

# *A BIS Abu Dhabi Novel*



THE BRITISH  
INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL  
ABU DHABI

*Be Ambitious*

A short novel written by staff  
and students of The British  
International School Abu Dhabi  
during the global Covid-19  
pandemic in 2020-21



*Front Cover Art Work Credit to Safa Al Dulaimi, Year 12*

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## Preface

During the global pandemic and lock-down of 2020/21, several members of The British International staff and students worked together to produce their very own novel. The pandemic caused school closures to protect the community and this project was accomplished as part of our Virtual School Experience.

Each member of the novel writing team was given one chapter to write. There was no brief, no plot-line to follow, no set character list to include – all we had was a title ‘The City’. Therefore, the writing team took their turns, chapter-by-chapter, and developed the story in whichever direction they wanted. The rest of this book is the result.

I would like to thank everyone involved in this project, but especially our students whose unwavering enthusiasm and collaborative spirit was truly inspiring.

*Mr. Stanier, BIS Abu Dhabi English Teacher and Head of Year 9*



## The City – Chapter 1

### *Mr. Butterworth, English Teacher & Head of Year 8*

This city never sleeps. Heidi was snaking into its outer suburbs in a taxi just as the first half-light of dawn was breaking. The cab driver must not have been on long; he wore what looked to be his pajamas and was rubbing his eyes and yawning. At the traffic lights Heidi watched a big-bellied shopkeeper sweep discarded cigarettes butts from the pavement onto the road. Across the street, a purple haired waitress was wiping down the tables and greeting the day's first customers.

Heidi had headed straight to the airport yesterday afternoon as soon as she received the email. The instructions were brief:

**Your flight will leave at 9:54pm. Bring the case, dress smart for the job interview and don't bring more than a backpack. You're staying at The Artezen Hotel on 42<sup>nd</sup> street. You'll find out more when you arrive.**

The briefcase that had been stowed away in the back of her wardrobe for weeks now, was finally hauled onto the bed. Heidi slotted her notepad into the front pocket of the backpack, 3 pens for good luck and allowed herself a moment to contemplate how the next few days would pan out. She called for a taxi and made it clear that there would be no conversation on the way to the airport.

The Artezen was not a hotel she was familiar with but 42<sup>nd</sup> street was on the south side of the city – she knew that from her student days. That had been 10 years ago, and she was intrigued to see how the city had changed in her absence. Meandering through the streets, she tried to take stock of anything that she could remember. A side-street noodle bar that her friends used to go to after lectures on Wednesdays was boarded up; perhaps it was too early for that to be opened. A bric-a-brac shop where she'd bought tables and a mirror for her student apartment advertised 'summer discounts'. A smile crept across her face as she let herself remember her old life; her life before everything changed.

"You know whereabouts on 42<sup>nd</sup> you're headed? It's the 3<sup>rd</sup> longest street in the city..." The cab driver inquired. That accent made her grin; she'd missed its warmth. Thankfully, he knew The Artezen, and after tipping a little too generously, she stood, exposed with briefcase in hand and backpack strapped tight looking like a ridiculous parody of student and businesswoman. The hotel concierge smiled politely, beckoned her towards the front desk and she dived in before attracting too much attention on a street that was still waking up.

"Welcome to The Artezen, your room will be available from 11, please leave your belongings in reception. Our restaurant isn't open yet but why not take time to explore the city. Luigi's round the corner does the best coffee in town". The receptionist checked his watch. "He'll just be opening now". Knowing she could not leave the briefcase, she had to think quickly without attracting attention.

She watched a porter take her rucksack into the luggage room while the concierge drew directions on a city map towards Luigi's café. Did the porter know something? He seemed interested in the weight of the bag. "Be careful", she shouted down the hallway. The porter flushed his eyelashes and smiled politely. She thought about asking if any messages had been left but knew her arrival here

would not have been overlooked. Heidi took the map, turned on her heels and re-emerged into a brisk April morning in the city that had once made her, but now threatened to take everything back.

The hotel receptionist may not have understood what an acceptable level of gel was to use in his hair, but he was right about this coffee, she could not remember a drink tasting this good in years. She sat back, ran her fingers along the soft leather briefcase before routinely checking its latches were still there, ice cold, locked shut. The café was decorated modestly, black and white film posters lined the walls, gilded frames of jazz musicians from the 20s and a duke box that didn't take coins but would still play requests. Heidi opened her phone; 13 emails had amassed since she had been on an overnight flight. Most of them could be ignored but she had 3 appointments that would need cancelling later today and two meetings she would need to think of an excuse for. If this went on for longer than a week, she would have to think of something else. A strongly worded email to the company secretary would do for now. She concocted a believable story about long-standing clients that had needed urgent attention and fired it off quickly. She was signing off when a message came through:

**“You got here. Interview at 11, Waldorf Astoria. Listen out for Lucy Shutter”.**

Heidi flushed and re-read the message 7 or 8 times hoping it would give some more information, but nothing came. The Waldorf Astoria was one of the most iconic and exclusive buildings in town. A place where, as a student, she felt guilty just walking through. Teeming with the city's elite, a sparkling water in the Waldorf would set her back 4 days train fare. But that was then, and she was different now. On the street, the city was warming up, beginning to bustle. There was a cab waiting, the driver had a knowing look. Had this been organized?

Upon arriving at the elegant hotel Heidi headed straight for the reception. “I'm here for the interview, I'm looking for Lucy Shutter...” The receptionist checked her schedule. “Interviews are on 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, Harlow Lounge. Take the first left and use the elevator”.

“And Mrs. Shutter” Heidi inquired.

“Never heard of her” said the receptionist, already now dealing with the gentleman behind her. She headed for the elevator. Inside the waiting room for the Harlow Lounge, she poured a glass of water and looked round. Tailored suits and designer shoes sparkled with subtlety, people around her age scrolled through phones, had quiet conversations, or stared at modern art on the wall. The door opened.

“Lucy Shutter” a grey, suited and spindly looking older man announced, looking up from his clip board. Heidi looked around eagerly waiting for a clue.

“Lucy Shutter” he repeated, slight irritation creeping into his voice. His piercing eyes met hers. “*Listen out for Lucy Shutter*” the message had said. Me? She thought... Me. Obviously. She picked up her briefcase and walked towards the wooden doors.



## Chapter 2

*Mrs. Cannon, English Teacher and Head of Year 7*

The grey suited man watched unemotionally as Heidi walked towards him leaning slightly to one side countering the weight of the briefcase in her hand. Did he look familiar to her? She felt she might have seen him before but couldn't quite place him. He had greying hair with a square jaw and brown piercing eyes. Heidi pondered that he was quite handsome – for his age.

As she approached him, she smiled and met his eyes, at which point he quickly turned, expressionless, hand outstretched in front of him, as if to suggest she should follow. He guided her through the heavy wooden doors, closing them carefully, clipboard under his arm, as she stepped beside him and into a spacious room that contained a large, ornate wooden desk with absolutely nothing on top of it. No papers, no computer, no books – nothing. The room contained the desk, an equally ornate chair behind it, and an antique cabinet were the only items in the room except for the out-of-place, solitary modern beige chair that 'grey suited man' gestured towards.

"Please wait here Ms Shutter," he said, and then promptly left out of another wooden door – singular this time – on the other side of the room from where they had entered.

Heidi carefully examined the room in which she found herself. As she placed the briefcase on the floor beside the chair on which she sat, she could hear muffled voices in the waiting area she had left.

Her eyes surveyed the room and she took in the solitary artwork on the back wall behind her – *Guernica* by Picasso – she knew this piece and reflected on the dark greys and blacks with faces contorted harrowingly, and limbs detached and outstretched. "Does it mean something?" she questioned to herself.

As her eyes returned to the desk in front of her and to the glass behind it, she stood up and walked towards the view of the buildings that was framed by the enormous double-glazed window. She leaned on the wooden frame, her forehead against the glass, and looked down at the street below.

She recalled the excitement she had felt when she received the letter of offer to study accountancy at Columbia, New York. These opportunities did not always present themselves to people like her, from families like hers, but she had been determined to show what she could do and her final high school exam results meant she could study anywhere in the world – and where else would she want to study?

She came to love this city and quickly mastered the subway and the labyrinth-like halls of higher learning. She drank in the hustle and bustle, the colours and the sounds of the city. The people were so friendly, but there were none friendlier than the person that would change her life.

Shamsa Ali had been a quiet student that smiled from afar and, although they sometimes sat near to one another in the lecture halls, she and Heidi never quite properly crossed paths. Until one day, they found themselves together in the queue at the cafeteria and began to converse. At first, they

discussed innocuous subjects like the weather and eccentric lecturers but soon they found themselves discussing all manner of topics. She was so worldly and opened Heidi's eyes to numerous possibilities. She also had a very interesting and seemingly important family in the Middle East that she talked about with great fondness. Heidi thought Shamsa's family sounded utterly intriguing.

Heidi reflected on the last time she and Shamsa had spoken, just prior to their graduation and her move back to London to take up a position with the large accountancy firm – Hawker Monroe. Shamsa had arrived at her apartment unexpectedly and, with urgency in her eyes, had announced that she had to go and may never be able to come to New York or visit her in London again.

The years had drifted by, and the days Heidi and Shamsa had graced the streets below where she now stood with her breath fogging the window, seemed like a distant dream.

Except that Shamsa had delivered the briefcase.

Heidi only knew this because she had asked the over-friendly security detail in the foyer of her London apartment building whether she could take a peak at the CCTV footage to see whether her brother had stopped by as he said he had. Even though he protested the ethics of allowing her to see, Heidi knew Robert would capitulate and show her in the end – he clearly could not resist her charms and believed her story.

Heidi made sure not to react too strongly when, leaning over Robert's shoulder and staring at the computer screen on his desk, she saw the grainy image of the lady entering the building. She could not mistake that gait, nor the face that glanced up towards the camera, almost as though the person knew she would be viewed. That was Shamsa – no doubt. She disguised the rush of breath that left her as a cough, and thanked Robert profusely for his help, declaring that she knew her brother had been lying.

When, arriving home from work a day earlier, she had noticed the corner of the briefcase sticking out from behind the large pot next to her front door, at first she had panicked and had every intention of calling the police ... until she remembered how ordinary her life had become and that the likelihood was that the briefcase had been left there by mistake. She figured she would leave it and someone would probably collect it by morning and, if not, she could check with Robert and find the mysterious person to which it belonged. She had been excited at the prospect of an interaction with even one of the reclusive occupants of her building.

Once she had seen Shamsa's face though, she knew the briefcase was meant for her and that she should keep it safe until she heard from her old friend. Six weeks later, the email had arrived.

And now here she was, in the Waldorf Astoria, about to find out what on earth was going on.

Loud voices approaching startled Heidi out of her contemplative state and she quickly brushed herself down and returned to the chair in the centre of the room, making sure the briefcase was in place, and that she was ready for the 'job interview'.



### Chapter 3

*Ms. Brazier, Head of English*

Heidi sat upright as the approaching voices got closer. Despite the strange situation she was in, she didn't feel nervous at all. Intrigued, yes. But nervous? No. Shamsa left the suitcase; it must be only logical that Shamsa sent the email too, shouldn't it? And if that were the case then Heidi knew she had nothing to be worried about because why would such a good friend get her involved in anything that might put her in harm's way? Heidi took a deep breath as the handle of the double doors slowly moved down. Whoever was opening the door was still talking, whilst the door remained closed. It was male. A deep and gruff yet strangely calming voice speaking in a language Heidi could not pinpoint. Certainly not any of the languages she had learned in school. As she strained to listen closer to see if she could pick out anything to hint the nationality of this man, a screeching, piercing noise started blaring from above Heidi's head. The fire alarm. In her panic at hearing the noise, Heidi knocked the briefcase off the table. She hurried to try and pick it up to take it with her, but behind her the door banged open. A blue suited security guard with a busily hissing walkie talkie stood there. He kept one hand behind him ushering people down the corridor to the fire exit.

"Ma'am you need to leave immediately. Leave everything behind."

"But...I just...this briefcase..." Heidi started to stutter as she bent down again to try and pick up the heavy case.

"Ma'am I won't ask again. You need to leave NOW" demanded the security guard. This time in a tone that told Heidi she really didn't have a choice.

Heidi hurried out of the room, squeezing past the security guard as he gave another stern order on his walkie talkie. She made her way down the now empty corridor, attempting a peek inside rooms as she passed. She spotted nothing out of the ordinary. Conference rooms, piles of paper, some of it on the floor where people had left in a hurry. Big projector screens showing complicated looking graphs and tables. She got to the end of the corridor and pushed through the door marked 'FIRE EXIT.' Below, she could hear bored voices. No-one seemed in a panic at the possibility of a fire. Must be a drill.

As Heidi emerged on the busy street below, she cast her eyes around. She recognised no-one in her vicinity. A woman in business attire lit up a cigarette next to her. "This is the third alarm this month. Why can't maintenance get it fixed?" She complained to an equally fed-up man standing next to her. A man with wet hair wearing a hotel dressing gown, wrapped his arms around himself. He looked embarrassed, clearly having had to exit his shower early. Heidi continued to look around the faces for any hint of recognition.

Heidi reached into her pocket for her phone. At least she could catch up on some emails whilst she stood out here, waiting. She opened her inbox and scrolled through. She had a few replies to her cancelled meetings, an email from Waitrose to say they had an offer on organic strawberries this week, one from her brother asking if she was free tomorrow as he had something urgent to talk to her about. Heidi's brother didn't seem to know the meaning of the word 'urgent.' Usually 'urgent'

consisted of him crying at her about his most recent break-up, which was also usually his fault. And then, something caught her eye. Another email from an unknown address.

**“So far, so good. You are passing the interview with flying colours.”**

Heidi scrolled down and back up for any hint of anything else. Nothing. As far as Heidi was aware, the interview had barely started! And why was she now being addressed as Lucy Shutter? Heidi’s previous excitement was slowly beginning to turn to irritation as she once again swung her head round to the left and right to look for a face she recognised. Was this all just some big joke? Perhaps cooked up by her idiotic brother? But then she remembered seeing Shamsa’s face on the security camera and reminded herself that Nathan, her brother, had never even met Shamsa. Heidi opened her phone again and went to Google. She typed in ‘Lucy Shutter’ and waited for the page to load. Several innocuous looking pages came up. Nothing that suggested anything out of the ordinary. She opened up the Facebook profiles. There were three Lucy Shutters. Two looked to be happily married women with children in their profile pictures (one from Port Isaac in Cornwall, the other from somewhere Lucy had never heard of). The final profile didn’t have a picture with any people in it, just a clipart picture of a telephone. She started scrolling down but then, Heidi felt a tap on her shoulder.

“Ma’am, if you would like to go back inside now. It was a false alarm.” It was the blue security guard.

Heidi followed the crowds back into the hotel, hoping she would be able to find her way back to the Harlow Lounge. She made a glance towards reception. The receptionist who greeted her coldly a few minutes ago was gone. A smartly dressed man was stood in her place. Heidi pondered this as she climbed the stairs to the second floor, avoiding the lifts which were busy. She made her way back down the corridor to the room at the end with the double doors. Once again, she brushed herself down and entered the room. Ahead of her she could see Guernica still hanging on the wall. The room appeared just as it had done before the security guard forced her to leave. However, things were not *exactly* the same. She looked down at the floor where she had knocked the briefcase to when the alarm went off. It was gone.



## Chapter 4

*Sara Alnobani, Year 12*

Frantically, Heidi searched in every nook and cranny of the interview room hoping for something, anything, that would lead her to finding the case. Several minutes passed and nothing, and nobody had shown up. It was gone. Letting out a sigh of frustration, she threw herself on to the fawn chair next to where she'd left it. With no sign of the mystery men that were meant to meet with her, Heidi pondered on what the people outside had said, "This is the third alarm this month". The third of that month? This place was state-of-the-art so why was the faulty system not fixed yet? Are all the alarms part of a distraction for something on a much larger scale? Heidi shook her head; she couldn't let herself overthink like that. Her thoughts shifted to Shamsa and the briefcase. The case. Now that she had time to think about it, she had never opened it or had any sort of indication of what could be inside. She had been so caught up trying to complete these anonymous instructions, that she never thought about what this briefcase could be for. Plus, Heidi still had not uncovered the identity of the incognito sender. Just as her mind started to wonder, a dinging sound came from the phone in her pocket. 'One notification from Unknown'. She could feel her heart pounding as her shaky hands clicked on the message.

**"You looked nervous outside. Relax, you're doing fine. They'll be there in 5 minutes. Be ready."**

Whoever this was, they had a knack of filling Heidi up with suspense and anxiety. Who is going to be here? Filled with apprehension, she paced the room back and forth, racking her brains for any sort of clue. The sender must have seen her outside, so she replicated the scene in her head. The cigarette lady, the shower man, none seemed to match. Growing more and more exasperated, she walked over to the large window and peered down at the city again. She knew this would calm her down. The bustling streets were cramped with vender sellers, unsuspecting tourists and young students scurrying about. Yet again, she let herself get carried away with nostalgia. Heidi glanced down at her watch which told her that the peculiar people would be here any minute now. Right on que, the door handle tilted to one side.

A young woman, about the same age as Heidi, walked into the room accompanied by another older man, both wearing sharp suits. The more mature of the pair she didn't recognise at all, but the other was very familiar. There was something about the woman that made Heidi feel warmth and relief. Nervously, the woman shuffled inside, followed by her acquaintance. Heidi's heart skipped a beat. Clutched in the old man's hands was the briefcase that she had just lost. She felt a rush of emotions coarse through her.

"Hello Lucy" the man began. "Well done for obeying the instructions. We can see you are clearly trustworthy enough. You passed the first test. Congratulations." He opened the briefcase and held it out for Heidi to see inside. Nothing. The case was...empty? Heidi suddenly felt very overwhelmed with emotion. This was all part of some test? What test? "Don't worry, we'll explain very soon" he said, almost as if he was reading her mind. "But first, you have another task to complete. Keep an eye on your emails, we'll see you again soon. Goodbye Lucy"

Heidi was speechless; she had so much to ask but couldn't seem to form any words. As the pair advanced towards the door, the girl looked back with a solemn expression on her face. Heidi knew who this woman was. She had last seen her on the cctv at her apartment, dropping off the briefcase. It was Shamsa.



## Chapter 5

*Angelina Vasilopoulou, Year 10*

“That’s not possible, I mean this has to be a set-up or something. One of those undercover style TV shows where the presenter will pop out any moment and show that it was all a joke. How could Shamsa even know I was here? What does she have to do with this interview anyway? How did she know where to drop the suitcase in the first place?” she asked herself. Heidi’s mind felt like it was falling in a deep abyss where nothing made sense. All these un-answered questions were tormenting her, overwhelming her. She felt this familiar feeling she hadn’t felt in years. A tight grip around her chest, a sharp and intense burning sensation inside her lungs as if she was breathing in and out without permission. Her mouth was drying up, gasping for air as her shaky and bony hand reached for her black handbag, helplessly searching for her inhaler. “1, 2, 3 breathe Heidi” she thought as she positioned the inhaler in front of her mouth. She felt her eyes tear up as her throat started to open slowly, allowing the cold air to enter her lungs again. She felt a wave of relief wash over her, but it didn’t last long.

The oak coffee table in front of her vibrated abruptly meaning only one thing. “Not again...” she told herself, as she picked her phone up, not daring to look at the screen just yet. “Heidi let’s be logical for a minute because the only thing you’ve done today is act irrationally. It might not even be from *Unknown*.” Heidi reassured herself as she flipped her phone, revealing the contents of the latest notification.

***From: Unknown***

***To: Lucy Shutter***

**“Hope you feel better after the panic attack you just had. Get a grip, you didn’t look good!”**

Heidi stopped. Her chest started to feel a little tight again, but she continued reading.

**“If you could please look to your left you will see a folder containing a key card.”**

Heidi still felt feeble, especially after the sudden panic attack she just had but she managed to stand herself up. Her legs felt very unsteady as she slowly made her way towards an antique cabinet. There it was, exactly as described in the email, a white folder containing a key card.

**“Floor 5, the Waldorf Offices. Office 13’. 10 minutes. Do not be late. More information will be given to you shortly.”**

“What is this? Some sort of sick game? I don’t want to play!” Heidi was talking to the walls and she knew it; but she also knew the sender could see and hear her. “Yeah, you hear that, I don’t want to play your idiotic little mind games. I am-” Heidi was interrupted by a sound of an email popping up in her inbox.”

**“Less than 10 minutes now. Better hurry.”**

Heidi’s jaw clenched, trying to keep her tears inside her. She picked her things up furiously and made her way to the elevator, determined to show some strength and resolve to whoever was watching her. She could hear nothing but the sound of her high heels hitting the cold marble floor

as she rushed to the Waldorf's elegant elevator. She impatiently pressed the button. "*Ding*". The sound of the elevator interrupted Heidi's train of thought as she snapped back into reality. The elevator greeted Heidi as it opened its doors to her. Heidi had now become glued to her phone, obsessively refreshing her emails for the "*more information*" she was promised.

Heidi stepped into the elevator, still staring at her phone. Oblivious to her surroundings she stumbled over something that had been left in the middle of the elevator. A suitcase identical to the one she had before. As Heidi moved closer to it, she saw a note on top of it saying, "*Curiosity always kills the cat.*"

Completely ignoring the note, Heidi pressed the 'Floor 5' button. She stared at the suitcase worried that if she looks away, it would be gone.

**"2 minutes. You have found our next little gift in the elevator. Why don't you go ahead and open it?"** Another email popped up in Heidi's inbox.

Heidi quickly exited the elevator as it reached floor 5, one hand carrying the folder and key card for Office 13, and the other one the suitcase or 'gift' as the last email described it.

Heidi glanced through the glass windowpanes into the offices as she passed them. Office 1, 2, 3 and 4 were completely empty. Not just empty of people, but totally devoid of office furniture too. Offices numbered 5 – 10 looked like normal everyday offices – desks, IT equipment, filing cabinets, coffee machines, water filters where demotivated employees would likely gather. However, there were no employees working today. Every office empty, no one inside. As she got nearer to her destination, she slowly started to realise how numb she felt. As she anxiously passed office 11 and 12 she began to feel even more numb. The glass windowpanes that adorned the doors of the previous offices were gone. Offices 11 and 12 had just a thick, wooden door with a small, metallic and surprisingly plain number attached to the middle signalling the number of the office. On the side panel of each door was a credit card sized slot allowing key card access. None of the other doors she passed were like this "Why the change?" Heidi thought to herself. A thought crept into her head that made the numbing sensation even worse, '*no window, no-one can see what is happening inside*'.

Office 13 was next. She stood at the door for a few seconds, not knowing what to do. With no signs of life, and no further instructions via email, Heidi used the key card to unlock 'Office 13', as she did so she heard the sound of paper falling down. "The note" she thought. Heidi proceeded to pick it up and as she slowly stood, the door of Office 13 swung open. Standing there was that familiar face again, "Shamsa" Heidi said with a nervous smile on her face.

## Chapter 6

*Lachlan Brauman, Year 10*

Ignoring her overwhelming sense of confusion as Shamsa smiled comfortably in front of her, Heidi scanned the room in awe. Red velvet carpet layered the floor with mesmerizing patterns stitched in with incredible craftsmanship. Vintage paintings lined the walls with bursting colours and hypnotizing shapes. A colossal chandelier hung heavily from the roof, decorated with large crystals where light danced furiously across them.

“Come on through Lucy”

She walked through cautiously, analysing the room to spot, yet again, another leather briefcase with deep brown stitching lining the edges and a bronze metal clasp.

“How many of these are there?” She murmured softly. There were two people in the room, a tall man with swept over blonde hair, adorning a high-end designer suit with an intense pale skin colour as if he hadn’t taken a beach trip in years. Shamsa stood firmly next to the mysterious man with an expression of plain focus; yet Heidi spotted that nervousness prevailed deep in her eyes.

Surprisingly, Shamsa was the one who spoke first, “I’m glad you have made it this far Lucy, now that we can fully trust you, we can give you your next task” she said calmly.

“Why are you calling me Lucy and No, NO, this is not how it works, I will not just play along like a puppet being set up to do these ridiculous tasks, I want to know what’s happening and I’m not doing any more until someone explains what’s going on!”

Shamsa stared back irritated at Heidi’s outburst. “Although I would love to tell you what this is about, our lives are in danger if you do not do exactly what I say, so listen carefully as you-”

“Did you just say our lives are in danger? Shamsa this is insa-”

Heidi was unable to finish her sentence. A high-pitched bang pierced through her ear as the sound of a gunshot echoed throughout the building. Heidi had never heard a gunshot in real life before but she had watched enough movies to know this was definitely what it was. It seemed to come from below leaving Heidi paralysed and terrified, her throat threatening to close up again.

“Take the emergency exit stairs and follow the instructions on your next email, good luck Lucy”

Heidi’s instincts took over, she sprinted towards the flashing neon green “EXIT” sign and barrelled through it, still holding the briefcase defensively. Heidi descended the 5 flights of stairs hastily with a combination of large jumps and sporadic jogging. As she wheezed and puffed when finally pushing open the ground floor “assembly point” door, a high-pitched ding companioned by a light vibration came from her pocket.

**From unknown:**

**“Lucy take the briefcase and deliver it to a man at City Hall park, he will be wearing a golden rose in his breast pocket, HURRY!”**

She reached into her bag and took 5 deep breathes of her inhaler, halting the rapid closure of her airway. Luckily, Heidi knew the City Hall park well from her aimless meandering there during her university days. She knew the way but still wanted reassurance from her good friend google maps. Right now, Heidi felt she needed any sort of reassurance she could get. She stood in the middle of the street, deep in thought about what she was doing here and what was going on. She took a moment to soak up the sounds of cars honking frustratedly in traffic, people shouting across the street with thick New York accents and the infamous sirens which never stopped echoing throughout the vast city. No place like home.

Heidi set off down the street clutching her briefcase and, as the walk was fairly easy, she didn't feel it was necessary to take a taxi. She had once run for her track team so a walk down the street didn't seem to be the largest of her problems right now. Heidi welcomed the respite from the morning's insanity and was grateful for the opportunity to reflect on the events she had been a part of. "What could have Shamsa got herself involved in? Why all the secrecy? Who is the sender of these messages? Who on earth would be firing a gun in the Waldorf Astoria hotel?" She shook her head in disbelief as she was unable to come up with any sensible answers to her internal questions. Suddenly, the Parks fountain came in to view and Heidi's eyes darted dramatically, desperately searching for the man with a "golden rose". Her pocket vibrated as she faintly heard the familiar sound of an incoming mail. She checked her phone, already confident in who it was from.

**From unknown:**

**"The man will be sitting on an oak park bench near the fountain, hurry Lucy!"**

Heidi narrowed down her search to the still plentiful amount of park benches near the fountain. A number of New Yorkers were indulging in picnics with checkered cloths placed down neatly and exchanging laughter and joy. How Heidi wished she could forget all this and do the same. She spotted the man she was searching for easily. In amongst the smile and joy of other park goers he very clearly stood out. The man had an upright posture with an emotionless face, slicked back grey hair and as described a tacky golden rose stuck on neatly at his breast pocket. Heidi walked up to him cautiously sitting down on the aged bench and placing the briefcase carefully on to the table.

"Hello Lucy"

## Chapter 7

*Mr. Horne, Principal*

And then suddenly, simply from the look on his face and the sound of his voice, things started to make some sense.

Heidi was transported back to her University days. She had originally grown up in a small country town where everything had been very comfortable, her parents were poor but life was easy, and most people did not travel too far to go to University. Somehow though, without much analysis, Heidi knew this was not for her and she needed something more. She worked hard to get out and once she had the offer from Columbia she made sure she got the required grades and could make her way to New York.

She had missed family initially, but soon the excitement of the city and the independence of University life had taken over. Then that initial meeting with Shamsa and the joy of finding a kindred spirit. That companionship with Shamsa had changed her life at University and it was continuing to do so.

Heidi still recalled their first conversation and the eccentric lecturers which had been a shared topic. She only shared a few lectures with Shamsa, but the one figure who stood out above all was Dr Nkomba. Although Heidi's major was accountancy, she had also opted for a course in Twentieth Century History at which Dr Nkomba had held court. He was only the first naturalised American from an African immigrant family, but his knowledge and his stories had captivated Heidi and Shamsa and made them feel like this was someone who simply knew everything there was to know about the world. His grey beard and the cane he carried, even though never showing signs of a limp, had topped off the picture of a great wise figure, yet all accompanied with the twinkling eyes of a favourite uncle with a surprise behind his back.

And here in front of her now, with that voice, Heidi could start to join the dots which had previously been so unconnected. Dr Nkomba was before her and his simple greeting of "Hello Lucy" had felt warm and familiar. Although she couldn't remember all the details, she also now knew where Lucy and Shutter came from – two surnames in a lecture Dr Nkomba had once given about New York and the early developers who had helped transform the city into the wonderful metropolis it was now.

Lucy's panic had disappeared with the appearance of this familiar figure. She calmly sat down on the bench and simply said, "Hello again, Dr. Nkomba".

"Lucy, I must first apologise for the run-around you have been given recently", Dr Nkoma began. "I sincerely regret any panic you felt, however I am sure you will come to see why it was necessary. Ever since Shamsa first identified you, we knew you would be right to join us one day. We just needed to know that the ethics and values we saw in you once upon a time had not been compromised. And of course I am not surprised to see that they still hold true."



Lucy smiled. The calmness from this learned man and his reassuring words gave her comfort just as they had done back in his lectures. There was also an excitement she felt, knowing there was more to come to this story and she would have her part to play.

“You will remember now I hope where the names Lucy and Shutter originally arose. Back in the early 1900’s New York was on a path to glory, and after surviving the great depression and two world wars, our city did once again regain its glory. It will of course not have escaped your notice that in recent years things have started to go somewhat downhill again. We see increasing number of people in hardship or in conflict and we see the effect this has on so many families.”

“Shamsa and I belong to a small organisation which has one simple aim, and that is to retain the joy and belief in this proud city. Not simple, short-term joy, but a long-standing confidence and love for the city which will unite our citizens and benefit everyone.”

“There may be risks in what we have planned, but then again, was ever anything worthwhile truly achieved without a little risk? We have an important challenge ahead and we hope you will join us. But of course we know you will join us because we know your heart aligns with ours.”

And with that, Dr Nkomba paused. He held his hands on top of his cane and sat quietly waiting for Heidi to speak. Heidi thought for a while but she already knew what she was going to do, just as Dr Nkomba had predicted.

“Dr Nkomba”, she smiled as she used his name again, “although I know little of what you have planned, please do rest assured that you have my full support for whatever you require. I loved this city as a student and being back here reminds me of that all over again. If there is something that we can do to raise the spirits of people here then I would be delighted to be part of that.”

“Zikomo”, Dr Nkomba replied, with the familiar eye-twinkle. “Thank you.”

## Chapter 8

*Christian Theobald, Year 12*

A whole week had passed since Heidi's last encounter with Dr Nkomba, and Heidi had still not heard anything. The conversation with Dr. Nkomba kept running through her head. She had felt reassured that someone she admired and trusted was behind this, but the passing of time had been disconcerting. Heidi had spent the week in her deluxe room in the Artezan hotel with a 'do not disturb' sign on the door. In room dining and coffee became routine. She had spent the week fielding, and often ignoring, the increasingly frustrated messages from her employers in London. She also felt the need to reach out to her family, to try and feel some semblance of reality as she sat in her hotel room. The conversation with her mother was more draining than Heidi had hoped; it went the same way as all her other conversations did with her mother, which is why Heidi kept in contact sparingly with her close family. Her mother, a retired cleaner in her early 70s, would always complain about the family's hardships, their lack of money, the lack of support from the government for low paid workers, and most frustratingly the details of her brother's latest failings both in relationships and his inability to hold down a job. Heidi always felt a sense of guilt that she had moved on from this life. Even worse, she always felt her family envied her because of it.

Still, she waited for news from Dr. Nkomba. She woke up early at 6 in the morning, every morning, just in case any calls came through for her. Again, no notifications came through or popped up on her phone; it felt as if Dr Nkomba and Shamsa had forgotten all about her. Heidi's room appeared like it was the aftermath of an explosion; it was filled with grimy room service plates, mouldy mugs and rancid clothes which were scattered all over the place. Heidi had repeated her monotonous morning routine for seven, idle days -- she could barely motivate herself to leave her recliner, let alone wash up. This is the schedule she followed subconsciously:

6 am: Wake up, make coffee, sit in the recliner and wait for a message.

7 am: Wait, drink coffee.

8 am: Wait, drink coffee.

9 am: Wait, breakfast.

10 am: Wait, drink coffee.

11 am: Wait, drink coffee.

This was all Heidi would do all-day - wait. The time was now 11 am, and Heidi had been lazing around uselessly and waiting for hours now. All of a sudden, the claustrophobic nature of Heidi's last 7 days took over. Heidi's heart started beating rapidly, her breaths became faster and shallower, the adrenaline began to pulse through her veins, her complexion became full-blown red, every heartbeat became louder and angrier and it felt as if her heart was about to blow out of her chest. This must have been from all the coffee she had been drinking. In a blind panic, Heidi turned to the door and rushed out, the 'do not disturb' sign flying off as she shot passed. She raced down into the crowded, muggy and rowdy street, attempting to get some space and fresh air to calm down. It was

midday and Heidi's attempt at relaxation was quickly halted by the millions of trying tourists, and cantankerous New Yorkers queuing for cheap hot dogs, freshly-baked bagels and recently brewed coffee; as their delicious smells permeated throughout the stuffy Midtown Manhattan air. Heidi attempted to barge through the almost impenetrable and clustered crowd and did so successfully for about 10 meters, until she collided directly into a man. The collision seemed to knock Heidi off her stride more so than the man. He was tall and his muscly physique, that easily sent Heidi backwards, had been developed from hours in the gym. As Heidi gathered her footing and composure in a bid to confront the person in front of her, she realised it wasn't just any man; it was Harvey.

Harvey was Heidi's ex-partner, who she had dated throughout Columbia University. However, things quickly turned sour after Harvey was hired for a top Manhattan law firm and Heidi moved to London to work for Hawker Monroe. Inevitably, the two lovers lost contact over the years. "Harvey? It's good to see you." Heidi said excitedly. Harvey was wearing a bespoke suit straight from Saville Row with a lustrous and luxury Rolex on his wrist. "Heidi, it's also great to see you as well. I'm sorry about bumping into you then but I'm sure you can remember how busy these streets get. What have you been up to these past few years?" asked Harvey. Heidi then went on to inform him that her accounting job was going well but that she was now currently helping out a friend, with a cause that was close to her heart. Harvey, not overly interested in Heidi's comments, replied "Listen, I have to get back to the firm but I'd really love to catchup later when I can talk more. Let's have dinner tonight to catch up properly?" The first question that came to Heidi's mind was what if Dr Nkomba required her help? Well, it probably wasn't a big deal, they hadn't asked for anything for a whole week, so why should they now. "Of course, I'll be there, where would you like to go?" Heidi said a little too keenly. "Blanca tonight at 7, sound good?" said Harvey, as Heidi eagerly replied "Sounds great! See you then".

Feeling better, Heidi walked back to her room; it was cleaned, the stray towels which once were strewn all over the floor were now stacked and folded neatly. The once mouldy coffee mugs were now sparkling with cleanliness, and Heidi's clothes were neatly folded and meticulously placed into her drawers. Heidi then went to check her phone that was on her bed charging; still, there was no message.

Heidi, with nothing else to focus on, spent the rest of the day preparing for her meal with Harvey. She hadn't seen him for nearly 10 years and was nervous about seeing him. The chances of the two of them bumping into each other at that exact moment were so slim that Heidi had thought fate might be playing its part.

That evening, she walked into Blanca restaurant and stood in shock at the scene. It was the most peculiar setting. Nobody apart from Harvey and a few chefs and waiters were present. Heidi said inquisitively to Harvey "Where is everybody else?" Harvey replied, "Oh yes, I was given the restaurant a few weeks ago by a client; her name is Fallon." "Interesting," said Heidi, still extremely confused as to what was going on. They sat down and had a luxurious and divine seven-course meal, and it was just getting to the final opulent course when Harvey reached into his black leather Prada briefcase and pulled out a file. The file contained a job offer. "How would you like to work at my firm, in the accounting section? With your experience, you could be head of accounting and make a lot of money", said Harvey inquiringly. Heidi opened the file, the job offer was real, and she was scanning through it when suddenly she gasped; she had seen the salary. Heidi thought she was paid

well in London, but this was on a different level. She would be making millions of dollars every year. This would give her enough money to live a lavish life and comfortably support her family. “The only caveat is you will have to start tomorrow.” Tomorrow? What if Dr Nkomba or Shamsa needed her assistance, she had come to New York following the advice in a random email and a mysterious briefcase, not for this. Then, at that moment, a combination of Harvey’s smile (he always had the ability to make her act impulsively) and the thought of the money took over. Heidi looked up and smiled at Harvey and said impetuously “See you at nine tomorrow.” and signed the contract.

The dinner finished with a warm embrace between the two. Heidi hadn’t missed Harvey. She had barely thought about him in years, but having his arms wrapped around her again felt comforting. Heidi got a cab back to her hotel, and as she opened the door, a bunch of ravishing roses were sitting uniformly on the table. There was a card protruding out of the centre of the bunch which stated, “Welcome to Keating Colby!”. Harvey. Heidi smiled and adored the flowers for a while. She impersonally, and with a strange sense of satisfaction, emailed her employers in London saying she would not be returning.

After what seemed like hours of blissful bathing, Heidi put on her warm and cozy silk pyjamas and got ready for bed. She opened her phone to send her mother a quick message to tell her about the evening’s events, but as she powered on the phone, a message popped up:

**“Dr.Nkomba**

**Shutter, meet me in central park at 9 am sharp, DON’T be late.”**

## Chapter 9

*Alif Nafili, Year 11*

It can't be a coincidence. It must be another one of their silly tests, right? She sat up restlessly as dozens of emotions begin to cloud her mind, creating a violent thunderstorm above her defenseless conscience. Whatever they were trying to accomplish finally took a toll on her: whether they intended to exploit her vulnerabilities for evil was uncertain, but Heidi couldn't relax until she knew.

Heidi spent the rest of the night awake and staring at the ceiling, half obsessed with solving her dilemma of where to be at 9am in the morning, half desperate to end the insomnia that had been ensued upon her. Throughout her state of limbo, she began to formulate countless theories on the events that she experienced over the past week. Was the briefcase *really* empty? Did Harvey orchestrate the fire drill? Is Harvey the hidden identity behind Unknown? At one point, she even considered the possibility that the empty rooms were part of some sick experiment where she was the 13<sup>th</sup> subject. Luckily, Heidi wasn't new to the inability of falling asleep, and it wasn't long before she found a comfortable sleeping position and joined the city's collective, tranquil slumber.

After ignoring the initial 6 AM alarm that she had set herself the night before, Heidi managed to get up at half past 8 from her uneasy, yet arguably deserved rest. Both the firm's headquarter, and the park were a quarter of an hour away accounting for traffic, meaning that she only had 15 minutes to freshen up, get some sustenance from the snack bar, and ultimately make her decision.

The way that Harvey presented information to her wasn't very cryptic, and didn't match the pattern of how Shamsa, Dr Nkomba, or Unknown spoke. He definitely wasn't part of their 'association' meaning that choosing him would be an act of betrayal towards the others. Heidi had also noticed that Harvey did not wear a wedding ring, so it is also possible that getting back with her was one of his motives. Both sacrifices discouraged Heidi's decision to pick him.

On the other hand, Shamsa mentioned that their lives were in danger, and the codename that Dr Nkomba gave her was probably deliberate in order to protect her in some way. But what else was there? She never wanted to be interviewed as a '*Lucy Shutter*'. She never wanted to leave her job in London. She never wanted to be put under so much attention; all she wanted was to be a civil member of society, doing civil things in a civil life. Despite all the warnings that she had heard so far, she had to face the truth: Harvey's offer was exactly what she wanted. Shamsa and Nkomba could wait.

The headquarter was a modestly sized building with an aged concrete exterior, a stark contrast to the flashy appearance of the Waldorf Astoria and the Arzezen. Its location outside the highly touristic areas of the city made it significantly easier for Heidi's cab to drop her off safely without instantly being swarmed by customers. For the first time since revisiting New York, Heidi was unfamiliar with the building she was about to enter, which amplified her desire and eagerness to turn over this new leaf that awaited before her.

Just like she had expected, the interior of the lobby was filled to the brim with law décor. Carvings of indistinguishable Latin texts and paintings of unfamiliar, but seemingly influential people were



everywhere. The receptionist was pleasantly surprised about Heidi's early arrival and directed her to the 5<sup>th</sup> floor where Harvey was waiting to debrief the job's tasks and expectations. She was informed that the entire floor was a large meeting hall, so she didn't have to worry about getting lost.

The hall's interior, however, did not meet her expectations. Exiting the elevator, Heidi was confronted by two armed guards who escorted her to a large table in the middle of the room. The guards donned a navy uniform with sophisticated equipment such as a vest, a harness, and a balaclava under their bulky helmets. She wasn't certain, but their demeanor and appearance were akin to the government special forces in the action movies that she had watched. Harvey was sat at the other end of the table.

"Heidi! Welcome, take a seat. You look like you haven't had breakfast, why don't you have some treats?" he said nonchalantly.

Sure enough, there was a plate of Danish pastry on her end of the table, similar to the ones that he used to get her for Valentine's Day. Heidi tried to take a seat calmly, but her nerves got to her and ended up trembling anxiously while doing so. Harvey let out a soft smirk as he stood up to approach her.

"You're just as... fragile as I remember. I was honestly astounded that you were daring enough to come back here, but then again, I only knew one person who would operate under such a foolish name as *Lucy Shutter* -"

"Alright, I'm calling the police," interrupted Heidi as she fearfully reached for her phone. Whether this was part of the same group as Shamsa or not, she wasn't having it.

"Oh, don't even bother," replied Harvey with a grin, "We've already hacked your phone. I mean, how else would we know where to find you? We tried to intercept you at the Waldorf a while back but security was too tight."

The gun shots and evacuation. That was Harvey. It was possible that he delayed and intercepted Dr Nkomba's messages as well, which was why she didn't get any in a whole week. Heidi looked up to see his grin creep into a smile. Her vision obscured by the swarm of tears formulating in her eyes, and a distinct ringing in her ears. She was forced to eat the treats as a feeble attempt to not pass out, humiliating her in front of her ex-boyfriend.

Harvey was about to speak when sounds of cars and faint gunshots filled the hall from the outside, turning his smile into a scowl.

"Looks like we're gonna have to speed this up," he said urgently, "Your little friends are braindead trying to contact you through your phone. We know the location and identity of every single one of them – except for one."

He paused for dramatic effect.

"Who is Unknown?"

## Chapter 10

*Niharika Agrawal, Year 10*

“What?” Heidi asked, clearly panicking and confused at this whole situation. A few days ago Heidi was living her normal life as a normal accountant in London. Now she was following cryptic messages from an unknown sender and right now she was surrounded by armed guards and an ex-partner. This couldn’t get any more confusing and Heidi was clueless about what she was involved in. Whatever it was, the seriousness of the situation was starting to dawn on her. This was confirmed by the stern look of the two armed guards, who Heidi had noticed were in fact US military personnel judging by the stars and stripes emblazoned on their apparel. Harvey motioned for the guards to head outside to deal with the commotion. They were hesitant but followed their boss’ orders and made their way to the elevator to head downstairs. Who is Harvey and why does he have US army soldiers obeying his every command? The questions just kept coming.

“You heard me. Tell me who Unknown is Heidi.” Harvey urged Heidi to spill the truth, a truth she did not have but one she desperately wanted to know too.

“I don’t know” Heidi tried to say with confidence, but her fragility was obvious.

“Don’t lie to me!”

“I’m not lying!” Heidi desperately retorted. She was just as clueless as to the identity of Unknown. The person behind the emails directing her around.

Just as Harvey was about to continue his interrogation, the elevator doors burst open. The loud noise made Heidi flinch as both she and Harvey turned their heads to face the noise.

“Nathan?!” Heidi exclaimed at the person who had just slammed their way in. She stood there, frozen, looking at her brother who had just barged in the room. He showed signs of someone just involved in a struggle. The ripped black shirt Nathan was wearing, and the red marks across his face and knuckles suggested the two men Harvey had sent to investigate had put up a good fight.

Nathan was 3 years younger than Heidi and shared her athletic abilities. He too was part of his university’s track team. He was a competitive decathlete so possessed a combination of speed and strength that multi-eventers need. In his heyday he was the NCAA track and field decathlete of the year. He was at University on academic merit as well, not a sports scholarship like many of his teammates. Nathan was smart, strong and quick; he had it all. For some reason that he never revealed to his family, Nathan dropped out of university shortly after his award and led a life of apparent unfulfillment after that. Heidi recalled the email she had ignored from Nathan about a week ago. *“I need to talk to you urgently”* it had said. And now here he was standing 8 feet from Heidi with a gun clutched in his palms, not to mention just handing a beating to two armed guards who would have tried to apprehend him. He glanced at her, and gave her a small smile, before turning back to face Harvey, his expression cold. Nathan raised the gun he had in his hand and aimed it straight at Harvey’s head. Harvey was motionless. Calm. Too calm for a man with a gun pointed at him, Heidi thought.

“Heidi? Heidi, what’s happening? Do you know this man? Why is he pointing a gun to my head?” Harvey said innocently. He was so believable. Last night’s dinner and the job proposal showed how good he was at lying. It was clear to Heidi that the innocent collision between the two in the streets of New York was not fate that brought them together. It was calculated and planned.

“Oh, cut the act, Harvey” Nathan answered as he started walking towards him, his gun still pointed at Harvey’s head. Nothing made sense anymore. What was Nathan doing here? Was he working with Dr. Nkomba? Her brother, the deadbeat who couldn’t hold down a job and failed in relationships, was the last person she’d expected to see here. And yet here he was, and he looked anything but the deadbeat now. He was poised, alert, expert.

“Nathan, what are you doing here? What is all this about?” Heidi tried communicating with her brother, in hopes that he would provide answers to shed some light on the darkness in her desperate mind. To her dismay, she was met with silence. Nathan would not take his eyes off Harvey. The only sound that could be heard were his footsteps as he inched ever closer to his target. Heidi hated the silence. It was suffocating.

Suddenly, the silence broke and time seemed to speed up. Harvey quickly reached for something inside his suit jacket. Before he could withdraw his arm, Nathan, who was just a few feet away from him, leaped forward towards Harvey; a leap that showed he hadn’t lost his athleticism from his university days. Nathan swung viciously and struck Harvey across the side of the head with the gun he was clenching. Within a second of the silence being broken, Harvey was unconscious on the floor. Nathan took the gun from the holder attached to Harvey’s sternum and emptied the bullets. “A glock 17 9mm handgun” he said knowingly waving it at his sister.

Heidi was both impressed and in shock at what she had just witnessed. It was all too much. She began to feel dizzy and the room began to spin. Nathan shot up and ran over to her, gripping her tight and trying to keep her from fainting “I know how many questions you must have but we need to get you out of here. Now. I’ll explain everything. I promise” he said firmly. Still too shocked to talk, Heidi was dragged by her brother to the elevator. Nathan pressed the down button and the doors opened instantly. The siblings made their way back through the reception towards the front door. Heidi still being helped along, noticed the two armed guards in a heap by the reception desk. They were beaten badly. The desk was empty, and Heidi wondered where the receptionist was who greeted her earlier. Had her brother taken him out as well? She looked at Nathan, still not coming to terms with what he had done, and what he was doing now.

They rushed outside and in front of them a car was waiting. It was parked right in front of the building. The black 2012 Dodge Charger had tinted windows that made it impossible to see inside. Nathan opened the rear driver’s side door and helped Heidi inside. The interior of the car was like the exterior; black. Still feeling nauseous and dizzy Heidi glanced into the front of the car where Nathan had just jumped into the passenger seat. The driver turned round and smiled at Heidi; it was Shamsa.

Through the dizziness Heidi managed to ask the pair “what is going on here? Nathan, what on earth are you doing here?” Shamsa, with a smile still on her face, said something that Heidi could scarcely believe.

“Say hi to the Unknown” she said as she nodded in the direction of Nathan in the passenger seat. At that moment Shamsa turned to face the steering wheel, hit the accelerator and they sped away from Harvey’s building.

## Chapter 11

*Mrs. Collinson, Geography teacher and IB Coordinator*

They sat in silence for some time whilst the Dodge negotiated the streets of New York, stopping, starting and speeding through the traffic light junctions. Roads that seemed familiar to Heidi flew passed her eyes with little recognition. At this point she didn't know or even care where she was going. She just knew she needed some time to think, rest and take stock.

They were heading towards Chappaqua when she really began to come back to her senses. So many questions buzzed in her mind but she sat back and simply watched the people-lined streets go by, no-one spoke but there was a strong sense of apprehension in the air. She wouldn't be the first to break the silence though, they needed to do that, they needed to provide the answers.

Nathan finally spoke, "we're here" he said as they swung into the driveway of a relatively unassuming house. Heidi suddenly noticed the day was hot, too hot, as she stepped out of the car. She could feel the sun's rays on her skin and the unique smell of city life came through on the gentle, and welcomed, breeze. It gave her comfort, smelt like home and created a new sense of purpose. "I do love this city" she muttered as she slammed the car door behind her and followed the others into the house.

It was a normal house; no gunmen waiting in the wings, no destruction, no Picassos or gleaming carpets. In fact, it was quite the opposite of all the places she had been in so far on this escapade. There was very little in the reception room of the house. A faint ticking of a grandfather clock and the silhouette of Dr. Nkomba were the only things Heidi noticed. She took her place on the sofa with a new inner comfort that the normality of the house provided. The silence continued and the four looked around the room. Waiting.

Eventually, Dr. Nkomba gave a slight nod towards Shamsa. Heidi's old friend turned to face her and the story began to unfold...

"It all started with my father." Shamsa began. "You see he was quite an influential businessman, he was always off travelling around on his 'important' business when I was growing up, so I rarely saw him. He did visit whenever work allowed though and he loved me dearly. He wished he could spend more time with me but his work commitments came first unfortunately. I was never allowed to talk about his work with him either, he wanted to keep that separate. However, I knew it involved politicians, governments and the most important businessmen and women around.

Shamsa continued, "Whilst I was at University however, he changed. He had become even more unwilling to share, to even talk to me. I knew something was wrong, my father wasn't acting the same. I hated seeing him like that so I kept asking him what had affected him so deeply." Shamsa paused, clearly hurt by the story she was recalling. "And then one day I found a briefcase left outside my door that had details about the latest merger he was involved in. It was all about a plan for the City. It was a merger that needed government approval and it seemed like my father was in discussions with the most powerful people in our country. This briefcase contained details about a group of powerful individuals who wanted to change the face of New York forever. There were



photos, handwritten notes, proposals, recordings of people. The plan, it seemed, was to keep the richest rich and the rest could simply waste away. It was, in essence, a high level conspiracy to change our city. My father was a successful man, a powerful man Heidi, but most importantly he was a good person. He had compassion and a sense of empathy that made him such a loving father. He loved this city too. He trusted me I am sure he sent me these documents to make me aware of what these people were trying to do.”

Nathan and Dr. Nkomba looked at Heidi knowingly. “So what were these plans and what does it have to do with me” Heidi asked anxiously. “Heidi, we need your help”. Shamsa hesitated before continuing, “This briefcase had information about the group wanting to block any rights or even movements for anyone who didn’t meet certain financial criteria. That criteria would mean about 75% of our City would be affected. Bank loans, business loans, mortgages, credit cards and car loans would all be blocked to anyone who didn’t meet the required financial benchmark. Freedom of movement would be restricted too. Citizens and residents who didn’t meet the criteria would need special travel permits to leave the house, they would need permits to even work and when they do it would be the minimum wage, a reduced minimum wage. Anyone falling under the financial threshold would have their property transferred to a more financially stable individual as well. Once ownership was transferred, the new owner would be free to demolish and rebuild to suit their interests. The poor would simply disappear - A New Metropolis they were calling it.” Heidi, looking shocked replied, “Look, this is insane, no one would let this happen and why would anyone want to do this in the first place?”

“There is a great deal of discontent among the rich and powerful, Heidi.” Nathan said. Shamsa sat down, visibly shaken by recalling the plans her father was involved in. Nathan continued, “I know it’s hard to believe but this briefcase had proof. It included a secretly recorded of a meeting between some of the individuals involved. Who they are isn’t clear but their objective is unmistakable.” Nathan walked over to a small console table by the grandfather clock and picked up a small cassette player. “It was 10 years ago” he said with a smile. No one else in the room smiled as Nathan pressed play on the device.

“We are under attack” a voice said with a thick New York accent. “For too long there has been a growing sense of ‘entitlement’ amongst the poor and working classes. Demanding more money in wages, demanding more money for social benefits, demanding lower taxes, demanding free healthcare. It is crippling us. We are the greatest nation on earth, and we are on the brink of financial ruin. Why? Because the poor and the weak and the influx of generations of low-skilled immigrant workers are sucking the life out of this City. Banks have thrown bad debt after bad debt at these people. Billions and billions of dollars lost to these people. They can’t pay back their mortgage, can’t pay back their car loans, can’t keep up with cell phone payments, can’t pay back their business loans, can’t pay their cable contracts. Most claim working benefits without any intention to find work. Billions of dollars of New York money lost. Our money lost. Unemployment is at an all-time high; crime rates are at an all-time high and violent crime rates, in particular, are spiraling out of control. Who is to blame? The uneducated leaches of this City. We have become so weak over the last 30 years that we’ve even become an easy target for terrorists around the world. We are being crippled. This must stop and we will make it stop!” Nathan halted the recording.

The room fell silent again. Heidi spoke first “I’ll say again, no one would let this happen. Would they?”

“The handwritten notes I received suggested this group contained some of the most powerful people in the country. It made it clear that if they wanted it to happen they had the support to do so” Shamsa said with conviction. “Father had a colleague, a lawyer who worked closely with him called Michael Carter. Carter worked relentlessly to halt certain proposals on a legal basis through City Hall. I am sure my father and Carter were fighting against the proposals and wanted all the individuals held to account for that they were planning. In the end,” Shamsa paused and looked solemnly downwards, “it cost him his life. They killed him Heidi. Shortly after I received the briefcase I had word he was dead – they must have killed him for sending the details to me.”

Heidi instinctively stood up and gave Shamsa a supporting hug. The embrace felt awkward and cold, this was no time for sorrow. “Why didn’t your father or Carter say something? Do something else to stop these people?” Heidi asked. Shamsa responded, a sense of hurt at Heidi’s question in her voice “They were Heidi. They were in the process of collecting enough evidence to put all these people away. As a lawyer, Carter knew any circumstantial evidence would be dismissed, and the voice of a couple of men against the City’s elite would be ignored. Laughed at most likely. That is why I left University so quickly, I needed to do something, and that’s when Dr. Nkomba reached out to me too. He received a briefcase with a message for me; a message about the affordable housing developments made by Lucy and Shutter all those years ago. The ones that enabled New York to become the melting pot it did and provided the foundations for our great city.”

“Since then, we have hijacked city changes or prevented them; at least delayed them until now. The City Governors are meeting next week to sign a declaration that basically prevents the rights of poor property owners in Lucy and Shutter developments across the city. ‘The LShutter Housing Act’ they are calling it. This is what they have been fighting for since the beginning. It is the start of it Heidi, and we have been able to prevent it. Until now. That bill is getting signed next week and when it does, all property ownership in those developments will transfer to the super rich”. Shamsa took a long breath, looked around, the second of silence was deafening but she finally carried on, “That’s where you come in. You’re a successful accountant and I knew if anyone could be trusted to help us it was you. We need details of corrupt payments made to these Governors to convince them to sign off on this Act. Up to now they have covered their tracks too well.” *Successful.* Heidi clung on to the word with a sense of pride. “Harvey’s firm was involved in a lot of these payments. His law firm have been working tirelessly to find legal loopholes and put the necessary legislation in place to make all this happen.” Harvey. Heidi had forgotten he was left crumpled on the floor after her brother’s deft attack. “So why did Harvey offer me a job?” Heidi questioned. Dr. Nkomba spoke for the first time, “well it was clear he needed to know who the Unknown was. Harvey was going to leave no stone unturned, no one ‘unknown’ to get in the way of risking this legislation. He was trying to gain your trust.”

Nathan glanced toward Dr. Nkomba affirming Heidi’s thoughts that he was in charge of this. With the mentioning of the Unknown he had felt it was the right time to explain his involvement. “For some time now Heidi I have been working for the FBI. The failed relationships, I’m not a total loser you know” he said with his boyish smile and an uncomfortable laugh. “So much of my life is about secrets and hiding my true profession as a special agent. I could never tell you, or anyone about it.

My department, that, out of necessity works very much below the radar has been working on Government corruption for years. My investigations led me to Shamsa, to Dr. Nkomba and the evidence. We used the same idea of leaving a briefcase to get you involved too.”

“We’ve been working together for the last 8 weeks but we haven’t got the proof we need to move forward on the LShutter Act. We need evidence of these corrupt payments and fast, otherwise the bill will be passed and our city will change forever. And not just our city, we believe they are planning to do this in Washington, Seattle and Las Vegas next. A countrywide takeover of the rich soon after. They have the power, wealth and backing to make this happen. Our world is becoming more divided by the day. We seem to be losing our basic human qualities of compassion, tolerance and respect for each other and the rich want to take back control.”

Heidi shook her head in disbelief. Dr. Nkomba spoke with conviction “Are you really that surprised? These people don’t care about the damage they’ll do; it’s been a long time since the wealth and policy makers cared about the impact of their decisions. Look at the last 100 years. The economic recessions caused by callous bankers, off-shore tax havens for the dispassionate super-rich, policy and laws by nonchalant governments that help the rich stay rich and the poor stay poor. This is simply their next step.”

No one spoke for a while, the grandfather clock chimed 5pm the sun’s rays began to fade a little, the clouds seemed to be coming overhead. The day was drawing closer and Heidi was no closer to knowing what was next. Heidi, voiced her thoughts, “You say you needed my help as an accountant to find these payments – but how on earth am I supposed to do that?”

Nathan reached into his pocket pulling out a pile of papers, it was the job contract from Harvey’s firm. Heidi could quite clearly see her signature at the bottom. “You see, Harvey’s company has just hired you as an accountant. My clean up team went into the office straight after we left so there will be no signs of anything suspicious; you are officially employed at Keating Colby”

“and” stated Dr. Nkomba “our only chance of stopping this”

## **Chapter 12**

### *Oumaima Morchid, Year 11*

Smoothing her hands over her black pencil skirt, Heidi looked up at the sky- a silent plea for everything to go as planned. Yesterday's events kept playing back in her mind, swarming her thoughts. She shook her head frantically, a distressed expression painting her features, hoping to forget about it all and just focus on what is ahead of her. A heavy breath escaped her lips, as she whispered to herself encouragingly "You can do this, Heidi. Just breathe."

Her heels clinked loudly with each step, which did not go overlooked by the receptionist at the front desk of her new workplace, who turned his head in her direction, eyeing her with a smirk plastered on his face. Heidi did not notice this though; she was too focused on the clinking of her heels and so didn't pay much attention to her surroundings. It seemed to take her mind off where she was heading and where she would be when there are no more steps to take.

So many questions were coursing through her mind. What if she got caught? What if Harvey's company found out what she was really there for? Too much was at risk. People's lives were on the line, and the mounting pressure was almost becoming too much for her to bear.

When she arrived at the front desk, her gaze met the receptionist's and her heart stopped. She had remembered him despite their short encounter, and it seemed that he did too when he gave her a knowing look that sent shivers down her spine. Nervously, she swallowed down a lump that started to form in her throat. Who is he exactly? What if he knows? What if he tells everyone? Even worse, what if my secrets are already out? Heidi pondered. Once again, there were too many questions with no answers.

Carefully, he observed her, as she managed to stutter out 'I-I am the new head of accounting here, could you please show me to my office?' He nodded a short, brisk nod and strode confidently towards the elevator door on the right. Heidi took this as an indication to follow him, and so she did.

The elevator had rose gold walls with two metal railings attached on opposite sides. A soft, warm white fluorescent tube lined the roof, casting a beautiful shadow on the floor. When the doors slid shut with a slight groan, Heidi tried her hardest to avoid the man's piercing eyes by looking around everywhere and anywhere she could. She suddenly found the small patterns on the roof fascinating while balancing on her feet and crossing her arms, trying to appear nonchalant even though she was far from that.

Heidi breathed a sigh of relief when the lift grinded to a halt with a small "DING", signalling they had reached the third floor in the building. Finally, the receptionist broke the silence with a small "Follow me" to Heidi, as they stepped out the elevator.

Heidi couldn't help but let her eyes wander, taking everything in. A long corridor stretched out in front of her, lined with glass partitions on each side, separating each office on the floor. On the right, a few grey couches encircled a small black round coffee table- this was most likely where employees would gather on their break. Looking up, she noticed the intense recessed lights that were

scattered on the plain, white ceiling. She looked away immediately, shielding her eyes from the blinding light rays that seemed to jut out in every direction.

Many employees seemed very eager to know who Heidi was. Some even stood up from their rolling chairs, trying to steal a few quick glances at her. Heidi never liked having so many eyes on her but their gentle smiles seemed to ease her discomfort, as her eyes lightened and she smiled back. Maybe this wasn't so bad after all, she thought.

Stopping at a plain frosted glass door with clear lines going through, the receptionist informed her that it is her office as head of accounting. Heidi closed her fingers around the silver door handle and swung the door open.

When they walked in, they were immediately welcomed with the crisp, cold air blowing from the air conditioner that was blasting at medium from the left corner of the room. The office was painted light grey, and it had one floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the main road. On the mahogany desk in the centre sat a desktop computer, a black notebook, stacks of paperwork already in a file organiser, a few pens in a tin and a desk name plate. Close to the desk was a cream white filing cabinet with binders and papers peeking out of its drawers and a water dispenser on top. A bookshelf, bursting with books was placed in the corner, with yet another stack of papers on top.

Intrigued, Heidi sat on the swivel chair and inspected the desk, gently running her hands over its surface. The receptionist then spoke up "Well enjoy it for now," a smile on his lips, as he left the room without another word.



## Chapter 13

*Alice Sullivan, Year 10*

So far, so good. Heidi had been in the office for close to half an hour, but she hadn't yet heard the signal she needed to start. The small earpiece that had been put in her ear tickled, and she was tempted to pull it out, but she knew she needed the support of Shamsa, Dr. Nkomba and Nathan to get her through this. She got up from the leather swivel chair and ran her fingers along the edge of the smooth desk that was supposed to be hers. The small but bright chandelier in the centre of the room glittered, casting a warm glow around the room that instantly made her feel at home. A little too at home she thought. She walked around the desk once, feeling lost for anything to do. Impatiently, she decided to walk over to the bookcase. She'd been warned before to refrain from pacing, as that can often look suspicious. And although she was alone, they didn't know whether there were cameras in the room or not. She felt a tug of sadness coming from somewhere in her stomach as she realised that if none of this had happened, she'd still be at home. If London could even be considered her home anymore. She'd only been in New York for just over a week, but the city already felt like it had whilst at university; somewhere she couldn't bear to leave. She'd just sat back down in the plush sofa on the opposite wall to the floor-to-ceiling windows. Although Heidi wasn't afraid of heights, she decided it was best to stay away from anything as fragile as glass. Especially because of what should be happening any minute now.

Almost as if right on cue, the expected loud shattering sound still startled Heidi into standing up abruptly and knocking several books off the shelf. She heard several muffled screams coming from a few floors below, and with a grin tugging at the corners of her mouth, she knew her brother's plan had worked. "Alright, Heidi, you're up," Shamsa's voice was quite faint through the earpiece, but it was enough to force Heidi into focus and she made her way to the door handle.

At first, the plan the trio had formulated had sounded very simple. Go to Harvey's office, get the documents, get out. This mission had been planned for over a month, Dr. Nkomba had said. Heidi was just the final piece of the puzzle. Her hiring and Harvey's death had aligned perfectly and was the only opportunity they had to seize the documents needed to stop this takeover. They had a small window of time where Harvey's old office hadn't been cleared out yet. The documents they needed were stored somewhere in Harvey's filing cabinet. In an age where cyber-attacks were the norm and sophisticated hackers had the ability to infiltrate almost any network, Harvey had preferred to protect himself, and this Housing Act, by trusting in good old fashioned paper and folders. Print, store, delete. This method was fine, until Nathan had deleted Harvey himself. Heidi suddenly felt the weight of expectancy on her shoulders. She knew that for months Shamsa had been working on a way to finally retrieve the documents from this building. "You can do this" Heidi whispered to herself softly, and, after glancing at the clock on the wall, whispered in a louder voice, "Two minutes are up, Shamsa. What should I do now?"

As Shamsa guided Heidi to the quieter elevators at the back of the floor, Heidi realised the plan was running like clockwork. Nathan had planted several devices just outside the building that would emit a high frequency sound that couldn't be heard by the human ear, but would shatter all glass within a short range. As a result, everyone on Heidi's floor was rushing to the front stairwell to evacuate the

building. Heidi had been doubtful about this plan at first, but now she silently thanked her brother for creating such a huge diversion; there was no one around at all. Still anxious, every noise startled her, and when the elevator dinged, she jumped so hard she bit her lip. Upon stepping into the elevator, Heidi was taken aback by the significant difference between this one and the ones in the main reception. The main elevators' interiors were a mixture of polished mahogany and glass that looked like it was cleaned every five minutes. It was brightly and warmly lit and felt professional, elegant. This one, however, gave Heidi none of those impressions. It was a dull steel, with only one small mirror that was clouded and covered in fingerprints. The handrail on the side was sticky to touch, and there was one dull LED light in the centre of the roof that flickered every couple of seconds. Almost as if she'd been reading Heidi's saddened mind, Shamsa said "These ones are mainly used for the cleaners. As you can tell, Harvey's firm has no shame in treating the low paid workers poorly. They just don't care". "How could Harvey think all this was ok?" Heidi whispered, still unnerved at the uncleanness of the current elevator she was in.

Just as Heidi began to feel very claustrophobic, the elevator doors opened. She gulped, and then followed Shamsa's guidance until she found a door that looked a little different to the others. Heidi had been told before coming that one of Harvey's old employees, the man who Heidi had met in room 13 alongside Shamsa in the Waldorf, had found out what Harvey was involved in and reached out to Shamsa. When Heidi was told this she couldn't remember the face from a week ago. He had given the team vital information, one of which is that Harvey's office is always the one with the black doorknob, rather than the other regular handled doors that were along the rest of the corridor. Harvey changed office and computer frequently, so he couldn't be tracked virtually or broken in to, and whenever he had meetings with other companies or people (Heidi included) they were always taken to a different room on a different floor. Clicking the door open and stepping into this so-called secret room, Heidi felt an immense satisfaction.

Upon entering the office, Heidi was startled by how simple it was. She'd expected this to be the most lavish of rooms, but it was the exact opposite. The walls were the same shade of dull grey, and apart from the same mahogany desk that was in Heidi's office, there wasn't much else to see apart from a filing cabinet in the corner. "Heidi!" Shamsa hissed. "You're taking too long! Someone's going to notice you on the cameras soon." As if in a trance, she walked up to the desk and gazed down at a picture of Harvey that must have been placed there after he died. Heidi looked deeply into the picture, as well as being handsome in person, Harvey was also incredibly photogenic. Her heart wobbled slightly at the thought of what Nathan did to her ex-partner. "Heidi!" Shamsa's voice urgently hissed again. "Listen," says a deeper voice through her earpiece, Dr. Nkomba had taken over the instructions, "We have eyes in there, and there are people coming back upstairs. You need to get those files now and get out of there before someone sees you!" His voice was a mixture of urgency, anger and fear, and it prompted Heidi into tearing her eyes away from the picture and walking briskly to the filing cabinet. She started ripping open the drawers, her heart beating a million miles a minute. She began to lose hope after she'd found nothing in the first two. The third drawer was stacked with folders, far more than the other two. Heidi had been flicking through files and folders so quickly that papers were scattered all over the floor, and all Heidi could think about was how it would feel to return empty handed.

Heidi, becoming more exasperated by the second, picked up a folder marked LSHA. 'The LShutter Housing Act' Heidi thought. "Got it!" she shouted rather too loudly whilst waving the papers from the folder over her head and she quickly stuffed them in her inside blazer pocket. "Okay, good, now get out of there! Remember the escape plan we discussed. I think you'll be quicker down the stairs, but make sure to leave from the fire exit on the south side. It's the only one that isn't monitored." The voice is back to Shamsa's, and it fills Heidi with comfort that there might be a safe way out of this labyrinth of a building. She quickly entered the fire exit staircase but was met immediately by an angry-looking businessman who was significantly taller than her. He frowned down. "What are you doing here?" His voice boomed and then echoed down the 14 floors of the building. "Umm..." Heidi's voice was weak, and she stalled, waiting for Shamsa to tell her what to say. When no advice came, she improvised. "Well, I've actually been up here on a very serious matter." Heidi tried to make herself sound assertive, even though she felt far from it. "It seems that one of your filthy janitors has made a terrible mess inside one of the offices upstairs. I would check it out if I were you." With a concerned look on his face, the businessman nodded to her and changed direction to the office corridor. "I could have used your help there guys!" Heidi whispered.

Relieved though to have handled the situation herself, Heidi quickly regulated her breathing. 'Fire exit on the south side' she reminded herself. "Shamsa, fire exit on the south side, am I still heading in the right direction". Heidi waited for a response but none came. "Shamsa?"

Nothing.

"Shamsa? Dr. Nkomba? Can you hear me? Where do I go?"

Still nothing in her ear; not even the annoying tickle from before. It dawned on Heidi that she was in that building, alone.

## Chapter 14

*Aisyah Ariffin, Year 11*

*In, and out.*

Heidi took deep breaths and composed herself. She felt the warmth drain out of her cheeks, and her body regaining stability. Her throat opened and she tasted air again; cold and sharp, running through her nose and flooding into her chest. The panic, the blaring alarms, the echoing screams... it'd all proved to be too much; her anxiety had kicked in and taken control of her.

But she was calmer now. She was focused. She had a job to do, and she'd already lost precious time. *I can do this*, she told herself. She reminded herself that she knew the escape plan. It'd been drilled into her through countless repetitions. Now, all she had to do was carry it out. *Fire exit*, she reminded herself. *Fire exit on the South*. She raised her pace, turned the corner, and found a stairway with a green exit light above it. Still slightly dizzy, she hurried down the steps, until a voice in her ear stopped her.

"Heidi!"

Only it wasn't from the earpiece.

The source of the echoing sound stood right before her. The receptionist. His tall figure stood at the bottom of the stairs, meeting her eyes challengingly. Behind him stood two men. They were even taller; dressed in all black, with bronze skin and carved features. Their strapping builds told her that a physical fight was not in the cards.

"Ah, Heidi." The receptionist smiled with mocking empathy. "You really underestimated us, didn't you?"

He laughed, with a sickening condescension. "It was so entertaining watching you scrambling through drawers, running around elevators. Why, I haven't had a laugh like that in ages."

He took two steps towards Heidi, and instantly, all the humor drained from his expression. He eyed her coldly. "Who do you and your little friends think you are? You killed Harvey, and now you plan to take us down? I don't think so."

Swiftly, he reached into his back pocket and drew a silver object. It took a moment before Heidi realized what it was. She could hardly breathe as he aimed the revolver towards her and ran his finger over the trigger.

"Listen to me very carefully," he said. "You drop those files and leave this building. You will speak nothing of what you have seen or heard. You will tell your friends to drop their scheme immediately. Do that, and I spare your life."

Heidi was numb with terror. In this moment, her own life was the least of her concerns. If she surrendered, the files would be lost. If she didn't, she would die. There seemed to be no right answer.

She looked down at the files, and then back at the receptionist. She couldn't bring herself to look straight at the gun.

"Stop contemplating, Heidi," he said. "You know what to do. You know this is over. So just stop"

"This is not over."

A deep voice had replied before she could. Heidi turned, and in the doorway stood a well-built man, of medium height - dressed in a sharp suit, with a familiar rose in his breast pocket.

*Dr Nkomba.*

Without missing a beat, he fired a shot into the air. It was a blank, but the sound caused the receptionist and his men to duck down instinctively. This gave Dr Nkomba just enough time to pull Heidi away and out of the stairwell.

"Change of plans, Heidi," he said quickly. "They are onto us and they'll stop at nothing to get these files back. We have to go."

"How are-"

"There's an emergency exit round the back," the professor interrupted. "We'll leave that way, but we must be quick. Hopefully we'll outrun them, but if we can't, here's the plan."

Dr Nkomba pulled a slim white object from under his arm. As he brought it out, Heidi realized it was a file; practically indistinguishable from the one she had stolen from Harvey's cabinet and placed in the breast pocket of her blazer.

"*A faux*," they said at the same time.

Dr Nkomba nodded. "If we get into any trouble, we can use this as a-"

"Diversion," finished Heidi.

"Very clever," smiled the professor. "You learn from the best."

Dr Nkomba gave a little wink. The familiar gesture instantly took Heidi back to her university days. She hadn't appreciated it then, but it'd been the most peaceful and joyful period of her life.

Since her first day at univeristy, Dr Nkomba's class had been such a welcoming environment. He made it a point to learn each of his students' names by heart. He often engaged in friendly discussion, finding out little things about them; their hometown, their family, their dreams. He was a diligent worker and shared in the triumphs and losses of others. He was supportive, and never once made anyone feel belittled or inadequate. He held the most genuine care and adoration for his students; almost as strong as the adoration they had for him. In just weeks, it had felt more like a family than a class; it was a norm for students to sit around with him after lecture, discussing good books or new ideas or conspiracy theories.

Those were good days.

Never would she have thought that in several years' time, they would be scurrying the hallways of Keaton Colby Law Firm, with a very important mission resting on their shoulders. Heidi followed as

Dr Nkomba paced down a series of routes, directing her instinctively as if he knew every turn by heart. It wasn't long until they turned the final corner and were greeted by the sight of a large exit, a hundred meters or so ahead.

Sunlight leaked through the gap under the door. It almost felt strange; after hours of surreal experience, the outside world seemed almost like an illusion. But there it was, so near. Success had never tasted closer.

Dr Nkomba gestured for her to move along, whilst fumbling for the decoy file hidden under his blazer.

"Now, remember our plan," he panted. "Heidi, I can't run too well. So if they come, you take the faux and-"

"Drop it!"

The pair turned around and were confronted with a familiar tall figure. The receptionist stared back at them, triumphantly. His men somehow seemed stronger and taller, and the revolver in his hand looked more terrifying than ever. They couldn't have been caught at a worse moment; the faux file was exposed, held clearly between the two. Without a moment's lag, Dr Nkomba pulled the faux file from Heidi's grasp into his own.

"Drop what? This?" he taunted.

The receptionist and his men advanced on Dr Nkomba, attempting to lock his arms and snatch the file. For a man in his mid-fifties, the professor had incredible strength; fighting back with his elbows and thrusting his knees in defiance.

But it wasn't enough. He was no match for three young and sturdily built men; he was losing steadily. Heidi wasn't a strong fighter, but she had to do something. She started to move forward but was met by Dr Nkomba's glare.

"Heidi!" he hissed. "What are you doing?"

"I-"

"Go!" he said firmly.

"But-"

"Go!" he repeated.

Heidi fingered the file hidden under her clothes. She looked to the door before her; it was so close. At her best, she could sprint out of there in less than ten seconds. Then she looked back at Dr Nkomba, struggling pitifully in the clutches of Harvey's men.

"Heidi!" scolded the professor. He tried to speak, but the words were broken between grunts gasps of air. "You... have... to..."

Heidi clenched her jaw. He was right. This wasn't about her, or him. There was a greater good. She swallowed her sentiments and willed herself to lock out all emotions. Her heart was racing as she sprinted - faster than she ever had in her life - towards the exit. *I can do this*, she told herself.

Her barricaded emotions flooded back into her as the door was within reach. She felt a churn in her stomach and tears welling in her eyes, but she shook her head kept pushing.

*I have to*, she told herself. Her escape was within arm's reach. Her mind was desperate, and she could think of nothing except keeping her legs moving. She pushed forward, too afraid and too guilty to look back. As she burst through the exit doors, she heard a dreaded sound, and knew exactly what it meant.

*Bang!*

They'd lost another brave martyr.

## Chapter 15

*Mr. Stanier*, English Teacher and Head of Year 9

The gunshot only motivated Heidi to run faster. It did not matter the direction, she just kept running. The exit she had burst through moments earlier had led straight into the back alley of the Keaton Colby building. Heidi had no intentions of observing her surroundings, her only motivation was to get away from there as quickly as possible. Although they allowed her to play the part of 'new employee', she quickly realised the heels she was wearing were now a hinderance. She managed to kick them off as she ran and continued barefoot, jumping and skipping over anything that might cause harm to her feet.

Heidi still headed East along the back alley, passing several similar sized buildings and expertly avoiding strewn garbage bags, broken bottles and the occasional sleeping vagrant whose kind littered the back streets of the city. She knew the men who had just executed Dr. Nkomba would be in pursuit and she suddenly felt isolated and alone. With the exception of the homeless individuals wrapped in a combination of newspaper and torn blankets, no one was in these alleys. A perfect place for another murder that no-one would see or hear, she thought.

She suddenly felt the need to blend in, to disappear into a crowd. No one would risk hurting her in the middle of a busy street; pursue...yes, attack...no chance. Even the men from Keaton Colby wouldn't risk drawing attention to themselves by making a move on the bustling streets of downtown New York. At the next junction where back alley met side alley Heidi veered, not willing to glance back to her assailants, and headed for the busy streets that were now ahead of her. She could see the throngs of people maneuvering, evading, occasionally bumping into each other on the sidewalk ahead. A mix of suits, students, shoppers and tourists lined the streets.

At that moment she felt something whistle over her shoulder and noticed a puff of plaster appear in the building about head height to her right. A bullet. Missed. She sprinted harder, faster, calling upon all her athletic past. Another whistle, closer this time, barely missed her left ear and planted straight into the garbage bin by her side. Heidi had about 10 metres to the sidewalk and without slowing, burst out of the alley into the unsuspecting New Yorkers passing by. She was running with such force she knocked two suited men clean off their feet. The screams and shouts of surprise from the people immediately surrounding her were strangely comforting. Without stopping to check on the condition of the men she just knocked to the floor, Heidi quickly weaved her way through the crowds and away from the Keaton Colby building. She looked down as her hand patted her chest to make sure the documents she had stolen a few minutes earlier were still there. Reassuringly, they still were.

Away from the bustling sidewalks, the receptionist stood over Dr. Nkomba's lifeless body waiting for his security detail to return. When they did so with the disappointing news that Heidi had made it to the streets and disappeared into the crowd, he knew he needed to inform his superior. With a fearful lump in his throat he took out his cell phone and dialed the most important contact in his phone.

"Yes" the Middle-Eastern accented voice said on the other end.



“I’m sorry Sir, she managed to get the documents and escape the building” the receptionist said anxiously.

After a slight pause the reply came, “You and Harvey had one job. One job! Find out who the Unknown was and to track, trace and watch these people so this didn’t happen!”

“Yes, I’ve tracked Heidi Sir, I paid the Artezen Hotel to allow me to be porter there for her arrival and Harvey and I decided that pretending to be the receptionist at the firm would allow me to monitor her clo...”

“ENOUGH!” the voice bellowed with immense authority. “I do not want to hear about what you have done. The fact is she has incriminating files that will stop this Act. Harvey is dead and you have no idea where this girl is. Again, I do not care about what you have done. I pay you enough money to protect us, I want this fixed now.” The phone line on the other end clicked off.

The receptionist looked up at his colleagues with a steely determination in his eyes. He did not want to disappoint his superior again. “I need to find her” he said as he headed toward the front exit of the building.

Out on the streets Heidi continued quickly, doing her best not to bump into as many people as possible. A task she was finding difficult. Her bare feet were starting to feel the strain from the previous alley floor and hot asphalt. All of a sudden, a noise appeared that stopped Heidi in her tracks. It was a faint crackle in her ear. A crackle that became louder and clearer. “Heidi. Heidi, can you hear me? Heidi?” It was Shamsa. “Yes. Yes. I can hear you” Heidi said loudly trying to hear her own voice over the hum of New York noise. “Heidi, where are you? Are you ok? Dr. Nkomba left to come and help you. Is he with you?” Those words hit Heidi hard. With the panic of fleeing for safety she had not stopped to think about Dr. Nkomba and the fate he just met.

“Heidi?” Shamsa shouted again with a clear sense of urgency. “We think the team at Keaton Colby put a block on radio transmissions which is why we lost contact with you. Dr. Nkomba came to help. Where is he? Where are you? Talk to me Heidi.”

“They killed him Shamsa. They killed him.” Heidi said trying to stay strong and fight back the tears.

After a short pause Shamsa asked “Have you got the files? Are you safe?” Heidi was taken aback by the bluntness and lack of emotion shown about the demise of their mentor. “Yes, I have and I’m out on the streets heading East towards the City Hall Park. But Dr. Nkomba, what are we going to do Shamsa?”

“We are going to stop this Heidi, that is all we have ever wanted to do. To save our city. We can mourn later but we can’t let it get in the way now. Nathan is still waiting for you out there. How far are you from the park?”

“About 5 minutes”

“Ok. He will meet you by the South entrance in 5 minutes. We have someone we trust high up in the Justice Department. Michael Carter, the close friend of my fathers. The Justice Department is about 10 minutes by car from the park. We need to get those files to him. With the evidence you

now have showing corrupt payments and incriminating the Governors, he will have the power to end the LShutter Housing Act.'

Heidi felt an enormous weight of expectation again.

"Get to the park now" barked Shamsa through the earpiece.

## Chapter 16

*Kyeong-Min Goob, Yea, Year 10*

Once again, Heidi ran.

Perhaps a little while ago, she would have relished the thought of running so freely through the streets of New York, but after witnessing such traumatic events, she felt suffocated by the time limit. Five minutes. The more exhausted she became, the more her consciousness pushed her into running faster. The beat of her feet pounding the burning ground was now in sync with her heart throbbing against her chest.

‘We’ll have to mourn later,’ Shamsa had said to her, but she couldn’t shake away the horrible feeling in her stomach. The gunshot that killed Dr Nkombu echoed in her head, distracting her. She’d now already seen two deaths in the past few days - ex-partner and old lecturer.

Heidi knew she had to keep going forward, no matter what; she knew that each step took her closer to Nathan and to saving her city. She ran so ferociously, that for a moment, she couldn’t help but be convinced that her ankles were made of tightly coiled springs, rather than the sinews and bones she was taught to believe she was made of. How could she run like this otherwise? The fear of where the receptionist and his entourage were right now was also propelling her towards City Hall Park.

Meanwhile, Nathan patiently waited for his sister’s arrival. After having worked so long without breaks, it felt wrong to pause. He had to admit, the chance to breathe felt good after this intense storm of events. He stared aimlessly in the direction Heidi should be approaching from. The lack of contact with Heidi when the radios were blocked had scared Nathan. Scared wasn’t something he felt in his line of work, but he didn’t normally have his sister working alongside him. Snapping back into focus, he pulled out the photograph of Michael Carter that Shamsa had given him. He didn’t want to take any chances and had never met this man in person. He memorised the man’s face in a few seconds, a sharp memory was a key component of his success as an agent. He placed the image back in his pocket and glanced up to see Heidi, heading towards the car. The sprint was now more like a stumble.

Heidi spotted Nathan’s car from afar and stumbled upon the last few steps, acutely aware of the stinging in her legs. Nathan didn’t speak but looked up at his determined sister with a warm smile. Nathan leaned over and swung the passenger door open for Heidi to jump in. The relief of both seeing her brother and to rest her legs was not lost on Heidi and she sat in the passenger seat, closed the door and tried to regain her breath. “You ok?” Nathan asked caringly. Heidi nodded, it was all she could muster. Nathan nodded in return and proceeded to drive in the direction of Michael Carter’s office. Heidi pulled the stolen documents from her blazer pocket and rested them on her tired knees. Nathan glanced down and with an impressed smirk said “Well done Sis...really well done.”

Nathan slowed the vehicle down as they pulled up to some red lights, still 5 minutes from their destination. “So, this Michael Carter” Heidi asked, her breathing finally returning to normal, “can we really trust him?”

“Yeah, I think we can. Mr. Carter was a former associate of Shamsa’s father.” Nathan began whilst still focused on the road ahead. “Essentially, her father helped to close big financial mergers and company takeovers around the world. Carter worked as a lawyer to make sure the mergers were legally tight and above board. If there was anything that even sniffed of illegality within the deal then Carter would pull the plug on it from a legal point of view. He was renowned for it.” Nathan pushed the accelerator as the lights flicked onto green. “It didn’t matter if it was tax implications, unfair monopoly, regulatory issues, whatever. Carter would stop it. He’s interested in upholding the law, not making money. Carter was on to something before Shamsa’s father was killed and has been in contact with us a couple of times since. He needed proof of these city-wide takeovers. Not words and recordings but hard proof of illegal transactions so he could help. We have that proof in your hands now Heidi.”

Heidi couldn’t believe the situation she had found herself in. Only a couple of weeks ago, she’d been a perfectly ordinary girl, living her life as an accountant in London, and now she was about to do something extraordinary; stop a city-wide takeover of the super-rich. Heidi looked at her brother with admiration. He had hidden his real life so well. Dead beat, bum, scrounger, failure. A few days ago this was her brother, the false life he had created. Looking at her younger brother now, Heidi loved the fact he was instead a successful agent doing this job. It was comforting.

The five minutes of comfort in the car quickly passed, and they were at the Justice Department in no time. Heidi held on tight to the files in her hand, determined. This was their chance. They had everything that would prevent this Act. Nathan stopped the car abruptly in front of the building. FBI agents on serious cases didn’t have to worry about parking fines, Heidi thought. They walked through the front glass doors and with a flash of his badge and a quick directional guide from the front desk, the pair made their way to Michael Carter’s office. They stood at the doors to his office as Nathan cleared his throat, evidently just as nervous as Heidi.

Without a doubt, they’d expected Mr. Carter to be an old man, he was a friend of Shamsa’s father after all. However, as they walked in and saw the man sitting at the desk, his age was completely indeterminate. If you picked a number at random, he would probably be a few years older than that, Nathan thought, but it was impossible to tell. Certainly, his face was heavily lined, but he looked sharp. Well dressed, expensive watch, wealthy. Nathan looked closer. Despite the immaculate appearance his hands looked rough, an outdoors rough, hands that were used to hunting and holding shotguns and rifles. The office was no smoking, like all offices in New York, but Nathan could smell the recent smoke of cigar hovering in the air. Nathan homed in on the man’s face, the memorized photo of Carter still vividly in his mind. Nathan did not react when it became clear this was not the man from the photograph. This was not Michael Carter.

“Heidi, I’ve been waiting for you,” he spoke. “Do you have something for me?”

Nathan did not know who this man was. He weighed up his options; on the way to the office he hadn’t seen anything suspicious, no one tailing or waiting in the Justice building. Buying time was the safest, most logical response now.

“Tell us what you know about this takeover” Nathan insisted before Heidi had a chance to respond to the previous question. As the man in front started talking, Heidi heard a crackling sound in her ear. She had completely forgotten she still had her hi-tech earpiece inside. “Heidi” Shamsa said,

barely above a whisper. "I have met Michael Carter several times. That voice I can hear does not belong to Michael Carter." Heidi stiffened. She surreptitiously glanced over at Nathan, who glanced knowingly back.

"I do not know who that man is," Shamsa whispered. "But he must be important enough to know of my father's friendship with Carter. Shush, don't let anything slip," Shamsa continued. "I've just called Michael Carter; he is in the building and I'm making my way over too."

## Chapter 17

*Leena Laribi, Year 8*

Heidi tried to stay calm but couldn't stop her thoughts from racing. *Who was this man? What was he doing here?* She took a deep breath, and focused on the man's words, but even this was not an easy feat. Her heart was pounding painfully against her chest.

The man was still talking and as he did so Heidi started to recall the voice. She had heard it before from the voice recording Nathan had played for her recently. This voice, this man had been involved from the beginning.

"Do you have the documents with you Heidi?" The man behind the desk questioned. Heidi felt a cold shiver run all the way down her back. Unsure of what to do next, Heidi looked uncertainly at Nathan for guidance. He nodded in return. Heidi, not used to secret agent nods, had no idea what this was prompting her to do. She stood, frozen.

The man growled, "Well, do you have it?"

"You aren't leaving empty-handed, Mark" came a different, clear voice from behind them. Walking through the office door came an elderly, middle-eastern man, dressed impeccably in a dark blue, pin striped suit. He walked with an air of authority as the heels of his elegant shoes clicked delicately on the tiled floor. His face was marked with age lines and his eyes, although wary and watchful, showed signs of a man not totally at ease. There was a silence in the room that felt like an eternity. As Heidi looked for further encouragement from her brother, she noticed an anger on his face she had never seen before. He started shaking his head, clearly outraged at the sight of this person.

"Calm down Nathan" said the elderly man gently. Nathan did not seem to listen and looked even more angered. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you" the man said with a warm smile to Heidi. The warmth was not reciprocated. Heidi internally groaned, she had no clue of what was happening. "Who are you?" Heidi asked. She looked again in Nathan's direction; although his face was contorted with anger, the rest of him was motionless. Stunned. Silent. Heidi became distracted by a sudden noise; she heard the usual crackling as Shamsa sought to communicate with her.

"Heidi! That voice, it sounds like...that's... i-it can't be," Shamsa stuttered through her microphone.

The rage in Nathan's face, the confused stuttering of Shamsa through the earpiece sent Heidi's mind racing. Shamsa's next words however emptied those racing thoughts immediately and sent haunting chills through her body.

"Heidi, that man's name is Khaled Ali...he is my father."

Heidi went cold. Her head was starting to hurt. The mix of dehydration from the earlier sprint and utter, total disbelief was taking its toll. She felt weak, dizzy. The haunting chills had turned to a steady tremble. Heidi had never passed out in her life, but she felt like this was going to be the first time.

The silence in the room was penetrated by a phone ringing. Shamsa's father reached inside his suit jacket and answered his cell. "Sir, I have followed them to the Justice Department building. We expected they would make this move to find Carter. I will track them down and end this." It was the receptionist, clearly still focused on his task and determined not to disappoint again.

"You can leave" said Khalid coldly into his cell. "Leave? But sir, I'm just about to enter the build..."

"I said you can leave." The same cold and measured tone was the response down the phone. "Mark and I are already here – we are dealing with this ourselves. Turn around. Leave. Tidy up any mess you have caused today." He clicked his cell phone off and smiled at the siblings in front of him.

The receptionist turned to leave as instructed. Frustrated that he was not able to complete his job and fearful of the repercussions of not doing so. These were powerful men you did not want to disappoint. As he turned however, movement at the doors of the Justice Building startled him. Through the glass doors to the building, he could see several refracted security personnel dressed in black suits moving towards the doors. All of them walking in unison, all of them with guns raised. Secret Service. Somehow, they knew who he was, and why he was there. The receptionist had two options, out-run seven agents or shoot them all without any of them firing a shot. He didn't like either option. The agents burst through the doors commanding his compliance. "On your knees" shouted the lead agent. "We know who you are, we've seen footage of what you did inside Keaton Colby." A wry smile appeared on the receptionist's face. He had disappointed his superior's and that only meant one thing in the long run. He could wait for the order to be given from them to end his life, or he could go out fighting like he was trained. He quickly went for his pistol from his side holster but the gun never made it out. A shower of silent bullets thudded into his chest.

Unaware of the commotion outside, Shamsa's father was still smiling politely. "The documents please Heidi. You can't stop this so just hand them over. No one needs to get hurt here today."

The suggestion of people getting hurt reminded Heidi of Dr. Nkomba. People were already getting hurt by these people. The thought of her old professor disappeared as she was once again startled by her earpiece coming to life.

"We are here Heidi. Carter knows what is happening, he was waiting for this and been surveilling these people. I am with him now. We are all coming so stall them." Heidi was confused by the term *'we are all'* but did what she was told.

"Who are you?" She asked again; a question directed at both men. Thanks to Shamsa, she already knew who one of them was. Heidi spoke with more confidence than she expected to, perhaps the thought of Shamsa nearby gave her the courage to do so. "It doesn't matter who we are so just hand me what you stole and we will be done here."

For the first in several minutes Nathan spoke, Heidi could hear the anger through his voice. "That man is supposed to be dead Heidi. That man is supposed to be the reason we are fighting to stop all this. He is supposed to be the reason we have dedicated ourselves to this cause." Although Heidi knew who he was, she continued to play innocent to keep them all talking.

"What are you talking about Nathan?" she dramatically asked, perhaps too dramatically she thought. "That is Shamsa's father" was Nathan's short response.

“What? It can’t be. You told me he was dead!” cried Heidi, trying not to be too extravagant in her acting. A part of her was enjoying the performance.

“Powerful men like us need to disappear” said the man sitting at the desk. “Our plans make us a target for crack-pot libertarians like you.” He arrogantly chuckled as he said this.

“And who might you be?” quizzed Heidi growing confidence further still. “You know my name is Mark, the rest is irrelevant but we” he glanced over at Khalid “we know what is right for our great country. It is falling into decay thanks to the millions of people below the poverty line who are draining our resources. Mass immigration, masses of the uneducated, masses of work-shy leaches looking for a free ride in life. Filling our prisons, ruining our schools, destroying our economy. We work to stop that happening.” The arrogance and ignorance in his voice made Heidi feel sick.

“You sent Shamsa the files, the evidence to help us? Why would you do that if you are part of this?” Nathan’s angered question directed towards Shamsa’s father.

“That wasn’t me” replied Khalid. His words took Nathan and Heidi by surprise and they needed a moment to comprehend.

“Those files were the reason I knew I had to disappear. I travelled the world helping to secure deals, rights and legislation to protect our wealth. Bring the most powerful together. Someone realized our intentions, sent those files and we removed ourselves from the limelight. I thought the sender was the infamous ‘unknown’ – that doesn’t like the case now though does it Nathan?”

“How could you do this to your daughter?” implored Heidi. The act was gone, that was most genuine she had been in a long time. “My daughter is the reason you are all still alive” roared her father. An anger and hurt in his voice.

“Enough talk” said Mark as he stood and walked menacingly over to Heidi. It seemed he had enough of the pleasantries and wanted action. Heidi backed off quickly and Nathan, reacting as agent and big brother pulled his gun. “Don’t move” he demanded.

Mark continued to move forward, unperturbed by Nathan’s request. “I said don’t move.” Mark laughed almost manically, “What are you going to do? Shoot me? Don’t be stupid. You shoot me and you’ll have hundreds, no, thousands of the most powerful men in this country hunting you down.”

Mark continued forward and was now only a few feet from Heidi. “Shamsa, get here quick!” screamed Heidi into her earpiece. Shouts and hurried footsteps could be heard at the far end of the corridor. Mark lunged forward towards Heidi, who was still clutching the documents tightly to her chest. The sound of a gunshot reverberated around the large office. Mark fell short of Heidi. Face down. Motionless. A pool of blood slowly surrounding his head.

“Don’t you dare move” Nathan shouted at Shamsa’s father; his gun now pointed instinctively at the other man in the room. At that moment the office door burst open and in rushed several armed Secret Service agents who had already been in action outside with the receptionist. They were followed by a man Nathan clearly recognized from the photo he had seen earlier, Michael Carter. “Are you guys ok?” he asked as he looked around the room to see one body on the floor and



another man at the back of the office. “We’re fine” replied Nathan, his gun still firmly aimed in Khalid’s direction.

“Michael?” questioned the man being held at gun point, a first sign of bemusement in his voice.

Carter replied with a response that seemed rehearsed and planned; like he had been waiting for this opportunity for some time. “I worked with you for years, believing you were doing the right thing. I’m good at my job. Very good. You must have been so arrogant to think that your plans would be hidden, that no one would find out? Well I found out and sent those files to Shamsa to investigate further. I knew how powerful you were, but I also knew how much you loved your daughter. You would have had me killed in a heartbeat if you knew I was after you but your daughter coming after you? That was a different story. You would have never hurt her; she really was our only chance.”

Shamsa’s father looked dumbstruck. A tear formed in his eye before he quickly reverted to the cold persona of before. “You don’t know what is good for the people of this country, you fools.” Michael Carter had taken the files that Heidi had clutched onto so tightly and was smiling as he glanced through them. “You slipped up Khalid. It is all here. Names, transfers, payments, emails, everything. You’re finished.”

“You can lower your weapon, sir” said one of the agents to Nathan as two more members of the Secret Service walked over to Shamsa’s father, aggressively put his hands in cuffs and marched him towards the door. “You can’t stop this. As this country falls deeper into the cesspool, you will follow in our great footsteps” he arrogantly said as he was forced away and along the corridor.

Heidi seemed frozen in time for a few seconds and then the enormity of what happened seemed to hit her. She grabbed Nathan and sobbed into his shoulder. The embrace was broken after a couple of minutes when Shamsa steadily entered the room.

“I couldn’t bear to see him” she said softly and followed this with an “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” said Nathan defiantly.

“I just can’t believe my own father would be a part of something like this. He was a good man. How could he not understand the conflict this would cause, and the damage it would do to our society?”

“Arrogance and greed do strange things to people” said Carter knowingly. “We can’t thank you enough for this. What you did was extremely dangerous but stopping this housing Act means thousands of people can stay in their homes and continue living the best life they can. For now, at least.” He smiled as he walked out of the office.

“For now?” Heidi questioned when Carter had left. “It’s not the end of this is it?”

“It’s not the end, it’s just the beginning, but we will avail,” Nathan said grimly.

“Let’s go get some coffee” said Heidi “I know a really great café called Luigi’s by the hotel you put me in, best coffee I’ve had in years.” She paused “He really did love you Shamsa” she continued comfortingly. Her friend didn’t reply but looked warmly in Heidi’s direction.

As the three of them walked out, Heidi reflected on the past couple of weeks that had turned her life upside down. She didn’t know what would happen next or what direction her life would go in, but

she was clear about two things. Firstly, she loved her brother and Shamsa – she needed them in her life and two, she loved this City and the wonderful mix of people in it; nothing would ever change that.





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