

Hidden

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For the Halahmy family who told me their stories of Iraq

Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand...
from 'Remember' by Christina Rossetti

Do not wrong a stranger or oppress him;
remember you were strangers in the land of Egypt.
Exodus 22:21

Chapter 1

Hoodies on the High Street

School's out and I'm waiting for Kim when my phone bleeps. *Can't cum shppng. Gran sick. Soz.* So I'm stuck here on the High Street on my own, my best friend since forever sucked back into her super huge family. I need a new top but I've got hardly any money left and Mum wants me home in one hour max, because since she broke her leg she expects me to do everything. Even clean the loo.

"I'm not fifteen until May," I yelled at her earlier.

But she just said, "Save it. You'll find the bathroom cleaner under the sink."

"Might as well sell me into child slavery," I muttered, because since we've not been getting along, well not getting along even worse than usual because she broke her leg, (which for the record wasn't my fault), it's just not worth winding her up. I try to think thoughts these days instead of actually saying them out loud, because you know how it is, everything you say out loud gets taken down and used as evidence, or recorded on camera phone and loaded onto YouTube, so everyone can view it. Well that's how it feels anyway.

I don't care about shopping anymore. It's not much fun by yourself. The shops are full of girls from school hanging

out with their boyfriends and they're trying on the jewellery. Yes, the boys I mean, they're trying on the bracelets and stuff and the girls are screaming and laughing.

"Let's face it, Alix Miller," I say to myself, "you haven't even got a boyfriend." It's the Spring Rave on Saturday night at school and I've got no-one to go with, again.

I pull my hairband out and drag my hair back more tightly, wishing I had enough money for one of those sparkly vests that look great with shorts and black tights. I walk back to the bus stop feeling completely rubbish. When I get near, there's a crazy commotion just in front of me. Some boys are hooting and jeering. I can't make out what they're saying at first but as I get nearer I hear them yell, "Paki, Taliban, terrorist!"

I see Samir, the foreign boy from school. The hoodies have got him jammed up against a wall and they've begun chanting, "Paki out, Taliban out. Out, out, out!" They're really pushing their voices and shoving their arms like football hooligans.

People are crossing the street to avoid them and muttering into their shopping bags. The wind gusts all the takeaway rubbish around our feet and whips back one of the gang's hoods from his head. I recognise Terrence, Lindy Bellows' big brother, who's a real thug, and a horrible feeling sinks into the pit of my stomach. No wonder Samir looks totally scared to bits. Samir's a bit taller than me and his black hair spikes up over his head making him look even more scared. He's wearing an Arsenal football

scarf and his face is sort of pulled in as though he's trying to disappear.

Remember what I said about YouTube? All those thoughts that I try to keep in? Well suddenly I'm shouting, "Leave him alone, pick on someone your own size!"

The gang turn and Terrence snarls, "Shut it, Alix! Unless you want some." God! He knows my name. Uh oh! I'm in training for the Junior County Marathon, so I'm poised to sprint away when a police car pulls up, just like on the telly, and three ginormous cops in stab vests leap out.

The gang disappears in seconds and I see Samir's back whizzing off, Arsenal scarf flying out behind him. A tatty wallet slips out of his back pocket and onto the pavement.

The crowd that's gathered on the other side of the street trickle over the road, now that it's safe and surround the police, saying how dangerous the High Street has become.

One of the policemen asks the crowd, "Did you recognise any of them?"

A woman in a see-through plastic mac shrieks out like a parrot, "Terrence Bellows!" and everyone says, "Yes, yes, that's him."

"Terrence Bellows is on an ASBO. He isn't allowed anywhere in the town centre," frowns the policeman.

The crowd snort like a herd of bulls, but I've already picked up the wallet and I'm running after Samir who's dodged off down the next street. He's pretty slow, maybe a smoker, because I've almost caught him up when he comes

to a halt, pulls out a key, lets himself into a flat beside a Chinese takeaway and slams the door shut. I'm left standing out in the street, the smell of sweet and sour making me really hungry, wondering if I should knock on the door or just give up and go home. But the thought of Misery Guts Mum slouched in front of the telly giving out orders all evening overwhelms me and without another thought I rap loudly on the door.

Nothing. I rap again a bit more half-heartedly.

A Chinese woman comes out of the takeaway and says, "Do bell, they not hear you." She has a tired, wrinkly sort of face and she's wearing bright red slippers on her feet. When I look at the door again I can see a grubby bell with the wires hanging out of the side.

I press the bell and it rings somewhere above me and then I hear the thunder of feet coming down a long staircase. Someone rattles a chain and the door opens a sort of cautious crack. It's Samir and when he sees me he stares at me and I stare back.

"Girlfriend visit you," the Chinese lady pipes up and she lets out a peal of shrill laughter, which echoes around the street.

I feel my face go bright red and the door slams shut. More chain rattling, the door opens wide and, frowning at the Chinese lady, Samir says, "Come in."

I hesitate, thinking, Should I? What would Mum say? and even, What if they are terrorists? But then I think that's so crazy that I run up the stairs after Samir.

The smell of Chinese food fades and it's replaced with a strange smell, which I completely don't recognise. Samir pushes open a door and leads the way into the kitchen. It's very small and every surface is covered in cooking stuff: mixing bowls, wooden spoons and huge metal baking trays all smeared with a sticky looking mixture.

I'm just wondering what it is when Samir says, "Aunty Selma's been making *baklava*."

For once I keep my mouth shut and just think in silence, Why does his aunty make balaclavas? Aren't they like ski masks that terrorists wear and anyhow why would she make them in the kitchen while she's baking?

Chapter 2 SUSPICIONS

"Is this yours?" I ask holding out the wallet.

Samir nods in a shy sort of way and mutters, "Thank you." He puts the wallet in his pocket.

I don't know what else to say. Samir only joined our class this term and I don't really know him. I'm just wondering where he's from and if I should ask when the door below us slams shut and footsteps echo on the stairs. Samir throws me a nervous look and I'm thinking, Is it too late to hide? when Samir-mark-II appears in the doorway. Same black hair, not quite so spiky, same dark eyes and dark skin but quite a bit taller and a few years older.

"This is Naazim, my brother," says Samir.

Naazim fixes me with a suspicious stare and I can't help thinking that if anyone looks like a terrorist, he does. He has this sort of smouldering look on his face you see on suspected bombers they show on TV and he's wearing very greasy overalls. Car mechanic, I decide. But fortunately I manage to keep silent.

Naazim barks out, "Who you are?"

He has a strong accent and I'm wondering if he's from Pakistan or maybe Afghanistan, when he snaps, "Where you live?"

I glance over at Samir for support but he's fixed on his brother so I shrug and start to explain about the gang. But then Samir catches my eye and something in his look makes me stop. He doesn't want Naazim to know about the bullies on the High Street and his dark eyes have such a pleading look that I pull up short and instead mutter, "I'm Alix. I live on Hayling Island."

Naazim's face gets even darker and he starts rattling away to Samir in this totally foreign language. His voice is rising as he waves his hand about, which is also covered with grease, and he keeps shooting me poisonous looks. He's standing between me and the door so there's no way out and Samir can't get a word in edgewise. It's starting to get scary and I try to gauge whether I could slip past and race down the stairs. I can't help wondering if they go on like this all the time. Maybe they're planning their next attack on mainland Britain. The battery in my rubbish mobile is probably too flat to get a 999 message out.

Naazim keeps going like a rocket and in the end I'm getting so tense I start to fiddle about with some lemon peel lying around on the counter. There's nothing I can do until Naazim lets me go, assuming of course that he will and I'm just wondering what I should do if he doesn't when Samir says in English, "She's just leaving."

It's then I realise the difference.

Samir speaks really good English, with hardly any accent.

In the end Naazim just grunts, "Samir must clean kitchen," and he's gone leaving us alone.

I'm so relieved I let out a big sigh and throw Samir a look, expecting him to say something like, 'Big brothers, what a waste of space.' But he just stands there staring towards the door. I've never seen anyone keep so still.

It feels quite weird so I say, "I'd better go."

Samir nods and I follow him back downstairs again but as I go out the front door he calls out, "See you in school?"

He has that sort of lost, pleading look in his eyes again, so I call back, "Okay," and sprint off to the bus stop, but I can't help feeling relieved I'm outside again.

Families can be so embarrassing, I think as the bus pulls out of town. I don't blame Samir for not spilling anything to his brother. Maybe Naazim is a bit of a bully himself.

I'm just deciding that Samir is the best at English in his family, that they all rely on him and so he doesn't want to tell them about the bullies and look weak in front of his brother, when someone halfway down the bus says out loud to no-one in particular, "They want their heads examining."

I whip around in shock. What do they know?

Then I see Mrs Saddler from our street nodding towards a windsurfer tacking across the choppy sea out in Langstone Harbour. I should have guessed. Mrs Saddler's always complaining about something. Last week she told Mum I shouldn't be running about on the beach anymore. "She doesn't keep that dog of hers under proper control. I wouldn't let my Jeremy run about on the yacht club road unleashed."

She's such an old bat. She hasn't got a clue what I have to do to train for the Marathon and my dog, Trudy, loves to run with me, her daft spaniel ears flopping from side to side. Jeremy couldn't run to save his life.

My phone rings. It's Kim. Finally!

"Gran's okay," she says. To be honest I'd completely forgotten all about our shopping trip and why it was cancelled. "So Mum's happy. She was really worried," Kim goes on.

"Great," I say, but I can't help feeling a bit jealous.

Kim has sisters, brothers, a mum and a dad, and that's just for starters. My dad skipped two years ago. Disappeared with Gorgeous Gloria – Mum and me call her the Gremlin – and we haven't heard from him since. We moved into Grandpa's little cottage when Dad left but then Grandpa died last year and now it's just us two. And the broken leg of course.

My phone crackles and I say to Kim, "You'll never guess where I've been."

"Where?" she says.

"A suicide bomber's house!" I say.

Chapter 3 Elephants

"Tell me everything," gasps Kim.

Mrs Saddler's pushing off the bus in front of me so I say, "I'll ring you later," and click off.

Back home Mum starts the minute I get in. "Alexandra?" she yells from her usual position in front of the telly and she's using the name.

"It's Alix with an i," I yell back. But she never listens. I'm named after Grandma so she refuses to shorten it.

"The supermarket delivery came," Mum goes on. "I expected you hours ago."

She sounds really grumpy; she's probably been sitting watching the clock all afternoon.

I'm actually thirty-four minutes early but there's no point arguing.

Mum's been ordering the shopping online since she can't drive with her broken leg. It happened when she got out of bed. She was just getting up and somehow she tripped and bam! By the time the ambulance came, I thought she might die just from screaming. It's quite a bad break and she's no good on crutches. She might even lose her office job, which is only temporary anyway.

I took on a paper round, even though I've got loads of