

Extract from “A Place to Call Home”

Chapter 1

I stare anxiously at the clock. It's nearly two in the morning and my eyes are gritty from lack of sleep. In the bed next to me Suresh snores heavily, and I'm grateful that the sleeping tablet I slipped into his drink a few hours earlier still seems to be working well.

Even so, when I go to get out of the bed, I take care to lift the duvet cautiously and lower my feet quietly to the floor. I tiptoe across the room to collect my clothes from the chair in the corner. It's a bright night, the moonlight filling the room and illuminating me more than I would like.

For a moment I stand with my shalwar kameez gripped in my arms, watching the sleeping form of my husband of ten years. My heart's pounding in my chest and there's a sick feeling in my stomach, but I know that I have to do this. Whatever happens, I can no longer stay. It will be the last time I will ever be in this bedroom, in this house, with this man.

As soundlessly as possible, I make my way to the bathroom along the hall. Suresh's mother and father sleep at the back of the house, in the biggest room, which overlooks the garden. Thankfully, Sabina's room is at the other end of the hall to them. In the dead of the night, the only sound I can hear is my own nervous breathing.

I change my clothes in the bathroom, stripping off my nightdress and putting on the same shalwar kameez that I wore yesterday. I fold my nightdress carefully. That will come with me too. And my toothbrush. I'd like to freshen my mouth, but I don't dare risk running the tap. The walls are as thin as paper and I cannot risk doing anything that might wake anyone but Sabina.

The face that stares back at me in the mirror is thin and tired. This woman looks afraid. Afraid but determined.

Along the landing and I ease the handle on the door into Sabina's room. My child's pink nightlight fills the small space with a warm glow and I go straight to her bed, crouching down beside it.

I stroke my daughter's silky hair which is long and dark like my own. Sabina's hair, however, is tangled with sleep whereas my own hangs down my back in a heavy plait.

'Sabina,' I whisper in her ear. 'Sabina, my daughter.'

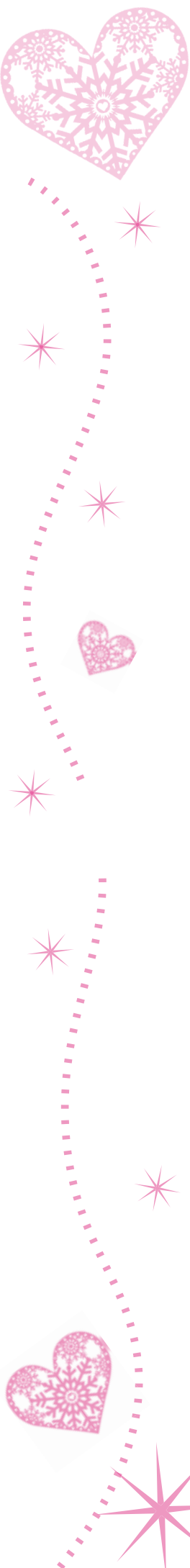
The child opens her eyes and gazes at me. The trust I see there is heartbreaking. For so long I've failed her, but not any more.

'Mummy is taking you on an adventure,' I murmur. 'We must be quiet though. As quiet as little mice. Can you do that for me?'

With sleep-filled eyes, she nods at me and I help to lift her out of bed. I put my finger to my lips. It's a needless gesture. Sabina doesn't speak. Not ever.

Quickly, quietly, I change her from her nightwear into her shalwar kameez. It's spring, but the nights are still cold, so while Sabina tiredly buckles her shoes, I get her coat from the wardrobe. My heart is in my mouth for fear of the door squeaking, but thankfully it's silent. I've done my best to furnish this room nicely. She has a pretty duvet cover, curtains and a lampshade that looks like a ballerina's skirt. But it's not enough, is it? The important things are love, affection, joy, and in this I've been so lacking.





Sabina, all buttoned up, sways sleepily on her feet, and I sit her down for a brief moment. Under her bed, tucked far into the corner, I have a bag already prepared for this event. It's taken me weeks to get to this point. Months even. We have a holdall that I bought cheaply from the market. It's very small, so that I could hide it adequately, and is filled with only enough clothes to last us until tomorrow. After that, I don't know what we'll do.

'We must go,' I say. My finger goes to my lips. 'Remember, very quiet.'

I take Sabina's tiny, warm hand in mine and I hope the contact comforts her as much as it comforts me. Leading her out of the room, we inch along the landing. Still I can hear Suresh's snores, and that calms me a little.

I don't know what my husband does for work, but I do know that it's not good. Sometimes he brings home men to our house and they laugh together until the small hours. Sometimes he doesn't come home at night at all. I never know which it will be, so I've had to wait a long time for this, the perfect moment.

On the stairs, I count our way down. The seventh stair creaks and I'm worried that it will sound out in the dead of the night, so I make sure that we step over it watchfully. Sabina is very slight for her eight years and, though I too am small, I lift her over it with ease. Her face is solemn, concerned. She trembles in my arms and I hold her tightly.

We make our way along the hall and to the front door. Lifting my coat from the peg, I slip it on and then pull my scarf over my hair. What will I do now if Suresh suddenly appears on the landing? Will I still be brave enough to bolt for our freedom? Or will I return meekly to his side despite vowing that I would never do so? If he sees us he'll know, instantly, that we are fleeing. Fleeing from him, from his fists. When he attacks me, as he surely will, can I fight him off? Or will he decide that, this time, he must kill me once and for all? The thought makes me shake. What then would happen to my darling Sabina?

Looking down at my daughter's anxious face, I know that I have to do this. If not for me, then for her. I have to be a good role model. I have to be the best mother that I can possibly be so that my child will grow into a strong, happy and independent woman. All of the things that I'm not.

Staring at the holdall in my hand, I realise that I'm leaving with the same material possessions I arrived with from Sri Lanka all those years ago, to be, for the very first time, with my new husband. How full of hope I was then! I should reach deep inside myself and try to find that feeling again now.

I ease open the lock on the front door, the lock that I secretly sprayed with oil last week so that it wouldn't make a noise and give us away.

'Ready?' I whisper to Sabina.

She nods and we both step out into the darkness.

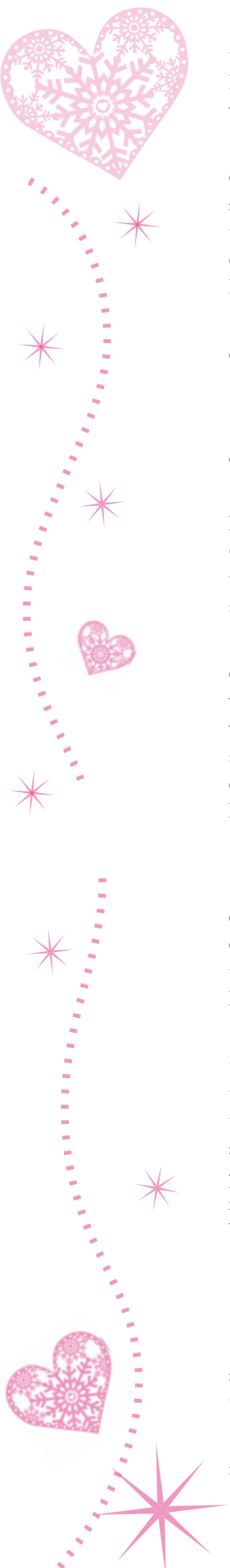
Chapter 2

I stand with Sabina by my side and stare back at the house. It's featureless, identical to the dozen or more that are the same in our terrace. There's nothing to make it a home. No name, no pretty flowers in the garden. It's as cold and blank as the people who live in it.

I take Sabina's hand and we hurry away from the house. 'We must walk quickly,' I say to her. 'Can you manage that?'

She nods her acquiescence.

Normally I wouldn't use the underpasses in the city, especially not after dark, as they're a haven for muggers and drug addicts. But, as I haven't been allowed out at night for many years,



there's a strange giddiness in having the freedom to put myself and my daughter at risk. The Redways are the quickest and straightest route to the Coachway and our escape, and I don't want to risk getting lost.

We don't live in a very nice area in Milton Keynes. Our house is right in the heart of the city, on an estate that has seen much better days. However, I'm grateful for that now as it isn't a long walk – about an hour, I'm thinking – to the Coachway and our ticket out of here. The train station is far away, at the other side of the city, and I'd have needed to call a taxi, which I couldn't risk. Too many of Suresh's friends drive cabs and he'd instantly hear of my departure. It's better to rely on my own devices.

'Are you all right, my child?' I ask Sabina. I can see my breath in the night air, a little puff of steam.

She nods again, but nothing more.

I'd give anything to hear her complain. If only she would whine about us walking too fast, or it being too cold, or demand to know about our destination. If only.

For months, I've stolen money from my husband's wallet as often as I was able. Just a little, as much as I could manage without him noticing – £5 here, £10 there. I kept it in an old Quality Street tin at the back of my wardrobe, underneath a pile of towels that we don't often use. Now I have £800 and my way out of here. It's in the bottom of my holdall, rolled and secured with elastic bands, £100 in each precious one.

We make our way in the darkness. Due to council cutbacks the streetlights are switched off, and it takes longer than I anticipated as I'm uncertain of the way. Sabina and I take a wrong turn and we walk for nearly quarter of an hour before I realise from the signposts that we're heading in the opposite direction to where we want to be. So we have to retrace our steps. Then, as I'm beginning to despair and the sky is beginning to lighten, I see the building of the Coachway ahead of us in the distance. I can hear the gentle thrum of traffic from the M1 behind it and it sounds like music to my ears.

'Not long now, Sabina,' I urge. 'We're nearly there.'

The building is modern, recently built, and the lights shine out harshly in the dissipating darkness. Hand in hand, we cross the final road to reach it – two conspicuous figures standing out in the emptiness of the night. I hope that Suresh hasn't woken and found us gone. I pray that he doesn't think to come looking for us in his car when we are so, so close to escape. My hand tightens on Sabina's fingers and, picking up our pace, we walk faster.

The first coach to London isn't until half-past four and we have a little while to kill until then as, I'm relieved to say, we have made good time. With trembling fingers and my back to the waiting room, I slip some money from one of the rolls in my bag and buy our tickets from the machine, feeding in the crisp notes that I have stolen from my husband. At this hour, there are very few people here. A man in uniform carrying a clipboard lets his gaze fall on me as we pass. When I feel it linger, we go to sit in the corner furthest away from him, where a big plant in a pot obscures his view. The café is shuttered for the night and I've nothing to give my child but a carton of juice that's in the holdall.

'Do you want a drink, Sabina?'

She nods and I get out the carton of orange and fix the straw for her.

I check that my rolls of money are safely secreted once again in the bottom of the holdall and relish the comfort that they bring. Then I get the tickets out and clutch them to me. Two travelling to London Victoria. One adult. One child. One way.

As we sit on the cold wooden bench, I huddle my daughter to me and relief washes over me. We're not free yet, I think, but we've made it this far.



Chapter 3

The sky continues to lighten and the coach arrives. Sabina and I board as quickly as we can. The driver wants to take my holdall and put it in the luggage compartment under the coach, but I cling to it. This is my lifeline, my future.

I find us seats and put the holdall by my feet, then settle Sabina next to me. Within minutes all the passengers are on board and we speed out of the coach station and turn on to the motorway. The amber lights of the road blur past my eyes and the anxious breath that I've been holding is finally released. We're on our way. Already Sabina's eyes are heavy with sleep and I cuddle her in to me. 'Are you comfortable?'

She nods at me and snuggles in to my side.

'Rest now,' I tell her. 'When you awake, we'll be there.'

Soon she sleeps beside me and, as I hold her close, my mind goes over what has led me to the point where I feel the need to flee for our safety in the middle of the night.

I've lived in this city for ten years, since I came here from Sri Lanka to meet and marry my husband, Suresh Rasheed, but I know so little of it now. It's changed so much and, for some time, I've gone only where my husband has taken me. Some weeks I wouldn't go out of the house at all. I wouldn't dare. If Suresh came home and found that I wasn't there, he'd fly into a rage. And I never knew when he was coming home, as he'd never tell me where he was going. Soon it was simpler not to leave the house at all. If there was shopping to be done or errands to be run, his mother would go, and take Sabina with her. I'd be left behind, anxious and fretting, to clean the house or to cook the meal. A prisoner in my own home.

I had no friends that I could turn to as, eventually, Suresh wouldn't allow me to see anyone other than his relatives. So the few women that I'd become close to had fallen away over the years as they couldn't bear to see the evidence of my controlling marriage. Now there's no one I can call on who isn't connected to my husband's family. I couldn't trust one of them to help me in case they should tell Suresh of my whereabouts and he'd find me and drag me back. I can't allow that to happen.

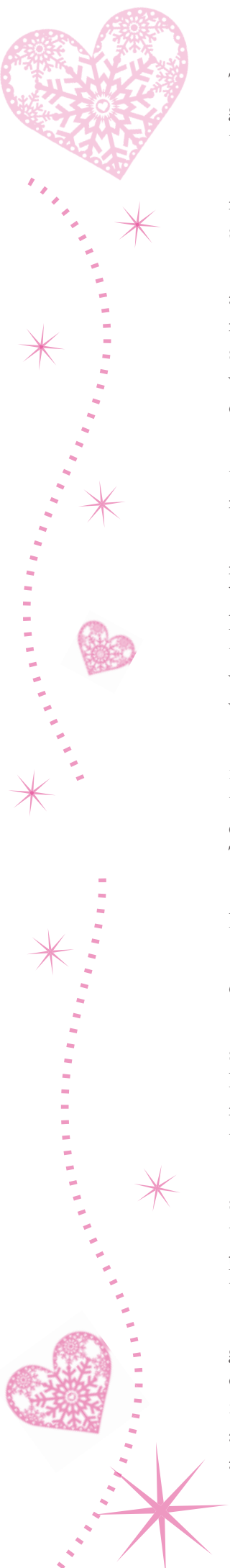
Yet it wasn't always like this. The first year when I came to England was a happy one. My husband and I took pleasure in each other's company. Suresh was never open or overtly affectionate towards me. He didn't like to hold my hand or kiss me, but he was considerate and a steady man. I thought that, in time, we could make a good marriage.

We rented our own house near to his parents, who had been settled in England for many years, since Suresh was a child himself. Our place was small but comfortable and I kept it clean and pretty. I did my utmost to make it a loving home. When, very soon, I became pregnant, Suresh was so pleased to find that I was with child.

Then he changed. Almost overnight. I'm still not sure why. It was many small hurts, I believe, that harmed his personality.

When my dear Sabina was born, he was delighted to become a father. Soon after, though, he became withdrawn, difficult. I feel that he was jealous of the attention I gave to my tiny, mewling daughter, but is that not what new mothers do? I knew from the moment I saw her that she was my life and that I would never love another human being more than this helpless bundle who clung to me for her every need. The whole of my heart was suddenly filled with her, and perhaps Suresh felt that there was no room left for him.

Within weeks, he was made redundant from his job, and that severely hurt his pride. Try as he might, he couldn't easily find work despite walking the streets and seeing all his contacts. Eventually we fell into financial difficulties; our bills weren't paid and we hid when men knocked at the door. We were forced to give up even our modest home and move in with his parents.



To start with my mother- and father-in-law were kind people, fun-loving, smiling. They tried their best with us all crammed together in their home and they loved their new granddaughter very much. But soon that changed too as their son became increasingly difficult to live with.

Before too long Suresh stopped looking for work at all and stayed in bed until late every morning. He'd never been a man of great faith but he no longer prayed at all. My husband started to drink heavily, and he fell in with the men who now keep him out at night.

It saddens me to say that my own faith is long gone too. At home we liked to embrace all faiths – sometimes we'd worship at the Buddhist temple, sometimes at the Hindu one. My mummy also liked to take us to the Catholic church sometimes, if there was a festival for the saints. 'It is better,' she always said, 'to keep one's options open.' Perhaps she felt one god would, eventually, turn out to be better than another. Now I'm not sure there's a god at all. My only instinct is survival. My parents would be disappointed in their daughter.

Sabina is close to her paternal grandmother – the only one she's known. They would cook together in the cramped kitchen and she'd show my daughter the family recipes, as she did to me when I first arrived.

But she too is a woman who's now scared to speak. One day, as we prepared the evening meal together, I looked at my mother-in-law and saw my future self. That vision of my life began to make me anxious. She's a woman who clings to the shadows, who is intimidated by her own son. My husband's father, too, is frightened by what his eldest child has become and they've each retreated into their own shell. They don't speak up for fear of his wrath. They would stand by, powerless, while he hurt me. It's very sad and I'll miss the people they once were, but I must think of myself now and my child.

At first they tried to protect us, but soon they became frightened for their own safety. I'm frightened for them too. His mother would cry bitter tears for our pain, but that didn't stop the bruises I suffered. I came to realise that keeping Sabina and myself from harm was entirely down to me. I didn't dare tell them that I was leaving as I couldn't risk them knowing my plan. The less they were aware of, the better.

My daughter shifts in her restless sleep and I stroke her hair to soothe her. 'Hush, hush,' I murmur.


The bus is quite busy, but everyone is sleeping or in their own world, listening to music on earphones. No one pays us any attention, which is more than I could have hoped for.

A year ago, my husband beat me so badly in front of my daughter that she stopped speaking. I was curled into the corner of the living room while he rained blows on me and, as I looked up, my eyes met Sabina's. She'd come down from her bedroom when she heard the noise. It wasn't the first time that she'd seen her mother slapped or punched by her father, but this was much worse.

Sometimes she cried out and tried to intervene, and it tore my heart in two that she should witness such things. As Suresh's fist made my head rock back, I saw her eyes wide with terror, her mouth frozen as if to scream, but no sound came out. The sight of her was so pitiful that it even stopped my husband in his tracks and I was able to hurry her from the room to soothe her, my own agony forgotten.

My injuries healed, my bruises faded, my broken bones mended, but my daughter's pain goes on. From that day to this, she's never uttered a single word. She hasn't laughed with joy or cried out with fright. Before that she was bright, articulate, clever for her age – and she was funny, so funny. It was a delight to listen to her childish chatter. Now she makes no sound at all. Not even when we're alone and there's no one else to hear. It's as if she can't forgive me, and I don't blame her. I can't forgive myself.

When she lost her voice, that was the very moment I realised that I had to get far away.



I had to put a stop to this and I vowed to leave. How long would it be before I was unable to recover from the beatings? Would there come a point when the slaps and punches were aimed at Sabina too? There was no way I intended to let that happen. Already, she'd been hurt enough by this. I'd never wanted to harm a hair on her beautiful head and yet I'd allowed this terror to take her tongue.

The only way to right this wrong is to protect her now above all else.

Chapter 4

We arrive at Victoria Coach Station just before seven o'clock and I realise straight away that London is the busiest place I've ever been to. In Sri Lanka I lived in a small fishing village by the coast near Kathaluwa, but that seems like a lifetime ago now.

When I first came to England I couldn't believe how many people there were in one place. I feel like that all over again, as if I've recently landed from abroad and know nothing. Surely in this vast metropolis Suresh will be unable to find us. There are thousands of people here. Thousands. All bustling back and forth like ants. Can we simply disappear here and live in peace as I want us to?

I wake Sabina, who thankfully has slept all the way. The coach was nearly full, but we sat quietly at the back and no one gave us a second glance.

When we come out of the coach station I look for a café that's open and find one that's a little way down the road. It's warm inside and smells strongly of fresh coffee. The place is worn round the edges but homely. I buy more juice for Sabina and a chocolate-chip cookie as there's nothing else I can see that she'll eat. I ask for a cup of tea and a croissant. The man behind the counter is kind and smiles at Sabina.

'She's a very pretty little girl, if you don't mind me mentioning it.'

'Say thank you,' I urge her. In return, she stares blankly at him. 'She doesn't speak,' I say apologetically.

He hands me my tea and wraps the croissant in a napkin, and I pay him.

'May I ask how to get to this place?' Out of my pocket, I pull my piece of paper with the address printed on it.

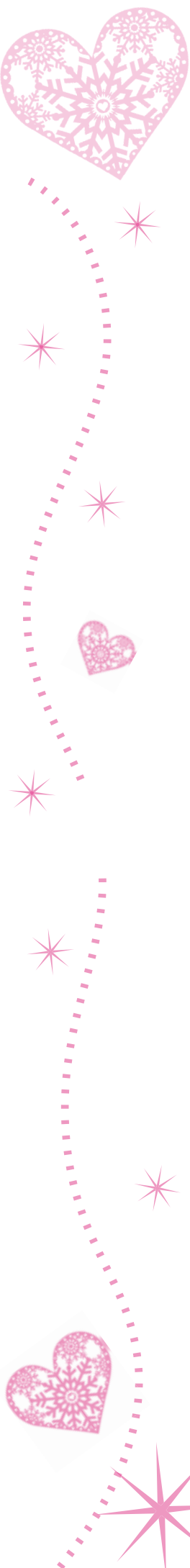
Some months ago, I made an excuse to my mother-in-law to go alone into the city, which was a nerve-racking experience. She lowered her eyes as I left and never asked me where I was going. The whole time I was out my stomach was knotted with anxiety in case I should turn a corner and find Suresh standing there, waiting for me. Thankfully he wasn't, and I reached my goal.

In the library, a kind lady showed me how to access the internet and how to surf. It was a whole new world. She assisted me in contacting a helpline and I was given the name of this women's-aid charity. The lady I spoke to said that they'll allocate me somewhere safe to go, a place that'll give me breathing space away from my husband so that I can think what's best to do for me and Sabina. So that's how I decided that London would be the place to go, and the women's-aid charity is where I'm heading for now. Their office doesn't open until ten o'clock so we have time to kill.

'Hop on the tube,' the man behind the counter says. 'Victoria Line, right up to Euston. It's easy enough. Won't take long at all. The place you want is right by the station. Ask someone at the other end.'

'Thank you.' I fold the paper carefully and replace it in my pocket. Though, if I'm truthful, the address is embedded in my brain.

In my holdall there's a colouring book and pencils for Sabina, and we tuck ourselves into



a corner of the café on a worn leather sofa. I hope we can stay here for the next few hours until we must leave. While my daughter quietly busies herself with the business of colouring, I open a discarded magazine and flick through the pictures. I can speak English well enough, as I learned from an early age. I had lessons throughout my schooling and my village was popular with tourists who came to see the traditional stilt fishermen at their work.

We used to talk to the visitors and were sometimes cheeky enough to ask the people for pencils and sweets, even though our parents forbade us to. Yet I never imagined that one day I'd actually live in England. My ability to read and write in English, however, is now very poor through lack of practice, and Suresh would never allow me to attend evening classes to improve my skills. Instead, I've been learning along with Sabina and can read all of her books. I'm always sure to do her homework with her so that I can keep up with my child. No one wants a mother who is ignorant.

The pictures blur in front of my eyes and, in my coat pocket, my mobile phone tings. I take it out and, through my tears, I see a text from Suresh. My insides turn to water and my palms grow damp with fear.

I wonder what's happening at home now. He must have already risen to find that I'm gone and I've taken Sabina with me. My husband will be consumed with rage, I'm sure, and Suresh is a man who doesn't like to be crossed.

Reluctantly, I look at the message. *Where r u?* it says.

I don't answer, but simply stare at the phone in terror. Could he trace the whereabouts of my phone, I wonder, like they do on police television shows?

A moment later there's another one. *Come home or there will be trouble.*

My mouth is dry.

Then another. *I will hunt u down & find u bitch,* it says.

Perhaps he'll drive round in his car to look for us, but I don't think he'll go as far as calling the police. Panicky, I turn off my phone and walk as quickly as I can across the café to drop it into the nearest litter bin.

Chapter 5

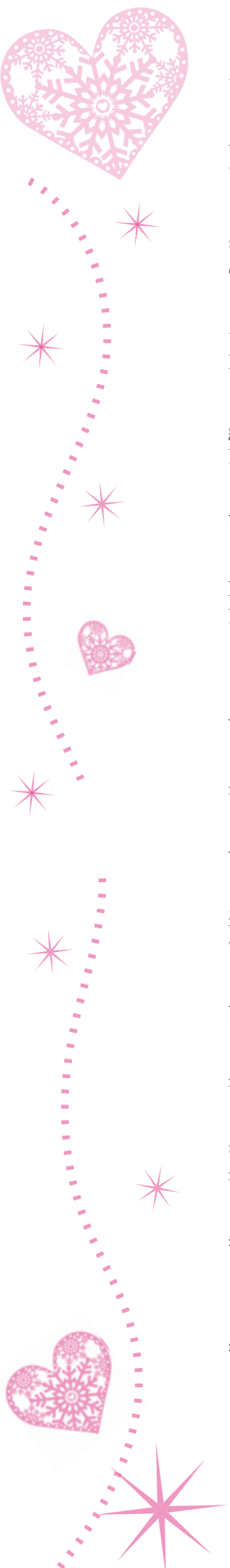
At nine o'clock we're standing outside the door of the women's refuge. We lingered as long as we could at the café, but I didn't want to waste money on tea that I didn't want to drink and I felt we were outstaying our welcome.

We're not the first, as there are two ladies already here queuing before us. One of them has a black eye and one of them has a plaster cast on her wrist. My heart goes out to them, as I've been there myself. The last time Suresh beat me he cracked my ribs and my jaw. They both look at the pavement, anxious to avoid conversation, and I feel the same. Sabina stands still by my side without complaining. It's arm already, a mild day for the time of year, and I'm hot, sweating in my coat. At ten o'clock, when the door opens, we're shown into a small waiting room and we do just that. Wait.

The other two women are seen before me and eventually Sabina and I are ushered into a small and rather scruffy office where two women sit at desks piled high with paperwork. We're offered seats at one of them. The lady looks up from the form she's currently filling in and smiles.

'I'm Ruth,' she says. Even though it's early in the day, she seems harried. 'Now then, how can we help?'

I tell her of my circumstances. I tell her that Sabina doesn't speak any more. I tell her that I cannot go back.



She sighs and then informs me that we're unable to go into any of the women's refuges they have as they're all full.

'I'm really sorry,' Ruth says with a frown. 'We've got several homes in the area and usually manage to squeeze everyone in somewhere, even if it's only for a couple of nights. Unfortunately, the two ladies before you have taken the last places.'

I have no plan as to what I'll do now. I thought that this lady, this Ruth, would help me. It seems as if I was wrong. I'm cross with myself, as we could have been here and waiting much earlier if only I'd known that help was offered on a first come, first served basis.

I sit still. So does Sabina. I'm not being difficult. I'm paralysed with fear. My plan was only to get myself to this place. If I stand up and leave, I'll have to go somewhere else and I don't know where that might be.

'You can never tell what's going to happen,' Ruth continues when she sees that I'm not going anywhere. 'But we're not expecting anyone to leave the refuges for at least a week or two. I'm not sure what we can do.'

Still I sit, unmoving. I feel that if I don't acknowledge that I've heard this then it will not be real.

Eventually, the woman sighs again at me, but it sounds kindly and not exasperated. 'I'll have a ring round,' she offers. 'See if I can find somewhere for you. Even if it's only temporary. It's the best I can do. We can't have you out on the streets, can we?'

No, I think. We cannot.

She tries several numbers while Sabina and I wait patiently. Each time she hangs up, the woman's frown deepens and my unease grows.

Shaking her head, she says, 'I've got one last place to try. An old friend of mine who might help me out. We used to work together years ago.'

Ruth jabs at the keypad and I see that she's gripping the receiver tightly. I fear she's more worried for us than she wants us to believe.

'Hi, Crystal,' I hear her say. 'Wondered if you could help me out, darling. I've got someone in desperate need of a place and I'm all out of rooms.' Ruth glances anxiously at me again. 'Even the B&Bs are chock-a-block. Can you put them up? Even if it's only for a few days?'

I can't hear what the other woman, Crystal, answers. But I realise that I'm holding my breath and praying to someone, to anyone, to help.

'It's a woman and her daughter. They're both very' – another glance – 'quiet.' There's a moment before she adds, 'Thanks, Crystal. You're an angel. I owe you one.'

When she hangs up, the relief is visible in her eyes and I wonder what my own expression shows. I believe that she's found somewhere for us to live. Somewhere safe. Somewhere that my husband can't find us.

'We don't normally use this house,' Ruth says. 'This is a big favour. Crystal and I go back a long way. I hope you won't be any trouble for her.'

'I don't think I will be.'

Ruth smiles at Sabina, but my daughter remains impassive as always. Ruth writes down an address and pushes it across the desk to me. 'It's a lovely house. You'll like it there.'

'Will I be safe?'

'Yes,' she says. 'Of course.'

I can only hope that she's right.