

Where You Need to Be

The first snowflakes of the season flutter in an updraught like angels performing a silent dance. Twenty-seven years, and the sight of falling snow still mesmerises me. I pull my coat tight around me, check my watch, and glance up the deserted street towards Tavistock Gardens. 4:34 a.m. If there is any truth to the legend, a bus should arrive in precisely one minute.

The humble drone of an engine fractures the stillness as an antique bus rounds the corner—on time—and stops alongside me. Doors hiss open.

‘Where to?’ the driver asks.

I’ve rehearsed the requisite response a hundred times in as many inflexions. ‘Where I need to be,’ I say.

He smiles and nods approvingly. ‘I’m Sal. Hop on.’

I’m chary of boarding an empty bus with a complete stranger, but Sal has a mature Pierce Brosnan vibe. *Affable. Gentle. Trustworthy.* So I shove my apprehensions aside and take the priority seat nearest the door where I can keep a vigilant eye on this man I’m entrusting with my life.

Sal watches me in his mirrors as we travel through Bloomsbury in silence.

‘Did you wait long, miss?’ he asks after we turn onto Oxford Street.

‘Not long,’ I say. ‘Please. Call me Lamina.’

‘Beautiful name. What’s its origin?’

‘Afghanistan. My family immigrated here when I was eight.’

‘How wonderful,’ he says. ‘What do you do, Lamina?’

‘I’m a solicitor for Netflix. Acquisitions and Contracts.’

‘You must make your parents proud.’

‘Yes, I guess,’ I answer, but dad’s most recent remarks resonate in my mind. *‘I didn’t risk everything and bring you to this country so you could deliver frivolity to a society already consumed by rubbish. You’re a brilliant solicitor, Lamina. Put your skills to better use.’*

‘You married? Children?’

‘Neither,’ I say. ‘Not by choice.’

‘Tell me, Lamina. Are you happy?’ Sal asks.

I gaze into his eyes reflected in the rearview mirror. ‘Would I be here if I were?’

‘Fair point.’

Several wordless minutes pass.

‘What makes you so unhappy?’

‘Where do I start?’ I snicker. ‘I worry about my future ... about letting people down. I’m terrified of ending up alone. I just feel ... *lost*. Without any real direction or purpose.’

*

I’m awakened from a hazy dream when the bus stops in front of a colourless, flat-roofed building. I’ve no idea how long I’d been sleeping or how far we’d traveled. All I know is that it’s daylight, and a thick blanket of snow covers the ground.

‘Where have you brought me, Sal?’

‘Where you need to be.’

I look towards the building. ‘In there?’

Sal nods and opens the doors.

As I approach the building, I see several small faces with noses pressed up against a window. I immediately recognise the meld of wonderment and worry in the children’s doleful eyes.

I press the intercom buzzer beside the door.

A woman answers. ‘Refugee Support Centre. Are you in need of assistance?’

‘No,’ I reply. ‘But I believe I can offer mine.’