

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'aeb' in a white, elegant, cursive script font, positioned on a solid black rectangular background. A thin white horizontal line is drawn beneath the letters.

WHAT FALLS
BETWEEN THE CRACKS

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PROLOGUE

May God forgive me.

He folds the single sheet of paper, places it carefully inside the envelope. He looks around the room, at everything he has built, crashing down around him.

I tried, Natasha. God knows I tried.

He moves on autopilot, shrugging his jacket off, pinching the collar to fold down the middle, letting it drape down over his arm to quarter it. He lies it by the wall, brushing away imaginary specks of dust from the spot next to it before sitting down, back flat against the cool plaster. He closes his eyes, picturing her again, smiling. Happier times before it all went to shit.

Focus on her. This is for her.

The gun feels surprisingly heavy as he cradles it in his lap. He sits like that for what feels like several lifetimes, listening to the drone of conversation from beyond the door. They will come running in when they hear the shot, but for now he is glad to be alone.

Now. Do it now. Be a man.

He clamps the barrel between his teeth, eyes scrunched shut as if in pain, thumb resting on the trigger. The tip touches the back of his tongue, and he pulls it back out with an involuntary retch. His breathing picks up pace. He has to do this now, or the coward lurking deep in his brain will make a play

for life. Her face flashes in his mind again, reminding him why he doesn't deserve to live.

It's the only way. For her.

He blinks, tears blurring the edges of his world. He owes her this. *Deep breath. On three. Inhale. Exhale.*

One.

One swift movement. The end of the barrel kisses his temple this time.

Two.

He closes his eyes. He doesn't want the last thing he sees to be a storeroom full of boxes. It should be her. He pictures her face again, sees her smile, hears her laugh. No false starts this time. He takes another lungful of air. His last. Holds it. Feels the trigger move.

Three.

There is no blinding light, only darkness, and peace.

CHAPTER ONE

The maintenance man knocked again as he pushed the door to flat 10 halfway open. It was dark inside, the flat still shrouded from the early morning sunlight by the curtains. A musty smell filled his nostrils.

'Hello?' he called into the silence. 'Building maintenance; we've had a leak reported. Anyone home?'

No reply. He hit the light switch by the door but nothing happened.

Click, click.

He tried two more times, frowning. Still nothing. He pulled a small torch from his pocket and pointed the narrow beam inside. There was a rustling sound as he opened the door the rest of the way, a pile of papers and leaflets that had been sat behind it shuffled out of the way like a messy deck of cards. Glancing down at them, he saw a mixture of residents' newsletters and flyers mingled in with the post, that some enterprising souls must have gotten past the secure entrance to deliver.

He walked down a short hallway, sweeping the torchlight left and right, calling out as he went. The hallway led to an open-plan space incorporating the kitchen, dining and living areas. He was no interior decor expert, but the place definitely had something of a retro feel to it.

A faint hint of an odour hit his nostrils and he stopped to look around. He wrinkled his nose in disgust as he bent over a coffee cup on the nearby bench

and sniffed. Spots of brownish green mould clung to it and he stepped back out of range of the smell, noticing the thick cloak of dust on the bench as he replaced the cup in the spot that it had been protecting. He made no effort to mask his footsteps as he looked around, calling out to minimise the surprise to any occupants, but nobody responded.

He went back to the open area that accounted for most of the floor space and looked around, mentally calculating where the leak would be located from what he'd seen of the layout downstairs. As it turned out, the answer was glaringly obvious when he saw the pool of water on the kitchen floor over by two white appliances – a fridge and a freezer, he presumed. They were short stocky units, a little above waist height, pale cream in colour with matching chrome handles, doors closed on both, but the water pooled on the floor was a giveaway as to which one was the culprit. Maybe a power failure had caused it to thaw? The contents could have leaked through a gap in the door seal. The model looked like one he'd had in his first flat years ago.

He set his toolbox on the bench and lay his torch on the floor so it illuminated the area by the base of the freezer. Expecting some form of leakage, he had brought an old towel from downstairs, and laid it out now over the puddle. It'd also come in handy to soak up most of what would no doubt spill out when he opened the door. There was a token resistance when he tugged at the handle, but it opened with somewhere between a cracking and a sucking noise as the seal gave up its grip. He watched the miniature waterfall trickle over the interior edge and soak into the towel. Not as much as he'd feared, but then again most of it was downstairs now. He was less prepared for the cloying stench that made him screw his eyes closed, flinching away as surely as if he'd been slapped across the face.

He pulled the neck of his sweater over his nose and mouth, bandit style, and looked back, still wincing, at the four identical compartments inside.

Eenie, meenie, miney . . .

He started at the top and worked his way down, a cursory scanning of soggy bricks of cardboard packaging, looking for the source of the smell. The drawers rattled open and closed in quick succession, until he reached the fourth one. Instead of closing it, he just stared, open-mouthed, as his

brain caught up with his eyes, and finally told him what he was looking at.

The act of opening the drawer had caused the severed hand inside to rock gently. Its fingers were outstretched, ready to shake on a deal. Ragged shreds of grey skin clung around the edges of the severed wrist like dirty wet cloth.

He jerked upright and away in the same motion, stumbling back into the opposite kitchen bench.

‘What the fuck?’

The words slipped out before he could stop them. He quickly put a hand to his mouth, looking around. It occurred to him that although he’d called out when he came in, he hadn’t actually looked in any of the other rooms. What if he wasn’t alone in here? What if the owner of the hand was in here somewhere? More to the point, what if the person who removed it was, too?

He stumbled out of the kitchen and down the corridor, looking over his shoulder as he did, not stopping until he reached the safety of the hallway. He jogged to the lift and jabbed the button with one hand, pulling his phone out of his pocket with the other, and dialled 999. His eyes never left the doorway. He’d not even closed up behind himself. Had no intention of going back to do so. Whatever had happened here, it hadn’t ended well for someone.

Detective Inspector Jake Porter spotted his partner waiting patiently for him by the main entrance to the apartment complex as he pulled into the last available parking space this side of the police cordon. It never ceased to amaze him how many people were content to loiter by the edge of the tape without a clue of what was going on, hoping to catch a glimpse of something worthy of gossip. On one level it was almost ghoulish, but he dealt on a regular basis with people who had far worse traits than that.

He rubbed a fist in each eye. They felt gritty and raw. He had dreamt about Holly last night. She didn’t visit him every time he slept. Probably once or twice a week, but when she did, it was like losing her all over again. That five or ten seconds of no man’s land between dreams and the real world, lines blurred between the two. The empty pillow next to him a reminder of where he was; of where she wasn’t. He almost welcomed those mornings in a masochistic kind of way. It was worth the pain to see her

again, to feel for the briefest of moments that she was still alive. Almost two years without her now. After Holly's funeral, his mum had put an arm around him, fed him the cliché of time being a great healer, but Porter was leaning more towards a term like *quack*. The face staring back at him in the rear-view mirror was a tired doppelgänger of the man in his wedding photos only three years back. He had spotted the first of the grey hairs amongst the dark brown a few months ago, but didn't care enough to do anything about them. He sighed, grabbed his jacket from the back seat and headed over to join Nick Styles inside the cordon. London had almost shrugged off its winter coat, but the contrast between the heated car and the fresh February morning gave Porter goosebumps.

Styles stood with his back to the outer wall of the building, like a suspect in a police line-up. His six-four frame meant he towered above the officers who stood guard at the door. He was focused on tapping a message out on his phone and didn't sense Porter's approach over the ambient noise of the scene until they were practically side by side.

'Morning,' said Porter, tilting his head to compensate for the difference in height.

'And there was me thinking you must have had a better offer, guv,' Styles replied, both thumbs still pecking away at his phone.

'Well, you know me with my packed social calendar.'

'I may have got bored and poked my nose inside already while I waited.'

'Come on, then.' Porter patted him on the shoulder as he walked past him towards the door. 'You can give me the plot summary on the way upstairs.'

Styles peeled away from the wall and followed Porter inside. Their reflections in the polished glass elevator doors made for an incongruous pairing. Styles had his weakness for all things Hugo Boss, his image neat and orderly, close cropped hair, number two all over. He had been christened office pretty-boy by a few of the older crowd, part jealousy, part banter, but he took it all in his stride. A few had referred to him as the Met's answer to Thierry Henry, until they saw him try and play five-a-side. Porter was from Irish stock, his wardrobe more high-street fashion, and his appearance, while not unkempt, had a more lived-in feel to it; hair so dark it bordered on black, refusing to be

fully tamed by gel, but with a sense of messy style to it. Styles started to bring Porter up to speed as they waited for the lift.

‘It’s one of the stranger ones I’ve seen,’ he said as he tucked his phone into his jacket. ‘Call came in from the maintenance guy. He went in to turn the water off after it started leaking into the flat below, except it wasn’t a leaky pipe.’ He paused as the lift doors opened and they stood aside to let a crime scene tech out first. The camera in their hand left no doubt as to what they’d just been up to.

‘Come on then, don’t keep me in suspense,’ Porter said as Styles hit the button for the fourth floor.

‘First guess was that the freezer had packed in, probably a while back cos those things are usually pretty robust, but the door seals do give way eventually. Turns out that there’s just no power. Not sure why yet. The freezer thawed, water ran down the front, through the cracks in the floor tiles and ended up waking the downstairs neighbour during the night.’

‘I’m assuming you’ll get to the juicy part soon?’

‘Yep. The maintenance guy figured out where the water was coming from and was about to start patching it up when he got spooked and called us.’

‘Spooked by what? What’s got him rattled? A domestic? A burglary? A spotty teenager fresh out of training could handle that. Quit stalling and tell me why we’re here.’

‘There’re no flies on you, guv,’ said Styles in mock acquiescence.

‘Yeah, yeah, I know, just the marks of where they’ve been.’ Porter finished the tired old joke for him and looked at him expectantly.

‘Sorry, I’ll quit playing. Turns out it wasn’t just food going off in the freezer. There’s a hand in there.’

That got Porter’s attention. ‘Just a hand?’

‘As if that’s not enough?’

‘You know what I mean.’

Styles nodded. ‘Yep, just a hand; female by the looks of it, and missing the little finger.’

‘Do we know whose place it is yet?’ Porter asked just as the doors opened to reveal the fourth-floor hallway.

‘The flat is registered to a Natasha Barclay and has been since 1981. You need to see this place to believe it,’ said Styles, nodding to the officer guarding the door as they each slipped into a white Tyvek crime scene suit and entered the flat.

The first thing Porter noticed was the smell. The unmistakable perfume of decay hung in the air. Without the update from Styles, he’d have put that solely down to the rotting food, but he knew better than that now. Layered over the top of that was a general sense of mustiness. He stopped in his tracks and looked around. A small wooden table six feet into the hallway had a phone handset that looked like the one his mum used to have. A visible fuzzy blanket of dust coated it and the table surface. He looked at the walls. The wallpaper too looked like a relic from a bygone era. Styles had walked on ahead of him, presumably headed for the kitchen, and Porter hurried after him.

He caught up with him in what he assumed was the main space of the flat. A dining table, clear except for an empty vase, sat over by the far wall. The relatively narrow kitchen area was bordered on two sides by worktops, with the remaining space housing two sofas and a TV that looked almost as old as Porter himself. *Never mind retro*, he thought, *this place looks like it’s stuck in a time warp*.

Styles waited patiently by the open freezer door while Porter peered inside. Each of the drawers had been pulled out to varying extents to allow for inspection of the contents. The resulting image reminded Porter of a mini staircase, with the bottom drawer practically hanging out and each of the three above it revealing less and less. The bottom drawer housed the main attraction. The hand sat in the centre of the plastic compartment. It was palm up, its fingers outstretched and curled in ever so slightly at the last joint, as if begging for loose change. The little finger had been severed at the first joint above the knuckle. It looked like a clean cut, and a small circle of bone stared up at him, a white pupil in an iris of grey flesh.

‘Ah, Detective Porter. I see you’ve found exhibit A.’

Porter looked back over his shoulder, recognised one of the senior scene-of-crime officers, Will Leonard, approaching from the hallway. It

was hard not to, even with the protective mask over his face, Leonard's eyebrows like black caterpillars marking him out at any crime scene. He had a mop of greying hair underneath the hood of his Tyvek crime scene suit, though, and Porter was convinced he dyed the brows. Why the brows and not the rest of his hair, though? One of life's great mysteries.

'Oh, hi, Will. Looks like a fun one here. What you thinking?'

'Hard to say yet.' Leonard shrugged. 'It's fairly well thawed now, but impossible to say how long it's been in there until we run the usual tests, maybe not even then. I'd say a fair while, though, judging from the freezer burn on the skin.' He pointed at the blotchy pattern across the back of the hand. 'My guess is twelve months, maybe more.'

'What about the rest of whoever this is? No sign of any other body parts?'

Leonard shook his head. 'Just this for now.'

Porter turned to Styles. 'What have we got apart from this?'

'It's a strange one.' Styles shook his head gently. 'There's some opened mail here addressed to a Miss Natasha Barclay. Whether she lives here alone we don't know yet, but we're trying to track her down to ask.'

'What about the neighbours?'

'We've been knocking on doors but only been able to speak to three so far and they've been no help, but this is where it all gets a bit weird. Nobody's seen her, or anyone else, coming or going.'

'What's weird about that? People can live in a building like this and not see each other for weeks.' Porter walked around the living area, soaking in the details.

'Try ever.'

That stopped Porter in his tracks. He turned back to Styles. 'Ever?'

'Nasty echo in here,' said Styles playfully. 'Yep, ever. We spoke to three other residents, one of whom has lived here since the early nineties, and not one of them can remember ever seeing or hearing so much as a mouse squeak in here. Same goes for the maintenance guy, although he's only been here for five years.'

'OK, that is a little strange, I'll give you that. I'm assuming you've got more than just that, though?'

‘That opened mail I mentioned: there’s a bank statement, a dental appointment letter and one from a friend in Edinburgh. The thing is that they’re all dated 1983. Make of that what you will.’

Porter frowned. ‘1983?’

‘There’s that echo again.’

‘Where’s the mail? Show me.’

Styles pointed at a few sheets of paper that lay neatly stacked on the kitchen bench. Porter picked them up one at a time and scanned the contents. Sure enough there was a dental check-up arranged at a local surgery. The statement for her current account confirmed her as a Barclays customer. Porter speculated as to whether there was a connection with the surname but dismissed it as coincidence for now. He looked up again, first at Styles, and then around the room, but more closely now as if seeing everything for the first time. The TV was a big bulky thing that belonged in a museum, with knobs on the front to change channel and volume. From the pattern on the curtains and the fabric on the furniture, to the same layer of dust everywhere he looked, the flat seemed like a snapshot from the land that time forgot; a TV or film set that had just been taken out of storage to air it.

‘What do you think, then?’ Styles said from behind him.

‘I’d say we need to speak to Miss Barclay about the standard of her housework, but I have a feeling she’s not been in here for some time.’ Styles nodded and Porter went on. ‘The way the dust has built up on the surfaces, I’d say it’s been months since anyone set foot in here, at least, maybe a lot longer. Let’s just hope that wherever she is, she’s got nothing more serious than a few chores around the house to worry about.’

It took another half hour for the crime scene techs to finish up. Everything was painstakingly catalogued. Styles had joked in the past that the process was like a macabre fashion shoot, and Porter could see why. By the time the pictures were taken, the techs had dusted surfaces with fine powder like a make-up artist applying foundation. Fibres were snipped from the carpet like a hurried pre-catwalk haircut. They chose their camera angles carefully to capture every detail, like David Bailey immortalising the perfect profile.

Porter decided Styles had understated in the extreme when he had called it a strange one. Everything looked to be from that same era, from the peach, pale blue and soft green curtains to the light brown furry-looking sofa that screamed 1980s. Add that to the correspondence that hailed from the same period, and it was as if they'd travelled back thirty years when they crossed the threshold.

The bedroom did nothing to alter that perception. Porter could almost feel the dust lining his nasal passages as he breathed in. Styles moved across to the curtains and opened them with both hands simultaneously, sending wispy plumes of dust up into the air like ash from a volcano. Two of the curtain hooks on the left-hand side relinquished their grip on fabric made weak by time, and tore free of their fastenings.

Porter moved over to the wardrobe, one door slightly ajar with gauzy strands of cobweb laced across the gap like the back of a corset. He opened it slowly, watching to see if the web's architect was at home, but there was no sign of life. Porter was no fashionista but the suits that hung in the wardrobe reminded him of some of his mum's outfits from family pictures before he was even born, let alone a toddler. It was starting to feel like an eighties version of *Great Expectations*, and he'd walked into Satis House with Miss Havisham lurking somewhere inside.

Satisfied that there was nothing of immediate interest in the bedroom, they made their way back out to the kitchen area in time to see Will Leonard placing the hand carefully into an evidence bag. Porter turned and scanned the living room. It reminded him of a party he'd been at last year where a fight had broken out. An armchair lay on its side like a wounded animal. A small coffee table that had presumably been next to it was upturned, one of the legs snapped off at the halfway point. A magazine lay face down, pages sprawled open and spine pointing upwards.

He saw dark smudges on the far wall, and moved in for a closer look. The cream paint was flecked with dark spots, a night sky in reverse. A handful of evidence markers, little yellow tents, had set up camp on the carpet around a series of brown stains. All in all, the room looked like a jigsaw smashed by an angry child, none of the pieces seeming to go

together just yet. He wandered over to where Styles waited at the door.

‘Let’s head back to the station then and see if we can track down Miss Barclay, or at least rustle up some family and friends to speak to.’

‘After you,’ said Styles, gesturing towards the door. Porter had just walked past him when he added, ‘Do you think the techs can manage to carry everything, or should we offer to give them a hand?’