

# Betrayed

ROSIE LEWIS

One girl's struggle  
to escape a  
cruel life  
defined by  
family honour



Rosie Lewis

**Betrayed: The heartbreaking true  
story of a struggle to escape a  
cruel life defined by family honour**

«HarperCollins»

## **Lewis R.**

**Betrayed: The heartbreaking true story of a struggle to escape a cruel life defined by family honour / R. Lewis — «HarperCollins»,**

In the much-anticipated follow-up to Sunday Times bestseller *Trapped*, foster carer Rosie Lewis tells the heartbreaking true story of 13-year-old Zadie. When the young teenage girl runs away from home and is discovered hiding on the city streets by the police, it is clear that all is not as it should be. Taught to believe that Westerners should not be trusted, when Zadie is initially delivered into the experienced hands of foster carer Rosie she is polite and well-behaved, but understandably suspicious of the family around her. Through Rosie's support and understanding, gradually Zadie begins to settle into her new surroundings, but loyalty to her relatives, and fear of bringing shame on those around her, prevents her from confessing the horrifying truth about her troubled past. When the shocking truth finally emerges, Rosie and her family can hardly believe that Zadie had managed to keep the shocking secrets to herself for so long.

## Содержание

Copyright	7
Contents	8
By the same author	9
Prologue	10
Chapter 1	11
Chapter 2	15
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	20



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ROSIE

## Copyright

Certain details in this story, including names, places and dates, have been changed to protect the family's privacy.

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Rosie Lewis asserts the moral right to  
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## Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[By the same author](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Exclusive sample chapter](#)

[Moving Memoirs eNewsletter](#)

[Write for Us](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

## **By the same author**

*Helpless: A True Short Story*

*Trapped: The Terrifying True Story of a Secret World of Abuse*

*A Small Boy's Cry*

*Two More Sleeps*

## Prologue

Moonlight shrouded a robed figure as he entered the unlit hallway, his silhouette fading with a gentle clunk as the double lock was secured behind him. Nine-year-old Zadie watched the stranger's arrival through a narrow gap in the banisters, a chill prickling across the top of her scalp at the sight of the black leather bag clutched in his hand. The realisation of what was inside made her heart pound so hard that she imagined it might squeeze through her ribs and escape from her chest.

Shivering as she crouched on her haunches, her eyes ferreted the shadows for Nadeen. There was no sign of her sister but she could just make out her father as he crossed the hall beneath her, his sandalled feet echoing on the bare floorboards. The late-night visitor followed; a thin, upright sort of man with a thick beard and greying, straggly hair; nothing like the monster who had stalked her dreams. Sensing nervousness in the way her father moved, Zadie felt another hammering inside her chest. Ripples pulsed upwards, teasing her throat into a cough.

She clamped a hand over her mouth to muffle the sound, hardly able to believe that the rumours she had feared since she was a little girl were about to merge with reality. Her stomach lurched, bile fizzing at the back of her throat. Tempted to run directly back to her bedroom, she straightened and was about to turn when muffled sobs from the back room rooted her feet to the floor.

'Please, Papa. I don't need an injection, please.'

Zadie squeezed her hands flat against her ears to try and block out her sister's pleading. Closing her eyes, she was gripped by the sudden image of a woman drifting through the air in front of her. As always, as soon as she tried to reach out for the comfort she knew she'd find there, the grainy presence vanished, sounds of a struggle from downstairs chasing it away.

Zadie whimpered and ran back to her bedroom, slumping down onto her mattress and pulling her pillow over her head. An hour before first light she fell into a troubled sleep but was soon woken by a shuffling noise outside the door. Nadeen walked slowly into the room, tears rolling down her cheeks. As the 12-year-old rolled tentatively into the bed opposite her own, her legs bound tightly together with bandages, Zadie could see tell-tale spots of red on the back of her sister's linen nightdress. Silently she crossed the room, reaching out to stroke Nadeen's back.

Zadie sighed with relief as dawn approached and the male members of the household left for morning prayers.

## Chapter 1

‘Do you think she’ll be like Phoebe was when she first came?’ my son Jamie called out from his bedroom.

I couldn’t help but smile at the hesitancy in his tone as I swept from room to room, checking there were fresh towels in the bathroom and grabbing a floral duvet set from the airing cupboard. Nine-year-old Phoebe had stayed with us for almost a year before moving on to a long-term carer. The friendly, kind and bubbly girl we said goodbye to was unrecognisable from the angry whirlwind we had first met. Our house seemed so much emptier without her presence and, despite her leaving months earlier and other children staying with us meanwhile, we still missed her. But the first few weeks of Phoebe’s stay had been challenging for all of us, especially so for Jamie.

From the moment she arrived Phoebe had fixated on him so that, whenever she was confused or upset, Jamie would be the one who got a wet finger shoved into his ear or a plate thrown at him. As she settled and learnt to trust us we witnessed some dramatic changes in her behaviour, so much so that our motivation to foster had grown even stronger, but the traumatic start had left Jamie chary of new arrivals.

‘No, I doubt it,’ I said, though my words sounded hollow. I actually had no idea what Zadie Hassan would be like. In a hurried telephone conversation with her social worker late that afternoon, I had been told that the 13-year-old was from a Muslim family who had never come to the attention of social services before, and so information was sketchy. Of Asian heritage, Zadie had been found by two patrolling police officers early that morning, sheltering in a shop doorway in a central northern shopping centre. Apparently she had pleaded with officers not to take her home, begging as if her life depended on it. She had seemed so genuinely terrified that the officers took her straight to the police station and alerted social services.

At 13, Zadie was outside of our approved age range, but she had spent most of the day waiting at the local authority offices, listening as social workers phoned agency after agency, trying to match her with Muslim foster carers. By the time the decision was reached to settle her with a white British family it was almost 5 p.m. and the poor girl was exhausted. Strictly speaking, our family was only approved to take children from 0 to 11, leaving a gap of at least two years between any child coming into our home and my own youngest, Jamie, who was just 13. But when an ideal match isn’t possible and a child urgently needs a warm bed to sleep in, social workers are usually prepared to bend the rules.

A gap of two years is recommended between looked-after and birth children so that the family dynamics are roughly unchanged. If disrupted, resentment against the foster child can build to a point where the placement breaks down. Some fostered children have been so badly abused in their own homes that they find it difficult to witness the positive environment when they arrive in a foster home and seek to sabotage the relationships between family members, so it’s important to maintain the original pecking order.

Preparing children for family life when they have had little experience of boundaries or parental discipline takes time and patience. Even getting them to sit at the table at meal times can seem like an insurmountable task, in the beginning. I wondered whether we would experience any behavioural issues with Zadie. If so, we would have to brace ourselves to get through the first few weeks while she adjusted to our house rules and boundaries.

I had cared for teenagers before and emerged unscathed so I wasn’t *too* worried about Zadie’s age. What concerned me more was her culture. Would she feel comfortable living with people who didn’t share her faith? I wondered. My own parents were Christian and, having grown up in a house where one adult was more devout than the other, I had witnessed first-hand the problems that differing religious views can cause. My father was so determined to prevent any of his children drifting away

from the Church that he would only allow us to mix with families who shared his faith. Such a sheltered existence left me wary of outsiders when I was Zadie's age. It took years for me to realise that people didn't necessarily need to be religious to have a good heart. I wondered whether Zadie might feel as guarded as I had. If so, she might well feel awkward around us, frightened even.

Armed with clean linen and towels, I went through to make up Zadie's bed. It was almost 6 p.m. but the bright, early May sunshine was still streaming through the window, giving the magnolia walls a cheery glow. I was pleased Zadie would have the room in our house that got the most sun during the day; she needed to recover from the nights spent sleeping outside.

I wondered whether there was anything about the place that Zadie's parents might disapprove of, certain that they would have concerns about her staying in an environment so far removed from her own. The last thing I wanted was for Zadie to feel uncomfortable in what was to be her home.

My 16-year-old daughter Emily, still dressed in her school uniform, was already bustling around the room with accessories she thought Zadie might like. As if reading my thoughts, she plucked a book from the shelf beside the bed and handed it to me. It was a children's illustrated Bible. 'I don't think she'll be needing that, Mum,' she said.

'No, you're right,' I said, grimacing. 'Help me scout around and see if there's anything else we should move, would you, Ems?'

Emily nodded, kneeling in front of the bookshelf and running her index finger along the spines. 'There's a Muslim girl in my class, Mum. Aisha. She has, like, a special room to go and pray in. She's never allowed to skip prayers *and* she sometimes has to miss lessons to do it. Muslims have to wash their feet and everything before they pray.'

'And they're not allowed to fart,' Jamie piped up from his bedroom. 'Or they have to start all over again.'

Emily rolled her eyes. 'He's so gross, Mum.'

I could hear Jamie snickering to himself. Leaning out of the bedroom door, I called down the hall, 'How did you discover that then, Jamie?'

'Rohan told me. But I'm not sure if he was lying or not.'

Typical of my son to retain that particular nugget of information, I thought, although, to be fair, it was the sort of thing that captured the imagination of 13-year-old boys. There were actually quite a few Muslim pupils at Jamie's school so he shouldn't have been too ignorant about the faith. In fact, one of his friends from primary school had been Muslim. I remembered Jamie going to Tariq's house for tea one day after school. He must have been about six or seven at the time and the little rascal had cleared his plate, yet at home he had been such a picky eater. When I asked Tariq's mother how she managed such a feat she volunteered to show me how to cook chicken shorba with keema naans. I had taken her up on the offer, so at least I was confident about cooking a traditional meal for Zadie, although it was probably gross stereotyping to assume that she even liked spicy food.

Emily broke my chain of thought, handing me another pile of books – the Harry Potter series. 'Goodness, all of these have to go as well?'

'Honestly, Mum. Muslims are *so* strict. There's no way Zadie would be allowed to read these. Aisha is the only one in our class who hasn't seen the films. I feel really sorry for her.'

'Hmmm,' I said, my mind racing again. Emily had sparked a memory of myself as a child, coming home from school in an excited state and telling my parents about our assembly that morning. It had been close to the end of term and teachers had arranged for a magician to come into our school to perform a show for the children. My father was furious and complained to the school; to him, magic meant sorcery – a violation of the first of the Ten Commandments. He feared that through magic there was a risk of me being seduced by the occult. After that, whenever a story or topic involving magic came up, my teacher would ask me to leave the room. I think my classmates felt sorry for me at the time. I bit my lip. 'Strict isn't necessarily bad, Ems,' I said, bending to rest the heavy pile of books on the carpet in the hall. 'Look at your grandfather and how devout he is, but we weren't

unhappy growing up.’ I fanned my fingers and swept my hands through the air in front of me. ‘And see how I’ve turned out?’

Emily curled her upper lip. ‘Exactly. See what I mean?’

I gave her a mock stern look.

She grinned. ‘I’m just *so* glad we’re not that religious, Mum. It’d be awful.’

‘I think you’re generalising, Em. Faith can be a positive thing. And Muslims are no different to anyone else. All religions have their extremists but on the whole people just want get on with their lives and do the best they can, don’t they?’

She looked doubtful. ‘I don’t see how anyone can be happy with all those rules. I bet that’s why Zadie ran away. Her parents were wa-a-ay too strict.’

‘We don’t know that at all,’ I said, shaking the pillows and moving the duvet so I could get on with making up the bed. ‘We hardly know anything about them.’ But what Emily had said really got me thinking. So many questions ran through my mind. Had Zadie rebelled against her faith, or would she still need a special area for prayers? And what about visiting the mosque? I wondered as I manoeuvred the pillows into freshly washed cases. If Zadie wanted to worship in a particular way, then, as a foster carer, I had to honour her beliefs and provide her with whatever she needed to maintain her faith.

Still, whatever hurdles we had to get over, a feeling of excitement ran through me. It wasn’t unusual for me to feel apprehensive before meeting a new, temporary member of the family. If I was to take the best care I could of Zadie then there was certainly a lot I had to learn. I got the sense that this placement would open my eyes to a way of life very different to my own but I was looking forward to the challenge. I resolved to do a bit of research on Google if I had time before Zadie arrived. But preparing the room had to be a priority.

Both Emily and I loved the build-up of getting everything ready, and making the child’s own special place look welcoming was a practical way of doing something positive for them before they’d even arrived. Usually I would make an effort to find out what interested the child, tailoring the room so that it was unique to them, although often that wasn’t possible.

Several years earlier I had been expecting a boy of 10 who was coming into care as an emergency. During the initial phone call with his social worker, she had mentioned that Chester had a passion for motorbikes. With an hour to spare before he arrived I dashed to the shops and bought some models to put on the shelf in his room. When I took him up to show him where he’d be sleeping he got emotional, burying his face in his sleeve. I assumed he was upset because he was missing home so I left him upstairs to have a few words with his social worker. When she came down she told me that Chester was overcome at the sight of the motorbikes. He told me later, ‘It was the nicest thing anyone ever done for me, Rosie.’

I think Chester was moved more by the fact that I had taken the time to think about what might be important to him rather than the items themselves. It really is amazing how something so seemingly insignificant can mean so much to someone when they come from a place where kind gestures are in short supply. Since then I’ve always tried to bear Chester’s reaction in mind.

When the room was ready I went downstairs and logged on to the computer to see what I could find out about Islam. My mind strayed to a hot day months earlier when I went to watch one of Jamie’s cricket matches. I remembered being surprised to see that some of the school’s star cricketers were watching the match from the sidelines. One of the parents told me that some of the boys weren’t allowed to join in as it was Ramadan and they couldn’t drink anything, not even water. Even medicine wasn’t permitted. Before that day I had assumed that fasting during the month of Ramadan meant not eating solid food. I never imagined that fluids were to be avoided as well. To be honest, I didn’t even know when Ramadan would next fall, although I knew it migrated throughout the seasons; something to do with the Islamic calendar.

Wikipedia offered the most condensed information so I printed the pages and took them to the living room to read. Emily was already on the sofa. ‘I wonder if Zaidie will have her face covered, Mum.’

‘Yes, I was thinking the same. What does Aisha wear to school?’

‘One of those headscarves, but it has to be in school colours.’

From what I had just read, it seemed that Muslims placed great store in the concept of ‘haya’ – dressing decently and wearing nothing that accentuates the body shape. I couldn’t help but wonder what Muslims must think of some of the local girls tumbling out of nightclubs at the end of a Saturday-night session. I supposed Emily might have been right about Zaidie rebelling against her own culture. It was possible she would turn up dressed in T-shirt and jeans. What seemed almost certain was that she would only eat halal meat, but I knew that was easy enough to get hold of these days; I had seen a whole section in our local supermarket. The rest would depend, I guessed, on just how strict the family were. I scanned my eyes over the print-out, my stomach rolling with anticipation.

‘A car’s just pulled up outside, Mum,’ Jamie shouted as he hurtled down the stairs.

## Chapter 2

‘Hello, my lovely. Come on in.’

Zadie was smaller than I had expected. Standing aside to welcome her into our hall, I remember her height being the first thing I registered about her. Strange, really, considering that she was cloaked from head to foot in a black robe. But she barely reached my shoulders and I was surprised because, being only a few inches over five foot myself, I’m usually dwarfed by anyone over the age of 10.

‘Peggy Fletcher,’ Zadie’s social worker said as she followed Zadie in. A heavy-set woman in her fifties, she released a light musky scent into the air as she removed her coat, her chest reacting to the effort with a small wheeze. She was wearing a navy-coloured blouse with three-quarter length sleeves that pinched into her flesh, leaving red welts behind on her skin. Her short grey hair and scrubbed, make-up-free skin gave her a stern appearance.

‘Nice to meet you, Peggy,’ I said, momentarily flummoxed. I had planned to shake her hand but instead of reciprocating she slipped her coat over my outstretched arm. For a second I swivelled on my foot, one way and then the other, not sure what to do with it. Peggy snatched the coat from me with a sigh, draping it over the newel post at the bottom of the stairs. ‘There. Now, shall we go through?’ she asked, pushing the glasses she wore further up her nose and gesturing down the hall.

‘Yes, please do,’ I said, already appreciating Peggy’s directness. As I followed them I could hear the social worker’s loud breaths, raspy as if she’d jogged all the way from the council offices. When we reached the living room I gestured for them both to take a seat, certain that Peggy probably would have made herself comfortable, invited or not. Zadie hovered in the doorway, one shoulder hitched higher than the other to support a rucksack. Her head was lowered, her slender hands running over and over themselves as if she was trying to rub Vaseline into her fingers. I noticed that the headscarf fell behind her at an angle from the top of her head and guessed that she must have long hair, caught up in a large bun.

‘I’ve heard your name before, Rosie, doing the rounds,’ Peggy said as she leaned back into the sofa, her face red with exertion. ‘It’s nice to finally put a face to a name.’

‘Oh dear, sounds ominous,’ I said. It was a predictable reply but my mind was distracted by Zadie. She looked so uncomfortable, still standing at the threshold of the room. ‘Would you like to sit down, Zadie?’

She dipped her head politely, obediently taking a seat about a foot away from Peggy on the sofa, though she perched on the very edge nearest the door. I got the sense that she wanted to be as far removed from us as possible. Close up I could see signs of wear on her robe. It was badly creased, tatty at the hem and hung shapelessly from her shoulders. The cardigan she wore, threads trailing from the cuffs, was missing a couple of buttons. She sat with one foot tucked neatly behind the other, her dark hands resting in a pile on her lap. There were sores all over them but it was difficult to get a good look because she kept tugging at her sleeves with her fingers, pulling them down over her knuckles. It was as if she were trying to make herself disappear.

‘Not at all,’ Peggy said after a pause.

I smiled appreciatively, although I knew that generally I was considered to be what local authorities needed their carers to be – a safe pair of hands. ‘Would either of you like a drink before we get started?’ I asked, wondering for a moment where Emily and Jamie had got to. They were nowhere to be seen. They hadn’t passed us in the hallway so I guessed they must have slipped quietly into the garden. It was unusual for them not to crowd around a new house guest, but they were getting older now and probably sensitive enough to make themselves scarce.

‘Nothing for me, thanks. I’ve done nothing but drink tea and make phone calls today. I’ll be up all night if I have anything else.’ Peggy tucked her fingers into her armpits as she spoke, as if trying to warm them, her palms at rest on the top of her breasts. I got the feeling this was not a woman to

be messed with and found myself hoping that Peggy would be more supportive than Phoebe's social worker had been. Back then I had felt as if I was a lone voice, battling against the system as well as Phoebe's traumatic past, something that happened with dispiriting regularity.

'Zadie?'

She looked up with a start and shook her head. It was the first time I managed to get a good look at her face. Even without the softening effect of hair, Zadie was clearly very pretty. Her lips were full, although cracked and sore. The horizontal line of the hijab slicing across her forehead seemed to accentuate the large molasses eyes below, her dark-olive, unblemished skin luminous against the harsh black material. With delicate features and thick dark eyelashes, it was the perfect face for framing with a headscarf.

I'm not sure why but I was hugely relieved to see that most of her face was visible. I think I would have been a little intimidated by the anonymity of a face veil. In the first few weeks of a new placement there are many hurdles a foster carer has to overcome in order to gain trust from the troubled child. Children that have been hurt often erect invisible walls around themselves as a defence mechanism. Sometimes it can take weeks to dismantle the barriers and 'reach' the child behind and I think that a face veil would have been yet another stumbling block to overcome.

I certainly didn't need to be a body-language expert to work out that Zadie was nervous; her knees were bobbing up and down and, though the nails on her restless fingers were already short, she kept raising them to her lips, nibbling at the edges. But she may as well have been wearing a full veil for all the clues her expression gave away. It was impenetrable, neither happy nor sad, just devoid of all trace of emotion. I guessed she was probably completely drained.

'So, Zadie. You've had a bit of a day of it, haven't you?'

She nodded, her large brown eyes meeting mine for a brief moment before she cast them downwards. My eyes followed hers and for the first time I noticed that the Wiki pages were still on the floor where I'd left them before answering the door. I crossed the room and sat down in the armchair, letting a moment pass before discreetly nudging the papers underneath.

Peggy swung her bulky knees around to face the teenager. 'Yes, she's been a very silly girl, haven't you?' The social worker peered over the top of her glasses and spoke in a loud, patronisingly slow voice. 'Hmmm? Dangerous, wasn't it? Wandering around the town at that time of night.'

Zadie nodded her head in avid agreement, her face no longer a blank canvas but dotted with blotches of red. My heart went out to her and I felt the muscles in my jaw clenching. Besides feeling sorry for Zadie, I was irked by the way Peggy was talking to her, as if she had learning difficulties or something.

'Never mind. I've got a comfortable bed ready for you,' I said gently. 'I'll show you in a minute.'

Zadie nodded and gave me a grateful half-smile before looking away.

Peggy turned around again, puffing with the effort of shifting in her seat. 'Anything could have happened,' she said, her voice pitched a little softer as she spoke to me. 'Probably a lad involved somewhere along the line, I shouldn't wonder.'

Zadie glanced at me then hung her head to the floor, her shoulders hunched over.

'Ran away from home two days ago, so she says. Slept around the back of Cannons Leisure Centre on the Sunday night. And then in a shop doorway last night, didn't you?' she shouted at Zadie. 'Thank goodness the police found her before ...' Peggy sighed and closed her eyes. 'Well, doesn't bear thinking about, does it?'

The social worker then lowered her voice to a normal level, though I got the feeling she would rate it as a whisper. 'The family didn't report her missing but I spoke to the father on the telephone this afternoon. He feels that Zadie has brought shame on the family by running away ...'

Zadie blinked at that body blow, her eyes flitting between the ceiling, the fireplace and the window. A chink appeared in her expression and I got the feeling that tears weren't too far away. It was an insensitive thing to say in front of her and I felt my hackles rising again. Children are drawn

to their birth parents with inexorable power, no matter what wrong has been done to them, and most, whatever appearances may suggest, genuinely want to please their mother and father. Being a social worker, Peggy must have known that her words were going to hurt.

‘So you’re not going to do anything like that again, are you, hmmm?’ Peggy spoke loudly again, as some people do to foreigners. It then struck me that Zadie might not actually be able to understand or speak English very well.

Zadie shook her head again, her face covered in blotches. My heart went out to her. I scanned my brain, trying to come up with a simple, neutral question to help her relax. Settling back into the cushions, I asked, ‘So, which school do you go to, honey?’

‘I don’t ...’ she whispered, the blotches spreading to her neck. Her voice was nasal and thick with a cold, her eyes red rimmed. It wasn’t unusual for children to arrive in foster care unwell; prolonged abuse or neglect wears down resistance, leaving youngsters susceptible to all sorts of bugs and viruses.

‘Oh.’ I looked from Zadie to Peggy and back again. ‘No?’

‘I don’t know anything about the family,’ Peggy jumped in, ‘but I do know that many Muslim parents worry about lax discipline in schools and the effect on their daughters. It’s not unusual for Muslim girls to miss out on secondary education, even in this day ...’

‘I used to go,’ Zadie cut in. I sensed a defensive tone, as if she were sticking up for her parents. ‘Until a few months ago, but Papa felt that it wasn’t ...’ Her voice grew quieter with each word that she spoke, as if she’d run out of confidence before she could complete the sentence. Though her voice was barely audible, she spoke so eloquently that it really was ridiculous the way Peggy had raised her voice.

I nodded several times, trying to encourage Zadie to continue.

‘The parents from our local mosque drew up plans for a free school. Papa would have allowed me to go there but approval for the application has been delayed and ...’

I cocked my ear, straining to make out what she was saying. Both Peggy and I watched, waiting to see if she was going to say any more. When she didn’t I smiled and nodded. ‘Shall I find a school place for Zadie while she’s here?’ I asked quickly. The social worker was still staring at Zadie and I imagined her to be the sort of person to bellow something like: *Speak up, girl! No need to be bashful!* Besides, it seemed a shame to me. Zadie was clearly an intelligent girl. For her to miss out on an education at such a critical age didn’t seem right at all.

I noticed a frisson of interest from Zadie. Her head turned sharply towards me, a flicker of hope stirring in her smoky eyes. Peggy’s jaw dropped as if she was shocked to the core by my question. There was a pause and then she recovered, shaking her head. ‘Oh no, Rosie, I don’t think so. Not just at the minute.’ She lowered her voice again, leaning towards me. ‘Things are a little sensitive. We have to tread carefully on this one. The father is not best pleased about her staying with a non-Muslim family as it is. Best not to rock the boat until we know where we stand.’

I prickled. If Zadie was in ‘care’, then we should be looking after her best interests, but I realised it was probably far too early to worry about it. She could be back with her parents before the end of the week, I thought. It seemed that Peggy actually had no idea why Zadie was too frightened to go home.

Peggy echoed my own thoughts, saying, ‘We need to gather more information before we make a decision.’

‘You might only be here for a few days, Zadie,’ Peggy said in another hammering tone. ‘We’ll get you back with your family soon, mmm? Would you like that?’

Zadie’s jaw tensed minutely, enough to tell me that home was the last place she wanted to be. The subtle change in the teenager’s expression seemed to drift right over Peggy’s head. ‘Good,’ she nodded, tapping the papers on her knee. ‘We’ll see what can be arranged. Meantime, do you know much about Zadie’s culture, Rosie?’

I nodded. ‘A little,’ I said, unconsciously slipping my feet back to the rim of the chair where the printout from Wikipedia was nestling. ‘Though I’m sure you won’t mind filling me in on what I need to know, will you, Zadie?’ I asked, smiling.

Again she nodded, whispering a polite, ‘Yes.’

Peggy flexed one of her stout legs and groaned, rubbing the knee. There were red welts on each ankle to match those on her forearms, where her black socks had cut into her skin. ‘I’m so swollen after sitting down all day,’ she groaned, hoicking one of her legs up with cupped hands and resting her ankle on the knee of the other one. ‘I called around all the specialist fostering agencies but every placement was filled. As you probably know, Rosie, we prefer a cultural match if at all possible, but there’s a massive shortage of Muslim fostering families at the moment,’ she said, her breathing jagged as she rubbed away at her ankle. ‘There’s been such a surge of Muslim children being taken into care but nothing like the same number of specialist carers coming forward.’

At that moment Emily and Jamie walked in from the garden, probably unable to contain their curiosity any longer. ‘Ah, here they are. Emily, Jamie, this is Zadie.’

Zadie forced a stiff smile then lowered her head, shrinking back further into the sofa.

‘Hi, Zadie,’ they chorused, Emily lifting her hand in a little wave.

‘And this is Peggy.’

Peggy’s jaw dropped again as if she was shocked by their appearance. Seconds later it was back in its usual position. Her default expression seemed to be a scowl while her brain assimilated a response giving the impression that she was furious with what she had just seen or heard. ‘These yours, are they?’ she asked. The social worker had a way of depersonalising everything, reducing everyone to inanimate objects.

‘Yes. Emily is 16 and Jamie’s just turned 13.’

‘How do you feel about having someone else about the place, taking up your mum’s time?’ Peggy asked, talking in the same loud voice she used with Zadie. Emily raised her eyebrows. Jamie glanced sideways at Zadie. I think they both felt as sorry for her as I did, although I didn’t think for a second that Peggy meant to sound callous. There was a kindness in her slightly hooded eyes that remained while the rest of her face contorted; she was probably just one of those people who spoke her mind before processing it fully, I thought. Still, it was unlikely to make Zadie feel any better about staying with us. One thing I realised, though, was that Peggy was using the same tone with my own children as she had with Zadie. It must have been her way of communicating with all youngsters. Many of the social workers I had met were awkward around children, strange considering their line of work, although there were exceptions. My supervising social worker, Des, for example, was amazing with youngsters, immediately putting them at ease. But then again he was comfortable in his own skin and I think children responded well to his natural warmth.

‘It’s cool,’ Emily said, bestowing a shy smile. ‘Want to come and see your room, Zadie?’

Peggy frowned, her lips stretching to a thin line. ‘That’s a good idea,’ she boomed after a moment, her tone once again incongruous with the look on her face. I had a feeling it was a habit that would take a bit of time to get used to. With a hand at the side of each hip she pushed down on the sofa and rocked forwards, once, twice, until she had enough momentum to heave herself up. ‘Lead the way, young lady,’ she told Emily, shooing her along with her hand. ‘Come on, Zadie. We’ll take a wander to check your room and then I’ll be off.’

Jamie flopped himself down on the sofa while Peggy bundled Emily and Zadie into the hall, her leg creaking rebelliously as she wheezed along. Emily led the way upstairs. Zadie followed in silence, her robe billowing outwards so that the hem brushed each stair as she climbed. Peggy huffed her way up next, chivvying Zadie along with impatient little noises in her throat. Each stair groaned under the weight of her heavy footfall.

In the room, Peggy pulled the duvet back from the bed and pressed her flat palm all over the mattress, a standard check that all social workers are supposed to carry out each time they visit the foster home. It was a routine put in place ever since it had come to light that some rogue foster carers had put children down to sleep on sheets of MDF, with no mattress or even padding on top.

‘Everything OK with the room, Peggy?’ I asked.

The social worker straightened and glanced around, her mouth contorted. Emily looked crestfallen. ‘It’s absolutely lovely, Rosie,’ she said after a moment, her face softening into a smile. ‘Do you like it?’ she boomed, turning to Zadie.

Zadie nodded, rewarding Emily with her own shy smile.

Leaving Zadie to settle in and unpack the few items she had in her rucksack, I went back downstairs with Peggy to go through the placement agreement. Half an hour later, as I said goodbye to the social worker, I was already of the opinion that Zadie had ran away because she was at ‘that age’ and was testing the boundaries, perhaps resenting the strict rules her parents had in place at home. Having to leave school was probably the final straw, I thought. In my head I had it all worked out.

But, as often happens when fostering, my initial assumptions couldn’t have been more wrong.

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