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GALLOWSTREE LANE

Written by **Kate London**

Published By **Corvus, an imprint of Atlantic Books**

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GALLOWSTREE LANE

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Also by Kate London

Post Mortem
Death Message

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GALLOWSTREE LANE

KATE LONDON

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First published in hardback in Great Britain in 2019 by Corvus,
an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978 1 78649 795 6
Trade paperback ISBN: 978 1 78649 338 5
E-book ISBN: 978 1 78649 339 2

Printed in Great Britain

Corvus
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London
WC1N 3JZ

www.corvus-books.co.uk

For D & Y

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Author's Note

Special thanks to Sheldon and Michelle Thomas from the charity Gangsline, who shared their experience, understanding and passion so generously.

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AFTERWARDS

FRIDAY 4 NOVEMBER 2016

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Detective Inspector Sarah Collins had set off before dawn, whipping round London's arterial roads, thundering along the motorway and then winding down country lanes to the Saxon church that lay, through a gate and along a path, on the brow of a small hill. The hedgerows and trees were flaming with late colour.

More than thirty minutes remained before the funeral. She slid the car seat back and drank her flask of tea. Caroline had offered to come with her, but it felt wrong to be so intimately together so soon after they had separated. She sighed and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. The only sound now was birdsong.

When she was only sixteen, Sarah's sister had died. Susie's boyfriend, Patrick, had been driving too fast and lost control on a sharp bend. It was no more than a moment's misjudgement, a youthful thrill at the power of the car he had borrowed for the day, but in an instant her sister was as dead as if Patrick had taken a knife and killed her.

Sarah sighed again. It was tiresome to think of this so many years later and at such a very different funeral. But you can't control what comes into your mind. Perhaps it was Susie's youth when she died, or perhaps it was the vast sadness that Sarah felt now, expanding inside her like air.

The body is not a fairy tale. Sometimes it does not survive an impact or a stab wound or the bullet from a gun.

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and tidied her flask away. Into her mind had stepped the children who would follow the hearse today. There was no remedy for the loss of a

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parent: that was the thing she could not handle. When she was at work, Sarah could do her best to deliver justice, but today what could she contribute? She would sit alone at the back of the church. Pay her respects. Bother no one.

Other cars had started to arrive. They bounced up the bank and parked and spilled their occupants onto the verges. The funeral today was for a police officer, and so many of the mourners were also police. They were easy to recognize from their best-behaviour attitude and their smart clothes and the assessing way they met your eye.

There were children too, populating the graveyard as they spread out on their way to the church. Sarah smiled as she watched them. A chubby boy of about four in matching blazer and trousers. A slightly older girl in an apricot taffeta dress and dark cardigan – dressed more for a wedding than a funeral. Teenage girls in tight dresses and spike heels that sank into the path or wobbled beneath them. And teenage boys with gelled hair and outsized Adam's apples, squeezed into horrible suits in tribute to the baffling adult world that couldn't today be gainsaid.

Sarah's heart went out to them in their poorly concealed vulnerability, their sensitivity to any slight, their hastily made mistakes and their painful, long-drawn-out regrets. As she watched the adults gathering in their offspring with varying degrees of patience, she knew that for all the push and pull of parenthood, these children were the lucky ones. Mum and Dad cajoling them towards their emergence from this desperate and grandiose and ridiculous time when even a haircut felt like a life-or-death event.

And as she left the car and walked through the gate towards the church, her thoughts travelled to those other teenage boys, on their bikes, stealing phones and slipping drugs hand to hand on the streets of London. Into her mind came Peter Pan's lost boys roaming

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free, and Neverland, where to die was an awfully big adventure and where pirate Smee wiped his glasses before he cleaned his sword, and her gaze turned to the far edge of the churchyard, where, by a fence that separated the consecrated ground from a field of horses, the deep grave waited.

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A PROMISING FOOTBALLER

SUNDAY 9 OCTOBER 2016

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1

Please don't let me die.

The first time, Owen wasn't sure he'd heard the words correctly. And he couldn't see properly either. The street light wasn't working. The big old park that ran alongside the pavement was pitch dark, and his eyes were still filled with the brightness of the shop where he had just been. At first, the only thing visible was a shifting in the shadows. Then, as his irises expanded, he made out two teenage boys standing with their backs against the railings.

Gallowstree Lane was too wide, too dark, and life had taught Owen the hard way never to take anything at face value. Perhaps these boys were going to rob him. But the boy who had spoken stepped forward, and Owen saw he was gripping the inside of his leg. A dark, sticky lake was spreading around his feet, and he said it again.

'Please don't let me die.'

Owen had only popped out to buy some fags from the corner shop before it closed. He had a boy of his own at home, a boy he had only ten minutes ago told to switch the lights out but who was probably still wide awake glued to his Xbox. He'd flick the lights off at his father's return and pretend to be asleep. It always made Owen smile, and thinking of it stopped his breath for a second, because although his boy was all the things you'd expect of a teenager – lazy, messy, disorganized – Owen loved him so hard he knew he'd die for him.

The boy in front of him was, he guessed, about the same age as his own son. Fifteen. He tried not to let the thought of that paralyse

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him or make him leap to the outcome that the growing pool of blood suggested. He'd been trained not to give up, not just by the army, but by life too. He'd seen stuff. A soldier stepping on an IED. A suicide attack on a market. He was right back there and the familiar reaction – a certain cold sweatiness – was counteracted by the equally familiar instruction to himself. Do what you can. Don't stop to think about outcomes.

He called out to the other boy, the one who seemed unharmed, and he stepped forward. Unremarkable: a London kid with the usual uniform of dark hoody and dark tracksuit trousers.

Owen said, 'Have you called an ambulance?'

The boy shook his head. 'Haven't got a phone.'

'You haven't got a phone?' Even in this moment of peril, Owen disbelieved. Surely every teenager had a phone? He glanced at the boy again. His eyes were becoming accustomed to the thin light and he took in a bit more detail. Pale skin for a black lad, wide mouth, a line shaved in his left eyebrow. Superdry logo across the front of his hoody. The boy was probably shocked. In these situations you had to take charge, give clear instructions. He reached his own phone – an iPhone 6 – out of his pocket and handed it over.

'My code's 634655. Call 999.'

The boy fumbled anxiously with the phone. 'Fucking hell! There's no signal.'

'Find a signal. Tell them there's an off-duty paramedic on scene. The patient's conscious and breathing but there's a suspected arterial bleed. Have you got that?'

'Suspected arterial bleed, yes.'

'Tell them we need HEMS. You got that? HEMS. It's the air ambulance.'

'HEMS, yes.'

'Tell them it's life-threatening.'

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The boy was still fumbling with the phone. 'Fucking hell,' he said again.

'What's your name?'

The boy shook his head – whether at the phone or refusing his name, it wasn't clear.

'OK. Whatever your name is, stop panicking. Find a signal. Make the call, then come back and help.'

He turned back to the wounded boy and said, 'You need to lie down.' But the boy was confused. He had started to take off his clothes, and as Owen approached, he tried to push him away.

He looked around and said it again, this time with rage and fear.

'Don't let me die.'

Two other people were passing. Young white kids, a boy and a girl. About twenty, maybe. Their steps faltered.

The boy said, 'Is there a problem?' He had one of those good-schools accents: out of place on this street. There was fear in his voice, and his eyes flickered to the pool of blood.

Owen was catching the victim as he began to lose control of his body, lying him down on the street even as he resisted like a fluttering bird. Looking up, he said to the kids, 'This fella's in trouble. Can you help me?'

'What can we do?'

'Put pressure on his leg.'

The boy knelt, put his two hands on the leg, pressing his thumbs. Owen said, 'No. Much more force. Stand up. Put your foot in his groin, here. That's right, use your weight. Don't be afraid.'

He gestured to the girl. 'You, darling. What's your name?'

'Fiona.'

Her skin was white as birch in the dark street, her eyes wide. She had long straight hair. He smiled and tried to sound encouraging.

'Right, Fiona. Kneel down and rest his foot on your shoulder. Lift

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the leg. That's right. Get it high up. We're trying to slow the bleed.'

He knelt by the patient. 'My name's Owen, fella. What's yours?'

The boy just groaned. Owen started searching for other wounds. The skin was already clammy. With the darkness and the blood it was hard to see the necessary detail. He didn't have a torch, no dressings, no defib. Nothing.

He said, 'What happened? Have you been stabbed more than once?'

'Don't know.'

Another woman had joined them. A fat black woman, fifties maybe. She had a steadiness about her and the light gleamed off her skin as if she was highly polished stone.

She said, 'What can I do?'

The clothes the boy had taken off were on the pavement, and Owen gestured towards them. 'Look through those. See if you can see other cuts.'

Studiously she began, holding the clothes up to catch what light there was.

The girl was wearing a scarf, and Owen asked her to give it to him. She surrendered it immediately. It might well be pointless but what else could he do? He wrapped the scarf tightly round the top of the thigh. The boy was losing consciousness. He had no blood to give him, no oxygen. He put his face towards the boy's mouth. There was still breath. There was still hope. The police were here, already pulling on their plastic gloves, asking what they could do. Owen turned and looked over his shoulder. There was no sign of the boy he had told to call for help.

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2

At first Ryan had been in a daze. He had stood for an aching while, watching the guy working on his friend. He was a black guy, buzz cut, jeans. Other people had gathered and the guy had shouted instructions. He seemed to know what he was doing. Everything would be OK. After all, lots of people do fine after they've been cut. That was true. That was true! He'd *seen* it.

Good scars they were: shown like trophies. A trouser leg pulled up: a patch where the knife had entered and the hair on the leg gone forever. Jeans pulled down: an ivory cord drawn tight and hard through the soft, warm skin of a thigh or a buttock. A shirt unbuttoned: silver lines like staples across a toughened line of tissue. These were the good scars: neat, professional. But sometimes too – because the medics always go to the cops – no criss-crosses. So instead a raised angrier band where a friend has helped and traced a streak of superglue along the line of the cut. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. That's what everyone says, isn't it?

Ryan had been lost in his hopes, but the focus of his gaze had returned to his friend, Spencer, lying floppy on the street. For a bit he had struggled, almost resisted the guy who was trying to help him, but then he had seemed to stop caring. He'd begun to wander around; the guy had held him. Then he'd lain down. There was a lot of blood. That was worrying. But they had all kinds of shit nowadays that could save a life. Loads of people get stabbed. Ryan had known he should leave, but Spence was his friend. He couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been his mate. He just couldn't make his legs turn and carry him away.

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Some of the blood had been seeping into a storm drain. Ryan had watched that for a while, his friend's blood spilling into London's sewer system, making its way through those dirty tunnels towards the river. He felt his own blood as if it was pooling into his feet. His face rigid, his bottom jaw pressing against his top teeth, his tongue hard against the roof of his mouth. He'd dialled 999, like the guy had told him, and the voice at the other end of the phone was still asking questions. He could hear the voice rattling away but he was no longer holding the phone to his ear. They had everything they needed to know. He lifted the phone to his ear and said it out loud.

'Just fucking get here.'

One of the bystanders, a young white woman, turned and glanced over her shoulder at him with a briefly curious expression.

The red helicopter swung into the sky above them, hanging in the air as if swinging on a wire and then descending with a rush of wind. A roar like a movie sound system. Ryan's chest filled with the vibrations.

The street was filling with people, uniforms, bystanders. Traffic was slowing to watch. A fat white bloke leant out of a car, side window down, and said, 'Do you know what's going on?' Ryan said, 'I don't know, mate.' The fat bloke said, 'Wannabe gangster. I hope he dies.' He drove off. There were two paramedic cars now. The street was noisy, and bright too with flashing lights, like a fun fair.

Then the first cop car arrived. A young female officer got out and moved towards Spencer and the paramedics. Luckily she hadn't thought to look around her. That was what finally got Ryan moving. He didn't want to leave his friend, but he had to.

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3

By the time Sarah arrived, Gallowstree Lane was already closed to traffic and a two-hundred-metre section of the road had been cordoned off with blue and white plastic tape. Portable lights had been brought in, and beyond the tape, the crime scene blazed brightly white against the dark backdrop of the park. Life had been pronounced extinct at the scene and so the body had not been removed. The tent that held the boy was pitched a few yards down from a uniformed officer who stood at the shadowy cordon line, cold and bored, scene log clutched in his gloved hand.

Sarah put her logbook on the dashboard of the car and stepped out onto the pavement.

Gallowstree Lane was a road that took you from east to west, not a main thoroughfare but not residential either. There were AstroTurf pitches at one end, in the middle a lonely shop, and at the end, a scary-looking Victorian pub. There was a vacancy about the place, an absence. Sarah had driven through it many times on the way to somewhere else and it had always given her the creeps. Was it the dimensions – too wide, too open? Was it the sombre, uninviting park with the railings? Someone had told her once that farmers used to drive their sheep into London to sell them here. Sheep markets and hangings: what a day out it must have been. There was another piece of folklore – that the sheep had got anthrax and were buried beneath the park, and that this was what had preserved the road's undeveloped character, its open spaces. The strange emptiness offered the inevitable opportunities. Gallowstree Lane was both busy with crime – drug dealing and prostitution and fights – and yet also

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deserted. It was a good place to hurt someone and get away with it.

She opened the boot of her car and split the cellophane wrapper on a white forensic suit. As she began to put it on – legs in the suit, hitching it up, arms in the sleeves, careful not to snag the zip – she watched the specialist search team combing the street, moving in a silent, patient line in their own white suits and blue plastic overshoes, and it seemed to her that perhaps a secular liturgy was occurring. It was a sacrament she held close. In this huge and various city, no murder should go undetected.

Although each detail of the scene was a little different from the last, a bleak familiarity nevertheless washed across the street like an urban watercolour. So many young men dead nowadays that the officers who worked London's streets knew by heart the established order that followed.

The park would be searched. The prostitutes who worked the road would be spoken to. The CCTV trawl, Sarah noticed, had already begun. The little shop, Yilmaz, metal blinds drawn firmly against the night, had a camera pointing in the direction of the murder, and two officers were knocking on the wooden residential door that was set into the blind side of the shop. A light came on in an upstairs window.

Sarah pulled the shoe protectors on, took the decision log out of the car, scribbled.

9 October 2016. 23:22 hours. Gallowstree Lane.

The forensic team was on its way, bringing a pathologist with them for an initial investigation before the post-mortem. Sarah would wait for them before looking in on the poor boy, cold and lonely in his tent.

She approached the PC on the cordon and showed her warrant card. He called her ma'am and she smiled and said, 'Sarah, please.' Fat Elaine was standing at the far end of the cordon arguing with a

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uniformed sergeant. While the PC copied her details into the log, Sarah watched Elaine, enjoying her bad manners that leavened this sad road with its familiar procedure, its usual constraints and its teenage death.

Instead of her usual capacious dress, Elaine was in trousers – a concession perhaps to the practicalities of being part of the night-duty homicide assessment team. Pulled tightly around the vague area of her waist, they were a bit too short in the leg and showed her canvas lace-ups.

Sarah took back her warrant card and walked towards her, watching with some amusement the sergeant's protests. He towered above Elaine but his face still brought to mind a carp out of water, gulping for air.

'We've got three outstanding I grades on the box,' Sarah heard him saying. 'A rape scene and a shooting. I need to free up these officers.'

Elaine's hands were on her hips. 'Well, Sergeant, the Met's not so fucked that you can't provide cordon officers for a murder. And while you're at it, I need you to get the first-on-scene back here so I can debrief them.'

Sarah interrupted, offering her hand. 'Sarah Collins, I'm the SIO. Thanks for your help. I can see you're stretched …'

Taking a minute to negotiate the difficulties of insisting he stretch his team still further, she moved on to her next priority.

'I've got a moment before Forensics get here. Can you point me in the direction of the off-duty paramedic who came across the victim? Owen Pierce, I think that's his name.'

Owen Pierce was outside the cordon, sitting on the steps of an ambulance, smoking. A thin black man, late thirties probably, with a buzz cut. His clothes were drenched in blood and he had blood on his face too, where he'd wiped it.

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She offered her hand. 'Sarah, I'm the detective inspector.'

He nodded. 'Owen, yeah.'

He looked dog tired. She said, 'Well tried. It can't have been easy.'

'He asked me not to let him die.' He managed, just about, to get the next words out. 'I've got one the same age at home.'

The comment rippled through her. She had no children of her own. Did that disqualify her from the pain he felt? It was a familiar moment of alienation, as though he had unwittingly suggested that she was only really watching life on earth and not participating in it. In any case, she certainly knew how it felt when a job went wrong.

She said, 'I'm sorry.'

He nodded, drew his hand across his face.

He looked terrible. Off duty, just popping to the shop, the boy's terror catching him unprepared: clearly it had been a bad one. All the usual expressions crowded in, clamouring to be said out loud – *you did your best, nothing would have saved him, at least he was being looked after when he died* – but experience told her not to voice them. Such utterances served only to make the speaker feel better. As for Owen, he would have to pull himself together and be polite and say something positive he didn't feel. *Yes*, or *I suppose so*. So she said nothing further but instead caught his eye.

'Yeah,' he said, understanding her expression. 'Thanks. I appreciate it.' Then, after a moment, he added, 'You needed to ask me something?'

'I'm sorry to ask you right now …'

'No, that's fine. Do your job. Catch the bastards.'

That was right. Justice was all she had to offer him, and here on the streets of London, into her mind came the scripture of her childhood. *If a slain person is found lying in the open country …*

'There was another boy with him?'

'Yes, he stole my phone. Can you believe it?'

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'How did that happen?'

'He said he didn't have one to call the ambulance, so I gave him mine. I was working on his friend, turned around and he'd buggered off with it.'

Sarah gave that a moment to sink in. So doing a subscriber's check on the phone wasn't going to tell her anything about the witness who had called the ambulance and named the victim, because he hadn't used his own phone to dial 999.

'You said he was the victim's friend. What gave you that impression?'

'I don't know exactly. They were together, of course. But it was also his manner. He was so … anxious. He was black, but he was still white as a sheet, if you know what I mean.'

'Did he give you his name?'

'No. I asked but he didn't say.'

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4

As if he was a stranger in his own streets Ryan walked, seeing what had happened in flashes: the boys taking his stash; Spencer stepping forward to try to stop them; the silver flash of the knife in the street light, clearer and colder about what it was up to than any of the boys.

Spencer moving back, suddenly afraid. 'Please, don't.'

And the tall, thin boy with the tattoo had stepped forward, as if in reply, as if Spencer and he were partnering each other in one of those funky line dances from the seventies. Then it was a one-two movement – very quick – the knife darting forward with a jabbing life of its own. A gasp: breath expelled like a punch. *Haah*. Almost like Spence was agreeing to something. Then he had sort of staggered backwards and put his hand to his thigh, the blood spurting from between his fingers. Who would have thought we had such fountains inside us? Spencer had looked at him, terrified and puzzled.

'Ry, what's happening to me?'

The two other boys turned and ran. They probably had wheels nearby, because Ryan heard a squeal of tyres and the grinding roar of a car being driven too fast in a low gear. As he watched his friend's growing confusion, he thought: Fuck, man. They planned this. They must have planned this.

He realized he had stopped walking. His thoughts had overpowered him. He opened his eyes and, through a wave of dizziness, saw the present. The street was cobbled. Low houses, nice cars. A Porsche and an old red sports Mercedes. Rich people.

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He squatted, his back against a wall. There was a sticky wetness on his hands and on the sleeves of his jacket. Had he been cut too? He pulled his hoody over his head, lifted his T-shirt – his torso bare, reassuringly healthy in the night. But as he checked his chest, he hand-printed the shine of his skin with sticky darkness. Spencer's blood: he realized now that that was what it was. When he'd moved forward and held his friend, he'd covered himself in his blood. His head was spinning with it. He wasn't coping. He looked up and saw a face staring down at him from one of the houses opposite. The man pulled up the window and shouted across at him.

'What are you doing here? Clear off!'

Ryan got up and pulled his hoody back on over his head, then began to walk quickly away down the cobbles. That guy was the kind who'd probably call the feds just because he'd seen a brother in his street. The blood on his clothing: any fed who saw him would stop him. It would be a quick chat on the radio before he got nicked. He didn't know what to do but he knew he had to work that out. He drew the strings of his hoody tight. A beat of blades above him, thumping the air. He looked up. It wasn't the good guys' oversized red dragonfly. No, it was the blue and yellow watcher, hovering high, swinging round and scanning the streets.

Ryan dreaded the secret power of those police eyes in the sky and their radios telling the ants on the ground where to go. An invisible net was being thrown over the streets. He resisted the impulse to run. That would be sure to draw attention. Instead he weaved on through the back streets. He'd take the cut-through down to the canal. There were no cameras down there and there was a bridge he could shelter under away from the helicopter.

His heart was racing. He wished he had his bike. Bloody Spence. His had had a puncture. On foot Ryan felt slow, out of his element. The route wasn't direct. There was a railway line parallel to the canal

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and the streets kept ending in high walls. He was fenced in, trapped in the streets of the comfortable people. Little brick terraces. Front gardens. One with big stones in it and tall grasses. Through the window of another a flat piano with its massive lid lifted up.

Any cop car doing a drive-around would be sure to be interested in him. But he had an advantage because these were his ends. The feds would never know the twists and turns like he did.

At last he was there: barely a gap in the wall just before a little hump-backed bridge. It was a slipway down to the towpath, confined and damp-smelling. As he turned down towards the dark, oily water, a brief picture came to him of those flat-capped folk of hundreds of years ago on their own errands. No different then, he reckoned. Cut-throughs and hideaways and knives. A young man sped past him on a racer but barely clocked him. Bright lights, fluorescent jacket, the cyclist was locked into a different game and had all the gear: the wrap-around glasses, the stretch Lycra, the computer measuring his speed and heart rate. The helicopter was circling overhead. The cloth-capped guys of a hundred years ago hadn't had to contend with that. Ryan felt utterly alone. He didn't dare go home with his bloodstained clothes. What if the feds were waiting for him?

He sheltered beneath the bridge, blinded by the image of Spencer lying there in the street, his blood seeping down the drain. Then a sudden flash of a different memory: running down the wing waiting for Spence to pass to him. Always went on about how he'd had a trial for Tottenham, but he was a rubbish footballer. Never passed the ball. He couldn't die, could he? Course not. Christ, Ryan'd give him some shit about this when it was all over! He heard his friend's words again, just before it happened. It was nothing like the videos on YouTube. *Please*, he'd said. It had sounded like forever. Please. How long was that damn word? But also like every childish thing that had ever happened to you. Please. Like every

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moment you had felt small and alone and not man enough. Please. And then just the other word: *don't*. Don't: one word somehow able to hold within itself the seriousness of what was about to happen.

The helicopter was above. His hand hovered over the phone he had taken from the paramedic. He could remember Shakiel's number. He wouldn't be happy but he was just about the only person who would know what to do, who wouldn't be a bullshitter, who wouldn't be out of his depth.

Shakiel picked up after two rings. 'Wagwan?'

'It's Ryan, Shaks. Spencer. He's been stabbed.'

A brief, thinking silence on the other end of the phone. Then Shak's voice. 'He all right?'

'I dunno.' Ryan had to swallow back a flood of tears that fought to break out. 'I had to leave him. There was medics, the helicopter, everything.'

'How'd he look?'

'Not good.'

'What does that mean?'

'There was blood everywhere. He was, like, completely flat out. But that doesn't mean he's going to …'

Die.

The word loomed at him and he stopped himself saying it out loud just in time. If he said it then it would happen. And he wasn't going to die because that wouldn't be possible. Not Spence.

Panic had poured uncontrollably into his voice too. He could hear it, like he'd inhaled helium from a stupid balloon, for fuck's sake. He had to just stop saying so much, wait for Shakiel to tell him what to do.

There was a pause.

Shakiel spoke again. 'How'd it happen?'

'It was Lexi. She didn't show. Soon as I saw them I knew it was Soldiers.'

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Another silence. It seemed to last an eternity.

Then Shakiel said, 'Neither of you had phones on you, like I told you?'

'I didn't have no phone. Don't know about Spence.'

'What phone you using now?'

'I nicked it.'

'Who you nick it off?'

'The paramedic.'

'Fuck's sake, Ryan. What you thinking? You're calling me on a phone stolen from the fucking paramedic.'

Ryan waited. Tears were threatening again. When Shakiel didn't speak, he said, 'I'm really sorry about that, Shaks. I didn't know what to do. I daren't go home. I'm covered in blood and I got nothing to change into.'

'Where you now?'

'The canal.'

There was a pause. Then – at last! – Shakiel took charge.

'Take the SIM out the phone and split it. Throw it in the canal. Chuck the phone too while you're at it. Do it under a bridge. Take your hoody off and throw that in. I'll get someone to the slip, up by the Deakin, against the wall. I'll get a change to you. Wait on the canal until it gets there, however long it takes. Put the top on at least before you leave the canal. You wanna look different on the cameras. You got cash?'

'Yeah.'

'OK, go to a pound shop. Get nail scissors, shampoo. Go to the gym. Have a wash, a good one. Cut your nails in the shower. Scrub underneath. Throw the scissors away. When you get home, throw your own phone. Don't turn it on, nothing. Just get rid, properly, mind. Don't talk to no one. I'll have to chuck this burner, but I'll be in touch.'

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