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opening extract from

Smokescreen

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CHAPTER ONE

Zlatko Matesa stood facing the bark of the tree, killing a line of ants with the fingers of his free hand. Between his thin lips smouldered a foul smelling cigarette, which he took out and doused before he zipped up his trousers. His face was expressionless, pale skin, dark hair cut short, and when he revealed them, very good teeth that looked as if he could bite hard. He turned towards the river, looked at his watch, and pulled his mobile phone from his pocket.

To the second, the phone rang. He listened, didn't utter more than a growl, and finally seemed to be satisfied about something. With the curtest of nods – nothing as weak as a smile – he snapped the phone shut and headed back to the clearing where he'd parked the van.

He bumped through the track in the woods to the D45 and steered onto the quiet French road, where his sudden acceleration told the world that another deal had been done.

Ellie Searle was by her own stretch of water, on the towpath of the Regent's Canal in London. She was on the long bend where the canal ran through the final lock before opening out into Limehouse Basin, a girl alone, staring at the sluggish water. She hated the water, she hated the sound of it as it forced its way between the crack of the closed lock gates, as it ran over the weir beyond; she hated the sight of it; and she hated the fact of it. After what had happened in her life she had a deep mistrust of what water could do – and now she couldn't believe what was happening to her.

Her father was bringing her to live beside a canal. How cruel was that? Or selfish? Or, at its best, just how thoughtless and inconsiderate? He had to know how she felt about water.

She stood well back on the towpath as two joggers ran through; and when one of them stooped to pick up a stray stone that could twist an ankle, throwing it out into the water, she covered her ears; she didn't want to hear anything going under. And she knew that whatever she did – this trying to be brave about it – forcing herself to come and stand here, her water phobia was a very long way from being cured.

Still hugging the inside edge of the walkway, she turned back towards where she lived now; thinking with a deep sadness about the old life that had ended on the last day of the summer term; back to the form room last thing on that Friday – and the start of the long holidays, study assignments shoved to the bottoms of bags. It would be freedom in ten minutes, Miss Jenkins would be first out to a wine box open in the staffroom, and here in the form room quick, casual plans were being made for meeting up, texting at least, mobile phones bipping as contact numbers were keyed in. And Ellie Searle was crying.

Which was a unique sight: and not the sort of easy crying some were good at, like on the death of a friend's dog, but a quiet, couldn't-hold-it-back welling up of tears, lips compressed to a white scar, her fair head down on a desk and her shoulders heaving.

Ellie Searle never cried. When your dad ran a pub it wasn't the sort of thing you ever let yourself do. He was

hardened not to show much emotion except having a laugh, or dishing out tough justice against drugs on the premises; and Ellie knew that in a few years she could be in her mother's shoes, serving behind the bar, and that girls growing up in pubs don't have soft edges – dry eyes come with the job, and private thoughts and feelings go cellar deep inside. As a pub kid you're spoiled by the regulars but you don't buy it, you know the meaning of every foul word but you don't use them, and you need your sleep but you rarely get to bed before closing time. All of which had happened fast for Ellie Jane Searle.

Her father was an ex-footballer, Chris Searle, son of the great international Danny, who'd lifted more cups than most. At the end of his own less distinguished career, Ellie's father had gone into the brewery trade as a trainee manager with Bass, and in time he had taken his own tenancy – just as Ellie's mother died in that terrible accident. So for the past months the Cherry Tree at Charlton had been *their* thing, Chris's and Ellie's, father and daughter. There was a morning cleaner, a midday cook, casual bar staff, a weekend potman, and Ellie helping on the computer with the accounts – and busy in the kitchen with the microwave on Charlton Athletic home game Saturdays. Ellie lived a pub life.

After the tragic death of her mother and with school and the Cherry Tree, Ellie had no time for tears; none left for shedding, anyway. Except when all that came to an end.

'Head up, Babe, we'll come an' see you!'

'Can't lose touch with a soul sister…'

Two of Ellie's best mates were leaning over her, patting and stroking with the hands that weren't holding their mobiles.

Ellie snuffled and came up off the desk, digging for a tissue. 'Yeah,' she said, the kid with the brave face again. 'Sure.' But she knew they wouldn't stay friends for long. Charlton on the south side of the river was a universe away from the East End where she was going. People never crossed to the other side of the Thames unless they really had to. Even her footballer father, cheered in south London and Kent, would be just a name painted over a pub door in Limehouse. Over the door of the Regent's Arms.

The 'Regent' was a pub that should have been good news because it was Chris Searle's own, where he wasn't going in as a manager or on a brewery tenancy, but where he owned the premises from the cellar floor to the Sky dish on the chimney pot. It had been left to him in the will of a great-uncle he'd not seen as much of as he should: Uncle Ronnie Lewis, an old footballer himself, Arsenal,

Millwall, Dover and finally Faversham. With the previous deaths of a few in-betweens the pub had come to Chris, lock, stock and metal cask: and it was a unique set-up, because it fronted onto the Regent's Canal at Limehouse.

In Venice they would have been millionaires, but the Regent's Canal isn't the Laguna. And as for the pub, the place was old, and damp, and badly needed doing up. It had once been a lock-keeper's house, with a small untidy garden at the side, but everything had been let go. Worst of all, Ellie would have to change schools, change boroughs, change *cultures* to come and live here. And the pub looked like a real money loser. On the day she first saw it, with the wife of a friend of old Uncle Ronnie running the place, it hardly sold three pints of lager in two hours: there'd be no living made out of that.

But her dad already had a light in his eyes. They had driven through the Blackwall Tunnel, turned left, and parked at Limehouse Basin, a large marina filled with yachts and barges and surrounded by shining smart apartment blocks. The new aristocracy lived here, the successful actors, designers, the City people, personalities in public life who spent their weekends in the country or out on the water. And from here it was just a few steps along the canal towpath to the Regent's Arms.

'Brill!' her dad said. He paced his way through the old plush bar to the brick-built outhouse at the side.

'Future! Potential!' – asking for a coffee from old Annie behind the bar. 'Have we got a catering licence?' he wanted to know.

'I'll do you egg an' chips.'

'Cheers, no; but *can* you?'

'I told you, I'll do you egg and chips, an' I won't break the yellow. I say what I mean an' I mean what I say…'

'No, what *I* mean is, are we *allowed* to serve food here?' Chris persisted. 'Do the health people come? Are we licensed for grub?'

'Must be,' the old woman said. ''Cos I'll always knock up a sarnie if someone's hungry. 'Ow about the girlie? You want a bite, too, love?'

Ellie shook her head. 'No, ta.' It was a late spring day, quite warm, and the door onto the canal towpath was open. She got up and dragged herself outside, stole a look at the lock with the water spilling through, and across at the weir that ran alongside it; and she shivered. Now she was going to have to live here, and move school, no longer be the old Ellie Searle with a place in the school pecking order, and when she thought about it – trying not to be a drama queen – go through the next worse time in her life to the death of her mother.

But all her dad was doing was rubbing his hands and dreaming about his plans – 'moving on': in the car, and back at the old place, and locking up that night after he'd

called time. 'You saw them apartments, all them posh properties, those expensive yachts and barges in the Basin. And what's there? Old heritage pubs along the river front and a couple of smartish restaurants.'

'So?'

'So what's going to go down a treat for the rich residents, right on their doorstep? A bit of choice for the admirals and captains on the water, and the London "goers"? Where's the gap in the market? Eh? I'll tell you, a smart canal-side restaurant: clear the garden, tables outside, decent food, reasonable prices, good midday trade and a candlelit atmosphere for night-time. Drinks, yes, up at the bar or at your table – but good food, not your usual pub stuff, cooked by a real chef with high standards. "The 'in' place to eat out…"' He ran the slogan in the air with his hand.

Ellie saw the look on her father's face and wanted, wanted, wanted never to see it go, the burning light of the dreamer, something that had been snuffed out when Mum had died: it was as if he was about to turn a corner. But Ellie Searle would have to turn the corner with him, and she was desperately unhappy about that.

Besides, he was talking rubbish! 'You're going to pay a chef? What with?' She did the accounts, she'd seen the books. 'Bank of Toyland money?'

There was no taking the shine off his apple, though.

'I'll learn, I'll be my own Jamie Oliver. Yeah, get someone proper to start with, contract for a season, then I'll take over. You can learn these things. Your mum was a good cook, we've got the books an' we'll get more. Start small, yes, but shut the Regent for a couple of weeks while we redo the inside – and we go for it!'

'Hang on! What about plan B?' Ellie was making them both a cocoa, her back to her father, kitchens being a good place to talk tough because you don't have to face the opposition. 'Plan B's favourite…'

'What's plan B?' Chris was cashing up the Cherry Tree's night, putting the notes from the till into the large floor safe tucked under a work surface.

'You sell the old Regent and carry on here. I'm doing okay at school, and we're doing all right here as tenants.' The Cherry Tree had a small, regular clientele from the streets around, the cash turnover wasn't brilliant but they were holding their own amongst other Charlton pubs, and home football games always gave a boost – the Charlton Athletic 'faithful' had adopted it. If the brewers ever shut the Cherry Tree they'd be shutting everything outside the town centres. 'Else you could give this up and find yourself saddled with a loser.'

'Could do.' Chris slammed the safe door shut and gave the combination a spin. He came over and took his cocoa, stirred it till it was almost whipped, finding the words in

the swirl. 'Listen, Ellie, I went to eight different schools, following Granddad's transfers – you do that when your dad's a top footballer – changing school's not the end of the world, you look on it as an education in itself. You'll cope, you know you can; on my life, I wouldn't do this if you couldn't cope.' He took a sip. 'Lovely.' He paused, then deep in his throat he said, 'And I can just see Mum looking down and saying…' he took another mouthful of hot cocoa, gave his eyes an excuse for watering up, '…"Go for it, Chrissie. Take the chance. Be yourself."'

Ellie looked at her father, didn't blink. 'That's crap!' she said. 'Mum's dead – and she won't ever come back.' Now Ellie had a catch in her own throat. 'But if you want it enough to come all that sob stuff on me, I s'pose you'll have to do it.'

And she went to bed – to see again in her head the picture of her mother, lying dead, an imaginary picture that would never go.

It was instant attraction. It can happen like that, the friendship version of falling in love. It was the first day of the new term at the new school and Ellie's consolation prize was there in place, sitting next to her at a double desk in the form room: a girl called Flo Moses.

That morning Ellie had felt as raw as the new Year Sevens in the school yard of Limehouse High, her bright new scarlet sweatshirt still smelling of its plastic wrapping as she'd tacked onto the back of the 9L line. But a corridor jostle's a corridor jostle whether you're old, new, supply teacher or deputy head; a school corridor's a great leveller, and Ellie Searle could always barge her weight; so by the time she'd squeezed through the form-room door her newness was well creased.

She sat where there was a spare place, slung her bag onto the desk and folded her arms on it, waiting for whatever word was going to come from the form teacher who was sorting herself out at the front. And next to her this girl said, 'You move about a lot?'

'No. Why?' Ellie looked into a beautiful black face, a hint of make-up on the lips and eyelids.

'You've got the push of a traveller kid – in this school, in that, never fazed by what anyone's up to. No "May I?", just, "Kiss my ass!" as you come barging through that door.'

'You noticed?'

'An' most kids ask permission to sit next to me.'

'Why? Don't they know you smell?'

And that was it. The girl stared at her then screeched with a sudden laugh, Ellie joined in, and they both got ticked off for inappropriate behaviour, names on the board, first morning: blood sisters in trouble, straight off.

Which was what Ellie needed, because back home at the Regent's Arms things were dire, so much so that coming to a new school on the other side of the river had ended up way down her list of worries. But all gifts gratefully received...

She and her dad had moved during the school holiday, and that had been their summer, fitting into the Regent's Arms by the canal. Their furniture had come down the narrow steps from Salmon Lane, and they'd sorted themselves into the private accommodation while old Annie looked after the bar. It was a temporary, sort-it-later sort of move, tea chests and suitcases sitting in the middles of rooms for a few days because there was a business to run. Her dad wanted to let Ellie have the front bedroom while he faced Salmon Lane, but she didn't want the sight and the sound of the water, not yet; no, not yet, so she had the back. None of their curtains fitted here, and her old wardrobe was too big to come so she had to make do with shallow cupboards each side of a filled-in fireplace. Personal accommodation problems weren't the big headache, though. It was the business, and from the start there was going to be a battle of wills.

When Ellie's dad sat in the bar costing up the price of knocking through to the outhouse and putting in a bigger kitchen, saying something to Ellie about his closure plans,

old Annie's barmaid's smile suddenly turned into a frown.

'Close up? You can't do that, guv'nor. They won't 'ave that round here!'

'Who won't have it?'

'The customers. Your regulars.'

'What regulars? We've hardly got any regulars. My Ellie's our biggest regular, drinking her Coca-Colas.'

Ellie burped to prove a point.

Annie slapped a hand flat on the bar. ''Ow long you been here?' she asked. 'Tell me, 'ow many days?'

Chris stopped the costing calculation he was doing to count on his fingers. 'Five,' he said. 'Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday.'

''An' you 'aven't been here tomorrow?'

'No, I 'aven't been here tomorrow. Why, what's so special about Fridays? Do we actually do more'n a tenner of business on a Friday?'

Annie slid a pint of Special along the bar to an old man with a dog, both sitting up on bar stools growling at each other.

'"Do we do more'n a tenner?" Haven't you seen the cashing up? Didn't you see Friday's takings?'

Chris might have or he might not, but Ellie had, although she'd thought that decent amount was a sort of accumulation, a total of all the weeks since old Uncle Ronnie had died.

'I'll tell you.' Annie came round the bar, took Chris's arm and led him into the kitchen. Ellie came away from the laptop where she was designing the 'Pub Closed for Refurbishment' signs to strain an ear at the door. 'Friday night is music night,' Annie went on. 'Friday night is locals' night; they all come in of a Friday. Why? 'Cos we've got the best music this side of the Circus Tavern, Friday nights. You won't stop pulling pints, Fridays – it'll 'ave your arm in a sling.'

'Straight up?'

'You never heard of Ivy Stardust your side of the river? They come from all over to hear Ivy, this side. She's your banker, guv'nor. She's your business. An' you can't shut up on her or you'll never get her back. She's got a right loyal following…'

'Never heard of her.'

'Well you wouldn't, from over Charlton! Didn't them solicitors tell you what the business is?'

'Not really.'

And Ellie, just round the woodwork, knew the truth of it. Whatever her dad had been told about the Regent's Arms, whether he knew there was sometimes a bit of music on Friday nights or not, his mind was fixed on all that being old hat, in the past. New plans for a posh venue just a stroll away from Limehouse Basin was all the man had in his head.

The stupid man!

'Have we got a licence for live music?' he asked.

'Must have. Like the grub,' Annie told him. 'I'll do you a dance for sixpence!'

'Well, we'll see.'

'You'd do best to see it their way!' Annie's voice sounded deadly serious. 'I tell you, guv'nor, don't you cross that Ivy whatever you do, not her lot. That'd be a big mistake, you mark my words!'