

ABOUT TWO YEARS BEFORE

‘Forgive me’

Meiling sits alone at the large centrepiece table in an impressively opulent banquet hall. She’s bored and unimpressed by the grandeur, but she’s enjoying the sultry solo jazz performer on the stage and her fourth glass of champagne of the night.

From her seat, she can see across the palatial hall, and it seems everyone but her husband is staring at her. They don’t smile or look away when she locks eyes with them either. She could easily pretend to be having a good time because she’s good at pretending. She once had a burgeoning career as an actress, but she quit. Dreams are for little girls, she told herself.

Her husband has been working the crowd for half an hour and hasn’t looked in her direction once. She turns away from the stage to search for him again in the lively room. All the men look almost identical in black tuxedos, but she easily spots him. She watches him, and he looks alien to her in a tuxedo, but it

handsomely fits his tall and lean frame. She sighs; she knows the worst is over as the dinner will finish soon. But just before she turns back to the stage, her husband catches her eye with a smile.

At fifty-one, age has been good to him. He has the vigour of a younger man and still has all his jet-black hair. He walks towards her, and a plump man follows him closely. She wears a well-practised smile and stands as they approach. In her high heels, she is the same height as her husband and almost a foot taller than the other man.

‘Monica, my beautiful wife,’ Meiling’s husband says to the other man.

‘Frank Robert, Hampstead and Kilburn MP,’ the man introduces himself with pride.

‘Nice to meet you, Frank,’ she says, and shakes his outstretched hand. He stands on his toes to kiss her on both cheeks. ‘Forgive my husband, call me Meiling; only my gran calls me Monica.’

‘Very well, Meiling,’ Frank says. ‘Your husband speaks highly of you, says you organised this all by yourself.’

‘Yes, she did,’ her husband interjects. ‘The Camden Children Together charity is very dear to her heart. Her father, you know, they took care of him as a boy.’

He turns to Meiling for confirmation, and she nods.

‘You’ve done a wonderful job,’ Frank says. ‘I thank you on behalf of Hampstead and Kilburn.’

‘My pleasure,’ she says and glances at her husband with a subtle but peculiar expression that only he will recognise – her simmering annoyance.

‘Go on, Frank,’ he says. ‘Enjoy yourself. I’ll see you soon, we’ll finish our chat.’

‘Sure,’ Frank says.

Frank politely smiles at Meiling, and she smiles back. Meiling continues to smile as she watches Frank walk away, and soon as Frank rejoins the crowd, she glares at her husband. But he’s oblivious to her glare because he’s watching the room.

He turns to her and genuinely smiles as he admires her.

‘Monica?’ she asks.

He shrugs. ‘Forgive me,’ he says. ‘But . . .’

‘But what?’ she asks and shakes her head in disgust. ‘Meiling is not good enough for your new friends? And no one else can hear you, so just talk normally.’

‘Ah, fuck,’ he mutters. ‘What’s wrong now?’ he asks in his true coarse London accent, which has a faint hint of Irish in it.

‘Nothing,’ she snaps. ‘I don’t like this place. These people look at me like trash.’

‘Who did?’

She chuckles. ‘What are you going to do about it?’ she asks. ‘Tell Frank?’

‘What?’

‘This isn’t you. You don’t belong here, and these stuck-up fucks know it. They know who you are. Everybody in London knows.’

‘I’m not hiding it, am I?’ he retorts. ‘This lot think I’m a changed man with more money than sense. That’s what matters here. Plus, they came, didn’t they? And there are press and paps in here and no one’s shying away from taking a photo

with me . . . enjoying my booze, my food. If this comes off, I'm sweet with this lot. Even get Frank's job in a few years. You'll live the life, and you'll enjoy it. For now, all you need to do is smile, okay?'

She shakes her head, and this angers him.

'Stop that shit,' he commands. 'There are people fucking watching. And smile, for fuck's sake.'

His tone stuns her, and she glares at him, but he looks away. She snatches a customised cigarette case from the table.

'What are you doing?' he asks.

'Going outside for a fag. What does it look like?'

'You're going to leave the bag?' he says, and gestures to a large handbag on the table.

'Yes, it's fucking heavy, you know that.'

'I know, and that's why you'll take it with you. I can't be watching it, and we can't leave that amount of cash lying around these vultures.'

'Why don't you—'

'Don't argue.'

He reaches into the bag and picks out a platinum security bracelet that's attached to it. He grabs her wrist and locks the security bracelet above an exquisite diamond bracelet, which deftly disguises it.

'Fuck this,' she says, and grabs the bag.

She attempts to strut past him, but he places a hand on her belly to stop her.

'Let one of the boys know you are outside,' he softly says. 'Don't want you out there alone looking this ravishing.'

She forces a smile, and he smiles back. She walks across the busy hall to a fire exit and barges out. The night is quiet and sparsely lit. She scans the street, and it's desolate. She walks a few steps to an area of the pavement not lit up by the street-lights, and with every step her stiletto heel produces a sharp sound that echoes into the night.

She places a cigarette between her lips and takes her time to light it. She takes a long drag and savours it before she slowly exhales.

The chill of the April night seeps through her thin dress, and she shivers. She could have gotten her jacket, but she didn't leave through the main entrance, past the cloakroom, because she didn't want one of her husband's boys guarding the entrance to follow her. She's grown tired of their constant presence in her life.

From the moment she started dating her husband – while he was still in his first marriage – her life became one of constant paranoia. Not hers, but his. He has her followed and guarded every minute of the day. He's without a doubt a jealous man, which has something to do with it, but he has a justified fear that she's a prime target for the vast collection of enemies he's amassed through his infamously violent decades in the London underworld.

She takes a last drag and tosses the stub to the ground. She snaps open the cigarette case.

'Gimme the bag!' someone says from behind her.

She turns around to two men wearing full head masks. The taller weedy man wears a Tony Blair mask, and the shorter

stocky man wears a Gordon Brown mask. Tony Blair holds a sawed-off shotgun to her face, but Gordon Brown is unarmed.

‘Gimme the bag!’ Tony Blair repeats in the most assertive voice he can muster in a whisper.

She takes a moment to study both men and grins before she blows the smoke in her mouth from her last drag towards Tony Blair.

‘What?’ Tony Blair asks. ‘You want to die?’

She doesn’t respond, and Tony Blair turns to Gordon Brown.

‘Why doesn’t anyone listen to me?’ Tony Blair asks.

Gordon Brown grunts and doesn’t take his eyes off her. Tony Blair shrugs and turns back to her.

‘Maybe cos you whine like a bitch,’ she says.

He’s surprised by her defiance and forces a chuckle. ‘Gimme the fucking bag now, or—’

‘Do you know who my husband is?’ she interrupts.

‘I don’t give a shit.’

She nods. She opens her mouth to speak but decides not to. She doesn’t want to indulge any further.

‘Please, talk, let’s hear it,’ Tony Blair says.

‘Just to make me happy,’ she says. ‘My husband will cut you both to pieces and feed you to his dogs. He loves those dogs. I don’t much care for them, but they’ve got to be fed.’

‘Believe me,’ Tony Blair says. ‘If not for the masks you’d see the horror in our faces.’ He chuckles. ‘Give me the fucking bag.’

‘No.’

Tony Blair shakes his head in frustration, and she smiles.

‘You expected me to be overwhelmed with fear and just

hand you the bag,' she says. 'But I'm not, and now you're fucked. Because you know who I am, you know who my husband is, and you can't touch me. Plus, I don't suppose you were just walking past on the prowl . . . wearing these ludicrous masks. Someone sent you for the bag. Someone on the inside.'

She shakes her head in disgust, and Tony Blair attempts to speak.

'No,' she commands. 'You're done. But I'll give you five seconds' head start before I scream, and my husband's boys come running. And you can tell whoever sent you that you couldn't have gotten the bag anyway.'

She extends her left arm to show that the bag is secured to her wrist, but Tony Blair is captivated by the glistening diamond bracelet.

'No . . .' she says.

In one sudden motion, Gordon Brown pulls a cleaver from his jacket and swings with full force clean through her wrist. The bag falls to the ground with her hand still attached, and before she can react, he hurls a fist onto the side of her head, and she collapses, unconscious.

'Suka,' Gordon Brown mutters in a deep, mature voice.

Tony Blair is stunned. 'Ah, shit! Holy fucking shit!' he says. 'Why the fuck did you do that?'

Gordon Brown ignores him and picks up the bag and the attached hand.

'You fucked me,' Tony Blair says. 'You fucking fucked me, man. Fucking hell!'

A GOOD DAY TO DIE

‘Shut up. Let’s go!’ Gordon Brown says with a pronounced Russian accent.

‘Fuck no!’ Tony Blair says, and runs away.

Gordon Brown grunts and runs off in the opposite direction.