

C.L. TAYLOR
Strangers

avon.

Chapter 1

Alice

Alice Fletcher has never seen a dead body before. She always imagined they'd look peaceful: their skin slackened, their muscles softened and their mouths settled, not into a smile exactly, but a loose, contented line. Alice Fletcher was wrong. The body lying motionless at her feet looks nothing like the soothing mental image she's been carrying around with her for the last forty-six years; the mouth is open, the jaw is hinged into a silent scream and the glassy, lifeless eyes are staring into the distance, somewhere beyond the toes of her sensible court shoes.

Alice isn't aware of the frantic pounding of her heart, the heavy-duty lino beneath her feet or the steel-grey shutter that separates her from the rest of the world. Nor is she conscious of the people around her. She doesn't notice when the tall hulking woman to her left takes a step closer. She doesn't see the sweat patches under the armpits of Ursula's pale blue sweat-shirt or the way her hands are shaking, one fingernail torn away leaving

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behind a raggedy nail bed, tinged with blood. She isn't aware of Gareth's laboured breathing or the bruise blooming on his jaw.

An anguished scream from across the shop snaps Alice back into herself. There are other sounds too: whispering, sobbing and 'Oh God, oh God' repeated over and over again. And then there's the pain, the deep, nauseating ache that radiates up her arm and across her shoulder to her neck. Alice clutches at her arm, her fingers sliding over the warm, wet polyester sleeve of her blouse. But it's not the blood that makes her stomach lurch and her legs weaken. There's a dead body at her feet and her nightmare isn't over yet.

'I need my phone,' she mutters. 'I have to find my phone.'

'Where are you going?' Ursula shouts as Alice stumbles away and the frantic wail of a siren drifts through the open window. 'The police are coming. What do we tell them when they get here?'

Alice turns slowly, her gaze returning to the corpse. She looks at it for a second, two, three, then draws an exhausted, raggedy breath and raises her eyes.

'We say it was self-defence'.

Chapter 2

THE SAME EVENING, ON TWITTER

@realmadwife:

Massive police presence in the centre of Bristol.
What's going on?

@DiddleBopDee:

Probably a road rage incident. The traffic is
MENTAL.

@PeterCrussell:

I follow BBC Radio Bristol and they haven't mentioned
anything.

@realmadwife:

That doesn't mean there's nothing going on, Peter. It
just means we haven't been told about it yet.

@pauldunphy:

Everyone's a conspiracist. Ring the police if you're so
worried.

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@realmadwife:

I think they've got enough to deal with, don't you?
Anyway, thanks for butting in with your 'helpful' advice.

@onthecliffedge:

I bet the Harbourside Murderer is pleased.

@lisaharte101:

About what?

@onthecliffedge:

That we're talking about something else for a change.
Ha. Ha.

@lisaharte101:

Seriously? People have died and you're laughing?

@cris_matthiesen:

There's no such thing as the Harbourside Murderer. It's
an urban legend.

@snugbookshop:

Really? So how did three people just disappear then?
Answer me that . . .

Chapter 3

Alice

ONE WEEK EARLIER

Monday

It's the beginning of March but a bead of sweat winds its way down Alice's spine as she unbuttons her damp coat and slides it off her shoulders. There's a small round wooden table in front of her and a print of a dog sitting next to a gramophone on the wall but Alice isn't interested in what she can see. She's listening: for the tinkle of the bell above the door and the squeak of shoes on the sticky pub floor. But there's no one creeping up behind her. The pub is silent apart from the tap-tapping of a man at his laptop on the other side of the room, the murmured voices of two old blokes at the bar and the clink of glasses as the dishwasher opens. She takes a steadying breath then flings the coat over the back of a chair and sits down on the padded

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corner seat, shuffling around the table so she's facing the door. Her pulse slows.

Alice likes predictability. All-day delivery slots make her tense and just the thought of someone sneaking up on her, covering her eyes and shouting, 'Guess who?' is enough to bring her out in hives. The day she turned thirty-nine she texted all her friends telling them that under no circumstances were they to arrange a surprise party for her fortieth. It was probably the worst thing she could have done. Her phone didn't stop pinging with threats to hire village halls, to swipe her spare house keys, to collude with Peter. One so-called friend had even tormented her with the promise of a male stripper.

She shudders at the thought and takes a sip of her lemonade. As it turned out there was no surprise party for her fortieth and, although she'd felt nervous stepping into the restaurant her friend Lynne had booked, there was no stripper either. It was a lovely evening, surrounded by good friends and full of laughter. Peter had been on his best behaviour all evening and, even though she'd girded herself for unpleasantness in the taxi on the way home, he hadn't started a fight.

Her mobile vibrates on the table and she snatches it up, certain it's Michael, cancelling their date. But it's just Lynne, her best friend and workmate at Mirage Fashion, asking her how it's going. She taps out a reply, keeping one eye on the door. It's tipping down with rain outside and people are running past the pub, heads down, their faces obscured by heavy hoods and damp brollies.

He's not here yet and I'm shitting myself. I don't know why I agreed to this. Actually I do. Emily!

She inserts a rolling eyes emoticon at the end of the text, then deletes it. Her twenty-year old daughter didn't force her into using Tinder. But Emily certainly dropped a lot of hints:

'It's been two years since Dad left . . .'

'I can't remember the last time you went on a date.'

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‘You’re forty-six, not eighty-six. You don’t have to spend the rest of your life alone.’

‘Doesn’t it get lonely? Spending the weekends on your own?’

She’d answered all of her daughter’s comments with a sharp comeback but when she tried to respond to the last question the words dried in her mouth. Returning to her empty two-bedroom flat wasn’t so bad in the week when her daughter was there. Besides, she was so tired after spending eight hours a day on her feet, smiling at customers and rallying her staff, that all she wanted to do was sink onto the sofa and lose herself in a documentary or some terrible reality TV show. But on a Sunday, when her daughter disappeared off to her boyfriend Adam’s place, the flat seemed to swell and Alice seemed to shrink. As she walked from room to room, looking for something to do, she felt like a marble rolling through a maze. And on the rare occasions when she spoke – to herself or to the television – her voice seemed to bounce off the cavernous walls. It was almost a relief to wake up on Monday and get ready for work.

She stares at her phone, pushing down the wave of self-pity that threatens to engulf her and deletes the part about her daughter. She presses send and, a couple of seconds later, the phone vibrates with a reply.

Leave! Meet me for a coffee and a sandwich! Kaisha can cover for me.

It’s a tempting offer but there’s no way she’s going to let her nerves stop her from meeting Michael. She decided, on 31st December, as she whirled around Lynne’s living room with her hands in the air and her head thrown back as eighties hits pounded at her eardrums, that the new year would see a more assertive Alice. She’d learned through bitter experience that when you sit back and wait for what life throws at you, you mostly get covered in shit.

She glances at her watch. 1.10 p.m. She only gets an hour

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for lunch and even if Michael walks through the door right now they'll only be able to spend forty minutes together before she has to leave. An old man's boozier with a sticky floor, tobacco-stained walls and choice of two soft drinks – 'Coke or lemonade, that's your lot.' – wouldn't have been her ideal venue for a first date but he said it was his favourite pub and that they'd easily get a table because it wasn't busy at lunchtime. She'd given him the benefit of the doubt. He was new to Bristol and probably hadn't had chance to visit any of the nicer places yet. Either that or he has low standards. She smiles ruefully to herself, then pushes the thought away.

The bell above the door tinkles and a man in a black waterproof jacket walks in. Alice's stomach hollows as he pauses, his glaze flitting from the blonde bloke with the laptop to the two older gents at the bar. She fights the urge to slip down in her seat and slither under the table. Assertive Alice wouldn't do that, she tells herself as she straightens her spine and fixes a smile to her face. Assertive Alice *does not* hide. Instead she casts an eye over the man at the door. Michael's shorter than she imagined, five foot eight or nine to her five foot four, but he's better looking than his photos (her daughter warned her that the opposite was more likely to be true). His thick dark hair is peppered with grey at the temples and he's very masculine looking with his heavy brow, wide jaw and strong nose, the tip pinked from the cold. There's a tautness to his expression but it vanishes as he turns his head and his eyes flick towards her. His lips twitch at the edges. It's not a *smile* per se, more a flash of recognition, and as he ambles across the carpet towards her the pit in her stomach fills with self-doubt. He doesn't fancy her. She can see it in his face.

'Alice!' As Michael nears her table he half-falls, half-lunges in her direction and lands a cold kiss on her cheek. 'Sorry I'm late!'

'It's fine,' she lies, shifting across the padded bench to make room for him as he unceremoniously plonks himself next to her

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rather than taking the seat opposite. 'But I can't stay long. I need to get back to work.'

'You've got time for a quick drink though . . .' His brow furrows as he takes in the near-empty glass on the table in front of her. 'Gin and tonic is it?'

'Lemonade.'

'Have a gin and tonic!' Still in his wet coat he heaves himself back onto his feet. 'You can't let me drink alone.'

'I'm working! I don't want a—'

But Michael is already halfway to the bar. As he signals to the bored looking twenty-something barman Alice pick up her phone.

He's here, she texts Lynne. *He's a bit . . . exuberant . . . but he's nice looking.*

She stares at the phone, waiting for a reply, then quickly drops it into her bag as her date returns from the bar, two glasses in his hands.

If that's gin I'm not drinking it, she thinks, warily eyeing the clear liquid and slice of lemon in one of the glasses.

'Lemonade.' He slides it across the table, his eyes not meeting hers.

She takes a sip to check – definitely lemonade – then sets it back down and takes a better look at Michael, or at least the part of his face that isn't hidden behind the rim of his pint glass. Up close his skin is grey and dry, spidered with red thread veins and dotted with age spots. His thick hair is dull and brittle and his nails are gnarly and split. She sniffs subtly, silently drawing his scent into her nostrils. Booze. And something worse: unwashed clothes. He senses her watching him and sets down his pint, swivelling his bloodshot eyes in her direction.

He's drunk, Alice realises. He's turned up to our first date drunk.

Perhaps he's nervous, she thinks, trying desperately to reconcile the glassy-eyed man to her right with the witty, clever man she

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exchanged dozens of messages with. It's after one o'clock, technically the afternoon. Maybe he had a glass of wine with his lunch to calm himself down and one swiftly became two, or three.

'Cheers! Here's to meeting at last.' He holds out his drink and clinks it, slightly too heavily, against hers. Lemonade slops over the glass and wets the cuff of her sleeve. 'I wasn't sure you'd come.'

'Why's that?'

'Catfish. You don't know who you're talking to on the internet half the time.' His words aren't slurred but they're louder than they need to be, given there's barely a foot between them. Definitely nervous, Alice tells herself.

'Have you been catfished before?' she asks.

He gives her a long, lingering look, his gaze drifting from eyes to her mouth. It rests there a fraction too long, making her feel so self-conscious she presses her lips together, pulling them between her teeth.

'I've met a lot of people who can't be trusted, but you seem different.' He pauses. 'Are you?'

Alice runs her hands up and down the skirt of the dress she changed into in the staff toilets at work. Nervous or not, this is too much, this intensity. She thought they'd make small talk, then segue into chat about their interests, their families and their plans for the future. She thought he'd be as light-hearted and jokey as he'd been in his messages.

She forces a laugh. 'I don't think I'd have got the manager's job if I was untrustworthy.'

'That's not what I mean and you know it.' He presses a heavy hand over hers. 'Are you someone *I* can trust?'

Alice glances at the bar but the near-teenager is too engrossed in his phone to notice the look she shoots in his direction and the two older men have their backs turned to her. But someone has noticed her anguish. The man with the laptop on the opposite

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side of the pub has stopped typing and is looking at her with an expression of concern on his face. She flashes her eyebrows at him, signally what she's not sure, but he doesn't move from his seat. Instead his attention returns to his screen and he hunches over, typing furiously. He wasn't watching her at all, he was staring into space.

'I asked you a question,' Michael says. 'Are you someone I can trust?'

Alice keeps her gaze firmly fixed forward. 'Yes,' she says from between her teeth. 'Of course I am.'

She tugs her hand away from beneath his sweating palm but he's quicker than she is and he pins her hand to the light cotton material of her skirt.

'Look at me. Look at me, Alice.'

No, shouts the voice in her head. I don't want to.

There's a part of her that wants to shout at him to take his heavy, clammy hand off hers. He's drunk but he must be able see how uncomfortable she is, how rigid she has suddenly become. But there's another part of her, a bigger part, that doesn't want to cause a scene or risk angering him. He's not sexually abusing her. He hasn't touched her boobs or her bum. But that doesn't make it okay. Hot angry tears prick at her eyes. Of all the men on Tinder, she chose him. It's like she's got a sign on her head: *complete walkover seeks utter arsehole. Decent men need not apply.* Well she's not going to let him see her cry.

'Excuse me.' She stands abruptly, yanking her hand from his, grabs her handbag, shifts to her left and rounds the table. Out of the corner of her eye she spots laptop man packing up his things. 'I'm just going to use the ladies.'

Irritation flares on Michael's face. 'You're doing a runner.'

'No, I'm not.'

But I will, she thinks. When I get back.

'I'll get you a drink,' Michael calls after her as she hurries

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across the pub, following the sign to the toilets. ‘Might make you a bit less uptight!’

Alice’s pulse pounds in her ears as she throws open the door to the ladies’ loo and stalks over to the sink. She grips the cold, ceramic sides and folds over herself, her eyes screwed shut, breathing rapidly through her nose.

‘Arsehole,’ she says, lifting her head, staring into the eyes of her tear-stained reflection. ‘Stupid bloody arsehole.’

She steps into the nearest cubicle, grabs a handful of cheap, rough toilet paper and blows her nose. She flushes it, grabs another handful and returns to the sink. She blots the tears that roll down her cheeks, cutting pale rivets through the thick foundation that mask her freckles. As she takes a deep, steadying breath, an image of her ex-husband flickers in her brain – curled up on the sofa with his new wife and her burgeoning baby bump – and fresh tears replace the ones she wiped away.

‘Stop it,’ she says to her reflection. ‘Alice, stop it! You’ve got a nice flat, a lovely daughter, a good job and great friends. You don’t need this shit.’

She roots around in her handbag for her concealer and powder and does her best to cover the redness on her nose, then replaces the eyeliner that disappeared down her cheeks. She doesn’t want to give Michael the satisfaction of knowing that he made her cry.

‘It’ll do,’ she tells herself and snaps her handbag shut.

She steels herself before she opens the toilet door. She’ll go back to the table. She’ll pick up her coat, say a cursory, ‘It was nice to meet you,’ and she’ll walk out of the pub with her head held high.

‘Right,’ she says to herself, then she turns the handle, opens the door and steps out of the ladies’ toilets.

‘Hello, Alice.’

Michael is standing at the end of the narrow corridor, blocking

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her route back to the bar. As his eyes meet hers, her heart stills its frantic thumping. It pauses between beats.

A slow smile forms on Michael's lips. 'Did you get lost?'

'No. Why?' There's a quiver in her voice that she's never heard before.

'I thought maybe you were waiting for me to join you.'

'I'm sorry?'

He shrugs, his dark anorak shifting on his shoulders and Alice's stomach lurches. Clenched in his right hand is her coat.

'You only had to ask.' He leers at her. 'If you wanted a quickie. I'm all for a bit of . . . fun.'

'I have to go back to work.' She steps towards him, gesturing for her coat.

There's a pause as Michael considers the request, then he lifts her coat and holds it out towards her. She reaches for it, limp with relief. Her fingertips graze the shiny material and she fixes her mouth into a tight smile as she mentally prepares the last words she'll ever say to him.

It was nice to meet you.

No, it wasn't. How about, *I really must get back to work. Bye then.*

Or maybe just: *Goodbye.*

She raises her eyes to his, the word forming between her lips, then gasps in shock as the coat is ripped from her curled fingers.

Michael holds it behind his back. His smile widens.

'Kiss goodbye?'

She stares at him, too stunned to speak.

'I had to take half a day off work to meet you. And I bought you a drink.'

Her incredulity morphs into anger. He took the morning off work to get pissed and shelled out for half a lemonade and he thinks that entitles him to a kiss? What century does he live in? What planet?

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‘My coat.’ This time her voice doesn’t betray her. Every ounce of anger she feels is compressed into the two words.

He shakes his head then leans forward, lips pursed. Alice reaches round him, squeezing half her body between him and the wall, and grabs at the coat, dangling from his hands. ‘Just fucking give it to me!’

The air is knocked from her lungs as Michael lunges to the side, his elbow connecting with the small hollow between her collarbones. She stumbles backwards, the crown of her head hitting the wall as her handbag tumbles to the ground.

‘Don’t swear at me.’ His breath is sour, his eyes glassy. ‘*Never* swear at me.’

Alice presses a hand to her throat, sucking in air, her brain empty. She is vaguely aware of the soft squeak of a door opening and a dark shape in her peripheral vision but all she can do is stare up into the sweaty, open-pored face of the man whose right hand is clamped around her right shoulder, his fingers digging into the soft tissue beneath the hard bone. Michael lowers his face to hers, his dry cracked lips parting, as he draws closer.

He’s going to kiss me.

His wet, red tongue quivers against his bottom lip, saliva glistening on its tip. The revulsion that courses through her body makes her dazed brain spark back to life.

He’s NOT going to kiss me.

Her knee whips through the air then stops suddenly as it finds its target. Michael throws his head back and roars as he falls away, hands clasped between his legs.

Alice doesn’t wait for him to recover. Instead she stoops down, snatches up her bag and her coat, and she runs.

A male voice follows her as she bursts out of the pub, shouting, telling her to stop, to wait. She hears footsteps behind her, pounding the cobbled street as she heads for the Meads, but she doesn’t look back.

Chapter 4

Gareth

It's the sudden movement across the top left screen that catches Gareth's eye. Someone is speeding across the shopping centre, running hell for leather. He snatches up his radio, his thumb primed over the talk button. Someone moving so fast can only mean one thing – shoplifter. He pushes a button on the control desk, zooming in on the sprinter, then his eyes widen as they come into focus. He knows this woman. She works in the ladies' fashion boutique on the first floor. He's watched her open up in the morning and close up at night. Given the fact she's always the first one to arrive and the last one to leave he's pretty sure she's the manager. She's short, not much more than five foot, with vivid red hair that she wears curled up in a bun on the back of her head.

He jolts in his seat as a hand darts across the screen, grasping for the red-haired woman. Male fingers latch around her shoulder. Gareth zooms out to see a tall blonde man in a beige

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jacket with a black laptop bag slung across his body, then lifts his radio to his mouth.

‘Alpha Charlie Zero. Anyone available on the first floor? Red haired IC1 female being assaulted by a blonde haired IC1 male. Just outside Superdrug. Over.’

He takes his thumb off the button and stands up to get a better look at the screen. The shop manager looks terrified: her hands are up by her mouth, her eyes are wide with fright and she’s backing away from the man. He’s got something in his hand and he’s waving it in her direction. Gareth’s radio crackles.

‘Bravo Golf Seven,’ says Liam, one of his security guards. ‘I’ve spotted them. En route. Over.’

As Gareth watches, the guard sprints across the expanse and inserts himself between the man and woman. Gareth holds his breath, waiting to see what Liam will do next. He’s already had one warning for overly aggressively apprehending a shoplifter, on top of another for the state of his uniform. One more and he’s out.

Gareth pans back in so he can see everyone’s faces. The tall blonde man is shaking his head, holding up his hands as though in surrender. He opens his right hand and looks from Liam to the red-haired woman. There’s a small, black purse on his palm. The woman stares at it in surprise then opens her handbag and rummages around inside. Her lips move as she looks back at the man with the laptop and, not for the first time, Gareth wishes he could hear what was being said. He continues to watch as the woman takes the purse out of the blonde man’s hand then scurries away in the direction of Mirage Ladies Fashions.

Gareth’s radio crackles to life.

‘Bravo Gold Seven,’ Liam says. ‘Incident under control. No assault took place. IC1 male was returning a purse to IC1 female. Apparently she dropped it during a scuffle in the Evening Star pub on Broad Street. Over.’

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Gareth raises his eyebrows. 'Received. What do you mean by scuffle? Over.'

'Not entirely sure. Sounds like she was assaulted but fought back. Not by the IC1, someone else. Over.'

'Is she pressing charges? Over.'

'I asked her that and she said no. Over.'

Gareth runs a hand across his face. He wishes he could go down and chat to her, to see if she's okay and counsel her about pressing charges. But he can't. He can't leave the CCTV office when he's manning it alone, not even for five minutes. At 2pm he'll swap with one of the other guards, currently on patrol. Until then he's got to stay where he is.

'All right,' he says into his radio. 'Don't forget to write it up and file it. Over and out.'

He wheels himself over to the side of the desk and enters the details of the incident into the database, then rolls back to the centre of the desk. He looks from screen to screen, watching mothers pushing babies in prams, dads carrying young children on their shoulders, toddlers having tantrums, two elderly ladies walking arm in arm, a small group of teenagers on the skive from school, a single bloke, a single woman, people frowning, laughing, chatting and deliberating. It's not a large shopping centre – two floors (three if you count the level where the CCTV office is situated) containing about forty shops. But hundreds of people go in and out of the Meads every day, and he watches them – looking for signs of trouble, for shoplifters and vandals, for the infirm and unwell, for missing children and frantic parents, for accidents waiting to happen (or accidents that already have). Even when he's on patrol people rarely look him in the eye. The other guards moan about their families – how their wives nag, how their kids fight, and how the dog's shat behind the sofa again. But in the same breath they'll tell him what a bloody good mum their missus is, how their kids were

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‘star of the week’ at school, and how the dog’s learned a new trick.

Gareth’s just got his mum. He lives in the same house he was born in. You could blindfold him and spin him around and he could still find his way from the living room to his bedroom without stepping on the loose nail in the stairs or the squeaky plank in the hall.

His mum used to wake him up in the morning with a sharp tap on the door and a cup of tea of his bedside table. He can’t remember the last time she did that. Before Dad left maybe? These days it’s him doing the waking up: knocking softly at her door, opening it a crack, holding his breath, looking at the small shape of her shrouded by the duvet, watching for the rise and fall of her chest.

The thought makes him dig in his back pocket for his mobile. It’s 1.40 p.m. and, sure enough, there’s a text from his mum’s carer Sally.

All good. Mum seems coherent today. She was telling me all about your dad and how he won the biggest marrow competition at some fair. I’ve left her with a sandwich and Bargain Hunt on the TV. Yvonne arrived before I left.

Yvonne is his mum’s other carer. Gareth hits reply and slides his thumb over the electronic keys.

Any visitors today?

There’s a pause then,

That man from the church popped in.

Gareth grimaces. William Mackesy, the local Spiritualist Church leader, aka the biggest fraud that ever lived. He taps out a reply: *What did he want?*

A text pings back: *He just wanted to say hello but he did mention something to your mum that freaked me out a bit.*

What’s that?

I’m not sure I should tell you.

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Tell me!

There's another pause then Gareth's phone pings again.

*That he's been receiving messages from the other side for you.
He said you should be careful. There's someone close by who
means you harm.*

Chapter 5

Ursula

Ursula steps from foot to foot as she fumbles her key into the lock.

‘Come on, come on, come on!’

The key doesn’t turn so she wiggles the handle. To her surprise the door opens. It’s the middle of the day and both of her flatmates are at work. There’s a distinct possibility that she might be about to interrupt a burglar clearing out the house, but Ursula doesn’t care. She bursts into the hallway, slams the front door shut with a kick of her foot and speeds up the stairs to the bathroom. At the sight of the white porcelain her pelvic muscles weaken, she lets out a little squeal of alarm and yanks down her jogging bottoms. She needs to use the toilet, leave the house and get back in the van as quickly as possible. The traffic was terrible at Temple Meads and she’s already running seven minutes behind schedule. Much more and she won’t complete her delivery round on time.

‘Ahhhh.’ She sighs with relief as her bottom hits the seat. As

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she reaches for the toilet roll there's a sharp knock at the bathroom door that makes her jump.

'Ursula, it's Charlotte. Can I have a word in the living room when you're done?'

Charlotte? What's she doing at home? Ursula pulls up her pants and jogging bottoms, washes her hands and reaches for her pink hand towel. But it's not on the top rung of the metal wall radiator. Matt's black towel is on the next rung down and Charlotte's grey towel beneath that, but hers is gone. She looks down at the tiled floor then peers behind the sink. It's definitely gone. As she casts her eye around the small bathroom she notices other missing items – her toothbrush and toothpaste, her shower gel, her shampoo and conditioner, her body cream and her contact lens solution and pot. Charlotte and Matt's things are still in their usual places so it's not as though one of them went on a cleaning rampage – something Matt is very fond of doing ridiculously early on a Sunday morning, Ursula's only day off. So why move her things? Glancing at her watch, she hurries across the landing, throws open the door to her bedroom and steps inside. Then immediately steps back out again. She's in the wrong room, maybe even the wrong house . . .

'Charlotte!' She hurries down the stairs and through the open door of the lounge. She stops short and gawps at the enormous pile of cardboard boxes crowding the middle of the room.

'We're very sorry, Ursula.'

She jolts at Matt's voice. He's sitting on the sofa behind the mountain of cardboard, his fingers entwined with Charlotte's.

'Sorry? Sorry about wh—'

The pieces slot, Tetris like, into shape in her brain. They've packed up all her stuff. That's why her bedroom has been stripped bare and none of her stuff is in the bathroom. That's why Charlotte zipped back into her room without saying good morning when they passed on the landing a little after seven.

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It's why Matt cheerily offered her a cup of coffee when she came downstairs. They planned this. They let her think they were going to work and then they let themselves into her room and they moved her out.

'You've been through my things,' she says, goosebumps prickling beneath the thick cotton of her hoody. 'My personal things.'

'Not just *your* things, Ursula.' Matt tugs his hand from Charlotte's and stands up. At a little under six foot he has to tilt his chin to make eye contact with Ursula but there's no fear on his face (despite her size). Instead he looks determined, and more than a little pissed off.

'We knew it was you.' Unlike Matt's steady tone, Charlotte's voice is tight and screechy with emotion. 'We tried to give you the benefit of the doubt. We made allowances for you, Ursula. We even told you that if you returned our things we'd say no more about it but—'

'You took her granny's wedding ring,' Matt says. 'That had huge sentimental value to Charlotte. Didn't it, Char?'

Charlotte nods, her eyes shining with tears. Ursula's throat tightens. She didn't know it was her granny's ring or that it had sentimental value. The little ceramic dish had been in the bathroom for what felt like forever. There wasn't much in it – some hair bands, toothbrush heads, the knob that had come unscrewed from the cupboard, and a slim gold band with a slit that broke its perfect circle. It had glinted at her in the early morning sun and she'd picked it up and put it in her pocket. She barely even noticed herself doing it. She'd been thinking about Nathan at the time.

'I'm sorry,' she says now. 'I meant to put it back.'

'Like you meant to put my watch back,' Matt says, 'and Char's mug and my pen and her scarf and my photo frame and . . .'

He shakes his head. 'I'd be here all day if I listed it all. We found it, by the way, all our stuff, and some things that belong to our

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friends. Friends who stayed over on the sofa believing that their belongings would be safe in our house.'

Ursula swallows. She hadn't meant to take the fancy shower gel from the bathroom, or the book from the arm of the sofa, or the umbrella from the hook in the hall. She'd wanted to return them – she always wanted to return the things she took – but the friends never stayed long enough for her to sneak their valuables back into their bags. Unfortunately there'd been no way she could return Charlotte's ring to the dish after she'd practically torn the bathroom apart looking for it.

'There was other stuff we found in your room too,' Charlotte says. 'Clothes, jewellery, knick-knacks with price tags attached. Matt said we should go to the police but I don't want you to go to prison. I just want . . . I just want . . .' Her voice breaks and she sobs.

'Please, Charlotte,' Ursula begs. 'Please don't do this. I'll change. I promise. You can't kick me out. I've got no money and nowhere else to go.'

'You could stay with your mum.'

'I can't. You know that. Even if she wanted me there I couldn't afford the flight to Spain and there's no one, literally no one else in Bristol I can stay with.'

'Nathan's mum then.'

'No.' Ursula shakes her head violently, tears pricking at her eyes. 'No, you know why I can't do that. Please, Charlotte. Let's talk about this. Let's sit down this evening, have a glass of wine and sort it out.'

'I can't.' Charlotte shakes her head miserably. 'I'm sorry but I really can't.'

Matt presses a hand to his girlfriend's shoulder and gives it a consoling squeeze. 'I'm sorry, Ursula. We just want you out.'

Fat tears drop onto the piece of paper in Ursula's hands. The back of the van is crammed with her belongings, the engine is

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running and she's nearly forty-five minutes behind schedule, but she can't bring herself to release the handbrake and pull away.

She managed to hold it together until Matt held out his hand. When she went to shake it he snatched it away.

'Your house keys.'

Hot tears welled in her eyes as she unclipped two keys from her keyring and dropped them into his hand.

'Where do I go?' The words scratched at her throat. 'I've got nowhere to live.'

Other than Charlotte and Matt, she doesn't really know anyone in Bristol. There's Bob, the guy who drops round her packages every morning, but other than a brusque 'hello' they've never actually spoken. Her boss Jackie is nice but she's married with two kids and won't have space. And Ursula isn't in touch with anyone from her previous job as a primary school teacher. Her thoughts flit from the present to the past, to a bench outside Banco Lounge, six pints lined up on the table, male laughter and the sun making her squint. Nathan is beside her, as small, round and hairy as a bear, his rotund tummy wedged between his lap and the top of the table. His friends . . . she searches their sepia faces and plucks names from the air. Andy. 'Randy Andy', Nathan called him. Joe. Tom. Harry. Even if she could get in touch and they had a spare room, they wouldn't want her to move in. They blame her for what happened, she knows they do, even if they've never come out and said it. It's why she deliberately lost touch with them. When she lost Nathan half her world disappeared too.

She swipes a hand over her eyes, dampening the sleeve of the Long Tall Sally hoody she bought on Ebay, and focuses on the image on her phone. It's a photograph Charlotte just texted her of an advert in a shop window. She can see the grey shape of Charlotte reflected in it. Something twangs in Ursula's heart. She'd assumed that Matt was the driving force behind getting

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her out of the house. She never completely warmed to him, despite sharing a home for over half a year. He'd given her a strange, narrow-eyed look, and wrinkled his nose – just the tiniest amount but enough for her to notice – when Charlotte introduced them for first time.

'My boyfriend, Matt!' Charlotte's face glowed with pride, before a flash of apprehension dulled it as she glanced at Ursula, looking – hoping – for approval.

They were living together – Charlotte and Ursula, best friends since secondary school – in the two-bedroom terraced house that Charlotte had bought with her inheritance money when her father died. They were happy – happyish – and then Matt moved in and everything changed. All the little routines they'd established – late night sofa chats, girls' night in, cinema on Sunday – gradually disappeared and Ursula began to spend more and more time alone in her room. Three was most certainly a crowd.

House share available now.

She reads the first line of the handwritten advert.

William Street. Decent sized double room with bed, wardrobe and chest of drawers available for clean, tidy, non-smoker employed person (m or f). Shared use of kitchen. Live-in landlord. Parking available. £350 pcm including bills. No pets, couples or benefits.

A telephone number is listed below the description.

Ursula glances back at the house she called home for nearly two years and spots movement at the far left of the living room window, Roman blinds that suddenly close.

She looks back at the advert. William Street is still in Totterdown, just a few roads away. If she stays in the neighbourhood she'll get to keep her round and she likes her clients and the safe familiarity of the local roads. The rent is very reasonable too. It's a whole hundred pounds less than she's been paying Charlotte.

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She dials the number, her heart flip-flopping in her chest. She mustn't get her hopes up. The room's bound to have gone, or else it's tiny and dirty, or the landlord's a weirdo. If she doesn't – or can't – take it she'll have to find a hotel for the night, something she can barely afford when she's earning seventy pence for every parcel she delivers. And she can't take tomorrow off work to go round letting agents; she simply can't afford it.

As the number dials out she raises her eyes to the ceiling of her white van and says a quick prayer.

If this pans out I'll never steal anything again. I promise.

And this time I'll keep it, she adds as an afterthought.

'Hello?' a pleasant male voice says into her left ear.

'Hello, I'm calling about the room. My name's Ursula Andrews and—'

'Like the Bond girl?'

She fakes a laugh, the number of times she's heard that. 'No, that was Ursula Andress, she's like eighty or something. I'm thirty-two years old. I don't smoke and I'm very neat . . . well . . . quite neat. I'm a courier. I wasn't always one. I used to be a primary school teacher . . . Sorry, I'm waffling. Anyway, I need to take in my deliveries every morning but they wouldn't get in your way and—'

Warm laughter interrupts her. 'You sound nervous, Ursula. Take a breath.'

He sounds posh, which makes her more nervous, but she does as she's told and fills her lungs with the warm cab air then exhales shakily. 'Sorry.'

'No need to be sorry. The room's still available if you'd like to see it.'

'Is it? Brilliant. Is it empty? When could I move in?'

There's a pause, then, 'The room's empty and I want it filled ASAP. Are you free to see it now?'

'Yes! No.' Her heart sinks as she remembers the thirty-odd

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parcels squeezed up against her belongings in the back of the van. 'I've got to finish my round first, but I could be with you about sixish. Is that too late? I do really want it. I'm very keen and, as I said, I'm very reliable and tidy and—'

More laughter. She's not entirely sure if he's laughing at her or with her. 'You haven't seen it yet. You might hate it.'

'I'm sure I won't. It sounds perfect.'

'Listen, no one else has booked in to see it today and, if anyone does ring, I won't make any decisions until after you've come round. Okay?'

'Okay.' A warm wave of optimism courses through her. She's not going to end up penniless or on the streets. Everything is going to be okay.

'All right then,' says the male voice. 'I'll see you about sixish. I'm number fifteen by the way.'

'I'll be there. Oh.' A thought hits her. 'One more question before I go.'

'Shoot.'

'I didn't catch your name.'

'It's Edward.'

'Edward what?'

There's a pause, then Edward laughs lightly. 'Goodbye, Ursula. Looking forward to seeing you soon.'

Chapter 6

Alice

Alice catches Lynne staring at her as they sort through the rail of rejected clothes outside the changing rooms and pile them over their arms, preparing to return them to the racks.

‘What?’

‘You’re amazing. You know that?’

Alice laughs. If Peter had been as ready with the compliments they might still be married. Actually, no, they wouldn’t. Nothing would have allowed her to forgive him for his infidelity, but she might have left the relationship with a tiny amount of self-confidence.

‘Why am I amazing?’

Lynne lugs a heavy coat off the hanger and loops it over her arm. ‘Most normal people would have gone home after what happened to you.’

‘So I’m not normal then? Cheers.’

Now it’s Lynne’s turn to laugh. ‘You know what I mean. I’d

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have been straight under my duvet. Or . . . ? She gives her a sideways glance. ‘. . . at the police station. Are you sure you don’t want to report him? I don’t want to go on at you but—’

Alice sighs. That was what Simon said – the man who’d nearly given her a heart attack by running after her all the way from the pub to the mall with her dropped purse. He’d seen the whole thing and was willing to make a statement to the police. She’d said no, she just wanted to forget it, but her decision has been rankling at her ever since. What if she wasn’t the first woman Michael abused on a date? What if there were dozens of other women he’d creeped out and hurt? She realised she was going to have to report what happened but now she had no way of getting in touch with Simon, the only witness. She’d gone back to the shop without getting his details, desperate to put the whole episode behind her.

‘Oh, crap.’ She swears softly under her breath, causing Lynne to look round. It’s 5.15 p.m., fifteen minutes until they close and a customer has just wandered in.

‘It’s her.’ Lynne sidles up beside her and hisses in her ear. ‘The one I told you about.’

Alice watches the customer as she drifts from rack to rack, trailing her fingers over the clothes. She’s the tallest woman Alice has ever seen – at least six foot three or four – with wide shoulders, a weighty physique and a large face with a broad forehead that her fine fringe draws attention to rather than hides. She’s dressed casually, in jogging bottoms, trainers and a lumpy wool coat.

‘Last time she was in she took a size eight skirt,’ Lynne hisses. ‘One of the new lot of stock – the ugly blue floral design none of us like. And she’s at least a size twenty-four.’

Alice’s gaze flicks towards the door where Larry, their sixty-something security guard, is staring longingly out towards the concourse. Probably desperate to get home.

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‘Did he catch her?’ she asks Lynne, already knowing the answer.

‘He didn’t even notice and there was nothing on the CCTV.’

Alice sighs softly. Chances are the woman’s stealing to order – probably has a list as long as her arm. The regular shoplifters are known to every manager in every shop in the galleries. They’re all banned but it doesn’t stop them from chancing it if Larry’s distracted and the staff are busy. But this woman isn’t on the printout she’s got pinned up in the back of the shop.

‘But she definitely took it?’

‘Yeah. I saw her stuffing it into her jacket, but I had a woman kicking up a fuss about a button coming off a pair of trousers she’d bought two months ago. The next time I looked up, Godzilla over there had disappeared. So had the skirt.’

Alice watches as the tall woman drifts towards the back of the store where they keep the handbags and jewellery.

‘You cash up,’ she tells Lynne. ‘I’ll tell her we’re about to close.’

She follows the shoplifter across the store, dawdling at the racks en route, sorting the sizes into order as she keeps an eye on her. It doesn’t seem as though the woman’s looking for anything in particular but there’s a strange, tense air about her as though she’s holding her breath or she’s primed for a fight. It reminds Alice of her daughter and the way the air in the house changes when she gets back from work. There’s no point talking to Emily for at least half an hour after she comes in. Alice has to wait for her to stomp along to her room, get changed, stomp back down again to the kitchen, open the cupboard, uncork the rioja and glug a sizeable measure into a glass. Then they *both* relax.

‘Excuse me?’ The tall woman with the fringe appears beside Alice, making her jump. She looms rather than stands, her

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shoulders curved inwards, her head slightly bowed. The blue/grey eyeliner under her lower lashes is smudged and there's a faint tint of pink lipstick on her top lip.

'Yes?' Alice tries to read her body language. Most shoplifters are harmless – they want to get in and out without being spotted. But there's another, more dangerous, breed: feisty and desperate women who'll threaten anyone who gets too close with a dirty syringe. This woman doesn't look like a druggy but there's an edgy vibe to her that puts Alice on her guard.

'There's a man over there who's trying to get your attention.' The shoplifter raises a long arm and points over Alice's head.

Standing near the cash desk, shifting awkwardly from side to side with an enormous bouquet of flowers in his hands, is Simon. Lynne, still behind the counter, catches Alice's eye and pulls a face as if to say, 'What the fuck?'

'Excuse me.' Alice abandons the shoplifter and hurries across the shop towards Simon. He clears his throat as she draws closer, the base of his neck flushed red.

'I . . . um . . . sorry, this is probably a bit weird but I . . . er . . . I've been wrestling with what happened earlier. I can't help but feel that I should have stepped in or done something and I really didn't help matters by chasing you down the street so um . . .' He thrusts the bouquet of lilies and roses at her. 'These are to say sorry. For what you went through and me . . .' He clears his throat again. '. . . being a bit crap.'

'It wasn't your fault.' Alice feels herself flush as she takes the flowers. She buries her face in the blooms, sniffing to give herself a couple of seconds thinking time. She can't remember the last time someone gave her flowers. Peter was never much of a romantic; she was lucky to get a card on Valentine's Day and she'd always receive something functional and lacking in romance on her birthday.

'My . . . um . . .' Simon taps the cellophane wrapper. 'I wrote

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my number on the florist's card. Just in case you changed your mind about talking to the police.'

'Thank you.' Alice raises her eyes to meet his. 'You really didn't have to do this. But it's very kind of you.'

He smiles awkwardly, one side of his mouth lifting more than the other. He's not an attractive man per se – it's not just his mouth that's asymmetrical; there's something about the balance of his face that's a little bit off – but his grey eyes are soft and warm and his voice is deep and melodic.

'Okay then.' He shrugs and half-turns to go.

'I'll be in touch,' Alice says.

Simon stops walking and looks back at her, surprise registering on his pale, freckled face.

'About the police,' she clarifies. 'I'm going to ring them when I get home.'

'Of course.' He gives a small sharp nod, his eyes flicking towards the hulking woman who slips between him and Larry and trots out of the shop, arms folded tightly over her bulky coat.

'Oh shit,' Lynne breathes from behind Alice. 'She's nicked something else.'