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A SONG OF ISOLATION

Written by **Michael J. Malone**

Published By **Orenda Books**

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A SONG OF ISOLATION

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**ORENDA
BOOKS**

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First published in the UK in 2020 by Orenda Books
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-913193-36-2
eISBN 978-1-913193-37-9

Typeset in Garamond by typesetter.org.uk

Printed and bound by 4edge Ltd, Essex

For sales and distribution, please contact *info@orendabooks.co.uk* or visit *www.orendabooks.co.uk*.

Prologue

London, 2010

She sat in the back of the parked taxi, hand tight on the handle of the door, and looked around, scanning the street for strangers.

‘You okay, Miss Hart,’ the driver asked.

‘I’m...’ It always took her by surprise when people recognised her. She’d only been in three movies so far, two as a background character and one as the main character’s best friend. ‘...Fine. I’m fine, thanks.’ She met his gaze in the rear-view mirror. His expression was open, growing concern in the strip of face she could see as he read her lack of movement.

She felt her pulse thrum in her throat and forced a long, slow breath, hearing the quiver of it in the shell of the car. It’s fine. Everything will be fine. Leaning forward in her seat, she looked around herself again, cursing the poor light.

Then she thought of that morning, just a week ago, waking up and finding a small photo beside her on the pillow. A photograph of her own sleeping face, with just enough of her shoulders showing above the bedclothes to see the blue pyjama top she was wearing at that very moment.

She’d screamed, jumped out of bed and checked every window, every door, every cupboard. Looked under her bed, checked the shower, looked behind every door again. Then she called the police.

‘We’ll send someone round as soon as we can,’ the person said.

‘Just like you did the other nine times I called.’ She couldn’t keep the sarcasm from her voice, and had hung up. There had been other strange happenings: letters in the post every day for a month, each one saying if she didn’t return his love he’d kill

himself; panties missing from her washing line; small love hearts drawn in the corners of her windows with spray paint.

This was the first time she'd been back here since the photo mysteriously settled on her pillow.

'Anything I can do?' the driver asked. He hadn't talked too much during the journey from the studios. Only to ask about the movie she was working on. And to say he'd read in a movie magazine that they thought this new one was going to be her breakout role. 'Fancy being in a movie with Tom Hardy,' he added. 'My missus proper fancies him.'

He'd taken her low-key response as a cue not to ask anything more.

'Can I book you in for noon tomorrow, please?' she asked. She was due on set with Tom at 2.00 pm. That would give her time to get through make-up and wardrobe, and have a quick read through the scene.

'Noon tomorrow.' The driver took his phone from its holder on the dashboard and scrolled onto another page. 'That's fine, I'm available.'

'And ... can you wait until I'm inside before driving off?' She almost asked him to go into the house and check it for her, but she hated appearing so weak.

'Course, mate,' the driver replied, his eyes crinkling in a manner he probably thought reassuring, but it just looked creepy when all she could see was the back of his head and his eyes in a strip of mirror. 'I always do for my ladies.'

'Thanks,' Amelie said. Then she read the price on the meter, found a note in her handbag and handed it to him. 'Keep the change.'

She braced herself, and opened the door. Staying at Lisa's had been a welcome retreat, but she couldn't continue to impose on her friend, and she couldn't let this freak, whoever he was, run her life.

On the pavement, she scanned the house. The creep of the ivy

over the large sandstone blocks, handsome bay windows either side of the oak door, the lion-head brass knocker. It looked exactly the same as when she'd left. Just as it was the first time she'd seen it and fell in love and couldn't not take over the rental. But that simple image had tarnished what had once been her haven.

Like most of the homes in this part of London the house was set back from the street by a small front garden. Six paces and she was up her garden path and at the door. As she walked she rummaged in her bag for her keys.

With a start she realised they weren't in the little zipped compartment in the side wall of the bag. Nor in the middle section. She pushed aside her purse, her diary, her phone, fingers scrabbling for the tell-tale solid metal. Where were they?

She became aware of movement in her peripheral vision. To her right. Coming up from behind the still-waiting taxi.

Jesus. Where were her keys? She remembered checking on them when she'd left Lisa's that afternoon.

A cough. Her head whipped round. A man. Head bowed, wearing a flat cap, walking slowly.

Mouth dry, she dug furiously through her bag. Where were they? How many times had she told herself to get a smaller bag?

She tried the zipped compartment again. There they were. She exhaled in relief. How had she missed them?

Key now in hand, she thrust it into the lock, but before she opened the door she turned. The man was at the top of her path. The streetlight just above cast him in a jaundiced glow.

He grunted. 'Evening, sweetheart.'

'Oh, hi, Mr Denby.' She almost sagged with relief against the door. It was only the old man from three doors down.

'Told ya,' he chuckled, 'it's Larry.'

'Course it is. Larry,' she said and worked a smile into her expression.

'Lovely evening,' And with a tip of his hat he continued on his way.

Waiting for a moment till her heart slowed, Amelie turned the key in the lock, opened the door and stepped inside. Before she shut it, she waved at the driver. He returned the gesture and drove off.

Inside, back against the door, she listened as the car moved away, then she strained to hear if there was any other noise in the house.

Silence.

The familiar sounds of the area registered. A dog barked from somewhere behind her. A door slammed next door. A car, then another, drove past. Someone, a child, called out to a friend as they ran past. Life, moving on, completely unmindful of her troubles.

She put the chain on and clutched the keys in her fist, one pointing out from between two fingers like a makeshift knuckle-duster. A stunt guy on her last movie had shown her this little trick when weird things first started to happen in her life. She suspected it wouldn't cause much damage, but she felt reassured by it. If anyone came at her she'd aim for the eyes. Make as much of a mess as she could before running to safety.

Keeping her footfall as light as she could she made her way down the long hall, past the dining-room door and through into the kitchen. The back door was locked, just as she left it, and all of the windows were closed.

Retracing her steps, she went back down the hall and edged into the living room. All the seats were vacant, the windows shut.

But the curtains were open. Meaning if he was out there he could see everything.

On her hands and knees, she crawled over the carpet to the large bay windows, and eventually, with a lot of tugging and some heavy breathing she managed to close them. Then she made her way onto the sofa, where she collapsed.

What are you doing, she asked herself?

Who crawls along their living-room floor to shut their curtains?

She looked down at her hands, they were shaking. Wine would help; she could almost hear Lisa's voice. And smiled. And felt that smile loosen the muscles in her neck, in her back, all the way down to her feet.

She was safe. There was no need to worry.

A noise.

A creak as someone moved above her head.

In her bedroom.

Without thought, barely breathing, she made her way towards the door as silently as she could. From the creak of the old floorboards she could tell whoever was up there was also on the move.

At the living-room door she paused. Thought about her phone. Would she have time to call? No, her best plan was to get the hell out of this house.

Now.

Folding herself into a crouch she stuck her head beyond the doorway and looked up. There, as if inhabiting the shadows at the top of the stairs, stood a man.

Cursing her decision to put the chain on she charged at the door. The man thundered down the stairs. Fumbling with the chain, she managed to release it. Hand on the snib lock, she turned.

The door was open. Just.

He was right behind her.

He slammed her into the door and it closed.

She tried to scream, but a hand clasped over her mouth. There was some sort of cloth in his hand. With a sweet, chemical scent. She felt the weight of him crush her against the door. His hardness at her hip. Hot breath, and beard bristles scratching her ear as he whispered:

'Do as I say and you'll get out of this alive.'

Chapter 1

Lanarkshire, Scotland, 2015

There was a knock at the door.

Loud and firm.

‘You going to get that?’ Amelie looked at her boyfriend, beside her on the sofa, thought about the bottle of champagne she’d found hidden at the back of the cupboard under the sink, and was relieved there might be some sort of a distraction.

Was he really going to do it? Now? Today?

Shit.

How was she going to respond?

She shifted in her seat, and, plucking a cushion from the pile at her side, placed it over her tummy.

‘Wish you’d stop that,’ said Dave. It may have been her imagination responding to the champagne sighting, but he seemed a little on edge. ‘You’re not fat.’

‘And you’re still not going to the door,’ she replied with an inner grimace. She hated it when he did that. Read her movements and got them spot on. ‘Anyway, it’s nearly dinner time. Why are you snacking?’ she asked, looking at the giant packet of crisps beside him on the sofa. Another giveaway, she thought. He always ate when he was nervous.

‘Starving,’ he said. ‘Doing the garden’s hungry work.’ Then he laughed, leaned forward and snuffled at her neck.

Despite herself she laughed, but then pushed him away. Then felt guilty for doing so. She’d been doing a lot of that lately. Feeling guilty. About how she was treating him.

‘You okay?’ he asked, his tone all honest concern as he leaned back into his cushion.

‘Door?’ she repeated,

‘It’s probably someone trying to sell us something. Ignore it ... they’ll go away,’ Dave said, brushing crisp crumbs from his jeans.

‘It’s Good Friday and nearly dinner time. Who’s going to be selling stuff at this hour?’

‘Someone who’s desperate.’ He sat back in his seat and regarded her. ‘You okay, honey? Something bothering you?’

She crossed her arms, thinking she wasn’t ready to unburden herself in case she said something she would later regret. When they’d met she was Amelie Hart, movie star. One-hit wonder, to be precise. Against all the odds, and after a few flops, her fourth movie had hit the public consciousness and the great unwashed couldn’t get enough of her.

Her dream came true.

Except the dream came with a whole lot of baggage she couldn’t deal with. Most of which Dave knew nothing about, and that was why he couldn’t understand why she was always reluctant to answer the door.

It sounded again. Amelie turned away from it and pulled her knees up to her chest as if that might form some kind of protection.

‘Jesus, they’re not for giving up, are they?’ Dave looked over his shoulder in the direction of the front of the house. He got to his feet as if it was a huge effort. ‘I’ll get it then, will I?’

‘Please?’

Whoever it was, Amelie hoped it was something important. Something big enough to distract Dave from asking a question she wasn’t sure how to answer.

Chapter 2

Dave walked to the door, checking the little box was still in his pocket, aware he was possibly about to make a huge mistake, but unable to step aside from the path he had decided upon.

A marriage proposal would do it, right? Clarify Amelie's mind as to what she wanted. He couldn't bear the thought of life without her, and he was all but certain she only needed a nudge to settle things in her own mind once and for all. And he needed to risk that nudge because the uncertainty was driving him mad.

To be fair, he was lucky to have her.

The Amelie Hart shared a home with him. They'd met in the north of Scotland, up by Loch Morlich. He'd been there on holiday on his own. Nearing the end of a week he'd devoted to learning about forestry in an estate nearby. It was a job he'd long wanted to do, but Dad insisted he go to university and get the required qualification to join the family accountancy firm. It hadn't stopped his longing to be in among the other, more important to the planet, green stuff, so he'd jumped at the chance he was offered while attending a stuffy champagne reception for some equally stuffy law firm. One of the partners had just invested in an estate 'up there' – he'd waved his hand lazily, struggling to remember the name of the place, as if the entirety of the Highlands of Scotland hung in the air just above his head. Dave perked up at the mention of it and said he'd always wanted to work on the land, and it was arranged. A week's work experience. He remembered the feeling of elation, and the lawyer's look of incredulity.

Amelie had been walking between one of the lodges on the estate and the local shop, at a time when she had disappeared from public view. Romantic cliché alert, they would always say as they

recounted this to new acquaintances: she'd dropped one of her gloves, he raced after her to return the errant item.

Their eyes met.

And hearts collided.

It helped that he had no idea who she was. Most of his time was spent at work, and what free time he did have he was countering the effects of sitting hunched over a computer by training down at the local rugby club, so the world of film and TV celebrity completely passed him by.

Must have been all that fresh air. Why else would he have taken one look at this amazing woman and asked her if she wanted to go and see – the first thing he thought of – the local reindeer herd? Amazingly, she said yes, and the rest was history.

But the most recent part of that history was worrying. There were too many times when he entered a room and she'd hurriedly finish the conversation she was having on her phone. A phone that was more than ever stuck to the side of her head. The way she covered up whenever she came out of the shower, whereas nudity had never bothered her before. Then there were the long silences, when the air between them had always been filled with words and laughter.

He'd asked her if she needed to get back into that world.

'It's not all glamour, you know,' she'd said as she tucked a strand of flaxen hair behind a perfect ear. Dave could watch her all day, just doing simple things like that. He'd joke with her; it was because she was half French – full breeds just don't have that exoticism he'd say. There *was* an effortless grace to her that ordinary humans lacked; there was a good reason the camera loved her.

'It's beyond boring. And stressful. Worrying whether people will like your hair, your dress or even the bloody shade of lipstick you're wearing. It's exhausting.' No, she went on to say, her charity work and her yoga were where her life was at, for the foreseeable.

Exhausting it may have been, but Dave knew Amelie well enough to see that whatever she had in her life at this point, no matter how much she protested, wasn't enough for her.

And worryingly, he was no longer sure that he was enough for her anymore.

The letterbox creaked open and a voice boomed, 'Mr Robbins. It's the police. Will you please open up?'

Chapter 3

Amelie's phone rang. She watched Dave's back as he walked towards the front door. Read the tension in it as he moved away. He deserved more than this from her. He deserved a woman who would be every bit as kind, gentle and considerate as he was.

She pushed a breath through her pursed lips and heard a note of frustration in that small expulsion of air.

The screen on her phone displayed a name. Lisa. The one friend who remained from her time in the limelight. She'd played her best friend in Amelie's first movie, and happily their on-screen chemistry had been real. The only thing about that movie that actually worked, she remembered ruefully. From the moment they met they'd sensed the other was on the exact same wavelength. Now, though, they rarely got together, as Lisa's career had rocketed, meaning she had her own team of paparazzi who followed her about, but the two women spent hours on the phone. It seemed that Lisa's function, other than to listen to her complaints, was to alert her to any news stories that were about to break about her.

Even four years after walking away from it all, the press, and by extension the public, were still fascinated about why she had abandoned the opportunity to live the life that most people wanted. Lisa had lots of media contacts so she was happy to alert Amelie that a fresh batch of paps might be beating their way to her door. 'Get the wide-brimmed hat and the large sunglasses out, darling,' she'd say. 'The vultures are about to come calling.'

Looking at the screen for a moment, Amelie cancelled the call. She couldn't even be bothered speaking to her best friend.

'Have you told him yet?' Lisa had demanded, the last time they spoke.

‘Oh, Leece,’ she replied, and sank back into the sofa.

‘Don’t *oh Leece* me, Amelie. You need to put the poor schmuck out of his misery.’

‘But I don’t know if I want to dump him. I’m not even sure he’s the problem.’

‘What *is* the problem?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I’m calling bullshit on that, honey. You know.’ Lisa’s tone weighted the word *know* with a burden of importance. ‘You just don’t want to face up to it.’

‘But what if I’m wrong and I lose out on one of the best things that has happened to me?’

‘What’s meant to be, is meant to be.’ Lisa had a strange relationship with the notion of fate. When it suited her, something was *meant to be*. When it was an inconvenient notion, she railed against it. She was as capricious as the weather on a mountain top, and Amelie loved her for it. Life was never dull with Lisa wittering in her ear. ‘He came along at the right time, honey. That’s how life works. Just when you needed something – *someone* – solid in your life, he appeared. Now you’re going through another transition and you need to face up to that. If he’s still there at the other side, great. If not, he’ll hopefully find someone as amazing as you.’

Amelie snorted, mentally retreating from the compliment. ‘Me? Amazing? I’m a witch.’

‘You’re being too harsh on yourself, babes. Relationships change. People move on. We *have* to move on, or it just gets too...’

‘What about you and Pretty Boy?’ Amelie interrupted. She’d already had enough of talking about herself. Pretty Boy was what she called Lisa’s latest lover. He was a hot young actor, famous for taking his shirt off in TV period dramas, and for not having too much between the ears.

‘Oh, I dumped his scrawny ass,’ Lisa cackled. ‘Haven’t you been keeping up to date with the goss?’ She paused. ‘Sorry, I forgot you have no access to the wider world in that little haven of yours.’

Don't you even have satellite TV? Lisa had asked her, incredulous, when she first moved in.

Her haven was an estate in the Lanarkshire countryside. It offered them the best of both worlds. A manageable daily commute for Dave into Glasgow, and for Amelie, spirit-reviving time in the heart of nature. The family who had owned it for generations had hit on hard times and sold the whole lot to a development company. The big house had been converted into luxury flats, and the stable block renovated into a row of quaint mews cottages. She owned the largest, end cottage and fell in love with it the moment she stepped inside.

It even came with its own cat, a tortoiseshell named George. The previous owners had tried a number of times to take him to their new place, but each time they'd carted him off in the back of their car to their new home five miles away, he'd turned up a week or so later, licking a paw as if to say, *Well, that was a bit of a walk.*

Never was a cat person, or so she thought, but George managed to worm his way into her heart – that purr of content as he lay on her lap became part of the music of the cottage, and the last time the previous owners turned up to collect him again, she suggested, hoping she didn't sound too desperate, that he stay with her.

Said cat padded into the room. Sat in the middle of the floor. Curled his tail around his feet and stared at her.

'Needing fed, George?' she asked him. He opened his mouth and let out a long, low noise. Amelie had counted a 'vocabulary' of about ten different sounds that George used to communicate. She hadn't managed to work out which noise equated to which need, as he seemed to change them at his own whim.

She heard a rumble from the front door. Two different male voices. A long silence and then a high-pitched, in-panic Dave as he shouted, 'Amelie?'

Chapter 4

Dave made out two tall figures through the small marbled-glass insert on the front door. They looked as if they were in uniform and they were both wearing hats. The police?

His first worry was for his father. He was in his early sixties, still spent long hours at the office, and had a large paunch and a ruddy complexion thanks to a career of liquid lunches. He was a heart attack in waiting as far as Dave was concerned, so with a charge of worry in his stomach, he reached for the door and pulled it open.

There were two policemen and one policewoman. Behind them like a squat reminder of officialdom was their police car. None of the officers was smiling.

It takes three cops to tell me that Dad's ill? Or dead? Dave became aware of a tremble in his thighs and steeled himself. He thought of his mother. She was the most fragile being he'd ever met. Shit, how must his mum be feeling? He had to go to her.

'Mr Robbins? Mr David Robbins?'

'Yes, that's me. Can I help you?' His voice was a squeak. He cleared his throat. 'Is my dad okay?' His mind was racing away from him. He should ask them all in. They were working on a public holiday, poor bastards, he should at least offer them a coffee. Then he dismissed the thought as silly, processed the correct movements to place a smile on his face, while bracing himself against the side edge of the door.

'We've received a complaint from your neighbours, Mr Robbins, that you touched their daughter, Damaris, inappropriately.'

'Wait. Damaris? Next door? Me?'

The policeman on the right stepped forward. Metal glinting in

his hands. Handcuffs. Dave felt his face flush. Watched as the cop continued his movement: hand on his shoulder, pulling him round and out of the doorway onto the path. He felt his arms being held behind his back and the pinch of steel on his wrists as his arms were secured in position.

Later on as he reflected over events he'd hear himself shouting for Amelie. Think it was pathetic, but wondered what else he could have done.

'We are placing you under arrest, Mr Robbins,' the policeman continued, his tone polite. Might have been remarking that this was nice weather for an April Easter, for all the threat in his voice. But there was a threat, thought Dave as his stomach grew heavy. His vision narrowed. Pressure on his sphincter. And he was aware of all of this as if from a distance.

The policeman was still talking. His voice coming to him through a fog of confusion. Under the something-something act he was being taken to the local police station for questioning.

A neighbour from the stables opposite opened her door, stepped outside, took one look at the tableau in front of her and, face white, went back inside.

'It's all a mistake,' he shouted at her. Mrs Wallace. She was a nice old dear. With a bad heart, she was fond of saying. She wouldn't be able to handle all this excitement.

He was guided over to the police car. The back door on the near side was pulled open. Pressure on his head. He ducked and sat inside. Almost before he had his feet positioned in the footwell, the door was slammed shut.

Amelie was at the door of the cottage, her face pale and long. She shouted. Her voice reached his ears as if through a time delay.

'Dave? Dave? What the hell's going on?'

She approached the car and knocked on the window. Her face loomed before him, her expression twisted with fear and worry. *Lawyer*, she was saying. *I'll get you a lawyer.*

'S'okay,' he shouted, determined to display a stoic front. He

could handle this. Everything would be okay. Except it wasn't. They claimed he'd touched her inappropriately. What did that even mean? What did Damaris say to her mother that made her phone the police?

Mentally, he ran through the encounter that afternoon. It was just like many other occasions in the garden. The girl was bored. There were no other kids on the estate to play with. He'd given her the time of day loads of times. She would circle him on her bike, judging if he would be up for some fun. Then he'd feel sorry for her, giving in and giving her half an hour of his time. Throwing a ball, or playing with a hula hoop, willing to look like an idiot for a few seconds to win the prize of her laughter.

Today was a little different from the usual. He had work to do and he had his tools around him on the lawn. And he did warn her she might fall off.

As if at some silent signal two of the police officers and Amelie disappeared inside the cottage, leaving Dave alone in the car. He looked around and saw his neighbours around the little square, one by one, look out of their window or front door, and take in the sight of him in the backseat of a police car.

'It's all been a mistake. A huge mistake,' he shouted. But no one could hear him, and they all ducked their heads and retreated back into their houses. He imagined them all pinking a little at the shame he'd brought into their little enclave. It was just not the done thing to be seen in the back of a police car. Whatever would we have next? People shooting up heroin?

'Shit,' Dave whispered, feeling fear claw at his gut. He studied the door handles, but with his hands behind his back they were unreachable. In any case, the central locking was sure to be activated and the doors could only be opened from the outside.

The car was facing the exit, so he tried to twist round in order to look back at number six – the Browns' door. He'd maybe catch their eye, get them over to the car and ask them to tell the police that it was all a big mistake. Sure, he maybe manhandled Damaris

to keep her safe – he could remember picking her up, one hand under each oxtar – but he'd never do anything dodgy.

There was no one there.

If he could just speak to Roger and Claire. Clear this misunderstanding up.

As if by magic, Roger appeared and marched towards the police car. His red face and clenched fists were not a good sign. He pushed the cop who was by the car so hard he fell onto his back, then he wrenched the door open and dived in.

'This is a terrible misunderstanding, Rodge,' Dave shouted.

'Don't fucking, Rodge me, you evil prick. When I'm done with you...' The rest of what he was saying was lost in a snarl as Roger began to punch at Dave. The confined space meant he couldn't get much purchase on his swings, but he still managed to connect a couple of times, once on the bottom lip, before the cop got back to his feet and pulled Roger away.

The door slammed shut and Dave was alone once again. Head bowed, ignoring the physical pain. But what did that matter, really? That would fade – but Roger's fury...? The man truly and deeply believed that Dave had harmed his little girl.

'But it's not true,' he shouted. 'It's all a mistake.'

A horrible mistake. The police would come to see it. The Browns would come to see it, and he'd be allowed back inside and everyone could get on with their lives as if it never happened.

Chapter 5

'Name, please?' one of the police officers asked her, as they stood in an awkward clump of human flesh in her narrow hallway.

'Amelie Hart,' she said, feeling that was all a bit unnecessary. Judging by the way he was staring at her he knew exactly who she was, and couldn't wait to phone all his mates later to say whose house he'd been in.

Then she felt a stab of resentment. Her hard-won sanctuary was lost, thanks to that stupid little girl – she'd heard that much from the exchange at her door. But with a cringe of guilt she forced that down. How could she be so selfish? This was about Dave and how his life was going to be affected, because not for a second did she believe the allegation.

'May we come in?' the policeman said.

'You *are* in,' she replied, crossing her arms.

It's like that is it? the man's expression read.

'We've had a complaint of sexual contact between a man named Dave Robbins and a child under the age of thirteen. We'll expect you down the station...'

At that Amelie almost detected a smile. This was clearly the most exciting thing that had happened to this guy in years. His eyes roamed over the cottage, and then over her.

The policewoman took over, sending her colleague a look of admonishment. 'We'd like you to come down and give a statement, please, Miss Hart. In the meantime what can you tell us about this afternoon's events?'

'Nothing, really. I'm mystified as to what's supposed to have happened.'

'Were you in the house this afternoon?' the policewoman asked, undeterred by Amelie's brevity.

'I had yoga class this lunchtime, stopped off at Tesco for some shopping and was home from about two pm onwards.'

'And what did you do from two till now?'

'Sat on the sofa and read. One of Maggie O'Farrell's ... What's going to happen here?'

Bloody hell.

How could a normal day turn into a nightmare so quickly?

'What exactly is Dave supposed to have done?' she demanded, looking at each of the officers. 'And are three of you really required? By all means come through...' she said, and moved into the open-plan living and dining space, thinking, *Let them see how modestly we live.*

A large sofa sat in the space in front of the patio doors. It had red, plump, velvety cushions, was a little worn, but looked much loved. She sat in the middle of that, legs crossed, arms wide resting along the back of the settee, hoping she was presenting an image of a strong, capable woman. One who would never allow herself to be caught up in something as tawdry as a child-molestation claim.

The novel she had been reading was on the long, low coffee table in front of her.

'Can you tell us, as far as you know, what Mr Robbins was doing this afternoon?' The older male officer was back in charge, the tilt of his chin telling her he wasn't impressed by her theatrics. *Oh, but you are*, she thought, as she uncrossed and crossed her legs, from left over right to right over left. Since a very young age she'd been aware of the power her unusual beauty conferred on her, and however shallow it might be, she was prepared to use it to her advantage if the need arose.

'Dave loves his little patch of garden. He was out there most of the afternoon, taking advantage of the dry weather...' She smiled at each of the officers in turn. *This is how much I feel I have to worry about this nonsense charge*, she was telling them. 'I heard Damaris singing at one point as she went past the doors and further into

the garden. She popped her head in first. Said hi, and then went off to annoy ... sorry, find Dave.'

'That suggests habit?' The female's tone made this a question. Amelie noticed a small notebook in her hand. Pen scratching over the page.

Amelie paused before answering. Could she be hinting at some kind of grooming practice? Didn't paedophiles do that? They thought Dave was a paedophile? Jesus. She had been about to say that Damaris's parents ignored her and she practically brought herself up, but she edited that. 'There are no other kids on the estate.' Shrug. And she knew there was an elegance to that movement that could captivate. After all she'd seen herself do it on the big screen. 'Now and again she pops in, asks me a lot of questions about being in the movies...' See, it wasn't just Dave. 'Then goes off to find him. Most times he fobs her off. What does a grown man have in common with a little girl, after all? But occasionally he feels bad and gives her a moment or two.'

'And today?' the female asked.

'I heard and saw nothing until Dave came back in complaining that Damaris was extra annoying. He said she caught her bike on the flex of the lawn mower, fell off and hurt herself.'

'You saw and heard nothing more?'

Amelie gestured towards the novel on her coffee table.

'Mind if we take a look in the back garden?' the male cop asked.

'Please. Be my guest.' Amelie shot a look over her shoulder. 'The door's open.'

Before he made for the door, his head cocked as if he'd heard something that concerned him and instead he went back the way he'd come in.

As he moved away Amelie looked at the only cop now in the room. 'PC...?'

'Talbot.'

'PC Talbot, don't tell me you're taking this claim seriously?' asked Amelie.

Talbot's brow furrowed. 'We take all claims seriously, Miss Hart.'

'Of course you do,' Amelie agreed, allowing her features to soften. 'People who suffer from this kind of thing have to feel safe enough to come forward. I can't imagine...' She shuddered. 'But Dave. He's one of the good guys.'

'If that's the case then you've nothing to worry about.'

'We both know miscarriages of justice happen, don't we?' And she cringed as she thought of how the media would spin this. *Hollywood star hiding out with paedo*. Then the talking heads would get involved. Opinions as rancid as their so-called personalities, wearing hair extensions and Botox stares as they demand, *how could she not know?* And then they'd wonder if she was actually involved in some way. Before they knew it they'd be painted as the twenty-first-century version of Brady and Hindley.

Jesus.

You can jump off that bridge when you come to it, Amelie, she told herself. First, she needed to make sure Dave was okay.

'We'll need access to Mr Robbins' laptop, please,' PC Talbot said.

'Sorry?' Amelie was so lost in her doomsday scenario – media darling to media demon – she didn't catch what the constable said.

'Often we find that perpetrators of such crimes have a multitude of illegal images on their personal technology...' Oh, laptop, thought Amelie. 'I'm sure a quick look by our people will cross off that particular box.'

Amelie hugged herself, dipped her head. Dave was in real trouble here. 'He has an office at the top of the stairs. Two laptops. A company one and a personal one. His iPhone will probably be up there as well, on the charger. Don't know why he bothers, barely uses the thing.'

'Is it okay if I...?' The officer looked back towards the stairs.

'We have nothing ... Dave has nothing to hide.' A bitter smile.

‘Please. Do what you need to do.’ As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wondered if this was the right thing to do. Didn’t they need a warrant or something?

PC Talbot gave her a polite little bow and left the room, just as the cop who’d gone out the front returned.

‘Mr Brown has been ordered to stay indoors until we have taken Mr Robbins from the premises.’

She jumped to her feet. ‘Why, what happened?’

‘It’s all under control now, Miss Hart.’

‘Dave was in your custody. If he’s been hurt because of your mistreatment I will sue your arse.’ Roger was fat and lazy, could barely fit through his own front door, but he would have enough heft to cause some damage.

The policeman was unfazed. He held up a hand. ‘Mr Robbins is fine.’

It occurred to her the policeman didn’t much care if he was or not.

Then the thought hit that, given a supposedly vulnerable child was living right next door, Dave wouldn’t be allowed back until this had all been settled.

Perhaps, not even then.