

MARCH 2017

“This is you,” Sergeant Joanne Ferris said. She was dangling a pair of keys in her hand. Sergeant Ferris was a tall woman, and she held the keys above her head, as if encouraging a puppy to jump up and play with them. They were well out of Emily’s reach.

Emily stepped further into the apartment and looked around. It was small, with an open plan kitchen and living area. The bedroom was on the left as they came in, and the bathroom opposite it. Everything was white – absolutely everything. Sergeant Ferris had informed her that the apartment had been recently painted, so the walls were a crisp, pristine white, but the kitchen cabinets were just as white, as was all other furniture she could see, except the sofa, which was grey. The floor was a pale wood imitation laminate.

“Everything should be in order. I gave you the code to the alarm, and you can change it, of course, if you need to. There are some supplies in the fridge and in the cupboards, and there’s a supermarket around the corner. You have my phone number and your phone. I’ll give you a tinkle in the next day or two to see how you’re getting on.”

Emily frowned at the expression although she thought she understood the meaning.

“Just be cautious, but you have nothing to worry about. You’ll be safe here.”

Sergeant Ferris put the keys on the kitchen worktop and gave Emily a reassuring smile. Emily thanked the sergeant, who turned on her flat heels and headed back out into the stairwell.

Emily turned back to face her new home. It was compact but seemed to contain everything she needed. There was even a tiny balcony that overlooked the front lawn of the apartment block and the street beyond it, and which was only fit for airing purposes.

She had arrived with nothing. She had the clothes on her back and a small budget to get her started. She had a week to settle in before starting in her new job. Her telephone and laptop would arrive later in the week, but the desk was already there, in the space between the kitchen units and the sofa. Emily didn’t think she would like her new job, but at least it was a start. Cold calling was not her thing, but it was the best they could do if she wanted to remain in marketing. She could hardly land a major PR job in her current situation.

Emily took the keys off the kitchen counter, entered the code on the alarm like she had been advised and left the apartment.

It was sunny outside, a nice day for March. She didn’t know if it was ordinary for London at that time of the year. She had never been to London before.

She had never been anywhere.

She had kept to the east coast of the United States for all 28 years of her life, and she had been in no hurry to leave. Yet here she was, in a foreign country full of strangers who spoke in a weird accent.

She walked down the street and located the supermarket. She didn't want to go in, but it was good to know that it was only a stone's throw away. It looked so foreign – quaint but not like the stores she was used to.

She carried on past the supermarket, past the florist and past the hairdresser's. Then she stopped, turned around and walked into the hairdresser's. It was a small salon with only two seats but with mirrors everywhere. A middle-aged woman with a fluffy blonde mane was cutting a younger woman's hair.

"What can I do for you, love?" the hairdresser asked with a smile in Emily's direction.

Emily cleared her throat.

"I'd like a haircut. And a new colour."

The woman nodded.

"It's not busy today, so if you come back," she glanced at the clock on the wall, "in an hour I should be able to fit you in."

Emily thanked her and left the salon.

She kept walking and came to a small park. There was a children's play area which was busy with a group of kids. At the other end of the park, a man was throwing a ball for his little dog, who barked enthusiastically every time the ball was flung into the air.

Emily looked at the scene for a moment, but it felt alien to her. These people were going about their ordinary daily activities with quiet contentment. The childminders were keeping an eye on their wards, the children were learning new skills on the slides and seesaws, and the man was exercising his dog. It was so ordinary that it made her feel nauseous. There was nothing ordinary about her life. She had no routine.

Emily turned around and headed into the café that overlooked the park. She picked a seat that didn't face onto the park but onto the street instead. When the waitress came over, she ordered a black coffee and pancakes with bacon and maple syrup. It was the only thing on the menu that seemed familiar.

She ate and drank slowly, savouring every mouthful. It wasn't quite like back home, but it was close. When the minutes on her phone screen neared twelve, she got up, paid her bill and returned to the hairdressing salon.

"There you are, bang on time," the blonde woman said with a big smile. "You haven't been in before, have you?"

Emily shook her head. "I just moved into the area."

"Well, welcome. I'm Aileen." The woman stuck her right hand out at her. Emily looked at it for a moment and then realised that she appeared rude not shaking it.

"Emily," she replied with a vague smile. Her innards squeezed at her response.

Aileen gestured for Emily to sit down. Emily did as instructed.

"What can I do for you today?"

"I'd like to go blonde. Could you cut it a little shorter, with some layers?"

Aileen had her hands in Emily's hair, as if she was weighing it up.

"You have such beautiful, thick hair."

Emily agreed. It was a shiny mahogany in colour and had a bit of a wave to it. She had made her mind up though. If she was going to have to change, her appearance would too. It was an extra precaution, and she had never had a different haircut. She had been so proud of her hair that she hadn't wanted to let go of it.

"It's going to be a major change for you. We could start with a full head of highlights. Then you can keep adding to them for a deeper blonde. How does that sound?" Emily could see a slight frown on Aileen's face in the mirror.

Emily nodded. "I need a change."

"Bad breakup?" Aileen asked sympathetically.

Emily felt another twist inside of her.

"You could call it that."

Aileen smiled. "Nothing like a new hairdo to cheer you up then. Let's go for it. I'll get the colour chart."

Aileen was a wonderful woman. Emily felt much better when she returned to her empty apartment two hours later. It had been great to have someone to talk to. Aileen was so full of chatter that Emily had hardly got a word in edgeways. Aileen had done all the talking and had not asked any nosy questions. It was exactly what Emily needed.

Emily spent her first week getting to know her surroundings. She walked a lot, come rain or shine, and she tried to get the hang of everything in her apartment. There were immersion switches, sockets with power switches on them and a shower that would have required a degree in engineering. Her first shower was cold, the second one a mix of hot and cold and the third one was finally comfortable.

She acquainted herself with the supermarket. It was small, and she didn't recognise the brands on offer, let alone many of the products. She stuck to simple things like curries and spaghetti

bolognese. She wasn't much of a cook and had never needed to be, but she was determined to get by. There were takeouts – that were branded as takeaways – within walking distance, but they didn't look appetising to her.

She had discovered that she had a spare set of clothes in the closet, but after a week of washing and drying her two sets over and over again and finding that her second pair of pants was much too big on her, she concluded that she needed more clothes. With the help of the city map Sergeant Ferris had given her and her cell phone, she headed into London.

Commuter traffic didn't bother Emily. She was used to it in New York, and London was known for its good connections, but it was still mind-boggling to travel in a new city. She managed it in the end, with only one mishap where she hopped on the subway heading in the wrong direction.

She emerged in Oxford Street in a slight mental haze. She had heard so much about this place, but now that she was here, she was more overwhelmed than excited. London was full of designer stores that she would have loved previously, but that stage of her life was over. She was a day away from starting her new job, and it would be another month before she would get paid for her first month. Even then, telemarketers could not afford to shop in high-end stores.

Dressed in her better jeans and a plain black t-shirt under the weatherproof jacket that she had been given, Emily gave the shop windows longing glances as she walked past them, but even the mediocre prices seemed too high. She would rather have several cheap outfits than two or three expensive ones. Variety is the spice of life, she thought. If she bought smartly, she would be able to mix and match the pieces for several outfits.

When she came to a window displaying a t-shirt for £4 and a pair of jeans for £9, she was gobsmacked. These clothes were cheap! This was much more like it.

Emily headed into the store and started looking around. There was everything: shoes, leggings, skirts, dresses, lingerie and accessories. It was eleven on a Monday morning, and already the store was busy.

After a moment's browsing, Emily spotted a lady with a shopping basket.

"Where can I get one of those?" Emily asked with a finger pointing at the basket.

The woman gave her an amused smile. "Right there by the door."

Emily thanked her but hesitated. "Is everything here really brand new? It's so cheap."

The woman with the shopping basket chuckled. "It's all brand new, and it really is this cheap. Shop till you drop, my dear."

Emily smiled back at the woman and headed back towards the door to get a shopping basket.

Emily returned to her apartment with three bursting bags of clothing, footwear and accessories. She had bought a couple of candles for her apartment too, to make it feel more like home.

Before she started to organise her new wardrobe, Emily made herself a cup of coffee and took it out to her tiny balcony to enjoy the afternoon sun. She had learned a few things on her trip into the city centre: she could get almost anything for a ridiculously low price if she knew the right shops, and the shoe and clothes sizes were not the same as they were in the United States. Her kind clerk at the pay point had informed her that the chain had just opened its first store in New York. There was an irony about it; Emily had narrowly missed it, and she would not have been caught dead going into such a store in her home city. The clothes she had bought were distinctly different from what she was used to wearing. Gone were the blazers and LBDs; they were replaced by jeans – an item she would rarely have worn in the past – casual, comfortable dresses and lazy tops. The woman who looked back at her from the mirror was not the same woman who had been there before. Emily was a wary but friendly person with nothing to lose and a whole lot to gain if only she dared to put herself on the line. As of yet, she didn't.

She had also realised how lonely one could be in a city of over eight million people. There were so many people around, and yet she didn't know a single one of them.

Emily's first few days working were dull. She was in training, and she knew the concepts she was being taught better than her trainer. She had never done telemarketing before, but it was not rocket science, particularly not with her experience. She also struggled with the idea of working from home. When she took a break, she walked a few steps to the kettle; she badly needed to invest in a coffee machine when she got some money. When she finished work, she logged out of her phone and shut down her laptop. She didn't see anybody while she worked except via video link. She had workmates who worked from various corners of the country and spoke in a variety of dialects.

On Saturday night, she ventured out to get a pizza. She had some wine in the house, and she sat down in front of the TV pretending to be at home. Then she reminded herself that she WAS at home even if it didn't feel like it.

She browsed through the channels and ended up watching a family entertainment show hosted by two small guys whom she couldn't tell apart and whose speech she struggled to understand. The pizza was good, although not the same as it had been in her usual spot. The wine was cheap and tasted it. This wasn't how Saturday nights were supposed to be.

Emily went to bed early, crying and missing everyone and everything from home, thinking about how the following day was Mother's Day in this country she now called home.

Three weeks into her stay in London, Emily was bored. Her days passed by quickly enough while she was working – it was tiresome, but she could talk to customers even if some of their accents and phrases confused her – but it was in the evenings that the loneliness got to her. She watched TV, but she didn't want to spend all her evenings doing that. She had signed up at the nearest library and went through at least a book a week. She had consciously started to look for bigger books that would take longer to complete. She hadn't been an avid reader in the past because she'd never had the time, but she was enjoying catching up. Still, a combination of sitting at the computer all day, watching TV and reading books was not good for her eyes or head. She couldn't afford a gym membership, but she wanted to exercise. She had looked up some equipment that she could use at home instead. She didn't want to lose her figure even if she wanted to change herself.

Sergeant Ferris visited her. She came over with a pack of donuts. They laughed at the cliché of Emily being an American and Sergeant Ferris being a police officer, and there they were, having coffee and donuts. Emily enjoyed her company and wished that they could be friends. She knew that Ferris only visited her out of duty. She wanted to make sure that Emily was safe and sound – not that there was any real concern over that – and wanted to see how she was settling in. It was Sergeant Ferris who suggested that Emily should find a hobby to keep her busy in the evenings.

“You're not a prisoner. You should enjoy life. Think of it as a new chance.”

It was much too early for Emily to think of it as a chance to start a new life, and she did feel like she was trapped. It was hard to make friends in her circumstances, and she was worried about going out and meeting people. She hadn't exactly been left with a lot of trust in people. Still, a hobby seemed like a good idea, so when her first pay cheque eventually arrived... Well, first she cried. The amount was in pounds, not in dollars, but it was not what she was accustomed to. She realised that she had not been paid commission yet as it was always a month late, but she couldn't believe that people got by on that kind of money. She would have to get by on that money. It was going to be mac and cheese all round.

Once she was done crying, she went online and ordered a cheap coffee maker and an exercise machine. There were some comforts in life one simply couldn't do without.

She also bought a student violin. She had played the violin in her pre-teens and teens, and while she had forgotten all about it after high school, it made sense to pick it up again. She had enjoyed playing it when she had been younger, so why not in her grown-up years too?