

Nina's Secret

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It's black. It's all black. A sackcloth bag over my head. Coarse weave scratches my face like tiny rodents. The neck pulls so tight it chokes me. Smothering cloth, wet with sweat and tears and snot. My arms wrenched behind my back. Something binds my hands, cuts my wrists. Heart thumps in my throat. Pounds in my ears. The darkness terrifies me as much as being grabbed and dragged away. There's a voice screaming they've got the wrong person. It begs them to let me go. It's distant, but familiar.

I'm seized by the arms. Shoved over. There's a dizzy second of freefall before my head cracks against something metallic. Shoulder jars. My legs are picked up and dragged. There's a harsh grinding and a dull *thunk*. A van door slides shut. And an engine vibrates through my body. And the sickening, giddy journey through streets. Like being blindfolded on a fairground ride. Cold. So very cold. My breath rasps and crackles in my chest. I try to swallow but my mouth is dry and I'm suffocating. And when I think I can't take any more, it still carries on. *I* carry on. I'm trying to figure out what's happening. But it's like trying to find logic in a puzzle where none of the pieces fit together. And all the time, there's this voice telling them—whoever *they* are—they've got the wrong person. And I can't *believe* this is happening to me.

And dragged out. Feet wanting to work but can't. Reeling. Pushed down. Onto a chair.

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Brilliant lights burn through the sackcloth's tiny weave. The room spins. Knots in my stomach. Like it's trying to pull everything. Inside me. Tighter. I try to stand, but I'm shoved down again. I'm trying to scream *You've got the wrong person. My name's Jerry Lockwood.* And someone shouts at me. *Où est-elle?* I don't answer because I can't work out what he's saying. My French can't cut through the terrifying chaos that makes *all* language indistinguishable.

I don't understand, I plead. The same piteous voice. My body jerks. Head flicks back like a whiplash as someone drags back my hood. Choking. Reality blurs.

Où est-elle, connard?

I have two thoughts: *What do they want?* and *I'm going to die.* How can you reason with something if you don't know what it wants?

"I'm English," I say. "I want to help," I say. "Please. Help me understand what you want."

Shouts amongst them. It's French, but their words are ribald. It's pronounced wrong. It's not as *fluent* as when I learned. It's *coarse*. Their accent is *vulgar*. Maybe they don't speak English. *Nous cherchons Nina Conway. Où est-elle, enfoiré?*

Nina. My body sags. Hit by a wave of cold despair. Because I know who they mean. Because it was Nina who'd called me here. Because it was Nina who had begged me to help her. They want to know where Nina is.

Which means they have the right person. This isn't a mistake. They know who I am. And I know who she is. Except ...

"I don't know *where* she is," I say. I hear the whine in my voice. I try to rock in my seat, but it only achieves fiery pain across my wrists and forearms. My teeth grind.

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My temples throb.

Saland! someone shouts. All the nerves and tendons crack a notch tighter. I can't breathe. I'm going to puke. I try to raise my hands in a placating gesture, but they jar against the back of the chair. My throat and chest burn. I'm trying to break free but not moving. "Please. Listen to me." My voice is breathless and doleful. But they've stopped shouting. Maybe they'll listen to reason. "Nina ... she called me. In England. I came to Paris to find her. She wasn't where we arranged to meet. You were ... you were there instead. I don't know where she is."

Silence. Except for the rasps of my breath inside the sackcloth. And the *thudda-thudda-thudda* of my heart. And the sound of my jaws clenching.

Silence. Head aches. Tears stream. Chest constricts.

Something cold and hard rams against the back of my neck. Someone shouts: *On va le zigouiller, ce salopard!* I hear a click. It's the sound of a cocked weapon. My eyes snap shut. Time stops. I try to jerk away but I'm forced back into the chair. There's a whiplash across my face and the cracking of cartilage. Pain is a bolt of white electricity. Too stunned to cry out. I'm drowning in my own blood. It pours down my face. Down my throat. Trying to cough. Bubbling blood and mucus. Suffocating. My head lolls, but can't fall, restrained by the bonds.

"I don't know what you want," I try to say through the bubbles of my blood-spattered spittle. "Please."

The last word sounds pathetic. Nina would've despised my weakness for showing I'm hurting. I'm hurting. So much. A part of me wants them to put a bullet in my head

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to finish it. Nina would've thought that was pathetic as well.

Descend-le! someone shouts. I try to raise my head, try to say something else. But something merciless connects with my temple and my last thought—*five years since I've seen Nina*—crowns my unconsciousness, along with a maudlin idea ... *and what a stupid way to die.*

Vivid colours explode in my eyes even though they're squeezed as tight as I can manage. My face feels like it's been hit by an electric charge. It buzzes while I try to chase a thought that seemed important, but I can't remember what it was. The sackcloth pushes against my cheek and there's a vibration running through my whole body. I'm shivering. My teeth chatter like castanets made from a dead man's bones.

Breathing is like trying to draw breath underwater. I choke, gagging and hacking up globules of phlegm which sit against my cheeks like blooded jellyfish. I try to wipe it away, but my arms are still restrained. The van judders, moving slower now. Outside horns blare and police sirens squeal. The centre of gravity shifts, and then I'm slipping. My legs kick. The *futtering* and hissing of tyres against the road. My feet touch something hard and the van halts.

What now?

The door grates open. Something drags my hands behind me. Suddenly there's a dizzying weightlessness—the last sensation a hanged man experiences before the end—then pain snaps through my shoulder and temple and something like a baseball bat hits me in the stomach, winding me. And another stinging jab in my ankle. My teeth crack against my tongue and a trail of copper saliva oozes from the corner of my mouth. I can't even writhe

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in agony. Trying to inflate empty lungs. Waiting for them to finish me because I haven't the strength to fight back. Because death would be a release from this.

Slow, shallow breaths through sackcloth wet with blood and saliva. My brain spins, starved of oxygen. I try to regulate my breathing but I'm still tense against the next blow. My confused mind takes a few seconds to process what's happened. I can't hear the van's engine. I can't feel its vibrations. Instead cold stone presses against me on one side. And the cacophony of multiple voices. When I try to struggle against my bonds my hand comes away. The wrists throb and as sensation returns, my hands feel like I've plunged them into boiling oil.

I tear off the sackcloth bag.

And it's like a flare of magnesium burning in front of me. The world spins like it's going to hurl me away. I'm on the pavement, coiling round a metal bollard on a pedestrian crossing. Trying to focus and to adjust from the darkness. At first, it's a blur of colours, blue, white, red, before I try to breathe again and end up gagging and hacking, without the energy even to spit out the blood in my mouth.

Reality starts to assemble itself. The red takes form. Triangles become awnings and parasols with the words *Café brasserie* on them. There's a shuttered shop front next to it. White stone buildings with long, thin windows, rising one two three four storeys high, with small squat windows in the black tiled roof and a *boulangerie* on the ground floor. And the blue is a neon sign reading *Café de ...* I can make out the first letters ... *Col*, perhaps? A few people are sitting outside. Most are inside.

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A car turns into the road and blares its horn as it avoids hitting me. A traffic light blinks on and off. On and off. The red symbol of a waiting pedestrian reflects in the wet tarmac. I grip onto the bollard like it's a life raft in this insanity and I use it to haul myself up. I need a doctor, or a hospital. I dropped my holdall when I was jumped. I've only got the clothes I'm standing in. My hand goes to my jeans and my inside jacket pocket. Both wallet and passport are still there. That's something, at least. Not that there's any money in there and I've almost totally maxed out my credit cards. But not having my passport would cause more problems than I already have.

But, robbery wasn't the motive.

They also didn't check my passport ...

Because they know who I am.

I brace myself against the bollard then stagger to the café. They'll have a phone there, surely, though I'll need to use my best sign language to change one of the few notes I've got. Or a diner could call a hospital for me.

I'm moving like the walking dead. My head hangs to one side and I'm limping to try to compensate for the pain. Diners glance at me, in a way that confirms they're going to ignore me, whatever I want. A woman looks at me and swallows like she's been forced to eat her own shit. She leans and engages her fellow dining companion in conversation, holding her napkin to her face so she doesn't have to see me anymore.

“*S'il vous plaît,*” I beg to the people who are closest to the roadside, but, failing. “Telephone.” Not sure, but I think ‘telephone’ is a universal word. The woman closest to me

shakes her head and raises a hand at the brasserie where a waiter clad in a white shirt and black trousers comes to her aid. He's tall and gaunt and his hair is swept back, giving him the appearance of a Mediterranean Dracula.

"*S'il vous plaît,*" I try again. "Telephone."

"*Non, monsieur,*" he says. He's polite but firm and he's wagging his finger at me. "No telephone." But then I see through his mask at the expression beneath. This is a *good* restaurant. The likes of *me* don't belong there.

"Please," I beg again, aware of how pitiful I sound. The other customers are shifting in their seats and I lurch towards them. "What?" I demand slamming my hand on the table. It's aggressive, but I'm trying to steady myself as my world spins. "Sorry. Did I put you off your dinner?"

The waiter steps forward again. Grabs me by the arms and turns me around, away from the café. Not so polite anymore. "*Dégagez, clochard!*" He shoves me away and I go sprawling into the road.

I turn and plead at him, like a starving stray begging for a last scrap. "Please," I say again. "Telephone. Hospital."

The waiter makes towards me again, but looking at him is like peering through rippling water. I can't see the expression on his face, but his body tenses. Like he's going to kick me away. But there's another voice and it says something totally unexpected.

"Jerry? Jerry ... Lockwood?"

My name.