C I R C L E L I N E

D a v e P e s c o d

Prologue

The Circle Line

In 1884 when Inner Circle services began, clockwise steam trains were run by the District Railway and anti-clockwise trains by the Metropolitan Railway – causing uneven wear to the rails and regular breakdowns.

Thursday May 29, 2019

The young man descends on the escalator, like any other commuter. He's oblivious to the theatre posters, animated ads and people rushing past. Clean-shaven with hair still wet from showering this morning, he's dressed in a brown jacket, patterned shirt, jeans, polished leather sandals, and he clutches a handmade briefcase. It's always felt important to him to look smart, no matter what the occasion.

On the platform, rush hour builds as more commuters descend from the street, jostling for space. Many of them have wires coming out of their ears, as if they're recharging their brains.

He has a moment of calm, helped by the extra medication he took after breakfast; then his body tenses as it concentrates hard in the strange underworld. There is a little doubt in his mind, but that should not be confused with hope. His aim is only to do a good job, without confusion. Standing near the end of the platform, he keeps his head down and strains his ears for the sound he needs, but there's nothing yet. A child laughs, and he wants it to be quiet. He still hasn't got used to being underground, travelling below the city that chewed him up and spat him out. The crowd are all facing forward, disguising any anguish, bracing themselves for the work day ahead.

He does up his jacket, leaving the top button open. He grips the briefcase and his mouth turns dry, terror hitting him for the first time. A vibration reaches him, it gets stronger, pushing a gust of hot wind from the tunnel, smelling of oil and panic.

He notices a woman standing close by. When their eyes meet, he pushes the red briefcase into her arms and places a kiss on her lips, before she can protest.

'Take care of it,' he shouts, then launches himself at the roaring machine as it bursts into the station.

He catches a glimpse of the shadow man in the cab. The last human being to see his face before his body falls onto the tracks, shattered by the collision, releasing its final breath.

At last, he has peace.

Chapter 1

Farringdon

This is the first Underground station in the world. It opened in 1863 as the Metropolitan Railway terminus, the birth of the Underground.

Wednesday June 5

I stumble across the street, avoiding construction workers in high-vis jackets with tattooed bodies lauding loved ones. The chaos on the earth's surface contrasts with the order below, where I long to return, to the quiet dark. But it's out of my reach. Every day on the London Underground millions of passengers and thousands of staff burrow below the surface; and I yearn to join them. I pause to look up at the blue Farringdon station sign, above Victorian lettering that announces Entrance to the original building. This is where the Underground started, and where I had my first job as a station attendant, but that seems like another life.

Red and white bollards line Cowcross Street, as workers in hard hats roll ciggies and grab bacon rolls between shifts. It's a roaster of a day and why I'm wearing a raincoat in a heatwave is hard to explain. Crossrail, or whatever they call it now, is leaving its mess scattered everywhere like a tomcat marking its territory. Voices yell instructions as cement lorries park, and scaffold workers swing on bars to ogle passing women. The sharp London skyline of tower blocks and skyscrapers boasts the achievements of modern architecture, but underneath the ground there are miracles happening daily, all unsung, yet vital for the city to thrive.

Inside the station entrance, commuters rush past me, talking into phones, or eating on the move. I try to summon up courage while I rest my back against the cream-tiled wall. Rashid, a colleague, is busy taking an excess fare and he doesn't notice me, which is good news. I don't want to talk to anyone. The familiarity of the station gives me some sense of security, but it doesn't quell my anxiety. I sip from my water bottle and keep my dark glasses on, despite the shade.

I was a driver on the Circle Line for seven years. It runs in my blood, and it was all I wanted to do. My grandfather was a driver, then Dad. He got promoted to the control centre, and power went to his head. It's funny how people forget their past in the pursuit of ambition.

Dad still likes to control everything – he was never happier than in the nerve centre of the operation, running his own train set.

'Watch out for those rats down there,' he used to shout when I headed in for an early shift.

Sweat drips from my forehead and my breath shortens as I struggle to get through the barrier. I need to win this battle. I used to do it every day without thinking. I stumble forwards, reaching for my pass; the photo shows me wearing a smile, proud of my job. Is the card still valid, or have they wiped the records? The gate opens, answering my question.

Frozen at the top of the stairs, I shiver at the sight of the metal reinforcements on each step, neatly grooved, guaranteeing maximum damage if you fall. A stray pigeon flies up into the skylights and perches on a girder, then coos in ridicule at my cowardice. It swoops down from the roof, then escapes the station for the London sky. I grip the handrail and take one step down. A small victory: descending into the bowels of the city, my home and my history. People tut at me as I block their way, and I bully myself, forcing my feet to move. There's no pain, not like a sprained ankle or broken arm, just an overwhelming fear that everything will collapse. My back is drenched with sweat, and I hear my father's voice in my head shouting, 'Sort yourself out!'

I manage four steps, five, almost a rhythm, but the sound of metal wheels grinding and the squeal of brakes terrifies me. It's all I can hear, the nightmare starting again, raucous and deafening as the man hurls himself in front of my train. I am petrified, and my body becomes part of the ground beneath me, my heavy limbs ignoring any wish or instruction to move. My mind is locked in isolation – time has collapsed, and the world is moving in slow motion. I was a child, then a man and now I am dead, my life spun out before me, a terrifying chasm of emptiness, a void of loneliness that has taken hold of me. Tears run down my face. I struggle back up the stairs, dragging my body through the barriers and out on to the street. Spat out of the station, rejected, I gasp[for breath. I'll never have the guts to get down there again.

My breathing slowly steadies and I watch Londoners in shorts with thin tops enjoying the freak weather. When I retrace my steps back up St John Street, lined with houses that were turned into offices long ago, the noise of construction ebbs away. I cut through to St John's Square, past the old gates that protected the city from invaders and follow Jerusalem Passage. I stop by The Dovetail, a Belgian beerhouse where I had my fortieth party in March. It's hard to believe how free I felt that day: the jokes that life begins at forty and how it was time for me to get my love-life in order. I fell, but not for love – I

tripped into a pit of despair. I look at the beer menu hanging outside. Trappist monks must have drunk themselves into oblivion to perfect the recipes, and life in a monastery is starting to appeal.

I amble through streets unsure of where I'm going or where I've been. These streets have gentrified over my lifetime, cobbles reveal themselves here and there in defiance of progress. My eyes are fixed on the ground, where cigarette butts lie in the gutter, and a plastic bag is blown up the street by the draught from a passing van. Shame overtakes me – and anger that my attempt to get back underground failed. I keep my head down, in case someone recognises me. Maybe my old workmates caught me on the CCTV and are laughing at my pathetic attempt to submerge. I creep up Woodbridge Street past the Georgian terraces with their Farrow & Ball front doors, and the old hall on Skinner Street, where I entered a talent contest playing piano when I was eleven years old. Mum got me a leather waistcoat to go with my black jeans and shirt. She hounded me to enter, and I played boogie-woogie, a rendition of 'I Put a Spell on You' and the judges awarded me the prize. It was a recording session in a tiny studio in Islington. Winning led to girls wanting to date me and hanging around the flats, teasing me for my shyness. The talent show made me want to perform more, but I've never found it easy playing in bands with battling egos and fame seekers.

I cut through the Spa Fields to my tower block. The familiarity of the buildings stacked like boxes around Michael Cliffe House is reassuring – this is the twenty-five-storey colossus where I was born. When I reach the lift, there's another person waiting: Marta, Mum's best friend, who gave the tribute at her funeral. She's lived in the tower since it was built and dyes her hair vivid red, like a stalwart communist. I help carry her tartan shopping trolley into the lift.

'I heard about this 'orrible business on the train,' Marta says, throwing her hands into the air. 'Alice tell me.' Marta has lived here forty years but retains her strong Polish accent. 'You need to look after yourself, Joe, and eat more. All those girls used to chase after you, but they don't like a skeleton.'

The lift bell rings and she exits on to the fourteenth floor. I rub my unshaven chin and push back my sweaty hair, embarrassed by Marta's observations. When the lift reaches floor sixteen, I hurry to my flat and bolt the door when I'm inside. I catch my reflection in the bathroom mirror: a full head of unruly hair and a solemn-faced mugshot, with blue eyes that still function without glasses. But I'm a shadow of who I was before. I draw the curtains tighter to hide the day and slump in a chair to scan the strange space I call home. I did a

kitchen makeover a few months ago, turning it into an open-plan diner, but right now I miss the familiarity of the old kitchen table and bentwood chairs replaced by Ikea furniture.

When I open the door to the balcony and let in some breeze, a crack between the curtains reveals a slice of London. The view still amazes me, a Canaletto with a new detail every day that the artist added overnight. London is constantly evolving; the cranes are like economic indicators going up and down, but I have never seen so many, sprinkled across the city. I can see the Shard, St Paul's and the Gherkin from my window. It's strange that nothing stays the same when so many people long for the good old days. Progress is a necessity, but who really benefits? A gigantic crane swings its load over a roof-lined street, too perilous for me to watch, so I shut the curtain and retreat to the sofa. The spacious room feels threatening, though at least there's some comfort from my old bookcase, overburdened with thrillers. More books and records I mean to sort are stacked on the piano, its lid weighed down by music magazines.

I remember the battle to get it into the flat, squeezing its bulk into the lift and manoeuvring it through the hall. It was a bargain, but still the most expensive thing I've ever bought. I wanted my daughter, Alice, to learn the magic of music, so I taught her the basics, but she was more interested in DJs and beats than Bach and Chopin. Mum was the one with the talent – she taught me 'Chopsticks', boogie-woogie and improvisation. I played jazz mainly, with the occasional pop gig at the Hope & Anchor. I haven't touched the piano for a while now – it sits there like a mute friend, sulking.

I pick up the paper and read an article that tells me I am more likely to live ten years longer if there is another heart beating in my space. A human heart is best, but even a cat or dog's presence will extend my life. I lie on the sofa and find myself listening to my own heartbeat.

There's a knock at the door, and the flap of the letterbox is lifted.

'Are you there? I've brought you some food.'

I turn my head slowly towards the hall.

'Let me in, Dad!'

I stay where I am. I can't face Alice at the moment, or anyone else. I already miss her and wish she wasn't going to live with her girlfriend.

'I'll leave it by the door.' She blows a kiss through the flap, and I watch it fade into sunlit dust as her footsteps patter away down the corridor.

I was nineteen when we had her, didn't know my arse from my elbow. It was a fast birth, blood and gore everywhere, and a mess of emotions that confused me. The first time I

saw her face I felt my cheeks launch the widest smile. As I cradled her in my arms I felt helpless – I still am, proud and protective.

It was a shock pregnancy, especially for my dad. He made sure I did the honourable thing. We were very young, but I enjoyed parenthood, despite being unprepared and unrehearsed. I wanted to do a better job than my mum and dad. I don't know how I coped with nappies, cooking and sleepless nights. Maybe I didn't – the marriage didn't last – I became a single dad. An outsider standing by the gates of the school like a weirdo, ignored by the gaggle of mums. I attended school groups and eventually made friends, but now I haven't even got the guts for computer dating. It seems so impersonal. I don't trust the virtual world, and I haven't got much faith in the real one either. Friends introduce me to perfectly qualified women who I take to nice restaurants, but it always feels like an interview. You don't get A-levels in love – it's something you have to learn through work experience, and maybe I haven't had enough. I can count my serious relationships on one hand. Remarkably, my friends think I'm the kind of bloke lots of women should fancy. That just makes me suspicious and think they should aim higher than an emotional cripple with a two-bed flat on the Finsbury Estate, who can't even get down the Underground.

I go to the kitchen table and pick up the anti-depressants the doctor prescribed. Take three times a day for two weeks. Inside the box there's a repeat prescription. It's all packaged so neatly, the antidote to darkness and fear. I squeeze a pill out of the foil and put it on my tongue. The taste is bitter, and I swallow it with the last of the orange juice.

My phone rings. It's Dad. I don't want to answer but guilt overcomes me.

'Where's my watch, Joe? You're not trying to nick it, are you?'

'Sorry. Things have been a bit…'

'Are you still moping about?'

I keep silent.

'Don't worry about it. The stationmaster rang me and he said that the jumper was an illegal immigrant. They're all criminals. Forget about it, Joe.'

Most things are black and white for Dad.

'Don't forget the watch, will you? Get back down there, son. No good sulking. Gotta go, playing cribbage.'

I put on a Bill Evans album, my recipe for calmness – there are few ways I can relax. Mum used to take me round the Circle Line when she was stressed or after an argument with the old man. You could sit on the Tube for a couple of hours going round and round, hiding under the earth's apron. She'd get me to read the station names and work out which one was

next. It was my first geography lesson, memorising the Tube map. I'd sit next to her, eating a Sherbet Fountain while she stroked my hair and told me to be a kind man when I grew up. She whispered stories into my ear about ghosts and how every Underground station had one.

I peep out through the curtains as a Tube train surfaces from the tunnel before vanishing again. I should be in the driving seat, heading deep into the underworld. I lift my gaze, and I can see people working in offices, busy on phones and computers, snacking on the job. The street's busy with delivery drivers, and a traffic warden slaps a notice on a black Audi. A couple on the corner stand together talking, then they embrace, kissing for a long time. Their arms extend around each other, trying to hold on for that bit longer, before they break apart and vanish down separate alleys. I shut the curtains tightly and the music finishes.

The doorbell rings again, but I don't answer it. I wait till my visitor goes then choose another record, Paul Weller's Wild Wood. I've seen him in concert a few times and listened to that pained voice screaming for love in this crazy world. I lie there with eyes closed, but the man appears again, haunting me with that final leap. He's in my dreams every night, a stranger who entered my life as he finished his own: an act of violence, a looped film I can't switch off.

I pace the room, my stomach empty. The fridge is bare, except for a piece of mouldy cheddar, two eggs and a plate of unfinished pasta. The freezer is just as bad – some macaroni cheese past its sell-by date, which I sling into the bin.

People are shouting in the corridor outside. I wait till silence returns, open my door and grab the shopping bag. On the floor is a floral cake tin. Inside there's a round cake, iced in vivid yellow with a gift card. Take care, Joe. Love, Marta.

She used to leave small gifts for my mother in just the same way. I search on top of the bookcase until I find some paper, then rifle through the drawer for a pen. I sit at the table staring at the blank page, then grasp the felt tip and draw a big circle and colour it yellow. I write Circle Line across it, then add the names of the stations round the edge, etched in my mind from endless shifts. I stick the drawing on the fridge with some sellotape and stand back. I'll conquer the Circle Line one stop at a time, even if the journey kills me.

Chapter 2

Barbican

Livestock for Smithfield market was once delivered from this station directly to the nearby abattoir, where criminals were also executed in the thirteenth century.

Wednesday June 5

Early in the morning before work, Emiri Zeybeck struggles to fill in the visa application form. Surely it shouldn't be this hard to stay in the country? She's been here five years working for the NHS. She attempts section four of the form for the third time, her pen runs out and she stuffs it back in her folder, deciding to grab a quick shower. The cool water refreshes her and afterwards, she remembers her Uncle Cemal offering to help her with any visa issues, but family politics makes this difficult. She dries her hair, a cloud of black curls that hang wet around her high cheekbones. Her small wardrobe on the narrowboat is squeezed into a corner of the bedroom, where she chooses a pair of black trousers, with a blue shirt and light jacket, then slips on some flat sandals.

She bought the boat, Elpis, five years ago. It's a wide-beam narrowboat she refurbished, working long hours, learning carpentry and using recycled materials wherever spossible. It's cosy, and Emiri loves the idea that she can sail away any time, even though she's never actually left the mooring. She sips a black coffee and eats her muesli, looking at the framed picture of Istanbul hanging in the galley. She can almost feel the warm Bosphorus where she used to swim with her mother, but her plans to go back and visit never work out – hospital shifts are always changing, and foreign workers have to be flexible.

Already late, and regretting drinks with her neighbours last night, Emiri feels anxious about her return to work after time off to recover from the accident. She puts her sandwiches next to the unopened red briefcase, and stares at it. If only the man hadn't given it to her – she's worried it might turn out to be a Pandora's box.

She jumps from the boat on to the towpath, lighting a cigarette. She gave up smoking years ago but has started again since seeing the man fall under the train. Walking along the canal side, she waves at her neighbour hanging washing out on her boat. Nancy was the main culprit for last night's drinking session, but it loosened everyones' inhibitions. She does a little jig, holding her arms out and mimicking Emiri's Turkish dancing. Emiri blushes a little

and remembers how Nancy nagged at her to hand in the the briefcase to avoid any trouble with the police. But Emiri feels loyalty to the man who thrust it into her hands.

She trots up the old, cobbled path that the bargees' horses trod to avoid the Islington tunnel. Georgian houses line the canal converted to luxury flats now, way beyond most people's budget and looking down on the boats like lords. Emiri feels fortunate to have Elpis and not to live in the squalid living conditions that other hospital workers often moan about. If her father hadn't helped her financially, she wouldn't have coped.

She prefers to walk to Barbican and get some morning exercise, though it's not the nearest station. Glimmering tower blocks appear as she waits to cross City Road. There's an England flag covering the window of a flat above the newsagents, taunted by EU flags outside an Italian café opposite. Two men are talking loudly on the side.

'I just want to make England better,' the older one says to his mate as he climbs into a white van. She smiles to herself, this is her goal every day, but her preferred method is medical intervention, not political dogma.

When she moved to London in 2013 Emiri was surprised to see so much poverty, both at work and on the streets. It also came as a shock to occasionally be abused by strangers just because she's a foreigner. Most people are friendly – they just want to get on with their lives – but since the referendum some disenchanted people want a new pecking order.

She throws her cigarette into the kerb and makes a phone call as she walks. Last week, the woman at the Underground office had told her to ring in, and with her visa issues Emiri doesn't want to break any laws.

'It's Miss Zeybeck. I'm ringing about the briefcase. I still have it after the man's accident.'

'You should hand it in to the transport police or bring it back to King's Cross. The man was an illegal immigrant, and they'll need it for evidence.'

Emiri can still see his face, and his voice echoes in her head: Take care of it.

'Do you know anything about his funeral?' she asks the woman, who gives Emiri the undertaker's phone number. There's a silence, she wants to ask more but can't find the words before the woman hangs up.

She likes Barbican station, close to Bart's Hospital and Smithfield market, where surgeons brush shoulders with blood-stained butchers. She did some training at Bart's, but as a vegetarian avoided walking through the meat market. Smithfield's historic architecture is more beautiful than the bland modern buildings at University College Hospital where she's based. Emiri sprints down the stairs and just manages to catch the train. The city passes by

the window as the train gains speed, as graffiti walls and billboards blur into one. She plugs in her phone and selects some music to soothe her as the train enters a tunnel.

When she first came to London, Emiri printed off maps from Google and took them with her everywhere, but gradually a collage of the city has taken root in her mind. Now she has affection for the landmarks, and it feels more like home, a place where she can prosper. She's glad to have finished her master's course, and longs to build her career in her new home.

The music changes on her phone and she scans the carriage adverts. There are plastic surgery pictures, and clinics that can improve your face, constant reminders of how women should better themselves. There are several dating website adverts showing happy people who have found instant love. Emiri hasn't used them recently – busy with work, her studies, and the boat; though she went on a few dates, but nothing sparked. Dating was difficult for her in Istanbul – she didn't know who she was then, let alone if she wanted a relationship. It was as if there was a time limit, or she had an inability to fully trust anyone, but that was after her four-year relationship with Burak. He was kind at first, but then one rule led to another, until she felt like a prisoner. Eventually she qualified as a radiographer and fled Turkey. Her mother was disappointed as Burak's family were respectable and wealthy. She remembers her last words at the airport: 'Englishmen may be called gentlemen, but they can be bastards like every race.' It didn't help Emiri's confidence, and she's given up any dreams of an English prince sweeping her off her feet.

The train pulls into the station and a gust of wind cools the air. Several commuters get on, and a man in a camouflage coat with khaki shorts and worn trainers moves down the carriage, holding out a plastic cup. Emiri finds some change in her purse, knowing how easy it is to fall by the wayside. She would rather be accused of naivety than cruelty. When she puts coins in the cup the two of them make eye contact, and the man tries to smile before he turns away. She can't imagine what it must be like to call a doorway your home.

A shaft of daylight shines down before they dive back into darkness and Emiri stares at her reflection in the window opposite. She thinks of the man who gave her the briefcase, wishing she had spotted him on the platform earlier. She could have saved him, but he was tall and bigger than her – it would have been impossible to pull him back. When the train stops at her station, Emiri is so deep in thought she has to leap out before the doors close. Running up the escalator, she dodges past some Japanese tourists and finds that her Oyster card has no credit. She has to approach the attendant.

'No worries, love. I'll let you through and you can top it up.' He winks at her.

Emiri laughs, surprised by the friendly manner of the Underground staff. By the time she gets out of the station she's late and has to run up Gower Street towards the huge hospital complex. She hurries down corridors lined with smiling portraits of nurses and doctors, next to paintings donated by patients.

When she reaches her department, she throws her bag in the locker, puts on her uniform and dashes to the imaging section. She expects to find her friend Mary there, but when she approaches the waiting room an agency clinician appears.

'Emiri? I'm Janet, I'll be working with you today. Mary's off sick.'

'Sorry I'm a bit late, there was a problem on the Tube.'

'I did wonder when you were going to turn up, so I went and spoke to Nigel.'

'Thanks.' Emiri remembers the text Mary sent her when she was at Nancy's, an urgent appointment at her daughter's school.

'We've got a busy day.'Janet shuffles some papers. 'I need to see the manager to check something else. Can you start without me?'

She doesn't wait for an answer and Emiri watches her march towards the office. She's probably in her late fifties and putting on weight from comfort eating, as proper meal breaks are hard to find in the hospital. Emiri has worked with other agency staff and knows Janet's a senior radiographer who's gone freelance to make more money before she retires. She feels a pang of envy and a yearning to be better qualified. Every day brings more changes to the NHS as European nurses and clinicians resign after Brexit. She makes her way to the imaging room, wishing Mary was here. Her friend is a reassuring voice in the daily chaos and never arrogant about her experience.

The first patient is Brian Whittaker, six foot three, aged twenty-eight, built like a tank. He moves like a wrestler when she asks him to approach the machine. It's a normal lung X-ray, and the notes suggest it's precautionary. She positions his chin on the rest plate and manoeuvres him closer to the screen.

'Bit chilly in here, love,' he says, smiling.

'Quite nice in a heatwave.'

'I like the sun, myself. Where you from?'

She pauses and almost ignores him, suspicious of his question. 'Near the Angel,' she answers.

'All nurses are angels to me, love.'

Emiri smiles to reassure him, and steps into the control room and flicks the switch. The room is airless without any windows, but Emiri feels good to be back at work. She

speaks into the microphone to ask the patient to remain still. The equipment clicks into action and Emiri watches the lights change on the display panel; even after all this time she still marvels that this technology can reveal the inside of a human being. She opens the scans to verify them, but when she looks closer she's puzzled. Her college lecturer told her that radiography is about finding meanings from complex shades of grey, many more than fifty. You could see a broken heart with these machines, but what she's looking at is as close as anyone could get. The man has a collapsed lung. She's amazed that he seems so unaffected, but it's probably happened over a long period and he's adjusted to his lack of breath. She tells him to wait there and rushes off to find the doctor, but bumps into Janet in the corridor.

'Collapsed left lung,' Emiri whispers.

They go into the control room and check the X-rays. 'Good images, but bad news for our friend. I'll contact the wards and see if there are any beds available. Tell him to wait outside.'

Emiri returns to the patient and takes him to the waiting room.

'Everything all right, love?' he says. 'Got to get back to work soon.'

'We just need the doctor to see you, Mr Whittaker. Please wait here.'

She grabs a moment in the imaging room and takes deep breaths, counting to ten. It's a struggle to focus on the next patient, but she doesn't want to let anyone down. With its constant reminders of human vulnerability, her job requires strength. She feels faint but is determined not to give Janet another chance to pull rank.

'You all right? You look pale.'

'I'm fine. Have any luck with a bed?' Emiri asks.

'Lucky bugger's got one in Ward 7. His feet won't touch the ground.'

Emiri greets the next patient and hopes there won't be any more Mr Whittakers today. She notices a stack of boxes in the hall for the storeroom, but she's already behind with appointments when her line manager appears. His identity card is pinned to his breast pocket, announcing Rufus Girton-Paine, Executive.

'Emily, isn't it? Can you get these boxes moved, pronto? Or did you miss my talk about health and safety?'

He tuts as he marches off in his tight-fitting grey suit. She has to suppress an urge to give him a middle-finger salute. Most of the time she likes her work, but there are occasional pitfalls and when she's got a better contract people will treat her with more respect. She's applied for a course at City University to study radiology, and her manager Nigel has encouraged her to be ambitious, even though it will mean hours of extra study to become a

doctor. Emiri isn't sure she can face it, but the increasing sense of déjà vu, with predictable x rays, makes her want a change.

The afternoon passes with the usual mix of patients, and there are some moments when Emiri puts Janet in her place about recent procedural changes, which she secretly enjoys. By the time she gets home to the boat, Emiri is exhausted and throws off her shoes and pours the last glass of wine. The man's briefcase lingers on the table and, as she sips the cold wine, she realises she feels sad that he is considered a criminal when he hasn't even had a trial. Thinking again of his final words, she doesn't want give up the briefcase – though of course she knows she should hand it in. But what if it holds information that proves his innocence? She believes that keeping it is the decent thing to do; it's what she would want someone to do for her in the circumstances. If she hands in the briefcase, his story might be lost forever, and nobody will ever know why he ended his life.

Her phone rings. It's her mother, and the perfect video picture shows her sitting outside the restaurant in Istanbul with a drink under the Judas tree. Emiri fills her glass with the dregs of her Chardonnay and they toast each other. Her mother is wearing the batik headscarf Emiri gave her on her fiftieth birthday, and she can almost smell the musky scent of the wisteria climbing the restaurant wall.

'How are you, princess?'

'Tired, Mum. It's been a hard day.'

'I hope you're not overdoing it. It's been mad here; the customers are eating us out of house and home, but it's good for business.'

Her mother started the restaurant just before her father lost his teaching job at the university. He took part in some demonstrations and someone filmed him lecturing the crowd and reported him.

'How's Dad?'

'Bit low. He's on new medication.'

'What's he been given?'

'I don't know, just pills. Your father doesn't like to discuss it.'

'You should tell me, Mum. After all, I am a medic.' Emiri pleads with her mother but gets nowhere, so she changes the subject. 'Can you send me that recipe for Revani cake?'

'I'll email it to you. But don't add too much sugar. More importantly, what about men, Emiri?'

Normally her mother is subtler than this.

‘I’m having to turn down consultants, registrars and even porters,’ Emiri says. ‘Flowers are falling from the sky.’

Her mother laughs. ‘What is really happening? The clock is ticking, my anneciğim.’

Emiri can sense them beginning to rake over old ground.

‘How will my daughter find love?’

‘Love is the full story of a woman’s life, but it’s just an adventure for men.’

Emiri’s mother clasps her hands together.

‘Have faith, Emiri. God willing, we will have grandchildren.’

‘It’s best if it’s part of a rich, loving relationship.’

‘You had that when you were here, but you threw it all away.’

Emiri doesn’t want to argue with her mother, she looks tired, yawning outside the restaurant. Emiri respects her for the hard work, persisting through financial struggles, but says nothing about it.

‘I wouldn’t knit any baby clothes yet, Mum.’

‘You mean, there’s nobody at all?’

‘Nobody,’ Emiri announces. A shiver of loneliness tenses her spine as she looks round the tidy boat, all in order and rather too neat. Her mother moans some more about her father and his politics, but Emiri enjoys the anecdotes about drunken customers and the authorities trying to put up her rent. No one would want to fight her mother, unless they were prepared to lose.

‘If you can’t find a man, Emiri, you could at least come home to visit so we can point you in the right direction.’

‘I will, Mum, but I have to renew my visa, so not yet.’ The signal becomes shaky as her mother reminds her to meet a family friend off the Stansted Express at eleven o’clock on Friday, but she doesn’t tell her their name before the phone goes dead.

Tired after her long day and her mother’s phone call, Emiri locks up the boat, and her cat Mergen creeps in, making himself comfortable on the sofa. He’s a black and white cat named after the Turkish God of wisdom, friendly and clever. She talks to him about her day, tickling his favourite place behind the ear as she gets snug in bed. Emiri hears the moaning call of a fox, shrieking into the night, making Mergen’s ears prick up. They both listen to the pained cry of a vixen calling out for a partner. Emiri has no intention of clambering out on to the deck in her nightdress and screaming at the moon until a prince appears, even if that would please her mother.

Chapter 3

Moorgate

Systems which automatically stop trains at dead-ends have been installed on the Underground since 1975. They are known as Moorgate Control.

Thursday June 6

The nightmare grabs me again, tossing and turning my body in the darkness. It's always the same: I emerge into the light of the station, and he jumps from nowhere. He does it by the tunnel – where the train enters the station at speed – throwing himself on to the tracks and casting a shadow across the cab. I go into automatic, remember my training and let go of the dead man's handle, but the train takes ages to slow down. I check the other controls, and then my mind goes blank. All I can see is his face, strangely peaceful. His head gets bigger and bigger as I shrink and cower in the cab. The grind of the brakes echo, and a smell of burning fills the air. The train stops mid-station. Screams erupt around me and I leap from the cab, telling people to stand back. Should I try and find the body, mangled across the tracks, or just run away? I've been trained for this, yet I'm no use to anyone. The crowd stare at me, a criminal who has killed a man. I need to do something, but blood drains from my body and I want to escape. There's a loud bell that won't stop ringing. I stumble out of bed and stagger across the floor towards the door.

By the time I get there, the ring has turned into friendly tapping on the glass. Oscar is on my doorstep in a Jamaican shirt, with sunglasses and a baseball cap squeezed over his dreadlocks.

He follows me into the kitchen and flicks the swich on the kettle.

'Someone been leaving you presents?' He opens the cake tin.

'Help yourself.' I get out a plate.

'Where's the teabags?'

'In the caddy marked tea.'

'Too logical for me. Has Alice been tidying again? Cake looks good.' He searches for a knife and cuts two huge slices.

I retire to the sofa, breathing in the smell of lemon and alcohol from the cake. ‘Make yourself at home, Oscar,’ I say. We’ve worked together for more than ten years on the Underground and I’ve got used to his cheek.

He gives me a wry smile and bites into the cake. ‘Blimey, you could get pissed on this.’

‘Probably half vodka if Marta made it.’ I push my plate away.

Oscar stares at me. ‘Bad night?’

I look away, fearing his inspection, the usual insistence on eye contact.

‘There’s no rush, Joe. This city’s going nowhere.’ He parades in front of the curtains, dropping crumbs on the floor. ‘Who would want to go down a hole in the ground on a lovely day like this?’

There’s a pause before I confess, ‘I tried yesterday but chickened out.’

‘I told you not to try it on your own.’ He moves towards me, but I turn away and he returns to the window, peering through the crack in the curtains. ‘You’re lucky to live here, looking down over everybody like a king. You could grow tomatoes on your balcony, Joe. South facing, they’d love it.’ He stuffs down the last of his cake. ‘The gang were asking after you last night.’

‘You didn’t say anything?’

‘Just that you’re making good progress and don’t want any visitors.’

We talk about football next. Oscar’s a staunch Tottenham fan, forever chiding me for being a Gooner.

‘At least we have one thing in common – losing in the Champion’s League final.’ Liverpool beat Spurs last weekend, and he’s still hurting. He changes the subject, sifting through the CDs stacked on the piano and reading the notes on a Bill Withers cover. ‘From fitting loos on aeroplanes to musical genius. There’s hope for us all.’ He sits down, his hand tapping out imaginary tunes on the armchair. ‘Did you pick up your dad’s watch?’

‘Fuck.’ I remember the phone call, and that Dad likes to keep perfect time, especially now he’s a pensioner with nothing to do.

‘He’ll crucify you if you lose it.’ Oscar waves a finger at me. ‘Why don’t we do a stop on the Circle?’

I know his plan: he wants to get me out. He was a carer for his mum, taking six months off work to nurse her day and night before she went into the hospice. His gentle persuasion and a sprinkling of sarcasm help me go and get dressed – I choose light trousers and a summer shirt I haven’t worn for years. I feel relieved that Oscar will be my companion.

We make our way to Farringdon station and Oscar stops for a coffee from the local Italian, imbibing caffeine to function. Near the station I have to stop and rest by the wall; a newspaper vendor holds up a headline: 'PM to Step Down'.

'The country's falling apart at the seams.' Oscar comments. But I'm more concerned with my own dilemma as I pause by the ticket office. He puts his arm round me and guides me to a side corridor where some large wooden panels are being erected for an exhibition about Edward Johnston, the designer of the typeface for the London Underground. I look closer and recognise the familiar lettering that appears all over the city. Oscar chats to the guys erecting the panels, but I begin to doubt if I have the will for an expedition. He sees me hyperventilating and leads me away. My mouth is dry and I've got a headache but don't want to let him down. We stop by the stairs for a moment while I grab some shallow breaths.

'Shall we give it a go?' Oscar stands by my side like a football trainer. 'In your own time, Joe.'

If I wasn't so stressed, I'd laugh at having my own bodyguard just to go down a few steps.

He leads the way, then watches me descend after him. 'Just like Arsenal, sliding down the league. Easy-peasy.'

He beams a grin, and I make it to the platform then collapse onto a seat. I watch the commuters in suits trying to stay cool in the heat, a few talking on their mobiles. There's almost silence before a train roars into the station, and the noise makes me shudder. Oscar puts his hand on my shoulder but I push him away.

'I can't do it.' I run back down the platform towards the exit.

'Don't worry, Joe,' he helps me up the stairs, out onto Farringdon Road and hails a cab. Inside he offers me a sweet, and we watch London through the tinted windows. The peppermint flavour brings comfort.

'A little each time, and you'll get there, son.'

Oscar calls everyone 'son', as well as his step-son Michael. I quite like being called son, as Oscar is ten years older than me, though he looks younger. We drive through London in silence and he tells the cabbie to pull over by Moorgate station. We walk round the corner to Moor Place where a plaque is mounted on the wall. It commemorates the worst peacetime accident on the Underground, when forty-three lives were lost in 1975.

'I know it's tough, Joe, but I thought it might be useful to show you this. My mum brought me here once – she lost a cousin.' We stand there out of respect and then shelter in the shade of the station foyer, where Oscar puts his arm round my shoulder again.

‘You’re not going to get down in one go, Joe. Why don’t we just have a look round the station, then pick up the watch?’

I observe the tiled maze and nod my head. This station has always seemed anonymous and endless – it reminds me of the George Tooker print that hung outside the headmaster’s office at school. The picture depicted underground humans hiding behind pillars and stairways in a New York subway, locked in a labyrinth of passages that led nowhere, much like my comprehensive school. They looked like lost spirits in the subterranean world, and some drivers say they’ve seen ghosts in the tunnels of Moorgate, but I never have – not until now. It’s a challenge to keep walking through the station, but I know Oscar’s reasons; we make it down to the third level before my breathing gets worse and I panic.

We take a lift to the surface where I’m dazzled by the light and confused by the noise of the city street. Young men in striped shirts have loud conversations, carrying their jackets and ties, like schoolkids playing truant. We cross over London Wall and find the watch shop fifty yards up the street. Oscar stares into the window and drools over the treasure displayed while I calm down. The shop’s name is Tempo & Time, and I reflect on the words while Oscar makes noises like a child at Christmas. Tempo is Italian for ‘time’, but it means much more in music. I always look at a manuscript before I play, to check the speed of the piece, but that’s interpretive according to any individual’s desire, much like choosing a watch to keep time through your life.

‘Look at that beauty.’ Oscar points at an instrument you’d expect an astronaut to wear, several dials on a large face with lots of switches. He opens the door and I follow him into the brightly lit shop packed with glass cases. We explain that I’ve got a Rolex to collect. Oscar’s much better with people than me, more affable; they enjoy his company. We exchange some banter before the assistant goes behind some curtains. He brings out a small box and opens it on the glass counter.

‘This was a good buy – the Rolex Oyster Perpetual is a lovely timepiece.’ He hands it to me, and I stare at the precision watch.

‘Was there much to do?’

‘It needed a little TLC, sir, but it’s perfect now.’

I hold the watch to my ear, close my eyes and listen intensely. It’s like a distant planet is calling.

‘It’s a lovely sound.’

‘Eight ticks per second. And if there aren’t, it’s a fake, sir.’

I slip the watch on to my wrist, then hold it away from my body to admire.

‘My goodness, is that the time? We need a bevvie, Joe,’ Oscar announces.

I settle the bill and we go out onto the street. Cars hoot, pneumatic drills break concrete, police sirens fill the street with panic, and I want to go home. I persuade Oscar that a pub visit isn’t necessary as I’ve got chilled beers at the flat. We take the back streets to Clerkenwell, past architects’ dreams built out of glass and concrete. I clutch Dad’s timepiece in the bag and inspect it again at the flat when we get out of the lift.

‘Funny to think that your old man bought a bloody watch to count time in his retirement,’ Oscar says as he follows me into the flat. I get him a beer.

‘Masochism. He got a lump sum from his TfL pension – I suppose a watch is better than buying himself a case of whisky.’ We move out onto the balcony and take in the sun. ‘He wasn’t a great dad, but at least he stayed. It was hard on Mum.’

‘Your mum was all right. She was good fun.’

‘It wasn’t all bad. I thought this flat was amazing when they bought it in the eighties with Thatcher’s right-to-buy. She was Dad’s hero.’

‘The Iron Lady – she was a curse.’

He passes me a can and we look out on the city putting the world to rights.

‘Michael’s being odd with me again,’ Oscar sctaches his head.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘The boy’s hard work, man. I know he’s on the spectrum somewhere, but it’s like he doesn’t want to know me, and since he’s been at uni it’s got harder.’

‘You never know, Oscar. Things can change.’

‘Maybe. Precious is great with him, but he’s her son. I’m just Stepdad and I want to do better, find a way in.’

Oscar raises his can and drains it. There’s a long pause, then I try to change the subject.

‘It’s the funeral tomorrow.’ I give him a sidelong glance.

‘Whose?’

‘The guy who jumped.’

‘So?’

‘I want to pay my respects, understand better. It’s a bit like you and Michael.’

‘Christ, Joe. Michael’s my fucking stepson, not some random guy who threw himself under a train.’

‘I know he was probably an illegal but he’s still a human. He deserves respect.’

Oscar's been driving longer than me but never had a jumper, so he hasn't had to suffer this.

'I don't know how you can compare him to Michael,' he says. 'That guy was a bloody stranger.'

I was already regretting mentioning Michael. 'Just unfinished business, that's all. I need to find out why he did it.'

'D'you really have to attend a funeral at this moment in time? Look at you, it's taken enough of a toll, hasn't it?'

'I have to go, Oscar. I'm not asking you to come.'

He stares at me, then takes the empties to the bin and mutters, 'If you got yourself a girlfriend, that might be more useful.'

It's easy for a man who's found someone like Precious – his manager, lover, best friend and also beautiful. I know he's only trying to help, but how can I think about romance when I'm in bits?

Oscar pauses on his way out and gives me a meaningful look. 'We'll do it, son. One step at a time. You did good today. I was proud of you at Moorgate.'

After he's gone, I lie down on the sofa and just as I'm getting comfortable there's a text from my dad: Don't forget my watch, Joe.

I can't face it phoning him, but I grab the watch and leave. I cross Liverpool Road to keep in the shade, but the smell of the traffic fumes gets heavier in the hot sun. I saunter up the patchwork of pavement, through the constant reconstruction of London until I see the yellow brick building with its well-kept borders and tended gardens. I wave to the warden as I pass under the arches and cross the lawn to Dad's flat. He's sitting on the grass in a deckchair wearing chinos and a striped shirt with a tie, like the Lord Mayor of London.

'Hello, Joe. Hot enough for you?'

No hug. I try, but he prefers the old English handshake. When he moved out of the flat, I had to re-mortgage so he'd have the money he needed for the accommodation. I didn't mind, it mattered to me that he was clear of debt and comfortable. It's a nice one-bed unit with a kitchen and bathroom.

'Cold drink?' he says, heading inside. I follow.

'Yes, please.'

'I've got orange juice, lemonade and some cranberry juice. Margaret left it here.'

I note the casual mention of Margaret, a name I've not heard him use before. Most importantly, I know that he's trying to tell me he's met someone, and I'm pleased.

‘Lemonade would be lovely.’

‘Ice?’

I nod and he goes to the freezer section, then pours himself some of Margaret’s juice.

‘Good for the prostate, apparently.’ He raises his glass and we toast the prostate. I sit at the small table and he busies himself in the cramped kitchen putting some biscuits on a plate. I can only presume that Margaret has been training him as this hasn’t happened before. There’s a vase on the dresser, made of blue glass with some fresh flowers in it, not something I’ve seen before either.

‘Nice vase, lovely shape.’

‘Oh, that. Present from George, old boy in the main block. He’s blind – I read to him, war books mainly.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘It’s nothing. You out and about now?’

‘Not really.’

‘No good moping, son. Just ’cause some immigrant topped himself on your watch. Life goes on, grab it with both hands.’

I take a biscuit. ‘Alice has moved back into her flat.’

‘With that funny bird?’

‘Eva’s okay, she’s just a bit vulnerable.’ I defend her, even though I know she’s taken my daughter away.

‘Haven’t seen my grand-daughter in ages – be nice if she visited. They let lesbians in here, you know.’ He finishes his drink. ‘So, what about you? You got someone?’

I shake my head and watch him fold up the drying cloth like a piece of origami.

‘Almost forgot.’ I hand him the watch.

He lifts it to his ear and smiles. ‘How much was it?’

‘Don’t worry, Dad.’

He fastens the watch to his wrist then holds it away from his body to admire his valuable timepiece.

‘I’ve got someone coming to tea,’ he says, smoothing down what’s left of his hair and adjusting his trousers. ‘You’ll have to go, Joe.’ He grabs his cream jacket and ushers me away.

I hold out my hand and for a moment I think he’s too busy to shake it, then we fleetingly touch flesh and make brief eye contact.

‘Remember, Joe, stop all the moping. Get over it.’

I walk back across the gardens and turn to see him preening himself in the kitchen mirror.