

From *Friendly with Murderers*

Chapter 2
Inside, 2020

Ria unlocked the door and the men burst into the art room from behind her. She unpacked her things, fending off hands searching for biscuits, the treat she brought in weekly for prisoners starved of food with any sweetness or flavour. Metal-framed wooden chairs were pulled out and rearranged as she tried to find somewhere for her bag and travel mug of tea, as well as space to get her notes ready for the lesson.

Yesterday one of her Level 2 learners had asked her if she ever forgot she was in a prison. ‘Like, don’t you just think after a bit that you’re in a normal school or college, miss?’

She looked at the four men who were now seated around the table under the yellow strip lighting. Mr Davies with his neck tattoos and the need to check everything was clean, one two three four five *six* times; Marcus – arm bandaged again and the criss-cross of pale scars on his throat and arms; Rudy wearing his noise-cancelling Bluetooth-style earphones which gave the effect of permanently being on a business call; and Simeon with fresh fade haircut, already five biscuits into the custard creams which Ria hadn’t realised were not still in her bag.

No, funny enough, aside from the bars on the windows of the run-down mansion house which had been repurposed as the education block at HMP Hartestone Category C Men's Resettlement Centre and Young Offenders Institution, she couldn't forget where she was. But not like in film or TV where staff turn every corner clutching their belongings with bunny rabbit eyes, expecting to be shanked by a sharpened toothbrush or scalded by a kettle of boiling water. There was just the day-to-day chaos and noise in the education block where everyone had a story to tell and the men needed someone, anyone, to listen to them. The tales often induced the sting of tears, such was the hand dealt to most of the men inside. Even the ones you thought you'd never like who struck you as being more than just a product of their environment. Once you heard how many times they'd been in care, how their stepdad behaved to their sisters, the constant failing and punishment at school, you'd struggle not to feel something.

Ria stood up and took off her cardigan. It was always too hot in her room, except if the boilers broke. 'So last week,' she said to the group who all looked up, alert from the morning air on the long walk from the wing, 'we looked at watercolours and tried some washes.'

'Flat wash, graded wash and wet on wet,' said Mr Davies, chewing his bottom lip and pushing himself back to rock in his chair.

'We likes a bit of wet on wet, don't we?' said Simeon smirking with crumbs stuck to his lips.

The others sniggered except Mr Davies who gave a disapproving look and made sure Ria clocked it.

She ignored the banter and continued, long having learnt not to give airspace to innuendo and distraction. ‘Today, I want you to go to the library and look for books with pictures of landscapes.’

Mr Davies was batting away Rudy who was sitting too close to him, and bandaged Marcus was trying to prise the biscuits from Simeon.

‘Where do you think you’ll have to look?’ she said.

They were up, jackets flapping, chairs scraping, vapes in hand. ‘I know miss, I know. I’m getting the atlas,’ said Marcus.

‘No, you twat, not an atlas, that’s maps,’ Rudy jostled as two of them went to move round the table at the same time.

‘Watch the arm,’ said Marcus, pain in his expression, put on or otherwise. ‘Geography then. Like books on the arctic and the rainforest.’

Ria nodded. ‘Good. Don’t forget the art section. And ask Jenny for help if you need it. Please be back here in five minutes. That’s FIVE.’ She held up her hand, fingers outstretched. Simeon high-fived her as he swept the packet of biscuits from the table and dropped it into the pocket of his fleece jacket. Ria stared at him and held out her hand for their return. He gave them back with a shrug and joined the others, their voices trailing down the corridor.

Ria blinked and looked at the clock, five past nine. She would have time to set up and then to take a sip of the hot tea to calm her. She picked thin-bristled paintbrushes from the large tin on the shelf at the side of the room, then filled plastic cups with water and got each learner a sheet of cartridge paper, budget not stretching to specialised watercolour paper. Then she unhooked the padlock on the art cupboard and took the key hidden behind a stack of photocopied handouts to open the padlock on the clasp of a metal tin of watercolour paint

tubes. She placed them next to her spot at the head of the table to be handed out as needed. Even tubes of paint had value, she didn't know how many caps they were worth, what the prisoners called vapes, their currency inside. Or if someone would want to take them back to their cell to dabble, but she had to replace anything taken with her own money. Otherwise, she'd face an interrogation from Suzanna the department administrator who would want to know how she was being so lax with supplies and might raise it as a security breach. Ria placed stained plastic palettes next to each of the four places.

As she sat down and opened the lid of the hot flask of tea, enjoying its metallic but soothing contents, there was a knock on the door.

‘Still two minutes,’ she said. Taking another long sip, she swished the tea in her mouth looking above to wonder when gravity would get the better of the pencil lodged in the ceiling tile and whether there might be Healthcare repercussions.

The door opened and a tall man stood at the door. He was in his early forties, she guessed, with smooth skin and hair in grown-out twists that stopped at his jaw. She imagined him ordinarily confident, but he seemed cowed from the bewilderment of the new regime. He smiled and looked at a piece of notepaper in his hand.

‘Ria? Tuesday art group?’

She nodded and put down her cup, straightening herself in her chair. He hovered at the door. He was wearing prison issue grey sweatshirt and joggers with an ugly royal blue anorak. Their prison had no mandatory uniform; the men could wear civvies if they wanted. Some of the men had clothes sent in or would buy them from Amazon, some borrowed or traded designer gear inside, and

some never cared how they looked, sticking with what was provided. You could see in his slim, slumped body the uninvited saturation of remand. Twelve months in a noisy jail with men who would later be dispersed to all incarceration categories, from shoplifting and middle-class fraud to knife crime and gangland kingpins. His shoulders were not yet ready to relax into the next however many years of his sentence, the shield still there from the fight of his court case and the unknown but inevitable verdict.

Ria beckoned for him to come in and sit at an empty place. She got up from her seat and fussed again finding equipment for him.

‘So,’ she turned from the sink to view him with a raised brow as a hint to expand.

‘Wade, A87625, miss,’ he said.

‘What’s your first name?’

He smiled apologetic, pale green eyes stimulated. ‘Jay.’

‘Jay,’ she said, ‘I’m Ria. What brings you here?’

‘To jail, miss? I mean, Ria.’

She shook her head. And put the cup of water next to him taking in a haze of soap and washing powder mixed with his natural scent. Liquids and aerosols were banned in cells, so she was spared any overpowering aftershave, though some prisoners never quite got the hang of personal hygiene.

Ria sat opposite him, her body language open in the way she had learnt would get the best from her students. Art was of course an expressive practice.

‘I liked to travel, miss.’ He laughed and pursed his lips. ‘Ria. On the outside, I’d travel, you know, go to galleries and look at the art, simply to be agreeable with my, um, you know, companion. But now it’s where I go, you

know, at night when there's a code blue or the guy next to me won't shut up. I close my eyes, and I think of those walls filled with paintings from the centuries. Renaissance, Pre-Raphaelites, Impressionists, Modernism, you know. All of it so alive in my head, like it's been painted an exhibition just for me.'

He studied her now and she reckoned those now confident pale grey green eyes could see her brain working as he watched her asking herself who this companion might be. A woman the same age as her? The same build, same hair? Maybe that woman was more bohemian, better read, well-travelled. More successful and cultured than a prison art teacher who could be the big I am with her literally captive audience of wounded men. All eager to please her so they might collect her comments on their prison record, their brownie points for early release. Maybe his companion wasn't a woman but a 'man'.

Ria said the word out loud. She coughed, her already pink cheeks heating a deeper hue as she exposed herself.

She puffed and thumbed through her notes relieved as the bedlam of the rest of the group fell back into the classroom, an assortment of high vis jackets, designer sportswear and branded trainers.

As Ria stood up and held up a brush ready to demonstrate variegated wash, her new enigma caught her eye with a look she couldn't yet work out.