

Prologue

London, November

The bottle was less than half full. She had been rationing herself carefully – the strong, sweet alcohol would have to last her the rest of the night – but it wasn't going to be enough. Not that it really mattered. The air seemed to bite her skin, and the light dusting of snow turned to water the instant it fell on her dirty, tangled hair. She was going to need more than a few mouthfuls of booze to keep her warm during the bitter night ahead.

The snow had come early this year, but she didn't let it get to her. It was just another thing to deal with if you were going to survive on the streets of London. Her boots were sodden, her hands numb. Beside her the cars churned the snow to a mushy sludge, occasionally splattering icy water from a puddle onto the pavement, soaking the lower half of her beat-up jeans. She did her best to put this from her mind as she walked purposefully down the street.

It had been a bad day. She had woken up in a shop doorway in Conduit Street, just off Regent Street, to the sound of somebody urinating not two metres away, and that was just the start. Everybody had been too cold and busy hurrying to get off the streets to pay any attention to a down-and-out nineteen-year-old woman begging for loose change outside Starbucks. Normally it was a good

spot – Hamleys toy shop was just across the road, packed with excited children and shoppers preparing early for Christmas. Normally she could rely on parents wanting to instil a charitable nature in their kids by giving them a few coins to drop into the empty polystyrene coffee cup of the bedraggled homeless girl, but today it was too cold even for that. Her cup practically empty, she had just stared at the festive display in the window across the road and thought of a happier time: her father had taken her there once, promising her that she could have one toy, whatever she wanted. But it seemed like a lifetime ago.

Those thoughts had been wiped from her mind when she had been forced to move on by the shop manager. Where now? The usual Christian volunteers with their charitable handouts were nowhere to be seen because of the snow; but for the soup kitchens it was their busiest time. They meant that people like her didn't have to spend the few precious coins they had earned that day on food. But now the kitchens were closed for the night, and the hostels were full, just as she knew they would be in weather like this. They were the last place on earth she wanted to be, in any case. She still needed to find somewhere with a little warmth, though, somewhere she wouldn't be moved on every hour by the police who, she thought, had nothing better to do with their time. Shivering, she hurried on.

To her left, a derelict warehouse rose towards the sky, its brown Victorian bricks and broken windows protected by a criss-crossed wire fence; ahead of her, she knew the concrete monolith of the Elephant and Castle would still be bustling with life. But her destination was neither of these places – she was heading for a small park nestled

between the two that ordinary people seldom set foot in, especially after dark. And with good reason. For the homeless unfortunates who congregated there it offered comfort of a sort, companionship even. But anyone entering into this circle did so on its terms, and those terms were fierce. After all, these people had nothing to lose.

She pushed open the iron gate and took in the scene. Half a dozen fires smouldered in bins, flames occasionally licking above the rims. They had been placed under trees, in an attempt to protect them from the snow; but the trees were bare anyway, so they did nothing to stop the silent flakes drifting in. Around each bin were small groups of ragged-looking souls, their bodies silhouetted against the flames, their faces half illuminated by the meagre light of the fires. Some of them sat hunched on old crates, others leaned against the trunks of trees, and a few just sat on the ground.

Other groups of down-and-outs huddled together away from the bins. Clearly they had not been part of this community long enough to earn themselves a coveted place by a fire. It was an unspoken rule, and they knew better than to approach without being asked. This was a vulnerable community, full of drug addicts, alcoholics and the mentally ill – frowned upon by society as the lowest of the low. But like any other community it had its ranks and power struggles. The strongest overruled the young, the weak and the elderly, and it paid to know your place.

As she walked further into the park, she could see a crowd gathering on the other side. From this distance she couldn't tell what was going on, but it was most probably just another drunken fight. Nothing unusual. Not here.

'You got anything for me, love?'

The woman turned in surprise. She hadn't seen the gnarled figure of an old man approach her from the darkness. He had a threadbare blanket wrapped around his shoulders, and wore an old woolly hat that could have been any colour once upon a time, but was now grey. His face was grizzled and lined, his eyes pale and watery. He eyed the bottle of Thunderbird in the woman's hand meaningfully. 'It's been a slow day,' he continued, before abandoning his attempts at subtlety. 'Just a couple of pulls, love. It's a cold night.'

She looked at him for a moment. He was a pitiful sight. She took one last swig, then handed him the bottle. 'Take it, old man,' she told him, her voice emotionless. He greedily snatched it, fumbled at the cap, put the bottle to his lips and drank deeply, stopping only to cough wretchedly. With difficulty he replaced the top and secreted the bottle under his blanket. There was no word of thanks.

'What's happening over there?' She nodded in the direction of the disturbance.

The old man sniffed. 'Bob Strut. Looking for new girls.' Her eyes narrowed.

'Stay out of it, love,' the old man advised. 'At least they get a bit of money.'

She barely acknowledged him – her gaze was fixed on the scene ahead of her. The old man shrugged as he shuffled off towards one of the fires.

She'd heard of Strut, of course. They all had. And so far she had managed to ignore him, as she knew she must. He was the worst kind of scum. Strut liked it when new faces arrived in these miserable communities. Where other people saw just another wasted life, he saw an opportunity. He had a special knack for finding people's

weaknesses, and he would supply them with small quantities of whatever substance – drugs usually, or sometimes alcohol – they needed to bring themselves a little piece of oblivion; but he always expected something in return. The younger men and women were more able, and would sometimes be forced to carry out acts of petty theft or drug running. But Strut was mainly interested in them because they offered a more lucrative commodity: their bodies. Pimping was his trade, abusing the fear and vulnerability of both boys and girls, and he would take the lion's share of any money they earned on the streets. And the pittance that was left to them normally went his way too – the small packets of chemicals or bottles of spirits he sold would become more important to his employees than what shred of dignity they had before he entered their lives.

The noise was becoming louder now as the crowd grew bigger and bigger. Not the old-timers – they knew better than to get involved, and Strut had no interest in them anyway. They were too elderly or too weak to be of use to him. But gradually the younger ones, high on whatever substances they could get their hands on – crack if they could afford it; more likely stolen glue – were gathering round like a pack of hyenas, jeering and screaming at the sight in front of them. They had no reason to avoid Strut. He already had them in his pocket.

As she made her way through the crowd, she saw Strut standing there in a heavy overcoat, his bald head uncovered. He was a tall, strong-looking man with two unkempt henchmen, one on either side. At his feet a girl was crouched on the ground, a look of horror in her eyes.

She knew that girl. She had met her somewhere before.

It couldn't have been more than two weeks ago. She had been walking across Westminster Bridge when she had come across the pitiful sight of a young girl staring over the side, a vacant look in her eyes. She had stopped alongside her. 'You're not thinking of doing anything stupid, are you?'

The girl didn't reply, so she tried again. 'What's your name?'

The girl hesitated before stuttering, 'M-Mary.'

'Why don't you go home, Mary?'

'I can't.' Mary answered forcefully and turned to look at her. Her face was dirty, but the grime could not hide the fact that she was young. Barely a teenager. 'I can't,' she repeated, more quietly this time, her eyes welling up.

She understood. God knows she understood better than most. 'When did you last have anything to eat?' Mary shrugged her shoulders as she turned back to look down at the fast-flowing current of the river. It was clear what she was thinking: with one jump the Thames would take her away and all her problems would be solved. 'Do you know where the soup kitchens are?'

The young girl slowly shook her head.

'Come on. I'll show you. There's no point staying hungry, and it's that or the bins.' She took Mary by the arm and marched her away. The last time she had seen her, Mary was hungrily sipping at hot soup from a polystyrene cup. It had been all she could do for her, really . . .

Tonight she looked different. Two weeks on the streets had changed her almost beyond recognition. You could tell she was young but she had lost that clear, fresh look in her face that had revealed she was a newcomer to the streets. Now she was dirtier, her face leaner and hungrier.

Around her lips and chin were the red pimples that told of a body that was undernourished and underwashed, and there was a soreness around her nose that suggested she too had been tempted by the sickly high of cheap glue.

One of the teenage boys who had congregated around the scene shouted out an obscenity, his voice high-pitched and wired. A few others laughed, and Mary turned to look at them in panic. Strut just ignored them.

‘One of this lot gave you a toke on her pipe last night.’ His voice was hoarse, his accent south London. ‘And you haven’t even thanked me.’ He leaned over to meet her face to face and almost whispered, ‘I’ve had my eye on you for a few days.’

Mary stared at him with fear in her wide-open eyes. She didn’t reply.

‘Better than a tube of glue, darling, and lots more where that came from. But you *are* going to come with me. I’ve got plenty of gentlemen clients who’ll fall for *your* charms . . .’

Mary shook her head. Her body was shivering, but not from the cold. Strut breathed out heavily, impatiently. Then, with a deft movement, he put his hand in his coat pocket and removed a large flick knife. With one click, the point of the five-inch blade was resting gently on the underside of her chin. Mary gasped. ‘Get on your fucking feet,’ he told her in a voice that wouldn’t be argued with, ‘and stop pissing me about. I haven’t got all night.’

Slowly she stood up, the cold blade resting on her skin as she did so. ‘Good girl,’ Strut muttered, his voice less menacing now, but only just. He closed the knife, put it back in his pocket and grabbed hold of her arm. ‘Come on.’

Just as he was about to turn, Mary pulled away and

ran. It was a hopeless attempt, but the anger in Strut's eyes was violent nevertheless. 'Get her,' he barked at his heavies.

It didn't take long for them to catch her. She couldn't get out of the human circle that surrounded them.

As one of them grabbed her shoulder, she fell on the hard path. Her face scraped along the concrete, but she didn't have time to put her hand to her cheek and feel the wetness of the graze before her hair was grabbed once more and she was pulled, struggling, back towards Bob Strut.

The two men each held one of her arms. 'Get off me!' she screamed through her tears. 'Let me go.' But they had no intention of doing that. Strut walked up to her, his face emotionless. He stood there for what seemed like ever to Mary, and gradually she stopped struggling, exhausted and aware that it was useless.

It was not until her screams became drawn-out whimpers that he hit her. The back of his hand suddenly lashed out and thumped the side of her face that was bleeding from the fall. He looked with distaste at the blood smeared on his hand, before wiping it on the unwounded side of Mary's face. Again, he removed his flick knife from his pocket.

Mary was too scared to cry out. As Strut pointed the knife towards her she could do little more than gasp for breath, until she found the words she was trying to say. 'Please,' she wept, 'please leave me alone. Please. I want to go home to my mum.'

Her wide eyes watched the blade as Strut slowly moved it towards her, relishing her fear before he inflicted his violence on her.

‘I just want my mum . . .’ Her voice was quieter now, almost as if she was talking to herself.

‘Well, she doesn’t want you, you little fucking bitch,’ Strut whispered.

Nobody else spoke. Even the group of teenage junkies had fallen silent at the violence of the scene, and the noise of the traffic on the main road seemed to fade into the background.

And then the silence was broken.

The woman couldn’t watch this any longer. ‘Leave her alone!’ Her voice cracked as she spoke, so she repeated herself, more firmly this time but still with a faint tremor. ‘Leave her alone!’

Strut’s knife stopped just millimetres from Mary’s face.

‘She’s fourteen years old,’ the woman insisted. ‘Just leave her alone.’

Bob Strut turned round to see who dared talk to him like this, but her features were half obscured in the dim light. As she stepped forward, however, he saw that she had long, matted hair that had once been blonde, tied back into a ponytail that was frizzy with knots. She had black jeans, ripped in places, neatly patched in others, but filthy nevertheless, and she wore a beaten-up woollen coat that was done up to the top to protect her from the cold. Her face was thin, but her piercing blue eyes were bright and alert, and she held her chin high – everything about her body language spoke of a woman doing her best to hide her fear.

‘Who the fuck are you?’ Strut gestured at his men to let Mary go. They threw her down and stood flanking him on either side.

The woman didn’t answer.

He strode towards the woman, raising his knife hand as he did so in preparation to swipe it across her cheek; she covered her face in defence and the knife cut deeply across her palm. She gasped sharply as the pain shrieked through her body, then looked at her hand to see the blood seeping down to her wrist. Strut stood in front of her, breathing heavily. After a few seconds he put his knife in his other hand and whipped her across the face with his fist, knocking her to the ground.

Then he turned his attention back to Mary. She was frozen with horror at the scene that had unfolded before her. Strut stormed up to her and began kicking her hard in the stomach. She curled into a little ball, screaming with every kick. All of a sudden he stopped as the beam of a car's headlights swept over them all. He turned as the man who had been waiting patiently in a quiet street leading off the park drove away – scared, no doubt, that the commotion might attract the police, and unwilling in any case to pay for damaged goods. Strut swore under his breath: he'd lost his punter.

'Keep an eye out for Old Bill,' he muttered to his sidekicks. 'There's going to be a tear-up.'

'What d'you mean?' one of them asked, a bit nervously. They knew what he was capable of doing to the young girl.

'I mean, I'm going to see to these two bitches.' His voice was impatient, and the men took their cue, striding purposefully away to take up their lookout positions. Strut sniffed hard, his face determined and his upper lip displaying the ghost of a sneer. He moved his knife back into his right hand.

The woman was lying in pain, knowing that she and Mary couldn't get out of this without serious damage to

themselves. Suddenly she caught a glimpse of the old man she had given the bottle of Thunderbird to earlier, standing at the front of the crowd. Their eyes met as he bent down and rolled the nearly empty bottle towards her. She clasped it firmly in her hand then struggled to her feet as Strut leaned over the terrified Mary. One of his guys called out, but it was too late: she smashed the bottle over Strut's head with all the energy she could muster, leaving the jagged glass neck in her hand. Strut fell to his knees in a daze, a horrifying mixture of alcohol and blood rushing down his face. The crowd had started up again, but it sounded as though their fickle allegiance had changed sides: Strut's men looked nervous as the crowd started to turn against them, and they edged away.

Dizzy, but spurred on by blind rage, Strut managed to jump to his feet. His face was like a wild animal's, even more terrifying for the streaks of red that dripped down from his forehead. The woman took a nervous step backwards. She had not expected him to stand up.

And now Strut was bearing down on her like a man possessed.

It happened in a split second. She didn't even give it any thought – she just knew she had to defend herself. As Strut lurched at her and raised his knife arm to attack, she struck out blindly with the stump of the bottle. It sliced through the skin of his neck like a knife through jelly, before becoming wedged in the tough knot of his Adam's apple. Strut froze, more out of shock than pain, but as the blood started to flow profusely he fell once more to his knees. The bottle was stuck deep in his neck – the woman had let go once she had realized what she had done.

Strut made a pitiful gurgling sound as the upper part of his body slumped heavily to the ground, his life oozing rapidly from him. The bottle neck quivered in time with his faltering heartbeat.

The woman stood above him, looking down aghast at what she had done. A few metres away, Mary was being comforted by two older women. They put their arms round her and made reassuring sounds, but she hardly seemed to know they were there. Her crying had stopped, replaced by short, sharp breaths as she hyperventilated with shock. Her eyes were darting everywhere, but always seemed to return to the body lying in front of her. She looked as if she was trying to say something, but the words would not come.

'Jesus, Frankie,' she managed finally, her voice a panicked, high-pitched whisper. 'What have you done?'

PART ONE

Chapter One

The same night, a mile or two away

Rosemary Gibson strode down the corridor clutching an armful of heavy files. ‘Look confident,’ Carter had told her, ‘and nobody will suspect what you’re doing. Trust me – these things only go wrong when people show how nervous they are.’

Easy for him to say, she thought as she turned the corner. Her heart was racing, and it was all she could do to stop herself from looking over her shoulder every few seconds to see if anyone was following her. There was no particular reason why she shouldn’t be here – that’s what made her perfect for the job – and she had her story all worked out in case she was asked what she was doing. God knows how she would react if she was actually questioned, though. Rosemary was the last person you’d expect to be doing this, but Carter thought that was her best asset.

‘You’ve worked there for so long,’ he’d told her. ‘You’re part of the furniture.’ He was right. She had worked at Lenham, Borwick and Hargreaves, a merchant bank in Belgravia, longer than almost anyone.

‘But I never normally stay as late as that.’

‘Then put in a few late nights for a couple of weeks beforehand. There’ll be plenty of other people working, won’t there?’

‘Well, yes, I suppose so. They have to be in contact with offices around the world, you see . . .’

‘So there you are.’

‘It’s just . . .’

‘What?’

‘It’s just that I’m not very good at this sort of thing.’

Carter had sighed with impatience. ‘We’ve already gone through this. If you don’t want to do it, just say.’

‘No,’ Rosemary had replied just a little too sharply. ‘No. I’ll do it. It’ll be OK.’

She had started something and was determined not to pull out of it now.

Finally she arrived at the door she had been heading for. A shiny brass plaque bore the name ‘Morgan Tunney’. The door would be locked, of course, but that wasn’t a problem. For the past few evenings she had been asking the night-time receptionist for a key so that she could leave confidential financial documents on Tunney’s desk. She was a senior member of the accounts team, so it was reasonable enough that she should do this, and the documents she had been delivering contained information that Tunney definitely wanted to see. As far as the receptionist was concerned, tonight was no different to any other.

She quickly unlocked the door, stepped inside, then locked it behind her, too scared to switch the light on for fear of it drawing attention to what she was doing.

It took only a few seconds for Rosemary’s eyes to adjust to the lights of London illuminating the room enough for her to see her way around. Morgan Tunney’s office was richly furnished, as befitted his status as chairman. The couches were made of leather, and the huge

oak table was home only to a laptop computer, a lamp, a virgin blotting pad, a picture of his grandchildren in a silver frame, and a gold pen. Like almost everything else in the office, the pen was there just for show; whenever he signed anything, he used the fat Cartier that he always kept inside his jacket pocket. There were several oil paintings on the wall, behind one of which was a safe with a numeric touch pad. But Rosemary knew for a fact that it was empty: Morgan Tunney was not the sort of man to leave precious or sensitive material lying around.

The office had one of the finest views in London. The floor-to-ceiling windows looked out from the fifteenth floor over the grand buildings of Belgravia, and anyone standing there might well feel like the lord of all they surveyed. Under other circumstances, Rosemary would be captivated by the scene – it was a far cry from the view she enjoyed from her own desk, or from the little terraced house in an unfashionable part of north London that was her home. But tonight she hardly glanced out of the window. All her attention was focused on the laptop in front of her.

She put the files down on the desk. Standing in front of the computer, she removed a small silver locket hanging inside her blouse from a delicate chain round her neck. She lifted her necklace over her head, wincing slightly as the chain caught in the hair that was gathered severely into a bun. She held the locket up to her eyes and squinted at it over the top of her half-moon glasses. The letters 'RG' were engraved in immaculate copper-plate, and on the side was a small clasp. She pushed it with her thumb and held it in for three seconds, just as she had practised so many times at home. The interface

of a small USB storage device clicked out of the top.

Rosemary took a deep breath and mentally went through the instructions Carter had given her. 'Plug the locket into the computer *before* you turn it on, otherwise the patch won't work.' She picked up the locket and gently tried a couple of the ports at the back of the laptop before she found one that would accept it. She closed her eyes, took another deep breath, opened the computer and switched it on.

Immediately the office was bathed in the familiar blue light, and she quickly tilted the screen downwards slightly in an attempt to dull its glare. As she did so, she noticed the white light from the corridor leaking in underneath the office door, and the telltale shadow of a pair of feet standing in front of it.

She held her breath. The whirring of the computer's hard drive as it cranked itself up seemed impossibly loud; surely whoever was outside would be able to hear it.

Then, to her horror, the laptop beeped.

Even if she had wanted to, Rosemary would not have been able to move a muscle. Her eyes were glued to the bottom of that door, and the shadow that stubbornly refused to move. Suddenly, though, it disappeared, and she heard the sound of footsteps walking away. She breathed out, gently but shakily.

Lifting the screen back up slightly she saw the log-on window for the company's intranet. Carter's device was clearly working, because every fifteen seconds or so a new asterisk appeared in the password box. It took a couple of minutes for the ten asterisks to appear, indicating that the password had – with any luck – been broken.

She pressed the enter key. The log-on screen flickered

away; a few seconds later her boss's desktop was displayed. She was in.

With the speed of somebody who spends her working life at a computer, she navigated to the folder she wanted. She quickly scanned her way down the files she was used to working with all day long, until she found an unfamiliar one. That was what she was after. This document did not appear on her system. To the best of her knowledge it did not appear on *anyone's* system apart from Tunney's. That was why she needed it. She copied the file onto the USB device.

It was a big file, and took a couple of minutes to download. Rosemary counted the seconds as she watched the animated yellow folder fly repeatedly across the screen. Her palms were clammy and her blouse moist with nervous sweat – it seemed to take for ever, and all she wanted to do was get out of there. The instant the operation was completed, she shut down the computer, waiting, as she had been instructed, for the screen to go black before she removed the locket. She pushed the USB device back inside the locket with a click, and replaced the necklace over her head, before picking up her folders and taking a moment to compose herself. She moved to the door and stood there for a few tense seconds, carefully listening for footsteps outside.

When she was sure there were none, she slipped out and locked the door again. She marched quickly back down the corridor, eager to put as much distance between her and Tunney's office as possible.

Rosemary couldn't quite believe what she had just done. How had she got herself into such a dangerous position? What if she was discovered? She couldn't deny

a vague feeling of excitement now that she'd done what she came to do, but she knew it wasn't over yet. All sorts of confused thoughts were firing through her head when she turned the corner and almost walked into a tall, uniformed security guard. In her surprise she dropped the folders, and papers spilled everywhere. 'Oh!' she cried, as she knelt down in a fluster to start picking them up. 'Oh dear!'

The security guard bent down to help her. 'You're working late, Mrs, er . . .' He glanced at the identity badge clipped to Rosemary's jacket. 'Mrs Gibson.'

'*Miss* Gibson,' Rosemary replied automatically. 'Yes, it is rather late, isn't it . . . delivering paperwork . . . lots to do . . .' The words were not coming out as she had practised them. She scrabbled around, stuffed the final pieces of paper inside one of the folders and the two of them stood up.

For the first time Rosemary looked at the security guard's slicked-back hair and immaculately groomed goatee beard. It wasn't the person she had expected to see. 'Where's Ray?' she asked, doing her best to take control of the situation.

'Haven't you heard?' the guard replied in his thick East End accent. 'Sick leave. Could be permanent.'

'I didn't know he was ill.' Rosemary was shocked. Ray always had a bit of banter with her as she left the office of an evening. Surely he'd have told her if something was wrong.

'Nor did he. Come on very sudden. Makes you think, doesn't it?'

'Yes,' she replied. 'Yes, it does.' Rosemary stood in silence for as long as she thought was respectful. 'Right.

Goodnight, then. Time for me to go home.’ She side-stepped the guard who was still standing in front of her.

‘G’night, *Miss* Gibson,’ he replied without a smile.

Rosemary continued down the corridor to the lift. Once she had pressed the button, she looked nervously over her shoulder.

The security guard was still there, looking straight at her. Their eyes met for a few uncomfortable seconds. Then he turned and walked round the corner, out of sight.

Frankie wasn’t afraid to do what it took to look after herself, but it had never gone this far. There was no point checking to see if Bob Strut was dead – nobody bled as much as that and lived; the main thing now was to get the hell away. Her hand was bleeding badly from the cut of Strut’s knife; but more importantly the police could be on the scene any minute. They wouldn’t care less that the world was a better place with Strut six feet under – if they could charge her for the killing and get one more vagrant off the street, it would be a result for them.

Behind her was chaos. Strut’s cronies had fled the moment they realized what was happening, and most of the remaining down-and-outs were in a state of confusion: nobody wanted to be anywhere near the dead body, to be associated with it in any way, and yet they had no place to go. They held urgent conversations with frightened looks on their faces. In a far corner of the park, a few of the younger ones were more boisterous – happy Strut was gone, but too high to understand the seriousness of what was happening. Mary was still being comforted by the two older women as Frankie hurried up to her and

crouched down. She didn't have time to console her, but she knew from the one conversation she'd had with the teenager since she arrived here that a softly-softly approach was called for. She gently put her arm around the young girl. 'Mary,' she whispered hoarsely.

The girl just carried on sobbing.

'Mary,' she said more firmly, 'you *have* to listen to me.'

Mary turned her reddened eyes towards her.

'When the police arrive, you've got to let them take you away.'

Mary shook her head in disbelief. 'They'll think it was me –' she started to say.

'No, they won't,' Frankie interrupted her. 'Everyone's seen what happened. Trust me, Mary. This guy has friends. When they find out what happened here, they'll be back. The safest place you can be is a police cell, and when they let you out, you must never come back here. If you can't go home, move to a different part of the country. And whatever you do, don't tell the police anything about me. Do you understand?'

Mary just looked at her blankly, and Frankie couldn't tell if she had taken in a word she had said. But she couldn't stick around. She gave the girl a weak smile, then she turned and left, knowing that she would never see Mary again.

As she made her way down the street along the side of the park, she walked as calmly as she could, not wanting to attract attention to herself. But she felt her pace quickening almost involuntarily as her body screamed at her to get away from that place. Soon she was running. As she hurried, her mind was working overtime. What the hell had come over her? Scumbags like Strut weren't worth

the time of day, and now she had risked everything on his account. It wasn't even as if he had his eye on her – she was too streetwise to allow guys like him anywhere near her. But she'd seen too much of herself in little Mary to allow anybody to take advantage of her. It was a reflex action, a coil deep inside her that had finally snapped. Frankie couldn't change the past, but maybe if she could stop it happening again . . .

'It was him or me,' she muttered, trying to convince herself as she ran. She needed to get to the other side of the river, as far away from the scene as she could, so she headed towards Vauxhall Bridge. Her breath steamed in the cold air, and her hand throbbed with pain – she kept her fist clenched to stem the bleeding. But as soon as she stood on the bridge, she saw the heart-stopping sight of blue police lights coming from the north side. She had been on the streets long enough to know to avoid those flashing lights, and tonight she had more reason than usual.

She turned and headed away from the bridge and into the streets of south London. She knew them like the back of her hand. God knows she'd walked them often enough.

There was no knowing what Mary – or any of the others – would say about her to the police. They wouldn't go out of their way to shop her, but their first loyalty was always going to be to themselves. Suddenly Frankie realized that in her eagerness to leave the scene she had forgotten that her prints would be firmly on the bottle that killed Strut. She had been arrested enough times for her fingerprints and mugshot to be on file, but she knew she couldn't go back to collect the bottle. She needed to disguise herself, and get out of town as quickly as possible.

To do that, she needed money. And fast.

Still running, Frankie turned a corner and headed west. She kept a lookout for a shop that would be easy to break into, but most of them had metal shutters fastened tightly over their windows, and in any case she doubted their tills would be full. Had she been in a richer area, she might have taken the risk of breaking into a couple of expensive-looking cars and rooting around for the small change the owners often kept in the front for parking – that little trick had seen her out of more than one hungry evening before now. But she needed Mercedes and BMWs to earn her money that way, not the clapped-out rust-buckets parked up round here.

After thirty minutes of half-walking, half-running, she figured she was far enough away to think about crossing the river. She took a right-hand turn and started weaving her way up towards Chelsea Bridge.

It started to snow again as the lights of the bridge came into view, but she wasn't cold: the running, spurred on by the adrenaline pumping through her body, had taken care of that. The imposing towers of Battersea Power Station were lost in the flurries of snowflakes. It was pretty, but Frankie did not have time to take in the scenery. She knew that she was going to have to be driven to another act of desperation tonight if she was going to disappear. She didn't want to do it, but she couldn't think of any other way.

She ducked into a dimly lit side street and stopped to catch her breath in the arches that ran under the railway line. Her hand was still bleeding, and she knew she needed the use of it for what she had in mind. There was no way she could risk going to a hospital to get a clean bandage,

so she took off her overcoat, ripped a strip of material from one of the two dirty T-shirts she was wearing, then tied it tightly around her hand. It still hurt, but at least she could use it.

As she was pulling her coat back on, she saw two police officers in their bright yellow jackets walking past the end of the street. She pressed her back against the wall of the arch and waited for them to pass. The fight had been forty-five minutes ago, and in a different part of the city, but she couldn't take any chances. The police might already have a description, in which case they would all be keeping a lookout for her. She silently gave thanks that the clothes she was wearing – the only ones she had – were black.

Frankie stayed hidden for a couple of minutes after the police officers had passed before gingerly walking back out to the main road. Chelsea Bridge was illuminated in front of her, but the snow was falling more heavily now and she couldn't see the other side. She stood watching as people occasionally appeared like ghosts out of the blizzard – couples, mostly, on their way home from an evening out, huddled together as they walked to protect themselves from the elements.

She let them pass. There was no way she could take on two people. Not in her state. Come to think of it, she didn't know if she could take on a single person – she had never done this before.

A thin layer of snow had settled on her clothes before a suitable candidate appeared. She could just make her out, standing on her own halfway across the bridge. She was not well dressed for the weather: a sensible jacket and skirt, with just a checked scarf to keep out the cold.

Her handbag was slung over her shoulder, and she was stamping her feet on the ground, trying to keep herself warm as she looked around as if waiting to meet someone.

Frankie strode up to her and walked past, peering through the snow to the other side of the bridge to check that nobody was coming. It was difficult to see, but the coast seemed clear. She doubled back. The woman was looking the other way, so she quietly approached her from behind and grabbed the handbag.

The woman slipped, fell with a scream and landed on her back. Her handbag was still hooked to her arm, so Frankie knelt down and tugged it hard, breaking the strap. As she pulled, the woman's scarf unfurled slightly, and Frankie noticed she was wearing a necklace. She grabbed the chain and yanked it off, pulling the scarf with it. Her victim cried in pain as the metal bit into her neck, but by that time Frankie was already standing up. She barely looked at the chunky silver locket at the end of the chain before stuffing it into the pocket of her jeans. It might be worth something to someone.

Suddenly she saw figures running towards her from the north side of the bridge. Shit, she thought. I've taken too long. Clutching the handbag and the scarf, she turned and ran. Have-a-go heroes – was there one or two? Or maybe more? She didn't know how the hell they had seen what she'd done – they hadn't been in sight when she grabbed the bag – but she didn't have time to worry about it. They were bearing down on her. She just had to get away.

Manslaughter and assault: the police would have a field day with her if she was caught.

As if summoned by that thought, she heard the familiar

sound of sirens, and looking over her shoulder she could make out the telltale blue glow somewhere on the other side of the bridge. There were two options: run across the road and scale the railings over into Battersea Park, or try to lose herself back under the arches.

It was a split-second decision. Battersea Park would be too exposed – there was nowhere to hide – and the railings were sharp; so she would have to take her chances under the arches. She ran with all her strength and turned back into the side street.

She heard footsteps running behind her. A voice shouted ‘Stop!’ as Frankie disappeared once more into the shadows, her eyes welling up with tears of panic.