WHEN YOU ARE MINE

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SPHERE

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To Tony Doherty

Book One

Extinguish my eyes, I'll go on seeing you.
Seal my ears, I'll go on hearing you.
And without feet I can make my way to you,
without a mouth I can swear your name.

RAINER MARIA RILKE

1

I was eleven years old when I saw my future. I was standing near the middle doors of a double-decker bus when a bomb exploded on the upper level, peeling off the roof like a giant had taken a tin opener to a can of peaches. One moment I was holding onto a pole and the next I was flying through the air, seeing sky, then ground, then sky. A leg whipped past me. A stroller. A million shards of glass, each catching the sunlight.

I crashed to the pavement as debris and body parts fell around me. Looking up through the dust, I wondered what I'd been doing on a London sightseeing bus, which is what it looked like without a roof.

People were hurt. Dying. Dead. I spat grit from between my teeth and tried to remember who had been standing next to me. A tattooed girl with white earbuds under hacked purple hair. A mother with a toddler in a stroller. Two old ladies were in the side seat, arguing about the price of cinema tickets. A guy with a hipster beard was carrying a guitar case decorated with stickers from around the world.

Normally I would have been at school at 9.47 in the morning, but I had a doctor's appointment with an ear, nose and throat specialist, who was going to tell me why I suffered so many sinus infections. Apparently, I have narrow nasal passages, which is probably genetic, but I haven't worked out who to blame.

As I lay on the street, a man's face appeared, hovering over me. He was talking but he made no sound. I read his lips.

'Are you bleeding?'

I looked at my school uniform. My blue-and-white checked blouse was covered in blood. I didn't know if it was mine.

'How many fingers am I holding up?'

'Three.'

He moved away.

Around me, shopfront windows had been shattered, covering the pavement and roadway with diamonds of glass. A pigeon lay nearby, blown out of the sky, or maybe it died of fright. Dust had settled, coating everything in a fine layer of grey soot. Later, when I saw myself in the mirror, I had white streaks under my eyes, the tracks of my tears.

As I sat in the gutter, I watched a young policewoman moving among the injured. Reassuring them. Comforting them. She put her arms around a child who had lost his mother. The same officer reached me and smiled. She had a round face and brilliantly white teeth and her hair was bundled up under her cap.

My ears had stopped ringing. Words spilled out of her mouth.

'What's your name, poppet?'

'Philomena.'

'And your last name?'

'McCarthy.'

'Are you by yourself, Philomena?'

'I have a doctor's appointment. I'm going to be late.'

'He won't mind.'

The police officer gave me a bottle of water so I could wash dirt from my mouth. 'I'll be back soon,' she said, as she continued moving among the wounded. She was like one of those characters you see in disaster movies who you know is going to be the hero from the moment they appear on screen. Everything about her was calm and self-assured, sending a message that we would survive this. The city would survive. All was not lost.

★

Standing in front of the mirror, sixteen years later, I remember that officer and wish I had asked for her name. I often think about bumping into her again and thanking her for what she did. 'I became a police officer because of you,' I'd say. 'You were my childhood hero.'

I laugh at the thought and stare at my reflection. Then I pull a face, which is supposed to reduce my chance of wrinkles, but makes me look like I'm busting for the loo. My mother swears by these exercises; and recommends them to all her clients at the beauty salon, most of them older women who are desperately clinging to their looks, while their husbands get to age gracefully or disgracefully, going to seed without a care.

Leaning closer to the mirror, I consider my face, which looks heart-shaped when I bundle my hair up into a topknot. I have grey eyes, a straight-edged nose, and an overly large bottom lip, which Henry likes to bite when we kiss. My eyebrows are like sisters rather than distant cousins because I refuse to let my mother near them with her tweezers and pencils.

I am working early today, with a shift starting at seven. Henry is still in bed. He looks like a little boy when he sleeps, his dark hair tousled and wild, and one arm draped across his eyes because he doesn't like to be woken by the bathroom light. Henry could sleep for England. He could have slept through the Blitz. And he doesn't mind when I come in late and put my cold feet on his warm ones. That must be love.

I glance at my phone. It's not even six and already I have four voicemail messages, all of them from my stepmother, Constance. I don't normally refer to Constance as my stepmother because we're so close in age, which embarrasses me more than her; and my father not at all. What a cliché he turned out to be – running off with his secretary.

I play the first message.

Philomena, sweetie, did you get the invitation? You haven't replied. The party is on Sunday week. Are you coming? Please say yes. It would mean so much to Edward. You know he's very proud of you . . .

and wishes . . . She doesn't finish the statement. *He's turning sixty and he wants you with him. You're still his favourite, you know, despite everything.*

'Despite everything,' I scoff, skipping to the next message.

Philomena, darling, please come. Everybody will be there. Bring Henry, of course. Is that his name? Or is it Harry? I'm terrible with names. Forgive me. Oh, let me check. I've written it down . . . somewhere . . . yes, here. Henry. Bring Henry. No presents. Two weeks on Sunday at four.

Constance has a posh braying voice that makes every utterance sound like, 'yah, rah, hah, nah, yah.' She is the granddaughter of a duke or a lord, who gambled away the family fortune a generation ago and 'doesn't have a pot to piss in', according to my uncles, who call her 'the duchess' behind her back.

Henry stirs. His head appears. 'What time it is?'

'Nearly six.'

He raises the bedclothes and peers beneath, 'I have a present for you.'

'Too late.'

'Please come back to bed.'

'You missed your chance.'

He groans and covers his head.

'I love you too,' I laugh.

Outside, a dog begins furiously yapping. Our neighbour, Mrs Ainsley, has a Jack Russell called Blaine that barks at every creak and cough and passing car. We've complained, but Mrs Ainsley changes the subject, pointing out some act of vandalism or petty crime in the street, which is more evidence that society is unravelling and we're not safe in our beds.

It's an eighteen-minute walk from Marney Road to Clapham Common Tube station, along the northern edge of the common, past sporting fields and the skate park. I am wearing my 'half blues', with my hair pinned up in a bun. We're not allowed to wear our full uniform when travelling to and from work. Periodically, a politician will suggest the policy be changed;

arguing that police officers should be more visible as a deterrent to crime. Cops on the beat. Boots on the ground.

I can picture my morning commute if I was in uniform. Random strangers would complain to me about schoolkids putting their feet on the seats, or playing music too loudly. I'd hear how their neighbour doesn't recycle properly or has a dog that keeps crapping in their front garden. If trouble did break out, how would I call for back-up without a radio? And if I made an arrest, where would I take the offender? Would I get overtime? Would anyone thank me?

I catch a Northern Line train to Borough, which is six stops, and walk two minutes to Southwark police station, stopping to buy coffee at the Starbucks across the road. The skinny barista is called Paolo and he keeps up a constant patter as he presses, steams, froths and pours. He offers the ladies 'extra cream', or a 'sticky bun', making it sound like a sexual proposition. His brother works the sandwich press and occasionally adds to the banter.

While I wait for my order, I think about my father and his sixtieth birthday party. I haven't spoken to him in six years, and haven't been in the same room with him for nine. I can remember that last meeting. Jamie Pike, the coolest boy I knew, was fumbling in my knickers in our front room. One moment he had his hand down my pants, acting like he'd lost a pound coin, and the next he was flying backwards and slamming into an antique sideboard, where a William and Kate wedding plate toppled from a stand and shattered on the floor next to him.

My father marched him out of the house and spoke so sternly to Jamie that he never so much as looked at me again. A few years ago, I bumped into him at a cinema in Leicester Square and he literally ran away. He might still be running, or hiding under his bed, or checking his doors are locked. My father has that sort of reputation. He is steeped in myths and stories, many of them violent, hopefully embellished, but all of them spoken

in whispers in dark corners because nobody wants to discover if they're true.

Jamie Pike isn't the reason that I'm estranged from my father. My parents' divorce set us on separate paths. I chose to live with my mother; and Daddy chose not to care, or care enough to fight for me. Yes, he sends me birthday presents and Christmas gifts and makes overtures, but I expect more from someone who broke my heart. I want him to grovel. I want him to suffer.

When I applied to join the Metropolitan Police, I had to list my connections with known criminals. I named my father and three uncles. I watched the recruiting inspector read my application and felt as though the oxygen was being sucked from the room. He laughed, thinking it was some sort of joke. He looked past me, searching for a hidden camera, or whoever had put me up to this. When he realised I was serious, his mood changed and I went from being an applicant with a strong CV and a first-class degree, to a fox asking permission to move into the henhouse and set up a barbecue chicken joint.

His face changed colour. 'Money-laundering. Extortion. Racketeering. Theft. Your family is a pox on this city. Are you seriously suggesting I allow you to join the police service?'

'I cannot be held responsible for the past actions of my family members,' I said, quoting the regulations.

'Don't lecture me, lassie,' said the inspector.

'I'd prefer not to be called "lassie", sir.'

'What?'

'That's the name for a dog or a young girl.'

My mouth, running off again.

My application was rejected. I applied again. Another rebuff. I threatened legal action. It took me four attempts to gain a place at Hendon, where the instructors were harder on me than any of the other recruits, determined to have me fail, or drop out. My classmates couldn't understand why I was singled out for such brutal treatment. I didn't tell any of them about my father. McCarthy is a common enough surname. There are

twenty-eight thousand of us in England and almost the same number in Ireland. A person can hide in a crowd that big. A person might even disappear, if only her father would let her.

At Southwark police station, I get changed into my full kit: stab vest, belt, shoulder radio, body camera, collapsible baton, CS spray and two sets of handcuffs. My hair-bun fits neatly beneath my bowler hat, so that the brim doesn't tilt down and restrict my field of vision. I love this uniform. It makes me feel respected. It makes me feel needed.

Although only five foot five, I'm not frightened of confrontation. I teach karate two evenings a week at the Chestnut Grove Academy in Wandsworth, and occasionally on weekends. I can block a punch and take a fall; but more importantly, I can read a situation and stay cool under pressure. I don't practise karate because I'm mistrustful of people or frightened of the world. I like the discipline and improved fitness and how it speeds up my reaction times.

Twenty officers gather in the patrol room for the briefing. Our section sergeant, Harry Connelly, has a quasi-military bearing and weight around his middle that puts pressure on his buttons. Certain jobs need to be followed up from the night shift. Crime scenes guarded. Prisoners escorted to court. A suicide watch at a hospital. Outstanding warrants to be served.

'We had a confirmed sighting overnight of Terrence John Fryer, a violent escaper, wanted for drug use, supply and manufacture. He tried to break into his girlfriend's house in Balham. You have his mugshot. He's dangerous. Call for back-up if you see him.'

Paperwork and follow-up calls are the bane of a copper's life. Every LOB (load of bollocks) from an MOP (member of the public) generates a report and a response. Forms in triplicate. Statements. Updates. Liaising with other services.

'Morning, partner,' says PC Anisha Kohli, falling into step beside me.

Kohli gets called 'Nish' and is the station heartthrob. Tall and lean with milk-chocolate skin, he was born in East Ham and has never been to India, but he still gets peppered with questions about arranged marriages, the caste system and cricket.

'Why do people treat me like I'm fresh off the boat?' he once asked.

'It's because you look like a Bollywood star.'

'But I can't sing or dance or act.'

'Yeah, but you got the looks, baby.'

We sign out a patrol car, which doesn't smell of piss or vomit. I'm grateful for that. Nish gets behind the wheel and I radio the control room. Our first job is a reported burglary in Brixton and a series of cars that were vandalised near Peckham station. Nish and I work well together. Instinctively, we choose who should take the lead in asking questions. Some of the more experienced officers aren't sure how to treat female PCs, but things are getting better. One in four officers are now women, and the ratio is even higher in management.

The morning is a mixed bag of accidents, burglaries, a bag-snatch on a Vespa and a dementia patient missing from a nursing home. Nobody on patrol ever says, 'it's quiet' because that's considered bad luck, like an actor naming that 'Scottish play'.

After three years, I can plot my way around South London based on the crime scenes that I've attended. A hit-and-run on this corner. A jumper from that building. Cars set alight on that vacant block. Some locales are more famous or infamous than others; and some crimes are so shocking that the victims' names are seared into the history of a city: Damilola Taylor. Stephen Lawrence. Rachel Nickell. Jean Charles de Menezes. Most people look at London and see landmarks. I see the maimed, broken and the addicted, the eyewitnesses, the innocent bystanders and the bereaved.

At midday, I'm picking up coffees from a van near London Bridge when the control room radios about a domestic in progress. A neighbour can hear a woman screaming. The address

is one of the newer warehouse developments near Borough Market. Nish pulls into traffic and gives a blast of the siren to clear an intersection. He looks at the dashboard clock. 'This one kicked off early.'

Nish presses a buzzer on the intercom. The neighbour answers and unlocks the main door. She is waiting on the fourth floor, an elderly black woman in a brightly coloured kaftan and slippers. Her ankles are as wide as her toes.

'Mrs Gregg?' I ask.

She nods and points along the hallway. 'I can't hear them any more. He might have killed her.'

'Who lives there?' I ask.

'A young woman. The boyfriend comes and goes.'

'Owner occupier?'

'The owner works in Dubai. Rents the place out.'

'You said you heard screaming,' says Nish.

'And stuff breaking. She was yelling and he was calling her names.'

'Have there been other fights?' I ask.

'Nothing like this.'

'OK. Go back inside.'

We take up positions on either side of the door. I have one hand on my baton and my legs braced. Nish knocks. There are muffled voices inside. He knocks again. A chain unhooks. A lock turns. A woman's face appears. Late twenties. Dark hair. Attractive. Frightened.

'Hello, how are you?' I ask.

'Fine.'

'We had a report of a disturbance. A woman sounded upset. Was that you?'

'No.'

'Who else is in the flat?'

'Nobody.'

Nish has braced one foot against the door to stop it being shut.

'Can we come inside?' I ask.

'You must have the wrong address,' she says. 'I'm fine.'

'What's your name?'

'Tempe.'

'Is it short for Temperance?'

'No, It's a place . . . in Greek mythology. The Vale of Tempe.'

'What about your last name?'

'Why?'

'It's a question that we have to ask.'

Tempe's eyes go sideways.

'Who else lives here?' asks Nish.

'My boyfriend. He works nights. He's sleeping.'

'You said you were alone.'

She hesitates, trapped in a lie.

'Can you open the door a little wider?' I ask.

'Why?'

'We have to check on your welfare.'

Tempe edges it open, revealing her swollen left eye, which is filled with blood, and a split lip that has twisted her mouth out of shape. Even with a damaged face she looks familiar and I wonder if we might have met before.

'What happened to your face?' I ask.

'It was an accident.'

Her gaze shifts to the left again. There is someone standing behind the door.

I motion with my head and mouth the words, 'Is he there?'

Tempe nods.

I cup my ear in a listening gesture.

Another nod.

'Maybe you should wake your boyfriend and tell him we're here,' says Nish, speaking more loudly.

'No. Please. I'm fine. Really, I am.'

She tries to shut the door, but Nish has his foot in place and matches her effort. Tempe backs away. The front of her dress is

stained with blood and her lip looks like a large marble has been sewn beneath the broken skin.

A man steps from behind the door and pushes Tempe behind him. He's shirtless, and shoeless, wearing a pair of grey tracksuit pants that hang low on his hips. Early forties. Smiling.

'How can I help you, officers?'

'We had a report of a woman screaming,' says Nish.

'Screaming? Nah. Must have been the TV.'

'The young lady has injuries.'

'That was an accident. She ran into a door.'

'What's your name, sir?'

'Let's not go there,' says the man, who has a Roman centurion tattooed onto his shoulder and scars on his chest and stomach. 'I'm a copper, OK. This is all a misunderstanding.'

I glance at Nish, looking for guidance, but nothing has changed in his demeanour. He asks the man to step outside.

'What for?'

'My colleague is going to speak to Tempe alone. You're going to stay here with me.'

'That's not necessary.'

'She has a black eye and a split lip.'

I step past the man, who throws out his arm to block the doorway. I duck underneath.

'You don't have permission. I know my rights,' he complains.

The hallway has a broken bowl on the floor and a smear of blood on the wall. Tempe is in the living area, sitting on the sofa, with her chin resting on her knees. She has found a bag of frozen peas in the freezer and is pressing on the side of her face. She has long slender feet that are calloused around her toes from wearing high-heel shoes.

Her boyfriend is still arguing with Nish.

'What happened?' I ask.

'I made him angry.'

Her accent is Northern Irish. Belfast maybe, but softer. She is two inches taller than me, with almond-shaped eyes that are

pale green. Again, I feel as though we might have met, but I can't place her.

Voices are drifting from outside, where the argument continues. I distract Tempe with a question.

'You live here?'

She nods.

'Is your name on the lease?'

'No.'

Tempe lowers the frozen peas. Her left eye is almost completely closed.

'Your cheekbone might be fractured. You'll need an X-ray. I'll take you to hospital.'

'He won't allow that.'

'He'll have to.'

I take a photograph of her face. 'Lift your chin.' I take another. 'Pull back your hair.' And another.

'Any other bruises?'

'No.'

'Change your clothes. Put the dress in a plastic bag.'

'Why?'

'It's evidence.'

'I'm not pressing charges.'

'Fine, but I'm taking you to hospital.'

Tempe goes to the bedroom and I look around the apartment, which is tastefully decorated, although everything looks like it came from a furniture showroom, one of those places that puts fake books on the shelves and empty bottles of wine in the bar fridge. There are no personal items like photographs or souvenirs or knick-knacks. Nothing that creates a notable signature or gives an insight into the occupants.

Tempe clears her throat. She is standing in the doorway wearing a modest woollen dress with a cowl neck. She collects her handbag from the table, making sure she has her phone.

'What about your passport?'

'Why do I need that?'

'It's good to have proof of your identity – in case you don't come back.'

'I'm coming back,' she says adamantly.

I take her forearm as we walk along the hallway. Nish is still arguing with the boyfriend.

'Why are you writing stuff down? I told you, nothing happened.'

'Why does the young lady have blood on her dress?'

'It was an accident.'

'Yeah, so you keep saying.'

'You won't be writing this up. I'm a detective sergeant stationed at Scotland Yard. The Intelligence Unit.'

Nish sounds less certain than before. 'I need your name.'

'Fuck off!'

Tempe tries to step around him, but the boyfriend grabs at her hair. I knock his arm aside and push her behind me, before bracing my legs, one forward the other back, letting my hands hang ready at my sides. This time he lunges at me. I dance back a step and perform a rising cross-block with open hands.

Suddenly, enraged, he swings a punch, but I grab his attacking arm from inside and back-fist him in the jaw. Dropping to one knee, I trip him backwards, turning him onto his chest and twisting his arm high up the middle of his spine.

All of this happens so quickly that Nish hasn't had time to unholster his Taser or extend his baton. Taking cuffs from my belt, I snap them on his wrists.

'I am arresting you for assaulting a police officer. You do not have to say anything. But if you do not mention now something which you later use in your defence, the court may decide that your failure to mention it now strengthens the case against you . . .'

The man has blood on his teeth. 'You're finished! You're both fucked!'

'. . . a record will be made of anything you say, and it may be given in evidence if you are brought to trial.'

'I am Detective Sergeant Darren Goodall. I want my Police Federation rep.'

I glance at Nish, who is taking notes, but looks dazed. 'Can you arrange transport to the station? I'll take Tempe to the hospital.'

He nods.

Feeling calm, almost weightless, I lead Tempe along the hallway.

Goodall shouts after her. 'Not a word! Not a fucking word!'

Inside the lift, Tempe pins herself against the mirrored wall, wrapping her arms around her thin frame.

'How did you do that?' she whispers.

'What?'

'You dropped him like a . . . like a . . .' She can't think of a word. 'He was twice your size. It was like something you see in the movies. What are you? Five-six. A hundred and thirty pounds.'

'On a good day,' I laugh, the adrenaline starting to leak away.

'Do they teach you that in the police?'

'No.'

'You were so fast. It was like you knew exactly what he was going to do before he did it.'

'I knew he was right-handed.'

'How?'

'That's the hand he used on you.'

Tempe touches her swollen eye, making the connection in her mind.

We've reached the patrol car. Tempe sits in the back seat and I get behind the wheel. We can see each other in the rear-view mirror on the windscreen.

'Is he a detective?' I ask.

'Yeah.'

'How long have you been seeing him?'

'A year. He's married. Does that shock you?'

'All part of the rich pageant,' I say, but instantly regret the comment because it sounds flippant and condescending. I shouldn't be mocking an institution that I'm about to embrace.

Tempe pulls at the collar of her dress. She's fidgeting, wanting to busy her hands. We've stopped at the traffic lights and I take a moment to study her face, not the bruising, but the half which is undamaged. Thoughtful. Sad. Lonely.

Ten minutes later we walk into the Urgent Care Centre at Guy's Hospital. The waiting area is full of the broken, beaten and accident-prone. A black woman with her arm in a sling looks at me with undisguised hatred. She has two small kids clinging to her skirt.

What have I done to deserve such loathing? Put on a uniform? Kept the streets safe?

A triage nurse takes down Tempe's details and then we sit side by side in the waiting area. A different nurse gets Tempe an ice pack, which she holds gently against her cheek.

'Has he hurt you before?'

No answer.

'Will you make a statement?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I'm not stupid.'

I don't blame her. If Darren Goodall is a police officer, he will know exactly how to handle a complaint like this one; what to say, and who to call, and how to twist the details. He'll claim that Tempe hit him first, or that he was trying to protect himself. It will be her word against his. No contest.

'You look so familiar,' I say. 'I could swear that we've met before.'

'I don't think so,' says Tempe.

Then it comes to me – the memory of a pretty girl with dark hair who was three years ahead of me at St Ursula's Convent in Greenwich.

'We went to school together,' I say. 'But your name wasn't Tempe.'

'It's my middle name. I hated being called Margaret.'

Maggie Brown. I remember. 'You were school captain.'

'Vice-captain.'

'And you had a sister who was older again.'

'Agnes.'

'You didn't stay. You left before your finals.'

'We moved to Belfast.'

I have a vague memory that something happened – some scandal or incident that people talked about for a few weeks, but I don't recall the details. My friend Sara might remember. We were besties at school together and her appetite for gossip is insatiable.

What can I recall about Maggie Brown? She was pretty and popular, but not an extrovert or a queen bee. She didn't 'own' the corridors or mistreat anyone or compete for attention or call shotgun on the back seat of every bus.

'Do you keep in touch with anyone from St Ursula's?' I ask.

'No,' she replies dismissively. 'I hated that place.'

'Oh!' I feel a little hurt.

There is another long pause. I watch the triage nurse examine a new arrival – a drunk man with a mouth full of broken teeth and a T-shirt that says TROPHY HUSBAND.

'How did you meet Darren Goodall?'

'My girlfriend and I witnessed a crime. A guy on an electric scooter snatched a handbag and took off, but as he ran a red light he was hit by a lorry. Killed him outright. Maybe it served him right.' She doesn't sound convinced. 'The police made us wait around to give statements. Darren took down our names and addresses. A few days later, he called me.'

'Why?'

Tempe laughs. 'Do I have to spell it out?'

I feel the tops of my ears grow warm.

'How did he get your number?'

'He's police,' she says, as though it should be obvious. 'I didn't know he was married, of course. He let me think he was single. When I learned the truth, I tried to rationalise it – telling myself I wasn't hurting anyone.'

'You thought he'd leave his wife.'

'No. Well, maybe. But he has two young kids. I'm not naive.'

'Is there somewhere else you can stay?' I ask.

'Not really.'

'I can take you to a refuge. It's a safe space until you find somewhere else.'

'He'll have calmed down by now.'

'Has he hit you before?'

'Not like this.' She looks at me defiantly. 'I'm not some battered wife.'

'I didn't say you were,' I reply, wishing I had a tenner for every time I'd heard the same thing said by wives and girlfriends with bloodied faces and bruised limbs, who didn't see themselves as victims but as strong, independent women, who would never let a man beat them . . . until they do.

'I have to ask you a series of questions,' I say. 'If your answer to any one of them is yes, then you should think about whether your relationship with your partner is healthy.'

Tempe laughs bitterly. 'I think we both know the answer to that.'

'Are you frightened of him?'

She doesn't answer.

'Do you fear injury or violence?'

Again nothing, but I don't expect or need a response.

'Is this the first time that he's hit you?' I ask.

'You asked me that already. Twice.'

I rattle off more questions. 'Is the abuse happening more often? Is it more extreme? Does he try to control everything you do? Do you feel isolated from friends and family? Does he constantly text or call or harass you? Is he excessively jealous? Has he ever attempted to strangle or choke you? Has he ever threatened to kill you?'

Tempe lets each query wash over her without comment, but I know that she's listening.

A nurse calls her name. She's taken to an examination room

where fresh white paper has been rolled across the bed. A young Asian doctor appears, wearing green scrubs and showing the tiredness of a long shift. She asks Tempe questions about her age and height and weight and medical history, before telling her to get undressed behind the screen. 'This is a rape kit. I need to take a few swabs.'

'But I wasn't raped,' says Tempe.

The doctor looks at me. 'I thought . . .'

'No,' I answer, glancing at Tempe to make doubly sure. 'I was worried about her cheekbone.'

The doctor asks Tempe to sit up straight and shines a pen-torch into her right eye. Her left has closed completely.

'Any blurred vision?'

Tempe shakes her head. The doctor moves the torch from side to side, then up and down.

'Any headaches?'

'One big one.'

She touches Tempe's swollen cheek and runs her fingers over her eyebrows and the bridge of her nose.

'I don't think you've fractured a cheekbone and your eye socket is intact, but that's going to be one ugly bruise.'

'How long before the swelling goes down?' asks Tempe.

'If you keep it iced – twenty-four hours.'

Tempe looks aghast. 'But I have meetings. If I don't work . . .'

'Maybe you could hide it with make-up,' I suggest.

'Or put a bag over my head,' she replies sarcastically.

The doctor peels off her latex gloves. 'I'll write a script for painkillers. Keep up the icing until the swelling goes down.'

I wait for Tempe to complete the necessary paperwork, before escorting her through the waiting area.

'I'm obliged to give you this,' I say, handing her a tear-out form with four pages of information. 'If you sign here, I can give your details to a support agency.'

'I'm not signing anything,' says Tempe. 'I won't be making a statement and I don't need a chaperone.'

'I understand, but this report will be given to the Local Safeguarding Unit. Someone will be in touch with you.'

'I don't want to be contacted. I don't give my permission.'

We are outside the hospital. A group of orderlies are smoking and vaping near the doors, standing in a patch of sunshine that illuminates their exhalations. Tempe lowers her head, not wanting anyone to see her face.

'This is a number for the National Domestic Abuse Helpline,' I say. 'Like I said, I'm not judging you, but I don't think you should go back to the apartment. Not today. Give him some time to cool off.'

Tempe bites the undamaged side of her bottom lip and contemplates an answer.

'I'll go to the shelter,' she whispers. 'For one night.'

The large detached house is in the back streets of Brixton and has no outwards signs or identifiers, apart from the extra security of barred windows and a CCTV camera covering the entrance. As we approach, I notice a child standing at an upstairs window. A girl. I wave. She doesn't wave back.

The intercom sends a jingle echoing through distant rooms.

'Can I help you?' asks a woman's voice.

I hold up my warrant card to the camera and give my name and rank. 'Do you have room for one more?'

'Won't be a tick,' says the voice.

We wait another minute until the twin deadlocks turn and the door swings open on creaky hinges. A large woman smiles and ushers us quickly inside, checking the street before locking the door again.

'Call me Beth,' she says, in a no-nonsense voice. 'First names only in here. Cassie is upstairs with another new arrival – a mum and two kiddies. The little boy is a doll.'

We climb. She talks. Tempe's room has a single bed, a wardrobe and a sink in the corner. The furniture looks like something from a motorway Travelodge, but everything is clean, with

cheerful touches like the colourful prints on the walls and a small vase of flowers on the windowsill.

'You'll be sharing the other facilities,' says Beth. 'We have a laundry room downstairs and a secure garden. The kitchen is a busy area, but you're allowed to prepare your own meals. We have a cleaning roster for the communal areas.' She ties back the curtains. 'Do you have any other clothes?'

'No.'

'We have a pool clothing system. Nothing fancy, but you'll find something that fits you.'

She puts a set of sheets on the mattress, along with a pillowcase.

'Spare blankets are on the top shelf.' She points to the wardrobe. 'Once you're settled, come downstairs and we'll fill out the admission forms.'

'I won't be staying long,' says Tempe, glancing at me.

'Makes no difference. It's the protocol. You'll have to fill in a Housing Benefit form and sign your licence agreement. I'll also give you a copy of the house rules.'

'There are rules?'

'No visitors, no alcohol, no drugs, no bullying, no threatening staff. I'll be your support worker. We can have a session once you're signed in.'

'I told you, I'm not staying,' says Tempe, even more adamant.

'Give it a chance,' I say.

Beth looks at her face and clucks sympathetically. 'I'll get you some ice.' She has one hand on the door handle. 'Is he looking for you?'

Tempe doesn't answer.

'Don't tell anyone where you are. This is a secure address. We have mothers and children who finally feel safe. We want to keep it that way.'

My phone pings. Nish has sent me a text:

You should get back here ASAP.

'It's all right, you can leave,' says Tempe.

Halfway down the stairs, my shoulder radio squawks. 'Mike Bravo 471, this is Control, are you receiving?'

'This is Mike Bravo 471, go ahead, over.'

'Where are you?'

'I'm leaving the shelter in Brixton.'

'Report to the custody suite.'

'Received, out.'

Tempe and Beth are on the landing.

'I'll call you,' I say, but Tempe doesn't reply.

Outside, a bank of dark clouds has cloaked the sun and the temperature has fallen five degrees in the space of a few minutes. Unlocking the patrol car, I slide behind the wheel and feel a hollow emptiness in my stomach. All is not well.