ONJALI Q. RAÚF

THE Letter WITH THE GOLDEN Stamp

Orion



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The Beginning Before the Beginning

I've never been inside a real-life police station before.

I've only ever seen the one in my hometown from the outside – it's all brown and grey and empty-looking. I've seen ones on TV too. Usually on those drama programmes where everyone is always crying and screaming at each other and running away because they're in trouble. Mam calls them 'soaps', even though no one in them ever uses a single bar of soap. Not even when their faces are all runny with tears and make-up or they've been running away for days and their hands are super dirty. Just like mine are now.

The police station I'm in now is nothing like the ones I've seen on TV or the one back home. It's all

shiny and clean, and so big it makes me feel like an ant trapped in a huge upside-down glass cup – except a cup that has lots of floors and lifts. There were guards at the huge front doors where I came in, standing near a giant shimmering silver sign that read 'NEW SCOTLAND YARD' – even though we aren't in Scotland and there isn't a single yard anywhere that I can see. What the sign really should have said was 'LONDON PAVEMENTS', because it's in London and has nothing but pavements all around it.

'Right then, who do we have here?'

I stare up at the police officer standing in front of me, and the large badge she has on her police cap. The badge is shining down from the middle of a black and white strip that goes all around her hat and which matches her thick, short tie. They look like chessboards that don't have any pieces on them.

'You're a long way from home, Audrey,' she continues. 'All the way from Wales, I hear?' Her eyebrows go up and disappear into her cap as if they're on board an invisible lift.

I nod at the floor instead of her, looking down at the large grey Royal Mail sack now sitting all crumpled

up on my lap. I haven't let go of it since the police caught me. My fingers don't want to.

'Well, I'm Sergeant Anita,' says the officer. 'And this lady here is Ms Rogers.' Sergeant Anita points to the woman standing a little bit behind her. 'She's here to look after you while you're with us, and to make sure you have everything you need until we can get you back home.'

The lady called Ms Rogers takes a step forward. She doesn't seem like she's one of *Them* – she isn't wearing a suit or carrying a folder or looking all frowny and strict and filled with horrible questions. She's smiling, and has kind eyes and a round face, and is dressed in a woolly jumper and jeans and the kind of shiny long boots Mam used to wear before she got sick.

'Hi, Audrey. My name is Georgiana Rogers. Georgie for short. So you can call me that, all right?'

I nod again, but still can't look at either of them.

'Like Sergeant Anita said, I'm here to answer any questions you have, and help you in any way I can. So feel free to ask me anything you want to. OK?'

This time I don't even nod. Instead, I grip the sack in my hands even tighter.

'What you did today was incredibly dangerous,' says Sergeant Anita from above me. I see her shiny black shoes take a step towards me. 'But no one is looking to press charges or anything like that.'

'They're not?' I blurt out without meaning to, looking straight up into Sergeant Anita's face in surprise. It's long and shimmery and her large brown eyes are as shiny as her shoes.

'No,' she replies with a small smile. 'Not at all. But we do need to know *everything* that happened in the lead-up to today. What you tell us will become part of what we call a "witness statement", which will then be submitted as part of our formal proceedings.'

I stare up at Sergeant Anita, not really understanding what she's saying. What are 'formal proceedings'? And what happens when those are over? Will I still get a criminal record even if they don't press charges? Are they going to take my fingerprints? And what if some of what I have to tell them is so bad I end up in jail anyway, until I'm really old and my hair turns white?

'Now, I know you must have been very scared when we had to bring you in,' continues Sergeant Anita. 'But

we've spoken to your mother, and she's sending someone to come and get you. While we're waiting—'

'But – but there isn't anyone who can come and get me,' I interrupt accidentally, quickly looking back down at the sack and my dirty hands and wishing that my silly eyes weren't burning with tears. 'My mam – she can't come . . . and I don't have anyone else. Unless . . .' Gulping hard to try and swallow down all my scariest feelings so that I can make room for some hopeful ones instead, I ask, 'Is it my tad? Is he coming to take me home? Is that who she's sent?'

'We'll have to wait and see,' says Sergeant Anita, her voice suddenly softer. 'Your mother is arranging it all, and the second the appointed person has arrived, I promise I'll notify you. But while we wait for whoever that might be, how about you tell us about the events leading up to today's incident in as much detail as you can. Exactly what happened and why. Just so we can have a nice, clear record of it all.'

'That sounds like a great idea,' says the lady called Georgie. Bending down so that her eyes can look straight into mine, she whispers, 'What do you think, Audrey? Can you tell the nice sergeant here what happened?'

I think about it for exactly six seconds. If I am going to tell my story, I'll need to start at the very beginning.

I give a slow nod.

'OK. Follow me then,' says Sergeant Anita, as she begins to walk ahead of me.

'Will – will you be with me the whole time?' I ask Georgie.

'Yes,' she replies. 'The whole time. I won't leave you until you're in a car on your way home. I promise.'

I don't really know why, but I believe her. Maybe it's because she has kind, warm eyes – a bit like Mam's – that look like they're telling the truth. Or maybe it's because I don't have any other choice. Holding on to the sack even tighter, I get up and follow Sergeant Anita.

Using a special badge that *beeps* and *boops* us through lots of doors, Sergeant Anita leads me into a room that has a table and some chairs in it. On the walls are lots of colourful pictures of police officers, smiling as if they aren't really police officers at all, but people in a toothpaste commercial. And on the table is a black box with lots of buttons on it. I want to press them all right away.

'Audrey, why don't you sit there,' says Sergeant Anita, showing me a chair. I go and sit down, wishing I could

run all the way home. But then I realise I won't have anything to run back to any more. *They're* going to know everything for sure now, and take everyone I love away from me. And it's all my fault . . . The thought makes my insides feel like scrunched-up balls of paper that have been thrown into the deep end of a swimming pool.

'Right, let's start at the beginning, shall we?' suggests Sergeant Anita. Taking off her hat and placing it on the table, she opens up a long, thin notebook that's filled with scribblings and arrows and, at the centre, a great big question mark. Seeing me staring at it, she gives me a smile and flips the page over to a fresh blank sheet. 'Now, while you're talking, I'm going to take some notes. But we'll be recording this conversation too, so we can be absolutely sure that my notes don't get anything wrong. Is that all right with you?'

I look over at the Georgie lady, who gives me a nod.

I copy her and give Sergeant Anita a nod back.

'Are you ready?' asks Georgie, as she looks down at me. 'Remember, if you want to stop at any time, or you'd like a drink or to take a toilet break, all you have to do to is tell us. All right?'

I nod again.

Sergeant Anita presses a button on the black box, which makes a tiny bright-red light come on and, saying the date and time and all our names, she looks at me. 'Whenever you're ready, Audrey. Begin anywhere you want to.'

Georgie looks at me too, her eyebrows raised hopefully. Pulling my eyes away from them, I place the sack on the table, still holding it tight. As long as I hold on to it, everything will be fine.

'Anywhere?' I double-check.

'That's right,' Sergeant Anita replies. 'Anywhere at all.'

Staring at my fingers and then up at her, I open my mouth and wait for words to come out. At first, none of them do. They're stuck in a traffic jam in my throat. But then I think about Mam and how badly I need to get back to her and stop her from getting any sicker and say the most *sorry*s I've ever said in my life, and the traffic jam starts moving and beeping, and soon all the words I need are driving at top speed out of my mouth.

'Erm . . . Well . . . I – I guess it all started with the house on the other side of the street. And the spy who lives there.'



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Behind Door Number 33

'I've lived on the same street since the day I was born. It's right in the middle of Abertawe. English people call it "Swansea". Do you know it – have you been?'

Both Sergeant Anita and Georgie shake their heads in a way which makes me think that maybe they haven't been to any bit of Wales, let alone my part of it.

'Swansea is a city – but it's not like London. We don't have huge theatres or royal buildings or squares filled with lights. We've just got Plantasia and the market – oh, and the new golden bridge too. But we do have the best beaches anyone could ever want. And the hills are so steep and high that cars make a loud growling noise going up them and a happy "Weeeeeeeee!" going down them, and the houses all look like they're surfing on

top of waves made of concrete. I've never lived anywhere else ever, so I know everyone on my street and what they do, which is exactly how I like it.

'Well, that is, I *used* to know everyone. But then that changed. And that's sort of what started everything, and led to me coming here and getting arrested.'

'We haven't arrested you,' corrects Sergeant Anita quickly. Her lips are doing something strange. They look like they're trying to make her nose sneeze, and her nose is fighting back. 'We just want to clarify the sequence of events that led you here, that's all. Please . . . continue. When did this change occur?'

Clutching the grey sack closer to me, I use my fingers to try and remember how many weeks ago it all started. I'm not good with dates and making days fit into weeks, so I give up and say, 'It was definitely the second day of the last school holidays. I remember because holidays are a bit boring when you can't go anywhere, so I was looking out of the window a lot. That was when I saw it for the first time. The car that magically appeared in the parking spot in front of the house – the one directly across from ours – on the other side of the street.'

I stop to watch Sergeant Anita writing something down before she looks back up at me. 'Do you mean your February half-term holiday, Audrey? Or your Christmas holidays?'

'The February one,' I reply. 'Kavi says that's a fake holiday because it's only one week and not two, and that it was teachers who invented it so they can eat all the chocolates they get on Valentine's Day in secret. Is that true?'

Sergeant Anita smiles and shakes her head, 'Not that I know of.' She pauses for a second, and then says, 'So you noticed a new car in your neighbour's driveway. Why did you think it was strange?'

'Well, I guess I didn't think it was strange right away. But after a few days I did. Because since the day it appeared, it's never been used – not even once. Why have a car if you're never going to drive it? And the curtains to the house are always drawn too, even in the daytime, and there's never even the smallest sound or bit of light coming from inside. No one has seen a single person go in or out of the bright-red front door – not even our postman.

'I know because I watched the house and the car

lots during the holidays, and when school opened again I told my two best friends at school, Inara and Kavi, all about it. I've never had anything exciting to tell them before. They argued about who the person might be a whole lot, and then decided the house had been taken over by a gang of robbers – who were going to rob the whole street until we all went blind for some reason. And that they were keeping the curtains shut to stop people from telling on them to the police and seeing all their high-tech equipment – like the walkie-talkies, and big sacks, and those spiky hooks with ropes on the end that robbers use to climb buildings.

'My little brother Peck and sister Kat – who are twins but don't look even a bit like each other – thought that the house was haunted. Peck thought it was haunted by a ghost in a white bedsheet. And Kat thought it was haunted by a group of hairy monsters who like to eat people's gardens. Whenever I picked them up from school after the day the car arrived, they always ran past the house as fast as they could – as if they were being chased. It was funny watching them do that. Especially as they're only four, and their legs are so

short that when they run they look like penguins who might fall over any second.

'But I knew the people who had moved in were definitely *not* ghosts or monsters because I'm way too old to believe in silly things like that. No nine-year-old would be caught alive believing any of it. And as I told Peck and Kat, even if ghosts and monsters *did* exist, I doubt they'd have much use for a car!

'I also knew for sure it wasn't a gang of robbers like Inara and Kavi thought, because that didn't make sense either. No robber with even a half a brain would spend weeks planning to rob some boring old houses on a boring old street in Wales – not in our part of Swansea. It wouldn't be worth it. Not unless they were after some ancient TVs – or maybe those weird crystal animals that Mrs Christela at number twenty-seven collects. Plus, their car had a number plate, and if you wanted to, you could use your secret hidden CCTV spy cameras to trace it and find out who they are. Couldn't you?' I ask.

It looks like Sergeant Anita's lips are trying even harder to make her sneeze now, but she fights back again and says, 'Eh-hum. Yes . . . I'm sure we could.'

'I knew it,' I whisper, and tell my brain to remember to let Kavi and Inara know that I was right about that. 'Anyway,' I say, continuing, 'I hate not knowing things. Especially important things, like who's living across the street from me. I knew whoever was inside wasn't a ghost or a monster or a robber. *My* hypnosis told me whoever was in that house was actually . . . a spy.'

I wait for Sergeant Anita to nod at me, but instead she looks at Georgie with her eyebrows all scrunched up.

'Your . . . "hypnosis", Audrey?' asks Georgie. 'What do you mean?'

I frown back at both of them. 'You know – when your brain comes up with a way to explain things,' I say, surprised they don't know. Weren't grown-ups supposed to know all the words? 'It was my hypnosis. My guess.'

'Ah! You mean *hypothesis*,' says Sergeant Anita. As soon as she says it, I know I've said the wrong word.

'Oh! Yeah – that's what I meant.' Then, leaning to the machine, I say, 'Scratch that from the record, your honour,' just like they do on TV, and I continue.

'My hypothesis hunch told me it was an invisible

secret-agent spy who had moved in across the street just so they could spy on me and Peck and Kat and Mam. I didn't have any proof – not just then. It was just a feeling I got whenever I looked at the house and saw all its dark windows. You see, it's my job to know absolutely everything, because knowing everything is the only way I can keep my family – and our secret – safe.'

'Your secret?' asks Sergeant Anita, looking extra interested. Georgie is leaning in too.

I nod. It's strange being listened to by two grown-ups at the same time. Usually it's hard enough to make just one listen properly.

'I haven't got to the part where I tell you what it is yet,' I say.

'Ah! I understand,' says Sergeant Anita. 'Take all the time you need.'

'And remember, you also don't have to say anything you don't want to,' adds Georgie, her face very serious.

Remembering where I left off, I start again.

'So, our secret. I bet, because you're in the police, you have to keep lots of things secret – like about crimes and things. You probably get trained for it too.

I'm good at keeping secrets even without training. And not just that, but I have to make my little brother and sister keep our secret too. But that got harder when the spy moved in opposite, because it felt like we were being watched all the time.

'In three whole years, not a single person has found out about our secret. That's how good we are at acting like everything's OK, even on the bad days. In fact, if I was a real-life actress in Hollywood I think I'd win all the awards – even the one that *everyone* wants where you get the little statue of the man called Oscar. Because if acting is just pretending to be something you're not, then I'm definitely one of the best actresses on the planet. Plus! I don't just play one part, I play all kinds of different parts every single day. I bet the real actors and actresses don't do that.

'When I think about it for more than five minutes, I guess my mam and tad must have known that I was going to be an actress. And Peck and Kat too. It's probably why they named us after Mam's favourite movie stars, the ones who were alive hundreds of years ago and acted in old black-and-white films that were filmed before special effects were even invented. I'm

named after a woman called Audrey Hepburn, and Peck is named after someone called Gregory Peck, and Kat is named after Katharine Hepburn – who, I think, might be Audrey's aunt or something, but I'm not really sure. Mam watches old movies all the time – which means I watch them all the time too. I wish I had a cool superhero name . . . like Storm. Or Raven. Or T'challa. Whoever heard of a superhero called "Audrey"? No-one, that's who.

'Anyway, a few days after the car appeared across the street, I told Mam a bit about the new neighbours and how no one ever saw them. I didn't tell her that I thought they were spies though, because I didn't want her to get worried. That's my other job, you see. As well as knowing about everything, I have to make sure Mam doesn't worry about things too much. It's not good for her. If she thinks and worries too much, her hands shake really badly and her breathing gets noisy and it scares us. So I only tell her what I absolutely have to, and the rest I try to solve myself.

'After the invisible spy moved in, I spent two whole weeks spying right back on them. Every night, after I helped Mam get dressed for bed and got all her

medicines ready for the next day and checked that Peck and Kat had fallen asleep, I headed straight down to the living-room window and used the kitchen-roll tube to watch them. Have you ever used a kitchen-roll tube to spy on people? It's really hard work – especially when there's still loads of the roll left. But it didn't matter how tired I was, or how much of my homework I hadn't finished yet, or how many times my tummy growled at me because it was still hungry, I had to wait and watch and try to see who was living opposite so that we could stop worrying. But after two whole weeks of trying, I still didn't have a single clue.

'The next day, as we were leaving school, I told Inara and Kavi that I still hadn't seen anyone leave the house, and Inara said that maybe, instead of robbers, they were graveyard workers – just like her tad. She used to think her tad was like Batman because he only ever went out at night and said he was "off to fight crime!" But then she found out he worked as a security guard on a graveyard shift – which made him definitely not Batman.

'Inara is super clever but likes to pretend she's only normally clever like everyone else. She has big, round

brown eyes and a mountain of curls that makes her look like a bear shaking water out of its fur whenever she shakes her head at someone. She always rubs the side of her nose whenever she thinks she's right (which is all the time). And she has a scar just above her right eyebrow – she got that from the time she rode her bike into a wall. It's been years since she found out her tad wasn't even a bit like Batman and was actually a night-time security guard, but she still hasn't got over it. So when I said my idea of the invisible neighbours being spies, she shook her curls and rubbed the side of her nose and said, "I'm telling you. They're definitely graveyard workers."

'"OR! They're robbers, like I said before, and they're staking out the street," said Kavi. He was eating a fruit pastille and chewing on it in large, round circles – just like a cow chewing grass.

'Kavi thinks any sweets that have fruit juice in them count as one of his five a day. By his count, he has at least fifty a day and is the healthiest kid in Wales. Whenever anyone wants a fruity, chewy sweet, they come to Kavi – he's famous for always having at least three packets on him. Kavi's got shiny black hair that

looks like curtains, huge white teeth that pop out of his mouth whenever he smiles, and he's the shortest boy in our school. He's also the loudest.

'He said, "Did you hear about those robbers in Cardiff who took, like, fifty *million* pounds' worth of jewellery? The news people are saying they've hidden themselves with all the diamonds somewhere. What if . . . what if they're hiding right here in Abertawe – and they're staying in that house across the road from you? We're not that far away from Cardiff, you know."

'But then Inara said, "It wasn't fifty *million*! It was *fifty* pounds' worth of jewels. And they've already got caught."

'And Kavi said, "No, it wasn't! Why would a robber take just fifty pounds' worth of jewels? They're not stupid!"

'"They were stupid enough to get caught!" Inara reminded him. See, I told you she was clever.

'But Kavi wasn't convinced. "There's probably someone hiding their stash for them until they can get out of jail. I bet that's who's in there! My dad is always saying you've got to be careful when it comes to neighbours. You've got to keep your slits about you."

‘“Your *what*?” asked me and Inara at the same time.

‘“Your slits! These!” said Kavi, pointing to his eyes.

‘“It’s your *wits*,” corrected Inara, rubbing the side of her nose again. “You’re meant to keep your *wits* about you!”

‘“Nah, that’s stupid. Using your eyes is way more important than trying to be funny,” argued back Kavi – even though he knew he was probably wrong. He hates being corrected by Inara, probably more than he hates salad, and he hates salad a LOT. He thinks vegetables should stay where they were found – in the ground.

‘Inara was going to say something else too, but then the ice-cream van arrived. Inara loves ice cream from ice-cream vans more than anything else on the planet. If there was a fire or a zombie apocalypse or something, I’d bet you anything Inara would run straight to the nearest ice-cream van she could find and order a 99 with strawberry sauce and extra nuts before even trying to fight off any zombies or put out the fire.

‘So as soon as Mrs Dimples and her ice-cream van showed up, Inara and Kavi ran off to join the crowd that had gathered all round it. Mrs Dimples isn’t the

real name of the ice-cream van owner – she's actually called Mrs Havens. But everyone calls her Mrs Dimples because she has the deepest dimples in Wales – it's like her face is a bowl of ice cream that someone's taken two scoops from. I always wish I could stay and have an ice cream too, but I have to pick up Peck and Kat from their class every day. And we don't have enough money for nice things like ice cream anyway.

'When I was little, I used to mind that I never got to do all the things that my friends did. But now I just focus on the important thing: getting home as quickly as possible. I'm always worrying about Mam and wondering if she's OK. There have been two times when I got home to find she wasn't, and I thought my life was over, so I always try to get home quickly.

'I waved goodbye to Kavi and Inara, picked up Peck and Kat, and we hurried home. They were telling me all about the paintings they had made in class, when suddenly Kat pulled on my arm and cried out, "Look, Old-Wee! Look!" That's what she calls me – "Old-Wee", because she's never been able to say my name right. It's the worst name anyone can *ever* be called – even by their cute baby sister, but luckily we were on our

street by the time she said it that day, so there was no one from school around.

'"Look! They're moving, they're moving! The monsters are moving!"

'I stopped and looked in the direction Kat was pointing. She was pointing at the house across the street. The one with the invisible spies. Or maybe the thieves.

'I stood and stared, but couldn't see anything or anyone.

'"There's nothing there," I told Kat.

'"But it moooooved," she wailed, as Peck nodded.

'"What moved?" I asked.

'"The kerp-tens," said Kat, pulling on my arm again. "The kerp-tens, the kerp-tens!"

'I waited and watched for a few seconds more, but there was nothing.

'"Come on," I said, not really believing her. Sometimes Kat's imagination is so strong it makes her see things like they're real when they're not. Last month she thought all the food in the lunch hall was screaming because it didn't want to get eaten. But really, it was builders on the roof using some sort of machine.

'I pulled her and Peck away, through our front garden

to the house. I wish our garden was like everyone else's on the street – all neat and clean and flowery. But except for a small bush that sprouts orange flowers whenever it feels like it, everything in our garden is pretty much dead. Even the small square patch of grass looks like straw. That means our house sticks out a lot – which isn't good when we're trying to be like everyone else. One day I'll get it fixed. Until then, the best thing about the outside of our house is our front door, which is blue. Tad painted it when I was smaller, and I still remember him letting me have a go with the brush.

'I opened it and shouted out, "Maaaaaam! We're home!" just like I always do.

'Kat ran straight upstairs, shouting "MAM! I painted in yellow!" and Peck followed her shouting out, "NO! IT WAS LOLLANGE!"

'I remember exactly what they said just then because *that* was when it happened! Peck was shouting and I was turning round to close the door when I looked out for a second. And I saw it! A pair of binoculars flashing at me from a gap in the downstairs curtain. It was only for half a second and then they disappeared – like whoever had been watching me was trying to hide.

'A second later and I would have missed it. But Kat had been right – there *was* someone there . . . and I had been right too – whoever was there was spying on us.

'I didn't know what to do so I quickly slammed the door shut and turned the key to lock it, wondering what they wanted with me and Kat and Peck and Mam! Or as everyone else on our street calls us, "the family behind door number thirty-three".'