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Opening Extract from...

Crossbones Yard

Written by Kate Rhodes

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KATE RHODES

Crossbones Yard



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For all the women who lie buried at Crossbones Graveyard

PROLOGUE

Your mother is holding your hand too tightly. You whimper and cling to her dress, because you know what will happen next. She stares at you, as if she's forgotten how to blink. There's one last glimpse of her face before she bundles you into the cupboard under the stairs. 'Don't make a sound,' she hisses, 'don't even breathe.' Darkness smothers you as the key twists in the lock. There's a chance that he won't find you, cowering on the floor, between the broom and floor mops, a stack of wellington boots.

Your father is closer now. Even his footsteps are angry, thudding too hard on the worn lino, while he looks for someone to hurt. He's so close, you can smell him. Whisky mixed with the sickliness of the sherry he hides in the garage, and something else, bitter and hard to identify. Splinters of light needle you through cracks in the door. There's dust everywhere. When you stand up the black skirt of your school uniform will be grey with dirt. Tomorrow he will shout at you when you come down to breakfast. You already know what he'll say. He will tell you you're filthy, you should be ashamed.

The footsteps move further away and you let yourself exhale. Through a knothole in the door you can see into the living room. Your mother is keeping her mouth shut while your father waits

for her to move or argue, looking for his excuse. Your mouth is full of dust. You close your eyes and try to swallow. When you open them again your mother is trapped. He's caught her by the tops of her arms, hands flapping against her sides. Your brother is trying to melt into the flowered wallpaper. It's hard to tell what he's thinking, his face frozen in a grimace or a smile. Your father lands punch after punch on your mother's arms and ribs and belly. Tomorrow she will put on lipstick, go to work as usual, the neighbours will never know. But one day, he might go too far. An ambulance will take your mother away and no one will remember to set you free.

Your brother's expression is the thing that frightens you most. Relaxed, as if he's watching his favourite programme on TV. The cupboard is shrinking, in a few seconds the air will have been used up. You want to run into the light, but you must stay there, for as long as it takes. You listen to the dull beat of your father's fists. Your mother is trying not to cry, but sometimes she can't help herself and a breathless moan escapes her. Your brother leans back, making himself comfortable, storing your father's actions in his memory.

The beating sound has stopped, and you know what will happen next. Your father's footsteps are returning. There's no point in crying, because he knows every hiding place. He has stolen the key from your mother's pocket and he won't care how hard you beg. Tears are for cry-babies he says, and when he hits you, it will be harder than before.

I

I peered into the metal box without stepping inside. It had the familiar smell of all hospital lifts, handwash and antiseptic, an undertone of urine and fear. I had only managed the twenty-four-storey journey to the psychology department once, with my eyes closed, holding my breath. It wasn't the speed that got me, just the space itself. Tiny and airless, no windows to escape through. I forced myself over the threshold, keeping the door open with my hand, but panic kicked in immediately, a surge of adrenalin just under my ribcage. My reflection stared at me from the mirrored back wall. My face was white and pinched, eyes glittering with anxiety. I looked like a small blonde child dressed up in her mother's smartest clothes. I backed out of the lift and the doors snapped shut, almost catching my fingers. My only option was to take the stairs, all two hundred and seventy-eight of them. By now the signs on every landing were imprinted on my memory: oncology, urology, orthopaedics, X-ray. But at least the daily climb was keeping me fit – at a steady pace the ascent took less than six minutes.

I was out of breath by the time I arrived at my consulting room, with just a few minutes to spare before the first appointment of the day. I changed out of my running shoes into a smart pair of heels. One of the unwritten rules is that psychologists must be well dressed, to convince their patients that the world is safe and orderly. But I needn't have bothered.

There was a handwritten note on my computer, informing me that my morning appointments had been cancelled, and a police officer would collect me in an hour's time. For a second my legs felt weak. I pictured my brother locked in a holding cell, just like last time, swearing his head off at anyone who tried to question him or bring him a cup of tea. Then I remembered that my name was on the rota for Met duty that week, and my heart rate slowed again.

My inbox was crammed with new emails: an invitation to speak to the British Psychological Society in April, eight GP referrals, dozens of circulars from drug companies offering extravagant bribes. I should have worked on my case notes, but my eyes kept drifting towards the window. The sky was a dull January white, threatening to snow, but the view was still staggering. London Bridge Station laid out like a train set, with half a dozen miniature engines arriving or leaving, and to the east the Thames curving past Tower Bridge to Canary Wharf. Red lights were blinking on the roofs of banks, while the money men cheated at sums. In the opposite direction office buildings lined the river, almost as tall as St Paul's. To a girl from the suburbs it was still the most glamorous view in the world.

Switchboard called just after ten to say that a visitor was waiting for me in reception. When I reached the ground floor an enormous man was standing by the entrance. He was wearing a pale grey suit, and from a distance he looked almost completely round.

'Dr Quentin?' He walked towards me with surprising grace for a man carrying at least twenty stone. 'DCI Don Burns, from Southwark police. Thanks for giving me your time.'

His accent was an odd hybrid of raw south London and genteel Edinburgh. Behind his thick black-rimmed glasses, his eyes were small and inquisitive in the pale moon of his face.

I offered a polite smile in reply, but felt like reminding him that I had no choice. The department was obliged to carry out assessments for the Met whenever a request came in. Any other work, no matter how important, was put on hold.

When we reached the car park, DCI Burns took several minutes to squeeze behind the steering wheel of his drab blue Mondeo. The car smelled of stale coffee, cooking fat and smoke. He must have stopped at McDonald's on his way to work, followed his breakfast with a quick fag.

'I could have walked to the station,' I commented, 'saved you a trip.'

'We're not going there. I'll fill you in on the way.'

He drove south, swearing under his breath at the traffic on Borough High Street. He seemed to have forgotten he had a passenger, completely absorbed in the journey, until we reached the embankment.

'Detective Chief Inspector. That's top rank, isn't it?' I asked.

He kept his eyes fixed on the road. 'Not far off. I look after most of the borough.'

'Quite a responsibility. Couldn't one of your underlings take me?'

'I didn't want them to.' We drove past Battersea Power Station. It looked like a massive table lying on its back, concrete legs pointing at the sky. 'We're going to see Morris Cley. Have you heard of him?'

'Vaguely. He killed someone, didn't he?'

'That's him,' he frowned. 'A prostitute called Jeannie Anderson in Bermondsey four years ago. He gets out of Wandsworth tomorrow because some hotshot lawyer got his sentence cut in half.'

'How come?'

'Unsafe evidence,' Burns sighed, 'which is total bollocks. He managed to con the judge into thinking Cley's got learning difficulties.'

'And he hasn't?'

'No way.' He scowled at the traffic jam ahead. 'Slippery little bastard pretends to be simple, but he kept us running round for weeks. I want to know how closely to watch him when he's out.'

'Sounds like he's not your favourite client.'

'Not exactly. The bloke's as dodgy as they get.' Burns gave the indicator an angry flick, like he would have preferred to snap it off and hurl it through the window. 'Guess who his mum's best mates were?'

'Who?'

'Ray and Marie Benson.'

I couldn't think of a reply. I knew plenty about the Bensons because a friend from the Maudsley had been consultant psychologist during the court case, and Ray and Marie had kept the tabloids happy for months. Pictures of the girls they killed appeared on every front cover, as if they were movie stars. Some of them were found under the patio of the hostel the Bensons ran off Southwark Bridge Road. One in the garden, another sealed inside a disused chimney, and a few more dumped on waste ground. Anyone who could read or owned a TV knew more than they wanted to about the couple's grisly recreational activities.

Wandsworth Common appeared in the car window. Women were pushing prams along the footpaths, joggers running slow laps round the perimeter, like there was all the time in the world.

'Ever visited Wandsworth before?' Burns asked.

'I haven't had the pleasure.'

'Paradise,' he muttered. 'Sixteen hundred blokes, high as kites on every drug under the sun.'

The prison looked like a cross between a Gothic castle and a Victorian workhouse, with filthy windows and a gate big

enough to drive a juggernaut through. It was so vast it blotted out most of the sky.

'Welcome to England's biggest clink.' Burns flashed his ID at the entrance and we were waved inside.

The interview room was miles along a corridor that must have been white once upon a time. I was beginning to regret the clothes I'd chosen that morning. My skirt was too tight to take a proper stride, and my high heels clattered on the tiled floor like a pair of castanets. Rivulets of sweat were pouring down Burns's face.

'He's in the Onslow Centre,' he puffed, 'for his own protection. The bloke won't be getting many bon voyage cards tomorrow.'

'How did he kill the girl?' I asked.

'There's no nice way to put it.' Burns wiped his face with a large white handkerchief. 'Basically, he shagged her, then smothered her with a pillow.'

'They were in a relationship?'

'Christ, no.' He looked appalled. 'He says they were, but you'll see why not when you clap eyes on him.'

'I can hardly wait.'

Burns pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with a stubby index finger. 'She looked a bit like you, actually.' His gaze rested on me. 'Petite, green eyes, shoulder-length blonde hair.'

'You mean, I'm his type?'

'I'm afraid so, yeah.'

Footsteps grew louder in the corridor. I've always hated prisons. Everything about them makes me want to run for the door, especially the way sounds carry. You can hear keys twisting in locks half a mile away. When Morris Cley was shown into the interview room I could see why he had to pay

for sex. Grey hair jutted from his skull in awkward tufts, and everything about his face was slightly wrong. Heavy eyebrows lowered above eyes that had sunk so deep into their sockets that I couldn't tell what colour they were. From the dullness of his skin I guessed that he hadn't been outside for weeks. When we shook hands he held my fingers for a few seconds too long. His touch was clammy, and it made me desperate to run outside, find somewhere to scrub my hands.

'Afternoon, Morris,' Burns barked from his seat in the corner of the room.

Cley's thin shoulders were hunched around his ears, his eyes flitting from the floor to the window and back again. He lowered himself on to the plastic chair cautiously, as if it might be booby-trapped.

'I hear you're going home tomorrow,' I said.

'No home to go to.' His voice was high-pitched and breathless.

'Rubbish,' Burns snapped. 'You're going to your mum's.'

'She's dead,' Cley frowned.

'How long ago did you lose your mum?' I asked.

Cley looked confused for a minute, then did a slow calculation on his fingers before answering. 'Five months, one week, two days.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' I told him.

He studied the backs of his hands, thin fingers twisting into knots.

'What about you, Morris?' Burns's voice was cold enough to freeze anyone in listening distance. 'Are you sorry for what you did?'

The question had an immediate impact. Cley's head slumped over his knees, as if someone had cut the string that held him upright. 'It wasn't me,' he whispered. 'I never touched her.'

'Shut up,' Burns hissed in disgust. 'I'm sick of your rubbish.'

I kept my peace. It was easier to learn about Cley from watching his reactions than asking questions. His whole body was trembling, face still turned to the ground. A tear splashed on to the dirty lino.

'Don't give us any more play-acting, Morris,' Burns groaned. 'I had a bellyful the first time.'

When Cley eventually lifted his head his expression was a mixture of fear and resentment. He looked like a child who would rather run away than face another beating.

'Tell me what happened to you, Morris,' I said quietly.

'Jeannie was my friend, I gave her money sometimes. I wanted her to have nice things.' Cley's falsetto relaxed to a lower pitch as he remembered her.

'How long did you know Jeannie for?'

Cley considered the question carefully before answering. 'A long time. I saw her every week. I asked her to be my girlfriend.'

'And what did she say?'

His head lolled forward again and another fat tear landed on the knee of his grey prison-issue tracksuit. 'She said she wasn't good enough for me.' Cley struggled to regain control, rubbing his eyes with his balled fists.

'But you didn't agree?'

He shook his head violently. 'She loved me. I know she did, because she let me sleep in her bed sometimes.'

Burns gave a loud sigh and Cley's mouth sealed itself. There was a rime of dirt around the collar of his grey top, and I wondered how often he risked using the communal showers. No wonder he was being kept in the secure wing. There might as well have been a neon sign over his head spelling out the word victim. When we got up to leave, his eyes lingered on my face.

'Alice Quentin.' He repeated my name slowly, as if he was doing everything in his power to commit it to memory.

On the way back Burns stopped at a greasy spoon on Wandsworth Road.

'He took a serious shine to you,' he commented. 'You handled him well though. Some of my girls wouldn't stay in the same room, said he gave them the heebie-jeebies.'

He was slugging down a large black coffee and I fought the urge to tell him to lay off the caffeine. The last thing his heart needed was a chemically induced workout. Beads of sweat had gathered on his forehead, as though sitting down was just as exhausting as standing up. The exchange at the prison had taught me more about his personality than about Cley's. Obsessive, struggling to empathise, stress levels hitting the roof.

I stirred sugar into my cappuccino. 'What's Cley's IQ?'

'Less than fifty, but that means bugger all. Playing dumb's his party trick.'

'You told me he didn't have learning difficulties.'

Burns shrugged. 'The little shit probably cheated in the test.'

'But you're positive it was him who killed the girl?'

Burns nodded vigorously, double chins rippling. 'Open and shut: his semen inside her, and bob's your uncle, unanimous guilty verdict.'

'Was there any other proof?'

'He was her last punter.' Burns gave me the long unblinking stare that liars always favour. 'Trust me, it's all there.'

'Right.' I watched him drop his gaze.

'Okay, the case was a bit light on forensics but Cley had no alibi, nothing to defend himself with.'

'So that meant he was guilty?'

'With respect, Dr Quentin, that's water under the bridge. All I need to know is how closely to watch him when he gets out tomorrow.'

'So you can blame me if he kills someone else.'

Burns's small mouth twitched with irritation or amusement.

'Based on a thirty-minute observation I'd say he's got learning difficulties, with the mental ability of a seven- or eight-year-old. Possibly he's clinically depressed, and he's still grieving for his mother, but no, I don't think he's an immediate threat to anyone.'

'You're positive about that?'

'Except to himself, when he realises no one's going to take care of him.'

'My heart bleeds.' Burns took a deep breath then slowly levered himself to his feet.

It was twelve thirty by the time we arrived back at the hospital car park. Burns's beady eyes observed me as I undid my seat belt.

'I'll ask for you again, Dr Quentin.'

'And why's that?'

'Because you don't fuck about.'

'I assume that's a compliment, Inspector.'

'It is. We had some bigwig from the Maudsley last year, for ever reeling out jargon, dazzling us with his intelligence.' His mouth puckered, like he had swallowed something sour.

I watched as Burns's Mondeo wove through the parked cars nimbly. The man behind the wheel could have been an athlete at the top of his game.

I saw three patients that afternoon. One for anger management, an agoraphobic and a girl called Laura with such advanced anorexia that I wanted to admit her immediately, but there were no beds. Six different wards refused to help

before a staff nurse finally buckled and agreed to keep one free the following day. After my last appointment, I checked my email. One hundred and thirty-six messages with red flags, screaming for an answer. I could have stayed there until midnight and still not emptied my inbox.

At seven I changed into my running gear and headed for the best part of the day. Soon I was running down the stairs so fast that it felt like flight, vaulting three steps at a time. When I reached the street the freezing air made me gasp. Commuters traipsed by, hands in their pockets, bracing themselves against the dark. As soon as I got to the river path the stress of the day evaporated. By HMS *Belfast* I was picking up speed, wondering why anyone ever bothered to go on board. The posters gave too much away, revealing the cramped living quarters where sailors slept in bunks as narrow as their bodies, stacked in alcoves like dinner plates. It would take ten seconds in one of those cabins for my claustrophobia to kick in.

I made myself run at intervals, jogging for a hundred metres then sprinting until my lungs burned, passing huge Victorian warehouses converted into expensive restaurants. By the time I reached China Wharf I'd been going for twenty minutes. I stopped by the railings to let my breathing steady. The water was oily and black, lights from the bus boats catching its dirty surface. God knows how many secrets were hidden underneath. I made my way home at a slow trot, enjoying the rush of endorphins – nature's reward for nearly killing yourself.

There was no sign of my brother Will's ancient VW camper van when I got home. Usually it was sitting in my parking space on Providence Square. Maybe he'd decided to move on, park his troubles outside someone else's flat. The security door to the building had been left open as usual. A woman on the second floor worked from home as a reflexologist and her clients never remembered to pull it shut behind them. I took

the stairs to the third floor and let myself in. The red light on my answer-machine blinked at me.

'I wondered if you'd seen your brother.' My mother's voice petered out, but soon regained its emotionless Home Counties calm. 'I'll have to ring tomorrow, I'm going to the Phillipses' for dinner.'

The second and third messages were from Sean.

'All I can see is you in my bed, wearing red silk stockings,' he sighed. 'Call me, Alice, as soon as you get this.'

I deleted the messages then investigated the contents of the fridge. One ciabatta roll, past its sell-by date, a piece of mozzarella and half a family-sized bar of chocolate. I chopped up a few sun-dried tomatoes and smeared a dollop of pesto on the dried-out bread, covered it with slices of cheese and stuck it under the grill.

Curled up on the sofa, I planned my evening. I would turn off my mobile, eat chocolate in the bath, and for once go to sleep alone.

2

When I woke up my uneaten meal was still on the coffee table, and someone was tapping on the front door. The sound was quiet but insistent, unlikely to go away. When I finally opened the door, Sean was standing there, clutching a bunch of sunflowers and a carrier of takeaway food. He gave me a long kiss, then pushed past me into the kitchen. It was impossible not to fancy him. Tall, blue eyes, clean-cut, and thirty-two years old, exactly my own age. I don't know why I always resented the jolt of lust I felt whenever I saw him.

'You were meant to ring me, Alice.' Sean dumped the flowers on the table.

'I fancied a night in. What time is it anyway?'

'Eight thirty.' He gave a narrow smile. 'God, you're hard work. If I didn't know better I'd think you couldn't stand me.'

I looked at the sunflowers' ragged yellow faces. 'Where on earth grows these in January?'

'Somewhere an obscene, guilt-inducing number of air miles away.'

'You villain. Let me have a shower, then I'll try and be nice to you.'

The hot water put things back in perspective and afterwards I felt almost human again. When I slipped out of my bathrobe Sean was leaning against the doorframe, ogling me.

'Don't get dressed on my account.'

I ignored him, pulling on a silk jumper, then wriggling into a pair of jeans.

In the kitchen he unloaded the takeaway.

'Vietnamese, my favourite.' I rubbed my hands together.

'Clear soup, sticky rice, duck in ginger sauce.'

'Yum.'

The duck was perfect, with small, fiery chillies that sizzled on my tongue. Sean watched me plough through a mountain of food.

'How do you stay so tiny, Alice?'

'Lucky genes.' I put down my chopsticks and looked at him. 'What did you get up to today anyway?'

He shrugged. 'Same old, same old. I cut people up, stitched them together again, listened to Marvin Gaye.'

'A bit of Motown encourages you to chop people to pieces, does it?'

'I don't need encouragement, Dr Quentin.' He pushed his plate away and grinned at me. 'You fix sick minds and I cut people up. It's what we do.'

'You seem a bit preoccupied, that's all.'

He glanced at his watch. 'I am. And it's a serious problem, actually.'

'Yeah?'

'The thing is, I'm on duty soon. I haven't got long to ravish you.'

I rolled my eyes. 'I don't need ravishing, thanks all the same.'

'But that wouldn't be fair, would it? I've raised your hopes.'

He was on his feet, hand in the small of my back steering me into the bedroom. It crossed my mind to say no, and I realise now that I should have done.

'It's going to take three seconds to undress you,' he muttered.

'It won't.' I pulled my jumper over my head. 'Because I always undress myself.'

The first time was too quick. But the second was slower and more considered. Sean was a natural show-off, and he had done his research, taught himself every fail-safe trick to make a woman come. Afterwards my lips burned; a combination of red-hot chillies and his stubble grazing my face.

'How long have I been seeing you?' Sean lay on his side, staring at me.

'A few weeks.'

'Longer, Alice. At least three months.'

A ripple of panic stirred under my breastbone. Before long he'd want me to go on holiday with him, or meet his parents.

'Look, Sean, this is all getting a bit out of control, isn't it?'

He kissed me again. 'Absolutely. Deliciously out of control.'

And then he was up, gathering the clothes he'd scattered across the floor. It was impossible not to admire the taut muscles spanning his back as he pulled on his jeans. He slammed the door shut behind him at ten o'clock and I stared at the ceiling. My body felt smug and satisfied, but my thoughts were struggling to get comfortable.

At 6 a.m. I sat up in bed, heart racing. Someone was banging on the front door. It crossed my mind that Sean had come back for another helping of low-commitment sex, but only one person would dream of making such a racket at the crack of dawn. My brother was wearing a thin cotton shirt, teeth chattering, pupils so dilated his eyes looked black instead of green.

'You locked the door,' he muttered.

'Come in, Will.'

'You shouldn't do that, Alice. Not ever.'

'It's okay, sweetheart, come inside.'

'People will think you don't like them.'

'Of course I like you. Come on, you'll get cold.'

It took ages to coax him into the hall, but I knew better than to touch him. Under the overhead light in the kitchen he looked even worse than he had the week before – unshaven, with hollows under his cheekbones, a deep sore on his upper lip. The muscles in his face kept twitching, his mouth stretched into a rictus like the Joker's grin in the Batman films. God knows what he'd taken this time; ketamine maybe. Enough to send every nerve ending in his body into overdrive. He ran the tap and dipped his mouth to the stream of water, slurping greedily. I rummaged in the food cupboard. It was almost empty except for a bag of rice and a packet of tortilla chips. I handed him the chips and he tore open the packet, crammed a handful into his mouth.

'Where are your keys, Will?'

He was too busy eating to reply, so I approached cautiously, dipped my hand into the pocket of his shirt and held them in front of him.

'Look, they're here. You could have let yourself in. I'd never lock you out.'

I must have gone too close, or maybe my tone of voice frightened him. He flinched, and then he came at me with both fists, crisps scattering across the floor. I ran out of the kitchen and along the hall, slamming the front door behind me. I got my key into the lock just in time, then leaned against the door to catch my breath. His feet pounded against the small of my back through the wood. I waited for him to exhaust himself, and when the noise finally stopped I ran downstairs to check his van. It was unlocked and a torn sleeping bag was lying on the fold-out bed, newspapers strewn across the slatted floor. Filthy shirts, underwear and towels were piled everywhere. I grabbed the clothes then forced myself to go back.

At the bottom of the stairs I weighed up the risks. There was an outside chance he'd beat me black and blue, but if I

called an ambulance he'd leg it as soon as he heard the siren. I could have knocked on someone's door and asked for help, but after a few deep breaths I let myself into the flat, legs shaky with adrenalin. Will was in the lounge, chattering peacefully to himself, rummaging in a cupboard. He had already forgotten whatever had triggered his rage. I piled his clothes into the washing machine and poured a liberal amount of detergent into the dispenser. He had found a shoebox full of papers to flick through. I hovered a safe distance away.

'Found something interesting?' I took care to make my voice as calm as possible.

'Pictures,' he murmured.

He was laying photos on the wooden floor like a game of solitaire. One was of a family holiday. My father's arms were wrapped tight round my mother and me, and Will was standing outside the circle, already several inches taller than me. Another was of his graduation day at Cambridge; he looked invincible, hair almost white in the sun. He pulled another from the box. This time he was holding hands with one of the dark-haired beauties he went out with. She was gazing at him, determined not to let him go. I bit my lip. Normally it was easier to ignore the gap between then and now.

'Is there anything you need, Will?'

He was too busy with his new game to reply, so I left him to it and got ready for work. By the time I had taken a shower and put on my make-up, Will had disappeared, leaving the front door hanging wide open. But he had been busy before he left: the lounge floor was covered with rows of photos, as evenly spaced as kitchen tiles. They ran in chronological order, starting with us as babies, a few in school uniform, then the pair of us in our twenties on a beach with Lola, right through to one of him outside the Stock Exchange when he started his job as a trader. He was beaming, as if someone had handed him the

keys to the City. I dropped the picture face down into the box. Part of me wanted to burn the lot, train myself to accept that he would never look like that again – triumphant, like everything he wanted was easily in reach.

I cycled to work along Tooley Street. It was startlingly cold, frost glittering on the pavement. For a second I imagined making a getaway, pedalling until my legs failed me, forgetting about the sick people and the worried well, queuing for their appointments. A crowd had already collected outside the London Dungeon, hungry for waxwork murder and artificial gore. At Great Maze Pond I chained my bike to the railings and gazed up at the hospital: a thirty-four-storey shaft of grey concrete studded with minute windows. No wonder Guy's had won prizes for being London's ugliest building. If there had been time it would have been easy to calculate which pane of glass belonged to my room, twenty-four floors up, fifth from the left. Climbing the stairs was harder than normal. By the tenth landing my stomach was churning, and I was regretting skipping breakfast. Fourteen flights later my head was spinning, lungs heaving in more oxygen than they could hold.

A steady procession of out-patients filed through my door at forty-five-minute intervals, and the day went by on autopilot. There was one victory though. The girl with advanced anorexia had been safely admitted to Ruskin Ward. I found her hooked to a drip, feeding saline and minerals into her starving body. The chart at the bottom of her bed reminded me that she was Laura Wallis, fifteen years old, five stone and two pounds on admittance. Her mother was perched on an armchair beside her pillow, her face grey under the overhead lights. She looked like she hadn't slept for days.

'How's Laura doing today?' I asked.

'I've never seen her this bad. She can't even stay awake.' The woman's eyes had the hollow look of trauma victims, as if she was reliving the moments before a bomb exploded. 'Why's she doing this to herself?' she whispered.

I could have reeled off all the clinical factors: depression, body dysmorphia, low self-esteem; but it wouldn't have helped.

'Laura's got a good chance of beating this, believe me.'

Even in sleep the girl's face looked tense, every bone visible under transparent skin. Her chances of survival were still stacked eighty–twenty in her favour, if she could be persuaded to eat.

'I'll see you both tomorrow.'

Mrs Wallis nodded, without taking her eyes off her daughter. Maybe she was afraid the girl would complete her vanishing act if she glanced away.

On the way home I stopped at the supermarket on Tower Bridge Road and bought fresh bread, milk, muesli, bananas, Camembert – two carrier bags heaving with food. At least if Will came back tonight the fridge would be full.

I went into the kitchen, dropped a lump of butter into a frying pan, two eggs, three rashers of bacon. I ate them with a huge doorstep of bread, standing in the kitchen, without taking off my coat.

The phone rang just as I finished the last bite.

'Hello?'

'It's your turn to pay me a visit.' Sean sounded relaxed. He must have finished his shift in the operating theatre then played a game of squash, like he always did.

'I can't, sorry. My brother might be coming round.'

'Fine, I'll come to you then. I'll get to meet him at last.'

I glanced around the kitchen. Evidence of Sean's presence was everywhere. His scarf hanging from the back of

a chair, an overnight bag huddled by the door, containers from last night's takeaway still stacked by the sink. I took a deep breath.

'Look, I'm sorry, but I think we should take a break.'

When he finally replied his tone was icy. Another man seemed to have picked up the receiver. 'What's your definition of a break?'

'I mean, we've been seeing so much of each other.'

'Sounds like you're trying to end it.' Sean's voice was rising with anger.

'I'm sorry. I feel a bit suffocated, that's all.'

'Jesus, Alice. We've just spent the last three months in bed. You never complained.'

I tried to explain, but he had stopped listening. I held the phone away from my ear while he ranted. Eventually I agreed to meet him the following day to talk.

Afterwards I sat on the settee in the stupor that follows a huge meal or a hard decision. It was half past eight when the moon appeared: a fragile white crescent in the corner of the window, outlined by a fuzz of yellow. For some reason it made me desperate to be outside.

I felt better as soon as my feet hit the pavement. Running is the best form of therapy. It's impossible to fret or feel guilty when you're struggling to breathe. I jogged until a rhythm set in, gradually picking up speed. Smokers were loitering outside the Anchor Tavern at Butler's Wharf, watching a dredger haul itself upstream, like an old man crawling on his hands and knees. I stopped to stretch my hamstrings by the *Golden Hinde*. The replica ship was lit up to please the tourists, dripping with gold paint, new windows gleaming. Francis Drake would have laughed himself sick. By now the endorphins were working their magic, my brain pulsing with a sublime belief that everything could be fixed. I looped back down Marshalsea

Road, and for some reason I turned again at Redcross Way, searching for the river and the quickest way home.

That's when something caught my eye. Two ironwork gates I'd never noticed before, with dozens of ribbons and tags of paper hanging from the railings. Then I glanced down and my endorphin glow evaporated instantly. A second look confirmed that my eyes were telling the truth. A hand was lying on the pavement beside my foot. It was even smaller than mine, holding out its palm, as if it was waiting to be filled with coins.