ELLY Griffiths

The Frozen People



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'The earth has bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them . . .'

Shakespeare, Macbeth 1.3

'Dear me,' said Mr Grewgious, peeping in, 'it's like looking down the throat of Old Time.'

Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*

CHAPTER 1

Monday 9 January 2023

Alison Dawson can never cross the Old Kent Road without thinking of Monopoly. The brown square nobody wants. She used to play it with one of her husbands, she can't remember which, offhand. He'd thought it a sexy, Ali MacGraw/Steve McQueen type of thing when, in reality, it had just been a board game played – rather self-consciously – on the grubby carpet squares of a Travelodge. Hugo. That was the one. None of the others would be mean enough for a Travelodge.

It's a grey, unpropitious day. The start of a new year, the old one still visible in the shape of dying Christmas trees lying in the gutter, awaiting collection, and the words 'Ho ho ho' in cotton wool on the window of a Turkish barber's shop. It's not a salubrious route to work but Ali hardly notices that anymore. Chicken Shacks, vape shops, boarded-up houses, graffiti promising that the Second Coming is on its way. About time too, thinks Ali. If she looks up, it's a different matter: she would see Georgian windows, moulded

cornices, the occasional surprising glimpse of a phoenix or an angel standing guard on a rooftop. Ali does not look up today. She's late but not enough to worry about. She knows that time is a relative concept.

The East End has changed since Ali moved here twenty-seven years ago but real, long-time Londoners, like her colleague John, say the skyline is almost unrecognisable now. The space-age buildings with their homely names – the Gherkin, the Cheesegrater – overshadow the Victorian churches and sixties tower blocks. But the building that houses the Cold Case Unit – so cold they are frozen, Bud says – wouldn't feature on anyone's list of memorable examples of city architecture. Number 14 Eel Street is so anonymous as to be almost invisible: plate-glass façade, featureless lobby with two lifts, one of which is permanently out of order, signs for Fire Exits and Toilets. There's an old-fashioned noticeboard, the type with removable letters, that lists the businesses spread over the five storeys. Ali's office, the Department of Logistics, a title that is both weighty and vague, is on the third floor. Ali considers the lift but pushes open the door to take the stairs. She threw her Fitbit into the Thames two weeks ago, but she still likes to get her step count in. 'Can't be unfit in our job,' says Geoff, despite not having seen his feet in living memory.

Ali takes a break on the second-floor landing and checks her phone in case anyone thinks she's out of breath (she's out of breath). A reminder from her book group. They're meeting tonight and Ali hasn't got around to reading *Conversations with Friends*. And there's a text from her son,

Finn. 'Terry fine. Bit me once. Now under table.' Finn is not, in fact, a case worker for disturbed adults. He is a parliamentary special advisor currently looking after Ali's deranged cat, Terry. She texts back, 'Thanks love,' and steels herself to finish the climb.

Dina is the only person in the office. She's eating microwaved porridge in a pot.

'This stuff tastes like death.'

'It's good for you. It's not meant to taste nice.'

'Isn't anything that's good for you nice?'

'Sex?' suggested Ali. 'Want a coffee?'

'Coffee's meant to be good for you these days, isn't it?' says Dina. 'I can't keep up.'

'In moderation,' says Ali. 'It's always in moderation.' A concept she struggles with, to be honest.

Dina and Ali are sometimes called 'the twins', although there is a fifteen-year age gap between them and Dina is black and Ali is white. Their only physical similarity is that they both have a small gap between their front teeth, but police nicknames are like that.

'How's Terry?' asks Dina, as Ali collects their mugs on her way to the kitchen.

'Much better,' says Ali. 'He bit Finn this morning.'

'Poor Finn,' says Dina, who always takes Finn's side.

'He's a Tory. He's used to it.'

Finn would say that he isn't a Tory, he just works for them. Sometimes that distinction doesn't seem quite enough for Ali.

'Geoff was here earlier,' says Dina. 'He was asking for you.'

Ali stops by the kitchen. The Covid regulations are still on the door, slightly faded now. Hands, face, space. Someone has added the words, 'Back to my place', with a drawing of a penis, in case the point was missed.

'What did he want? Do you think it's another case?'

'I asked if we were going through the gate again and he said, "It's a fucking five bar gate."'

'Geoff swore? Shit.'

'Yeah. I tried to make him put a pound in the swear box but he pretended not to hear me.'

'Come in, Alison.' Geoff waves at the visitors' chair with a lordly gesture that dislodges his 'World's Best Boss' mug, an ironical present from Ali that she fears was taken literally. Luckily it's empty. Geoff often misses out on the coffee run. Ali picks the mug up and puts it back in slightly the wrong place, just for the fun of it. Geoff moves it back.

'Alison,' she says. 'This must be serious, Geoffrey.'

'It's interesting,' says Geoff, and tries a smile. His husband, Bobby, once told him that smiling releases molecules that fight stress but, in truth, Geoff's face is made for tragedy. All the lines point downwards.

'Am I going through the gate?' asks Ali. If it's tonight, she won't have to read *Conversations with Friends.*

'It's a different gate,' says Geoff. 'A gate to the nineteenth century.'

'The nineteenth century? But that's Tudor times.'

'Do you say these things to annoy me, Alison?' says Geoff. 'I thought you had a degree in history.'

'I do,' says Ali. 'From Queen Mary's.' She waves in the vague direction of the Mile End Road.

'Then you must know the Tudors were the sixteenth century,' says Geoff.

Strictly speaking, the Tudor reign started in the fifteenth century, with the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, but Ali doesn't think that Geoff is in the mood to be contradicted.

'My degree was mostly about the Married Women's Property Act,' she says. 'Did you really say that we're going back to Tudor— sorry, Victorian times?'

'Let me explain,' says Geoff, settling himself in his chair. Please do, thinks Ali. Though she's not sure that even Geoff has the right words for this.

The first two are a surprise though. 'Isaac Templeton.'

'*Who?!*' Ali, who had decided to hear Geoff out in silence, can't resist an exclamation.

'Isaac Templeton. The justice minister.'

'I know. My son works for him.'

Geoff must know that Ali has a son. He's even met him, once at a pub quiz and once at Ali's Christmas party. All the team knows Finn. John and Dina could probably recite his birthday, jumper size and dietary preferences. But, for a moment, the boss looks genuinely confused.

'Your son?'

'Yes, he's a special advisor.'

'That's . . . well . . . that's interesting. Because Isaac Templeton's great-great-grandfather was suspected of

murdering three women in the 1850s. There wasn't enough evidence to convict him, but it's always been a stain on the family honour. Isaac is writing a book about his family and he wants to be able to present evidence of his ancestor's innocence. That's where we come in.'

Geoff leans back as if all is explained whereas, in Ali's opinion, all he has done is invite more questions. And did he really say, 'a stain on the family honour?' Are they in the nineteenth century already?

'How did Isaac Templeton find out about us? I thought only the Prime Minister and the home secretary knew.'

The Department of Logistics, or the frozen people, as Bud calls them, was set up by Geoff ten years ago. Ali joined in 2015. When she was recruited she assumed they were working on cold cases – so cold they are frozen, etc – and she still remembers her shock when she realised that their goal was actually, physically, to travel in time. Then she met Jones and it all seemed possible. The government have given them limited resources, all contained within the grim façade of Eel House, but Ali has never been sure exactly who knows what.

'Some higher up members of government are also aware of our operations,' says Geoff, sounding pompous, as he always does when challenged. 'Templeton is, of course, the secretary of state for justice.'

'I know.' *Minijus*, Finn calls it, which sounds like a particularly unpleasant diet drink.

'As such,' says Geoff, at his most pontifical, 'Templeton has followed our work in the Mulholland Case.'

Laura Mulholland disappeared in 1976. Her adult children were convinced that she was killed by her second husband, Steven, but there was no evidence. Until Ali and Dina visited and saw Steven burying Laura in the back garden of their house in Chiswick. In 1979 the house was knocked down and flats built in its place. Geoff is trying to get permission to dig up the car park, but the case is no longer seen as a priority. Steven died in 1992. They haven't even been able to tell Laura's children but, as Jones says, '*We* know and that's something.' It doesn't always seem enough though.

'The Mulholland case was a genuine miscarriage of justice,' says Ali, remembering the blood and dirt on Steven Mulholland's hands as he washed at the outdoor sink. 'Isaac is only writing a book. Are we really going to use the gate just to help him sell more copies?'

'It's an opportunity, Jones says.'

That explains a lot. But not everything. Jones still sees the team primarily as research assistants.

'We're waiting for Jones's report,' says Geoff. 'In the meantime, Isaac wants to meet you to put you in the picture.'

'He wants to meet me?'

'He's asked for you especially, I believe.'

Ali is surprised into silence. Outside she can hear Dina singing, 'Enjoy yourself, it's later than you think.'

CHAPTER 2

Ali has met Isaac Templeton before although she's pretty sure he won't remember. Finn invited her to a reception at the House of Commons and, during the course of the evening, introduced her to Templeton.

'Ah,' said the MP, when the family connection was explained, 'the Creator.'

'That's right,' said Ali. 'I did it all myself.' She'd been aware of Finn shooting her warning looks, just as he'd done one school parents' evening when she'd started singing 'Sister Suffragette' from Mary Poppins with the history teacher.

'HA HA,' said Templeton, in capital letters, before moving on.

Ali had been only half joking. She'd married Declan when she was nineteen and pregnant. They'd tried their best, living first with his parents, then hers, and finally being approved for a council flat on the outskirts of Hastings. They divorced five years later and Ali moved to London. She probably gets on best with Declan out of all her husbands but she's not about to give him much credit for Finn's upbringing. She

was the one who worked as a cleaner to pay for his school uniform, who sat with him over homework and encouraged the ambition that led to a degree at the LSE and Finn's current elevated employment status. Declan wasn't a bad dad, he attended football matches and was even supportive during the traumatic French horn period, but he wasn't the Creator. Sometimes Ali says that Elvis was Finn's father, a joke that comes from a Lana Del Ray song and appeals only to her.

It feels odd, crossing London in the middle of the day, as if she's skiving or on holiday. Ali spent a lot of her time at school skiving, hanging around with Declan on the beach or in the amusement arcades. It was never as much fun as she thought it would be. But today she is legitimately going about her work, albeit work that she can't discuss with anyone. She'd like to text Finn, 'Guess where I'm going?' He doesn't always answer but, sometimes, he's up for quite a virtual gabfest: jokes, memes, pictures of Terry wearing devil's horns. Now Ali sits on the almost empty Tube train, trying to read *Conversations with Friends*, and wishing she could tell someone where she's going. I'm meeting Isaac Templeton! At his flat! I'm going back in time!

Isaac Templeton lives in one of the new apartment blocks built as part of Battersea Power Station's rebirth. Ali hasn't been to the area in years and it's as disconcerting as any time slip: a whole new Tube station, residential piazzas appearing out of nowhere, landscaped walks lined by saplings still wrapped in plastic. She's not surprised that Templeton's address is one of the smartest, with a doorman

and a terrifying lift crawling up the mirrored outside wall. Ali is in the process of moving from Mile End to Bow (it's why Finn has temporary custody of Terry) and had thought she was moving up in the world because her new house has a small garden. But this is moving upwards at speed. She emerges from the lift feeling distinctly shaky.

Templeton meets her at the door, obviously alerted by the doorman. He's wearing tracksuit trousers and a T-shirt. It's a surprise. Templeton is always formally dressed, in dark suits that set off his Ken Doll good looks. He's often described, by the tabloids, as 'dishy'. Ali disapproves of objectifying a person by their looks but it's quite enjoyable to see a man at the receiving end for once. She has always thought that Isaac Templeton's dishiness was only in relation to other Members of Parliament. Who was it who described politics as, 'Show business for ugly people?' But, close up and in casual clothes, she's sorry to say that Isaac Templeton is very handsome indeed.

'Ms Dawson. How good of you to come.'

'No problem. And it's Ali.'

Does Templeton know of her link to Finn? Finn has Declan's surname, Kennedy. Ali went back to her maiden name after divorce number two. She bitterly regrets all the passport-changing, bank-card-altering nonsense that she went through with her first two marriages. She hadn't bothered with Lincoln. Partly because his surname was Scrubb.

She follows Templeton into a room so bright that she almost shields her eyes. The effect comes partly from the stunning view of the Thames, showcased in a wall of glass,

but also from the predominance of chrome and white marble in the room. The sun has emerged, and the light beams on myriad glittering surfaces. It's like walking into a trophy cabinet.

Templeton offers coffee, which Ali accepts. She's sure he'll have the latest Gaggia machine somewhere and is curious to see if he'll prepare the drinks himself. It seems so. Templeton pads away – his feet are bare – and Ali looks out of the window towards Chelsea Bridge and wonders how to broach the fact of being Finn's mother. She needs to tell Templeton. Apart from anything else, it will be embarrassing if he finds out another way. But she doesn't want the MP to treat Finn any differently because he has a weird time-travelling mother with startling hair and a nose ring.

But, when Templeton appears, carrying a tray with coffee and biscuits, almost the first thing he says is, 'So you're Finn's mother. He's great. One of my brightest advisors.'

Ali can't help responding to anyone who praises her brilliant boy. She can feel herself thawing. The excellence of the coffee helps too.

'He's very clever,' she says. 'How did you know he was my son?'

'I was introduced to you a few years ago. At a reception.'

'I didn't think you'd remember.'

'You're very memorable.'

'Thank you,' says Ali, though she's not sure if it's a compliment. Once again, she blesses the day she dyed her hair the colour of a London bus. Even though Finn hates it

and Terry had actually hissed when she first got back from Kelly's salon.

She goes on. 'My boss says you have a mission for us.'

Templeton is silent for a minute and then he fixes her with a stare. His eyes are grey-blue with surprisingly long eyelashes. 'I'm sorry. I'm just having trouble coming to terms with it. The fact that you actually travel in time.'

'*You're* having trouble coming to terms with it. Think what it's like for us.'

'I really can't imagine.'

'When Geoff told me I thought he was joking. But he doesn't joke much. I didn't realise that then.'

'You'd been seconded to the Cold Case Team?'

'Yes. I joined the police in 2005 as a graduate trainee. I went to university as a mature student. I joined CID in 2007 and came across Geoff – Geoff Bastian, my DI – on another case. He suggested I join his unit. He said they were doing interesting work. I had no idea how interesting. On my first day, he sent me to talk to Jones.'

'I've heard a lot about this Jones. But who is he?'

'Her name's Serafina. She's a woman. Her surname is really Pellegrini but she used to be married to someone called Jones. It's a kind of joke. Jones thinks she gets more respect if she has an androgynous name.'

Rightly, judging by the look on Isaac's face.

'Jones is a physicist. She graduated in Italy and moved here when she married Jones. Anyway, for years she'd been working away in a lab somewhere in London trying to come up with a method of time travel. Well, she managed it.'

'Just like that?'

'No, of course not "just like that". Though Jones would say the time involved is immaterial. But she developed an actual way of moving atoms in space. So, after many attempts and lots of mockery – mostly because she's Italian and a woman – she managed to get someone in government interested. They gave her a team, led by Geoff. I'm part of the team.'

The idea is that each member has a special skill. John is a celebrated murder detective; Dina has been trained in surveillance; Bud is a physics whizz. Ali still doesn't know what her special skill is meant to be, unless it's a previously unsuspected willingness to take risks.

'And have you,' Isaac lowers his voice, although there's no one to overhear apart from a whirring police helicopter, silent behind the triple glazing, 'have you actually travelled in time?'

'We call it going through the gate,' says Ali. 'And yes, I have.' This still seems such an amazing thing to say that she pauses, out of respect for the concept as much as anything.

'The first time was March 2020. It was lockdown, you see. We only had to go back to before the twenty-third to see the difference – no masks, busy streets, etc.'

'Weren't you worried about taking Covid back in time?'

'Jones didn't think it was an issue but, even so, we tested beforehand. We've made a few trips since then, me and two colleagues, Dina and John. Last year Dina and I went back to 1976 to get information on a murder case. That's the deal. You do know that? We collect evidence. We don't *do* anything.'

'Is that because anything you do in the past might affect the future?'

'That whole killing Hitler thing? You need Jones to explain why that's a fallacy. No, it's more that we're flimsy. We can't interact with people. We can't really be seen, except in certain lights. Jones is working on a way of making us more substantial. It's to do with displacement of matter, apparently.'

'And when you go . . . through the gate . . . do you come back to the same minute that you left? Has no time passed at all?'

'No, that's Narnia,' says Ali. 'Time passes as it usually does. If we're away an hour, an hour has passed in the present too.'

Ali remembers, the first occasion, being scared that she wouldn't get back in time to feed Terry. The larger fear – being trapped as a shadow for ever – had simply been too big to contemplate.

'What's the longest you've been away?'

'We were in 1976 for two hours.'

Isaac Templeton rubs his eyes. 'I'm sorry. It just sounds so extraordinary. Hearing you say it like that.'

'Yes,' says Ali. 'It is.'

After a pause, Templeton says, 'Why don't I tell you about this case? I'll think about the other stuff later, when my brain stops spinning.'

'Good idea,' says Ali.

Templeton produces a cardboard file, which must have been concealed under the fur throw that covers the white sofa.

'I need to explain to you about my great-great-grandfather,' he says. 'He was a collector.'

'What did he collect?'

'Women.'

'He collected women? What does that mean?'

Ali and her friend Meg are preparing themselves for the book club, which involves drinking wine in Ali's house. But at the moment it is full of packing cases and black plastic bags – she's moving at the weekend.

'Isaac Templeton's great-great-grandfather was a patron of the arts, apparently,' says Ali. 'He supported artists and their models. Of course, all the artists were men and all the models were women.'

'And all the artists were middle class and all the women were working class?'

'Naturally.' This is often where Ali's conversations with Meg begin and end. As far as Ali can tell, Meg's claim to be working class rests on the fact that she went to a rather posh comprehensive in Surrey. But Ali isn't going to argue. For her part, she can't see what's wrong with being middle class. For most of her life, she has aspired to be middle class. Ali and Meg met at Queen Mary's which, for Meg, cements her proletarian claims and, for Ali, represented a considerable step upwards. Everything's relative.

'Anyway,' says Ali, squinting at her reflection in the kettle since all the mirrors are packed, 'it starts with an artist's model called Ettie Morgan. She was killed in a building used

by artists and owned by Cain Templeton, Isaac's great-great-grandfather.'

'Cain? Talk about nominative determinism.'

'Oh yes. Cain and Abel. The first murderer. I think it's quite a cool name though.'

'You just like single syllable names.' Meg's children are called Sebastian and Arabella. Come to think of it, she *is* middle class.

'To go on with the story,' says Ali. She often has to do this with Meg. Their conversations have so many diversions that Ali is sometimes tempted to present an agenda. Meg, who teaches English at a secondary school, might appreciate this.

'People suspected Cain but he was an influential man, so it seems that no one actually accused him. But there were rumours that he was part of a club, a really gruesome group called The Collectors, and that, to be a member, you had to kill a woman.'

'Jesus. How do you know all this stuff?'

'Isaac's been researching his great-great-grandfather. Not much has been written about him but I think there are references in some art books. I don't know where the stuff about The Collectors comes from but I looked online and I found something called the Templeton Collection, which is kept – guess where?'

'The British Museum?'

'No, the People's Palace at Queen Mary, University of London.'

'QMUL? That's a bit of a coincidence.'

Jones has a theory about coincidence and déjà-vu being

proof that time travel is possible, but Ali doesn't think that it's the time to share this. Ali would love to tell Meg about the unit's true purpose, but she knows that her friend would never believe her or, if she did, keep the news to herself. Besides, Ali has signed the Official Secrets Act.

'Quite a few Victorian philanthropists left things to the People's Palace,' says Ali. 'Including Wilkie Collins. Although his library somehow got lost in transit.'

'Was Cain Templeton a philanthropist?'

'According to Isaac he was. He supported the arts and let impoverished artists live in his house rent free.'

'And killed women?'

'He was never charged,' says Ali.

'Of course not,' says Meg. 'He was rich. Did they even have a police force then?'

'The Metropolitan Police were founded in 1829,' says Ali. 'I remember going to a talk about it when I first joined up. They were called Peelers after Sir Robert Peel who was home secretary and they mainly dealt with petty crime. The detective branch wasn't formed until 1842. They were working-class men, labourers mostly. There was no formal training.'

'And no women detectives.'

'Of course not,' says Ali. 'It's no job for a lady.' They grin at each other. It's an old joke, a line once uttered by a professor in reference to bar work and now used by them as shorthand for all the many injustices that make up the patriarchy.

'I bet those detectives still didn't investigate rich, powerful men,' says Meg.

'I'm sure you're right. At any rate, no one seems to have investigated Cain Templeton but, according to Isaac, there started to be rumours about him, about other women who mysteriously vanished in his vicinity.'

'Why are you involved?' says Meg. 'I mean, I know you deal with cold cases, but this is ancient history.'

'I told you, we deal with cases so cold they're frozen.'

'Even so . . .'

'It's because of Isaac Templeton,' says Ali. 'He wants to clear his great-great-grandfather's name. And it seems that he's got enough influence to recruit a lowly detective sergeant.'

'He must be very charming,' says Meg, draining her glass and standing up. 'Just don't marry him.'

'He's married,' says Ali. 'And I'm really trying to get out of the habit of marrying every man I go to bed with.'

CHAPTER 3

When Ali arrives at the unit the next morning, slightly hungover from wine and Sally Rooney, there's an excitement in the air, a faint electric hum that means Jones is in the building. Dina jerks her head towards Geoff's closed door.

'The doctor is *in*.'

John is at his desk, writing notes in his italic handwriting which is both beautiful and illegible. He looks up as Ali hangs her coat on the rack.

'I hear that something exciting might be happening.'

'What have you heard?' Ali sits on the edge of Bud's desk and a voice from the coffee room says, 'Get your ass off my iPad.'

'Ass?' says Ali. 'You're sounding more American by the day, Bud.' But she shifts slightly.

'I heard that the gate might be very wide open.'

Ali looks at Dina.

'OK. I told him,' says Dina. 'It was too good not to share.'

'Is it even possible?' says John. 'To go back so far?'

'I guess that's why Jones is here,' says Ali.

Bud appears, carrying his Dr Who mug (David Tennant era). 'What's everyone talking about? Why am I always left out?' Bud is twenty-eight, the baby of the group, but sometimes sounds even younger. He's tall and skinny with a penchant for T-shirts with slogans like 'I'm With Stupid' or 'I'd rather be reading'. Jones says he's a brilliant physicist but that doesn't stop the others sometimes treating him as if he needs subtitles.

'Geoff wants me to go back to the 1850s,' says Ali.

'Cool,' says Bud. 'What was happening in the 1850s?' Bud sometimes likes to pretend that he's never heard of history.

'Crinolines, horse-drawn carriages, men in beards,' says Ali.

'Sounds like Hoxton,' says Dina. 'Will you have to dress up, Ali?'

Dina has an unfortunate addiction to fancy dress parties. Over the years, Ali has been forced to impersonate a nun, a pirate and Servalan from *Blake's 7*. Dina has recently broken up with her boyfriend Liam, which was a relief to most of her friends, but has curtailed her party spirit. Despite her personal preference for remaining in her own clothes, Ali hopes that Dina's sociability resurfaces. She'd even welcome an invitation to 'Dress as your fantasy' or 'Come as your star sign'. At least she's Leo, clearly the best of the bunch.

'Maybe,' says Ali. 'I don't know if I'll be visible, but I suppose we shouldn't take any chances.'

'You know the rules,' says John. The Team's Protocol,

what Geoff grandly calls their 'charter', is pinned on the wall in the kitchen.

Watch

Bear Witness

Don't Interact

Stay Safe.

'Does Jones think you'll be visible?' asks Dina.

'I don't think she knows. We almost were in 1976, remember?'

'We weren't able to interact though. I hope I'll be able to chat to people in 1966. As long as it's not all about football.'

'What's football got to do with 1966?' asks Bud.

'They think it's all over,' says John. 'It is now.'

Dina is currently working on a cold case involving suspected victims of a serial killer who died last year, aged ninety. It's thought that his murderous career, which involved vulnerable young men whom he befriended and housed in the many flats that he owned, began in 1966. If Dina sees Ross Canterbury being abducted by Sir Martin Grantly (the knighthood was taken away when he was convicted) then she will, at least, have some answers for his mother, herself in her nineties.

'Jones is perfecting the process,' says Ali. 'Apparently.'

'What does that even mean?' says Dina.

'It's to do with the particles,' says Bud vaguely.

'You'll have to wear a wig,' says John.

Ali pulls a strand of Ferrari-red hair in front of her face. 'Never,' she says.

*

'You'll have to dye your hair,' says Jones. 'Or wear a wig.'

'Typical,' says Ali. 'The first thing we're talking about is hair.'

'That's the patriarchy for you,' says Jones.

Jones's hair is jet black and cut so short that it's almost a skull cap. When Ali first met her, Jones had black curls tumbling down her back. She's beautiful enough to make the crewcut glamorous but there's no doubt that she looks more serious now. Jones is tall and slim with large brown eyes that can look meltingly sympathetic. Ali has learned not to be fooled.

'You'll have to lose the nose ring too,' says Jones.

Ali touches her diamond stud. This will be a wrench. She has had this particular piercing since she was fourteen, her first act of teenage rebellion. She'd been sent home from school with a letter for her parents. Ali's mum Cheryl had replied that Ali's nose was her own business. Ali had been proud of her for that.

'Will they be able to see me?' she says.

'I hope so,' says Jones. 'I understand you were more visible in 1976 than before.'

Steven Mulholland had seen them; Ali is sure of it. He had stopped, in the process of washing his Lady Macbeth hands, and stared wildly at the shrubbery. She hopes that the two shadowy figures reminded him of divine retribution. She hopes they haunted him until the end of his days.

'How much more difficult is it to travel so far back in time?' asks Geoff.

'It's just making a loop,' says Jones, as she has done many

times before. She picks up her leather jacket from the back of Geoff's chair and holds the material taut between both hands. 'If a small insect wants to go from here to here' – she nods her head to the left, then right – 'what a tedious journey! But if you do this' – she brings her hands together – 'it happens in an instant.'

'I know,' says Ali. 'We square the square and enter the fifth dimension. All I want to know is, will I be safe?'

'When have I ever failed you?'

'The very first time.' That had been during the lockdown trip. Ali and John were so elated to find themselves in a world where life was going on as usual, that they moved too quickly. They left the side street where they had materialised and drifted along Oxford Street. On this first trip they had been little more than wraiths, their reflections hadn't shown in the windows of any shops and they were able to move unseen through the bustling pre-Covid crowds. Occasionally they'd see someone shiver or look round, as if a shadow had passed over them, but to all extents and purposes they had been invisible. They could see each other, though, and exchanged delighted glances as they checked the date on newspaper stands and watched the billboards warning of the new killer virus. They had half an hour, Jones had told them, but their phones had stopped working. The blank screen was a surprise and strangely terrifying. But they checked clocks outside department stores and were back in good time. The problem was that they couldn't find the ingress point, as Jones called it. They hadn't realised that they had to be standing in the exact same spot, the position

of their feet correct to the millimetre, in order to return. An anxious hour was spent moving from paving stone to paving stone, trying to recreate the exact place and precise stance. Now they always mark the spot by spraying special paint – visible only in UV light – around their feet.

'We were all learning then,' says Jones. 'You're a pro now.'

'If you say so,' says Ali. 'But do you really think that you can take me back all that way? To 1850, wasn't it?'

'Time is relative.'

'So you keep saying.'

Jones ignores this. 'I'll need a few weeks to prepare. And I imagine you'll want to do some research too, Ali.'

'I've got an appointment at Queen Mary's this afternoon. It's where I was at uni,' Ali explains to Jones. 'I'm still in touch with my old history tutor. I thought she could tell me about the nineteenth century. Plus, the Templeton Collection is kept there.'

'The Templeton Collection?' says Geoff.

'Apparently Cain Templeton collected historical artefacts as well as women. He donated them all to the People's Palace.'

'The People's Palace,' says Jones. 'I like the sound of that.' She's a communist, albeit one that likes designer clothes.

'It's pretty cool,' says Ali. 'It was built in 1887 to provide East Enders with their own library. Apparently, it also employed the first female librarians. Some of the original building burnt down in 1931 but there's a new People's Palace next door. Art deco.' It was where Ali graduated. She remembers standing with Finn and her parents, feeling

ridiculous in her cap and gown but also giddy with the achievement of being the first member of her family to gain a degree. Even her brother, Richard, had been there.

'Is it worth all this trouble?' says Geoff. 'For a crime that happened nearly two hundred years ago?'

Ali looks at him in surprise. 'It was your idea.'

'Well, strictly speaking, it was Isaac Templeton's idea,' says Geoff.

'It's important to keep the government onside,' says Jones. 'They fund us, after all. And it's an exciting challenge. To go back so far.'

'It's not my job to please the government,' says Geoff. Although it is, really. 'The welfare of my staff must be my priority. I wish you didn't have to go alone, Ali.'

'Me too,' says Ali.

'I think it will be too difficult to send two people so far,' says Jones.

'I still can't understand why Isaac Templeton asked for me personally,' says Ali.

'You're quite famous in government circles,' says Geoff.

Ali didn't know this; it must be the hair.

'I think it's just because you're a white middle-aged woman,' says Jones. 'You won't stand out so much.'

'Grazie' says Ali. She's learning Italian on Duolingo but it's hard to be sarcastic in another language.

CHAPTER 4

Ali loves going back to Queen Mary's. She can never get over the fact that you can turn from a busy London street, pass through a gateway and find yourself in the centre of a campus university. The mixture of old and new buildings includes halls of residence, lecture theatres, shops, cafés and a launderette, bisected by the Regent's Canal. Students are wandering across Library Square, carrying laptops and take-away coffees. They are a vibrant and inspiring sight, the diversity of QMUL is one of Ali's favourite things about it. Clement Attlee, whose statue stands outside the cafeteria, would surely have approved.

Ali gives Old Clem a nod as she passes. She also takes a detour to look at the Jewish cemetery. This square of ground, surrounded by modern buildings, was fascinating to Ali as a history student and more interesting than ever now that she's a time-traveller. The Novo Cemetery, which dates back to the 1700s (too long ago even for Jones), was once the final resting place for London's Portuguese and Spanish Sephardic Jews. When Queen Mary's expanded

in the 1970s, they acquired the site, although the human remains were moved elsewhere. This was a controversial decision – not only was reburial said to contravene Jewish law but a proposed new memorial never materialised. The university committed to the upkeep of the flat tombstones but, today, they look somewhat sad, surrounded by weeds and wind-blown rubbish. Even so, Ali thinks that the graveyard symbolises the many different people who found a home in the East End of London. It was a Dutchman who drained the marshes so that houses could be built this side of the Thames; it was French Huguenots who brought the skills to start the local silk-weaving industry. The people once buried in this patch of ground, surrounded by student accommodation blocks, would have been fleeing from the Inquisition. Even here, they would have to practise their religion in secret. It wasn't until 1656 that the first synagogue was built within the City of London.

Once, returning from Drapers, the student nightclub, in the early hours, Ali had seen a shadowy figure crossing the graveyard with a peculiar dancing gait. She'd put it down to her first experience of hash brownies but, later, someone had suggested that the figure was the ghost of Daniel Mendoza, the boxing champion commemorated by a bronze plaque on the wall of the library. His bones no longer lie in the Novo Cemetery, but Ali likes to think that she glimpsed his shadow-boxing spirit.

Ali makes her way past the graves towards the Queen's Building, the elegant classical edifice that once housed the People's Palace. It's where students gather on graduation

day, having their pictures taken on the steps or posing on the lawn with the giant letters QMUL. Once again, Ali remembers that day. Since then she's attended two graduation ceremonies for Finn, for his bachelor's and master's degrees, and marvelled at the casual attitudes of some parents. 'We've got two graduations this week,' she overheard one mother saying. 'Bit of a bore really.' These people had always expected their offspring to move smoothly from GCSE to A levels to university. But Ali had left school at eighteen with indifferent A levels. By nineteen she was married to Declan, pregnant and working in a shop. She will never take it for granted, even for Finn, who'd been lucky enough to ride that smooth escalator upwards.

And now Ali is returning as a successful alumna on police business. She walks up the steps and into the lobby where, hovering between mock-classical pillars, Ed Crane, the museum's curator, is waiting for her.

'Alison, good to see you.'

'Ali, please.'

Ali remembers Ed. He's a tall man with receding hair and a slightly anxious look, as if he's afraid of doorways. Ed gallantly pretends that he recognises Ali too but she doesn't think he does. She didn't have red hair when she was at QMUL, was simply another mature student, diligent and self-conscious, carrying her books in a Lidl carrier bag. She'd caught Hugo's eye but only because he was a predator. Hugo had annoyed her on graduation day by taking all the credit for Ali's first. 'We got there in the end,' he said to Ali's mum. But Ali knew that it had been despite, not because.

'Thank you for seeing me,' Ali says to Ed. 'As I explained on the phone, I work for the police now.'

'It's not what I would have expected,' says Ed, which seems a rather odd remark.

'I work on cold cases,' Ali continues, 'and I'm researching the Templeton family. I understand Cain Templeton left his archaeology collection to the People's Palace.'

'He did,' says Ed. 'It's upstairs, in the attics. You don't mind the stairs, do you? The lift's broken.'

'I prefer stairs,' says Ali, although these are steep enough to make her out of breath. They don't speak again until they are on the top floor and Ed is opening a locked door.

'We used to have the collection on public display but there are some sensitivities . . .'

'Really?' Ali's ears twitch. 'What sort of sensitivities?'

Ed switches on the light and reveals a room lined with display cases. 'It's all looted,' he says.

Ali approaches one of the cases. It contains a skull with a nail hammered into the centre of its forehead. She backs away.

'It was quite common in Victorian times,' says Ed. 'Rich people went to archaeological sites and just took what they fancied. That skull is Roman but there's a mummified cat from an Egyptian tomb. Several *shabtis* too, and burial goods. Also a Bronze Age jet necklace, an Iron Age torc and an ancient Greek urn. It's doubtful whether Cain Templeton knew the value or provenance of any of it. He was just a magpie, picking up glittery objects. I said as much to the great-grandson, Isaac.'

'Isaac Templeton came here?'

'Yes, about a year ago. You know he's a Tory MP?'

'I'd heard.'

'He was just after a photo opportunity. He wanted to say that, thanks to him, his great-grandad's generous gift was available to the public again, after being hidden away by woke museum staff. You know the sort of thing.'

Ali does. According to Finn, Isaac likes to portray himself as a simple fellow, chivalrous in the old-fashioned mould, bemused by so-called 'Cancel Culture'. This despite trying hard to cancel most of his political opponents.

'Can you return any of this?' she says. 'Send it back to Egypt and Greece or wherever?'

'We've tried,' says Ed. 'On their own, none of the objects are that valuable or worth the trouble. As a collection, though, it's quite a curiosity. Have a look at this.'

He shines his phone torch into a dark corner of the room. It illuminates a vat of golden liquid with a sponge-like object suspended in it.

'Murderer's brain,' says Ed. 'Preserved in formaldehyde.'

'Murderer's brain?'

'The Victorians thought you could tell a murderer by the shape of his or her brain. No idea where Cain Templeton picked up this particular example.'

'I can see why you wouldn't put this on display,' says Ali.

'Exactly,' says Ed. 'And then there's the curse.'

Ali looks at the mummified cat, whose painted eyes look back at her. Of *course* there's a curse.

'If any of the exhibits leaves the collection,' says Ed, 'the person responsible will die.'

'The person responsible?' says Ali.

'Almost certainly the curator,' says Ed.

Ali takes photographs of all the objects though she can't see how they will help with the case. They do tell her something about Cain Templeton though. He was a collector through and through. On the way back downstairs, she asks Ed if he's ever heard of The Collectors.

'It was a club for men who collected women. The rumour was that you had to kill a woman to be elected.'

'Bloody hell,' says Ed. 'And Templeton was a member of this club?'

'Allegedly.'

In the lobby, Ed looks at her curiously. 'You're investigating this? From all that time ago?'

'In a way.'

They shake hands and Ed says, 'I really do remember you. I wasn't just saying that. You used to feed the stray cats in the cemetery. You had a Lidl carrier bag.'

Ali doesn't know whether to be pleased or slightly unsettled.

Ali's next visit is to Elizabeth Henderson, lecturer in nineteenth-century history. Elizabeth was once Ali's personal tutor and, once Ali got over her fear of tutorials, essays and university in general, was one of the best things about QMUL. Elizabeth is in her mid-sixties with short grey hair and an uncompromising demeanour. She can be fierce but Ali knows from experience that she can also be kind. Today,

though, fierceness is uppermost. Her first question is, 'Why did I have to sign the Official Secrets Act?'

'It's standard practice,' Ali says, before remembering that Elizabeth always knew when a student was bluffing.

'So why do the Metropolitan Police want to know about 1850?'

'We're not part of the Met,' says Ali.

'Even so.' Elizabeth leans back and waits.

'Don't tell her more than you have to,' said Geoff but Ali already knows that subterfuge will be impossible.

'What if I told you I could time travel?' she says.

'I would assume that you were on some kind of hallucinogenic drug.'

'Can we just skip that bit and assume I'm telling the truth?'

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

'Have you ever heard of a physicist called Serafina Pellegrini?'

'No, but it's a wonderful name. An angelic pilgrim.'

'She almost deserves it. Anyway, for years she's been working on a method of time travel. Backed by the government. And she's done it.'

'What do you mean, "she's done it"?' Ali can almost hear the tetchy quotation marks.

'She's worked out a way of moving in time.'

There's a silence. Elizabeth's office overlooks the canal and Ali can hear laughter from the towpath, the sounds of a brass band playing in the distance.

'You're telling me that you're going to travel to 1850. *Corporeally?*'

'It's just a theory so far.' Ali doesn't think she should mention the other occasions. A theory is still on the border of sanity. If she says that she has actually been through the gate she will have crossed that boundary.

'If, in theory,' says Ali, 'I could travel to 1850, what would I need to know? What should I wear? What should I say? What should I do?'

Elizabeth leans back in her chair. She always sits very firmly, legs apart, and now it almost looks as if she's trying to anchor herself to earth.

'It's not a question of what you wear,' she says at last. 'Fashion is fairly easy to research. I've got a friend who teaches at the London College of Fashion. Lots of skirts. The steel crinoline didn't come in until at least 1856 so you're spared that. I think you'd have pagoda sleeves in 1850, lots of braid and embellishment, horsehair on the bottom of your petticoat to make it heavier. Fashion's not the problem.'

'Are you sure?' says Ali. She thinks she's allergic to horsehair.

'No, the problem is up here.' Elizabeth taps her smooth grey bob. 'In your head. You, Ali, are a very modern woman. You can't just become Victorian by wearing a big skirt. You have to believe in God, in England, in the Royal Family. You have to believe that the shape of your head determines your character and that wearing divided skirts makes you a lesbian. You have to believe that the dead can talk and that men are superior. You have to be able to make a posset, sew a seam and recite the Lord's Prayer. Can you do any of those things?'

'Our Father, who art in Heaven . . .' begins Ali but she can't get any further. Declan, a Catholic, would have managed it, even adding a pious sign of the cross at the end.

'Exactly,' says Elizabeth. 'You're an atheist, feminist, socialist. They'll burn you at the stake.'

'Isn't that more of a seventeen hundreds thing?'

'They still believed in witches, trust me.'

'People still believe in them today. I've been married three times. All my ex-husbands think I'm a witch.'

'Three times?' says Elizabeth, momentarily diverted. 'I didn't know that. I knew about Hugo, of course . . .'

Hugo had been Elizabeth's colleague in the history department. His affair with Ali didn't break any official rules – they declared it so that Hugo wouldn't get to mark any of Ali's papers – but it wasn't exactly a popular move.

'There were Victorian feminists,' says Ali. 'Barbara Bodichon, Bessie Rayner Parkes. Mary Wollstonecraft was even earlier. When was "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" published? 1790s?'

'1792,' says Elizabeth. 'It's good that you remember something from my course. Mary Wollstonecraft was born near here, actually. In Spitalfields. But that's just my point, they were *Victorian* feminists, or pre-Victorian. You're the modern kind. It's very different.'

'Will you teach me all these things?' says Ali. 'All the things that make you a Victorian? You're a brilliant teacher. You can manage it.'

'You'll have to dye your hair,' says Elizabeth.

CHAPTER 5

'Where do you want this, Mum?'

Finn stands in the hallway carrying a large vase that looks as if it could once have held the ashes of a favourite elephant. Ali can't think where it comes from or why she has it.

'Oh, just leave it there.'

'There are already two chairs and a broken exercise bike here. It looks like the overflow from a junk shop.'

'In my bedroom then. Thanks, love.'

Ali's new house is a two up, two down in Bow. The downstairs is all one room, open-plan kitchen and sitting room with French doors onto a small garden. There's also a tiny loo that was probably once outside. Upstairs there are two bedrooms and a bathroom in dire need of modernisation. It's like a child's drawing of a house but Ali bought it because it has stained glass in the front door, original sash windows and an apple tree in the back garden. The front is concreted over and Ali sees Finn eyeing it disapprovingly. At least there isn't fake grass, one of the many things he

feels passionately about. Ali assumes that the paved area is for a car but that's no use to her because, to her occasional shame, she can't drive.

The removal men have completed their work, taking with them a large tip and a bag of mini Snickers. Now it's just Ali and Finn trying to make sense of her possessions, which seem mysteriously to have doubled. Finn has brought Ali's cat, Terry, a perpetually angry Siamese, who is now sitting on top of her kitchen cabinet, vibrating with resentment.

Despite the long day and the backache which is beginning to make itself felt, Ali loves spending time with Finn, especially when they are both involved in practical tasks which show them at their best. If they have too much leisure time, over a meal or day out, they start bickering about politics or Ali asks one too many personal questions. She knows that Finn has split up with his girlfriend Cosima but she has virtuously refrained from asking too many details. Ali liked Cosima, but avoided getting too close because she knew that this day might come. Finn is now on his own in the flat he and Cosima shared in Pimlico. 'He's fine,' Declan said when Ali raised the subject, 'don't worry.' Ali hates her ex-husband telling her not to worry. For years, worrying was her *job* while he was swanning around trying different jobs before eventually becoming a website designer. But, all the same, he's probably right.

'Shall I put the exercise bike in the pile for the dump?' says Finn, swinging on the door frame in a way that used to infuriate Ali but which she now finds rather endearing.

'Or put it outside and leave a note on it saying "free to collector",' says Ali.

'Yeah, they'll be queuing round the block.'

'It only wants a few screws or something,' says Ali.

'Did you ever use it?' Finn smiles rather patronisingly. Recently, to Ali's surprise and slight discomfiture, he's become very keen on fitness. He goes to the gym three times a week and cycles around London in alarming Lycra clothes. Finn is tall and slim, like Declan. He never seemed unfit but now he looks almost dangerously lean. Wasn't there a Shakespearean character who had a 'lean and hungry look'? Ali will have to ask Meg. For some reason, she blames Isaac Templeton for the bike.

'Of course I used it,' says Ali. 'Where else would I hang my clothes that are too clean to be washed and too dirty to go in the wardrobe?'

Finn laughs and heaves the bike outside. Then he puts the spare chairs in the kitchen and opens the back doors. It's been one of those balmy days that you sometimes get in January, full of the promise of spring, but now it's almost dark and the air is cold. A security light comes on and illuminates the skeletal tree. Ali jumps as Terry weaves around her feet. She picks him up.

'I don't want him to go out yet.'

'He'll be king of the neighbourhood before long,' says Finn. 'The godfather. The don.'

'He'll enjoy having a garden,' says Ali. Although, to be honest, the space doesn't look much fun at the moment. The grass is threadbare and the flower beds are empty. But

the previous owners have left a rusty wrought-iron table and it's not too much of a leap to imagine sitting out here with a glass of chilled wine.

'It'll be lovely in the spring,' she says. Since working with Jones, she no longer takes the future for granted.

'You can have parties here,' says Finn. Ali smiles at the thought, although even her colleagues on their own would make the place look crowded.

'Shall I order us a takeaway?' she says.

There was a selection of flyers on the doormat and, at random, Ali and Finn choose 'Taj Mahal, Indian cuisine to your door'. The food takes its time to make the journey – Ali reckons she could have reached the 1970s quicker – but, when it arrives, it's delicious. By this time, Ali and Finn have drunk most of a bottle of red wine and, perhaps due to its effects, the house is looking quite homely. There are three vases of flowers in the empty fireplace, sent by the unit (tasteful, so probably chosen by Dina), Ali's parents and Meg. Ali has lit the lamps and, in the kitchen, the downlights make the grey cabinets look quite stylish. Ali's precious collection of mismatched glasses and china is displayed in an open unit.

Ali and Finn eat at her new kitchen table, just big enough for two. Terry puts up a stealthy black paw and snares an onion bhaji.

'You won't like that.' Ali takes it away from him.

'Want a bet?' says Finn.

Terry starts to patrol the kitchen in stalking pose.

'Do you think there are mice?' Ali asks.

'Probably,' says Finn, tearing off a piece of naan. 'There are mice everywhere in London. Rats too.'

'Great. Now I'll sleep easily at night.'

'Do you want me to stay?' asks Finn.

'No, love,' says Ali, touched. 'I'll be fine. And aren't you working tomorrow?'

'Yes,' says Finn. 'Isaac's having an awayday. Just an excuse to show off his country estate.'

'Where is it?' asks Ali.

'East Dean in Sussex.'

'Sounds like a Victorian melodrama.'

'Piers says it's a bit like that. A big Gothic mansion on the cliffs. Near Beachy Head. Apparently, it's a popular spot for suicides.'

'Fun,' says Ali lightly, although the word always chills her to the bone. She knows the statistics about young men and suicide.

'How are you getting there?' she asks.

'I'm driving down with Chibu and Piers.'

These, Ali knows, are Finn's fellow special advisors, both Oxbridge and posh although Ali imagines that Isaac thinks Chibu's Nigerian heritage gains him some extra points somewhere.

'What's the awayday about?'

'Supposedly immigration but, really, it's the same as every meeting. How quickly can Isaac become PM?'

Ali thinks of Isaac Templeton, padding barefoot around his glittering apartment. *I need to explain to you about my*

great-great-grandfather. Part of her wishes that she could tell Finn about the meeting although she thinks he might not like the thought of her visiting Isaac at his home, drinking coffee prepared by him.

But Finn says, tipping more jalfrezi onto his plate, 'Isaac mentioned you the other day.'

'Did he?' Ali fills their wine glasses whilst telling herself to be careful.

'Yes. He remembered meeting you at that reception. He was asking about your job. I said you were a police officer and he asked if I ever worried about you being in danger. I said that you were only working on cold cases.'

'So cold they're frozen.' Ali finishes the line. She's slightly jolted by Isaac thinking that she might be in danger. 'You can tell Isaac that danger and me don't mix.'

'He also said he liked your red hair,' says Finn, in the expressionless tone that means he's uneasy. Finn got on fairly well with Hugo, who became his stepfather when he was fourteen. Declan had married again by then and presented Finn with two half-sisters. Finn had shuttled quite happily between his two families, with a stoic good humour that had made Ali want to weep. But Finn had openly disapproved when Ali divorced Hugo and married Lincoln. Ali's third marriage had coincided with Finn going to university and had been the most strained year in their relationship. Finn can't suspect Ali of wanting to marry Isaac, who is years younger and has a fragrant wife of his own, but he doesn't like men being interested in her. Oedipus, phone home.

'I'm thinking of changing my hair,' says Ali.

CHAPTER 6

'Are you sure?' says Kelly.

'It's my boss,' says Ali, 'he suddenly says it isn't suitable. '

'What a shame.' Kelly picks up a fiery strand of Ali's hair. 'It really suits you. What's your boss's hair like?'

'He's bald.'

'Typical. Well, red's the most difficult colour to change. We'll have to use a neutralising shampoo. That'll restore the natural pH balance and get rid of some of the dye. Then we can put an ash brown over the top.'

'Won't it be my natural colour?'

'I think your natural colour is too light. The red will show through. This will look natural, if that's what you're after.'

Is that what she's after? Ali looks gloomily at her reflection in the mirror. In her opinion, natural is overrated. Natural family planning doesn't work. Natural mineral water is boring. When she first dyed her hair, she felt invincible. This woman doesn't care what you think, said the almost fluorescent locks. People smiled at Ali in the street, stallholders in Hackney Market recognised her. 'It's Ginger

Rogers,' said an admittedly drunk man on the night bus. Now she'll be just another brown-haired woman trying not to let the grey show through.

One of the juniors leads Ali to the sink where she tilts her head backwards and feels the water trickle down.

'Is this temperature OK?'

It's slightly too hot but Ali doesn't have the heart to say. She's been coming to this salon for ten years. Before that, she used to cut her hair herself. When she was nineteen, she'd gone platinum blonde. It's there in the wedding photos. Ali in a red dress and Doc Martens outside Hastings Register Office. Declan in jeans and a leather jacket. Both sets of parents had wanted them to get married in a church but both had been relieved that the deed was done before Finn was born. He's there in the photos too, a slight swelling beneath the red lace. Ali shuts her eyes and lets the junior massage her scalp. It hurts a bit but, once again, Ali doesn't say anything.

Two hours later she emerges into the street with brown hair that comes to just below her shoulder blades. Kelly wanted to cut it shorter and add some layers but Ali suspects that she will have to wear her hair up so it's better to have some length. Ali doesn't recognise her face in shop windows. She looks dowdy, she thinks, the straight strands make her face look thin and pale. When she buys a *Big Issue*, the seller doesn't make his usual comment about redheads having more fun. Ali sighs and takes refuge in Dunkin' Donuts.

'You look great,' says Dina.

'Where's Ali?' says John.

'Ooh, doughnuts,' says Bud.

Geoff hears the D-word and appears in the doorway. Bobby is always making him go on diets but there are often tell-tale crumbs on his shirt. Ali found a Crunchie wrapper in his office once and Geoff said, unconvincingly, that he'd found it on the street.

'Have a doughnut?' Ali offers the jam-stained cardboard box.

'The hair's good,' says Geoff. 'Very nineteenth century.'

'Just the look I was going for,' says Ali.

'It makes you look younger,' says John. That must be something his wife taught him to say.

'Oh, I was going to say it makes her look older,' says Bud, surprised.

'How's the research going?' Geoff asks Ali.

'I'm going to the London College of Fashion this afternoon,' says Ali, 'to be fitted for my clothes.'

'I can't imagine you in a crinoline,' says Bud.

'Crinolines didn't come in until 1856,' says Ali. 'Don't even ask about bloomers.'

'I wasn't going to,' says Bud.

'Is Jones really sure about taking Ali back to the 1850s?' John asks Geoff. He's been asking the same question ever since the trip was first mentioned. John is a great worrier, which is one reason why he left CID after a stellar career as a murder detective. That and the alcoholism and subsequent breakdown. John credits the unit with helping him to rebuild his life. They come second only to his wife and adult children as objects of his fierce devotion.

'Jones says it's no different from the 1960s or 70s,' says Geoff. 'Just a rearrangement of atoms.'

'We travel in time every day,' Dina launches into her Jones impersonation, 'it's just that we go forwards not backwards.'

'Is like going upstairs.' This is Bud's contribution. He overdoes Jones's Italian accent, which, these days, is really only audible on some vowel sounds.

'She doesn't know though,' says John. 'No one has done this before. Ali shouldn't go alone. I should go with her. Like I did the first time.'

'Jones says that's too complicated,' says Geoff.

'When has Jones ever worried about complications?' says John.

'I'll be OK,' says Ali, wondering, as she does so, why she is so sure of this. 'Jones says I'll fit in just fine, being old and white and all that.'

'Yeah, can't say I'm looking forward to nineteen sixties racism,' says Dina. 'It'll be like going on twitter.'

'When are you going through the gate?' asks Ali.

'It was meant to be next week but it's been put off for you,' says Dina, which makes Ali feel rather guilty.

'Why is this mission getting priority?' John asks Geoff. 'Is it just because a government minister is involved?'

'Not at all,' says Geoff. But he undermines this slightly by saying, 'But Isaac Templeton is an important man.'

'He's an awful man,' says John. 'Have you heard his views on prisons? Close the gates. All that stuff.'

'Finn works for him,' Ali reminds him. She has always tried not to indoctrinate Finn with her left-wing views but

it's still a bit of a shock to find him working for the government. Finn says that this doesn't make him a Tory but, given that he spends his working life trying to advance the career of a Conservative minister, this argument seems specious, to say the least. The 'gates' remark rattles her a bit. *We call it going through the gate.*

John doesn't reply to this. He's the member of the team who best understands Ali's feelings for her only child.

'We all know the risks,' says Geoff. 'But we can minimise them as much as we are able.' But he looks worried and takes an extra doughnut back into his office.

'You're bigger than most Victorian women,' says Dulcie at the London College of Fashion.

'Gee thanks,' says Ali. 'That's all I need today.'

'No, really,' Dulcie says earnestly. 'Humans are getting taller and heavier. Mostly due to better nutrition.'

Ali banishes the image in her head of a corpulent, jolly Victorian, taken, she realises, from the pages of Dickens. She remembers Elizabeth telling her, 'Whatever you do, don't trust Dickens.'

Dulcie continues, whilst measuring Ali's waist, 'Women were, on average, two inches shorter in the nineteenth century. Queen Victoria was four foot ten.'

Ali is five foot six and a size fourteen. She's not sure what she weighs but, possibly until this very second, had been quite satisfied with her dimensions.

'Hands and feet were smaller and narrower then too,' says Dulcie. 'What size shoe are you?'

'Six.'

'Average for women in 1850 was our equivalent of a four. We'll have to get you boots specially made.'

Ali doesn't know what story Elizabeth told Dulcie – a reality game set in the 1850s? *Strictly Dickens*? – but the woman seems intent on providing Ali with as authentic a costume as possible. Even if she now feels like an exhibit in a freak show. 'Huge Woman with Giant Feet'.

Dulcie has provided Ali with a floor-length slip and now drapes fabric around her.

'You'll need lots of petticoats,' says Dulcie. 'Maybe as many as four or five.'

'But no steel crinoline.' Ali trots out her one piece of knowledge.

'Actually, a cage crinoline would have been a lot lighter to wear than multiple layers,' says Dulcie. 'And you'll still have to wear a corset. The silhouette is a long torso with a dropped waistline. Tight sleeves too. The pagoda didn't come in until later.'

Ali imagines herself trussed up in reams of material, unable to walk in her constricting boots, massive hands squashed into leather gloves. But Elizabeth would call this 'modern thinking'. Nineteenth-century Alison ('never Ali,' Elizabeth told her, 'and Mrs Dawson to everyone outside your family') would never have known what it was to stride in jeans or curl up on the sofa in tracksuit bottoms. Ali will have to suppress this memory. And take smaller steps.

'Your skin would look very brown to a Victorian,' says Dulcie. 'I'm afraid you might not seem upper class.'

'I've never wanted to seem upper class,' says Ali. Declan had accused her of 'marrying up' because Hugo was a university lecturer who went to a minor public school but Ali knows that her working class roots are visible for all to see and hear, from her accent and her vocabulary to the way she makes tea (apparently it's almost a sin to put the milk in first). 'Don't say "pardon",' Hugo used to say, 'it's so common. It's a worse word than fuck.' 'What?' Hugo had spluttered when Ali announced that she was leaving him after the discovery that her husband, true to type, had seduced one of his students. 'Don't you mean "Pardon"?' Ali had said. 'And I don't pardon you. So fuck off.'

Ali knows that, however wonderful the clothes provided by Dulcie, she is not going to present a refined figure to the world of 1850. But, if Cain Templeton has a penchant for women of a lower social status, she'll be right in there. As long as he isn't a murderer, of course.

Ali spends an hour being prodded and pinned. It's five o'clock when she leaves the college, which is in a modern building close to the park where the Olympics were held in 2012. Ali remembers the opening ceremony, possibly the only time in her life when she has felt patriotic. She'd been married to Lincoln then, who was Canadian, so this is probably why. She's not far from Bow so thinks she'll go straight home. There's a lot to do in the new house and she's worried that Terry, who's still not allowed out, will be feeling bored. Ali is waiting for a bus when her phone pings. It's Geoff. 'Ring me'. He never likes to text and doesn't even trust encrypted messages.

'Hi, Geoff. What's up?'

'Isaac Templeton's been on the phone. He wants you to go through the gate on Wednesday.'

'It's not up to him, though, is it? What does Jones say?'

'She says she's ready. But what about you?'

'I'm ready,' says Ali, raising her hand as the red single-decker bus edges towards her through the rush-hour traffic.

CHAPTER 7

'The Victorians were in crisis,' says Elizabeth. 'In 1835 a German man called David Strauss wrote a book called *The Life of Jesus*. It was actually translated into English by George Eliot in the 1840s. Strauss's main thesis was that Jesus probably existed but the gospels were written long after his death and so there was no evidence for any of the miracles, et cetera. It's hard to over-emphasise the shock waves this created. The Victorians nearly lost their collective minds. You see it in all the literature of the time. If the gospels weren't gospel truth, what could they rely on? Nothing and no one.'

'Did they stop believing in God?' asks Ali. Being in Elizabeth's office makes her feel like a student again with the freedom to ask stupid questions. Ali doesn't know how much Elizabeth believes in the time-travel project, but she has consented to give Ali several tutorials. Does Elizabeth think it's all an elaborate practical joke? Looking at her ex-tutor, feet planted firmly as she sits in her winged-back chair, Ali can't detect any hint of satire.

'Of course they didn't,' says Elizabeth. 'But belief in itself started to be the important thing, not evidence. Feeling rather than thinking. As Tennyson wrote in "In Memoriam . . ."' She clears her throat and assumes her quoting voice.

'If e'er when faith had fall'en asleep,
I hear a voice 'believe no more'
And heard an ever-breaking shore
That tumbled in the Godless deep;
A warmth within the breast would melt
The freezing reason's colder part,
And like a man in wrath the heart
Stood up and answer'd 'I have felt'.

'The word 'e'er' always makes me feel slightly sick,' says Ali. 'O'er is the same.'

'You'll have to be less squeamish if you become a Victorian,' says Elizabeth, glasses gleaming as the late-afternoon sunlight reflects on the windows of the building opposite. 'You'll have to launder your own sanitary napkins, you know. Best to use cold water and salt.'

'I'm past the menopause,' says Ali.

'Lucky you.' How old is Elizabeth? Ali had assumed that she was a lot older than her but maybe this isn't true. Time behaves oddly in academia. Put a gown on someone and surround them with panelled walls and books, and they immediately seem older.

'The Victorians believed in ghosts,' says Elizabeth. 'They were fascinated by mesmerism and somnambulism. They loved freak shows and stories about monkeys stealing children. Conjoined twins were displayed in fairs, as were men

who supposedly looked like dogs or elephants. Have you heard of sSpring-heeled Jack?'

'I don't think so.'

'He's a kind of devil figure, variously described as wearing a black cloak, having clawed hands and red eyes like hell fire.'

'I think I might have dated him.'

'Dated is such an Americanism. Although, from what you told me, if you dated him, you probably married him. Anyway, there was a spate of sightings of Jack in the 1830s and 40s, mainly in London. He was said to be able to leap over carriages and houses. In some reports he's described as being ten feet tall.'

'Was high-jumping all he did?'

'No. He also attacked women. In 1837, a servant girl called Mary Stevens was walking to her parents' house in Battersea when a strange figure jumped out from a dark alley. According to Mary, he gripped her with claw-like hands and sexually assaulted her before leaping over a wall and making his escape, cackling with manic laughter. Then, in 1838, a woman called Jane Alsop answered the door of her father's house to a man claiming to be a police officer. He told her to bring a light, claiming to have caught Spring-heeled Jack in the lane outside. JaneMary went to fetch a candle and saw that the man at the door was wearing a black cloak. As soon as she handed him the candle, he threw off the cloak and revealed himself to be a devil, vomiting blue and white flame from his mouth. Jane screamed for help and her attacker fled.'

'She was lucky,' says Ali. She no longer feels like joking. She remembers Sarah Everard, another woman walking home in South London, this time in 2021. Sarah was abducted by a serving police officer and subsequently murdered. The case made Ali consider quitting the force altogether.

'There are other reports of Spring-heeled Jack attacking women. Some of them report him wearing tight-fitting white oilskins and having metal hands.'

'Where are you getting all this stuff?'

'From the archives of the *Illustrated Police News*,' says Elizabeth. 'They're very interesting. Have you heard of the jumping ghost of Peckham?'

'You know I haven't.'

'There were several sightings in the Peckham area of a tall figure leaping out at women. Some witnesses say that he had horns and could run at superhuman speed. Like Jack, he could levitate into the air.'

'All these people are variations of Satan, aren't they? Bogeymen, meant to frighten women into staying indoors.'

'Except that there are actual police reports of their assaults,' says Elizabeth. 'I suppose what I'm saying is: be careful.'

There's a pause. Ali can hear a clock ticking somewhere. She remembers an estate agent once telling her that they play tapes of this sound in empty houses.: 'It's like a heartbeat.'

Ali glances up at Elizabeth's bookshelves. As well as tomes on history, and modern paperbacks, there's a whole set of Charles Dickens, gold tooling on blue leather.

'Why did you tell me not to trust Dickens?' she asks.

'He makes things up,' says Elizabeth. 'Well, of course he

does. He's a writer, a storyteller. You just can't trust Dickens for a view of what Victorian society was actually like.' She gives Ali a sidelong glance. 'Actually, he was rather interested in time travel.'

'Was he?' This is definitely news to Ali.

'What's *A Christmas Carol* if it's not a time travel book? Dickens thought about the subject a lot. There's another short story called *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain*. A strange little tale. It's about a chemist, Mr Redlaw, who's haunted by his own past. He's visited by a phantom and Redlaw begs it to tell him what would have happened if he'd made certain decisions differently.'

'A bit like the film *Sliding Doors*.'

'Actually Dickens used a similar phrase. He called them the revolving years. The quote is something like, '"They come back to me in the music, in the wind, in the dead stillness of the night, in the revolving years."'

And Ali has the strangest sensation, that she and Elizabeth are sitting still in the third-floor office while the whole of East London whirls around them like a merry-go-round.

It's getting dark as Ali leaves the campus. The lights are on in the library and the shadows are long across the Noeuvo cemetery. What would Elizabeth say if she knew that, tomorrow, Ali will be treading these same streets but in long skirts weighted with horsehair? Ali hardly believes it herself but the event has its own entry in the unit's shared calendar. *2pm Ali goes through the gate*.

Ali had completed almost all of her pre-assignment tasks.

She has money and clothes. She also has UV s.pray to mark the ingress point plus a rather more prosaic notebook and pencil. Tomorrow, Jones will collect her in her Fiat 500. Ali will leave her phone and house keys with Jones, then they will drive to Herald Street and Ali will stand on the spot. At fourteen hundred hours exactly, Ali will disappear. It's happened before so she knows the feeling, a jolt as if she is being pulled forward by her naveal, an unpleasant form of rebirth. The first time she wasn't sure if anything had happened, not until she and John had reached the end of the road and noticed they were in a pre-pandemic world. When Ali and Dina had seen the 1970s fashions around them, they looked at each other and mouthed, 'Wow.' Tomorrow, there will be no one to share the excitement. Ali will be alone in the nineteenth century.

Passing the Queen's Building, Ali is surprised to hear someone calling her name. Ed Crane is hurrying down the steps.

'Ali! What are you doing here? Have you come to see the collection again?'

'No. Sorry. I just called in on my ex-tutor, Elizabeth Henderson.'

'I know Elizabeth. She pops in here quite often.'

'She's very interested in the nineteenth century. Being a history teacher and all that.'

They look at each other, somewhere between goodwill and shyness. Ed is on ground level now and Ali has to look up at him. She has a sudden urge to tell him everything; about time- travel, about Cain Templeton and his great-grandson, the man who'd visited the museum in search of a photo opportunity.

'Well,' says Ali at last, 'I'd better be off.'

'Yes,' says Ed. 'Take care now.'

It's the sort of thing anyone would say, thinks Ali as she walks to the Tube station, but Ed's words seem to have a special resonance today. Until the moment when Geoff told her about the unit's special project, Ali had not thought of herself as a particularly brave person. She had survived as a single mother, battling the benefits system, school secretaries and university admissions, but only because there was no alternative. The only sign of physical courage was an early enthusiasm for roller coasters. However, since the approach of the menopause, Ali has hated anything that whirls her round or disturbs her balance. She is dreading the vertigo that always accompanies a trip through the gate. Maybe she should take some seasickness pills, just in case.

Back at home, Ali makes herself risotto. Although she's only been to Italy once – Rome with Hugo – she's a fan of the food and culture She's able to follow an Italian YouTube video, so maybe those Duolingo sessions are paying off, but she skips a few of the stock-adding stages so that her rice remains rather stodgy. Still, washed down with a glass of white wine, it's an acceptable supper. Terry watches her closely but he doesn't approve of Mediterranean food so he doesn't attempt to share. After washing up her plate and glass (she hasn't plumbed in the dishwasher yet), Ali goes upstairs to lay out her wardrobe for tomorrow.

Cotton chemise. A tubelike garment with short, capped sleeves.

Knickers. Or, as Dulcie called them, 'drawers'. Knee-length

bloomers that tie with ribbon at the waist. Dulcie said that the authentic Victorian garment would have been open between the legs. 'To make it easier to go to the lav.' But these have a neatly sewn gusset. Hopefully Ali will not have to visit a nineteenth century lavatory, given that she will only be there for an hour.

Wool stockings. Apparently, these got more colourful from 1850 onwards but Ali's are conservative black.

Corset. According to Dulcie it was believed that women's delicate internal organs needed support. Ali's undergarment is stiffened with whalebone at the front and tied at the back by a complicated pulley system. Ali thinks she might have to ask Jones to help her tomorrow.

Two cotton petticoats.

One flannel petticoat.

Petticoat stiffened with horsehair, called 'crin au lin'.

Vest, camisole, chest preserver.

Black silk dress with concertina sleeves that narrow to tight bands.

Black wool shawl.

Poke bonnet.

Gloves of soft grey leather.

Fur muff. Even in her own head, Ali can't say the word without a childish giggle.

Once I've got all that on, she thinks Ali, I'll need a lie down. How on earth did Victorian women get through the back-breaking work of their day? Well, with any luck Ali won't have to attempt any manual work during her brief sojourn in 1850.

Ali goes back downstairs, makes herself tea and begins the worst task: writing a letter to Finn 'just in case'.

'Darling Finn . . .' she writes. She usually calls him 'love' and thinks of 'darling' as too middle-class, but it seems right here. She stops and meet Terry's judgemental stare.

Why is Ali prepared to risk her life to prove that a Tory MP's ancestor was not a murderer? She knows that she's not doing it for Isaac. She's not even doing it to further the cause of human knowledge, something that brings a messianic gleam into Jones's eyes. She's doing it for the unit, to make Geoff proud of her and Dina say that she's an inspiration. Ali has never considered herself a people- pleaser. In fact, when she was younger, she often went out of her way to shock and offend. She succeeded so well that, by the time she took her GCSEs, her teachers had more or less given up on her. She stayed on to do A Llevels but was soon absorbed by her relationship with Declan. Her only ambition was to live with him and horrify both their parents. Well, she achieved this. Was this rebellion? It didn't feel like it at the time. But, deep down, Ali had always thought that she was cleverer thant her exam results suggested. This was why, as a single mother working in a zero hours job, she had managed to get a first-class honours degree. And now she's embarking on an adventure from which she might never return, just so that her boss can look up from his morning doughnut and say, 'Well done, Alison.'

It's a sobering thought.

CHAPTER 8

Friday 25th January 1850

The snow is the first shock. Ali had expected the cold. Elizabeth told her that there was a mini-ice age at the beginning of the nineteenth century and, even though that was over by 1850, winters would still be much colder than people today are used to. But Ali still isn't prepared for this glacial chill, the air thick with it, so that moving would be an effort even if you hadn't travelled one hundred and seventy-three years back in time. Last night, when laying out her wardrobe items, Ali had considered wearing ski socks under her boots. As she gets older, she feels the cold more in her extremities. In the end she'd decided to remain authentic and now her feet have turned to ice in their woollen stockings.

But the snow presents another problem. Ali has to mark the ingress point with her special indelible ink. How can she see it when she is ankle-deep in slush? She looks around her. This is immediately difficult because of the poke bonnet that obscures her vision on both sides, like a horse wearing

blinkers. She's glad of it though because her head is fairly warm, helped by the hair piled up in a bun. The street is quiet and the low light suggests a winter afternoon. The pavements are white but the road is grey, stained with horse shit and cut through with wheel-tracks. A man in a top hat walks by on the other side of the street. The sight gives Ali a thrill of excitement. An *actual top hat*. Is she really in the world of Dickens and George Eliot? Can the man see her? He doesn't acknowledge her but his head is bowed against the wind and he's leaning heavily on a stick. Or is it just that Ali is below his notice? Her dress and jacket are respectable, Dulcie told her, but not fashionable enough to attract attention. The black suggests that she might be a widow. Ali clasps her shawl more tightly around her shoulders. It's no substitute for her padded North Face anorak.

The swirling snow makes it hard to get her bearings. This, and the slight vertigo. Ali stands still, trying to control her breathing, difficult because the corset makes her chest feel like it's bound in iron bands. A horse and cart trundle past, spraying her with slush. Is this any way to treat a lady? thinks Ali. *Is* she a lady? Surreptitiously she kicks the snow away until there is a patch of stone, a paving slab that looks almost modern, beneath her feet. Ali takes out the small can from her fur muff (the only wardrobe item she likes; it keeps her gloved hands wonderfully warm) and sprays the area around her leather toes. Is this enough? 'Come back to the ingress point after an exact hour has passed,' Jones told her, 'and I'll get you home.' But is Ali's new timepiece – an unusual accessory for a woman, apparently – as accurate as

Jones's iPhone 14? Ali and John had taken their phones the first time they went through the gate but, faced with the shock of time going backwards, technology had given up and both screens went blank. She will have to make sure she's back in this spot with at least five minutes to spare. Well, she can't stand here for ever. Slowly, she starts to walk forward, one hand pulling her shawl over her hat and face.

'Sorry, ma'am.' An errand boy in a peaked cap skips to avoid her. She is visible. She is in 1850 and she can see and be seen. What's more, despite her brown skin, the boy thinks she's respectable enough to be called 'ma'am'. His accent is pure cockney which reassures Ali that she's in London. She should be in Herald Street, near Bethnal Green, the house owned by Cain Templeton, the place where the first of the murders occurred. Elizabeth had shown her a map of the street from the 1800s. It had looked reassuringly the same, the same curve of houses on one side of the street, although the other had gained several fast food restaurants and a block of flats. But, standing in the middle of the road, as Ali had done a few minutes ago, you could imagine the Victorian skeleton. Ali looks around for a street sign – did they even have such things in 1850? – and sees a brass plaque on one of the houses. It reads 44 Herald Street. Bravo, Jones.

Ali lifts up her skirts to climb the steps to the front door. The material is damp and heavier than she would have thought possible. Moving the four petticoats is like a workout at the gym. She should tell Finn. Except she can't.

Ali raises her hand to ply the griffin-shaped door knocker and, to her surprise, the door opens. Is this one of the

almost supernatural happenings which, according to Jones, will accompany time travel? 'You'll experience a sense of knowing what to do and why,' Jones had said the first time. 'A godlike omnipotence. Think of it as advanced déjà vu. This is because everything *has* happened before.'

Ali is in a hallway, dark with panelling and smelling of beeswax and something sharper and more sinister. It's wonderful to be out of the wind but the temperature feels as cold as the street outside. A clock ticks somewhere in the background. The arrow of time, Jones would say. Ali starts to climb the stairs. She is not aware of any feeling of omnipotence. She just knows she has to go upwards. 'An attic studio in my great-great-grandfather's house,' Isaac had said. 'They say that's where it happened.'

On the first landing, Ali trips over her skirts and almost falls. 'Another one for the collection,' says a male voice. Ali turns quickly but can see only blackness. Has she gone blind? No, it's just the poke bonnet. By the time she makes a careful circle in her skirts, the stairwell is empty.

Slightly scared now, Ali continues to climb. The vertigo is getting worse and Ali remembers shooting skywards in Isaac Templeton's outdoor lift. Was it really only two and a half weeks ago? But that was a tower block and this is a Victorian town house. How many floors can it have? Ali plods upwards, occasionally finding herself walking on the bottom of her petticoats. Eventually she is standing before a door that looks different from the rest, scarred and paint-smeared with a dent in the lower panel as if someone has tried to kick it open. The smell is stronger here and, on the

floor below, she can hear someone playing the piano, the scales going up and down in an uneasy chromatic rhythm.

Ali tries the handle and, for her, the door opens. At first all she sees is an attic, with sloping windows reflecting the white sky. Then, in careful order, she registers an easel, a chaise-longue and a woman lying on the floor, a pool of blood slowly congealing about her head.

'Cover her face,' says a voice. 'Mine eyes dazzle. She died young.'

That does it. In an instant, these words snap Ali back to herself. If there is one thing she hates, it's men who go around quoting. Hugo used to do it all the time.

'It might be more helpful to call a doctor,' she says.

'She's beyond the help of medicine,' says the man.

He's taller than Isaac Templeton, and a lot heavier, with a dark moustache and greying hair, but there's no denying the family resemblance. He's looking at her with an expression that would annoy her more than the quoting if it wasn't for the unmistakable fact that she is being observed by someone from 1850. And, however he is looking at her, it isn't the way a man looks at an apparition.

'Are you Cain Templeton?' she asks.

'Your servant.' He makes her an elegant bow. 'And you are?'

'Alison Dawson,' says Ali, before realising that she should have prefaced this with 'Mrs'. This is the first conversation she's ever had with someone beyond the gate. She thinks of the Charter: *Don't Interact*.

'But how charming,' murmurs Templeton.

'None of this is charming,' says Ali. 'What happened to her?' She gestures towards the woman. Templeton is right; it's too late. Ali has seen violent crime before, many times when she first joined the police, and this is no less shocking for having happened a hundred and twenty-two years before she was born.

'It looks as if someone hit her on the head with a heavy object,' says Templeton.

'Is that someone you?'

'Sorry to disappoint you,' says Templeton, sounding almost amused. 'But I'm innocent. Of this crime, anyway.'

'Do you know this woman?'

'You're correct, alas. She was no lady. Her name is Ettie Moran. She is – was – an artist's model.'

'Are you the artist?'

Again, he sounds amused. 'I am not. The occupant of this studio and – I assume – the perpetrator of this crime, is a man called Thomas Creek.'

'Do you know where he is?'

'No. And that is knowledge I would like to have. He hasn't paid his rent for several weeks. I came here to discuss the matter with him.'

It is said in the same light tone but Ali thinks she detects a note of menace all the same. She's not sure that she would like a discussion with Cain Templeton.

'Do you own this house?' she asks.

'I do. I'm somewhat of a collector of artists.'

The Collector. For the first time, Ali realises that the sound of piano scales has stopped and the house is in total silence.