

THE QUARRY

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The Errand

‘Have you been speaking to the police?’

Amina stood in the foyer of the station house, holding the phone a few centimetres from her ear to compensate for the shouting. Around her, uniformed police officers came and went. Others sat across from ashamed individuals, filling out wide charge sheets in carbon papered triplicate. To her left was a short concrete corridor of closed wooden doors, decorated with green paint and metal spittoons and signs that read ‘No Spitting on the Floors’. The whole place smelt of men's cigarette smoke and inaction.

‘I haven't had a chance to get to the police station yet.’ Who did this defence lawyer think he was, trying to extort money out of her?

Five minutes ago, Amina had stood feet apart, mouth open, shock melting into fiery anger as the female desk officer had explained Public Defence lawyers are salaried by the government and should not be charging individual fees. Amina had watched the policewoman remove a scrap of paper from under the counter, write ten numerals on it and slide it across the wooden bench. She had stepped back, taken out her mobile phone and called the number. She'd recognised the

corrupt lawyer's voice, the same one who'd contacted her at home, and greeted him with a calm edge of politeness.

'Tell me again, how much the fee is for the defence?' The scoundrel had been all business.

'Two thousand, and you need to get the money to me by Friday.'

'I can do that.'

Amina took a slow breath and allowed the evil fellow an extra second to believe the money was coming. 'Only, I have just heard the legal services your department provides are free, and in fact I should not have to pay you even one cent for what you are doing for my daughter. Is that correct?'

And then he was shouting. 'Have you been speaking to the police? Do not tell them I have asked you for any money or there will be trouble.'

'I haven't said anything to anyone.'

The police officer's eyes were averted down. She was dipping a long calligraphy brush into a glass gluepot, pasting forms together. Her lips were pursed lightly against a smile.

Time to seal the deal. 'So then, you won't be requiring any extra payment from me?'

'No.'

The lawyer ended the call.

Amina put her phone back in her handbag. Right. That was the legal fee attended to. She approached the desk officer again, holding the package of bread, dried fruit, nuts and clothing.

'I would like to see my daughter, Rahima Ibrahim.'

'Oh yes.' The officer looked through a thick logbook. 'I'm sorry but she has been moved from this station to the detention facility outside of town.'

'How do I get there?'

'Prisoners are not allowed visitors until they are convicted.'

'But I am her mother.'

'Not even family.'

'I was told to travel here so I could see my daughter.' She had never travelled in an airplane before. She needed the cabin attendant to help her with her seatbelt.

‘If she were still here, I would allow you to see her. But un-convicted criminals are not allowed visitors at the main complex.’

One thing on the phone and another when you turn up in person. Who was to know these sorts of rules existed? Amina indicated the goods at her feet. ‘Can I get this package to her?’

The desk officer leaned over the bench. ‘Let me check the contents.’

Amina followed her to the wooden desks at the back of the room and lifted the bundle onto the desktop. ‘It's just food and clothes.’

‘I need to check them.’ The police officer untied the string and unwrapped the brown paper. She removed each piece of clothing and bag of food and arranged them on the desktop. Then she reordered everything into two piles. The clothes were placed in a neat pile back on the brown wrapping paper. The fruit, nuts and bread were left where they were on the table.

‘I can make sure the clothes get to her, but she is not allowed to receive food.’

‘I was told she wasn't eating the prison food.’

‘Prisoners on remand are not permitted to receive food parcels.’

No food. No calls. No visits. No mothers. Amina's eyes were hot. This middle-aged police officer would also be a mother to someone, of course she would be. Amina collected up the unwanted flatbread, nuts and dried fruit into a pile. The godless and the believer share the same struggle in this world, but the believer knows greater suffering. They are left to wonder why.

The policewoman wrapped and retied the smaller package of clothes using the same paper and string and set it aside on a metal filing cabinet. She looked directly at Amina.

‘Would you like to know the circumstances of your daughter's arrest?’

‘Tell me whatever you can.’ The only information so far was from that crooked defence lawyer.

‘Wait a minute.’

Amina watched her disappear down the green corridor and into one of the smoky rooms, heels clicking on the bare floor. She can't be planning to catch any criminals in those shoes. Amina looked down at her own feet. She was also wearing good shoes, the sort saved for an afternoon at the department store, fondling

unaffordable clothes and bags. Shoes meant for temporary incursions into the better worlds of other people.

The police officer clicked her way back out of the corridor, carrying a brown envelope. At the desk she laid it down and unwound the string from the sealing eyelet. Opening the flap, she pushed her fingers into the envelope and brought out a pile of thin papers covered in blue handwritten characters and inked red with official stampings.

While she read silently through the docket, Amina strained to pick out a few things from the upside-down scratchings.

...7.35am train...

...520g...

...female restaurant owner...

The officer looked up. Amina snapped back in her chair. Was she too obvious in leaning forward? God. Now was the time to look as complacent as possible. This could be her only chance to hear the charges.

‘Rahima was stopped when alighting at the city station. Her bag was searched and almost 300g of heroin was found. Although Rahima had stated it was not her bag, she admitted she had been given money by the owner of the restaurant to travel with the bag. When officers went to find the restaurant owner, she had left town.’

The restaurant owner? Wearing her headscarf like a true Muslim and on the side running a heroin business! No doubt the whole time saying God this and God that. God on her tongue but not in her heart. Amina wanted to pull off the restaurant owner's headscarf and wave it in the air yelling, ‘Shame!’ She had no doubt disappeared back into her home village by now. The local police officers would either be her old schoolmates, or her brother - one of the village elders.

The desk officer packed the case details back into the envelope and rewound the sealing string. Amina was shaking, watching her work. When she looked up the policewoman was taking in the details of her appearance. Headscarf, gold earrings, flowered shirt, diamante brooch in the shape of a pomegranate flower, three-quarter length skirt, stockings and department store shoes.

‘You've never been to this city before, have you?’

‘No.’

‘From here, go straight back to your hotel room. Tonight, don't go walking anywhere. Keep inside the hotel and eat at the hotel restaurant. In the morning, get a taxi from the hotel straight to the train station. It is not safe in this city for people like you. You need to get back home as soon as possible.’