

Chapter 2: **I Love the USA**

THE SIRENS and the helicopters seem incongruous in suburbia. Despite being surrounded by the sounds of a war zone, we can still buy a grande decaf skinny vanilla latte and have a gourmet Thai dinner delivered to the door.

Days after 9/11, the factories are pumping out patriotic merchandise to satisfy the need for Americans to show their national spirit. *God Bless America* car stickers are everywhere and the flags, mostly put away after the Fourth of July, fly outside peoples' houses again. I wonder if those who fly the Stars and Stripes all year round have bought bigger versions. They are all over the neighbourhood, from ostentatious ones on poles, on the walls at the front of houses, to little ones, the kind you wave at the parade, defiantly stuck in the ground.

Strosnidars Hardware ('True Value') is flag central, with Cape Cod lighthouses for summer, harvest fruit and autumn leaves for 'fall', pumpkins for Halloween, snowmen, spring flowers and of course the Stars and Stripes. This is a shop for all seasons. When I first go to buy a broom the pavement outside is full of barbecues, lawnmowers, garden tools and mosquito repellent. There's a whole shelf of cool bags. Now giant rakes for the autumn leaves are coming in. Assistants in red waistcoats bustle about, helping customers find the right three-inch nail.

It is perfect weather: the humidity is gone and with it the mosquitoes. Guidebooks mention that Rock Creek Park,

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Washington's green lung, is a nice place to go at this time of year. I read up: It was established in 1890 'for the benefit and enjoyment of the people of the United States'. This is one of the largest urban parks in the world, 1,755 acres of forest and trails passing within walking distance of the White House.

I've heard the name of the park somewhere before. I realise it is the place where police searched in connection with the disappearance of Chandra Levy, the Washington intern who had a relationship with politician Gary Condit. She was among the many joggers who use the park.

Today we are here for a park birthday celebration at its woodland nature centre. Inside it is full of stuffed wildlife in glass cases and park rangers poised to meet their people. They wear brown trousers, short-sleeved shirts and Mountie-style hats, like giant scouts. 'Hey kids, how *are* you? Wanna see something cool?' Evangelists for nature, they lead children off, like the Pied Piper, to look at a frog, a bird or animal tracks. This is called a nature hike.

The parents are dressed in beige khaki shorts and T-shirts which proclaim what race they ran, who they work for or what college they went to. They call their children 'sweetie' and 'bud' ('buddy' if being formal). We look different – my hair is too short and my clothes too black, Roland's hair is too long and he's too pale and skinny. His T-shirt has random swirls rather than a declaration of belonging. We might call our children 'angel' or 'pickle' but obviously only in the privacy of our own home.

The girls have already assimilated. Amalie has wisely realised she has the wrong kind of mother to pull off the 'bright white polo shirt with ribbons in hair' look seen at nursery and has gone for the 'active kid' style of tie-dyed T-shirt, denim shorts and sneakers. Josie knows that if you want to look cool you should copy your older sister.

So here we are, on a fine autumn day, in a woodland clearing in the middle of a capital city, waiting for The Clown. He is in the traditional mould, with giant shoes, baggy tartan trousers and painted face. Fonzie and his assistant are the only black people at the gathering. I'm sure I read that Washington DC is two thirds black but it doesn't feel like it so far. Fonzie does some warm up tricks with scarves. Now for the clever stuff.

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‘Children, say with me the magic words, I love the USA!’

‘I love the USA!’ they yell and Fonzie pulls a dove from his hat.

‘I love the USA!’ the children shout again and out comes another dove.

The kids go wild.

Are British magicians telling the children to shout ‘I love Britain’ instead of ‘abracadabra’ these days? Somehow I can’t picture it.

The parents are trying to work out how Fonzie did the bird trick. The children don’t care because they have been promised free cake and they can see it coming.

‘The only thing I have noticed that has changed since 9/11 is the patriotism,’ says Sally later as we watch the dog walkers go by from her porch. ‘People used to just put a flag out for Memorial Day and the Fourth of July.’

Sally was born in Paris of American parents and came to the US by ship in 1933. She remembers standing on the deck with her sister and brothers to see the Statue of Liberty as they sailed into New York.

We look for some late flowers to pick as Sally talks about 9/11.

‘The day before, I was gardening and the sound of planes took me back to 1939 when I was young. Jet fighters went over. I had never seen any before in 40 years here. They knew something was coming. When it happened I called friends and said, turn on the TV. I went to the grocery store just to do the normal thing. One was a bit shaky with the Pentagon hit.’

Everyone knows someone who had a narrow escape – a dad who had a cancelled meeting at the Twin Towers, a brother who headed into work late because of a hangover.

Pushing Josie on the swings near the public library later that week, I get talking to another mum. She is on her way to see her aunt and is sad at the closure of the nearby Baskin-Robbins ice cream shop. She was going to take some as a present.

‘It’s only just shut,’ I volunteer, showing off some local knowledge.

Her little girl is in her best white and pink visiting outfit and we persuade them not to go in a muddy puddle today.

The mother's accent is unmistakably from New York City. She was at home in Manhattan when the Twin Towers fell.

'I went to the funeral of my ex-boss's husband – it was the saddest thing. You forget Manhattan is an island and they closed it down, shut off the bridges. At least it stopped my Mom coming over so we didn't have to work through her trauma as well as our own. I said, Thank you Mayor Giuliani!'

It is time for her to go to her aunt's and we say our goodbyes.

'Your Tony Blair,' she calls after me, 'we want him to be president.'

Tony fever is everywhere. Democrat voters appalled by Bush's rabbit-in-the-headlights reaction to 9/11 – and with the reputation of their former hero Clinton tarnished – have become instant Blairites on hearing his statement to the House of Commons a few days after 9/11.

'...let us unite in agreeing this: what happened in the United States on Tuesday was an act of wickedness for which there can never be justification. Whatever the cause, whatever the perversion of religious feeling, whatever the political belief, to inflict such terror on the world, to take the lives of so many innocent and defenceless men, women and children, can never, ever be justified. Let us unite too, with the vast majority of decent people throughout the world, in sending our condolences to the Government and the people of America. They are our friends and allies. We the British are a people that stand by our friends in time of need, trial and tragedy, and we do so without hesitation now.'

A neighbour, Bill, stops me in the drive. 'That was a good speech from your Tony Blair.'

In the park, a stranger hears my accent and comes over. 'Are you British? Blair is so good – did you hear his speech? You're lucky to have him. He makes a good speech like Clinton but Clinton was flawed.'

'Would you vote for him as president?' I ask.

'Sure would,' she says.

In the street we meet Sherri from down the road walking the dog in her jogging gear. 'Did you hear Blair?' she says....

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And the soul-searching continues. 'Why does the rest of the world hate us so much?' Leah asks. 'What have we done wrong?' It is a sentiment expressed by many.

But life goes on. The YMCA is hosting a potluck family dinner. The sports and leisure club likes to hold these community events every so often where everyone just turns up with a dish to share. People are holing up in the 'burbs', keeping clear of downtown unless they have to go there for work. We are frightened that there is more to come. Children play different games in the nursery school playground – imaginary planes crash and kids 'die' or run away.

ABC News says that residents in Montgomery County, where I live, are asking firefighters to come to their homes to show them how to protect themselves. Now we should all have an emergency plan, a place to meet up outside the city, three days worth of water, canned food, batteries and torches. Some people pick a 'safe room' in their home with few doors and windows to the outside and get tape ready to seal off air vents in case of chemical attack. Me? I do nothing. But it bothers me that the Washington Metro, unlike the London Underground, still has rubbish bins and there is no unseen voice piped onto the platform warning travellers to 'beware of suspicious packages'. It would be such an easy target.

So today, two weeks after 9/11, we go by car. The afternoon sky is weirdly dark as I turn off River Road into one of the many garages. The children in the back are getting nervous and clamouring to go home. 'In a minute,' I promise. 'We just need to go to the garage shop first.'

The friendly assistant guides me through a baffling array of battery chargers.

'This one is real good,' he says, before adding, 'Ma'am, I love your accent!'

'Everyone says that,' Amalie tells him.

As I pay, we can hardly hear ourselves speak for the deafening sound of a torrent of rain crashing onto the roof (I even thought I heard hail, surely not at this time of year). We sprint the few yards to the car, fighting against a rising wind. With the windscreen wipers on high speed, I can barely see the road. Should I pull over?

No one else seems to and some cars even overtake so I keep going, in a sedate British way, cursing impatient American drivers. Turn into Little Falls Parkway and the trees are swaying alarmingly. Remember there being something on the radio this morning about a storm approaching but didn't expect it to be this bad. Pull into the driveway as the rain suddenly stops and the wind eases. But the sky is still black, almost greenish. Get the girls into dry clothes and they trot off to the basement playroom to rummage in the dressing-up box.

The phone rings. It's Sally.

'Do you know what to do in a tornado?'

'No,' I reply, surprised by the question.

'Thought not,' she says briskly. 'Go to your basement now. Bye.' And she hangs up.

I turn on the radio and discover that a tornado has passed through Virginia, crossed the Potomac River and is heading from DC into Maryland. That's us.

Sally may be being over cautious, but she has lived here a long time. I decide to follow her advice. I grab my cup of tea and the radio and head to the basement.

The tornado misses us, picking up force further into Maryland, leaving thousands without power. It touches down six miles away at the University of Maryland in College Park. Two sisters are killed when the car they are in is hurled over an eight-storey building. On the college campus, hundreds of trees are uprooted or snapped in half and 300 cars damaged or destroyed.

I read about the aftermath in *The Washington Post*. One man was talking to his neighbour while cooking hotdogs on an outdoor grill. They heard a low rumble, the sky darkened and they shouted, 'Basement!' People came back upstairs to find half their roof gone, carried away by 200 mph winds. Another described watching the top of a tree fly by.

Experts on the radio say it was a category F3 – strong enough to pick up and carry a portacabin or a car – and caused simply by warm air hitting cold. They agree with Sally that you should run to the basement (most people seem to have one). If you are caught in the car, the advice is to get out and lie in a ditch or on the road. I really hope I never have to do it.

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I survey the fallen branches in the garden the next morning with Lena. 'We were very lucky,' she says grimly.

As Sally wanders over, I ask her for tips should another tornado come our way. She ponders before answering. 'A tornado cloud looks like fudge bubbling on the stove.' Right. I suggest that as she is always tuned in to TV or radio she could be my personal tornado spotter. She gives me a long look.

I have only just learned that there really is such a thing. The government's National Weather Service has a SKYWARN volunteer programme with around 230,000 trained severe weather spotters, 'part of the ranks of citizens who form the Nation's first line of defence against severe weather'. They watch out for thunderstorms, floods and the 1,000 tornadoes which occur across the US in an average year.

There are also 'storm chasers' who get off on the thrill of following a tornado. Followers can even go on a storm chasing vacation across 'tornado alley', starting in Oklahoma or Nebraska. Imagine a bunch of people with binoculars in a minivan with all sorts of geeks' accessories. I conclude they are the same kind of people who are interested in UFOs.

Since the tornado, life has got quieter, I tell a caller from home one weekday morning. Yes, the undercurrent of post-terrorism hysteria is still there but it can't go on forever can it?

A few hours later two men walk slowly and purposefully up the drive as I put out the rubbish. They look too clean cut to be storm chasers and I guess that they are Mormons. I am about to say, 'not today thanks', when the older one speaks.

'Good afternoon, Ma'am. FBI.'

They hold out their ID cards. A stab of fear goes through me before I collect myself. I haven't knowingly done anything wrong so why should I be worried?

They sit at my kitchen table. It is hot, warm enough for T-shirts and shorts, but they both keep their nylon jackets on and I can guess what is underneath.

My guests politely decline drinks. (Not allowed while on duty I presume. I might poison them.)

'Have you been here long?' the older one asks. He is fit-looking,

probably in his 30s, with short, brown hair and that all-American look that firemen and park rangers have. His accent is from New York, I guess, and I have to follow his words closely. He watches my face intently. Well, I came here three weeks ago from West London, I tell him, although so much has happened that it feels like three months. No, I don't know who owns the house. No, I don't know who lived here before. We did everything through an agent.'

'Do you ever send faxes?' he interrupts.

'Well, sometimes.'

'Does the name Victor mean anything to you?'

'No, I can't think of anyone I know with that name,' I reply, confidently.

The eyes of the younger man, an African American who is silently taking notes, meet those of the agent asking the questions.

'Are you sure?' asks the questioner again. There is a long silence punctured by a loud crash from the next room where I have put the children in front of a video. We all jump.

Victor is obviously in big trouble, I think. He tries again.

'Does the name Roland Victor mean anything to you, Ma'am?'

Only then do I realise they are trying to confirm Roland's middle name. Standard FBI questioning technique, no doubt. I laugh nervously. 'Sorry, I thought I had to think of a first name.'

Silence. The other agent keeps writing, even though I'm saying nothing. Then he meets my eyes, watching my face thoughtfully.

I look away, distracted by some stray Panda Puffs still on the floor from breakfast. His shoes are so close he is sure to crunch them.

'Did you speak to someone in Virginia on the phone on September 12?' asks the older agent.

Did I? I don't know. Maybe. Yes, I did, the night after the terrorist attacks. It was a weary late night conversation with Roland during his long drive back from Florida. How do they know about that?

The note-taker smiles encouragingly. He doesn't speak, but his face says, *'Don't be frightened.'* I must be looking worried.

'Do the words "falcon one" mean anything to you?' asks his colleague.

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I must have misheard. 'Could you repeat that please?'

But it still sounds like he is saying 'falcon', and that can't be right.

Patiently, he raises his arms to demonstrate a flying action and says, 'Like the bird, Ma'am.'

OK. 'No, they don't mean anything to me,' I reply. They have really got me this time.

It doesn't seem to matter. They appear to be winding up. 'We need to speak to Roland today,' says the older agent. 'He hired a car in Florida and stopped at motels along the route, right?' Right. I promise to call him at work right away, to tell him to stay there and that they are coming downtown to interview him.

They stand to leave. 'We have some other calls to make in the neighbourhood, so we'll come back round in ten minutes after you have spoken to Roland,' the interrogator says.

I watch them walk down the drive and turn the corner, out of sight. There is no sign of a car. Have they really more enquiries to make?

I pass on the message to Roland who laughs out loud, failing to appreciate the trauma of being confronted in my own home by two presumably armed men.

Exactly ten minutes later there is a knock at the door. The video has finished and my children glare sullenly, suspicious of these strange men, and hang onto my skirt. But the mood has lifted. The Feds are smiling, talking to the children.

Was ten minutes the time it took for my story to be confirmed on their database? Had they just been listening to my conversation with Roland? Or had they just surmised that we were unlikely recruits for Al Qaeda?

'We don't need to see Roland now,' says the older agent. 'We'll just call him. Can you make sure he is at home early tomorrow morning?'

They vanish into the afternoon sunshine as quietly as they had arrived. An hour later I switch on the radio.

'Police said today that terrorists involved in the September 11 attack may have gone to Britain first,' the newsreader says. 'There have been arrests in West London.'

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A stranger's face flashes by the window next to the front door. I run to answer it but there is no one there. Down the street a man is getting into a mail van. Isn't it late in the day for mail? And where's our regular postman?

A helicopter passes overhead but this time it doesn't hover. Sirens wail in the distance, coming closer, but then fade. They aren't coming to get me yet.

The next morning, a Saturday, the phone rings at 8.30am. It's the Feds. After more questions, Roland learns that a vigilant and patriotic hotel receptionist in Georgia had become suspicious of a stressed Englishman, registered as Roland Victor Watson. He checked in late at night and was overheard speaking, in an unfamiliar accent, to someone on his mobile about the President's movements. He made rushed phone calls to DC, received faxes on the subject of missile defence and wouldn't let the towel-change man into his room. As if that weren't enough, the receptionist thought she heard him say something like 'Falcon thirty-one secure' into his phone.

Had he said something that sounded like it? (He has no idea what.) Had she watched one movie too many? Or was she so desperate to be seen doing her patriotic duty that she had made it up?

For us, it is a sharp reminder that, while our educated neighbours in the suburbs are interested rather than frightened by our English accents, to many Americans we are weird foreigners.

From now on, in this fevered climate, I am going to be careful what I say.