

Extended Hours

Dusana walked up the path to collect Senka from the childminders, turning to glance over her shoulder once again. She'd noticed the man before. He was not obviously watching her, but she was keenly aware of his attention - and there was something about him that looked vaguely familiar.

Managing to pry the 5 year old from the group of children mingling around the door, she took her hand and headed towards the bus stop. "Quickly Senka! Don't worry, you'll see Jade again tomorrow." Pulling the girl up onto the bus, she made a quick scan of the road but the man appeared to have gone.

"I'm not sure I can make it this weekend Rosie" Ada was feeding George, her Jack Russell mix, while trying to keep the phone to her ear. She had 5 minutes to leave for work. "I've got an essay due on Monday."

Ada was 49, trying to stay fit by walking with a group each weekend in Epping Forest, and just starting an Access course in social work. The group - facebook page "Walking Women" - was a real priority for Ada. The exercise was great, but the sense of mutual support was what she really craved. It was only with them that she could talk about her son, Arron, in prison for GBH and robbery.

"Ok then, Ade - better you than me!"

"Anyway, I'd better get going. Howard's decided to open the Easymart until 2am and as I'm the oldest - he called it the "most mature" - I've got the late shift tonight. Can I call you when I finish the essay - if I do - on Sunday?"

Dusana moved to the right edge of the window and looked through the small gap between the pane and the curtain. After reading Senka her bedtime story it'd popped into her head who the man reminded her of. She was certain: it was somebody that she'd seen regularly - but not known personally - when she'd last lived in Serbia, when Senka was just a baby. She could hear the girl murmuring quietly to herself, continuing the story from where Dusana had left off, and she felt a wave of love - and of fear. The man's presence may have just been a coincidence, but if not, she would have to be ready.

It had been a quiet night, and Ada wondered whether the idea of extended opening hours had been a good idea. Earlier, about 10pm, she'd had the usual argument with a couple of young kids about ID, but since then no one had appeared at the night window. She was on her own, as had been the normal working practice when

the shop closed by 9, but Howard had said that, as long as the doors were closed and she served people through the security window, she was perfectly safe.

She moved to where a small stack of boxes, a delivery from the morning, had been left for a lull in customers, and bent over to strip off the tape, unsealing the box of bakewell tarts.

The sound of hard running pulled her up in an instinctual rush. She could see through the glass a woman struggling to carry a very young girl in her arms while speeding towards the shop. The look of panic made Ada scan the area behind them but she could see nothing.

The muffled cry filtered through the service window, "Please help me, can you let us in?!"

Ada was not supposed to open the door for anybody; it was alarmed and would automatically call the owner out. She called to the girl, "I can't! What's wrong? Shall I call the police? - Is it your little girl?"

Dusana's eyes widened, "No! Don't call the police! Can you please let us in? - He's coming after us, Senka's father - please help us get away!" The woman was clearly terrified, and Ada made up her mind. She would probably be fired but that didn't seem to matter right now.

She pointed to indicate the rear of the shop "I can't open the door, but bring her around the back - I'll meet you there!"

Ada quickly shut down the lights and ran to the back door where she grabbed her things and locked up. They were waiting in the alley on the other side of the back door.

"I don't live very far - you can come back to mine and we can decide what's best in the morning. We need to get your daughter safely tucked up." She gave the girl a squeeze as she rode on Dusana's back. "She's trembling", she said.

"Yes" Dusana spoke in small gasps as they walked as quickly as they could, the child's body beginning to escape from Dusana's grasp with each jerky step. "She is also afraid of her father."

The women held their cups of tea and slumped into the softness of the sofa. Senka had, surprisingly, Ada thought, gone to sleep easily after being settled down on the double bed in what served as Ada's guest room. It had been her son's before he'd veered away into his own chaos, but there was little sign of that now in the simple, tasteful colours and contents.

"I'd seen this man, I recognised him from Serbia, a couple of times, so I was afraid that Nebo - that's Senka's father - had found us." Fighting back tears, "He's a madman! Really vicious! He turned up tonight so I just grabbed her and we got out the back window."

Ada listened, quietly. She rearranged herself on the sofa, and waited for Dusana to continue.

"Nebo, he seemed such a good person at first. I'm not sure how it got to be so bad, so wrong..... he was just so - *angry* - it seemed all the time, as though everything was our fault. Then he started to hit me - I was so afraid for Senka - "

Coming to a decision, Ada said "My son," she hesitated. It wasn't easy to break through her normal guard, "Arron, we had some problems. He's in prison now, but .. well .. there was a time, he was only about 20, when I was afraid, I mean really afraid, of him too. "

The younger woman's eyes widened.

"His father left when he was about 10, or 11, and... well.. I just couldn't handle him. He'd be out all hours, pissed, then he started to get a bit violent with me - his *mum* - I had to have stitches on my head once when he'd knocked me over."

"That's awful..."

"I just wanted to tell you so that you knew I understood. Please don't ever think this is your fault. You've been very brave making a good life for Senka over here, and once you get to your friend's place in Sheffield, things will be ok." She smiled reassuringly, but there was only a shadow of Dusana's in return.

When she awoke they'd already gone, leaving a note of thanks.

Although she didn't have the morning shift, Ada thought she'd better go into the shop and explain to Howard what had happened. He'd know that the alarms had been set early, and he wouldn't be happy about it.

She saw the police cars from a couple of streets up. As she walked through the door Howard waved her over.

"Ada! I was going to call you. The police wanted to talk to the person on the window last night." He motioned as if to pass her over to the two uniforms. "Why did you close up so early?"

"I..." she hadn't yet prepared what she would say, or if she would mention the girl. "I just didn't feel well.." "Sorry" she added.

One of the policemen interrupted them “We’re investigating the report of a child abduction. A man’s claimed that his daughter was taken from their home - in Serbia that was,” he said, checking his notes. “A few years ago - the girl was just a baby then. He says it was their cleaner.”

The older PC had been watching Ada as she listened. “He’d just heard from a Serbian acquaintance, now living here, that the guy had happened to see the woman, found out where she lived, and rang him. He flew over and tried to see her last night, but the woman grabbed the child - now ... 5 -and escaped through her window. Your shop was the only thing open, so we thought you might have seen them.”

The other PC continued “The man said that they’d only taken the woman on because she’d lost her own family in the war - she was only in her teens. Must’ve been hard. A few years ago, they got up to find she’d disappeared with their baby.”

They looked at Ada, “Did you see anything, ma’m?”