

Prologue

Twenty-year-old Rani Weiss was sitting in the peaceful front garden among her mother's lavender and herbs, enjoying the summer sun when she heard the postman making his deliveries. She recognised the sound of the red post van as the engine stopped and started through the small hamlet, eventually pulling up at her gate. The van door opened and she heard the eighties music blaring from the car stereo, the postman whistling along. 'Just the one for you the day, pet,' he said. 'Well, for your Dad, like.' He slid the envelope into her hand, looking hot and bothered in his yellow fluorescent jacket, his pale skin contrasting with his bright red cheeks and nose.

'Thank you,' she said.

'Sorry pet, letters start to dwindle after a couple of months when everyone starts to realise he's... er-you know...' He reddened even more and shuffled on the spot.

'I thought everyone had been notified my family were dead, but I still keep getting the odd letter.' She chose her words carefully in order to put him at his ease, and make sure he knew she wasn't about to break down into a fit of 'girlie hysterics'.

'That one there, that's from America, I see.' He pointed at the letter in her hand, 'Ya dad got quite a few from Germany and a few other countries, but don't recall a one from the States.'

'Yeah, thanks.' She hadn't realised postmen took so much notice of the letters they delivered.

'Well, must get on,' he said. 'Enjoy the rest of the sunshine, pet.' He jumped in the van and was off down the lane towards the old hall.

She looked at the thick buff envelope addressed to her father Mr J H Weiss, CPsychol, FBPsS and her heart sank. Only one month before, her father, an esteemed psychologist, had been killed, together with her mother and younger brother.

Rani, who was always soul searching, found herself disappointed at her reaction to their deaths; she seemed to be coping far too well – nothing like the 'Dealing with Grief' leaflet she'd been handed by the overly sympathetic policewoman. She had waited for the depression to kick in, the uncontrollable tears, the loneliness, but so far she had waited in vain, she was unbelievably stable, not the gibbering wreck she presumed she should be after such a tragedy. She adored her parents and her brother and missed them terribly, but her reaction wasn't how she anticipated it would be. She suspected it was a form of shock, her feelings in total lockdown – waiting to surface later.

She opened the buff envelope slowly and as she pulled out the contents, the first thing she saw was details of a money transfer for 20,000 dollars in favour of her father. The further she read the more her stomach started to churn. Memories of her childhood started flashing through her mind at an alarming rate and she began to feel dizzy and confused. By the end of the letter she concluded that her life had suddenly taken on a totally different meaning: she was no longer Ourania Weiss, daughter of university lecturer, Josef Weiss, but she was something entirely different, something created, like some mythical creature in a made up story. Her life was breaking into a thousand pieces, her former self dead and buried alongside the people she had called her family.

CHILDHOOD

Chapter 1

Six-year-old Rani Weiss was snuggled with her dad on the blue feather sofa while he made up a story about fairies who lived deep in the woods that surrounded their Northumberland home. The little girl sat twisting her blonde curly hair, totally engrossed, believing every word her father said. He told of strange fairy-like creatures and all they got up to in Aspley Woods. He told her that humans could only see them out of the corner of their eyes, and when they turned their heads to look fully, the fairies would disappear into mist. She knew this already because she had seen them for herself. The story came to an end and Rani's smile fell. 'Again, Daddy! Again!'

'No, my darling. We're going to talk about colours.'

'Ah, not another talking game. I like stories best.'

'I want to see what's behind your eyes, Rani, and I want to see how your eyes talk to your soul.' She grabbed her father roughly by the ears and put her nose straight up to his. She opened her eyes as wide as she could and said, 'Just look then, Daddy. Just look.' He grabbed her, threw her down on the sofa and started tickling her. She screamed with joy.

After Rani had calmed down, which took a good ten minutes, she sat quietly on the edge of the sofa, swinging her legs back and forth. Her dad, Joe, stared at her, watching her brain tick away in her perfectly formed little head. She was everything he could have wished for in a

child: bright, inquisitive, brave, imaginative and loving – all the things he had hoped and strived for.

‘Look out of the window, Rani! Look at the colour of the roses growing up the wall! Now, squint your eyes like I’ve shown you. Now, what does it make you feel in here?’ He tapped his finger on her chest.

‘Ah Daddy, this is a hard game.’

‘Come on, Rani! Concentrate a bit harder.’

‘It makes me feel happy.’

‘Why happy?’

‘Because it’s the colour the sun shines down on us, the colour we have on happy days when I’m running through the woods or the fields.’

‘That’s clever thinking, Sweetheart,’ he said.

‘Can you think of any other words that yellow makes you feel?’

Since Rani could talk, Joe had given her a word a day to learn. She would wake up early in the morning full of anticipation for her new word. This meant her vocabulary far outstretched her years. He put a great deal of thought and effort into the selection of the words. They weren’t just random; they were planned to make her think about the world around her and allow her to express it. ‘What about any of your daily words? Do any of those make you think of yellow?’

She stood in front of him with her little hands on his knees, squirming and twisting back and forward. ‘I think maybe happy and calm. Like when we lie on the grass and listen to the birds and smell all the yellowness around us – that’s calm isn’t it, Daddy?’

‘Yes, my Sweetheart, that certainly is calm.’ Joe delighted that she was smelling the colour too. His heart swelled in his chest at that moment.

Rani watched him and knew instinctively that she had pleased him. ‘What am I thinking Rani?’ he said, smiling. She giggled and spun around like a little ballerina. ‘You’re thinking I’m a very clever girl and I can fly like the fairies.’ She was now jumping around the living room, trying to take off. Joe knew that his window of opportunity had well and truly gone and he sank back down on the sofa and closed his eyes to the sound of his happy daughter chattering away.

Rani lived with her Dad, Joe, her younger brother, Addie, and mother, Heather. They lived deep in the North Northumbrian countryside between Alnwick and Rothbury, positioned in woodland high above rugged moors. There were eleven houses in

the picturesque Northumbrian hamlet of Aspley, all of which at one stage had been part of a grand estate. Each building in turn had been converted lovingly into a home. The buildings were originally servants' houses, stables, barns, and a chapel. The whole hamlet was surrounded by sycamore, oaks and pine trees, giving it a slightly mystical feel, as if you were entering a secret world, a world where the 'rat race' didn't exist, where to simply drive towards it produced a sigh of relief. The approach into Aspley was a rough, single-track lane cut through the vegetation and full of awkward potholes, but a glance up revealed a canopy of beautiful sycamores holding their branches majestically high, protecting those travelling beneath. To the children, it always felt like entering a secret tunnel.

Aspley Hall itself was once the home of a Methodist landowner, but was now divided into four houses. The stalwart Methodist had also built a chapel behind the hall, insisting that servants attended every Sunday. This had now been converted into a home, leaving only the original oak doorway and vestibule to give a sense of its history. An old coach house had been demolished and, in its footprint, a brick and render bungalow arose, looking pristine compared to most of the older buildings in the hamlet. Three terraced red brick houses sat on the edge of the lane, built originally for the butler, the head gamekeeper and the head gardener. The hamlet oozed history from every vista. This was an unspoilt part of Northumberland devoid of the soulless, box-like houses that were springing up all over the county in housing estates where cars littered the roads and driveways, children dodged in and out of the traffic and the smell of barbecues was in the air at the first hint of sunshine. The footprint of Aspley had been virtually unchanged for 150 years and that was how the residents liked it.

The Weiss family lived in the former stable block in the centre of the hamlet. The stables were laid out in an oblong shape and at one time had had a huge inner courtyard with a two-storey hay barn and dovecote in the middle – a beautiful red brick building with ten ornate tiny arches in the eaves for the doves to fly in and out. The stables were now converted into six homes, each one having a small, secret walled garden, accessed by an old white gate built into the high wall. In the very middle, some of the old courtyard had been left, which now provided walkways to each of the houses and a safe place for the children to play.

The people of Aspley all had one thing in common: for some reason they wanted to be closed off from the hectic world around them, choosing a life of peace, quiet and solitude. Most of the residents could easily slot into the 'slightly odd' category. Although everyone

looked out for each other, which didn't seem to happen elsewhere, they also followed the first rule of being a good neighbour: be there if needed but appreciate each other's privacy.

The countryside around Aspley Woods was typical Northumbrian moorland: purple heather, fading and merging into every shade of green imaginable, a beautiful soft carpet stretching for miles. The moor was known by locals as 'the black lands'. Odd clusters of huge rocks would interrupt the sweeping softness of colour, some boulders balanced precariously on top of each other as if put there by some arcane force. Buzzards would soar high above as pheasants roughed their way through the heather, cackling and flapping in an almost manic state.

The locals in the nearby town of Rothbury would snare the attention of tourists with Northumbrian fables and legends of the moors. One such story held that the moors had been formed to provide a hiding place for the tiny fire-breathing wisps who wandered the land searching for evil, and when they found it they would breath on the dry moorland causing fires that could be seen from miles around. They told them that the wisps' main aim was to cleanse the land of heinous and hateful human beings, so tourists had to beware when out on the moors.

As the Weiss children grew, they soon became aware that the six cottages at Aspley Stables itself held a few oddities too: their father once used the word 'kleptomaniac' to describe the lady next door at No 1, but then on seeing his daughters interest added quickly, 'that means she's just an eccentric lady who forgot to pay at the supermarket.' He hoped desperately that this was one word his children would instantly forget.

Martha, 'the kleptomaniac', was a former headmistress at the local school, a busy little woman who sported a grey bob and a round, happy face. She spent most of her life with her two rather sneaky cats, who would stalk the woods pulling confused pheasants through her cat flap late at night. Martha could often be heard shrieking and squawking as she tried to corral the terrified birds out of the house. The children knew their dad had spent quite a bit of time with Martha after the unfortunate 'theft' episode, apparently convincing her that her shoplifting was not a hanging offence and that anyone with a busy lifestyle could potentially wheel the trolley out of the shop without paying, although how she got passed all the checkouts was a bit of a mystery and the fact she had £250 worth of wine, whisky, smoked salmon, top of the range cat food etc. was said to be inconsequential. Joe didn't quite realise that when relaying

cryptic stories to his wife, Heather, that little innocent ears were taking it all in and adding it all up. His cryptic ability was not quite up to scratch.

Although Martha had a sharp tongue, she also had a big kind heart, especially when it came to children and cats, and would like nothing better than to take Rani and Addie for a bit of a ramble in the surrounding woods, picking wild mushrooms and collecting berries, reminiscing about all the children she had taught over the years and what they were doing now.

At number 2 Aspley Stables was Sarah, the police officer, who would dart in and out of the house, always in a hurry, flying out of the car park in her posh car. No one knew too much about Sarah—only a few snippets. One being that she was counting the days until her retirement and another that, much to the delight of the onlooking shoppers, she had tasered a six-foot-seven Russian on Alnwick's main street for being abusive—or at least she had presumed he was being abusive as she admitted she hadn't a clue what he was trying to say. The only other thing known about Sarah was that a mystery man was sometimes seen skulking into her house late at night and coming out in the early hours of the morning 'with a smile on his face', according to Martha.

Aspley was the perfect place to harbour a secret, the high walls usually meant that neighbours didn't often know each other's business; there was only Martha brave enough to make comment on her observations. Visitors, if not too frequent, could often enter without being seen and could avoid the usual inane conversations about the weather, whilst tactfully being weighed up as to whether they were 'up to no good'. Yes, the people of Aspley were suspicious of strangers.

During the summer holidays, Rani and Addie would spend most of their time in the shared courtyard or the woods. One summer's day when the sun was high in the sky and the children were sitting playing 'target' with the gravel in the courtyard, chalking a circle on one of the walls and scoring a point every time they hit it, their heads were turned towards the red gravel car park at the end of the courtyard where a car had pulled in with a flurry and out had jumped a familiar woman.

'Where's your dad, squirt?' the posh voice boomed out.

Rani stared up at the rather large plain-looking woman, whom she usually tried her best to avoid. Caroline Hobbs-Brown, was a family friend, but Rani couldn't guess why, as friendly was not a word that

would typically be used to describe her. Caroline would attempt to smile but, to a child, it always came out as a frightening grimace, as if her face was never meant to smile. Her dark hair was always scraped back in a ponytail and her clothes always looked like she was off for a hike: fleece top, combat trousers and big manly boots.

'He's down at the cabin in the woods, but you're not allowed to go down there. It's Daddy's sanctuary.' Rani wasn't quite sure what a sanctuary was, but she liked to impress by using her big words.

Addie just put his head down. Rani knew her Dad would be annoyed if this woman knocked on the cabin door whilst he was working. She knew he needed peace and quiet.

Caroline was the daughter of Charles Hobbs-Brown, a local district judge. Caroline and her dad lived in a grand house in Hexham, in the Tyne Valley. Rani and Addie would occasionally visit. The house had huge lawns, which they weren't allowed to walk on, and a white sofa, which they weren't allowed to sit on. Yes, it was always fun time at the Hobbs-Brown house. No wonder Caroline was angry all the time. Rani wondered how the heck she managed when she was little.

Caroline was a police officer now, so Rani reckoned she could now walk on anyone's grass. Rani's dad would describe Caroline as a 'high flier'. That never made much sense to Rani, but she accepted that Caroline could somehow fly and she sniggered as she imagined her riding around on a broomstick with her big nose cutting through the air. She could see her tall frame hurling criminals to the ground and putting handcuffs on them like they did on the television. Rani thought she was the toughest woman she had ever met, a smile that would make cats run, curdle milk and frighten the bejeebers out of little girls. She would point straight at Addie and say, 'I'm sure I'll come across you when you're older, young man, if those parents of yours don't take control of you.' Rani's mum said they shouldn't take too much notice because Caroline was paid to scare people.

Rani and Addie tracked Caroline sneakily as she walked down to Dad's cabin in the woods. They sat outside listening.

'There's only one way to say this Caroline, so I'm just going to come out with it,' said their dad. 'People don't like you. And, quite frankly, you don't care. You make absolutely no effort to curb the behaviours we've talked about.'

'I think you've taught the children to hate me. Rani's bloody imagination runs away with her and she usually runs off when she sees me coming. And as for the boy... well, the least said about him the better. Sneaky little sod if you ask me.'

'I can assure you that Rani's dislike of you is of your own doing, not mine. You have no comprehension whatsoever as to how you're seen by others and you certainly don't care. And, as for Addie, do you really think you're qualified to give an assessment of his character at four years old?'

'One day you'll be begging me for my input. Working with the shite I do, I can recognise it a mile off. He's no good, Joe. Never will be.'

'At four years old Caroline I can assure you, you cannot!'

Rani remembered this conversation vividly because Caroline sprayed poor Martha with red chippings as she sped out of the car park in her car. Her Dad was mortified and Caroline didn't reappear for some time after that. And, of course, this only intensified Martha's hatred of the police.

At No 3, which backed onto the car park, were Arthur and Ella, Rani's and Addie's favourite neighbours. Arthur had a train track that skirted the tops of the high walls and ran down a makeshift hill, over the pond, past the lawn and over the decking, puffing out steam as it went. They also had a huge teddy bear of a dog called Buddy, a bearded collie who liked nothing better than a roll and a cuddle on the lawn. Addie insisted on calling him Balou and would sing *The Bare Necessities* to him, much to the amusement of Arthur and Ella, especially when Buddy would tilt his head from side to side wondering what on earth was going on.

They also had two friendly cats and a parrot called Spot. Their home was a little piece of heaven to two children without any pets to call their own. Arthur and Ella were the kindest people in the world and would often return from shopping with treats for the children. They also looked after two important Aspley projects: one to ensure the old cesspit, used by all the houses, was emptied regularly and the other to maintain a pump that ensured the hamlet had water. So they visited everyone's houses on a regular basis and knew what was going on in Aspley. There were no other children in Aspley, so Rani and Addie received quite a lot of attention from the neighbours. This was encouraged by their father, who wanted them to be able to mix well with people and come home with their little voices full of excitement, telling him all about their day. He realised Aspley was that special place where they could enjoy their freedom.