

The Top Floor

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You only live once

Skim read the chapter once.

- What is coming to an end for Maha?
- Why does Maha have to go home?
- What is Kieron trying to persuade her to do?

Everything was coming to an end. Maha had had a fantastic year in London but her university course had finished. She had spent nearly all her money, and the visa in her passport told her she had to leave the United Kingdom by the end of the month. It was time to say goodbye to her new friends and go home to see her family, but every time she went on the internet to book her plane ticket, something stopped her. She stared at the screen for a long time, but she couldn't click the button that said 'Buy now'. It just didn't feel right.

Then, on her last night at the university bar, she met Kieron. He was a student too, but he wasn't like her other university friends. Most of them were foreign students like her. They were serious young people who liked to discuss their studies or talk about their future careers. But Kieron was completely different. He never said anything serious. Life for him was one big joke.

The night she met him, he looked completely ridiculous. He was handsome, that was obvious. He was tall, with long black hair and bright blue eyes. But why was he wearing a black hat, red trousers and green boots? He was certainly somebody you noticed, so Maha was surprised that she had never seen him before. Something about him interested her, so she left her friends and walked towards him at the bar.

"Hello," he said to her. "I think I can guess what you want to drink."

"Oh, really?" said Maha.

"Yes," said Kieron. "A vodka and orange juice."

"Well you're wrong," said Maha, smiling. "I just want the orange juice! No vodka, thanks."

"All right, one orange juice coming up!" And he waved at the barman. "One Coke and an orange juice, please."

Kieron smiled at her as they waited. "Are you a student here?" he asked as he paid for the drinks.
"Yes. Well, I was. I've just finished my course."
"So why haven't I seen you here before?"
"You probably don't come here very often," she said. "I'm always here."
"Yes," he said, "that's probably true. I'm always in the library, that's my problem."

"I don't believe you."

"You're right," he said. "I'm not the world's hardest-working student, although I went to the library once. That was in my first week and I haven't been back since." Maha laughed.

"So, where do you spend your time?" she asked him.
"I go to lots of places. I'm a Londoner, you see. I've lived in this city all my life. And there are better places than this university bar, I can tell you." "Give me an example."

"I'll show you, if you like," he said.
"All right."

"Finish your drink," he said, "and follow me!"

Over the next few days, Kieron showed Maha a completely different side to the city. He took her to pubs and bars and nightclubs and parties. They explored parks and palaces and old warehouses by the river. They went to street markets that sold food from every country in the world. He took her to a rock concert held in the back room of a pub. It was the loudest thing she had ever heard. She couldn't believe that London had so much to offer.

But all the time she knew it was coming to an end. It was time for her to go back to her family. How could she stay in London with no visa, no money and no job?
One afternoon they were sitting in a café, when she decided to talk to him about it.

"What?" said Kieron. "You're joking! You can't go home now!"

And then he started talking very quickly and waving his arms. Maha spoke English well, but sometimes she missed some of the things Kieron said. He paused and looked at her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Could you say that again?"

"All of it! You mean you didn't understand *any* of that?" asked Kieron. They both started laughing but when Kieron looked at her again, he noticed that she had a sad expression on her face.

"All right," he said. "I'm going to be serious for once. You're twenty-two years old, you've just finished university and the world is yours. You can do anything you want. Why go home?"

"Because I have no visa, no job and no money."

"That's not a problem," he said with a wave of his hand.

"I'm sorry, Kieron," she said, "but these are big problems. I have to go home."

He held her hand across the table. "But do you really want to go home?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "I'd love to stay, Kieron, you know that. But I can't. It's as simple as that."

"All right," said Kieron. "Just wait a moment. Let's think about this. When was the last time anyone checked your visa?"

Maha tried to remember. In fact, nobody had looked at it since she had arrived in the UK nearly twelve months before.

"You see? There's no problem there, is there?"

"Well," said Maha, "I'm not sure . . . But before she could continue, Kieron interrupted her. "And you need money and a job, right? Well, I can organise that for you."

"Can you?"

"Of course I can. Remember, I've lived in this city all my life." Maha wasn't sure what to say. The thoughts were rushing through her head.

"Are you really serious?" she asked him.

"Of course." She drank a little of her coffee, then looked at him and shook her head. "No, I'm sorry, Kieron. It's a crazy idea. How can I stay here? What do I say to my family?"

"Tell them you're taking some extra holiday. That's true, isn't it?" "Yes, but it's not legal, is it? I'm not allowed to work here, especially if I don't have a visa."

"Oh, come on," said Kieron. "You worry too much. People do it all the time."

Maha still wasn't sure. Kieron squeezed her hand. "Go on," he said. "Take a risk. It'll be an adventure. You'll never have this opportunity again. Come on! You only live once, after all."

Maha nodded. "OK," she said. "Maybe you're right. You only live once."

CHAPTER 2

An interview with Mr Hurst

Skim read the chapter once.

- Where do Kieron and Maha meet Ollie?
- How can Ollie help them?
- What does Mr Hurst offer Maha?

The following day, Kieron met Maha outside her flat. He was driving an old blue sports car with an open top.

“Get in!” he said. “I want you to meet my friend Ollie. He’s in a different part of town, though, so we’ll have to drive.”

“Who’s Ollie?” asked Maha as she got into the car.

“He’s a kind of businessman. He’s got lots of contacts – he knows everybody. He’ll find you a job, I’m sure. And he’s the kind of person who doesn’t ask too many difficult questions. Do you know what I mean?”

Maha nodded, but she was still wondering if this really was a good idea. She thought about her parents. They expected her to be home in a few days. She thought about her visa. It finished in two days’ time. Was she really doing the right thing? Kieron could see that she was worried. When they stopped at some traffic lights, he reached across and squeezed her hand.

“Relax,” he said. “It’ll be OK.”

After about half an hour Kieron parked the car outside a big modern pub.

“This is Ollie’s office,” said Kieron with a smile. “Let’s go and meet him.”

The pub was full of people and very noisy. There were huge television screens on the walls, and most of the customers were men in football shirts and jeans and with very short hair.

“Are you sure this is all right?” asked Maha.

“Of course,” replied Kieron. “Stay with me and you’ll be fine.”

He led her through the crowd to a table at the back. “Hello, Ollie!” he called to a young man in an Arsenal football shirt. “Are you all right?”

Ollie pointed to show that he was talking on his mobile phone and waved towards some empty seats at his table. Maha sat down and Kieron went to the bar to buy some drinks.

“Well, Ollie,” said Kieron when he came back. “I haven’t seen you for a while. How’s business?”

“I can’t complain,” replied Ollie. “You know me. I’ve always got a nice little deal somewhere.”

This was obviously true. Maha noticed that he was wearing an expensive watch, and there was a diamond stud in his ear.

“So, who’s the lovely lady?” asked Ollie, nodding towards Maha.

“This is Maha.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said, shaking her hand.

“We’re at university together,” explained Maha. “Or perhaps I should say we *were* at university together. I’ve just finished, you see.”

“And that’s why we came to see you, Ollie,” said Kieron. “Maha wants to stay here for a little longer, but she needs a job, and I thought ... Well, I thought, why not go and see my old friend Ollie?”

Ollie nodded and drank from his glass. Then he thought for a moment. “It’s not easy to find a job just now, you know? There are all these problems with the economy. Of course,” said Maha. “I understand. Don’t worry.”

“No, no,” said Ollie. “I’m not saying it’s impossible. Every problem has a solution ... if you think about it long enough.”

He was silent for a moment. Then he continued. “So, Maha, you’re a foreign student.”

“Yes, that’s why it’s a problem for me. My course has finished, so I have to go home.”

“And there’s a little problem with her visa as well,” added Kieron.

“I understand,” said Ollie. “I don’t think we need to worry about that. All right, Maha, I’ve got an idea. I know a man who needs a secretary. It’s nothing special. You answer the phone, look after the post, perhaps type some letters ... that kind of thing. Can you do that?”

“Of course.”

“It’s an international company. I don’t know what it does exactly. Import-export, I think. Anyway, the office is near Heathrow Airport. Is that any good for you?”

“Yes, that’s fine. I can get there easily.”

“All right, then. Let me make a phone call.”

Ollie called a number on his mobile phone. Kieron looked at Maha

and smiled. Then Ollie got up from the table and started talking as he walked away.

"Is this OK?" whispered Maha to Kieron.
"It's fine. He's an old friend."

"I don't feel very comfortable about all this."
"Relax. It'll be fine."

Ollie came back a few moments later and gave Maha his phone.
"Job interview," he said with a smile. "The man's name is Mr Hurst.
George Hurst."

Maha suddenly felt very nervous, but she had no time to think.
"Hello?" she said. "Mr Hurst?"

There was no small talk. Mr Hurst seemed very busy. "Has Ollie explained this job to you?" he asked.
It was noisy in the pub and Mr Hurst spoke with a strong foreign accent, so it was hard for Maha to understand him at first.

"I'm sorry," she said, "can you say that again?"

Mr Hurst repeated his question.

"Well, I know a little about it."

"That's fine," said Mr Hurst. "Ollie tells me you're a clever girl. You'll learn quickly. Now the most important thing is – can I trust you?"
"Yes, of course."

"I am a busy man, so I will depend on you. Tell me again. Can I trust you?"

"Yes, of course."

"Do you promise?"

"I promise."

He asked her a few quick questions and told her about her wages. It was not a lot of money, but it wasn't too bad. And then he asked, "Can you start on Monday?"

"On Monday?" she said, surprised. "Well... well... yes, I suppose I can."

"Nine o'clock," said Mr Hurst. "Don't be late."

Then Maha wrote down the address of the office in her notebook and that was it. She had a job.

"You see," said Kieron as they drove home. "No problem. I told you."
"It was all rather strange, though," said Maha. "Do people normally do job interviews like that in this country?"

"Everyone's different," said Kieron. "What's normal?"

"Well, why didn't he want to meet me? I might have two heads or something like that? How does he know?"

"You've met Ollie and he trusts Ollie. Mr Hurst's probably a busy man. He doesn't want to waste his time."

"And another thing," said Maha. "Isn't George Hurst an English name?"

"It sounds English to me."

"Well, he certainly wasn't English. He had a strong accent."

"People change their names, though, don't they? Maybe his real name's hard for English people to say."

"Hmm," said Maha. "Maybe."

"Oh, come on, Maha. It'll be OK. You've got a job. You're staying in London. You should be happy!"

"I know," said Maha. "I am happy, but something doesn't feel right."

"Come on," said Kieron. "You worry too much. If you don't like it, you can leave. What have you got to lose?"

Maha turned to Kieron and smiled. "Perhaps you're right," she said.
"Maybe I worry too much."

George Hurst Import-Export

CHAPTER 3

Skim read the chapter once.

- What happens to the first delivery?
- Who does Maha have lunch with?
- What does Maha find in the second delivery?

The office was in a business park in the west of London. It certainly didn't look like the home of a successful international company. It was a small building with two floors and a flat roof. There were no cars outside and there was a large pile of rubbish next to the front step. Nervously, Maha pushed open the front door and stood in the hallway. She found the light switch and looked around her. There were two doors, and next to one of them there was a small sign which read, 'George Hurst Import-Export'. Stuck to the door there was an envelope with her name written on the front, and inside she found a set of keys. She unlocked the door and looked around the room. It was almost empty. There was just a desk, a chair, an old cupboard, a kettle and a computer. So, this was her office. She bent down to pick up some post from the floor and walked over to the desk. On the computer there was a typed note which read as follows:

Mr George Hurst will be away on business for the next few days. These are your duties:

1. Answer the phone and take messages
2. Check the post and throw away all advertising
3. Sign for deliveries
4. Be polite to visitors
Coffee is on the floor next to the kettle.

It was not the welcome Maha had been expecting, but she had never worked in the UK before so she had nothing to compare it with. Perhaps all offices were like this. It seemed rather strange to her. Anyway, at least the job didn't sound too difficult, and she quite liked the idea of spending a few days alone.

She made a cup of black coffee, sat down and checked the post. It was all advertising, so she threw it all away. Then she switched on the computer and, as she had nothing else to do, she started to surf the internet. She was soon checking her favourite shopping sites. After all, now that she was earning money, perhaps she could afford to buy some new clothes.

After an hour, she got up and walked around her new office. There was dust everywhere. It appeared that it hadn't been used for some time. She tried the windows, but they were locked and there were bars on them. She looked in the cupboard but couldn't see anything interesting; it was full of old letters and papers. Then she heard a "Miaow!" noise above her head. She looked up and saw a black cat looking down at her from a small window high up in the wall that she hadn't noticed before.

"Hello, cat," she said. "What do you want?"

The cat jumped down on to the cupboard and then on to the floor. He sat down and looked up at her. "Miaow!"

"I'm sorry, I haven't got anything for you. There's no milk here." The cat stared at her for a moment and then walked over to the door, stood there and waited.

"Do you want to go out?" Maha said. "Go on, then." She opened the door and the cat disappeared into the hallway. Maha sat down at her desk again with a smile on her face. It was nice to have a visitor. Then she went back to the internet.

When the doorbell rang half an hour later, she jumped. She got up and opened the door. "Hello," said Maha, with a smile. "Can I help you?"

"Delivery!" said a fat man in a yellow cap.

"Oh, thank you. What is it?"

The man didn't look at her. "Sign here," he said and gave her a piece of paper. "Aren't you going to tell me what it is?" said Maha. "The delivery, I mean?"

"How should I know?" said the fat man. "It's a delivery. It's a delivery of boxes, all right?"

Maha looked over his shoulder and saw that there were several large wooden boxes in the hallway. "But what's in the boxes?" she asked.

"Listen, I don't know what's in them, I don't know where they came from and, to be honest, I don't care. Just sign, all right?"

"Oh, OK," she said. She was signing her name when another man came into the

hallway. At first she didn't recognise him and then she saw that it was Ollie - Kieron's friend from the pub. "Ollie?" she said. "What are you doing here?"

He looked a little embarrassed for a moment. He scratched his head and looked away from her. "I'm just helping Mr Hurst," he said. "He needed some help with his deliveries. There were some problems at one of his other offices this morning, you see, so he called me. He helps me sometimes and I help him - that's business. Do you know what I mean?" "Oh, I see," said Maha and gave the paper back to the fat man. She didn't know why, but she didn't really believe Ollie.

"So," he said, trying to change the subject, "how's the new job?"

"Quiet," she said, "so far."

"Let's hope it stays that way!"

"Yes," replied Maha and before she could say any more, the two men picked up one of the boxes and started carrying it upstairs. "We'll put them in the usual place," said Ollie.

"The usual place?" asked Maha.

"Yes, up on the top floor. All right?"

As they climbed the stairs, Maha looked at the other boxes and wondered what was inside them. She tried to read the labels. None of them were in English, but one had some Russian writing on it. She had learnt some Russian at school several years before and so she tried to read it. She thought it said 'Danger' but she wasn't completely sure. "Ollie," she said when the two men came back downstairs, "are these boxes dangerous?"

"Only if you drop them on your foot!" he said, and the two men laughed loudly. "Don't worry about it," he said to her as they picked up the next box. "It's all under control. Why don't you go and do some work?"

Maha didn't like the way he spoke to her, but she had no reason to stay in the hallway, so she went back to her computer. By half past twelve she was hungry, so she decided to look for something to eat. She was locking her office door when she heard a voice behind her.

"Hello. Are you new?"

It was a girl of about the same age as her. She was smartly dressed and spoke with a strong London accent.

"Yes," said Maha. "I just started this morning."

"That's nice. This place is normally so quiet. I'm Deb, by the way. I work in the office opposite."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Maha."

The two women looked at each other for a moment.

"You're going for lunch, I suppose," said Deb.

"Yes."

"Well, you won't find anything to eat around here. The nearest sandwich bar's over a mile away."

"Is it?"

"Yes. You can share mine, though, if you like."

"Thank you. I'd like that."

"Well, as I said, it's normally so quiet round here. It's nice to have someone to talk to. Sit on the stairs and I'll get my lunch box."

Deb's sandwiches were horrible, but Maha wanted to be polite so she tried her best to eat one. "So what does your company do?" she asked as they ate.

"Company? It's not really a company - it's only me and my boss. I'm a secretary."

"Same as me," said Maha.

"He's an accountant. My boss, I mean. But he's away this week, so I'm on my own for a few days."

"Oh, that sounds... er... very interesting."

"Don't be stupid. It's very, very boring, but it pays my bills."

"Same as me," said Maha again, laughing.

Deb opened a can of drink and offered Maha some. "Do you know what your company does?" she asked. "Not really. I know it's an import-export business, but what does that mean?"

"We've never understood what Mr Hurst does. We haven't seen him for quite a long time, actually. He travels a lot, I think." They sat in silence for a few moments and Maha took another small bite of her horrible sandwich. "What happens upstairs?" she asked after a while.

"On the top floor? There are two empty offices up there. They've never been used as far as I know."

"But surely Mr Hurst uses one of them?"

"No, I don't think so. As I say, they've always been empty."

"So is there some kind of store room up there?"

"No. Just the two offices."

"Are you sure?"

"Go and see."

Maha got up and walked to the top of the stairs. Deb was right, of course.

course. There was no store room. There were just two office doors and no sign of the wooden boxes that had arrived earlier.

"Do you see what I mean?" called Deb.

Maha came back downstairs slowly, feeling a little confused. "But there were some men here this morning," she said. "They took some boxes up there. Didn't you hear them?"

"Oh no," said Deb and she laughed. "I don't hear anything. When my boss is away I listen to this all day." She took a small music player out of her handbag. "I couldn't live without it!"

"Oh, I see," said Maha.

"Anyway, are you going to finish your sandwich?" asked Deb.

"No, no. It's all right, thank you," said Maha. "But it was very nice." "I'll give it to the cat, then. Visa!" she called. "Visa!"

Maha jumped at the sound of the word.

"Why are you saying 'Visa'?"

"Visa? That's what I call the cat."

"Why Visa?"

"Because he goes exactly where he likes and nobody ever stops him. It's my little joke. Come on, Visa."

The cat appeared from the shadows and sniffed the sandwich for a moment. Then, without taking a bite, he walked away quickly with his nose in the air.

"Look at that!" laughed Deb. "Even the cat won't eat my food. It's no surprise I can't find a boyfriend! Anyway, back to work. See you later, Maha."

"See you. And thanks for lunch."

Maha closed her office door and thought hard. It seemed to her that something was not quite right. But what was it exactly?

She went online and looked up 'George Hurst Import-Export' on Google. There were more than 10,000 results, but after more than an hour she still couldn't find what she was looking for.

Then, just after three o'clock, there was another delivery. It was a different delivery man this time. He was friendly and polite, and he left a small box on Maha's desk. When he had gone, Maha picked up the box and shook it gently. She felt like a child who has found a birthday present hidden in her parents' bedroom. She really wanted to know what was inside. Perhaps it could tell her something about what Mr Hurst really did. Should she open it? Why not? She worked for the company, after all.

She opened the box and, inside, found another box. Inside that box

there was a pile of business cards. She held one of them up to the light.

George Hurst Import-Export
Maha Pelhova
Office Manager

They were her business cards. She smiled at her job title. It made her sound rather important. Perhaps nothing was wrong after all. Maybe it was just a normal job, in a normal office. Kieron was always telling her that she worried too much.

CHAPTER 4

A lesson in trust

Skim read the chapter once.

- Is Maha busy in her office?
- Who is her next visitor?
- What is Maha doing when she meets Mr Hurst?

Nothing happened in the office for the next three days. Nothing. There were no visitors. The phone didn't ring. There were no deliveries. In the morning Maha surfed the internet and watched the rain outside the window. She had lunch with Deb on the stairs and listened to her long, dull stories about the same old things: the boyfriend who left her, the boyfriend who laughed at her, and the boyfriend who didn't like her cooking. In the afternoons, Maha slept for an hour or two in the chair in front of her computer.

But although the days were boring, the evenings were wonderful. She had no idea that London offered so many things to do, so many places to go, so many people to meet. Kieron always met her outside the office at six and every evening he took her somewhere new. There were pubs and nightclubs, parties and concerts, new friends and new faces everywhere. Her job was boring but she really didn't care.

Then, while she was in the office on Friday morning, the doorbell rang. She opened the door and saw the fat man she had met on Monday. He didn't smile or say hello or try to be friendly. Maha thought that he didn't look well. His face was very white and his eyes were red.

"Delivery," he said. "Sign here."

Maha looked over his shoulder. There were several big wooden boxes in the hallway. Visa pushed past her feet into the hall.

"Excuse me," she said. "Do you know what's in these boxes this time?"

"No," said the man and coughed loudly.
"And where are you going to put them?"

"Usual place."
"And where's that?"

"Just sign."

"I'm not going to sign until..."
The man didn't listen to her, but turned around and shouted through the door into the street "Oi! We've got a problem here!"

A moment later another man joined him. It wasn't Ollie this time. This man was older and taller, and he wore a dirty white T-shirt. He looked Maha straight in the eye and said in a calm, quiet voice: "Listen, young lady. We've been driving all night. And now we want to go home and go to sleep. We don't want to waste time arguing with you. Do you understand? Just sign."

Maha decided it was best to sign the form. But as the men carried the first of the boxes upstairs, she tried to follow them to see what they were doing. The tall man turned around.

"You can't come up here. Health and safety reasons. What if we dropped this and it fell on your head? Whoah!" He pretended to fall backwards and Maha jumped. "You see what I mean? You stay downstairs, right?"

While the men were upstairs, she tried to read the labels on the other boxes. She could see that one of them had come from Heathrow Airport. Another was covered in writing that she didn't recognise. Chinese, maybe? Or Japanese? There was no Russian this time.

"Oi!" shouted the fat man from the top of the stairs. "Mind your own business."

"This is my business," she said. "I just signed for them."

At that moment she was certain she heard a noise – a cry from one of the boxes.

"What was that?" she asked as the fat man came down the stairs towards her.
"What?"

The noise came again.
"That."

The fat man bent down. The noise came again, but louder this time. "That," he said, "is a cat." And he picked up Visa the cat and held him in front of Maha's face.

"Do you know something?" he said. "You worry too much. My advice is – go and make a nice cup of tea and forget all about it."

And Maha knew from his voice that it was best to do as he said. Deb had a day off, so Maha had lunch alone at her desk. As she ate, she couldn't stop thinking about the wooden boxes. Why was it all so secret? What was inside them? Where had the men put them? Where

did they come from? And – where were they going next? Since the building was empty, she decided to check the top floor again. She finished her lunch and climbed the stairs. She listened carefully for a few moments, but there were no sounds apart from the traffic outside. She turned the handle of one door, but it was locked of course. She tried the door to the other office, with the same result. Then she got down on her knees and looked through the keyhole. She thought she could see some dark shapes inside. Were they the boxes? She wasn't sure. Then she heard a noise behind her, turned round and froze. A man was looking down at her.

"Can I help you?" he asked. He was a small man, about forty years old, and he wore a dark suit that was too big for him.

"Oh, hello," said Maha. "I was... I was just checking something."

"You were just checking something," the man repeated and Maha noticed he had a strong foreign accent.

"Yes, I work here, so I... I..." she couldn't think what to say next, so she looked down at the floor.

"Let me introduce myself," said the man. "My name's George Hurst. And you are...?"

"I'm Maha. I'm... I'm sorry, Mr Hurst. I'm... I'm your new secretary."

"Stand up!" said Mr Hurst.

Maha stood up.

"Why are you not at your desk?"

"Because... er... because... I don't know. I'm sorry, Mr Hurst."

"When we spoke on the phone, you said I could trust you."

"Oh, you can trust me, Mr Hurst, you can."

"Then what are you doing up here, looking through a keyhole on your knees?"

Maha still couldn't think of anything to say. Mr Hurst was staring at her. His brown eyes were cold and clever.

"Go and do some work," he said. "I'll speak to you later."

Maha walked slowly back to her office, sat at her desk and waited. She didn't like this. She felt as if she was back at school, waiting to talk to the head teacher. An hour passed. She wanted to surf the internet, but thought it was better not to. She looked out of the window and grew more and more bored.

"What am I doing here?" she asked herself again and again. "What am I doing here?"

At half past four, Mr Hurst came into the office. He stood by the

door for a long time and stared at her without speaking. Maha felt a little frightened of him. Then he said in a very calm voice: "Maha, you must understand that business is all about trust. I trusted you with my keys. I trusted you with my computer, my telephone, my office, and what do you do in return? You leave your desk during working hours and you spy on other offices. What is wrong with you, young lady?"

"I'm sorry, Mr Hurst."

"Can I also make it clear that the top floor has no connection with me? It has no connection with my business, none at all. You have no right to go up there. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Mr Hurst."

"So, can I trust you in future?"

"Yes, Mr Hurst, yes, I promise."

He stared at her again as if he was making a decision. "Good," he said at last. "So have you finished your work for the day?"

Maha nodded.

"Well, as it's Friday, you can leave early. Oh, and here's something for you." He handed her a fat envelope. She took a quick look inside. It was her wages for the week in cash.

"Thank you, Mr Hurst."

"Have a good weekend," he said. "I'll see you on Monday."

"Goodbye, Mr Hurst."

Maha left the office in a bad mood. Mr Hurst had made her feel small and stupid. She crossed the road and waited for Kieron. It was getting dark and cold, so she walked up and down to keep warm. Across the road she could see Mr Hurst moving around inside the office. Then the light went off, and a few moments later the light went on in one of the 'empty' offices on the top floor. Mr Hurst was in there. It had to be him; there was no one else in the building. Why had he lied to Maha? Why did he tell her that the top floor had no connection with him? Something was not quite right. Maha was sure of it now.

CHAPTER 5

The flying rat

Skim read the chapter once.

- What does Maha talk about on the way home from her office?
- Where do Maha and Kieron go the following day?
- What do they find on the top floor?

Maha couldn't stop talking as Kieron drove her home. Her mind was full of ideas. "What's inside those boxes, do you think? It has to be something illegal. Stolen goods? That's possible, isn't it?" "Maybe," said Kieron, but he wasn't really listening.

"The office is near the airport so they could store them there and then send them abroad. Or it could be guns or drugs... or even people. I read about that in the newspapers. They hide people inside those big boxes..."

"Don't be stupid, Maha. People need to eat, drink, that kind of thing. You can't keep them in boxes in empty offices."

"All right, it's drugs, then. That's why I saw that 'Danger' sign."

"They don't put 'Danger' signs on boxes of illegal drugs."

"OK. Guns."

"You know your problem, Maha? You watch too many James Bond movies."

"That's easy for you to say. You don't work there."

"Oh, come on, Maha. It's just a job. Don't take everything so seriously. Do you want my advice? Take the money and don't ask too many questions."

"But can't you see my problem? I signed for those boxes. It's my name on the form. If something goes wrong, it'll be my responsibility."

"Listen, you signed as Mr Hurst's secretary. It's his problem, not yours. And anyway, who says it's a problem? They're probably full of socks or plastic toys or hairbrushes, or something really boring like that."

"I'd still like to know what's happening, though. I've got a strange

feeling about it. Have you heard from Ollie recently? He'll know something about it, won't he?"

"No, Ollie's ill."

"What, too ill to answer his phone?"

"Yes, it seems so. He's been in bed for the past three days."

"So how do you know this if he can't answer his phone?"

"His mum told me."

"Does Ollie live with his mum?"

"Yes. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"No, but... well, when I met him I thought he was a businessman. You told me he had contacts."

"Well, of course he has contacts. He found you the job, didn't he?" "Yes. But he's also a delivery man and he lives with his mum. That's strange for a businessman, don't you think?"

Kieron hit the steering wheel with his hand. "I'm sorry, Maha," he said. "All these questions, all these suspicions. What's wrong with you? I think you spend too much time in that office with nothing else to think about."

Maha didn't say anything. There was probably some truth in what Kieron said.

"All right," he said. "Can we talk about something else? It's Friday night. I want to have some fun."

They drove in silence for a while, but Maha's thoughts kept returning to the offices on the top floor. At last she said, "I'm sorry, Kieron. I can't stop thinking about the office. Will you come there with me tomorrow?"

"What? On a Saturday?"

"I just want you to look around and tell me what you think." "I'll come if you promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"You don't say another word about the office today." "I promise."

"Good! Let's go to the pub."

They arrived at the office just before twelve o'clock the following day. As they got out of the car, Kieron sang the James Bond music quietly to himself.

"Oh, shut up!" whispered Maha.

"Relax!" said Kieron. "There's no one here."

Maha took a deep breath and unlocked the front door. She knocked

on the door of the accountant's office and waited. There was no reply. "You're right," she said. "There's no one here. Now, come upstairs. This is what I want to show you."

Maha led the way, but froze as she reached the top of the stairs. "Arggh! Look at that!" she said. "That's horrible!"

Kieron stood next to her. "Oooh," he said. "That *is* horrible."

A big brown rat was lying on its side in the middle of the floor. "What's a rat doing there?" said Maha.

"The cat probably killed it. You said there was a cat here."

Maha took a step towards it. "That wasn't killed by a cat. There's no blood. There's not a mark on it."

"All right, it was poisoned, then."

"Maybe," said Maha and walked slowly around the rat's body, looking at it carefully. She touched it with her foot and stepped back quickly.

"It's definitely dead," said Kieron.

"So, what are we going to do with it?" asked Maha.

"Why don't we just leave it there?" said Kieron. "Dealing with dead rats is not one of your duties, is it?"

"We can't just leave it there," said Maha. "It's dirty."

"All right, then," said Kieron and he had a big smile on his face. "Just watch this."

He went over and opened the window, then he picked up the rat by its tail and threw it high into the air and out into the street. "You can't do that!" said Maha.

"I just did."

"But what if someone is walking past?"

"What? You mean if someone is having a pleasant walk down the road on a Saturday afternoon, and then suddenly a flying rat lands on their head!" Kieron was laughing so much he could hardly get the words out.

"It's not funny, Kieron," said Maha, but she was laughing too.

"Anyway," said Kieron, looking out of the window, "there's no one out there, so you don't have to worry."

Maha stood beside him and looked out as well. "Yes, you're right. It's always so quiet around here."

Kieron tried to put his arm around her, but she pushed him away. "Don't touch me with your dirty hands," she said. "You've just picked up a dead rat, remember?"

"Sorry, sorry. I'll wash them in a moment. Just show me what you want to show me first."

"Well, these are the empty offices," she said. Kieron tried the handles, but of course they were both locked.

"You can only really see by looking through the keyhole," she said. Kieron got down on his knees and peered through the keyhole. "Maybe I can see some dark shapes," he said, "although I'm not sure." "Those are the boxes."

"Right. If you say so I'll believe you. Those are the boxes. So is that all there is?"

"Well, yes."

Kieron stood up and looked at Maha. "What do you want me to say, Maha? They are boxes in a dark room. The room is locked. We can't look at the boxes, we can't open them, we can't read their labels... we can't even touch them. What is the point of coming here? Why are we wasting our Saturday like this?"

"Because I need to find out what's happening."

"Listen. I think I can explain to you exactly what is happening. Mr Hurst is the kind of businessman who does a few things he shouldn't. Maybe he buys and sells things he shouldn't. Maybe he doesn't pay his taxes. There are lots of businessmen like that."

"But that's wrong, Kieron."

"Oh yes, of course, it's wrong, but that's the way the world works. You're not going to change it, so why worry about it?" "Because... because I don't want to be a part of something like that."

"But you *are* a part of it. Accept it."

Maha was starting to get angry. "I am not a part of it!" "Relax! I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it. You wanted to stay in London so you took this job. That's fine. If you really want something, you have to compromise a bit sometimes. That's life."

"I am not the sort of person who makes compromises like that!"

"Excuse me, you *are* staying in this country without a visa. Am I right?" "Yes, but that was your idea."

"You are staying here illegally and you are working here illegally. That's OK with me, but don't tell me you're completely innocent in this situation."

"But I haven't done anything wrong."

"All right, but have you paid tax on the money in that envelope Mr Hurst gave you yesterday?"

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that you haven't paid your tax, but that's all right with

me as well. I'm trying to show you that there's no real difference between you and Mr Hurst. Everybody does this kind of thing. Stop worrying about it."

"I'm not the same as him!" Maha shouted. "And it is not all right!" Kieron could see that there were tears in her eyes now.

"I'm sorry," he said. "All right, I'm not saying you're exactly the same as Mr Hurst."

"So what are you saying?"

"I was just saying... I was just trying to say... Oh, I'm sorry. Let's forget it. It's not important."

They stood in silence for a moment and looked out of the window. "I now realise," said Maha, "that I have made some serious mistakes. It was a mistake to stay here without a visa. It was a mistake to take this job. But do you know my biggest mistake? My biggest mistake was to listen to you."

"Hey, that is not fair! I was trying to help. You wanted to stay."

"Well, I don't want to stay any more. I don't want to stay if it means living with these cheap lies. I don't want it, Kieron. I'm going home."

"Just a minute! What do you mean? You can't just go home."

"I can," said Maha, "and that's exactly what I'm going to do."

"We can talk about this in the car."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not getting into the car with you until I've booked my ticket home."

"Maha!"

"I've made my decision."

"Be reasonable."

"If I get into the car with you, we'll go to another party, another pub, and I'll be back here again on Monday morning. I don't want to live like this."

"But Maha, please. I was doing my best for you. I thought this was what you wanted."

"Well, it isn't what I want, not in these conditions. And right now I just want to get away from this mess. I want to go home, I want to see my parents and then, when things are properly organised, I'll come back."

"You'll come back?"

"Yes, of course."

"I've heard that before."

"I'll come back, Kieron."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"Please, Kieron, look at it from my point of view."

"Yeah, sure. I'll see you when you come back."

"You don't believe me, do you?"

Kieron was already walking down the stairs.

"Kieron!... Kieron!... Kieron, please!"

He closed the front door without looking back.

CHAPTER 6

A loud click

Skim read the chapter once.

- Who is the man who comes into the office?
- Who does the man phone?
- What is the 'loud click'?

Maha unlocked the door to her office and ran to her chair. She put her head in her hands as tears ran down her face and dropped on to the desk. After half an hour, or maybe more, she sat up straight. "Come on," she said to herself. "Be strong."

She switched on the computer and started to surf the internet for airline tickets. There were several sites with good prices, but it was the same old problem. She just couldn't click the 'Buy now' button. Why not? "Come on, Maha," she said again.

Then she got up from her desk and walked up and down the room a few times. She talked to herself about the reasons for her decision. She told herself that it was the right thing to do. She had a family waiting for her back home. She had just successfully finished a course at a British university. A wonderful future awaited her. Why was she risking all that? Why was she wasting her time in this stupid job? She was sure she was making the right decision.

And then she heard a noise outside the door. For a moment it felt as if her heart had stopped. "Kieron?" she whispered. "Kieron?"

Suddenly the door burst open and a man stood at the entrance to the office. He was heavy, with a red face and a blond moustache, and he seemed to be in a very bad mood. It was definitely not Kieron.

"What are you doing here?" he shouted at Maha.

"I could ask you the same question," she said.

"Well, my name is George Hurst and I own this business, so that's why I'm here. Now, tell me, why are you in my office, young lady?"

"You're not George Hurst," said Maha. "I've met George Hurst. I know him."

"I think you'll find I am George Hurst," he said, and he reached into his pocket and brought out a passport. "You see? George Hurst. Would you like to see my driving licence as well?"

Maha felt embarrassed. She didn't know what to say.

"Would you like to see my driving licence?" the man repeated.

"No," said Maha. "No, no. I'm sorry..."

Maha was very confused. Was this man really George Hurst? His passport looked genuine. But if this man was George Hurst, who was the man who had employed her? What was happening here? "I'm sorry," she said. "Is this some kind of joke?" "This is certainly not a joke," said the man. "I don't find this situation funny at all, I can tell you!"

He looked around the office carefully, then walked towards Maha's desk. "So now we know that I'm George Hurst and that this is my office, the next question is: who are you?" "I'm Maha."

"Maha? So, Maha, can you explain what you are doing here?" "I work here."

"We both know that is a lie. This is my office. I think I know who works here."

"But I do."

"Come on. What are you really doing here? ... Well?"

"I told you. I work here."

"If that's the best reason you can give me, I think this is probably a matter for the police."

"No!" said Maha. "I haven't done anything wrong. I work here. I came here on a Saturday because I wanted to use the computer. I'm trying to buy a plane ticket to go home."

"Rubbish!" said the man. "I'm not going to listen to such stupid lies."

"I'm telling the truth!" But the man wasn't listening. Instead, he picked up the phone and dialled a number. "Yes," he said, as he walked towards the door. "I'd like to report an incident at George Hurst Import-Export... a burglary... Yes, that's right, in the business park... In fact, I've got the burglar here with me... No, I don't think she's dangerous..."

He walked out into the hallway and closed the door so that Maha couldn't hear the rest of the conversation, but she already knew that he was calling the police. She sat at the desk and held her head in her hands. She couldn't believe this was happening to her. What could she say? What could she do? After a few minutes the man came back into

the room and walked over to the desk. "I think these are my keys," he said, picking up her office keys.

"What?" said Maha. Everything was happening too quickly for her. "And this is my phone line." He bent down, pulled the phone and internet connection out of the wall and put the cables in his pocket.

"What are you doing?" said Maha.

"And this is probably your phone," he said, picking up her mobile phone, "but I'll keep it for now." And he put that in his pocket, too. "Stop!" shouted Maha. "Stop! You can't do that! Listen to me! We need to talk."

"You can discuss all this with the police when they arrive."

"No, Mr Hurst! Please!"

"They'll be here soon, although they said they're very busy at the moment. It's a Saturday, you see. But you're not planning to go anywhere, are you?"

"Please, Mr Hurst..."

He suddenly turned and banged his hand on the desk.

"Maha!" he said. "I'm a busy man. I really don't have time to talk about this. I don't know what you are doing here, but clearly something is very wrong. The police have keys to this office and I have a meeting to go to. And that's my final word on the subject. Goodbye." And he walked out of the office, closed the door and turned the key in the lock with a loud click.

Maha stared at the door. This was crazy. She ran over and tried the handle but it was definitely locked. "Mr Hurst!" she screamed. "Mr Hurst! Please!"

Outside, she heard a car drive away.

Think, think, Maha. Think, think, think.

She tried the windows, but they were locked and there were bars on them. She tried the phone and the internet, but they were both dead, of course. She shouted for help a few times. But it was no good. No one could hear her. She had no way of contacting the outside world.

She sat down at her desk and thought hard. There had to be a solution to this. If the police found her here, she would be in trouble. She had no visa and no work permit. She had signed for all those strange boxes in the room on the top floor. And now it seemed that she had no right to be in this office at all. She had no idea what was happening to her, but she knew she had to get out of the office. She had to get out, but how?

Then she remembered Visa the cat and how he had come in through the little window high up in the wall. Could she try to get out that way? She took her shoes off and climbed on to the desk chair and then pulled herself on to the top of the cupboard. It moved from side to side so she had to balance carefully. It didn't look hopeful. She wasn't big, but the window looked much too small for her. But maybe if she could put her head through it, she could shout or wave to someone outside. She reached up and felt the cupboard move beneath her. She tried to balance, but felt it move again. Then suddenly she was falling backwards.

Her head hit the floor with a thud and everything went black.

CHAPTER 7

Voices in the night

Skim read the chapter once.

- Who does Maha hear outside?
- Why does she hide?
- What does she do to Visa the cat?

It was dark when Maha opened her eyes. Her head hurt badly, and her left ankle was stiff and painful. There was a blue flashing light somewhere. An ambulance, perhaps? No. She realised she was still lying on the office floor and the blue light was outside the window. Slowly she sat up and rested her back against the wall. Her head felt strange. She thought she could hear voices somewhere. She listened carefully. She really could hear voices. They were outside in the street. She recognised one voice because of its strong foreign accent. It was the man who had employed her, the man she used to think was called Mr Hurst.

"No, officer, no, there's nothing to worry about here, I promise," he was saying.

"If you're sure," said the other voice. Maha guessed he was a policeman.

"I'm certain. My colleague and I have done a very careful check of the whole building and we found nothing suspicious. I'm sorry you've wasted your time."

"That's strange," said the policeman. "We were told there was a burglar in the building."

"Well, I promise you there isn't."

"Are you sure you don't want me to check?"

"I'm certain, thank you, officer."

"You have to be careful these days," said the policeman. "But if you're happy and you're sure there's nothing I can do for you, I'll leave you."

"Thank you, officer, thank you."

Maha heard a car door close and then the police car drove away.

"What do we do now, boss?" said a voice that Maha hadn't heard before.

"Well, first we need to be careful," said her employer. "I don't like this. What was that policeman doing here? And why did he say that Mr Hurst had called them? I thought he was away until next weekend."

"That's what I understood too, boss. Maybe he's come back early." "But if he is back, why did he come here? He never uses this office."

"Well, he doesn't usually, boss, does he?"

"I still don't understand this story about a burglar. We didn't leave anything suspicious in his office, did we?"

"No, of course not. We checked it yesterday after the girl went home."

"And Mr Hurst has no access to the top floor, so he doesn't know anything about us. I don't understand it. Something is wrong. I don't like it."

Although Maha's head still hurt, she was thinking much more clearly now. So, it seemed that the man with the red face who had taken her phone was the real Mr Hurst. That explained why he thought she was a burglar. But if he was the real Mr Hurst, who was the man outside? Why was he pretending to be Mr Hurst? Why had he employed her as a secretary in an office that didn't belong to him? What exactly was he doing? Maha didn't have the answers to any of these questions, but she was sure she was in big, big trouble.

Outside, the two men were still talking. "I think it's too risky to do anything right now," said the voice she didn't know. "What if the police come back to check again and find us?"

"You're right. Let's wait a few hours," said her employer, the fake Mr Hurst. "But I want to make sure everything is OK. Can you get the overalls from the van?"

"No problem, boss."

What were they talking about? Maha was fairly sure that it was the boxes. It sounded as if they were planning to do something with them that night. And they were also planning to check the building – which meant that she was in real danger. Her heart started beating very fast. She knew she had to find a place to hide. The pain in her ankle was still bad, but she managed quietly to push the cupboard back against the wall. Then she sat underneath the desk and tried to make herself as small as possible.

She heard the two men open the front door and go upstairs. Then she heard their footsteps on the floor above as they moved around. Since they spoke in low voices she couldn't understand what they were saying, but from time to time she could hear a fast 'bleep-bleep-bleep'

noise. After about twenty minutes they closed the door and their footsteps came down the stairs.

"Let's check the office," said one of them.

Maha held her breath.

There was a click as they unlocked the door.

Bang! Bang! Bang! went Maha's heart.

They shone a light around the room.

"There's nothing here."

"Just a minute, boss. Can I switch the main light on?"

"No, don't do that. I don't want to attract attention."

"All right. But I thought I saw something move."

Maha held her face in her hands as the man's footsteps approached the desk. She noticed that he was wearing a strange pair of boots and overalls which flashed white or silver as he moved. The man stopped and shone his light around again.

"Well, what about that?" he said.

Maha heard a "Miaow!" noise.

"Look at that, boss. It's a cat."

"Stupid thing!" said the other voice. "Leave it here. Come on, let's get something to eat. Then we can come back and finish this business."

They locked the door and a few minutes later she heard their van drive away. She got out from under the desk and sat in the chair. She suddenly felt very, very tired. But this was no time to rest. She needed to do something. She needed to think. She needed a plan.

And then she felt something touch her legs. The cat! Visa the cat!

"Hello," she said. "Hello, Visa. I'd forgotten about you. What are you doing here? You came in through that little window, didn't you?"

And as she said it, she had an idea. If the cat could come in through the window, the cat could get out through the window, too.

"Will you help me, Visa?" she asked him. "Will you do something for me?"

Then she found a pen and a piece of paper and wrote:

Urgent! To the person who finds this message. Please call Kieron on 0782826271. Tell him to go to the office as quickly as possible. Maha is in trouble.

Then she tied the note to Visa's collar and pushed him towards the cupboard. "Go on," she said and pointed up to the little window. "Please, Visa, please."

The cat leapt on to the cupboard and then jumped up to the window. "Miaow!" he said, and disappeared into the night.

Maha sat down at the desk and closed her eyes. All she could do now was hope.

CHAPTER 8

A face at the window

Skim read the chapter once.

- Who comes to Maha's window?
- Whom does Maha ask him to call?
- What is the news about Ollie?

Maha woke up and looked at her watch. It was just after midnight. Someone was knocking on one of the windows. She went over and looked out. A white face was looking through the glass.
“Maha, are you in there?”
“Is that you, Kieron?” she said. She got up and pressed her face against the window to get a better view. “Oh, Kieron, I’m so pleased you’re here.”

“You decided to stay, then, I see,” he said.

“This is no time for jokes. This is serious.”

“What’s wrong? Are you locked in? Have you lost your keys or something?”

“It’s worse than that, Kieron, much worse.”

“Well, I’m confused, I can tell you. I got a strange phone call from a woman who started talking about a cat.”

“Listen, Kieron, we don’t have time to discuss this now. You’re right. I am locked in and I need to get out as fast as possible.”

“So what’s happened to your phone? Why couldn’t you call me?”

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you later. Now, can you get me out of here?”

“Well, I don’t know. What do you want me to do? Perhaps I could break the window.” He tapped on the glass with his hand. “But that’s no good. There are bars, aren’t there?”

“Come on,” said Maha. “Please do something.”

“Shall I call the police?”

“No! Don’t do that! The police think I’m a burglar.”

“They think you’re a burglar? What are you talking about, Maha?”

“Stop asking questions and just get me out of here. Please! Do something!”

“Well, shall I call Mr Hurst? Have you got his number?”
“No, no, don’t even think of calling Mr Hurst!”

“Because the man you think is Mr Hurst is not really Mr Hurst.”

“What? Have you gone completely crazy?”

“All right, let me explain. The Mr Hurst who is my boss is not really Mr Hurst. He doesn’t own this company. This isn’t his office. I met the real Mr Hurst this afternoon. He thought I was a burglar, so he took my phone away, locked me in the office and called the police.”

“So are the police going to come and arrest you?”

“No, no, they’ve already been here.”

Kieron held his head in his hands. “Stop! Stop! This is too much for my brain! If the police have already been here, why are you still locked in the office? Why didn’t they arrest you as a burglar?”
“Because when they got here, they met the fake Mr Hurst and he sent them away.”

“Is this some kind of joke?”

“No, Kieron, I’m serious.”

Kieron took a step back from the window and scratched his head. “OK,” he said. “Please just tell me. What do you want me to do?”

“Wait a minute,” said Maha. She knew that there were no good options in this situation. If Kieron called the police, they would arrest her as a burglar. If he called the fake Mr Hurst, who knows what he would do to her? It meant that Mr Hurst – the real Mr Hurst – was probably her only hope. At least she was fairly sure he wasn’t a criminal. She went over to the cupboard and pulled out some of the old papers and letters. She took them over to the window so that she could read them by the light from the street.

“OK. These are Mr Hurst’s papers – the real Mr Hurst, I mean. And so this is his phone number. Write this down, Kieron. 810167619. Now I want you to call Mr Hurst on this number...”

“Excuse me – if I understand correctly, this Mr Hurst thinks you’re a burglar, right?”

“Right.”
“So he’s not going to come here and unlock the door, is he? He’s going to call the police again and you’re going to be arrested.”

“That depends on what you say to him.”

“Well, what do you want me to say to him?”

“I want you to tell him that his business is being used by an international criminal gang as a cover for its operation. At some time

in the next few hours these criminals are going to move some boxes out of his office. We believe that the boxes contain some kind of stolen or illegal goods which are registered in his company's name.

"Just a moment, Maha, he's not going to believe all this."

"But Kieron, it's true."

"How do you know?"

"I heard them talking outside – the criminals, I mean. They're going to move the boxes tonight. And I don't want them to find me here. They could be dangerous."

"OK, but what about...?"

"Don't argue, Kieron. I'm serious. Just make the call."

"I'll do my best. But I don't think this is going to work. I mean, he's probably asleep."

"Just make the call."

Kieron took his mobile phone out of his pocket and dialled the number. "Hello? Mr Hurst?... I'm sorry to call you in the middle of the night, but I've got some very important information about your business..."

Maha held her breath as Kieron talked, and she tried to guess what Mr Hurst was saying on the other end of the line. The conversation seemed to go on for a very long time. Kieron waved his arm a lot. She could tell from his voice that things were not going well. After about five minutes he put the phone back into his pocket.

"Well?" asked Maha.

"I was in the middle of a sentence and he put the phone down."

"So will he come?"

"I think so."

"With the police?"

"Yes. He said he was going to call them."

"Oh. That's not good news."

"No. I'm sorry."

"But if we can show the police what's really happening here, then they'll realise I'm innocent and it'll be all right, won't it? I mean, if we show them that there really is a criminal gang operating here, they can't blame me for anything."

"If these people really are criminals and we really can prove it, yes, you'll probably be all right. At least we can persuade them that you're not a burglar. But are you really sure that something illegal is happening here? What did these people say?"

Maha tried to remember the words she had heard a few hours earlier. What had they said outside the window? She couldn't remember exactly but she was certain that it sounded very suspicious. "I know," she said suddenly. "Why don't you call Ollie? He must know what's happening here."

"But I told you, Ollie's ill."

"That was yesterday. Maybe he's better now."

"But it's the middle of the night."

"This is serious, Kieron."

"OK, OK."

He took out his mobile phone again. "Hello, is that Ollie?" Maha watched through the window and saw that Kieron's face was becoming whiter and whiter as he listened. Then he put his phone away and turned to Maha.

"Ollie's in hospital," he said. "He's in intensive care. I spoke to his mum. She said it's a mystery illness. It's bad, Maha. They think he's going to die."

Maha saw that there were tears in his eyes. She stepped back from the window and sat down on the chair by the desk. She had too many thoughts in her head. "Stay calm," she told herself. "Stay calm and think." As she thought, things became clearer and clearer. "It's so obvious," she said to herself. She got up and went over to the window. Kieron was standing a few metres away with his head in his hands. She knocked on the glass to get his attention. "Kieron," she said. "I think I've got it."

Kieron came over to the window and listened.

"First," said Maha, "we found that dead rat on the top floor, and now we hear that Ollie's dying in hospital. Do you see the connection?"

"I'm sorry, Maha, there is no connection between my friend and a dead rat."

"But there is, Kieron, there is. They both came into contact with those boxes on the top floor. Ollie carried the boxes upstairs just before he fell ill. The rat died just outside the office where they're kept. And now that I think about it, I remember that the other delivery man looked very ill when I saw him last. Kieron, don't you see? There is something in those boxes which is very, very dangerous."

Maha paused and thought for a moment. "And another thing... the two men who were here earlier – the fake Mr Hurst and his colleague – they both put on special overalls before they went upstairs. They were obviously wearing them for protection. Oh, Kieron, it's all starting to make sense."

Kieron looked at Maha and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Maha," he said. "You're crazy. This is real life, this isn't James Bond."

Then he turned around and held up his hand.

"Listen," he said. They could hear a vehicle approaching.

"Don't let them see you," said Maha. "Quick, hide. But come back as soon as they go inside."

Kieron ran around the side of the building and stood in the shadows.

CHAPTER 9

Congratulations, George!

Skim read the chapter once.

- Who chases Kieron?
- Who finds Maha on the stairs?
- What is the real identity of 'Mr Hurst the first'?

Maha watched nervously through the window as a black van drove up to the office and parked outside the front door. Two men got out. They were both wearing shiny white overalls. Maha heard them open the front door and climb the stairs.

"Come on, Kieron," Maha whispered to herself. "This is our chance. Come on."

At that moment, Kieron's face appeared at the window.

"They've gone inside," said Maha. "Follow them. Find out what they're doing."

"Do you know them?" Kieron asked.
"Only one of them. The small man with the bald head is my boss, the fake Mr Hurst."

"Mr Hurst the first," said Kieron with a weak smile.

"This is no time for jokes," said Maha. "Go!"
Kieron ran to the front door and stopped. The men had left a bunch of keys in the lock. He took them and tried one of the keys in the door to Maha's office. It didn't fit. He tried another. The same result. He tried a third key and it turned in the lock. Yes! he said to himself. But before he could push the door open, he heard a noise behind him and turned around. The two men in white overalls were standing at the bottom of the stairs, watching him.

"Get him!" said Mr Hurst the first.

The other man moved towards Kieron. Kieron tried to hit him, but he felt his hand crash against something cold and hard and made of metal. What was it? A gun? Kieron suddenly felt very, very frightened.

"Get him!" Mr Hurst the first repeated.

The other man caught Kieron's arm, but Kieron pushed him away, stepped to one side and ran as fast as he could towards the

front door. He heard someone shout, "Don't let him get away!"

He knew they were close behind him as he raced around the corner of the building. He tried to stay in the shadows in case they tried to shoot him. He turned one corner, then another. He had never run so fast in his life. He crossed a road, jumped over a low wall, then squeezed through a hole in a fence and fell to his knees. He had no breath left in his body. He looked through the hole but he couldn't see them. He listened but he couldn't hear their footsteps. They had gone.

Back at the office, Maha had heard everything from the other side of the door. Now she tried the handle and found that the door was unlocked. She stepped out into the hallway, looked left and right and then quietly ran to the front door. She was free!

The two men were still chasing Kieron, so she crossed the road and found a place in the shadows where she had a good view of the entrance to the building. A few moments later the men returned.

"You idiot!" Mr Hurst the first was saying. "How could you let him escape?"

"Sorry, boss. He was too quick for me."

"Who was he? Did you recognise him?"

"I've never seen him before, boss. I'm sure of that."

"What was he doing here then?"

"Maybe he's the burglar the police were looking for earlier?"

"Maybe."

"What do we do now, boss?"

"First, we stay calm. And second, we check the top floor again and then the office."

"OK, boss."

The two men went back into the building.

Maha wasn't sure what to do. She wanted to run as far away as possible, but she knew that she mustn't. She needed to find out what was happening in the office. She needed to know what the two men were doing on the top floor. But first of all, she wanted to check that Kieron was all right.

She crossed the road and went around the side of the building. That was the way he had run, she was sure. After she had walked about a hundred metres, she started to whisper, "Kieron?... Kieron?" And every few steps she stopped to listen before walking on. "Kieron?... Kieron?" She went past warehouses and factories; she crossed empty roads and car parks. "Kieron?... Kieron?" In the darkness, she lost all sense of time and all sense of direction. And then suddenly she found

herself back at her office again. She was so surprised that she stood in the middle of the road and stared at it for a moment. The black van was still parked outside. Were the two men still inside the building? Was Kieron there with them? There was only one way to find out. She took a deep breath and entered the building. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs. Voices were coming from upstairs, but she couldn't hear what they were saying. What were they doing? She climbed a couple of steps and listened again. In fact, she was listening so hard to the sounds from the top floor that she didn't notice the footsteps behind her. It was only when she felt a hand on her arm that she turned around.

"Oh, Kieron," she said, and then looked into the red face of a very angry man with a blond moustache. It definitely wasn't Kieron. It was the real Mr Hurst.

"How did you get out?" he said.

"Ow!" said Maha. "Get off me! You're hurting my arm."

"I'm not going to let you go again, young lady." And he pulled her down the stairs and pushed her up against the wall.

"What exactly are you doing?" he asked.

"Mr Hurst, you know in the telephone call Kieron told you about the criminal gang..."

"Who's Kieron?" asked Mr Hurst.

"He's my boyfriend... you spoke to him on the phone earlier." "Kieron?" said Mr Hurst again.

"OK," said Maha. "It doesn't matter. Kieron's not important. Just listen to me. A criminal gang has been using your office as a cover. They import stuff into the UK illegally. They made me believe I was your secretary so I signed for their boxes when they arrived here. Then they store them on the top floor. All those boxes up there are here under your name. Don't you see? If the police investigate, you and your company are responsible for them. And I have reason to believe they contain very dangerous materials. It's some kind of poison, I'm sure of it."

"I've never heard such rubbish. Boxes? Poison? What are you talking about?"

"But Mr Hurst, I can prove it to you. They're up there right now. Please, please give me a chance."

"Who's up there?"

"The gang. Two members of the gang, anyway."

"I don't believe you," said Mr Hurst.

"Please, Mr Hurst."

"All right. I'll check."

He held Maha's arm hard and pulled her over to the bottom of the stairs. "Hey!" he shouted up the stairs. "Hey! Is anyone up there?"

They both heard a noise that clearly came from the top floor.

Mr Hurst looked at Maha for a moment. "All right. Maybe there is someone up there," he whispered. "But I hope this isn't a trick."

"No!" said Maha. "No! Please believe me!"

"All right," Mr Hurst whispered to her, then he shouted up the stairs again. "Hello! I know there's someone up there. Who are you? This is George Hurst here. I own the business downstairs. I have already informed the police of an incident in this building. They will be here very soon. I don't know who you are, but please come out and show your faces."

A few moments later the two men in overalls appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Hello, George!" said Mr Hurst the first.

"Harry?" said the real Mr Hurst. "Harry? What are you doing here at this time of night?"

"Well, the police were here earlier and they told us there had been a burglar in the building, so we thought we should check everything was all right."

"A very good idea!" said the real Mr Hurst, and he held Maha's arm so tightly that she nearly screamed. Her mind was racing.

"But . . . but . . . but . . ." she said, "how do you two know each other?"

"Harry's the accountant from the office opposite mine," said the real Mr Hurst. "We've known each other for years."

"You're the accountant?" Maha shouted up the stairs to Mr Hurst the first. "You're Deb's boss?"

He ignored her. "Congratulations, George!" he said. "I see you've arrested the burglar."

"Yes, and the police should be here soon."

Mr Hurst the first looked puzzled for a moment. "The police are coming again?" he asked. "But they were here earlier."

"Yes," said the real Mr Hurst. "I called them again about an hour ago. I got a strange phone call, you see."

"I think perhaps they're outside now," said the other man at the top of the stairs. They all turned to see a blue flashing light in the street outside.

"That's good news," said the real Mr Hurst. "Perhaps we can settle this matter quickly and then we can all get back to bed. All except you, of course, young lady. You've got a long and very uncomfortable night ahead of you."

CHAPTER 10

Visa

Skim read the chapter once.

- How does Maha prove her identity?
- What does Maha find in one of the offices on the top floor?
- What happens to Maha at the end?

The policeman pushed open the door, stood in the entrance to the building and took a deep breath. It had been a busy night and he was tired.

“Right,” he said, looking around him. “Is one of you Mr George Hurst?”

“Yes, that’s me,” said the real Mr Hurst, letting go of Maha’s arm. “You called us about an incident at these offices earlier, I believe.”

“Yes, officer, I did. In fact I’ve called you twice today. I called you this afternoon because I found this young lady in my office. She had no right to be there and I’ve never seen her before in my life. So I believe she is a burglar.”

“I am not a burglar,” said Maha. “I work here. I was employed by that man to be his secretary.” And she pointed at Mr Hurst the first at the top of the stairs.

“That’s rubbish!” said Mr Hurst the first. “I’ve never seen her before in my life either.”

“You’re lying!” shouted Maha. “You spoke to me just yesterday. You paid me yesterday!”

“That’s enough of that, thank you,” said the policeman, and he waited for her to calm down. Then he turned back to the real Mr Hurst.

“You say you called us twice today, sir?”

“Yes. I called you again an hour ago because I received a phone call from a young man with a ridiculous story about a criminal gang using my office.”

“And you believed this ridiculous story, did you, sir?”

“Well, no, I didn’t really believe it, of course. But after this afternoon’s incident I thought it was best to call you again.”

“I see.” The policeman looked up at the two men who were standing at the top of the stairs. Maha couldn’t stay silent for a moment longer.

“That’s the gang!” she said. “Those two men are part of the gang!” The policeman looked at her angrily. “I asked you to be quiet,” he said. “You’ll have your chance to speak in a minute.”

Then he turned to the men at the top of the stairs. “Now, tell me, who are you?”

“My name’s Harry Samir,” said Mr Hurst the first. “I’m an accountant. I have the office opposite Mr Hurst’s.”

The policeman turned and read the sign on the accountant’s door: Mr Harry Samir, Accountant.

“So this is true, is it, Mr Hurst?” asked the policeman, looking at the real Mr Hurst. “Of course it’s true. I’ve known Harry for years. He’s not the criminal here.”

“But he *is* the criminal!” shouted Maha. “If you listen to me ...”

“How many times do I have to tell you?” the policeman interrupted. “You’ll have your chance to speak in a minute.”

Maha stood in silence. “So, Mr Hurst,” said the policeman. “Let’s talk about the burglary. Has anything been stolen?”

“No, I stopped her before she could take anything.” The policeman made a note in his book.

“And do you know how she entered the building?”

“She had keys. I don’t know how she got them.”

“She had keys,” the policeman repeated as he wrote. “So, young lady,” he said, turning to Maha. “Can you explain how you got keys to these offices?”

“Yes, of course,” said Maha. “That man up there – Mr Harry Samir, if that’s his name – gave them to me. He gave them to me when he employed me as his secretary.”

“But if you were *his* secretary, why were you in *my* office this afternoon?” asked the real Mr Hurst.

“Because when he employed me, he was pretending to be you,” said Maha. “He told me he was Mr George Hurst. This is what I tried to tell you earlier. He’s using you as a cover, Mr Hurst.”

“Rubbish!” said Mr Hurst. “I think you’re wasting everyone’s time.” “I’m not,” said Maha. “I’m not – and I can prove it. Look at this. She searched in her bag for a moment and produced two of her

business cards – the ones that had arrived on her first day. She gave one to Mr Hurst and one to the policeman.

“I don’t understand,” said Mr Hurst. “Where did this come from?”

The policeman looked carefully at the card:

George Hurst Import–Export
Maha Pelhova
Office Manager

“And is Maha Pelhova your name?” he asked.
“Yes.”

“Can you prove it?”

Maha reached into her bag and gave the policeman her passport. He looked at it quickly and gave it back to her.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s certainly your name. But I don’t understand. If you’re telling the truth and you work as a secretary, why are you here in the middle of Saturday night?”

“Well, that’s because Mr Hurst locked me in the office.”

“I still don’t understand,” said the policeman. “Why did you come to work on a Saturday? Is Saturday a normal working day for you?” Maha looked embarrassed. “No,” she said. “No, it’s not. I came to the office today because I wanted to find out what’s really happening here. You see, during the week, when I was working in Mr Hurst’s office, some boxes were delivered. I signed for them as Mr Hurst’s secretary. I am certain these boxes contain something that is illegal and very poisonous.”

“I’m not going to listen to any more of this!” said Mr Hurst.
“But she’s telling the truth,” said a voice from the doorway.
They all turned around and saw Kieron.

“A friend of mine delivered some of these boxes,” he said, “and now he’s seriously ill in hospital.”

“And who are you?” asked the policeman.

“I’m Kieron.”

“He’s my boyfriend,” added Maha. “He knows the whole story, too.”

“Your boyfriend?” said Mr Hurst, and he looked at Kieron’s red trousers and green boots. “He looks like a complete joke to me.”

“Is this conversation going somewhere?” asked the policeman. “It’s a busy night for me.”

“Yes,” said Maha, “yes, this conversation is going somewhere. Just

listen to me, please. Kieron’s friend Ollie is not the only victim of the poison; only this afternoon we found a dead rat on the top floor, right outside the office. It had been killed by poison, too.”

“Rats are often killed by poison,” said the policeman.

“But, don’t you see?” continued Maha. “That’s why those two men at the top of the stairs are wearing overalls – to protect them from the poison.”

“Rubbish!” said Mr Samir.

“And they’ve got a machine that makes a bleeping noise that has something to do with it as well.”

“And I’m certain that one of them has a gun,” said Kieron. “This is all complete rubbish,” repeated Mr Samir from the top of the stairs. “I’m an accountant. I’ve never touched a gun in my life.”

“Listen, officer, these two are obviously lying,” said the real Mr Hurst. “They’ve got more imagination than sense.”

“Well, it’s certainly a strange story,” said the policeman.
“All right, then,” said Maha, and she turned to the two men at the top of the stairs. “Why are you two wearing those overalls? Can you explain that to us?”

Mr Samir looked down at her and smiled. “I can explain that very easily. You see, the offices on the top floor are not normally used, so they are extremely dirty. And today I am wearing one of my best suits. He opened the front of his overalls so that they could all see that underneath he was wearing a smart black suit with a pink shirt and tie. “I didn’t want to spoil my clothes while I was checking the top floor.” Maha opened her mouth and closed it again. For a moment, she didn’t know what to say.

“So,” said the real Mr Hurst. “I don’t think we need to waste any more time on this, do you, officer?”
Maha turned to the policeman. “Please, please just check the offices on the top floor. Believe me, something very wrong is happening here.” “Well,” said the policeman. “As I’m here, I could check upstairs. Do you gentlemen mind if I check the top floor?” He looked first at Mr Hurst and then at Mr Samir.

“I don’t mind,” said Mr Hurst, “do you, Harry?”
Mr Samir looked at the other man in overalls, who nodded at him. “No,” he said. “We don’t mind either. You’re welcome to check, officer.”

Maha was surprised. She hadn’t expected him to say that.
The policeman led the way upstairs and took the keys from Mr

Samir, Maha thought he looked hot and nervous. The policeman unlocked the door to the first office and switched the light on. Maha, Kieron and Mr Hurst looked over his shoulder. The room was empty.

"Well, no boxes there," said the policeman. "Let's check the other one."

They all walked across to the other door. The policeman turned the key in the lock. Maha held her breath. He opened the door and switched the light on.

"I don't believe it!" said Maha. "I just don't believe it!"

That room was empty, too.

"I told you she was wasting our time," said Mr Hurst. Maha took a step into the room to check. Where were the boxes? They had to be here... or had she just imagined the whole thing? What if the boxes had contained nothing illegal? What if there was no connection between Ollie's illness and the dead rat? Maybe there was another explanation for why she had been employed as a secretary. Then she had another idea. Perhaps they had moved the boxes into the van while she was looking for Kieron. That was possible. She turned to the policeman.

"I know," she said. "They've put them in the van. Check the black van outside. That's where they are."

"I'm sorry, Miss Pelhova," said the policeman. "I think we've all had enough of your little games."

"But..." she started. "Please..."

"Enough!" said the policeman.

Maha's eyes were suddenly full of tears. Kieron held her hand tightly.

The policeman looked around at all of them. "So," he said. "I can find no evidence of criminal activity on the top floor. I'm sorry, Mr Samir, if we caused problems for you and your colleague. Now, what about the ground floor? I have to say I am confused about what's happened down there. But I think we all agree that nothing has been stolen and no damage has been done, so perhaps it's best to forget the whole thing. I hope that's OK with everybody."

"Oh, all right," said Mr Hurst, angrily, while Mr Samir and the other man stayed silent.

"Just a moment," said Maha. "Can I go and look at something over there?" She pointed to the corner of the empty office.

"OK," said the policeman. "Go ahead. But be quick."

Maha walked across the room and bent down. They all saw that

there was an old black T-shirt in the corner. Something was underneath it. Nervously, Maha picked it up. She took a step backwards.

"Visa!" she said. "Oh no! Visa!"

She looked down at the black cat that had helped her earlier in the day, the black cat that could go anywhere. Poor Visa! She was sure he wasn't sleeping. She touched him with her foot. He didn't move. She knew that he was dead. She turned around to look at the others.

"You see?" she said. "You see? I told you something was wrong on the top floor – and here's your proof! Just a few hours ago this cat was perfectly healthy and now he's dead. Officer, take this cat away for tests and I promise you'll see that I'm right about everything."

The policeman looked serious. "I'm sorry, but we don't investigate dead cats. We don't have the time or the resources."

"But...but...you must!"

"There was something you said, though, that made me think," he said.

"Really?" said Maha. "Oh, thank you, thank you for listening, officer."

"Yes, it's about the cat. What did you call it?"

"Er...Visa."

"Yes, that's what made me think. Excuse me, do you mind if I see your passport again?"

"I'm sorry?" she said.

"Your passport."

Slowly, Maha reached into her bag and gave her passport to the policeman. She felt her heart beating very quickly. Maha and Kieron looked at each other across the room as the policeman turned the pages. Neither of them could believe what was happening. They wanted to reach out and touch each other. There were so many things to say. Maha closed her eyes and hoped.

"Please," she said to herself. "Please let everything be all right." The policeman closed the passport and held it in his hand. "I'm sorry, Miss Pelhova," he said. "There seems to be a problem with your visa. I'm afraid you're coming with me."

"But I'm not the criminal," she said. "It's not me, it's them!" And she pointed at Mr Samir and his colleague. "They're the criminals!" The two men looked at her with no expression on their faces. The policeman took her arm.

"Please, Kieron," she said through her tears. "Please say something." "I'm sorry, Maha," he whispered. "I'm sorry. What can I do?"

"Come along, Miss Pelhova," said the policeman. Kieron watched as the policeman started to lead Maha down the stairs.

"I told you she was trouble," said Mr Hurst.

Kieron ignored him and turned to look at the other two men. They were smiling at each other. He heard Mr Samir whisper to his colleague, "Good job."

"Maha's right, isn't she?" Kieron shouted at them. "Those boxes *are* in the van and there *is* something seriously wrong with them."

He ran down the stairs and out into the street. The policeman was putting Maha into the police car. Kieron ran to the black van and tried to open its back door. He pulled on it as hard as he could. Behind him the engine of the police car started. He turned around and saw Maha in the back seat. Desperately, he pulled on the handle of the van's back door. But it was no good. It was locked. He hit the back door of the van with his hand again and again as the police car drove away. Then he sat down on the ground and held his head in his hands.

"Bad luck," he heard a voice say. He looked up and saw it was Mr Samir. "Maybe the good guys don't always win."

Mr Samir laughed a cruel laugh and walked away.

Kieron said nothing. He stood up and walked away into the night. He and Maha never saw each other again.

QUESTIONS

Chapter 1 You only live once
What impression do you have of Maha's time at university? How was it different from Kieron's university career?
Would Kieron's argument persuade you to stay in the UK if you were in Maha's situation?

Chapter 2 An interview with Mr Hurst
Do you trust Ollie? Give reasons for your answer.
In what ways is Maha's interview with Mr Hurst *not* a normal job interview? Make a list.

Chapter 3 George Hurst Import-Export
Maha spends most of her first morning surfing the internet. How would you spend your time if you were in her situation?
Do you think there is anything suspicious about the delivery of the boxes?

Chapter 4 A lesson in trust
If you were in Mahas's situation, how would you react to this next delivery of boxes?
Do you agree with Mr Hurst about the importance of trust in business? Do you think Maha has behaved badly?

Chapter 5 The flying rat
Do you agree with Kieron that Maha takes everything too seriously?
Why do you think Kieron walks away at the end without looking behind him?

Chapter 6 A loud click
Why do you think Maha can't click the 'Buy now' button when she is looking for airline tickets?
The man with the blond moustache proves he is the real Mr Hurst by showing Maha his passport. Is there anything else about his behaviour that suggests he is telling the truth?

WORD LIST

Chapter 7 Voices in the night
 What do you think Maha's employer (the fake Mr Hurst) and the policeman had said before Maha started listening?
 Why do you think the fake Mr Hurst might have employed Maha as a secretary in an office that doesn't belong to him?

Chapter 8 A face at the window

Why does Maha think that Kieron should phone the real Mr Hurst?
 Do you think there could be a connection between Ollie's illness and the dead rat or do you agree with Kieron that Maha is crazy?

Chapter 9 Congratulations, George!

Do you think Kieron is right to run away from the two men?
 If you were the real Mr Hurst, would you believe Maha's story about the criminal gang? Why? / Why not?

Chapter 10 Visa

What lies does Mr Samir (the fake Mr Hurst) tell in this chapter?
 If you were the policeman, would you investigate the van outside and the death of the cat, as Maha suggests?

General questions

What mistakes does Maha make in the story? What is her worst mistake?
 There are lots of people like Maha who work in foreign countries without a work permit or visa. Do you think action should be taken to stop them – or do you think it is all right for people to work illegally? Kieron says that lots of businessmen buy and sell things they shouldn't and don't pay taxes. Do you think this is true? Give examples to support your opinion.
 What do you think is in the boxes? Use evidence from the story to support your idea.
 Do you agree with Mr Samir that 'the good guys don't always win'? Give an example to support your opinion.

Chapter 1

career
 course
 legal
 opportunity
 organise
 passport
 ridiculous
 risk
 secretary
 squeeze
 university
 visa
 warehouse

Chapter 2

accent
 complain
 contacts
 deal
 economy
 export
 import
 interview
 trust
 wages

Chapter 4

accountant
 advertising
 box
 delivery
 doorbell
 embarrassed
 hallway
 labels
 recognise
 rubbish
 shadows
 subject
 surf

Chapter 5
 breath
 compromise
 condition
 drugs
 guns
 hide
 innocent
 poison (v)
 rat
 responsibility
 steering wheel
 tail
 tax

Chapter 6
 balance
 burglary
 cable
 genuine
 incident
 pocket

Chapter 7
 ambulance
 ankle
 collar
 colleague
 fake
 footsteps
 hurt (v)
 overalls
 suspicious
 underneath
 urgent

Chapter 8
 criminal
 gang
 intensive care
 operation
 option
 protection
 prove
 register (v)
 sense
 vehicle

Chapter 9
 congratulations
 escape
 fence
 idiot
 investigate
 settle
 wall

Chapter 10
 damage
 desperately
 imagination
 resources
 victim

