'. Whatever she made for him to eat was 'a plate of shite'. Then he'd turn to me, saying I was just as big a waste of space, that I was always in his way. Eventually he'd storm out of the flat, shouting and swearing as he went. I'd hear him all the way down the stairwell, calling me and Mum names that drifted back up to us. When he came back, we never mentioned whatever row had gone on before.

For some reason, I never learned my lesson. Every time he came back and wasn't shouting, I would think that was it. Maybe it would never happen again. Maybe that was the last time he'd ever start on us. I thought that every single time. I'd be good. I'd be good he'd never shout at me again.

But there was just no way of knowing. Sometimes he said to Mum, ‘Put some slap on, you look half-dead,’ so she’d do her face. But if she put on some lipstick and a bit of mascara without him telling her to, he’d scream, ‘You look like a tart!’ till she cried and took it off. No way of predicting it.

Really, the only good bits when I was little were when it was just me and Mum. ‘You are not an only child,’ Mum used to say to me. ‘You’re the *one and only* child!’

When Dad wasn’t around, Mum was different. She was fun. ‘Wanna dress up in my clothes, Emma?’ I’d put on one of her dresses, wear her shoes and she’d put make-up on me. ‘Go on. Do one of your impressions!’ she’d say. I could really make her laugh. With bright pink lipstick and a pen in my mouth for a cigarette, I’d be Dora, the woman who lived above us and was constantly smoking on her balcony. Those cigarettes were always blowing on to ours after she’d flicked them out. I called her Mrs And-Why-Shouldn’t-I?, because that’s what she always said.

‘Me husband’ – I did her voice raspy and deep – *‘says I smoke too much. And why shouldn’t I? It’s not ’is business. I don’t moan that he farts so much I can’t light a match in the house, do I? I like to sit on the balcony in the fresh air and shout at the kids down there playing. And why shouldn’t I? I drive Mary downstairs mad with my shouting and my fag ends – and why shouldn’t I?’*

Mum would laugh and laugh, telling me, 'I honestly wouldn't know the difference with my eyes shut, Emma! You got a gift! But keep it down, she'll hear you.'

Mum didn't like me playing on the estate with the other kids after school. 'You're a cut above, my darling,' she'd tell me. 'You've got *prospects*. You're intelligent, you're beautiful. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with them kids out there . . .'

I'd roll my eyes and smile. 'But you are, Mum.'

'I'm not. I just don't think they're going anywhere. This estate sucks you in if you let it, and I won't let that happen to you.'

I didn't mind not going out to play. I had Mum to do things with. We'd watch all the soaps together, and I'd do impressions of the actors. She'd get these magazines full of all the celebrities and we'd guess who'd had their lips done, who'd had their boobs done. I stared at these girls on the glossy pages, and the lives they led, all shiny hair and rich boyfriends. They holidayed on yachts and sparkled at parties. It was another world, but these were the sort of places Mum thought I could go one day. She said I was pretty enough, and sometimes I'd think that maybe she was right. But back then, Mum and I just got lost in dreaming.

*

‘What do you want more bloody books for?’ my dad moaned when Mum and I brought a couple back from the charity shop one day. ‘You already got a whole load of ’em, taking up all the room in here!’ He said it like we’d gone out and bought saucepans when we already had a perfectly good set in the cupboard.

‘But I’ve read those ones, Dad,’ I said carefully.

‘You’ve read all them books?’ Dad scoffed. ‘Then you’re *sad*, my girl. You need to get a life or you’ll end up like your mother.’ He pointed his beer bottle at Mum, and it sloshed a bit on to the carpet. I got away with it that time, my shoulders sagging in relief.

I kept my books so perfect. Tucked in beside each other, tallest to shortest. Mum called me a book worm. It made me smile to think of being a worm, burrowing into my books to escape. We’d go to the library sometimes, but there were some books I loved so much I liked to read them again and again, and you always had to give library books back. I liked having my own to keep.

Mum read me *The Secret Garden* at bedtimes. It was one of my favourites. I’d imagine there was a secret garden on our estate, behind the high grey wall at the end. There wasn’t, of course. It was a samosa factory, but I’d still pretend. I had my books and a few toys in my little room that Mum painted pink for me.

When I was six, my absolute favourite toy was Speaking

Baby. She had shiny, dark hair like mine, and you pressed her hand and she went, ‘Ma-ma.’ She wasn’t just a doll to me. She was real. She had feelings and she loved me. When my mum and dad were fighting and I was off under my bed, I’d take her with me, holding her close to me, protecting her. ‘It’s OK, Speaking Baby, I’ll look after you,’ I’d whisper to her. Every moment when I wasn’t at school, I played with her. Rocking her to sleep in my arms, I sang her lullabies. I kissed her and tucked her in beside me in bed every night. I knew she could hear me. When I was sad or scared, I cuddled her close and she understood how I was feeling.

Sheila upstairs had given me Speaking Baby for my sixth birthday. She worked at the big supermarket, the one you had to get the bus to. She said to my mum, ‘It weren’t dear. I got my staff discount. I saw it in the shop and couldn’t resist.’

Sheila lived with Mike. They were older than my mum and dad and didn’t have kids. I was too small, then, to know you didn’t just blurt out, ‘Why haven’t you got children?’ at people.

‘God didn’t bless us with children, my darling,’ Sheila told me.

For a long time I wondered why God didn’t bless Sheila with kids. How could he have looked at lovely, kind Sheila and gone, ‘Nope. Not trusting you with a baby,’ but then looked at my dad and thought, ‘He’s fine, he can have one?’

Sheila and Mike's flat was my favourite place to be. It never smelled of fish fingers like ours did. It smelled of baking and Sheila's bowl of lavender potpourri. That bowl of dried woodchips, smelling of garden flowers, was to me the most sophisticated thing anyone could possibly have in their hall. Their flat was exactly the same size and shape as ours, but it looked so different – all plush, with their big, green, soft sofa and proper curtains, not plastic blinds like at ours.

'Can I go upstairs, Mum?' I'd ask almost every afternoon. Mum would nod with a mixture of relief and sadness on her face, then stand at the bottom of the stairs until she heard Sheila greet me with her warm, "Ello, my darling! You wanna come in for some milk and biccies?" Mum would shout up behind me, 'That all right, Sheila? Just send her down when she's a nuisance.'

'You're never a nuisance, are you, my darling?' Sheila would say to me. 'Come in. Mike! We got our little visitor.' Mike would wave at me from his chair and carry on watching TV. Somehow there was always football on.

The day after my sixth birthday, Sheila sat me down at her little table in the kitchen and gave me Speaking Baby. She showed me how I could make it talk by giving it a little squeeze.

'Ma-ma,' the doll said.

'See?' Sheila said. 'You're her mama, and you got to look after her just like your mummy does with you.'

When I was back downstairs that night, I tucked up in bed with my new doll and told her, 'It's OK, baby. Everything will be OK.'

Then one night, more than a whole year after I got Speaking Baby, I heard my dad come in really late. His footsteps thumping into the flat made my heart beat so fast that my chest hurt and it was hard to catch my breath. And the moment he came in, he started a fight with Mum.

'This place is a tip!' he yelled. 'And you're off in the land of Nod? Get out here and sort it!' He must have woken her up specially to have the fight.

The screams and thuds sent me under my covers. I heard Mum say, 'Shut up, you'll wake Emma.' Dad shouted back a fiery reply, but it was muffled at first. Mum was saying, 'Leave her alone!' and then I heard Dad more clearly. 'I'm so sick and fucking tired of you and your fucking brat, sponging off me and making a bloody mess!'

Before I could move under the bed, my bedroom door crashed open and in came my dad, yanking my covers off. Mum ran in after him, holding her bleeding head.

Dad grabbed my arm and pulled me out of bed. He made me stand in front of him and he was bellowing in my face. I couldn't even understand what he was saying. It was a load of swearing and calling me horrible names, and he was shaking me as he shouted. I was crying; I didn't know what I had done wrong. My eyes stung from the alcohol on his breath.

He stumbled backwards a bit, tripping over something. Speaking Baby. But when I moved to pick her up, he stomped his boot down, kicking me out of the way. Then he grabbed my doll, still raging, and took two giant, wobbling steps over to my window. We were on the twelfth floor, but he opened it, holding up my doll by her arm.

‘No, Daddy, no!’ I begged him, sobbing. ‘Please, Daddy!’

He looked at me for a second – then hurled Speaking Baby out into the darkness.

I stared at his empty hands as what he had done sank in. Then I let out a wail that rattled my skull. I didn’t care if he got angry. I didn’t care what he would do to me. The noise seemed to force him away, though. He stormed out of my room, hissing, ‘Shut the fuck up!’ but I couldn’t. My side was sore from where he’d kicked me, but I didn’t care about that either.

Mum could finally come to me and hold me while I sobbed for my doll.

‘Can we go down and get her?’ I wailed. ‘Please, Mummy, can we go and get her?’

But Mum begged me to be quiet. ‘Please, darling, we can’t, we just can’t. Not right now. She’ll be OK, don’t worry.’ Nothing she said helped. All I could picture was my doll lying all alone on the filthy ground where I couldn’t get to her. The thought gave me more pain than any of his kicks, punches or shoves ever could.

Mum put me in my bed and stayed with me until I finally got exhausted from crying and fell asleep.

In the morning, it took a second to remember the horror of the previous night. I scrambled out of bed and pressed my face to the window, wincing at the ache in my side. It hurt where he had kicked me. There'd be a bruise I would examine later. For the time being, I just looked desperately down on the ground for my doll, but I couldn't see her.

A big lump had grown beside the cut on Mum's forehead overnight. She held an ice pack to it, and I could tell she was desperate for it to go down before she faced my dad. None of us ever mentioned his rages once they had passed, and having visible injuries from the night before felt like mentioning it. We knew it would make him feel like Mum was taunting him. That's what he'd sometimes say when she limped around, bruised, fetching him breakfast after another rough night. 'Are you taunting me, Mary?'

Dad woke up and lumbered into the bathroom without a word. But Dad being quiet didn't mean safety. I had to be extra careful. I mustn't talk about the doll, even though I really wanted to go and look for her. We'd have to wait until he went out.

When Dad emerged, still belching last night's alcohol, Mum quietly served him his breakfast. She got my toast too, and set it down in front of me. I chewed on a corner, feeling tears building up again, but it was too dangerous to cry.

Dad pushed his plate away. 'I can't take being stuck in this flat with you two miserable bitches moping about,' he hissed, then grabbed his coat and went out of the door.

The minute it shut, my breath came back. The whole flat felt lighter. Mum and I looked at each other, waiting a few minutes to be sure he was gone. Then Mum got a cap and pulled it over her head, wincing as it touched her bruise. She got my coat, put it on me, and we rushed down the stairwell to find Speaking Baby. I insisted on the stairs, because the creaky old lift took for ever and always smelled of piss.

We looked all around the side of the building where Dad had thrown her – under cars, behind the bins, under bushes. Mum said softly that maybe someone had taken her, and my heart burst with hurt. The tears came again in a rush. I hadn't thought of that. What if some other girl had her now? Speaking Baby would never know that I came looking for her. We were too late.

'Please, my darling, stop crying. Stop making all this noise.' Mum was worried about Dad catching us. We couldn't let him see us trying to fix whatever he had broken. We went back inside, and I never saw my beautiful doll again.

TWO

No one saw my dad fall off the balcony. Lots of people heard the row, but no one saw what happened.

I was in my room, in bed, listening to my mum and dad fight. I could hear the whole thing, even with the covers over my head. I was eleven years old by then, a big girl but still scared. I still hid.

My dad was over six foot and heavy. My mum was quite small. Every time they fought, I'd imagine him towering over her. That night, my window was open a crack, so I could hear her screaming on the balcony and him shouting insults back at her.

And then Dad fell.

No one could say they saw Mum do it. But Mum looked guilty because she didn't call the police or ambulance straight away. The people who found his body about ten minutes later were the first to dial 999. All

I heard was yelling, shouting, screaming . . . then suddenly, silence.

Right after, my mum came into my room. Trembling, she held me close and told me, 'Everything is going to be OK.'

The police talked to me again and again.

'I know this is hard for you,' a police officer said gently, 'but I want you to tell me, word for word, what your mum said when she came in to your room that night.'

I was scared talking to the police. What if I said something that got Mum in trouble? I wondered whether I should say, 'My mum said Dad fell by accident.' No. That would be weird. So I told them the truth.

'She said everything was going to be OK.'

'Nothing more?'

'No.' Had I said the wrong thing? Would Mum go to prison?

'Did she call an ambulance before she came into your room?'

'I don't know.'

'Did you see her use her phone? Or hear her?' The police officer spoke to me the way teachers do when you are really little. Softly, so you don't get scared.

'No,' I said. Then, I don't know why, it just came out: 'She screamed,' I blurted.

'Your mum?'

I nodded.

‘And Emma, what about your dad? Did you hear him scream or shout?’

‘Yes.’ My breath was shaky. ‘They were fighting.’

‘Did you hear him scream or shout when he fell?’

I hadn’t. I’d just heard Mum. And then dead quiet. And then she’d come into my room. And that’s all I had to tell them.

Mum was with the police for a long time. Even without Dad and his big bear body, all the officers going in and out of our flat made it feel even smaller than it was. They smiled at me, letting me know they were here to help, they were friendly. They looked at the balcony and kept asking questions. They were with my mum so long that Sheila and Mike took me to their house for the rest of the night.

‘Blimey, my darling. What a circus,’ Sheila said. She closed the curtains and put the TV on for me, making me hot chocolate and giving me biscuits from a batch she’d just baked. Then she sat on the edge of the sofa, which she’d made up into a bed for me, and patted my hand. ‘Are you too old for a bedtime story?’

I shook my head. I didn’t want her to go. I missed my mum. I didn’t want to be alone.

‘Well. This is a story from when I was a little girl. My mum read it to me,’ Sheila replied, smiling.

She pulled out a book and showed me the cover. It was a story about a girl and her horse. It looked old-fashioned and for a younger kid than me, but I liked hearing Sheila read,

sitting on the sofa with my feet under the blanket, resting against her side. I snuggled down, breathed in the lavender scent on the pillow and felt cosy and safe, far away from what was happening in my flat.

The next day, Mum was back – and our estate was on the news. Cameras and presenters, all of that, were stood right outside. Kids went down and made faces behind a reporter’s head so they kept having to repeat the same thing again and again down the camera lens. A lot of our other neighbours, even the ones who didn’t know us, were talking to the TV people and to the papers.

‘Like vultures, they are,’ Mike said. ‘Vultures feeding off folk’s misery.’

I didn’t want to watch the news or look online, but I heard Mum FaceTiming Nan from her room.

‘So many people have said they heard us fighting.’ Mum sounded frightened and was crying.

Nan reassured her. ‘People fight all the time, especially husbands and wives, and especially round your way. It don’t prove a thing.’

Sheila hardly left our side in those early weeks. She was up and down, baking for us, making my tea when Mum was shut away in her room crying, or on the phone to Nan, or just sitting there, staring into space.

‘It’s like Mike told you, darling, they can’t prove nothing. And he should know, he’s been on jury service twice!’

When Sheila thought I was properly engrossed in watching TV, she added to Mum in a low voice, ‘We all know what he was like, and frankly no one would blame you if you *did* do it. I’m not judging you either way. I can hear everything anyone says from our hallway. I heard the way he was on at you.’

Suze was Mum’s friend from when they were kids. She lived on the other side of the estate and came around a lot more now Dad was gone. Suze had dyed red hair which was up in a ponytail most of the time. She liked to paint her long nails glittery blue, or green, or purple. ‘People will believe what they want to believe because they love a bit of drama,’ I heard her say. ‘*Woman snaps and kills husband* is more exciting than *Angry drunk man loses his balance and falls off his balcony*.’

‘But *so many* people believe it, Suze!’ Mum whispered back, her voice shaky. ‘People are calling me a cold-blooded killer!’

‘People forget and move on. Do you remember who won *I’m A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here?* Not this series, but the one before?’

Mum sounded baffled. ‘No.’

‘Exactly. No one does. At the time though, you were addicted to it.’

‘But this ain’t a TV show, Suze. This is mine and Emma’s life.’

‘I know that, my darling, but I’m trying to make you see that people will eventually find something else to chat rubbish about and leave you alone. Believe me.’

Suze knew what she was talking about. Mum had told me that back at school, Suze had had a different name. ‘I was always Suze, darling,’ she said once when I asked what her old name was. ‘Always Suze. It just took a while to tell everyone. Don’t matter what they called me when I was born.’

I’d only ever known her as Suze, who lived in Doc Martens boots and vintage dresses and spoke to me like she was interested, never like I was just a little kid. She told me she had been beaten up, spat at, had bottles thrown at her front door. ‘Why did you stay living round here?’ I asked her.

‘Friends, love. Like your mum. This place is my home, where my friends are. Not many of them, mind, but they’re all I’ve got,’ she joked.

Mum and Suze would talk for ages while I sat at the kitchen table. ‘This won’t go away, Suze,’ Mum told her. ‘This’ll never go away.’

Neither, I thought, would the fact that people on our estate knew Suze was trans, but she had survived. Couldn’t Mum and I?

Eventually, Mum was officially released without charge, and Dad’s death was ruled an accident. Suze was wrong, though. There was no going back to normal for us on the

estate. Outside of our four walls, Dad had been the life of the party, a permanent fixture in the local, mates with everyone. Now, when Mum and I passed by, people either looked like they were trying really hard to act normal, or they just narrowed their eyes and stared. Most people stopped talking to us altogether. Even Mrs And-Why-Shouldn't-I? looked away when she saw us. I could just imagine her saying, 'I reckon that Mary's guilty – and why shouldn't I?'

Mum tried not to let it show that it upset her, but I could see it did. She held her head up and would even raise her eyebrow if someone stared at her. She'd just stare back, like she was daring them to say something. They never did.

The estate wasn't the same any more for Mum and me. Not that we'd ever properly been a part of it. Mum hadn't gone drinking down the club with Dad, or with any of the women who made sandwiches for the bar there. We'd always stuck out. It was as if he existed entirely separately to our life on the estate. And now, apart from Suze, and Sheila and Mike upstairs, it was out in the open – no one really liked us.

At Dad's funeral I heard some men, mates of my dad's from down the pub, talking about him. 'The place just won't be the same without him . . .'

'Too right. He was a good man.'

'Solid. Never backed out of a fight.'

Now that was something I knew already.

That day, all these strangers came up to Mum and introduced themselves. She smiled and thanked them for coming, even though something felt off. It was like they wanted to get a closer look at a dangerous animal at the zoo. But somehow, it felt like *we* were the ones in danger.

There was one woman at the funeral who didn't come up to us. She was stood at the back, sobbing so much that people were turning to look.

'Who is that, then?' Nan asked Mum.

Mum said, 'I have no fucking idea.'

It was the first time I'd ever heard my mum swear. It made me think maybe she did know who that woman was. That she felt the general threat in the air, same way I did.

*

Time went on. A year, two years. The crackle of danger around us never really let up. I learned to keep my head down at school. I only really talked to Deana, my best friend. We'd met when, in the first few days of Year Seven, our form teacher made us go around in a circle and tell everyone what we wanted to be when we were older. YouTuber and footballer came up a lot. So did popstar and TV presenter. A few said they wanted to work in a shop. When it got to Deana, sat there in her long skirt and hijab, she smirked and said, 'Nun.' Everyone cracked up.

Deana was funny. I was so proud I was her best friend.

She didn't really bother with anyone else. She didn't care what people thought of her, or if she was popular. 'I should have said "pornstar". Less controversial, innit,' she'd said that first day, after class.

Then we hit Year Nine, and it was time to choose our GCSE subjects.

'I'm not allowed to do Art *and* Drama, Mum. I've got to choose.'

'Well, which are you best at?' Mum asked.

'Dunno.'

Mum said I was more likely to make money doing acting than doing art. 'You could be in a film or on *EastEnders* or something, but no one is going to pay you to draw some fruit in a bowl, are they?'

Our teachers never got tired of telling us how important the next two years were. It was a constant drone.

Deana was taking the whole 'very important' thing much more seriously than I was. 'I wanna go to college,' she said. 'I've got to pass every single GCSE.'

'I wish I could just leave school now and get a job,' I told her.

'A job?' she said, scoffing a bit. 'Like what?'

'I don't know. Any job. Babysitter. Postie. Something like that.'

'Babysitter and postie are very different jobs. You don't want to get muddled up and deliver a baby instead of a letter.'

I gave her a shove, stifling a laugh. I loved her for taking the piss. She made me feel like things were normal. That I was normal.

I never told her the truth about why I really wanted a job.

*

A few weeks earlier, someone had painted 'murderer' in red paint over our door. I almost didn't notice it because I was rushing out the door to go to school. The lift came, which I wouldn't usually get, but it was right there so I got in. Just as the lift started to creak shut, I glanced at our front door. There was the big M, and then the rest of the letters were squashed to fit. The letters were like a giant invisible slap, right across my face.

I jumped back out of the lift, forcing my shoulder against the doors to get out.

'What have you forgotten?' Mum said when I raced back into the flat. She had on her tabard and was getting ready to go to work, cleaning one of the big houses on Brunswick Road.

I was crying. 'Mum, look what they've done!' And I pulled her to the door.

Mum stared at it. Her face was upset for a second, but she pushed it away, and then she just looked furious. 'After all this time? Why can't they all just leave us be? Run upstairs and ask Sheila if she's got any white spirit.'

Sheila came downstairs herself with the white spirit and some rags. ‘Monsters,’ she muttered as she began to scrub.

I wanted to stay and help, but Mum wasn’t having it. ‘Get to school,’ she ordered.

I left them there, both scrubbing, wishing I could get a job, make some money and get us out of this place. The feeling had stuck with me ever since.

Nan had FaceTimed me on the night of the painted door. ‘What did you expect? You live in a shithole. Tell your mum you need to come and live with me and your Auntie Jean till she gets back on her feet.’

Back when Dad was around, Nan never used to call or come over. He hadn’t liked her, I knew that much. But as soon as he was gone and Auntie Jean had bought Nan a camera phone, she was on FaceTime every day. Often I came home from school and Mum would say, ‘Go and have a chat with your nan, she’s on the kitchen table.’ And there she would be, propped up against the fruit bowl, waiting for me to have a natter.

‘Your dad wanted us out of the picture, you know – your mum’s family.’ It was like Nan had been waiting years to say what she really thought of Dad. ‘Your Auntie Jean, I could understand. She gets on the wrong side of *everybody*. But I can’t understand why he had a problem with me, Emma, I honestly can’t. Just because I had a bit too much to drink at

their wedding and shouted out “YOU CAN DO SO MUCH BETTER, MARY” during the ceremony.’

I grinned at the screen. ‘You didn’t actually, did you, Nan?’

‘Best believe I thought it! And there are some thoughts you can’t hide from people. They’re literally written all over your face, and I reckon he saw them clear as day.’

Nan’s idea about us moving in with her and Auntie Jean sounded better and better. It’d be a way out of our problems on the estate.

‘Why don’t we go live with Nan and Auntie Jean?’ I asked. They lived on the other side of London. Three buses away – miles from all the bad memories here.

Mum let out a scoff as she folded up the washing. ‘Not sure your Auntie Jean and me could live together for very long,’ she said. ‘I don’t want to be accused of another murder.’

‘What about just for a bit, see how it goes?’ Apart from Deana, Sheila upstairs and Suze, there was nothing and no one around here I would miss. But my mum wasn’t having it.

‘Your Auntie Jean reckons I’ve got airs and graces.’

‘If I had a sister, I’d want to live with her,’ I said, already feeling a sulk coming on.

‘Not if your sister was Jean, you wouldn’t. She scrounges off your nan, that’s literally all she does.’

‘She bought Nan an iPhone though, that’s not sponging.’

'Did she buy it though? And who off? Believe me, your Auntie Jean won't have the receipt for that phone.'

Auntie Jean's two girls, Becca and Jade, were older than me, eighteen and nineteen. 'Those two would be a bad influence and all. She lets them run wild,' Mum said, 'and they've got no plans to move out of your nan's. If nothing else, there'd hardly be room . . .'

At least they had the chance to run wild. I never did. You couldn't be on our estate at night unless you wanted to risk real trouble – especially after what happened with Dad. Even people who tried to do some good got driven away. A woman tried to set up a youth centre here once. Someone set fire to it in the night. She never came back. That's just how it was round here – and for the time being, I couldn't see a way out.