

## PROLOGUE

‘...For only God can know my heart, my true thoughts, and tho’ I, Alice Hawker, commit them to the page, here in this my book, yet without His light they are as nought. The past weighs heavy upon me, yet have I breathed no word of this to a soul, nay not even to my own husband, tho’ heaven knows my prattle is of little interest to him. And apart from the Lord himself, ’tis only my little one who shares my prayers, my hopes, my dear Jonjo, for in truth my boy is the light of my life. Since we came here, I have found the burden of being mistress of Collyer to be a dead weight. I know the servants think nothing of my word, the hearths go unpolished, the milk unchurned and yet when Nicolas returns, then they jump to’t as if their very lives depend on’t...’

The next page was blank. Agnes found she was peering at it under the light from her bedside lamp, as if the paper itself might reveal further secrets. Across the river, she heard a bell toll midnight. She closed the old leather covers and put the book down carefully on the small table by her bed. It would be a shame, she thought, to mislay one of the few truly valuable books in the order’s collection at this late stage of the library move.

She wandered down the landing to the bathroom to brush

12 ALISON JOSEPH

her teeth. Her reflection stared back at her. She thought she was looking pale, although perhaps that was just the dim light; she ran a comb through her hair, which was short and brown with traces of grey. She hurried back to her room, lay down on her pillows and yawned. Beyond the ill-fitting window the traffic seemed to quieten and slow, and even the rattle of trains from London Bridge was muted with the night.

She wondered if Sister Helena had gone to bed. The thought was irritating. She knew it was her own failing, to resent feeling responsible for anyone, but Sister Helena was a difficult housemate; silent, well-mannered and utterly private. For years Agnes had lived alone, in dread of the privilege being removed, but had felt unable to argue when her superior, Sister Christiane, had said that it would be easier for everyone if she relinquished her own flat and lived in Collyer House with Sister Helena during the moving process, particularly when it was such a complicated sale, and Helena only being a novice, and anyway, a visiting Abbot from Normandy needed the flat for a year.

Agnes hated the house. And it hated her. It seemed to creak and sway; the heating, when it worked, made muffled rhythmic noises. Sometimes she thought she heard footsteps, or a sound like sobbing. Yesterday she'd been on the point of asking Helena if she'd heard it too, but Helena was sitting there, straight-backed and polite, her pale hair scraped back into a thin tail as she picked at a tiny serving of tinned tuna fish, and Agnes had begun to wonder whether, if there was sobbing in the house at night, Helena wasn't the source of it.

Agnes pulled the covers over her against the chill of the room. It wasn't as if the house was even that old. There had

been a dwelling on this site in the early seventeenth century, but at some point the property had been donated to a religious order, who had then knocked it down and rebuilt it. The existing building, a shabby and sprawling example of Victorian gothic, had served as an asylum during the nineteenth century. Agnes thought about the waifs and strays, the fallen women and the downright mad, stumbling across the Thames, to be forgotten in the dim marshlands of the south as the rest of London turned its back. Gradually the order had shrunk and the state had expanded, and now most of the building was used by the local NHS Trust as a day-centre for people with mental illness. The sisters kept one wing, where for reasons lost to living memory they housed their library, a sprawling collection of theological texts, mostly using mawkish and sentimental examples from the saints to preach unquestioning obedience, as Agnes had remarked to Shirley the librarian only the other day. Shirley had almost smiled, but had then gone on to point out that the Hawker Bequest was a wonderful collection of rare non-conformist texts and that the order was to be congratulated for handing it over to the nation. After a pause she'd repeated the word 'mawkish', as if to herself, two or three times.

Agnes sighed, rolled over and turned off the lamp. The lights from passing cars flickered on the ceiling.

There was a quiet thump from the corridor, a pad-padding that seemed to pass her room. Agnes lay on her back, staring at the shadows. It must be Helena, she thought.

And then, there it was again, the sound of crying. Agnes heard her heart beat in her ears and began to feel cross. It's thoughtless of her, she thought, all this creeping around at

14 ALISON JOSEPH

night. It's just as well I don't believe in ghosts, but she could terrify someone of a more nervous disposition.

Again, the sobbing. Agnes tried to match the sound to Helena, a woman of thirty or so, but something didn't quite fit. It sounded more like a child.

Agnes sat up. The floorboards creaked loudly outside her room. She got out of bed, and put on her slippers. Enough is enough, she thought.

She went to the door and opened it, and stared out into the corridor, listening. Now there was a hush; only the cold, damp smell, the dim lightbulb swinging slightly in the draught. Then, a movement at the end of the landing, by the stairs. Agnes took a step towards it. 'Helena?' she called, her voice too loud.

There was something there, and as she approached it gained definition; an animal, she thought, a tail lashing in the darkness, angular ears and jaw. It looked like a dog; a black dog, but as she got nearer there was the crying again, so close that she looked around for its source, expecting to see a child, a baby, perhaps; the cry now a distressed, urgent wail and Agnes wondering what to do with a child in need and a nasty-looking dog and realising that she was in fact scared; very scared indeed.

And then there was silence.

She thought perhaps she'd screamed or cried out.

Downstairs she heard a door open. 'Helena?' she said, and her voice sounded calm and normal, as if there had never been a dog or a baby crying or the lamp swaying on the landing.

'Agnes?' came Helena's voice, as she appeared at the top of the stairs. 'I was just going to bed.'

‘Yes,’ Agnes said. ‘Me too.’

Helena smiled. ‘Good night, then.’ She turned the handle of her door. ‘There’s early chapel at the community house tomorrow.’

‘So there is,’ Agnes said.

‘Perhaps I’ll see you there.’ Helena went into her room and shut the door behind her.

Agnes looked up and down the empty, silent corridor. Then she walked slowly back to her room. She sat on her bed and stared at her shaking legs with interest.

Yes, she thought. It’s just as well I don’t believe in ghosts.