

Prologue

Neda slammed her heel on the brake pedal, swore as the gear-stick jammed. A police car was parked up ahead, two officers flagging down drivers.

She couldn't be pulled over.

No fucking way.

Neda gripped the gear-stick, rammed it into first, the stick hitting her thigh. As she u-turned in the middle of the road, Neda felt the bullet in her leg ache. A psychological flash of memory. Being shot by the police in a car chase, thirteen years earlier in Belgrade. It wasn't going to happen again.

Horns blared as Neda swerved between cars and screeched off in the opposite direction. She snatched a glance in the mirror. The police officers were looking her way, one of them on his radio and the other moving towards the police car.

Neda took the first turning, no clue which streets she was taking as she sped left, then right into the city centre. She spied a side street, hit the kerb as she turned and jolted to a halt behind a fence. Checking the mirror, Neda couldn't see any police cars on her trail, but a distant siren made her jump into action.

She leapt out of the old Fiat, rooted around the boot and found a screwdriver. It wouldn't fit the registration plate screws, so she jammed it behind the plate and yanked hard. In case the police had seen the registration number, she needed to remove the plate. But the sirens were getting closer.

Fuck it.

Neda dropped the screwdriver, grabbed her handbag from the passenger seat and ran. Instantly tripping over on the kerb, Neda fell to the ground. Heels were no good for running. She took off her shoes and ran barefoot until she reached the main road.

Taking a breath, Neda slipped her heels back on. Her denim skirt was hitched up from the fall, a graze on her leg. She pulled down the shirt and checked herself on her phone camera, adjusted her wig. Her eyes were wide. A combination of panic and coke. But she still looked pretty hot.

Handbag over her shoulder, Neda walked along the main road towards the lake. If the police were still there, she wouldn't be recognised. Besides, there was nothing to connect her to the car, so they had no reason to stop her. But the police were gone. Had they driven after her? Or maybe it was nothing to do with her.

Walking tall, Neda wanted to laugh. Maybe she'd been overly paranoid. Or maybe she'd been ultra-alert. Either way, she was alright. A bit sweaty and the car had been dumped but she couldn't afford to run it anyway. Plus the bumper was falling off and the tyres were worn out. So it was better to get rid of it. Seeing the police checkpoint had been a good wake up call.

Fascist Austrian police. Why couldn't they just leave her be? Fuck them, she didn't need the car, though it was a long walk from the city centre to the lake, especially in heels. A car horn beeped, making Neda jump.

It was just two guys leering at her as they drove past. Neda gave them the middle finger. Couldn't a woman walk on her own without being hassled? It was 2016 for fuck's sake. Though at least it showed that at 36, she still had it. She walked past a brothel, housed between a BMW showroom and Bila supermarket. Maybe the two men thought she was a prostitute. Half the Austrian women were because it was all legal.

The lake came into view and Neda breathed a sigh of relief as she headed towards the former guesthouse. It was impossible not to remember when they had owned the whole building instead of renting one of the converted apartments. Before her idiot of an ex-husband fucked things up. The place still looked like from a fairy-tale, but these days represented a living nightmare.

Neda opened the door and walked into the apartment. Dejan stood in his bedroom doorway. He wasn't thirteen yet, but he was a big boy. Her boy. Without him, life wouldn't be worth it.

Dejan frowned, said:

'Where's the food?'

Neda looked down at her empty hands. In her rush to escape, she'd left the bags of shopping in the car.

'Shit, I forgot the shopping.'

'How could you forget it?'

'You don't understand what happened. I had to leave quickly.'

'Leave where?'

'The car.'

'So where's the car?'

'Don't ask too many questions.'

'So there's nothing to eat?'

'I'll make something.'

'Eggs again?'

'You need to eat less anyway.'

'You can't even buy food without making a problem.'

'If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have any food.'

'You always mess things up – you're an idiot!'

'Idiot? Don't ever call me that again you little shit!'

'You are an idiot. And you look ugly in that wig.'

Neda swiped off the wig and threw it at Dejan as he stormed into his room, slamming the door behind him. Neda didn't mind the argument. It was normal behaviour between a mother and son. Domestic reality was better than being chased by the police – real or imagined. Neda

sat in the kitchen. She needed a cigarette. And a drink. Opening her handbag, she found half a packet of Marlboros and a bottle of white with a third left.

She gulped the wine from the bottle and lit up a cigarette. Relaxed, Neda opened the fridge. There weren't only eggs. There were also two red peppers. She'd make scrambled eggs with fried red peppers. True Serbian food. She'd show her son that she wasn't a shit mother.

Feeling nostalgic, Neda found a YouTube video of Ceca on her mobile, turned up the volume as she cracked eggs into a bowl. Neda heard Dejan bang on his door. She didn't care and sang along with Ceca.

'Mama!'

Neda turned to see Dejan standing in the hallway. She blew him a kiss. Her son rolled his eyes as he opened the front door, Neda realising that it was someone else knocking, not Dejan. The world slowed as Dejan turned to his mum. She saw him mouth the words:

'Sorry mama.'

A man in a suit strode into the flat brandishing a police inspector ID. Over Ceca's voice, the inspector said:

'Frau Panić, you are under arrest.'

The inspector held up a document, said:

'And this is a warrant to search the premises.'

Neda froze as one police officer after another piled into the apartment, a sniffer dog lead in at the rear. This wasn't about her driving without a licence. It was the past coming back to fuck up her life more than she could imagine.