The Frozen People

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Chapter 1

Ali

Monday, 9 January 2023

Alison Dawson can never cross the Old Kent Road without thinking of Monopoly. The brown square nobody wants. She used to play it with one of her husbands, she can't remember which, offhand. He'd thought it a sexy, Ali MacGraw/Steve McQueen type of thing when, in reality, it had just been a board game played – rather self-consciously – on the grubby carpet squares of a Travelodge. Hugo. That was the one. None of the others would be mean enough for a Travelodge.

It's a grey, unpropitious day. The start of a new year, the old one still visible in the shape of dying Christmas trees lying in the gutter, awaiting collection, and the words 'Ho ho ho' in cotton wool on the window of a Turkish barber's shop. It's not a scenic route to work but Ali hardly notices that anymore. Chicken Shacks, vape shops, boarded-up houses, graffiti promising that the Second Coming is on its way. About time too, thinks Ali. If she looks up, it's a different

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matter: she would see Georgian windows, moulded cornices, the occasional surprising glimpse of a phoenix or an angel standing guard on a rooftop. Ali does not look up today. She's late but not enough to worry about. She knows that time is a relative concept.

Ali is fifty, something that still surprises her when she says it aloud or when she has to scroll back on online forms to find 1972. She makes it a point of honour never to lie about her age or to say 'thank you' when someone says she doesn't look it. All the same, it's a shock to acknowledge that she has lived for half a century, has chalked up three husbands, one son and a career in the police force. In many ways, she feels the same as she did when a teenager in Hastings, standing looking out to sea in a self-consciously troubled way, thinking: when is my life about to start?

She waits for the lights to change, something which always amuses her son, Finn. 'You're not in sleepy Sussex anymore,' he tells her, 'you have to take your chances with London traffic.' Ali moved to the capital when Finn was only four. She was a single parent by then, working as a cleaner and living in a one-bedroom flat in Stratford, an area that hardly seemed part of the metropolis then but is now famous for hosting the Olympics. Ali crosses the road. She's heading towards a cliff face of office buildings, grey and featureless. There are shops at ground level and, above them, floor after floor of business premises. What do these people do all day? Ali often wonders. She catches sight of herself in the window of Bilal's Bagels. Bright red hair, black jacket, jeans and trainers. 'Not bad for fifty,' Ali tells herself and then changes it to 'not bad'. You have to watch ageism, even in an internal monologue.

The East End has changed since Ali moved here twenty-seven years ago but real Londoners, like her colleague John, say the

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skyline is almost unrecognisable now. The space-age buildings with their homely names – the Gherkin, the Cheesegrater – overshadow the Victorian churches and sixties tower blocks. But the building that houses the Cold Case Unit – so cold they are frozen, Bud says – wouldn't appear on anyone's list of memorable examples of city architecture. Number 14 Eel Street is so anonymous as to be almost invisible: plate-glass façade, featureless lobby with two lifts, one of which is permanently out of order, signs for Fire Exits and Toilets. There's an old-fashioned noticeboard, the type with removable letters, that lists the businesses spread over the five storeys. Ali's office, the Department of Logistics, a title that is both weighty and vague, is on the third floor. Ali considers the lift but pushes open the door to take the stairs. She threw her Fitbit into the Thames two weeks ago, but she still likes to get her step count in. 'Can't be unfit in our job,' says Geoff, despite not having seen his feet in living memory.

Ali takes a break on the second-floor landing and checks her phone in case anyone thinks she's out of breath. A reminder from her book group. They're meeting tonight and Ali hasn't got around to reading *Conversations with Friends*. And there's a text from her son, Finn: 'Terry fine. Bit me once. Now under table.' Finn is looking after Ali's deranged cat, Terry. She texts back, 'Thanks love,' and steels herself to finish the climb.

Dina is the only person in the office. She's eating microwaved porridge in a pot.

'This stuff tastes like death.'

'It's good for you. It's not meant to taste nice.'

'Isn't anything that's good for you nice?'

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'Sex?' suggested Ali. 'Want a coffee?'

'Coffee's meant to be good for you these days, isn't it?' says Dina. 'I can't keep up.'

'In moderation,' says Ali. 'It's always in moderation.' A concept she struggles with, to be honest.

Dina and Ali are sometimes called 'the twins', although there is a fifteen-year age gap between them and Dina is black and Ali is white. Their only physical similarity is that they both have a small gap between their front teeth, but police nicknames are like that.

'How's Terry?' asks Dina, as Ali collects their mugs on her way to the kitchen.

'Much better,' says Ali. 'He bit Finn this morning.'

'Poor Finn,' says Dina, who always takes Finn's side.

'He's a Tory. He's used to it.'

Finn would say that he isn't a Tory, he just works for them. Sometimes that distinction doesn't seem quite enough for Ali. As she waits for the kettle to boil, she washes the cups in a half-hearted way. Sometimes Bud has a real blitz and cleans everything with bleach, which Ali says is more unhealthy than germs. The kitchen is as dreary as everything else in Eel Street: Formica cabinets, chipped tiles, stained sink with only one tap working. But Ali hardly notices because this is home, even down to the poster for a comedy night Bud attended in 2018. He loves stand-up although, amongst the team, he is often several minutes behind on a joke.

Ali makes the coffee adding an extra spoonful of Nescafé for herself – she has a serious caffeine habit – and carries the mugs back into the open-plan area. Her desk is at right angles to Dina and faces John. It's a view she's grown used to: John's West Ham

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water bottle, the underwater mural on the building opposite, the venetian blinds that are never quite straight.

'Thanks,' says Dina, when Ali puts the mug on her desk, avoiding Tom, the spider plant.

'Is Geoff in?' Ali nods towards the closed door of their boss's office. 'Should I have made him a coffee?'

'He was here earlier,' says Dina. 'He was asking for you.'

'What did he want? Do you think it's another case?'

'I asked if we were going through the gate again and he said, "It's a fucking five-bar gate."'

'Geoff swore? Shit.'

'Yeah. I tried to make him put a pound in the swear box but he pretended not to hear me.'

'Come in, Alison.' Geoff waves at the visitors' chair with a lordly gesture that dislodges his 'World's Best Boss' mug, an ironical present from Ali that she fears was taken literally. Luckily, it's empty. Geoff often misses out on the coffee run. Ali picks the mug up and puts it back in slightly the wrong place, just for the fun of it. Geoff moves it back.

'Alison,' she says. 'This must be serious, Geoffrey.'

'It's interesting,' says Geoff, and tries a smile. His husband, Bobby, once told him that smiling releases molecules that fight stress but, in truth, Geoff's face is made for tragedy. All the lines point downwards.

'Am I going through the gate?' asks Ali. If it's tonight, she won't have to go to book club.

'It's a different gate,' says Geoff. 'A gate to the nineteenth century.'

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'The nineteenth century? But that's Tudor times.'

'Do you say these things to annoy me, Alison?' says Geoff. 'I thought you had a degree in history.'

'I do,' says Ali. 'From Queen Mary's.' She waves in the vague direction of the Mile End Road.

'Then you must know the Tudors were the sixteenth century,' says Geoff.

Strictly speaking, the Tudor reign started in the fifteenth century, with the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, but Ali doesn't think that Geoff is in the mood to be contradicted.

'My degree was mostly about the Married Women's Property Act,' she says. 'Did you really say that we're going back to Tudor—sorry, Victorian times?'

'Let me explain,' says Geoff, settling himself in his chair. Please do, thinks Ali.

The first two are a surprise though. 'Isaac Templeton.'

'*Who?!*' Ali, who had decided to hear Geoff out in silence, can't resist an exclamation.

'Isaac Templeton. The justice minister.'

'I know. My son works for him.'

Geoff has met Finn several times. He even gave him some advice when Finn was thinking of applying for the civil service, Geoff being an expert on institutional form-filling. But, for a moment, the boss looks genuinely confused.

'Your son?'

'Yes, Finn. He's a spad. A special advisor.'

'That's . . . well . . . that's interesting. Because Isaac Templeton's great-great-grandfather was suspected of murdering three women in the 1850s. There wasn't enough evidence to convict him, but it's

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always been a stain on the family honour. Isaac is writing a book about his family and he wants to be able to present evidence of his ancestor's innocence. That's where we come in.'

Geoff leans back as if all is explained whereas, in Ali's opinion, all he has done is invite more questions. And did he really say, 'a stain on the family honour'? Are they in the nineteenth century already?

'How did Isaac Templeton find out about us? I thought only the Prime Minister and the home secretary knew.'

The Department of Logistics, or the frozen people, as Bud calls them, was set up by Geoff ten years ago. Ali joined in 2015. When she was recruited she assumed they were working on cold cases and she still remembers her shock when she realised that their goal was actually, physically, to travel in time. Then she met Jones and it all seemed possible. The government have given them limited resources, all contained within the grim façade of Eel House, but Ali has never been sure exactly who knows what.

'Some higher up members of government are also aware of our operations,' says Geoff, sounding pompous, as he always does when challenged. 'Templeton is, of course, the secretary of state for justice.'

'I know.' *Minijus*, Finn calls it, which sounds like a particularly unpleasant diet drink.

'As such,' says Geoff, at his most pontifical, 'Templeton has followed our work in the Mulholland Case.'

Laura Mulholland disappeared in 1976. Her adult children were convinced that she was killed by her second husband, Steven, but there was no evidence. Until Ali and Dina visited and saw Steven burying Laura in the back garden of their house in Chiswick. In 1979 the house was knocked down and flats built in its place. Geoff

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is trying to get permission to dig up the car park, but the case is no longer seen as a priority. Steven died in 1992. They haven't even been able to tell Laura's children but, as Jones says, '*We* know and that's something.' It doesn't always seem enough though.

'The Mulholland case was a genuine miscarriage of justice,' says Ali, remembering the blood and dirt on Steven Mulholland's hands as he washed at the outdoor sink. 'Isaac is only writing a book. Are we really going to use the gate just to help him sell more copies?'

'It's an opportunity, Jones says.'

That explains a lot. But not everything. Jones still sees the team primarily as research assistants.

'We're waiting for Jones's report,' says Geoff. 'In the meantime, Isaac wants to meet you to put you in the picture.'

'He wants to meet me?'

'He's asked for you especially, I believe.'

Ali is surprised into silence. Outside she can hear Dina singing, 'Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think.'

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