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ATTEND

Written by **West Camel**

Published By **Orenda Books**

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ORENDA
BOOKS

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Orenda Books
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London SE21 8HU
www.orendabooks.co.uk

First published in the United Kingdom by Orenda Books, 2018
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-912374-39-7
eISBN 978-1-912374-40-3

Typeset in Garamond by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

For sales and distribution, please contact *info@orendabooks.co.uk*

Chapter 1: **Anne**

Anne pulled at the door, but it resisted; it clung to the jambs. She hoped no one was passing on the balcony outside, seeing that she couldn't even get out of her own home.

She tugged again and recalled struggling like this once before. When Mel had locked her in.

He'd grabbed her as she'd made a dash for the front door of their flat. Held her against the wall, his heavy forearm at her throat; searched her pockets for her keys and the money she'd stolen from his wallet to buy herself a hit.

'Now look after your fucking kid,' he'd shouted as he locked the door from the outside, his face a dirty blur in the frosted glass.

Julie had wailed in the next room – the insistent keen of a six-week-old. What was it – eighteen years ago? The sound still rasped.

Anne's hand slipped and she grazed a layer of skin off the knuckle of her thumb. She took a breath and looked down at the key in her palm, its grooves and notches clean and new. Mel was long gone, she was alone and this door was just a bad fit. She tried pushing her toe under its bottom lip and pulling the handle upward. With a bit of a twist it opened.

She stepped out into sunlight and the smell of roasting meat. Sunday. Her mother would be busy with the dinner right now – hot, banging pots. Perhaps she should walk over there – have something to eat, help with the washing-up. But Julie would be home with the baby. They wouldn't want Anne there, spoiling things.

As she descended the three floors to the courtyard, she heard booming voices and shrieking kids. The Nigerian family on the ground floor had just arrived back from church. Anne nodded to them as she passed – the children in neat suits and dresses, the men

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smart, and the women tall in their hot-coloured wrappers and stiff headscarves.

'Hello, how are you settling in?' asked the mother, her children swinging at the ends of her long arms.

'Not bad, thank you. Getting there, you know.' But Anne kept moving, conscious of her mousey, messy hair, her drab jeans and scuffed trainers.

She hurried on out of the courtyard, not sure now whether she would call her mother. But waiting at the crossing on Church Street, she reminded herself why she had come back, clean, to Deptford. She pulled out her mobile phone; no credit. There was a phone box on the other side of the road – she would call from there and invite herself to dinner. She would make herself sound cheery and relaxed.

Rita answered loudly, but seemed to lower her voice when she realised it was Anne.

'Oh, hello, love. What's up?'

'Nothing, just settling in, you know.'

'Need anything doing?'

'I'm OK, I'm doing everything myself.'

'Oh yes? Well, don't be knocking back help when it's offered; you don't know when you might need it.'

Anne gripped the phone's stiff metal cord. 'How's everything there?'

'Alright. We're sitting down to dinner in a minute.'

'Oh right. I was thinking I could come over, if you don't mind. I just fancy a roast.'

Rita paused for a moment. 'I'd like to say yes to you, love, but…'

'Don't worry, not enough to go round?'

'Well, that, and, well, Mel's here.'

Anne dug her nail into the graze on her thumb. 'Come for his lunch most Sundays, does he?' She knew it was the wrong thing to say as soon as the words were out.

Rita was quick to react. 'No, but he's been to see his daughter and grandson a lot more than you have.'

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'I want to come now, don't I?'

'Well, I didn't know that. You wouldn't want to be here with him anyway, would you?'

'No, I fucking wouldn't.'

'Well there you are, then. What can I do?'

'You just think he's some fucking saint and I'm the only one that fucked up.' Anne heard her voice scudding away from her. 'And Julie thinks the sun shines out of his fucking hole. If she knew what it was like when she was little—'

Her mother interrupted, hard and quiet. 'She don't, Anne. But I do. And I also know that it was me that looked after her when you was off sticking yourself full of that shit. So don't start.'

Anne was silent. She heard her own breath in the handset. A train rumbled along the viaduct above her.

'Go on then, got any more?' said Rita. The baby cried in the background.

'No, Mum.'

'Right, then.'

'Bye.'

Anne thumped the wall of the phone box. Everything was clenched, her throat was tight. She tried to slam the door as she left the box, but the spring insisted on closing it slowly. Mel must be sitting down at her mother's table now, his fists tight around a knife and fork, a napkin tucked into his shirt, his heavy jaw steadily chewing through the meat. While she stood here alone, under the railway arch, not sure where to go. The noise of a massive, empty lorry drove her out, fiercely picking at the hem of her coat.

She wanted a fix, and had to shake her head and mutter 'no' out loud – she was beyond that now. She turned into Crossfield Street, her gaze lowered to the patches of old cobbles appearing where the tarmac was wearing away.

She slowed down; there was a bench ahead – she could sit down there and calm herself. It was on the edge of a green space that was criss-crossed oddly by humps and half-walls – left over from before

the war, she always supposed. Beyond it was the white church where she had been married to Mel. Kathleen – Mel's sister, and her oldest friend – had been bridesmaid. That had been the best part: her and Kathleen in their dresses.

She looked up at the church tower, its columns and scrolls rising above the uglier buildings around into an almost irresistibly sharp needle. The intricate gold clock below it always surprised her by telling the right time. And, as she looked, the bell began to chime.

When she looked down, she saw someone else was sitting on the bench: an old woman in a dark-grey woollen skirt and shawl, a grey bag placed beside her. She was bent over slightly and what looked like a white sheet was spread across her lap. Anne's step faltered – she could not work out where this person had appeared from. The woman glanced up as she passed, and Anne, attracted by the clean, open face and wave of white hair, allowed herself to smile and nod. But rather than returning her smile, the woman's face tightened in shock and she clutched at the edges of her shawl. Anne saw something drop from her hand and bounce onto the ground, leaving a twisting trail behind it. Turning her head back, Anne saw that it was a reel of white thread. The woman made no effort to pick it up, but stared open-mouthed as Anne walked away. Anne shook her head again, wondering why she had bothered coming back to Deptford.

She reached the junction with the High Street and turned back into the churchyard, where there were more benches among the graves and rose bushes. She had always found a little peace here. When she had rowed with her mother, or Mel or Kathleen, she would come and sit on the stone caskets or, most often, on the curved steps under the church's semicircular porch.

Now, as she lowered herself onto the top step, she heard the swell of voices from the service on the other side of the doors. The hymn's tune was familiar, but the words escaped her for the moment, and she couldn't resist a growing feeling that, after the long, meandering journey to get herself clean, she was back where she had started. She leaned against the pillar behind her and tried to tell herself that

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things were different now: she hadn't taken smack in two years; Julie was grown up and had her own baby; she and Mel had divorced long ago. But she still hadn't seen Kathleen; and he was at her mother's table while she was stewing on these same cold steps.

The voices had been quiet for several minutes when the old woman who had been sitting on the bench in Crossfield Street came in through the churchyard gate. She strolled slowly down the path, making a show of looking at the graves on either side, but all the time sneaking glances up at Anne. Her clothes and her bag were the same colour as the rain-stained stones. When she was just a few yards away, she seemed to realise that Anne was watching her, drew her short figure up a little and looked Anne full in the face, her lips parted and her blue eyes wide. There was something slightly desperate about her expression that made Anne move around on the step, but she held the woman's gaze and, at this, the woman approached more purposefully until she stood nearly at Anne's feet.