**HIDEOUT by Billy London**

She skimmed through a few nonsensical books until light warmed the sky to a clear blue. Shuddering, Atarah threw on the few clothes she had. Time to sneak back to civilisation. Stepping outside, she tucked her hands into the pockets of her parka.

Across the road, a man circled his vehicle, a red-headed little girl in his arms as she chatted away. A pink bobble hat set off the colour of her hair.

“What did I do with my keys, darling?” the man asked, patting down his pockets.

“You didn’t pick them up from the fruit basket, Dada,” she explained. The man looked up at the sky.

“Okay, wait here.”

The man rushed back inside and the girl turned her attention to Atarah.

“Hello!” she said loudly. “Did you make all the noises last night?”

“Sorry if I disturbed you,” Atarah replied, waving a stiff hand in her direction.

“It’s naughty ’cause everyone was asleep.”

“I know.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Why were you so late?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

The girl grinned. “Dada says the same. We’re going to the farm to feed d’animals. Would you like to come?”

Atarah laughed. “No, thank you. That’s very kind of you to offer.”

The girl looked up and down the lane. “Are you waiting for a taxi? Dada will take you, he doesn’t like the farm.”

*Dada* came out of the cottage and observed his child in conversation with a strange woman. Something strange shifted in Atarah’s stomach, the hairs of the back of her neck charged with electricity and her breathing shallowed. Automatically, her hand went to her hair and then skimmed her face. The touch revealed a complete lack of makeup.

*Great—not only had she committed murder, she had the audacity to not even have any lipstick.*

“What’s this?”

“Dada, this lady is waiting for a taxi and I don’t think it’s coming. Can you give her a lift before we go to the farm?”

He lifted his brows, the same colour as his daughter’s brilliant hair. “You’re wearing her favourite colour,” he said as if it explained his daughter’s behaviour.

“Good to know.” Atarah’s voice sounded so much higher than normal to her own ears. *Calm down*.

“You’re a neighbour,” he said. “I don’t mind giving you a lift.”

“Actually, I could really do with thirty quid to get back to London,” she said without hesitation. “My bank has blocked my card and I need to sort that out.”

“We have banks here,” he said, laughing. His laughter, deep and gravelled, tickled her in the pits of her elbows despite a rising panic that he wouldn’t do what she needed.

“London doesn’t have everything exclusively.”

*Mate, you don’t know the half of it*. “I’ll get a new card on the spot. Best I go back. And I’ll be able to transfer the cash to you.”

“Dada, hurry up! D’animals are waiting for me! They’ll be hungry!” His daughter raged at them both.

“Get in and I’ll drop you at the station,” he offered. “What’s your name?” he asked as soon as she reached the passenger door.

“Rae,” she said. Good thing all her aliases were nicknames. It’d be hard to keep up otherwise.

“Lonán,” he said, his name with such a lilt it spawned a hundred questions and each one stuck in her throat. “The little one in the back is Saoirse.”

“Hi!”

Atarah took the passenger seat and secured herself. She’d left a note for Xiu in case he did decide to come back with some fucking food. The very thought made her stomach grumble loudly.

Saoirse burst out laughing. “Your tummy’s hungry!” she said through giggles, tapping Atarah on the shoulder. “Dada, can she have one of my bananas?”

Lonán sent her a wry smile. “We do as we are bid in the presence of her majesty.”

The yellow fruit invaded her vision and she had to control the urge to snatch it from the poor girl. “Thank you. You’ve been very kind to me this morning.”

The girl caught her gaze in the rearview mirror before she shrugged. “You looked unhappy. I don’t want anyone to be unhappy.”

The words cut through her almost as sharply as the knife had last night. Unhappy didn’t really cover how she felt.