



WEB OF LIES

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London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2022

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2748-3

Typeset in 11.5/17 pt Sabon LT Pro by
Typo•glyphix, Burton-on-Trent, DE14 3HE

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Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

PROLOGUE

There is a myth that children, particularly teenagers, do not listen to their parents. It's as if a hidden switch trips at the age of thirteen barring all words emanating from parents, teachers and any other responsible adult. But this contention can be flawed.

Listening children exist. Those who only appear not to hear. Those who do hear, and store up what has been said for future reference and use.

Those who have an agenda . . . Those who have problems in need of solutions.

Mumtaz Hakim had grown up with boys like Habib Farooqi. Small, owlish behind his thick glasses, clever. He was fifteen, she'd been told, and wanted to go to medical school. Lee, when she'd informed him about the kid, had

given her a look which had seemed to say ‘Asian boy wants to go to medical school – so far, so clichéd.’ But Habib’s parents were Mumtaz’s parents’ neighbours and her dad, in particular, would not have been denied.

He’d told her, ‘The boy is good. I don’t know exactly what he’s done, but he and his friend say they will only speak to you. It could be something and nothing.’

Had the private investigation organisation for which Mumtaz worked, The Arnold Agency, not been hard up for work, she would have told her baba that she didn’t have time. But, after a summer of too much work, they’d now hit a fallow period.

Lee Arnold, her boss as well as her romantic partner, had said, ‘But we can’t charge a fifteen-year-old kid! Where’s the money in it?’

There was none. But with a caseload that contained nothing but process serving – delivering court documents to defendants – for the foreseeable future, Mumtaz was bored.

As she looked at Habib and his friend Lawrence, she couldn’t actually see a crime of the century situation developing, but she was prepared to hear the kids out.

She said, ‘Start at the beginning. Tell me everything. If you don’t, I won’t be able to help you. Let’s start with the cream. Why did you make it? Was it to make money for something specific?’

The boys, one small for his age, blinking behind his specs, the other a lanky white kid with spots, looked at each other. Then the white boy said, ‘It’s all my fault. Habib was just trying to help me out because I’m a fuck-up and he’s a mensch.’

Before her parents had emigrated to Spitalfields from what in the 1960s was then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Brick Lane and its environs had been a Jewish area for decades. People usually spoke Yiddish back then. In fact, it had seeped its way into the language of the local population who lived alongside the Jews. Had Lawrence Williams' family been one of those or had they been, at one time, Jews themselves? Whatever, it was unusual to hear the word 'mensch', meaning good friend, on the lips of one so young.

'Tell me about it anyway,' Mumtaz said. 'I won't tell anyone unless you give me permission.'

'You won't tell his dad,' Lawrence or 'Loz' said, nodding his head towards Habib.

'No.'

Ali Riza Farooqi was a respected local pharmacist. Not known for anything like bad temper or rudeness, as far as Mumtaz knew he was a devoted husband and doting father to his children Iqra and Habib. Her baba was always going on about how those kids were spoilt.

She saw Loz gulp and then he said, 'Kym told me she was on the Pill, but she weren't.'

Mumtaz didn't know what she'd expected the boys to say about why they'd suddenly taken to what had been basically snake oil salesmanship, but this had not been amongst the options she'd considered.

'Kym?'

'Fam with benefits, weren't it,' he said.

Habib translated. 'Loz was going out with Kym. She's a girl at our school.'

‘OK, and . . .’

‘She says she’s pregnant,’ Loz said. ‘She’s sixteen but she says it’s mine and she wants this phone and . . .’

Habib said, ‘She told him if he doesn’t get her the new Samsun’ Galaxy, she’ll tell her dad.’

Mumtaz, at thirty-seven and with one marriage already behind her, wasn’t easily shocked, but she hadn’t been expecting something like this. The boys had apparently been selling a home-made pain control cream called capsaicin. Used by a lot of elderly people to counteract arthritic pain, it had been in short supply since September. Habib’s father had apparently sounded off to all his customers about it. He was very sorry, but there was a supply issue and he just could not get hold of it. Habib had listened to this for some time before he’d actively sought out the recipe for a home-made version of the cream online. It had taken Loz’s ‘problem’ to spur him into action.

‘Kym’s dad’s a cage fighter,’ Loz explained.

The only thing Mumtaz knew about cage fighters was that they fought, bare knuckle, in cages and that one of media star Katie Price’s many husbands had been one. Loz was probably right to be scared. If indeed Kym was pregnant.

Remembering the little her father had told her about the boys, Mumtaz said, ‘This capsaicin cream, you sold it locally? Door to door? On the market . . .’

‘Door to door,’ Habib said. ‘But not locally. In the City.’

‘Lot of old people round here,’ Mumtaz began.

‘Who all know my dad!’

This was true.

‘We only charged a pound for it,’ Habib continued. ‘And I told them if they didn’t put it in the fridge it would go off.’

‘You told my baba you mixed cayenne pepper with ghee,’ Mumtaz said.

‘Yeah.’ Habib dropped his head.

‘Yeah.’ Loz followed suit.

‘So, OK . . .’ Mumtaz flicked the loose end of her headscarf away from her face and said, ‘And this you sold in the City, as in the Square Mile. Why? Very few people live there, it’s all offices.’

‘No it ain’t,’ Loz said. ‘Not where that kid lives.’

‘This is the boy . . .’

‘Covered in blood, yeah,’ Habib replied. ‘From his mouth I think, maybe. Certainly all down his front.’

ONE

‘Carter Court,’ Lee Arnold said, ‘looks like somewhere merchant bankers might live.’

Mumtaz, who was accustomed to Lee’s Cockney rhyming slang, said, ‘So, low opinion of the wealthy . . .’

‘Maybe, maybe not,’ he said. ‘I’ll give you not all wankers are merchant bankers, although a lot probably are.’

‘But all merchant bankers are?’ she asked.

He smiled. Swearing still sounded weird coming out of Mumtaz’s mouth. When he’d first employed her she’d been a timid, covered Asian widow lady with a psychology degree. Now, although the headscarf and the degree remained, she was a confident, sassy woman with a sharp sense of humour. He was also in love with her.

Lee was looking at Street View on his computer screen.

‘Just up Ludgate Hill from St Paul’s,’ Lee said. ‘Flats mainly.’

‘The boys said this kid was in a house. An old one.’

Lee frowned. ‘Most of the old places round there were flattened by bombs during the war,’ he said. ‘Must be one of the few that survived.’ He pointed to the screen. ‘Maybe that place beside that pub.’

Mumtaz peered at the screen. There was a tall, thin building next to a Victorian pub.

‘Mmm.’

Lee turned his chair round to face her. ‘So what happened?’ he said.

‘The boys say they had been to some of the flats and were surprised to find that most people were out,’ Mumtaz said.

‘You’d think they’d know . . .’

‘They’re both a bit other-worldly,’ Mumtaz interjected. ‘Even Loz. I think we imagine that kids living so close to the financial centre are clued in about it, but loads of them aren’t. I grew up there myself. The Square Mile might just as well have been on Mars.’

‘OK.’

‘They approached what they called an “old” blue door.’

Lee looked back at his screen again. The doorway to the house next to the pub was painted the shade of blue that always reminded him of laundrettes. Watery and faded.

‘And then . . .’

‘And then,’ she said, ‘before they could actually knock, they heard someone running.’

‘OK, running where?’

‘Towards the front door. He, as it turned out, opened the door, breathless and bleeding. Blond, so the boys said, sixteen-ish.’

‘Where was he bleeding from?’ Lee asked.

‘Not sure, but Loz reckoned he had a cut lip. There was blood on the jumper he was wearing.’

‘Kid with a nosebleed?’

‘I put that to them,’ Mumtaz said, ‘but the boys told me they didn’t think that was the case. This youngster, according to them, looked scared, he had bruises on his face and he said “help me”. There was an elderly man watching him from the other end of the hallway.’

‘Meaning what?’

‘Meaning, they thought at the time, that the man was preventing the boy from leaving. As they had approached the front door, he, the boy, was clearly on his way out. He saw Habib and Loz, it shocked him, and so he stopped.’

‘He didn’t push past them to get out?’

‘No, just stood, looking at them, asking for help.’

‘With this older bloke at the end of the corridor?’ Lee said.

‘Yes. Looking at them apparently. Then, according to the kids, the boy shut the front door in their faces, but he was shaking when he did it. And that was that.’

His granddad had laughed when Jordan had said his ambition was to join the City of London Police. He’d seen them at the Lord Mayor’s show when he was five and had wanted to be one until he actually joined in 2014.

His granddad had continued to laugh at him then and continued to laugh at him now.

‘Taller’n other coppers, the City Police always was, back in the old days,’ the old man said whenever he saw Jordan in his uniform. And Constable Jordan Whittington wasn’t tall. Not that his height was the point. What really worried his granddad was that his grandson was a black copper in a predominantly white city. Granddad Bert didn’t really ‘do’ the police and couldn’t understand why Jordan had wanted to become a copper. The boy’s parents, Bert’s son Derek and his girlfriend Gina, had been junkies and had subsequently been arrested by the police on numerous occasions. They had not been treated well, especially Gina, Jordan’s Afro-Caribbean mother. Just sick kids the both of them, Bert often felt. Poor kids.

A few months after Jordan’s birth, when they could no longer look after their child and feed their habits, Derek and Gina had put the child in his Moses basket on Granddad Bert’s doorstep in Bethnal Green. Then they’d run away, leaving their newborn with a pensioner with a dodgy leg.

Derek had been a junkie since he was in his twenties, and by the time Jordan was born, Gina was too. The old man had heard on the grapevine that his son had died by 1999, and none of Gina’s God-fearing West Indian relatives had heard from her in decades. For just shy of twenty-six years, it had been the old man and Jordan against the world. And Jordan wished that his crusty, arthritic old granddad was with him now.

Long, long ago, back in the mists of time, what was now

the City of London Police had been divided into ‘watches’ – the ‘Day Watch’ and the ‘Night Watch’. Patrolling either in the day or at night, the Watches sought to protect both the residents of the Square Mile and the financial institutions and legal Temples within its boundaries. They were not and had never been part of the Metropolitan Police and, as well as encompassing almost untold wealth within their patch, the City Police were also responsible for some key national monuments – like St Paul’s Cathedral.

That old copper’s friend, the Observant Drunk, had tipped them off in the early hours of that morning. On his unsteady way from his office Christmas Party in Hatton Garden to an assignation with a pole dancer called Minx at the Polo Bar on Bishopsgate, Ryan Faulks had noticed someone doing some late-night gardening in St Paul’s Churchyard. And because there was a police station just down Bishopsgate from the Polo Bar, Ryan had done his civic duty and reported it just before he met up with and paid for Minx to have a Harvey Wallbanger and a Full English. Two hours later, Jordan and an almost unconscious Ryan had been sent over to St Paul’s Churchyard to check it out. It was four in the morning by that time and Ryan wasn’t happy.

What they’d found had been grim beyond either of their imaginings.

‘So tell the coppers,’ Lee said.

They were both sitting on the steps of the iron staircase outside their office on Green Street, Upton Park so that Lee could have a fag.

‘The kids were trying to sell hooky arthritis cream,’ Mumtaz said.

Lee sighed. Then he said, ‘And this was the day before yesterday?’

‘Yes.’

‘So what can we do about it?’

‘Have a look,’ she said. ‘Find out who lives there and what they do. Find the boy and see whether he’s OK.’

Lee puffed. ‘What do the kids think was going on?’

‘They’re afraid the boy is being held against his will,’ she said.

‘What, in a sort of paedo kind of a way?’

She shrugged. ‘I don’t know. But Lee, if someone is brutalising this boy then it has to stop.’

‘Agreed, but we can’t just go stomping in there like the US Cavalry.’ He stood up. ‘Anyway, I have to get out to Romford.’

Process serving. Mumtaz had two herself; one in Barking and another just up the road from their office.

Before he left to go to Romford, Lee said, ‘I’ll have a think about those two kids of yours. See you back at the flat?’

She said that she would. Whether or not she’d stay the night, Mumtaz didn’t know. But if she stayed with Lee he always did the cooking, which was fine by her. Now that her stepdaughter Shazia was either at university or, when in London, staying with her boyfriend, Mumtaz rarely had either the need or the inclination to cook herself. Her own mother, a traditional Bangladeshi amma, was quite bewildered by the whole situation.

But then so, in many ways, was Mumtaz. Falling in love with Lee had come as a shock and she was still working out how that might or might not pan out in the future. For the moment things were on an even keel. They led fairly separate lives for much of the time, while her mother chose to believe that her daughter and her white boyfriend had an entirely platonic relationship. It wasn't ideal but it was way better than the abusive marriage she'd had before. Shazia's father, Ahmet Hakim, had been a violent drinker addicted to gambling and the company of gangsters. Now he was dead.

Mumtaz put Ahmet from her mind and got on with her day. What, she wondered, did Lee have in mind with regard to the two young boys from Spitalfields?

He'd seen that SOCO tent erected over outdoor crime scenes a few times during the course of his career, but Constable Jordan Whittington always felt cold whenever he saw one. There was usually a dead body underneath it and in this case, that was a certainty.

Ryan Faulks, the thirty-five-year-old Observant Drunk who had led Jordan to the scene in the early hours, had thrown up what must have been several pints of wine and at least half a bottle of vodka when Jordan had moved the pile of earth to one side and seen that hand. At first he had thought that it belonged to a doll.

But dolls were not pliant like that. Dolls didn't have bruised faces.

Dolls, unlike babies, never die.

* * *

‘The house where you saw the boy,’ Mumtaz asked, ‘was it next door to a pub called The Hobgoblin?’

Mumtaz had calculated it had to be lunchtime when she called Habib Farooqi on his mobile. He’d answered almost immediately.

Habib had thought for a moment when she’d mentioned the pub. Yes, he’d seen a pub, but what it had been called was another matter.

‘Was the front door of this house blue?’ she continued.

Another pause and then he said, ‘Yes. Are you going to look into it then, Mrs Hakim?’

She was. She knew she was. But would Lee be on board with her? And if he wasn’t, what then?

Eventually she said, ‘I’m not sure at the moment, Habib.’

‘Oh.’

‘But I’ll call you tomorrow morning and let you know without fail. Habib, do you know whether Loz’s girlfriend is really pregnant?’

‘She says she is,’ he said. ‘Why would she say that if she wasn’t?’

Mumtaz sighed. There had been a girl at her school who had told everyone she was pregnant when she hadn’t been. Diane something or other. She’d been going out with a boy called Jayden who had a stall in Spitalfields Market with his brother. They sold handbags, which had been part of the appeal. Nothing had ever come of Diane and Jayden’s brief affair, and word at the time had been that Diane hadn’t even got a fake Prada bag out of it. Mumtaz changed the subject.

‘Look, can you email me a list of things you remember about that boy and where he lived?’ she said.

‘Can’t we do it on WhatsApp?’ he asked. ‘I mean then I can, like, write things down when I think of them?’

He had a point, even though Mumtaz was loath to admit it. Shazia communicated almost exclusively via apps these days; Mumtaz wasn’t a fan. She decided to stick to her guns.

‘You’ve got my card so I’d prefer it if you emailed me,’ she said. ‘Just sit down for a few minutes and try to remember what you saw. Even better, do that with Loz – he may remember things that you don’t and vice versa.’

‘OK.’

But he didn’t sound pleased about it.

Tough.