

# CHAPTER 1

Zinah Al-Rashid recruited more brides for Isis than anyone else. *Alhamdulillah*. Praise be to God.

Her fifth teenager crossed to Syria without any hitches. The accolades this brought meant she was now after her sixth. She dressed in her abaya and got ready for the interview with the schoolgirl who'd been messaging her non-stop to meet.

Already a jihadi website hailed Zinah a superstar and the write-up, short as it was, got rated with yellow smiley faces. The Brotherhood applauded the brave sister for her skill at teaching the ways of Allah. They commended her ability to work undercover so not a soul could pick her true western identity.

So this was fame. How great it felt! Zinah hoped her biological father learned it was his very own daughter being praised for heroic missions. It was payback for the twenty-five years since he'd adopted the Islamic religion, changed his name to Mohammed and headed east.

At that moment Zinah regretted her mother and stepfather weren't still alive to see how well she and Mohammed worked together for Isis. They'd have a fit.

It was nearly time to leave the room for her meeting. Tying the laces on a pair of green suede trainers she reflected on how the two people who had brought her up mocked Mohammed's open-toed sandals and bushy beard. *Infidels*.

Still high on the Islamic honours, Zinah resisted checking the net once more to see if she'd got more glowing comments from her fans. Instead, she left her hotel room early and headed for the coffee bar.

Because the girl she had a date with was late, Zinah

had time to kill. To begin with, at the rear of Costa, she updated her note-taking app. Stay organised. It was vital to keep her jihadi profile hidden from those who worked with her in her other world. Her public relations on behalf of Isis depended on it. Was she the only one calling out Western media's lies? It sure seemed like it.

How the press spun things! Wasn't it in the UK where kids cut themselves with designer knives and got high on drugs? They were the ones in need of saving. Not Muslim women.

The teenager fitting the description she'd sent Zinah entered the coffee shop. She slouched in, head in an iPhone. Who was she speaking to when she should be focused on this important meeting? Maybe her mother? The silly woman was dead set on her becoming an electrical engineer, not studying the words of the Prophet? Didn't she think her daughter could do both? But the mum could be a danger to the operation, all the same. So Zinah knew the tack to take and used it. She welcomed the teen with smiling eyes.

'Hello, Amirah.' The adopted name.

'The name means princess or leader.' Zinah had read it right. The girl flushed pink. She was more excited by her new persona than Islam.

Amirah was now in with the 'in crowd'.

'A person's name says something special about them and their character,' Zinah enthused. 'It's how people interact with you.'

'And when I call myself Amirah they see straight away I'm a Muslim.'

While Zinah could call up a show of empathy in an instant, it took time to develop real influence over these girls. *You can't hurry things.* So when Amirah fiddled endlessly with her hijab, Zinah stopped herself saying, 'Leave it alone.'

Don't nag.

Amirah was the same as the others she'd converted in this respect. Her first rush of passion for the Caliphate was more to do with the 'look at me' factor than anything else.

'It's a beautiful name, isn't it?' With the spark ignited, fifteen minutes later it burst into flame. Zinah had not lost her touch, had she? She had a way with these girls. Amirah now ached to become more devout. Another win.

'When can I wear the full face veil like you do?' Amirah was longing to copy her, she could tell. Cover up completely. The parents were the blocking force because they'd not allowed Amirah to buy an abaya. But even though Zinah hated them for it, because they represented the major obstacle to her ambitions, she didn't show it.

'Your parents are right.'

She *understood* protective mothers and fathers. She'd dealt with dozens before. Find the point of agreement! To begin with, Zinah tackled the clothing issue which was usually the first to concern them. Yes, the hijab was indeed different to the niqab or the burka. To move from the scarf to the veil in two weeks would likely provoke people in the supermarket and on the street. The best way to wear what Amirah wanted, which was full Islamic dress, was to leave the UK. To up sticks from the place of her birth and travel east to join her sisters in Syria.

When she did that, she'd be an instant celebrity, coming from the West. Just like the girls in the top show business magazines. But better. Much better. They didn't have immoral size zero requirements where Amirah was going. 'Out there women are beautiful in their natural form.'

Not only did Amirah love the flattery, but also the travel sounded fun. It was 'like' the most cool idea she'd ever had.

'You will live in a maqar at first.' *A shared house for women.*

Then, unlike her parents, Zinah addressed Amirah as an adult. 'You don't have to worry about meeting someone perfect for you because Isis do it all. You don't have to go clubbing and be disrespected.'

With this final detail one more recruit was well on their way to a new life with Isis. Straightaway the sixteen-year old wanted to leave boring school and become a married woman. Like *tomorrow*.

'Can you believe where my mum is right now?'

The girl had been bloody jabbing at WhatsApp, so no surprise she wanted to spill.

Mum Linda Clark was at an anti-sharia conference and been sending updates. It couldn't be worse.

They googled it and that's when Zinah learned it was not only being held in the town but at the very hotel she was staying in. How had she missed that? She seethed at her slip up. Then vowed it would never happen again. She'd travelled halfway across the damn country for this conversation.

But Amirah saw the twist of fate as an opportunity. 'Oh cool. If you go back there she'll see you.'

These feminist rallies were happening right across the UK. The same ill-informed crowd ran them every time. Alesha Parkhurst was their leader. Alesha Parkhurst was responsible for denigrating the Prophet.

Another message arrived with a chime. Amirah read it out. 'Islam counts women as half of men.'

Messages were firing through. What Alesha Parkhurst was saying. How Islam treated Lindas and Amirahs as second class citizens.

'But sharia is a perfect system which looks after all,' Zinah reassured the schoolgirl. 'The West makes it out as chopping off hands and stoning fornicators which it's not. That's only the Saudi way.'

Amirah seemed satisfied when she left.

'We'll be in touch,' said Zinah departing at the same

time. It was as darkness descended and, by her mental maths, exactly when the conference should be closing up. She planned her entrance to the second, picturing the glorious scene ahead.

Zinah would enter the hotel foyer just as Amirah's mum was leaving. She would be SO gobsmacked to be faced with the epitome of all the evil she has been hearing about. Startled. What are you doing here? She would want to ask Zinah something. Like 'What are you doing here?'

Zinah would then ask, 'Do you believe the rubbish you heard in there about women in the burka being subjugated?'

Zinah had learned her name from Amirah, but she wouldn't use it because their meeting was to remain a secret. But she would say to Linda Clark was, 'What you've listened to for the last two hours from Alesha Parkhurst about Islam being an insult to women's rights is drivel.'

It was all planned. She gathered her cloak around her. It blended with the unlit buildings as icy wet air sprayed from the alleys. The night was harsh and her mood turned bitter as she rehearsed over and over the speech she would soon deliver. But when she reached the hotel lobby all was quiet.

The seminar must have gone over time, she thought. Zinah was too early. Damn.

The only person who noted the paradox in style between the feminists and the fully cloaked Islamic woman was a bulky man loitering in the shadow of the lifts.

So Zinah Al-Rashid got no audience reaction. Naturally, she felt deflated. There was little point in hanging around, so she proceeded up to the fourth floor. Only after she'd tucked herself away upstairs in the last single room with its heavy purple drapes and overhead fan did she disrobe. A full head of golden blonde hair was revealed.

She slid a pair of plain glass spectacles into their case and flicked out coloured contact lenses. Her eyes changed from chestnut brown to blue.

She examined herself. The foreboding figure was no longer. Instead, reflected in the glass was a woman early thirties wearing jeans and a pleasant expression who you'd cross on the street and take no notice of at all. She promised one day all this would change.

But for now Zinah Al-Rashid had to find some other means to express her resentment at those who made her mission so hard. God willing. *Inshallah.*

## CHAPTER 2

In the predawn dark, Filipino room girl Mary Mendoza arrived for work. She sang 'I want to find me a hero' into the scarf around her neck. A couple of guests, early checkouts, rumbled past dragging suitcases along the rough pavement. Otherwise, everywhere was peace and quiet. Life was *gooooood*.

She entered the hotel by the staff door off the car park. Mary, the girl who'd seven months back escaped a bullying household, today felt free as a bird. She admired her first inking, a sun tattooed on the underside of her wrist. It was a reminder of home and made her look modern. Sunshine and laughter.

The usual work pattern applied. To begin with, she hung up her puffer jacket, put on an overall and went into the kitchen. A bit of joking with the chef who only clowned around before breakfast, never after. Fun. Height-wise she barely reached his elbow.

What had Mary done on her night off? And look at her. She'd washed and glossed her hair until it shone and caked her face with powder and applied mascara to her lashes. Why? Where was she thinking of going at six in the morning?

'Yeah, I go to London,' she said, which everyone, including the chef, knew about because this weekend off Mary had spoken about over a hundred times at least. He was teasing her, of course. Life was better in Wales, no? The Big Smoke was dirty, crowded, noisy and she shouldn't return there in case she got caught.

No. Six months since her escape from the Saudi bosses meant it was safe to go back.

Anyway, nothing this morning would deter the twenty-five-year-old from returning for her weekend to the city

where she'd one day become a star.

She bounced from foot to foot. 'Maybe I get a job as singer tomorrow night in a fancy club. If not, I am back working here on Monday. Beds. Cleaning.'

The sluggish lift took her leisurely up to the fourth level. Most guests still slept, the two she passed earlier were an exception. She wouldn't have to hang around late. Bless them.

As Mary pushed the heavy service cart along the passage towards 403 the ancient floorboards creaked in protest. She was super quick. The first room was done in no time but finishing the bathroom she checked her watch all the same. No way was she going to miss the train and the party which had been on her mind for weeks. Two Filipino girls who'd be at the hostel were also runaways from abusive families. And Mary knew the ropes. So they looked up to her as an old hand which made her feel great.

Madame beat me, or, the Master's sons rape me. The stories were always the same and after they heard the newcomers tell their tale they would all cry together. There'd be lots of cake eaten and they'd sing and clap hands. It was like being back home. That's why she had to be in Willesden by twelve, no later. The fun wouldn't wait. Mostly, the women's refuge was a joyful happy place. She didn't want to miss out.

She ticked off the first 'clean' in bright red ink. She dropped the pen in the pot, put the clipboard on the trolley and headed on. Next up, room 425 right at the end of the corridor under the name of Parkhurst. Nearly done.

Because of her excitement, the noise of a hairdryer only briefly interrupted her dreaming. Mostly planning what she needed for the trip to London. Was she dressed ok? What should she take? Maybe she'd stop by Sainsbury's and pick up a six pack of San Miguel? They were for when one of the girls FaceTimed a mother or a

sister in Manila. When the others would wave their bottles of beer into the camera to show how hard they were partying. It gave their families at home great comfort to see them chatting, looking radiant, doing well. 'We are fine, mothers. Look how happy we are, now we free from our bad bosses. Did you get the presents we sent? Miss youuuuuuu. Luv you.'

As Mary pushed her way down the passage, she hummed in her head. She noticed the door ajar at 410. This was not on the project sheet, but perhaps they'd left early, anyway.

'Hello. Housekeeping.'

She tapped, but there was no response. She stepped inside. No sign of life, no suitcase, no towels dropped on the bathroom tiles, nothing. Mary knew the procedure was to check with Reception before the clean-up. So she took the lift to the ground floor to get the go ahead. Was it ok for her to service 410 now?

The girl behind the desk said she'd call up the computer system. At first she thought Mary had got the rooms mixed up.

'425? It's on your sheet.'

'It is not 425. It's 410.'

'410.'

The receptionist saw no problem as there was zero balance on the account. She could service it if she wanted to.

Room 410 took no time to clean. The bed was unused. Mary changed the sheets, all the same. But there was something strange with the bathroom. Whoever had been in there had taken the face cloths and towels. While this was not abnormal, none of the free packs had gone with them which was usually the case when guests stole hotel linen. Mary hated the strong smell of bleach and this area stunk of it so bad. As if the occupant, the thief, had emptied an entire bottle into the sink. Clanging the pedal

bin shut, she hurried away. She longed to be out of there.

One room more and she'd be through. To be sure it was unoccupied she gave four light knocks as a precaution. 'Housekeeping!'

Using her override key she opened up.

The closed heavy blackout curtains pulled to meant it was pitch black inside. Often the case when you did early rooms. But something wasn't right. The sour air hit her first. The skin on her upper arms prickled like it'd done so many times back in Jeddah, a sign to be careful.

She groped for the light switch. Flicked it, but it seemed nothing happened. Why not? She'd started the ceiling fan instead. As her eyes adjusted, she saw a shape moving. Whatever it was, it appeared to be dead centre in the room. It was now hard to breathe. Where was the light when you needed it to see? She fumbled and found it.

Hanging from the overhead fan a body swung in ever faster circles as the unit picked up speed. She gulped. Mary would carry the image to her grave. A face as purple as the yams she'd eaten as a child. The strap noosed around the woman's neck, eyes bulging from their sockets and the corpse carving a smooth circle in the room like a huge life-size puppet.

She heard herself scream as though it was from someone else. Then she tore down the stairs back to Reception.

## CHAPTER 3

The morning of August 31<sup>st</sup> was one Karen Andersen would never forget. It was the end of summer in calendar terms, but you'd have thought it was the beginning. The sun shone when they'd forecast rain and everyone wanted to be outside. But for her that was nigh impossible. She had far too much to do. Her head was spinning with so many indoor jobs the last thing she needed was the further distraction of good weather. To add to it, she had a strong sense something mega was about to happen and if so, whatever it was, she couldn't cope. Her place was a shit heap.

Only two weeks prior she'd moved into the flat. But, no excuses. The small front room which served as the main living and working space was cluttered with black bin liners full to brimming. In addition, the corkboard and office equipment, such as it was, needed setting up and plugging in. Wires spread over the carpet still required sorting. But she couldn't focus on any one task. It was her first property transaction. She was too *excited*.

On top of this, rather than concentrate on essentials, she was mucking around with a second-hand foil she'd bought off the internet so she could practice her fencing. This was also complete wood from the trees.

Karen Andersen was a private investigator with a healthy dose of imagination. So when her phone went off while carrying out a pretend parry riposte, in her mind she was Diana Rigg from the Avengers. It could have been anyone on the other end, even John Steed. In fact, it was the BBC asking was she free to come into the studio to comment on a cyberbullying piece they were running?

The story was related to suicide caused by online bullying. It was a look at the death of Alesha Parkhurst, a

high profile feminist who'd killed herself six months prior. A 'did she jump or was she pushed?' type of debate. A detective from the Met had raised concerns. He reckoned the UK ignored too many mysterious deaths like the Parkhurst case.

Now her mind was racing because she couldn't see at first any direct link with her actual work, which was mostly checking CV claims, finding missing people or dealing with internet fraud. Why did they want her? What could a little known private investigator add to a debate on suicide?

'Who put you on to me?' Karen asked, searching for clues.

After a barrage of questions, Karen sensed the researcher giving up. Losing the will to live. Wishing she hadn't bothered with her in the first place.

A deep sigh. 'An anti-bullying charity I called suggested you might help.'

Aha, so there was the connection! Karen had helped out a small victim support group pro bono because of the work they did with children. She'd given a couple of talks and answered questions on cyberbullying. But nothing as glamorous as appearing on TV for them. Then again, why Alesha Parkhurst? Alesha was a grown woman. But it sort of fitted. She'd been bullied to the point of wanting to take her own life which was pretty serious, wasn't it?

The BBC wanted two poles-apart views. Karen's one that being cyberbullied was a big, big deal and they should continue to bang the drum as often as possible. Was everyone doing enough to stop this cruel behaviour?

'And the other?'

'The other side is putting the view that last year only fifty percent of unexplained deaths in the UK were reported to the coroner. So some suicides may not be suicides.'

In other words, if someone had a known history of

being stalked or bullied, their so called self-imposed death could provide a killer with the perfect cover for committing a crime.

It was very scandi noir and seemed too far-fetched for real life. But according to Ms BBC, the detective taking that approach, Donald Partridge, had a lifetime of murder experience. So he should know. Karen didn't pick up on the name at this stage because she'd always known him up until then by his nickname of Quacker. It came from Donald Duck. He was famous on the security circuit for being rather long-winded. But, as the most regarded expert on stalking in the Force, he could also make mincemeat of anyone who crossed him.

What Karen Andersen thought of next was exposure and to be on TV! It didn't occur what could come from it. Any negatives. Any backlash. Or even any good. Decisions like these are often major turning points. If Karen hadn't agreed to the interview, who knows whether one of the most audacious terror attempts on the then Prime Minister would ever have been thwarted. Because life is a series of unintended consequences. As it was, she saw the offer to be on TV as a golden opportunity for self-promotion. She said 'I'll do it.'

'So when would you be able to get into our Westminster studio?'

Karen's motorbike flashed into her mind, which she'd ditched after a nasty skid in the London traffic. The claim to repair it had caused her insurance quote to treble. So it'd been hastily dumped. However, at that instant, she regretted this decision. She told the researcher she'd leg it.

It shouldn't take too long, she assured her. She enjoyed walking. It's was hardly a hassle on her to stroll along the Thames on such a great day.

'Ah. Well, we need you here soon. So we might send a car.'

No other consideration on her part was required. She was to be on the world news. They would go to air as soon as she arrived. Could she make it quick? She imagined being swept into the studio in a limousine. Something out of a Bond movie.

The moment Karen finished the call reality set in and nerves with it. What to say?

There was plenty, of course. Waiting for the car, she called up old headlines to refresh. *Alesha Parkhurst found dead in Welsh hotel. Cyber abuse drives feminist to suicide.* But she didn't really need this. Karen Andersen had known Alesha Parkhurst if only briefly or to nod hello in passing on the street. Alesha had even told Karen about her cyberbullying when they talked at a woman's event. At that moment, faced with a live interview, KA was wondering whether to keep this to herself or not. How Alesha had made light of it all and joked she was more trolled than Emma Watson! Small wonder, thought Karen at the time. Because Alesha was dead against stay-at-home married mums who she believed undermined the feminist cause. This put her well at loggerheads with quite a few.

Karen also had suspected something else at the time they spoke. While Alesha Parkhurst pretended it didn't bother her that much, it was all a bit of an act. Inside, she'd been struggling to remain sane. Obviously. The vicious name-calling and non-stop attacks must have finally driven her round the twist. To top it all, Alesha suffered from a manic depressive condition which she spoke about publicly because she was also a mental health campaigner. If she had asked Karen for advice, which she didn't, she may well have told her, 'You don't help yourself. You are too public.'

As a cause, the whole women's rights issue didn't for the most part interest Karen. She could take or leave the age-old male bashing bit. The anti-patriarchy movement.

But when it came to a safety issue, she was very much on board the feminist cause. Women escaping abusive relationships or being stoned or killed for not wearing what they're told to was a *totally* different matter. And Alesha Parkhurst stood up for these women a lot at her own peril, which Karen admired.

But she needed an example of this. So she called up a YouTube video where Alesha was condemning strict sharia law being brought into Britain. She'd slammed the Imams big time. This had generated the foulest hate mail. Some of it from the part of the Islamic community who strongly disagreed with her stance. The rest from God knows where. The sum total of the rape and death threats had finally taken her toll.

Karen knew Twitter could be brutal. Alesha Parkhurst had built a following in the hundreds of thousands which added to the pressure. Even the reaction to her suicide had been pretty heartless.

As an example, 'Celebrities love good publicity so why can't they take the bad?' Or, 'She got what she deserved for speaking out against the Prophet.' They used the hashtag #manhaters too which made Karen hopping mad because more cyber abuse increased as a result.

In response, she'd posted back to one woman in particular who'd been harassing her, 'Fuck you.' It was a longer message, same sentiment. She'd received her first Twitter warning for abusive language.

That morning Karen's ride to the studios was in a gunmetal grey people mover. It was no polished limo. The car sped past the great city sights and magic buildings and as it did, she wondered at it all. She was at her wits end to find the right things to say about why someone like Alesha would suddenly crack and want to finish it all.

But radical feminist or not, Alesha Parkhurst loved British freedoms as much as Karen Andersen. Moreover she'd fought publicly to preserve them. Now Alesha was

gone it was up to Karen to defend her corner.

