

Chapter 1

23rd May 2004

I am sitting on my red bench from the Bye Bye Bar in the middle of Charles de Gaulle airport, waiting to leave.

I am waiting for a green card so I can go to America. I am waiting for a British passport so I can go to England. I am waiting for my documentation so I can go anywhere.

I have been sitting on my red bench from the Bye Bye Bar in the middle of Charles de Gaulle airport waiting to leave for fifteen years.

Charles de Gaulle airport is 30km north of the city of Paris. My red bench is on the lower floor of Terminal One - a slab of 1960s concrete shaped like a doughnut ring.

Behind my red bench, a large glass window looks out onto the little open-air section at the very centre of the ring. It used to contain a fountain spouting water eighteen hours a day. The water kept getting dirty, so a few months ago the fountain was replaced by a garden planted with an uneasy mixture of palm trees and Christmas trees. I do not know if the garden will stay. I like the garden better because it makes less noise than the fountain so it is easier to get to sleep.

Above the new garden, escalators in silver walkways cut across the skyline, carrying passengers towards the planes that sit docked and waiting around the exterior of the terminal. You can get to anywhere in the world from here.

Passengers are reminded to keep their personal baggage with them at all times.

A tall woman with a mass of dark hair walks past my bench. I see her looking at me out of the corner of her eye. She is pulling a small suitcase on wheels and carries another bag slung over her shoulder.

I check my clock. It is 10:17 a.m. Around my bench are my possessions - my boxes, my bags, my newspapers. I reach behind my red bench and pick up a wad of A4 paper. On the top page I write: '23rd May 2004' and underline the date.

The tall woman walks past my bench again. She looks over, more obviously this time, hesitates, then pulls her suitcase and walks towards me.

'Excuse me, are you Sir Alfred?'

I tell her yes. She smiles.

'My name is Mandy Pink. Could I... could I talk to you for a few minutes?'

I tell her to sit down. In front of my red bench are a round black table and a chair, also from the Bye Bye Bar. When the bar closed down a few years ago, they gave me a special dispensation to keep the bench and the table and chair.